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## **The speed of change: motor vehicles and people in Africa, 1890-2000**

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# The speed of change



Afrika-Studiecentrum Series

**The speed of change**  
Motor vehicles and people in Africa,  
1890-2000

Edited by  
Jan-Bart Gewald, Sabine Luning & Klaas van Walraven

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Dedicated to Stefan Elders †



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## Preface

This volume has its origins in a panel presented at the First European Conference on African Studies (ECAS) – held in London in 2005 – which focused on the social history and anthropology of motor vehicles in Africa. The panel, organised under the title ‘Of drivers, mechanics, traders and prostitutes: a social history of motor vehicles in Africa in the twentieth century’, led to lively discussions on the historical, economic and anthropological dimensions that characterise this intriguing topic. While one of the most important factors for change in contemporary Africa, the discussions made clear that African studies has, so far, largely neglected the subject of motorised transport as an integral part of Africa’s social and historical change. It was thus felt that the inevitable delays, marking the transition from conference papers to the production of a single and coherent volume, were obstacles well worth overcoming.

This book should be seen as a first attempt to insert the subject of motorised transport into the wider field of African studies and take stock of the state of scholarly knowledge on this subject. The volume tries to set the topic in the wider context of social and transport history, in Africa and elsewhere, as well as that of general socioeconomic and cultural change South of the Sahara. It explores the complex relationships between people and motor vehicles in Africa in the twentieth century – from car and bush mechanics to call boys (‘coxeurs’) and prostitutes, from new market opportunities to the social organisation of taxi-ranks, from political agitation and mobilisation to the use of motor vehicles in policing and warfare. In order to achieve a balanced focus, both historical and economic studies were included, while two additional anthropological chapters, that of Sjaak van der Geest on Ghanaian lorry inscriptions and Sabine Luning on the cultural dimensions of road travel and its hazards in Burkina Faso, were commissioned for the project.

We wish to express our gratitude to all those scholars, Africanists and others, who encouraged us on this exciting path. We would like to thank Ann Reeves for her patient copy editing; Mieke Zwart for the production of the lay-out; the African Studies Centre for its support in bringing this project to fruition, and Brill Academic Publishers for its help in including the numerous illustrations, in black-and-white and full colour – in this field of study a vital and integral part of the analysis.

Finally, we wish to dedicate this volume to our deeply missed comrade, Stefan Elders, linguist, fellow Africanist, colleague and above all friend. His untimely death whilst in the field in 2007 is a great loss to us all. We can only say that his enthusiasm for the empirical study of Africa is an encouragement to us to continue on the fascinating road of Africanist scholarship.

*The editors*

Leiden, October 2008

# Motor vehicles and people in Africa: An introduction

Jan-Bart Gewald, Sabine Luning & Klaas van Walraven

## Introduction

Speaking to the South African Parliament in Cape Town in 1960, the then Prime Minister of Great Britain Harold Macmillan, spoke of the *Winds of Change* blowing across the African continent. Although Macmillan was undoubtedly correct in his assessment of the political situation, his words would have been equally relevant for the change brought about by the motor-car in Africa. For the speed of change brought about by the introduction of the motor-car is visible in all fields of human endeavour on the Continent. The introduction of the motor vehicle into Africa during the course of the twentieth century led to far-reaching and complex transformations in the continent's economies, politics, societies and cultures, and affected all aspects of African life. Until now little systematic research has been conducted into this multi-faceted topic from an historical, economic or anthropological perspective. Yet, arguably, the arrival of the motor vehicle was the single most important factor for change in Africa in the twentieth century. Its impact extended across the totality of human existence; from ecological devastation to economic advancement, from cultural transformation to political change, and from social perceptions through to a myriad of other dimensions.

There has been a tendency to see motor vehicles as being linked solely to the state and the political and economic elite but their impact stretches beyond into the everyday lives of people in the smallest villages in the furthest reaches of Africa. Buses, mammy trucks, cars, pick-ups and lorries go beyond where railways, ferries and boats can reach. True, the introduction of railways had a tremendous impact on African societies but from the 1940s onwards the train

decreased in importance and has now been almost totally superseded by other means of transport.<sup>1</sup> The extensive shanty towns that have developed on the tracks of the Ghana Railways shunting yards in the centre of Accra are a graphic example of this decline. In addition, unlike the motor vehicle, the train is forced to run on the tracks laid out for it and does not allow for much initiative on the part of individuals. The capital input is such that state funding, involving amounts quite simply beyond the finances of small entrepreneurs, is required, whereas purchasing a motorcycle, taxi or truck is not. Africa only owns a very small proportion of the world's motor vehicles, yet it is precisely because of the scarcity of transport that these vehicles assume such importance both in rural areas and the urban environment. In fact, as the contribution on Angola in this volume shows, public transport in the continent's many sprawling cities is often serviced exclusively by motorized vehicles.

Research on this subject is limited. For example, only one of the more than 1,000 papers presented at the annual meetings of the African Studies Association in the United States between 1990 and 1997 dealt with the impact of motor vehicles in Africa. This paper was later developed into a PhD thesis dealing with both railways and roads and concentrated largely on economic history.<sup>2</sup> The socio-economic impact of railways has traditionally received considerable scholarly attention.<sup>3</sup> Roads and motor vehicles have featured in a number of

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<sup>1</sup> There is extensive literature on trains in Africa, much of it of particular interest to trainspotters, for example, W. Sölch, *Kap-Kairo: Eisenbahn zwischen Ägypten und Südafrika* (Düsseldorf, 1985). Of relevance here, J.F. Due, 'The problem of rail-transport in tropical Africa', *The Journal of Developing Areas*, 13, 4 (1978/79), 375-93 and 'Trends in rail transport in Zambia and Tanzania', *Utafiti*, 8, 2 (1986), 43-58; P. Moriarty & C.S. Beed, 'Transport in Tropical Africa', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 27, 1 (1989), 125-32; E. Vickery, 'Pricing rail transport services in Ghana for increased efficiency', *Economic Bulletin of Ghana*, 1, 4 (1971), 28-48 and G.H. Pirie, *Aspects of the political economy of railways in Southern Africa* (Johannesburg, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> A. Chilundo, 'Roads, road transport, and the expansion of commodity production in Northern Mozambique'; paper presented at ASA 1992; and *Ibid. Economic and social impact of rail and road transportation systems in the colonial district of Mozambique (1900-1961)*; PhD thesis University of Minnesota, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> F. Cooper, "'Our strike": Equality, anticolonial politics and the 1947-48 railway strike in French West Africa', *Journal of African History*, 37, 1 (1996), 81-118; J.A. Jones, 'The political aspirations of railroad labor on the Chemin de Fer Dakar-Niger, 1905-1963'; paper presented at ASA 1992; and *Ibid.* 'An African response to European technology: Railway merchants on the Chemin de Fer, Dakar-Niger, 1897-1914'; paper presented at ASA 1995; L.A. Lindsay, 'Shunting between manly ideals: Nigerian railway men, 1935-65'; paper presented at ASA 1995; *Ibid.* 'The Nigerian railway, industrial relations, and the magic of modernization'; paper presented at ASA 1998; K. Weist, 'Women of Tabora: Of trains, credits and micro-

academic theses but generally as a side issue to the main topic under discussion.<sup>4</sup> And in the few works in which motor vehicles were a major theme, the emphasis has consistently been on economic aspects.<sup>5</sup> A notable exception is the classic work by Polly Hill that detailed the way Ghanaian cocoa farmers used motor vehicles to full advantage to exploit ever-larger areas of Ghanaian forest for cocoa production.<sup>6</sup> The more anthropological works by Lewis, Silverstein & Stoller detailing their investigations of how motorized road transport was structured and regulated are of particular importance, even though they are not truly historical studies.<sup>7</sup> Thus far, one researcher has focused on the highly fetishized impact of motor vehicles as a symbol of high colonialism in Africa.<sup>8</sup> Erdmute Alber's work looks at 'the introduction of motor cars in the West African colony of Dahomey and its consequences for colonial society'.<sup>9</sup> Jan-Bart Gewald also published an article to document the socio-cultural impact of the introduction of motor vehicles in Namibia prior to 1940.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, the

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enterprises'; paper presented at ASA 1997; N. Yelengi, 'Working and living along the Port-Francqui-Bukama railroad: Labor policies and household economic strategies in Kamina camp in the Belgian Congo'; paper presented at ASA 1997; W. Oyemakinde, 'Railway construction and operation in Nigeria, 1895-1911: Labour problems and socio-economic impact', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, vii (1974), 303-24.

- <sup>4</sup> A. Harneit-Sievers, *Zwischen depression und dekolonisation: Afrikanische Händler und Politik in Süd-Nigeria, 1935-1954* (Saarbrücken, 1991); P. Manning, *Slavery, colonialism and economic growth in Dahomey 1640-1960* (London, New York, New Rochelle, 1982).
- <sup>5</sup> S. Heap, 'The development of motor transport in the gold coast, 1900-1939', *Journal of Transport History*, 11, 2 (1990), 19-37; R. Poutier, 'Transports et développement au Zaïre', *Afrique Contemporaine*, 153 (1990), 3-26; H. D'Almeida-Topor *et al.*, eds, *Les Transports en Afrique XIX-XX Siècle* (Paris, 1992).
- <sup>6</sup> P. Hill, *The migrant cocoa farmers of Southern Ghana* (Cambridge, 1963).
- <sup>7</sup> B. Lewis, *The transporters association of the Ivory Coast: Ethnicity, occupational specialization and national integration*, PhD thesis, Northwestern University, 1970; Stella Silverstein, *Sociocultural organization and locational strategies of transportation entrepreneurs: An ethnoeconomic history of the Nnewi Igbo of Nigeria*, PhD thesis, Boston University Graduate School, 1983; P. Stoller, *The taste of ethnographic things: The senses in anthropology* (Philadelphia, 1989).
- <sup>8</sup> L. White, 'Cars out of place: Vampires, technology, and labor in East and Central Africa'. In: F. Cooper & A.L. Stoler, eds, *Tensions of empire: Colonial cultures in a bourgeois world* (Berkeley, London 1997). This is a somewhat sketchy and inconclusive article.
- <sup>9</sup> E. Alber, 'Motorisation and colonial rule'; paper presented at the conference 'Colonial everyday life in Africa', 6-7 October 1998, Leipzig.
- <sup>10</sup> J.B. Gewald, 'We thought we would be free...': *Socio-cultural aspects of Herero history in Namibia 1915-1940* (Cologne, 2000), 208-42. This was recently published



broader social history of motor vehicles elsewhere in the world has been extensively researched, particularly in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Some of these works provide insight into the impact that motor vehicles had on people's lives but on the whole they do not do so for African societies. However, they provide some initial, comparative material and theoretical background and insight into the issue. This is most notable in the fields of status and power, where motor vehicles appear to have taken on values over and above their mere utilitarian function. In contrast, there are as yet no social *histories* dealing with the diachronic impact of motor vehicles on the lives of people in Africa.

It is, therefore, clear that research is needed into the effects of the motor vehicle in Africa in overlapping fields of academic endeavour. This volume provides a number of case studies that analyse its impact from a historical, economic, as well as an anthropological perspective. They can be considered some of the first results of more systematic research that has recently been undertaken. To introduce these case studies, the remainder of this chapter will touch on the different effects the motor vehicle has had upon the economies, politics, societies and cultures of Africa and will then discuss the main arguments dealt with in the studies.

### Some historical dimensions

Motor vehicles have had a tremendous impact on politics in Africa, transforming the state as well as the way politics have come to be conducted. The colonial state relied heavily on motor vehicles for the extension and enforcement of its control at a symbolic and functional level. For example, when motor cars were introduced to German South West Africa, the quality of missionary reporting on the local environment began to decline for the simple reason that both missionaries and colonial officials could now make journeys to different locations and return to their headquarters without having to stay in distant

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in a revised form as 'Missionaries, hereros, and motorcars: Mobility and the impact of motor vehicles in Namibia before 1940', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 35, 2-3 (2002), 257-85.

<sup>11</sup> J.J. Flink, *The car culture* (Cambridge, MA, 1975); and *Ibid.*, *The automobile age* (Cambridge, MA, 1988); J. Pettifer & N. Turner, *Automania: Man and the motor car* (London, 1984); W. Sachs, *For love of the automobile: Looking back into the history of our desires* (Berkeley, 1992); P.M. Townroe, ed., *Social and political consequences of the motor car* (North Pomfret, VT, 1974); M. Wachs & M. Crawford, *The car and the city: The automobile, the built environment and daily urban life* (Ann Arbor, 1992); J. Wilczynski, *The passenger car and socialist economic planning* (Duntroon, 1979).

places for unduly long periods. Jan-Bart Gewald's chapter on Zambia indicates that this was not an isolated phenomenon. Later, after independence, motor vehicles became indispensable at all levels of government – for tax collection to education, and for health care to border patrols.

During early colonial rule, roads and motor vehicles helped the state to spread its message and enforce its will, even if this was a rather chequered process at times, as is shown in the chapter by Philip Havik on Portuguese Guinea. It was not only motor vehicles that colonial rulers used to impose their will on Africa and its people: across the continent, colonial states required labour for the construction of roads and, if it was not forthcoming, prisoners were used for this work. A colonial district commissioner in Tanzania, for example, was remembered in the following way: 'He made us work long hours on the roads, and he was the only one who had a motor car'.<sup>12</sup> Roads were not built just for the practical purpose of transporting goods and people but also as a measure of control and reprisal in the context of disciplining a subject population. Conversely, as Havik shows for Portuguese Guinea, they created confidence amongst the colonisers themselves in an age when roads were a symbol of speed and modernity and helped to enhance the status of the colonial officer. The motor vehicle thus contributed substantially to the mystique of the lone white man, who was never really by himself as he could be assured of the immediate support of soldiers and a ready supply of weapons and ammunition should the need arise. Both during colonial times and after independence, the motor vehicle allowed for the standardization of bureaucracies and the rapid and frequent transfer of government employees.

It also allowed for the development of novel methods of political action. Ghana's independence was gained in part through the use of propaganda vans touring the countryside to propagate the views of Kwame Nkrumah's Convention People's Party and, in South Africa, Africans fought apartheid by boycotting bus services. The chapter in this volume by Klaas van Walraven on Niger's Sawaba movement shows how the use of motor vehicles in the 1950s enhanced the pace of political competition and even helped to transform the nature of urban rioting. More generally, many political rallies in Africa – past and present – would have been unthinkable without the party faithful being bussed in from outlying areas or political leaders standing in open cars, preaching to potential voters, whipping up support and castigating their opponents.

From another angle, it can be seen how the development or neglect of roads became part and parcel of developing patronage systems that in turn led to economic development or decline. More recently, motor vehicles have become

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in G. Liebnow, *Colonial rule and political development in Tanzania: The case of the Makonde* (Evanston, 1971), 144.

part of new forms of warfare, with the so-called ‘technicals’ armed with machine guns in Somalia and the ‘Toyota wars’ in Chad being cases in point.<sup>13</sup> Georg Klute’s contribution on the use of open pick-up trucks in the Tuareg rebellions in Mali and Niger during the 1990s shows how such vehicles affected the pace and nature of guerrilla warfare in the contemporary era. More generally, the chapter by van Walraven illustrates how the development of professions related to the motor vehicle (ranging from drivers and chauffeurs to mechanics and passenger coaxers) influenced attempts in the 1960s to change the social order and overthrow the political dispensation. These are just a few examples to illustrate how motor vehicles affected historical developments in Africa throughout the twentieth century in decisive, albeit different, ways.

### Economic perspectives

Motor vehicles radically transformed Africa’s economies in the twentieth century. Increased mobility of people, products, raw materials, information, goods and services led to the development of new sources of wealth and decisively shifted patterns of economic competition.

Initially, the arrival of motorized vehicles led to the collapse of other forms of economic enterprise as old trade routes lost their importance. The chapter by Gewalt on Zambia shows how portage and animal-drawn freight came to be superseded. The service industries that had developed to cater for these now-defunct routes and forms of transport ceased to exist. But communities that came to depend on the motor vehicle and its roads could be similarly struck by economic ruin.<sup>14</sup>

In the formal economy, the motor vehicle led to the development and accessing of new markets as well as the establishment of a completely new economy centred around motor vehicles. New entrepreneurial and technical skills developed as petrol stations and workshops began to be established. New companies were created that transported people and goods, ranging from small companies with a single taxi to giant freight empires. Growing numbers of motor vehicles necessitated the development of roads, which in turn led to further

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<sup>13</sup> D. Compagnon, ‘Somali armed movements: The interplay of political entrepreneurship and clan-based factions’. In: C. Clapham, ed., *African Guerrillas* (Oxford, 1998), 73-90; N. Mburu, ‘Contemporary banditry in the horn of Africa: Causes, history and political implications’, *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 8, 2 (1999), 89-107; R. Buijtenhuijs, ‘Chad in the age of the warlords’. In: D. Birmingham & P.M. Martin, eds, *History of central Africa: The contemporary years since 1960* (London, 1998), 20-40.

<sup>14</sup> P. Moriarty & C.S. Beed, ‘Transport in Africa’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 27, 1 (1989), 125-32.

economic development. And increased accessibility stimulated the development and exploitation of resources which had been hitherto neglected. Mining, agriculture and industry all received a boost. In addition to being a major pollutant, motor vehicles or, more generally, the internal combustion engine caused extensive environmental degradation through strip-mining, logging and forest clearance, as well as the loss of top-soil and soil exhaustion due to large-scale mechanized farming practices.<sup>15</sup> Economic expansion and increased mobility also encouraged the growth of labour migration, the phenomenon of itinerant labour and, in urban areas, the emergence of daily commuting to and from the workplace. This, in turn, stimulated the growth of (informal) taxi and bus services needed to transport workers. Thus, the chapter by Carlos Lopes in this volume on the chequered development of passenger transport in the urban sprawls of Angola points to the importance of motorized transportation in the modern context of the African mega-city, not just in terms of ensuring public transport but also by providing income for impoverished populations turning to jobs in the transport sector. This chapter also highlights how the impact of the motor vehicle in the informal economy has primarily been in the service industry. African bus stations and transport depots are now unimaginable without the myriad of services provided by transport touts, food and drink sellers, prostitutes, puncture repairmen, welders, bush mechanics and many others.

Drivers maintain their powers of concentration by using stimulants, legal or otherwise, and passengers are entertained and kept occupied by everyone and everything from acrobats and book and pamphlet sellers to illegal copies of music cassettes. Along the road, villagers peddle handicrafts, agricultural produce, chickens, fish and bush meat, as well as charcoal for the city dweller. From a more negative perspective, new forms of corruption and taxation have also developed on Africa's roads, with roadblocks having become an important

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<sup>15</sup> P. Hill, *Indigenous trade and market places in Ghana, 1962-64* (Jos, 1984); O.O. Alokun, 'The determinants of the operating characteristics of trucking firms in Nigeria', *The Nigerian Geographical Journal*, 1 (1994), 221-32; C. Gilguy, 'Tendances des marchés de l'automobile en Afrique', *Marchés Tropicaux et Méditerranéens*, 52, 2681 (1997), 668-79; 'L'automobile en Afrique 1983'; special issue of *Marchés Tropicaux et Méditerranéens*, 39, 1984 (1983), 2715-90; B. Mougoue, 'La circulation automobile à Yaoundé', *Cameroon Geographic Review*, 7, 2 (1987), 109-24; S.T. Addo, 'Accessibility, mobility and the development process', *Research Review: Institute of African Studies*, 11, 1/2 (1995), 1-15; I. Sutton, 'Some aspects of traditional salt production in Ghana', *Annales de l'Université d'Abidjan*, Serie I, Histoire, 11 (1983), 5-23; E. Amonoo, *The flow and marketing of cassava in the Central region with special reference to Cape Coast* (Cape Coast, 1972); J.B. Wills, ed., *Agriculture and land use in Ghana* (Oxford, 1962).

source of income for underpaid police and civil servants in many countries.<sup>16</sup> And finally, as the chapter by Joost Beuving on Benin shows, the growth of informal economic spheres in the final decades of the twentieth century went hand in hand with the development of a flourishing trade in second-hand cars. But even if this trade, as Beuving indicates, is seemingly riddled with economic contradictions and invites new theoretical foci to make sense of economic behaviour, it is an activity that links Western economies and African entrepreneurs in a globalized market. Vehicles written off in the West are being shipped to Africa where they continue to enjoy long and productive careers. Apart from the development of new African entrepreneurs, the second-hand car industry has also led to the establishment of a myriad of middlemen and interlopers essential to the trade.

### A range of anthropological aspects

The advent of the motor vehicle brought about tremendous changes in people's access to health care, education and information, and affected religion, interpersonal relationships and the way of life of many. This improved access to inoculation campaigns, primary healthcare projects, hospital transfers and medical extension work that characterize health care in present-day Africa would have been unthinkable without the motor vehicle's arrival. Yet these vehicles have, at the same time, become the main vectors for the spread of disease and the speed of transfer of viruses from forest enclaves to cities, and vice versa, along roads transecting the continent has increased markedly. The most notable has, of course, been the rapid and devastating spread of HIV/AIDS. The provision of formal education has also changed; educational curricula have come to be standardized through the state's new-found ability to transfer teachers and examiners and enforce the findings of school inspections.

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<sup>16</sup> There is a fair amount of literature on the informal economies of Africa but little on the relationship between motor vehicles and the informal economy. J. Wainaina, 'The "parking boys" of Nairobi', *African Journal of Sociology*, 1, 1/2 (1981), 7-45; D.H. Afejuku, 'Theft under a motor insurance policy in Nigeria', *Zambia Law Journal*, 20 (1988), 20-31; R. Marima, J. Jordan & K. Cormie, 'Conversations with street children in Harare, Zimbabwe', *Zambezia*, 22, 1 (1995), 1-24; K.J. Munguti, 'Health last: The paradox of "Jua Kali" enterprises in Kenya', *Kenya Journal of Sciences*, Series C: Humanities and social sciences, 4 (1997), no. 1, 44-60; O.Y. Oyeneke, 'Apprentices in the informal sector of Nigeria', *Labour Capital and Society*, 13, 2 (1980), 69-79; M. Grieco *et al.*, *At christmas and on rainy days: Transport, travel and the female traders of Accra* (Aldershot 1996); G. Clark, 'Pools, clients and partners: Relations of capital and risk control between Kumasi market women'; paper presented at ASA, 25-28 October 1984; S.S. Berry, *From peasant to artisan: Motor mechanics in a Nigerian town* (Boston, 1983).

With motor vehicles and people's increased mobility, there was also a tremendous increase in the speed and amount of information transferred within African countries. Not only did letters travel faster to and from towns and villages, but also newspapers and, perhaps more importantly, gossip, or as it is aptly known in West Africa, *Radio Trottoir*. Information regarding developments in the newly created state – from soccer scores to politics to world affairs – travels along the continent's roads.

Central to the issue of motor vehicles in Africa are status and power. To some extent motor vehicles were incorporated as new status symbols into older pre-colonial forms and concepts relating to the expression of status and influence. Yet motor vehicles also led to the development of new forms of cultural expressions of power. In large parts of Africa, for example, it is common for people to be possessed by the spirits of motor vehicles. People associated with and in control of motor vehicles were granted status in accordance with the type of vehicle concerned. Accordingly, wealthy traders across the continent have become known as *waBenzi*, referring to the elite prestige ingrained in the Mercedes Benz.

With its tendency to traverse language barriers as well as social and cultural boundaries, the motor vehicle gave birth to new ways of looking at the world and new relations that required different forms of cosmological understanding. The myriad of new images and views shaped ideologies that, of necessity, transcended local socio-cultural arrangements, something that accounted to a certain degree for the extensive spread of Christianity in the twentieth century. Interpersonal relationships and responsibilities were transformed by people's increased mobility. In addition, there was the development of a completely new culture of taxi and bus driving.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> S. Berry, *Fathers work for their sons: Accumulation, mobility and class formation in an extended Yoruba community* (Berkeley, 1985); R. Gentle, *Crime and poverty* (Cape Town, 1984); J.U. Obot, 'Urban development planning and environmental population in Africa: The case of Calabar municipality, Nigeria', *African Urban Quarterly*, 2, 2 (1987), 96-104; W.F. Banyikwa, 'Urban passenger transport problems in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania', *African Urban Quarterly*, 3, 1/2 (1988), 80-93; J.W. Jordan, 'Role segregation for fun and profit: The daily behaviour of the West African lorry driver', *Africa*, 48, 1 (1978), 30-46; S. van der Geest, "'Sunny boy": Chauffeurs, auto's en highlife in Ghana', *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift*, 16, 1 (May 1989), 19-38; D.C.I. Okpala, 'Traffic consideration in urban expansion: Reviewing the Enugu town plan', *Nigerian Geographical Journal*, 23, 1/2 (1980), 83-97; E. Dammann, 'Einiges über "omitandu"', *Afrika und Übersee*, 79, 2 (1996), 271-94; A. Lisowski, 'Functional structure of Ghanaian towns in 1970', *Africana Bulletin*, 36 (1990), 95-108; K.B. Dickson, 'The development of road transport in Southern Ghana and Ashanti since about 1850', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, 5, 1 (1961), 33-42; H. Powdermaker, *Copper town:*

The obvious impact of motor vehicles on almost all aspects of daily life in Africa makes it all the more intriguing why so few anthropologists have taken up cars as a serious topic of research in Africa. Despite the fact that individual researchers can immediately connect to the topic and give examples of how motor mobility crops up in research practices in Africa, everyone inevitably has experiences of being on the road, at a bus stop, in a jam-packed taxi or at a garage. But only a few anthropologists have followed up Kopytoff's suggestion of taking the car and, in particular, its social life as a central focus for anthropological investigation.<sup>18</sup> Various suggestions have been made as to why anthropologists have neglected the topic for so long. In his explanation, van der Geest (infra) refers to farsightedness on the part of anthropologists. With their bias towards the exotic, they have tended to overlook cars – as well as other all too familiar items originating from the West – as being worthy of serious anthropological attention.

Verrips & Meyer point to the fact that anthropologists have particularly neglected the material and technological aspects connected to car cultures. As Western consumers, they take 'the technological dimension for granted, and simply trust that, regular maintenance in the garage provided, everything works'. The 'autobiography' they wrote of Kwaku's car indicates that a key term for understanding how Ghanaians deal with imported cars is adjustment. Cars coming into Ghana are adjusted to become 'part of the system'. 'This involves ingenious technological changes as well as more elaborate spiritual matters'.<sup>19</sup>

Several chapters in this volume pursue this anthropological research agenda, some by sharing the emphasis placed by Verrips and

Meyer on the pragmatic and creative aspects of tinkering with and adapting cars, some by studying the cultural reinterpretations of aspects of social life – such as travel – affected by the use of motor vehicles. The chapters by Kurt Beck and George Klute are examples of the first. Their work contributes to reflections on general questions about the relationship between different types of knowledge production and the social world of goods – in this case motor vehicles. They deal with the social processes in which technological knowledge

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*Changing Africa: The human situation on the Rhodesian Copperbelt* (New York, 1962).

<sup>18</sup> I. Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things: Commoditization as process'. In: A. Appadurai, ed., *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), 64-91.

<sup>19</sup> J. Verrips & B. Meyer, 'Kwaku's Car: The struggles and stories of a Ghanaian long-distance taxi-diver'. In: D. Miller, ed., *Car cultures* (Oxford/New York, 2001), 153-84.

is transferred to others and how changes can be studied in terms of knowledge production and social appropriation. Kurt Beck uses as point of departure the automobile workshop in Sudan, where lorries are transformed. His analysis of the social process in which the technological adaptations occur shows how the job in the workshop relates to the existing work of blacksmiths and how smiths and drivers interact. The artisanal workmanship is both creative and practical as it adapts the lorry to the requirements of new circumstances, resolving tangible problems and fulfilling the wishes of users. Knowledge is not just theoretical but informed by practice, providing the craftsmen with options. Georg Klute's analysis of the transformation of open pick-ups into modern 'chariots' that are used in Tuareg rebellions shows that the introduction of technical innovations must be understood as a dialectical process of appropriation by which both the imported artefact and the receiving society undergo changes. Hence, Klute chooses to speak of 'combining invention', the joining of existing techniques, which the Tuaregs have appropriated in specific ways. He also drives home a message of technological change within broader cultural continuities: camels became cars – and Tuaregs Toyota specialists.

Several anthropological chapters address the issue of cars and their social life, which was first touched on by Kopytoff. This frames the study of cars in Africa within the anthropological line of enquiry into relationships between objects and subjects, or things and social agency. The chapters move away from dichotomies in which artefacts are dead objects in contrast to the living agency attributed to human subjects. The case studies show that motor vehicles are not just dead objects but may act and give meaning to acts, and are hence attributed agency. The chapter by Gabriel Klaeger on road travel in Ghana shows that cars are subjected to acts that indicate that people attribute agency to vehicles. Both Klaeger's and van der Geest's chapters show how names given to vehicles express the intimate relationship between the destiny of the car and those in it. The ritual acts to which the vehicle is subjected ensure the welfare of the car, its driver and the passengers who travel in it.

While Beck and Klute focus on the technical tinkering wizards (mechanics), Carrier and van der Geest both focus primarily on the professional category of drivers. Interestingly, van der Geest's long research period in Ghana gives a particular time depth to his fieldwork data. He argues that in the 1960s with the start of regular transport between urban centres and rural areas, drivers were much respected as they were associated with urban areas that were awe-inspiring places filled with promises of wealth and new goods. Today, however, the job of a driver inspires fear, his work being clearly associated with the dangers of the road and the fatal car accidents that often occur. On the other hand, the drivers Carrier describes who transport the perishable stimulant *khat* seem to increase their reputation just because they survive the professional hazards of



their speeding practices. In these chapters, as in the other two anthropological contributions by Klaeger and Luning, attention is given to a major feature of car cultures: the state of being on the road, between village and urban sites, away from home.

The connection between cars, mobility and journeys is an important issue for anthropological enquiry. The anthropologists who contributed to this book, as well as others,<sup>20</sup> point out that travel is dangerous and thus requires precautions. How should one undertake a long journey? When should one 'hit the road' and when not? These are questions that may require answers from experts such as diviners. Questions about dangerous places and auspicious times for journeys situate the use of cars in an interpretative framework that Masquelier<sup>21</sup> labelled 'moral geographies'. The moral geography Klaeger describes for Ghanaian travellers renders car travel ambivalent. Being on the road is a bringer of life (in the sense of commerce or the production of wealth), but also the potential bringer of death. Ritual acts are therefore important to car travel: they serve as a precaution, attempt to prevent disaster and may help to turn the undertaking into a success. Not only do the contributions show that ritual is an important aspect of car cultures, the anthropological study of cars and travel leads to a better understanding of how ritual acts work. It has long been acknowledged that ritual activities resemble journeys or passages,<sup>22</sup> and the relationship between being on the road and ritual acts is scrutinized in several of the chapters.

Van der Geest and Luning describe discourses elaborating on the risks of dying in car accidents. A fatal car accident on the road, away from home, is a particularly bad way of losing one's life and in Burkina Faso such deaths raise suspicion, since car accidents are often seen as types of murder. Sally Falk Moore<sup>23</sup> has shown that fatal accidents may provoke intense comment on particular social processes. Despite the fact that such a case only covers a short episode, it can be used to write current history. Luning takes up Sally Falk Moore's suggestion and describes the case of a fatal accident involving a tradi-

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<sup>20</sup> P. Chilson, *Riding the demon: On the road in West Africa* (Athens, GA, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> A. Masquelier, 'Road mythographies: Space, mobility and the historical imagination in postcolonial Niger', *American Ethnologist*, 29 (2002), 829-55.

<sup>22</sup> A. van Gennep, *The rites of passage* (Chicago, 1961); R.P. Werbner, *Ritual passage, sacred journey* (Manchester, 1989); V. Turner, *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure* (London, 1969); M. Bloch, *From blessing to violence: History and ideology in the circumcision ritual of the Merina of Madagascar* (Cambridge, 1986); and D. Parkin, 'Ritual as spatial direction and Bodily division'. In: D. de Coppet, ed., *Understanding rituals* (London, 1992), 11-25.

<sup>23</sup> S. Falk Moore, 'Explaining the present: Theoretical dilemmas in processual ethnography', *American Ethnologist*, 14 (1987), 727-36.

tional chief in order to write a contemporary history focusing on the political changes in Burkina Faso.

The anthropology of motor vehicles is inevitably about the study of social change. Cars clearly open up vistas of new opportunities and dangers, and they are accompanied by creative processes of technological innovation. Moreover, the car itself is a vehicle of change and, as an imported good, many consider it a major marker of modernity.<sup>24</sup> And as a means of transport it allows ideas to travel quickly far and wide. This message is brought home most poetically in van der Geest's chapter on the connections between cars and highlife songs in Ghana: both cars and highlife songs are means of communication and thus cultural – indeed linguistic – brokers between the village and the city, past and present, local Twi and cosmopolitan English.

### The case studies: An overview

The historical part of the volume starts with a description by Gewalt of the changes and continuities in patterns of mobility in the heart of Africa, namely the area of modern-day Zambia. Gewalt not only points to the importance of human portage in trade during the pre-colonial era but also to its persistence in the early days of colonial rule when new modes of transport were being used to improve transport, affect local relations of power, and establish and consolidate colonial control. As the chapter points out, different forms of transportation were used for this, some rapidly following on from others that turned out to be useless in negotiating the physical hurdles of Zambian geography. Some modes of mobility, while truly modern like the steam traction engine, paradoxically depended on the importance of old-fashioned human portage to make them work. The same was true of the way that one of the most modern conflicts of the twentieth century – World War I – was pursued in this part of the world when African carriers made it possible for British-led forces to confront the German presence in Tanganyika. In the end, however, the impact of the motor vehicle was greatest on local societies, by ending caravan portage and changing employment possibilities and marketing patterns, thereby freeing up labour that could be employed in the copper mines.

The chapter by Havik also indicates that, initially, the impact of modern modes of transportation, such as the motor car, was quite limited. With the establishment of a colonial administration in Portuguese Guinea, the motorcar made its first appearance. An ambitious road programme was initiated to open up the interior, collect taxes and encourage the commercial exploration of land concessions. Havik points to an interesting aspect of colonial roads in the sense

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<sup>24</sup> Verrips & Meyer, 'Kwaku's Car'.

that they were (naively) considered – by the colonisers themselves – as beacons of modernity that, once put in place, would bring development and progress to West Africa's forgotten corners. However, the privileged few who drove on the unpaved roads were generally colonial administrators themselves, in addition to the private (European) traders. By the mid-1920s, the road-building programme had come to a grinding halt, with precious little improvement being made in terms of infrastructure until the mid-1940s. During this period, the number of vehicles belonging to the colonial administration actually declined whilst a lack of maintenance kept many others off the road. In contrast to neighbouring French West Africa, this Portuguese enclave appeared suspended in a limbo of under-funding and under-staffing within the colonial administration, making it impossible for the Portuguese to keep up with their counterparts in the French colonies.

The chapter that concludes the historical part of this volume deals with Niger during the latter days of colonial rule and the first years of independence. Van Walraven analyses the emergence of the Sawaba movement during the 1950s and describes the social background of the people at its core, the so-called *petit peuple* – the commoners who left the countryside to fill the new low-status jobs created by colonialism and modern technology. Transport workers such as bus and lorry drivers, mechanics and coaxers were particularly well represented and played an important role in the realization of the political and social agenda pursued by the movement. The chapter shows how the use of motor vehicles in mob violence in April 1958 affected the nature of urban rioting and, decisively if temporarily, changed the local balance of power. Secondly, it details the roles played by transport workers in attempts by the Sawaba movement later in the 1960s to overthrow Niger's government by way of modern guerrilla warfare, outlining their contribution to clandestine communication, the gathering of intelligence and the organization of infiltration. The chapter in this respect draws attention to the work undertaken by Hobsbawm on the role played by lower social strata or professions in spheres beyond their established social or vocational station such as political agitation, intellectual activity and armed resistance.

Two case studies serve to illustrate the economic perspective of motor vehicles in present-day Africa. Carlos Lopes provides insight into the struggles of impoverished Angolans to meet subsistence and transport needs under the difficult conditions of civil war. With little research having been done on this subject in Lusophone Africa, Lopes undertook extensive fieldwork among the fare collectors, drivers, owners and passengers of the minibuses plying the roads of Angola's capital, Luanda, and the taxi-bikes that service the transport needs of the provincial city of Huambo and are endearingly called *kupapata* ('hug me', 'hold me tight'). Minibus taxis have been studied in various countries but

research on taxi-bikes is much rarer. Lopes shows how the void left by the collapse of formal bus transportation in Luanda was filled by private minibus operators and taxi-bikes (motorcycles) in Huambo. This involved continual struggles between, on the one hand, the state that was attempting to regulate the service for the good of the city population or state representatives themselves and, on the other hand, the operators who were trying to retain their freedom of operation, resist the racketeering of law enforcers and eke out a meagre existence in Angola's urban landscape. That minibuses and taxi-bikes have been able to provide an adaptable, flexible and more efficient means of transport than the state reflects the greater drama of the history of the post-colonial state, not just in Angola but all over the continent. While the working conditions of the minibus and taxi-bike operators are far from easy, this is a story of sheer resilience by the growing population of Angola's urban sprawls and by the transport workers themselves. As Lopes concludes, the advice ingrained in the *kupapata* to hold on, symbolizes a lifeline for a people struggling to survive and meet their daily practical needs.

To some extent this story is reflected in the difficulties that many of the second-hand car traders face in Cotonou, the economic capital of Benin. The chapter by Beuving traces the growth and chequered development of this trade and clearly shows how traders tend to survive despite diminishing returns, hoping to be able to carry on in the expectation of better times to come. Interestingly, Beuving contends that this entrepreneurial behaviour is hard to reconcile with the rationalism of mainstream economic theory and he advances an alternative theory to explain the conduct of these second-hand car traders, comparing their activities with the gambling behaviour of gold diggers. Fortune seekers attracted by the lure of gold, for example in nineteenth-century North America and Australia, had little knowledge of the soil they were working and therefore depended on chance to strike gold. The result was that rational calculation became relatively unimportant and in such an insecure economic environment the diggers saw their colleagues as adversaries, exaggerated their chances of winning and underrated the prospect of failure. Such gambling is an understandable response in an economic universe structured by considerable stakes and substantial uncertainty.

Clearly such behaviour can be put in a deeper perspective by reference to cultural anthropology. The first chapter in this volume's anthropological section deals with the adaptation and modification of Western-made lorries in Sudan. As already mentioned, Beck's case study outlines how automobile workshops disassemble vehicles, mainly Bedford and Nissan lorries, rebuild them and adjust them to cope with the harsher conditions and requirements of goods and passenger transport on Sudan's difficult roads. This is done in small workshops that are part of the economy's so-called informal sector and involves a highly

sophisticated craft technology. Surprising technological innovations have found their way into the unorthodox (re)construction of what become novel vehicles. As the final product is a completely new lorry that barely resembles the original, modding, modifying or customizing are probably not very good terms for what actually happens. Analysed for their importance in transport and the economy or, alternatively, as pieces of art and bearers of signs, these lorries (in Sudan and elsewhere) have never been awarded the legitimacy of research in their own right. Below the surface of symbols and deep meanings is another world waiting to be explored, the interior world of technology, technological appropriation and human creativity.

In this respect Chapter 8 has special importance. Klute's case study on pickups used in the Tuareg rebellions of the 1990s argues that the way these vehicles were adapted by local engineers and users (by adding weapons to them) not only represents the unification of two existing techniques but has also resulted in a new technology. The process does not involve the simple addition of two existing technical artefacts but is an independent creative act for which Klute advances the term 'combining invention'. His study is clearly inspired by the work of Beck, who referred to the 'dialectic processes of appropriation' in which both the acquiring society and the acquired artefact are subject to change. Klute shows how ordinary four-wheel-drive vehicles are combined with light weapons in the technology of, what he calls, the 'modern chariot', as it resembles the technology of the historical chariot in form and application. The combination of speed and mobility with relatively high horsepower, a large operating range and independence of outside supply make the Toyota 'chariot' a weapon particularly suited to the highly mobile warfare of guerrillas. This argument is developed against the backdrop of a discussion of the all-important factors of time and space in war.

Similarly, Chapter 7 deals with the factor of speed that motor vehicles brought to transport. Neil Carrier shows in his case study how the *khat* trade in Kenya has grown from being just a local phenomenon to an activity with global dimensions. Global demand and the substance's perishability mean that local transportation before the air-freighting of the drug to overseas destinations has to be undertaken at speed. The Hilux pick-up is the most widely used vehicle along the initial crucial section of the *khat* network in Kenya itself. The chapter investigates those who own and operate the vehicles, drawing out perceptions of the Hilux and the daredevils who drive them. The image of a Hilux overloaded with sacks of *khat* and driving at great speed has become iconic and the chapter looks at the development of this image, the factors behind it and the reactions it provokes from Kenyan society.

As noted above, the dangers inherent in motorized travel by road give rise to a variety of cultural and religious repertoires that aim to cope with the risks and

insecurities involved. The case study by Gabriel Klaeger describes the ‘automobilization’ of beliefs and religious practices in Ghana and phenomena that can be found in and around vehicles, on and alongside roads and at motor parks. Being on the road is, at best, an ambivalent experience. The use of spiritual and occult practices can be discerned as a form of risk management that people employ to seek protection from the dangers and uncertainties of Ghana’s roads. In their spiritual endeavours, road travellers get help from street vendors selling religious literature or itinerant preachers on a mission to spread the good news. Proverbs and slogans decorating the vehicles, in addition to amulets, are meant to provide or reinforce the required protection. In this context, the author discusses the issue of the spiritualization of roads and travel in Ghana and the matter-of-fact way in which Ghanaians approach this.

Sabine Luning, in the penultimate chapter, deals with interpretations of a car accident in which a traditional chief in Burkina Faso was killed in 1988. Taking the accident as the starting point for a case study, the chapter records a particular episode in the political history of Burkina and analyses the interpretative framework that informs discussions on traffic accidents. Since the interpretations frequently refer to specific spatial features of travel, Luning borrows from Masquelier’s concept of ‘moral geography’. Cars are associated with journeys, with being on the road, and examples show how these journeys always require precautions. Travellers have to know what lies ahead of them and how their journeys can be undertaken in safety. Luning’s chapter shows that when, in spite of everything, fatal accidents do occur, ritual acts are once again required. Burial rites in Burkina Faso for someone who has been killed in a car accident are adjusted to prevent a repetition of the tragedy and this involves changing some of the spatial characteristics that mark the burial rituals of those who have died a natural death. This is a good example of how ritual acts express, as well as produce, a moral geography. By tampering with the spatiality of the ritual, one hopes to tamper with social life. With its focus on an eventful political arena and the way ceremonial passages are acted out, the chapter follows Gluckman’s footsteps by connecting the case method to car travel, ritual practice and power relations.

In the final chapter, Sjaak van der Geest elaborates on the connections between cars and Highlife, a topic most relevant for understanding processes of communication and change. It starts with an overview of studies on Highlife and then discusses how cars and lorry drivers are portrayed in their lyrics. Van der Geest then seeks to articulate these song texts to lorry inscriptions and sketches the connecting worlds of Highlife artists and lorry drivers. Both produce texts in which they express – and attempt to allay – the anxieties of life, particularly those that result from envy, by borrowing freely from Christian prayers, biblical verses, church songs and proverbs. The author describes how

he discussed the content of the texts with consumers, travellers and drivers he encountered on buses and in lorry parks. He shows that the inscriptions as well as Highlife songs remain ambiguous to some extent because their meaning is to be found both within and outside the text, in the personal history of the owner/driver, the singer and the reader/listener. Cars and Highlife are means of transport that allow ideas to travel between rural and urban places and past and present times.

PART I

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES





# People, mines and cars: Towards a revision of Zambian history, 1890-1930

Jan-Bart Gewald

## Introduction

This contribution concentrates on the relationship between people and transport, and presents an overview of the way transport was organized before and after the introduction of the motor vehicle in what is today the central African state of Zambia. Prior to the introduction of mechanized transport in this part of Africa, the prevalence of the Tsetse fly ensured that all goods were transported by human muscle power. The introduction of mechanized transport changed forever a fundamental aspect of the relationship between people and transport in central Africa, effectively freeing up substantial labour.

This chapter introduces the different forms of human muscle-powered transport that existed prior to the introduction of mechanized transport and discusses the implications of the introduction of motor vehicles for these African societies. It concludes that Zambian rural impoverishment in the 1920s and 1930s was a consequence of a change in modes of transport and the collapse in long-distance trading networks based on human labour power.

## The heart of Africa

Zambia is an African nation with a rich albeit sparsely documented history. Landlocked in central Africa, it is basically rectangular in shape and is the relic of British attempts at extracting the rich copper deposits of Katanga, Congo. The country was built around the core of the Lozi Empire in the West and the

Bemba in the East, and the Zambian population is, consequently, a hodgepodge of multiple ethnicities and cultures. Or as Andrew Roberts eloquently put it:

Northern Rhodesia was simply an awkwardly shaped piece of debris resulting from Rhodes's failure to obtain Katanga. The [British South Africa] Company now found itself committed to ruling what amounted to not one but two huge and sprawling territories: one in the West, with communications running South, and the other in the East, with communications running further East, to Nyasaland.<sup>1</sup>

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the British South Africa Company (BSAC) of Cecil John Rhodes was granted a Royal Charter by the British government to exploit claims to the territories that form present-day Zambia. By 1900, administrators appointed by the BSAC had begun establishing administrative centres in the territories of North-Western Rhodesia – operating from Kalomo – and North-Eastern Rhodesia – operating from Fort Jameson (Chipata). In 1911 the two territories were amalgamated to form Northern Rhodesia and a single administrator, Lawrence Wallace, was sent to Livingstone on the Northern bank of the Zambezi River close to the Victoria Falls. In the years that followed, young Oxbridge graduates were selected for service in the BSAC territory of Northern Rhodesia. These young men were despatched into the interior with instructions to establish an administrative system that, in the first instance, would establish a system of taxation. It has been primarily through researching the reports, diaries, letters and official correspondence of these men that the information in this contribution was gathered.

## Portage<sup>2</sup>

Kansanshi, January 21, 1913

My Dear Evelyn, I am off in an hour or so – on my road to Mwinilunga. Carriers have all got their loads fixed up – I am just sheltering in the verandah while the rain runs its course. I mean to get about 5 miles out this morning – i.e. just to get started – to get the men out of reach of their friends and the store. Then we start tomorrow with day light.<sup>3</sup>

The description provided by the young Theodore Williams of his first tramp through the bush with porters is in essence no different to those of

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<sup>1</sup> A. Roberts, *A history of Zambia* (New York, 1976), 175.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed overview of portage, see S.J. Rockel, *Caravan porters of the Nyika: Labour, culture, and society in nineteenth century Tanzania*, (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Rhodes House (RH), Oxford, Williams (Theodore R.) Administrative officer, Northern Rhodesia: Diaries, 1912 – 21. 3 vols; letters home, 1912 – 24. 3 vols. MSS. Afr. S. 776 – 781, Kansanshi, January 21, 1913.



Map 1.1. Zambia

the many other literate travellers and traders who traversed central Southern Africa between 1600 and 1900.<sup>4</sup> Williams's descriptions echo those of Livingstone who, although consistently portrayed as the single white man in Africa, was always accompanied by, and indeed dependent upon, a whole host of African porters, guides, soldiers and traders. Williams, and indeed all the young men despatched by the BSAC to administrative posts on the fringes of the British Empire in central Africa, were dependent on the services of men and

<sup>4</sup> See the papers and report of the conference 'Angola on the move: Transport routes, communications and history' organized by Beatrix Heintze & Achim von Oppen, Centre for Modern Oriental Studies, Berlin, 24-26 September 2003.

women who not only carried their goods and equipment but also knew where and how to travel.

On account of the Tsetse fly, most regions of Zambia were unsuitable for domesticated animals.<sup>5</sup> Tsetse flies transmit trypanosomes, parasites in the blood, from one host to another and as a result, domestic animals can develop trypanosomiasis, otherwise known as sleeping sickness, which is inevitably fatal. For this reason, draught and pack animals, such as oxen, donkeys and horses, which were employed elsewhere in the world for transporting goods and people, could not be used in Zambia. The transport of goods and people therefore depended on the muscle power of people.

The dependence of travellers, such as the young official Williams, on the skills of long-distance African porters is well illustrated by his description of days on the road:

We had breakfast and got our carriers loads arranged – with the help of (thank god) the English speaking Headman (*capitao*) named Matthew – a mission-trained boy.<sup>6</sup>

As yet unacquainted with the local language, Williams was dependent on the missionary-taught language skills of Matthew, the man appointed as *Capitao*, a word and position that nicely throws up the important, if somewhat forgotten, role of Portuguese traders and travellers in central Africa.

Reliant on the muscle power of porters, journeys through this part of Africa, and the rest of the world for that matter, covered at most 25 km per day, with porters carrying loads of on average no more than 20 kg – any more unnecessarily tired the porters and reduced the total distance covered.

We are going to take about 6 days to do the 90 miles of our journey – the carriers are heavy loaded and I have had to leave 3 book boxes & one picture case to be sent for later – and we are in no hurry...<sup>7</sup>

Prior to embarking upon a journey, the goods to be transported were divided up into loads of approximately 20 kg. Large items, such as tusks, crates and even pianos, would be slung under poles and then be carried by more than one porter. People were also carried, and it is this image of colonial officials being carried through Africa, followed by a long string of porters, that has come to be the popular image of colonial Africa. People would be carried by porters in the *machila*, which has been defined as follows:

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<sup>5</sup> The standard work on the Tsetse fly and trypanosomiasis remains the work by John Ford, *The role of trypanosomiasis in African ecology: A study of the Tsetse fly problem* (London, 1971).

<sup>6</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. S. 776 – 781.

<sup>7</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. S. 776 – 781.

This was a hammock slung on a pole (or two poles, according to weight carried), and the traveller would recline in the hammock and doze off, his only exertions being to swat flies with his switch, while the *machila* team jog-trotted along, chanting a song.<sup>8</sup>

Theodore Williams, the young Oxford graduate referred to above, chose not to use the *machila* during his first tour of duty in Mwinilunga in North-Western Zambia in 1913-1914. However, during his subsequent posting to Mporokoso in North-Eastern Zambia, he made grateful, even if a little self-conscious, use of the *machila*. Writing to his family Williams described his travelling party in the following manner:

Monday Oct. 4<sup>th</sup> 1915, 20 carriers plus a *machila* team of ten, as is the *mos orientalis*, very oriental too it feels lounging along in a *machila* when one is fit, until one gets the edge of sensibility rubbed off, and then one orders up the *machila* from behind, flops in, and thinks nothing of the slaves who cover the miles with your weight as well as their own to carry.<sup>9</sup>

A further development of the *machila* was the 'bush cart' or *gareta*, which looked much like what has become known as the Chinese wheelbarrow. Mrs Hayes, the wife of a British official in Nyasaland, described the *gareta* as follows:

A *gareta* was a sort of bath chair on one wheel with a couple of metal rods sticking down in front so that the *gareta* could stand upright when stationary. A couple of long metal rods projected fore and aft and with a man pulling and another pushing going at a slow but steady jog trot one travelled at a very satisfactory speed: the one wheel was perfect for going along narrow native paths. I had my *gareta* very soon: my husband used a bicycle.<sup>10</sup>

It was a single-wheeled vehicle in which the centre of gravity was directly above the wheel with handles at both the front and the rear. The quote taken from Winifred Hayes would indicate that the choice of vehicle was, to some extent, determined by gender. Men rode bicycles, while women were ferried about by *gareta*. Bush carts allowed people to transport goods and people easily along footpaths that were only wide enough for people to travel in single file.<sup>11</sup> A contemporary described the bush cart as:

... a wooden chair, cushioned and tented, hoisted high over a bicycle wheel, with a pair of shafts fore and aft. Two Africans would 'inspan' themselves and propel the

<sup>8</sup> A.G.E. Tapson, 'Transport in the early days at Fort Jameson', *The Northern Rhodesia Journal*, 1, 6 (December 1952), 52.

<sup>9</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. S. 776 – 781.

<sup>10</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. S. 1919, W.M. Hayes, 'Transport Chikawa District Nysaland, 1936-1939'.

<sup>11</sup> Rickshaws, being two-wheeled, are dependent on wide paths or lanes, and were thus not to be found in Zambia.

vehicle and it was a not uncommon sight to see ladies, beautifully rigged, going out to tea in them.<sup>12</sup>

### Water transport

Compared to Europe, Asia and North America, Africa has very few navigable stretches of water and it is only on its lakes and specific and limited stretches of the African river systems that boats operate with sails. Where boats could be used, they were generally dependent on human power in the form of paddlers, 'polers' and haulers for their movement. In Zambia prior to colonization, sailing boats were to be found on Lakes Mweru, Bangweulu and Tanganyika, where they were primarily used in the bulk transport of goods destined for the East African coast. On the Luapula river system, a series of societies and economies developed that were dependent upon fishing and used the river for transport.<sup>13</sup> In Western Zambia, the Zambezi River was similarly used for transport, though less for fishing purposes.

The dependence of the new BSAC colonial administration of Northern Rhodesia on the goodwill and transportation abilities of the local populace is well illustrated by comments written by Hubert Harrington, the District Commissioner in Fort Rosebery (Mansa). Prior to his transfer, Harrington jotted down helpful suggestions for his successor, including advice on not taxing certain sections of the local population:

Mulewa Kisoni ... this village does the ferrying of the mails across Bangweulu [and] it is not wise to be too severe with these people in collecting tax ... Because if worried for tax and being water people they bolt to Kisi and Mbawala [the islands Chishi and Mbabala that lie in the middle of lake Bangweulu] and leave no one to work the ferry which requires skilled paddlers as the crossing is 7½ miles wide taking 3½ hours and when the winds are on it it is a dangerous crossing.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, on another occasion, Harrington wrote the following about the village of Chongolo on the Luapula River:

Chongolo this is a friendly old man, he is the owner of the Canoes and does the ferrying across the Luapula on the Serenji Ft Roseberry road. His people are not called out for Hut Tax they being water-people are no use for work. Up till 1905 he

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<sup>12</sup> Tapson, 'Transport', 52.

<sup>13</sup> M.C. Musambachime, *Development growth of the fishing industry in Mweru-Luapula 1920-1964*, (PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1981); D.M. Gordon, *Nachituti's gift: Economy, society and environment in Central Africa* (Madison, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> National Archives of Zambia Lusaka (NAZ), KDF 3/1 vol. 1, district commissioner and magistrate, Mweru-Luapula District at Fort Rosebery, December 1906, Folio 21.

lived on the Belgian side but he has now crossed to the British side. Pay him 10/- per year for keeping the ferry open. He is and always has been most loyal.<sup>15</sup>

These examples indicate that by being involved in transport, these people, unlike the remainder of the population of Northern Rhodesia, were excluded from taxation and effectively excused from having to work for the colonial administration. Interestingly in the case of Chongolo, these benefits did not prevent him or his followers from making use of the opportunities provided by the newly delineated colonial boundary between the Belgian Congo and Northern Rhodesia and crossing over into the Belgian Congo.<sup>16</sup>

The flood plains of the Zambezi River running from North to South through Western Zambia formed the heartland of the Buluzi Kingdom. The river was used as the prime transport route in the region. Today, the annual move of the Buluzi royal capital – from the dry-season settlement of Lealui to the wet-season settlement in Limulunga – is one of Zambia's greatest national events and certainly its greatest tourist event. The move, referred to as the *Ku'omboka*, (literally 'to wade out of the water to higher ground') is initiated by the paramount chief of the Lozi, the Litunga, who boards an enormous barge powered by more than 100 paddlers and leads the move to dry ground. The royal barge – the *Nalikwanda* – is enormous and belies the popular notion of African canoes being small dugout tree trunks precariously paddled across streams. In Buluzi, enormous barges ferry complete households over great distances across the Zambezi River and its flood plains.

From the moment the BSAC sought to establish its presence in Western Zambia, the company was dependent on the services of paddlers and canoes in the employment of the Lozi Kingdom. Colonial officials, dispatched to dispense colonial rule in Western Zambia, would board canoes just North of the Victoria Falls at Livingstone and be transported upriver to their places of residence.

These journeys upstream, being dependent on the muscle power of paddlers, took a minimum of at least ten days, before the company's first administrative centre was reached. This allowed the new administrative officials time to adapt to their new terrain, and, perhaps more importantly, allowed the paddlers – and by extension their community – to gain insight into the habits, quirks, attitudes and characters of the new arrivals sent to administer them. As with portage, the

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<sup>15</sup> NAZ, KDF 3/1 vol. 1, district commissioner and magistrate, Mweru – Luapula District at Fort Rosebery, April 1908, Folio 59.

<sup>16</sup> Musambachime has written extensively on the way people in the area used the border to their advantage. See M. Musambachime, 'Escape from tyranny: Flights across the Rhodesia-Congo boundary, 1900-1930', *Transafrican Journal of History*, 18 (1989), 147-59 and M. Musambachime, 'Protest migrations in Mweru-Luapula 1900-1940', *African Studies*, 47, 1 (1988), 19-34.



use of barges and canoes illustrates once again the dependence of a colonial state established on the muscle power, if not goodwill, of the local population.

As late as the early 1930s, administrative staff sent to work in Western Zambia would make use of the services of paddlers to transport them up the Zambezi River. Writing to his parents in 1932 the young Oxford graduate, John Patrick Law, wrote:

Gerry Curtis is going to Barotseland too. To a place further North than Kalabo called Balovale on the Zambezi. He and I start off on Tuesday in a barge or rather a barge each, which is paddled by 18 natives, and takes us right up the Zambezi to the Provincial Capital Mongu. It takes us about 3 weeks to get to Mongu, and we are entirely on our own for that time, except of course for the paddlers and our native servants. We are expected to stop several times on the way up and spend a day or two at a time hunting.<sup>17</sup>

Law's letters home are littered with high hopes for 'lots of marvellous shooting', and close reading of them clearly shows that the three-week boat trip was to a large extent used to develop the young man's hunting eye and shooting skills. Writing to his mother from Shesheke, his first port of call along the Zambezi, Law provided a fine description of the barge and trip up the river:

The barges are about 20 feet long and 5 feet broad at the widest part, and are propelled by 16 paddlers, 8 in the bows and 8 in the stern. Amidships there is an awning made of rush mats, and under this we recline, side by side. All our kit is packed in behind us, or in the other barge, while our boys are perched on the top of the luggage. It's really very comfortable and perfectly cool, and the smell of native hasn't been noticeable yet! It's the most amusing and primitive way of travelling and I never realised that such a means still existed. On a good day's run you cover about 30-35 miles, but we haven't averaged this, as our little excursions after game have taken up time. We usually camp about 6 pm and move off about 8 am, but we are going to try now and get off at 6 am and stop at 4 pm, as then we shall be able to get some shooting in the evening!<sup>18</sup>

Although Law and his colleagues did not manage to leave at 6 am, a letter written to his father two weeks later at Senanga provides a fitting description of the travel upstream, as well as the way the young administrative officers whiled away their time and became introduced to their new field:

We start off every morning in the barge at 7 am, having been called at 6, eaten a few biscuits and drunk a cup of tea, and then we paddle till 11, when we stop for an hour and have a meal. Then we go from 12 noon to 4 pm and camp. As soon as we get into camp Gerry and I dash off with guns and rifles and hunt until it gets dark about 6.30. When we get back, we have a bath and then a huge dinner – once by mistake

<sup>17</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. S. 393, Law (P.J.) Letters to his parents during colonial service in Northern Rhodesia 1932-1936, 20 August 1932.

<sup>18</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. S. 393, Law (P.J.) Letters to his parents during colonial service in Northern Rhodesia 1932-1936, 26 August 1932.

we had 5 courses! This is the bald outline of our day, and though it may not sound it, it really is a marvellous life. When you're in the barge you can read, fish or pot cormorants with the .22, and then in the evening you can shoot, and when you go out you have no idea what you are going to see – buffalo, buck, geese and duck, partridges or guinea fowl.<sup>19</sup>

This form of travel, which has within it all the elements of the best of British *Boys' Own* narrative style, ensured that by the time the young men arrived at their postings, they would have formed their own ideas regarding those they were to work with.<sup>20</sup> Referring to a young Nyasa man who had been seconded to them by a timber camp manager, Law notes that he is:

... a far better hunter than these Barotse, in fact he is really wonderful and as keen as mustard. He is very quick at seeing game and is truly amazing in the way he gets you up to them. The Barotse seem cheery souls, but they are a bit lazy, and are slow hunters.<sup>21</sup>

The long journey upstream, which fulfilled the necessary conditions of British ideas regarding their departure from the civilized world, would have brought about a change in how these young British officials saw and thought of the world around them. Having undoubtedly read Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the young men's long trip away from what they would have seen as the last outpost of civilization at Livingstone would have fulfilled all the ideas and notions they might have had regarding their mission and role in Africa. At the same time, it is highly unlikely that they were ever consciously aware of the fact that they were in turn dependent on the people who they had been sent to govern.

Whilst the young British officials formed their ideas, their fellow travellers and paddlers would at the same time be forming their own opinions of the new recruits. It would most certainly not have been lost upon the Africans that the young representatives of the British Empire were dependent for their every wish, whim and need on the goodwill and assistance of the Africans travelling with them. In writing home, Law admits as much when he combines the positive qualities of hunting with the ability to purchase supplies, when describing the messenger accompanying their party:

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<sup>19</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. S. 393, Law (P.J.) Letters to his parents during colonial service in Northern Rhodesia 1932-1936, 7 September 1932.

<sup>20</sup> J. Richards, 'Boys' own empire: Feature films and imperialism in the 1930s'. In: J.M. Mackenzie, ed., *'Boys' own empire'. Imperialism and popular culture* (Manchester, 1986). It was a form of travel that led me to jot down in my notes, 'Hunt Hunt Hunt, ...'.

<sup>21</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. S. 393, Law (P.J.) Letters to his parents during colonial service in Northern Rhodesia 1932-1936, 7 September 1932.

The messenger who is escorting us is a very good lad and quite keen about hunting. He also buys us eggs and milk for which we pay in salt, which is more prized than money up here.<sup>22</sup>

The words of Law, Williams and their fellow administrators illustrate the dependency of the young administrators operating on the very fringes of the British Empire upon the goodwill of the local population. By and large, colonial officials in the remote areas of Zambia in the 1920s and 1930s were, by virtue of their extreme isolation and dependency on local populations for transport and communication, limited in their power and far from the traditional popular image of the all-powerful colonial tyrant.

### Draught animals and tsetse fly

The use of draught and pack animals in most areas of Zambia, as mentioned earlier, was not possible on account of the tsetse fly and trypanosomiasis. Nevertheless, cattle could be safely pastured in some of the country's South-Western districts and forms of animal traction were the norm there. Within the Buluzi Kingdom, the use of ox-wagons, the norm elsewhere in Southern Africa, was not common, primarily on account of the deep Kalahari sands that made dragging wagons particularly difficult. Instead, in those areas where the sand was too deep, people made use of sleds specifically constructed for the purpose. Old dugout canoes that could no longer be used on water were also put to use as sleds.

Although the tsetse fly was lethal to all domesticates, large numbers of wild animals were immune to trypanosomiasis. Not surprisingly, there were attempts to domesticate wild animals in the search for draught and pack animals that would be unaffected by the flies. Jared Diamond has noted elsewhere that it appears as if all animals worldwide that could be domesticated have indeed been so.<sup>23</sup> Attempts were made to domesticate animals that were resistant to tsetse but all of them eventually failed.

... someone in Fort Jameson once thought it would be a good thing to train zebra to pull the Administrator's carriage. A certain chap named Toby was given the task of training four spanking zebra which were reputed to be tame. After much trouble and patience, one of the zebra bit him and nearly tore the muscle out of his arm. This was too much for Toby. He shot the lot.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Indeed in those instances where animals can be domesticated, they have been. There is evidence to indicate that the donkey has been domesticated on at least two separate occasions and at different locations in Africa.

<sup>24</sup> Tapson, 'Transport', 52.

A direct, if unexpected, consequence of the presence of the tsetse fly, trypanosomiasis and the consequent absence of draught animals was the absence of roads suitable for wheeled transport. In contrast to those parts of the world where draught animals could be used to pull carts, wagons and the like, Northern Rhodesia had an almost total absence of wagon trails and roads suitable for wheeled traffic. Prior to the advent of petrol-driven motor vehicles, no roads had been made suitable for wheeled traffic and consequently no motorized traffic was possible until such roads had been built. In contrast to other places where animal traction had led to the building of roads suitable for wheeled transport, and where the advent of motor vehicles led to the rapid appropriation of these roads, to the surprise and annoyance of many incoming colonial officials roads were absent in Northern Rhodesia.<sup>25</sup>

### Steam trains

The train had a tremendous impact on societies across the world. In 1905 the railway bridge across the Zambezi River at the Victoria Falls was completed and, after this, the territories that would make up Zambia came to be linked by rail to the ports of South Africa and Mozambique. By 1909, the railway was completed between Livingstone and Ndola, with a branch line continuing into the Belgian Congo at Sakania and on to Fungurume. The newly emerging copper mines of Katanga thus came to be directly linked to the coast.<sup>26</sup>

However, for all of their power and capacity, the sad truth is that trains are always limited by the line of rail itself and, unlike cars, trains are unable to make detours to collect or drop off goods. Although the railway line meant a tremendous reduction in travel times for anybody living along it, the railway's impact was limited beyond a day's walk from it. The increase in costs entailed in transporting agricultural goods to the railway cut profits and ensured that there was a direct relationship between distance to the line and profitability, a fine balance often between profit and ruin. Farmers and colonial administrators were well aware of the implications, as is illustrated in the following:

... camped at Harvey's farm ... – 13 thousand bags of maize for a crop, ... 100 acres of spuds in the ground and 50 acres of wheat and 90 dozen eggs going to market every week. But of course 22 miles from the rail cuts down profits.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Not surprisingly, a major aspect of the colonial administration's self-proclaimed civilizing mission was the building and maintenance of roads.

<sup>26</sup> The building of railways was essential to the industrialization of central Africa. The standard work on the building of railways in this part of Africa is S.E. Katzenellenbogen, *Railways and the copper mines of Katanga* (Oxford, 1973).

<sup>27</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. S. 776 – 781, Chilanga, 1 September 1923, My dear mother.

The railhead was effectively the terminus and gateway to the outside world. Beyond it, goods, passengers and post had to be transported by other means and – in the absence of roads – by foot. With no effective means to transfer goods such as agricultural produce from farms to the line of rail, agricultural produce remained limited to what could be consumed or traded locally, with the exception of stock that could be walked to market. In the late 1930s, District Officer John Walter wrote to his wife noting what it meant to be away from the railway:

Everybody says I shall like Kasama – and it is not very lonely as there are about 20 Europeans there altogether; and a good mail service (only 2 or 3 days to railhead). Sharland's letters will take about a month to get to the railway from Mankaya in the centre of Barotseland.<sup>28</sup>

### Steam traction engines

In the absence of railways and with the presence of trypanosomiasis, there was one mode of transport in central Africa in the early 1900s that could be used for bulk transport, namely the steam traction engine. Essentially a locomotive designed to run without rails, the steam traction engine was a product of industrial technology normally associated with English country fairs, and certainly not Africa.<sup>29</sup> Steam traction engines had been used to ferry troops during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) and as early as 1904 these engines had crossed the Kafue and been put to work in central Africa.<sup>30</sup> The British South Africa Company used them to transport rubber from the Bangweulu swamps and Luapula to the railway line.<sup>31</sup> Similarly the copper mine at Kansanshi in 1913 used a steam traction engine to transport ore to the rail line at Mbaya in the Belgian Congo.<sup>32</sup>

In the early part of the twentieth century, the men who operated steam traction engines were accorded a status akin to that enjoyed by computer experts in the booming 1990s and rewarded accordingly in financial terms. Theodore Williams, an Oxford graduate and probationer with the BSAC administration in Northern Rhodesia in 1913, could not help but complain in a letter that:

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<sup>28</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. S. 664. Grand Hotel, Lusaka, Northern Rhodesia, 16 August 1937.

<sup>29</sup> As a child in 1977, I travelled to Kansanshi with my father and while travelling through the bush we stumbled upon the remains of a steam traction engine.

<sup>30</sup> South Africa A Weekly Journal for All Interested in South African Affairs, 5 May 1906.

<sup>31</sup> C. Lamb, *The Africa house* (London, 2000), 92-93.

<sup>32</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. S. 776 – 781, Kansanshi, Friday 17 January 1913, My dear father.

C.G. Dawson the traction engine driver gets 900 pounds a year – but of course he is a fairly skilled mechanic.<sup>33</sup>

Considering that Williams, as a graduate, was at that stage earning no more than £250 a year, Dawson's skills must have been very highly regarded.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the Kansanshi Mine must have been highly profitable if it could afford to pay such wages to someone to transport its ore over a distance of 90 miles to the rail line at Mbaya.

Powerful steam traction engines were, however, hardly suitable for use in the African bush. In the absence of paved all-weather roads, journeys that took three days to complete in the dry season could take more than a month in the rainy season. Early in 1913, as the rainy season was beginning in earnest, Theodore Williams jotted down the following in his diary:

Met Dawson traction engine – both inches deep in mud – the engine 2 or 3 feet deep in the road now and then – 2 miles short of Katandoma river – a cheery lad, and so pleased with life and the country – bucked to meet someone to talk to after a month on the Baya road with his engine.<sup>35</sup>

Dependent upon passable roads and a constant supply of clean water and dry wood for fuel, steam traction engines were far from the independent means of transport that they may have appeared at first. Instead, the steam traction engine and its driver were totally dependent upon hordes of labourers to ensure a steady supply of water and fuel.<sup>36</sup> The recruitment of the labour required for the logistical support of a steam traction engine is something that still needs to be investigated but a superficial reading of the documents indicates that in the progress of one expedition between Fungurume and Sankisia, approximately 1,000 labourers were employed to allow the passage of two steam traction

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<sup>33</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. S. 776 – 781, Kansanshi, Friday 17 January 1913, My dear father. In 1913, £900 would have been the equivalent of about US\$ 85,000 or € 80,000 today.

<sup>34</sup> The wages paid to those working in the mines rankled Williams throughout his BSAC career. At a later stage in 1917 he confided in a letter: 'It gives one food for thought to see men, and many of them with no more years, brains, breed, or bluff than I have at my disposal, only with a technical training of some sort, who get anything between one and two thousand a year!'. RH, MSS. Afr. S. 776 – 781, British Vice Consulate, Elizabethville, 23 January 1917, My dear Mother.

<sup>35</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. S. 776 – 781, Williams, T.R.. Administrative officer, northern Rhodesia: diaries, 1912 – 21. 3 vols, 12 January 1913.

<sup>36</sup> National Archives, Kew Gardens, London (PRO), ADM 123/142, contains detailed reports of the Tanganyika Naval expedition led by commander Spicer-Simpson. Of relevance here are the use of steam traction engines and the necessity of fuel, water and a decent road.



*Photo 1.1* Steam traction engine  
*Source:* Frank J. Magee, “Transporting a navy through the jungles of Africa in War Time”, in *The National Geographic Magazine*, October 1922.

engines.<sup>37</sup> The social costs of steam traction engines in central Africa in terms of labour were in any case substantial.

### Bicycles

... a broad path through the trees, with the enormous ruts a traction engine makes – no macadamized roads in this country. We had a bike with us and I’d have used it a good deal in places – but generally let Matthew push it.<sup>38</sup>

A *dona* who had a bicycle employed a special boy to accompany her on her rides. He carried a long forked stick. When the *dona* came to an incline she would say *kanka*, and the boy would press his forked stick against the back fork and push. He would have to keep up all the time, down hill as well as up, which wasn’t easy when the *dona* decided to do twelve miles per hour down hills.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> PRO, DO 119/918, Naval Africa Expedition, Report of Progress no. 4, Sankisia, 30 September 1915.

<sup>38</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. S. 776 – 781.

<sup>39</sup> Tapson, ‘Transport’, 52.

Apart from the steam traction engine, another product of industrial technology that transformed society and made its way to central Africa prior to the arrival of the motor car was the 'safety bicycle'.<sup>40</sup> In contrast to the steam traction engine and the gleaming limousines of the 1950s and 1960s, bicycles continue to provide reliable transport throughout present-day central Africa and Zambia.<sup>41</sup> In the 1880s, safety bicycles revolutionized societies in Northern Europe and North America. Suddenly overnight, people on a bicycle could easily cover three times the distance they could normally do whilst walking. Whereas previously people limited their activities to a radius of approximately five km, people could now extend their activities to a radius of 15 km. The social transformation brought about by the bicycle has led the British geneticist Steve Jones to argue that the invention of the bicycle is the most important event in recent human evolution. Work conducted by Jones has indicated that, on account of the bicycle, marriage patterns changed as the choice of potential

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<sup>40</sup> Safety bicycles were so called because in contrast to the 'penny farthing' cycles that had existed before with two different-sized wheels, the safety bicycle had two wheels of the same size and thus did not have the tendency to fly head over heels. For a detailed history of the bicycle, see D. Herlihy, *Bicycle: The history* (New Haven, 2004).

<sup>41</sup> The social history of the bicycle in Central Africa as a whole is a topic that awaits a historian. In Zambia today, bicycles are used for all manner of transport. On any day of the week, roads leading into Lusaka are crowded with cyclists bringing charcoal to the urban inhabitants of the city, and in the rural areas bicycles provide transport in the absence of motorized transport. Bicycles, by virtue of their versatility and ease survive long after cars have broken down. The BBC recently broadcast a devastating piece by Tim Butcher entitled *Re-charting the mighty Congo*. Butcher's words convey the immensity of what has come to pass in the Congo:

The Ho Chi Minh trail of Congolese survival – cadaverous men we saw by the hundred wandering the forest, pushing pedal-less bicycles laden with jars of palm oil for hundreds and hundreds of kilometres for the chance of making a few pounds by trading them for another commodity like salt. These men were on six-week round trips, drinking when they passed a stream, eating what they could scavenge in the bush, and sleeping on the trail when the sun went down. There are no shops here, no houses to rest in, just the endless forest void. 'There is nothing in my home town, Kongolo – this is my only chance to feed my family,' one of the men, Muke Nguy, said before heaving his tottering bike down the trail. 'What's that?' I asked, pointing at a loop of vine on his shoulder. 'My bicycle repair kit,' he said. The sap makes a gummy resin, ideal for mending flat tyres. I shook my head in sorry disbelief.

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from\\_our\\_own\\_correspondent/4137275.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/4137275.stm), Accessed 20 May 2007. See also N.R. Hunt, 'Bicycles, birth certificates, and clysters: Colonial objects as reproductive debris in Mobutu's Zaïre'. In: W. van Binsbergen & P. Geschiere, eds, *Commodification: Things, agency and identities: The social life of things revisited* (Berlin and Münster, 2005).



partner expanded and was no longer limited to the immediate environs of one's place of birth.<sup>42</sup>

The British South Africa Company provided its officials with bicycles. After a short spell of work in Nyasaland, one such official, Frank Melland, careened his way into Northern Rhodesia in late 1901:

Two miles of the Abercorn road then we struck off cross country I should think it was as rough a riding as I ever want to do though much more enjoyable and certainly more exciting than a *machila*, I rode most of the way, through scrub and over rocks, winding, as nothing but a native path can wind – but sometimes the path was too bad even to wheel the machine ... I wonder what the respectable English-born bike thought of it.<sup>43</sup>

Although Melland put on a brave face, the truth of the matter was that he arrived at his campsite covered from head to foot in soot and dust having taken a number of falls when his pedals had struck rocks and hummocks on either side of the footpath.<sup>44</sup> Indeed so tumultuous was Melland's arrival by bicycle in colonial Zambia that his bicycle had, as he put it, 'crocked'. Henceforth he refrained from using it and much to the chagrin of his carriers had himself transported by *machila*.<sup>45</sup> Even though he did not immediately succumb to the temptations of a *machila*, Theodore Williams, in keeping with Melland's sentiments, noted of cycling in colonial Zambia in 1913 that:

Still it is not quite such an obliteration of distance as is biking in England. Often there are simply too many trees across the track to make it worthwhile hopping off and on every 20 yards.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> S. Jones, *The language of the genes: Biology, history and the evolutionary future* (London, 1993).

<sup>43</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. R. 192, Melland, F.H. 'Diary of life in North Eastern Rhodesia, 1901 – 1904', 3 vols. Melland later travelled through Africa with his friend Edward Cholmeley. F.H. Melland & E.H. Cholmeley, *Through the heart of Africa: Being an account of a journey on bicycles and on foot from northern Rhodesia past the great lakes to Egypt undertaken when proceeding home on leave in 1911* (London, 1912).

<sup>44</sup> In advance of the rains and in keeping with Chitemene shifting cultivation practised by the Bemba, large tracts of the bush had been burnt to make way for fields. It is tempting to believe, though undoubtedly impossible to prove, that Melland's virulent opposition to and persecution of Chitemene agriculture has its roots in the dark and sooty day of his arrival in colonial Zambia.

<sup>45</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. R. 192, diary entry, 6 October 1901.

<sup>46</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. S. 776 – 781. At another stage Williams noted:

At other times the country is hilly and the bikes the company provides are most unsuitably high geared – considering one never wants to go faster than 5 miles an hour as one has to keep with one's walk-foot gunbearers and paths finder. I have generally made a point of walking about the first 8 to 10 miles – from 6 till nearly 9 say ... after that biked as much as was likeable.

For all of the negative experiences expressed by colonial officials at the beginning of the twentieth century, the bicycle soon developed into a popular and continuingly affordable form of transport for Zambians.<sup>47</sup>

## Motorcycles

A development that made full use of the skills and techniques developed in both the cycle and steam industry was the motorcycle. With the development of the internal combustion engine in the 1890s many bicycle makers switched to the production of motorized vehicles.<sup>48</sup> By the early 1900s motorcycles were being mass-produced in Europe and the United States. Considerably cheaper than a car and considerably more manoeuvrable on the trails and footpaths of colonial Zambia, the motorcycle soon became the preserve of wealthier colonial officials.<sup>49</sup> By 1917, well-to-do colonial officials had taken to puttering around on a wide variety of motorcycle models that had been produced by British manufacturers such as BSA and Norton. These motorcycles were transported to Northern Rhodesia in crates that were portaged to their final destination. Writing of an officer in charge of bulk stores destined for Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia in the settlement of Tete on the Zambezi River in Mozambique, a chronicler noted that:

He thought it would be a good idea to take them out of their crates, inflate the tyres, put the gear into neutral and let two porters push the bikes to Fort Jameson [Chipata, Zambia]. ... [unfortunately] the long hills were too much temptation for the porters, and many were the claims for damaged machines.<sup>50</sup>

Given the sheer mass of motorcycles, it can hardly be considered surprising that porters would have chosen to attempt to ride these vehicles whenever the opportunity presented itself. Anxious to avoid damage to his new motorcycle, the chronicler describes how a White Father went to the trouble of personally trekking down to Tete to take delivery of the vehicle and to ride it back to Fort Jameson. However:

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<sup>47</sup> Terence Ranger discussed the impact and continuing importance of bicycles in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe in a short article entitled 'Bicycles and the social history of Bulawayo'. (Manuscript in the author's possession.) See also, Hunt, 'Bicycles, birth certificates, and clysters', which has an extensive section on bicycles in Congo.

<sup>48</sup> Internal combustion engines are those in which motive power is derived from the explosion of vapour – usually a petroleum distillate – in a cylinder, and are to be found in virtually every generator, pump, motor car, train, boat and bus on planet Earth.

<sup>49</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. S. 776 – 781, Elizabethville, Congo Belge, 7 January 1917, My dear mother.

<sup>50</sup> Tapson, 'Transport', 53.

On the way back he ran into a herd of elephants. He threw his bike down and retreated hastily into the bush. One of the elephants came up to the bike to sniff it. His trunk came into contact with the hot cylinder and in a rage he stamped on the machine and trampled it into a tangled heap of metal.<sup>51</sup>

Unlike the bicycle, the motorcycle does not appear to have had a lasting impact on Zambian society. The reasons for this are manifold but include the following examples. Effectively the motorcycle continued to be an expensive toy of the elite with very little practical value. One could always attach a sidecar but motorcycles tend to be, by definition, the epitome of individualism. Furthermore, in contrast to bicycles, motorcycles are not easily manoeuvrable when heavily loaded. That is, even though a bicycle may lose its pedals and chain, it can still be – and often is – used to transport goods. The same does not hold for motorcycles. When they break down or run out of fuel, the engine becomes deadweight and a hindrance.

### The first automobile

One of the less controversial of the many settler heroes of German colonialism, Paul Graetz, a.k.a. ‘Bwana Tucka Tucka’, introduced the first motor car into colonial Zambia in 1908, when he drove across Africa between 1907 and 1909.<sup>52</sup> Graetz’s continuing popularity is such that whole websites are devoted to him and his exploits<sup>53</sup> and reruns of his trip with replicas of his vehicle and modern 4x4s are organized by German tour operators today. A reading of his travelogue indicates that Graetz had his fair share of ‘traveller experiences’, but what was omitted from his text and commemorative texts was the simple fact that his trip would never have been possible without African labour. Graetz’s trip from Dar es Salaam in German East Africa to Swakopmund in German South West Africa was a trip that was possible only on account of extensive road and bridge building, and the portage of his petrol by African labourers recruited to prepare the way and establish fuel dumps along his intended line of travel.<sup>54</sup> Stranded at the Lukakashi River, Graetz had to wait for three weeks for fuel to be brought up by rail from Bulawayo in Southern Rhodesia and portaged from Broken Hill to his involuntary campsite on the Lukakashi River. In keeping with the carrying load of an individual porter, the 50-gallon drum (approxi-

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> P. Graetz, *Im Auto quer durch Afrika* (Berlin, 1910).

<sup>53</sup> [http://www.bwana.de/deutsch/graetz/ind\\_ie.htm](http://www.bwana.de/deutsch/graetz/ind_ie.htm). Following his trip across the African continent, Graetz went on to make a name for himself in airships in the Dutch East Indies.

<sup>54</sup> NAZ, KSD 4/1 vol. 1, Mpika District Note Book, 1901. Entry for April 1908.



*Photo 1.2* D.C. Wallace on tour in his T-Ford, 1915  
*Source:* National Archives of Zambia

mately 220 litres) had to be manhandled by 12 porters. The size and weight of the load made an indelible impact on travellers along the route between Broken Hill and Mpika and, weeks prior to the arrival of the petrol, rumours of the impending arrival of an enormous drum had reached Graetz.<sup>55</sup>

### World War One and carriers<sup>56</sup>

Incapacitation through disease among the British was 31.4 to one for the troops and 140.8 to one for the followers.<sup>57</sup>

The motor car came into its own in colonial Zambia when African portage labour was unable to keep up with the demands of that most voracious and extravagant form of capital destruction, armed conflict. Many people fail to realize what devastating consequences the First World War was to have for the

<sup>55</sup> Graetz, *Im Auto*, 166-69.

<sup>56</sup> G. Hodges, *The Carrier Corps: Military labor in the East African campaign, 1914-1918* (Westport, 1986).

<sup>57</sup> A. Beck, *Medicine and society in Tanganyika 1890-1930: A historical inquiry* (Philadelphia, 1977), 40.

inhabitants of East and Central Africa.<sup>58</sup> Although there was very little actual fighting on the ground in Northern Rhodesia, the territory and its people were directly affected by the war. For the four years between 1914 and 1918, the societies of what are now the states of Zambia, Tanzania, Malawi, Kenya, Congo and Mozambique were ravaged by the effects of warfare as competing armies criss-crossed the region. They dragooned men into military service and conscripted hundreds of thousands of men and women as porters (*tenga tenga*). In addition, tremendous demands and strains were placed upon the ability of communities to make available food supplies for the armies. Indeed, so harsh were these demands that by 1917 there were districts in Northern colonial Zambia that were devoid of people and denuded of all agricultural produce.<sup>59</sup>

Recruitment for service in both colonial armies, either as soldiers or as carriers, was a very direct affair. Mel Page refers to one of his informants who noted: 'They used to chase people as if they were chasing chickens', and cites a former German Askari who stated that 'if they were short of soldiers they forced anyone they saw to join their forces'.<sup>60</sup> Carrier corps made up the bulk of the armies moving through East Africa. The work of Mel Page, Geoffrey Hodges and others have brought to the fore the central role played by African porters in the Great War in Africa.<sup>61</sup> These authors have detailed the enormous sacrifices made by Africans, and have, to some extent, dealt with the impact of these multitudes of non-combatants. It has been estimated that no fewer than 1.5 million people operated as carriers in Tanganyika alone. The men of the Carrier Corps were believed to have died at the rate of 400 per month during part of the

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<sup>58</sup> There is a vast literature, much of it of a popular nature, dealing with the war in East Africa. See E.P. Hoyt, *Guerilla, Colonel von Lettow-Vorbeck and Germany's East African Empire* (London, 1981); General von Lettow-Vorbeck, *Meine Erinnerungen aus Ostafrika* (Leipzig, 1921). The most detailed archival sources for this war are to be found in the National Archives, formerly the Public Records Office, in Kew, England. The War Office 158 Africa series, sub-series General Headquarters, WO 158/459 – 467 deal with NORFORCE, the British forces commanded by General Northey. In addition, WO 95/5329 – 5331 contain the war diaries of General Northey and provide a day-by-day account of developments in northeastern Zambia and southwestern Tanzania during the war.

<sup>59</sup> The same held true for the areas in the immediate vicinity of the railhead at Broken Hill. NAZ, KDA2/1 vol. 1, notes of 3<sup>rd</sup> Indaba held April 1916 'Famine in parts of district, ...'.

<sup>60</sup> M.E. Page, ed., *Africa and the First World War* (London, 1987), 7.

<sup>61</sup> M.E. Page, *The Whiwaya War: Malawians and the First World War* (Boulder, 2000); G. Hodges, 'Military labour in East Africa and its impact on Kenya'. In: Page, ed., *Africa World War*, 137-51; Hodges, *The Carrier Corps*; G. Hodges, *Kariakor: The Carrier Corps: The story of the military labour forces in the conquest of German East Africa, 1914 to 1918* (Nairobi, 1999).

campaign.<sup>62</sup> Porters died from causes that ranged from being killed as a result of direct combat and untreated wounds to malnourishment and disease. A government medical officer who served as a missionary doctor in peace time provided a stark picture of human destruction:

Large numbers have died in base hospitals, on the roads and in the reserves after reaching home. Further, the men left for active service well and fit. Those repatriated have returned mostly physically unfit, bringing with them diseases innumerable.<sup>63</sup>

Carriers were young men and women in the prime of their lives who were taken from their communities at a time when these were in desperate need of all the productive capacity they could muster. Writing of North-Eastern Rhodesia where he was based during part of the war, Williams wrote to his mother:

It is over in NER that natives have done *really nobly*: there they have not had a month's rest since 1915: if they were not actually humping loads they were being driven to their gardens to raise more food.<sup>64</sup>

Sir Laurence Wallace, former administrator of North-Western Rhodesia, drafted a lecture that dealt with the organization of transport during the war. It provides an excellent account of the difficulties encountered by the British:

The difficulties were that between the nearest point on the Railway and the Northern border, where the Rhodesian Column was concentrated for its advance into German East Africa there were 600 miles of country covered with tsetse fly, in which no domestic animals could live and therefore no sustained ox, horse, mule or donkey transport was possible. Because of this, no roads had been made suitable for wheeled traffic and motor traffic was not possible until such roads had been made. We were therefore at first limited to native carrier transport.

When war broke out some native troops were immediately sent through to the border, by various routes in order to assure food on the way, but to send the first European troops through we were forced to use ox-wagon transport knowing that the oxen could not live much longer than the outward journey, and certainly not long enough to bring the empty wagons back. Altogether 30 wagons with about 100 tons of stores and 600 oxen started and just got through, though none of the oxen survived the journey.

During 1915 the country had not been quite denuded of its share of food and we were able by carrier transport to keep the troops in supplies, but we had to prepare for heavier demands and motor transport seemed the only way out.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Hodges, *Kariakor*.

<sup>63</sup> Beck, *Medicine and society*, 40.

<sup>64</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. S. 776 – 781, March 31 1919, NC office Solwezi, My dear mother.

<sup>65</sup> PRO, CAB 45/14, East Africa Campaign Great War: Accounts of Activities on and around the Northern Rhodesia Border.

From late 1915 onwards, the British forces were commanded by Major-General Sir Edward Northey, whose first and most pressing problems of command were related to transport.<sup>66</sup> Northey was informed that 'in this country, except on a few bits of road South of the Frontier, all transport had to be done by Carriers, who consume as much as they carry in one month'.<sup>67</sup> Administrator Wallace, who had sought to ensure the effective supply of goods and materials to the front by carriers, worked out the capacity per distance of carriers:

The average rate of travel for carriers ... is about 15 miles per day. The net load carried is 60 lbs to which has to be added cooking pots, blankets, etc. Their rations are 2½ lbs of meal per day. A carrier would therefore eat the full weight of his load in 24 days, that is on a 12-day journey outward (180 miles) and 12 days return.<sup>68</sup>

Clearly the transporting of goods to the front 600 miles away could not be done effectively by carriers. Indeed, Wallace calculated that should he wish to ensure the supply of 1 ton per day at the front 600 miles from the railhead, he would need no fewer than 71,000 carriers.<sup>69</sup> At the time there was a taxable population of approximately 120,000 in Northern Rhodesia, of whom approximately 80,000 could be recruited. However, 'it was found that if more than one third of these away at a time cultivation suffered, with a consequent loss of the food we so much wanted'.<sup>70</sup> Not surprisingly, upon assuming command, Northey sought to engineer a shift in supply from carriers to motor transport wherever possible: 'I am now arranging for carriers to enable mobile forces to get forward and for the making of roads for motor traffic for forward and lateral communication'.<sup>71</sup>

In the course of 1916, a road was cut and bridges built from the railhead at Broken Hill to two points on the border. Model T Fords were obtained via South Africa and converted into lorries able to carry 700 lbs plus a driver and his kit. The road was a dirt track, except for approximately 80 miles of sand where 'wheel tracks in the sand were filled with soft stone and the cars ran on

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<sup>66</sup> For further information on Northey, see G.W. Hatchell, OBE, 'The British occupation of the South-Western Area of Tanganyika Territory, 1914-1918', *Tanganyika Notes and Records*, 51 (1958), 131-55.

<sup>67</sup> PRO, WO 95/5329, East Africa Brig. Gen. E. Northey's War Diary 4 Dec. 1915 – 18 Apr. 1916, 7 January 1916.

<sup>68</sup> PRO, CAB 45/14, East Africa Campaign Great War: Accounts of activities on and around the Northern Rhodesia Border. Folio 2.

<sup>69</sup> PRO, CAB 45/14, East Africa Campaign Great War: Accounts of activities on and around the Northern Rhodesia Border. Folio 3.

<sup>70</sup> PRO, CAB 45/14, East Africa Campaign Great War: Accounts of activities on and around the Northern Rhodesia Border. Folio 4.

<sup>71</sup> PRO, WO 95/5329, East Africa Brig. Gen. E. Northey's War Diary 4 Dec 1915 – 8 Apr. 1916.

two slightly sunken ribbons of Macadam thus formed'.<sup>72</sup> Although the Model T was able to transport far more than carriers, the British continued to rely on carriers until the end of the war. Nevertheless, as a quick glance at the numbers makes abundantly clear, the introduction of the Model T transformed the way in which transport came to be run in colonial Zambia.

### The socio-economic impact of the introduction of motor cars

One of the first things to happen following the introduction of the motor car was that carrier transport came to be superseded by motorized road transport. Henceforth goods were no longer carried from A to B by the long lines of porters so often seen in cartoon depictions of African caravans and European explorers on the Dark Continent. Instead of a string of porters each carrying a maximum of 60 lbs on their shoulders for an absolute maximum of 15 miles a day, the Model T easily transported ten times the amount a porter could carry and for much further than 15 miles a day.<sup>73</sup>

The immediate result of the introduction of the motor vehicle was an economic decline for most of the communities living along the line of travel. Prior to the introduction of the motor vehicle, the portage of goods ensured that the market came, in effect, to people in the villages. A reading of the travel reports for routes throughout the areas that make up present-day Zambia indicates that along the established routes there were villages and settlements scattered like beads on a string every 15 to 25 kilometres.<sup>74</sup> Settlements were spread along routes at distances that corresponded to a day's walk for a laden caravan. Work has recently been conducted by Minetti on the efficiency of postal services based on horses, on services such as the famous US pony express and the pony relay networks of the Roman and Chinese empires. This work indicates that irrespective of time and place, be it in the American West or Asia Minor, all the services that were based on horses came to a similar average travelling

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<sup>72</sup> PRO, CAB 45/14, East Africa Campaign Great War: Accounts of Activities on and around the Northern Rhodesia Border. Folio 1.

<sup>73</sup> Stephen Rockel wrote to the author in 1998 with the following: 'I like the story told with astonishment by a colonial official in Tanganyika about porters and a lorry in the Kilimanjaro region. Sometime in the late 1920s he recruited unwilling Chagga porters to go on tour with him, only to find that they all chipped in to hire a lorry to transport his loads. This made more economic sense to them – they could make more money if they stayed behind rather than wandering around the countryside for a pittance.'

<sup>74</sup> The district notebooks stored in the National Archives of Zambia contain a wealth of information on the various travel routes in Zambia prior to the introduction of the motor car. See in particular, NAZ, KDF 3/1 Vol. 1, District Commissioner and Magistrate, Mweru-Luapula District at Fort Rosebery, Folio 106.



distance (20-25 km) for horses prior to being replaced by new ones.<sup>75</sup> Undoubtedly the same holds true for people.<sup>76</sup> A thoroughly unrepresentative survey of guide books for contemporary recreational walking routes in Western Europe indicates an average of 25 km a day.<sup>77</sup>

District officials regularly went on tour within colonial Zambia. During these tours, taxes would be collected and attempts were undertaken to administer colonial rule. The District Notebooks stored in the National Archives in Zambia list the distances covered and the number of days these tours took. An overview of the available District Notebooks indicates the correlation between time and distance of district tours. An analysis of 27 district tours within the District of Broken Hill indicates that an average tour lasted 18.5 days between 1914 and 1925, and that a distance of little more than 194 miles was covered on an average tour. Therefore, for every day on tour, the average distance covered was 10.49 miles (16.79 km).<sup>78</sup> The average distance travelled on travelling days would have been higher than the average, given that rest days were observed and that there were days on which the colonial officials conducted official business.

Whereas in the past prior to the introduction of the motor vehicle, day journeys would average around 20 km a day, trips by motor vehicle were now limited to the condition of the road and the length of the day. This effectively meant that, suddenly, day trips more than doubled in number. Journeys that had previously taken four days on foot were now completed in a single day.<sup>79</sup> The distances covered in relation to days on tour changed dramatically.<sup>80</sup> Prior to the arrival of the motor car, the distance that had been involved in making tours had been studiously listed, but now journey distances appeared to have lost their previous importance. Indeed, the District Notebook for Broken Hill ceases to

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<sup>75</sup> A. Minetti, 'Efficiency of equine express postal systems', *Nature*, 426 (18/25 December 2003), 785-86.

<sup>76</sup> J.A. Amato, *On foot: A history of walking* (New York, 2004).

<sup>77</sup> <http://www.snp.nl/ProductGroups/invariant/products/Category.aspx?CategoryCode=WALK&WorldPartId=15&countryId=126>.

<sup>78</sup> NAZ, KDA2/1 vol. 1, District Notebook Broken Hill, Folio 160 ff. 'District travelling'. The 27 tours dealt with spent 501 days on tour and covered 5,242 miles.

<sup>79</sup> In this, developments in colonial Zambia mirror those in colonial Namibia where, from about 1925 onwards, the motor car – and with it the truck and bus – came to play an ever-more important role in everyday life. In the Namibian context, trips to outlying areas had taken the form of ox-wagon and walking expeditions, sometimes taking up to three months or more. With the introduction of the car, a trip from Windhoek to the Waterberg, which would normally have been done in four days, could be done in just one day.

<sup>80</sup> NAZ, KDG 5/1 vol. 1, Chipata District Notebook, 10 – 19 June 1919, lists a ten-day tour in which 196 miles were covered by motor vehicle and 50 on foot.

mention the distance covered on tour following the introduction of the motor car in 1925.<sup>81</sup>

Caravans of porters had brought goods, people and services to the villages and settlements they passed through and, in turn, made use of the goods and services that were on offer in these settlements. Prior to the introduction of the motor vehicle, the market in effect walked its way to the villages along the line of travel and in practice this meant that sick or lame porters could be replaced by new recruits, and fellow travellers could be replaced by others. More often than not caravans did not consist solely of porters but also of family members and servants who accompanied the porters as cooks and general hangers-on, and those merely travelling from one village to the next and seeking the company and security of a large travelling party. The arrival of a caravan of porters and travellers heralded the opportunity to sell and trade all manner of goods and services for these villages. With the introduction of the motor vehicle, settlements situated at distances of 15 to 20 km along the line of travel were now passed by in favour of settlements further up the road. The villages that formed the service nodes (the beads on the chain) along the line of travel became increasingly fewer in number and further apart as motor vehicles sped by.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s although colonial officials mentioned that fields and villages were being abandoned along former travel routes and that this decline could be related to the increase in motor transport, this fact appears not to have been immediately recognized by the colonial administration. That motorized transport – the epitome of modernization – could be related to rural decline was not acknowledged. Indeed, the work of Audrey Richards, commissioned in the 1930s, specifically dealt with the perceived decline in agricultural production and argued that this related directly to the mass migration of young men to the copper mines on the Copperbelt.<sup>82</sup> Some colonial officials shared this analysis of what was happening. A fine example is provided by Spencer Reeve Denny who was stationed in Kasempa District in the late 1920s and wrote the following in a letter home:

I believe it is a fact that the gardens are much smaller now than in the years previously. And this is not to be wondered at, when none of the men are there to do the manual labour of the gardens. The young men may return from the mines in July and August, when the beer is plentiful but that is just the time when the trees have to be felled and burnt and the ground tilled. And that is man's work. But having done six months at Nchanga they refuse to work still more at home. Consequently the extent of cultivated land is reduced. Unless some rule is made that so many men must remain in a village during the important seasons, there is going to be a bad famine in

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<sup>81</sup> NAZ, KDA 2/1, vol. 1, Broken Hill, 12 – 17 Sept. 1925.

<sup>82</sup> A.I. Richards, *Land, labour and diet in Northern Rhodesia: An economic study of the Bemba tribe* (London, 1939).

the next few years. As it is in many villages the inhabitants are existing on honey and mushrooms and odd vermin that they manage to trap or spear and now and then a buck or two that one hunter may shoot.<sup>83</sup>

In addition, colonial officials complained bitterly about the difficulty and expense of finding labour in their districts and blamed this on the mines, which they claimed had spoiled the market with the wages and conditions they could offer.<sup>84</sup> The work of Richards, and later Moore and Vaughan, see the development of the mines and their rapacious demand for labour as being responsible for the changes wrought in what is today the Northern Province of Zambia.<sup>85</sup> However, it could also be argued that the ending of the caravan trade freed up substantial amounts of labour for the mines. The reduction in employment opportunities (in terms of portage, agricultural produce and services) that was brought about by the cessation of portage caravans led to a freeing up of labour for the newly emerging mines. It was not so much the mines that were draining the hitherto vibrant rural communities but the end of the caravan trade that forced rural inhabitants to look for work elsewhere. And, in this instance, they found employment in mines many kilometres away from their original home villages. In combination with motor vehicles, which had been first introduced in 1915, there was a vicious circle in colonial Zambia from the mid-1920s onwards when the copper mines of the Copperbelt went into production. As the mines drew labour, this further limited the amount of labour available for transport, which in turn furthered a reliance on mechanized transport, which further decreased the demand for transport labour.

### In summation

The introduction of new forms of transport into central Africa from the 1890s onwards greatly transformed African societies. The introduction of the train in the first decade of the twentieth century allowed for the industrial development of the copper mines in Katanga, Belgian Congo. In colonial Zambia, the impact of the train was limited to the line of rail but the Katangese copper mines that became operational in 1908 had an impact throughout the region as the mines began to attract labour. Additional products of the industrialized world – the bicycle and the steam traction engine – also had an impact. The steam traction engine required enormous amounts of labour for wood, water and road building

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<sup>83</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. S.79, Denny, S.R. Typed extracts from letters home, Northern Rhodesia, 1929 – 31, 17 February 1930.

<sup>84</sup> RH, MSS. Afr. S. 79, Denny, S.R. Typed extracts from letters home, Northern Rhodesia, 1929 – 31, 17 February 1930.

<sup>85</sup> M. Vaughan & H.L. Moore, *Cutting down trees: Gender, nutrition, and agricultural change in the northern province of Zambia, 1890-1990* (London, 1993).

along the route of travel, a reliance on African labour that severely curtailed its operational possibilities. In contrast, the bicycle had a lasting impact on the way goods and people were transported. Bicycles, dependent as they are upon human muscle power, continued to form one of the main forms of transport in central Africa throughout the twentieth century. The motorcycle, unlike the bicycle, does not appear to have had such a lasting impact upon transport in central Africa. The introduction of the motor car, coming as it did when the effectiveness of human caravan portage was found to be wanting, radically transformed central African transport systems. Effectively from one day to the next the way goods and people were transported over distances greater than 25 km was transformed. Settlements and villages that had been at a day's walk from each other along the route of travel were bypassed and came to be abandoned for nodal points that better fitted the new forms of travel. Essentially, the ending of caravan portage brought about a decline in employment and marketing opportunities for rural populations and freed up labour that would be employed in the Katangese mines and the newly emerging mines on the Copperbelt. The large-scale introduction of the motor vehicle, in the form of cars and trucks, into central Africa in the aftermath of the First World War, led to a decline in rural opportunities and heralded the establishment of Zambia's mining proletariat.

# Motor cars and modernity: Pining for progress in Portuguese Guinea, 1915-1945

Philip J. Havik<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In a characteristically anti-modernist stance, Queen Victoria condemned motor cars as follows: ‘I am told that they smell exceedingly nasty, and are very shaky and disagreeable conveyances altogether’.<sup>2</sup> One may well wonder whether Africans, when confronted with these new-fangled, noisy, dirty and dangerous contraptions that rushed by in a cloud of red dust carrying colonial officials in safari helmets on important business, might have reacted in a similar fashion. Photographs from the colonial era show officials in or proudly standing beside their motor cars with a uniformed chauffeur waiting in the wings, and with an exotic African landscape and a few skimpily clad natives in the background. Travel accounts written by officials and foreign visitors in the 1920s and 1930s evoke this archetypal image of what was then Portuguese Guinea, an apparently peaceful and sleepy West African backwater.

However for a territory that had only recently emerged from a violent, protracted war waged by Portuguese and auxiliary troops against its inhabitants,

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<sup>2</sup> A. MacDonald, *Queen Victoria and her amusements* (London, 2002), 109.

‘pacification’, as the authorities called it, could hardly be expected to conform to a postcard colony. Although the war that had lasted from 1890 to 1915 was over, active and passive resistance continued in areas where the population refused to acknowledge European sovereignty. The population of the Bijagó Islands, as well as the Northern frontier areas that were inhabited by the staunchly independent Felupe or Diola close to the Senegalese border, would continue to defy the colonial authorities until well into the 1930s. And as a result, the territory’s Portuguese administration was particularly concerned with securing sovereign control over the territory. Roads were seen as the most effective way of consolidating colonial authority, whilst at the same time being paraded as symbols of progress. Curiously, motor cars, which were introduced in 1916-17 soon after the military pacification campaigns, initially received little attention in official reports, as if their presence would be an automatic result of road building. Motor cars appear to constitute a corollary of development, which at least from the administration’s point of view, was taken for granted and as if the responsibility for their introduction pertained to private initiative. Even so, by the late 1920s they had allowed their occupants to penetrate the deepest recesses of the colony.

Until its military occupation, the territory allocated to Portugal at the Berlin Conference (approximately the size of the Netherlands, i.e. 36,000 km<sup>2</sup>) could only be travelled by way of the region’s many rivers (such as the Cacheu, the Geba and the Corubal). The few towns further upstream were reached by medium-sized and small vessels, as well as by canoes with oars or sails. Journeys were long and hazardous due to natural obstacles (tides, sandbanks) but also as a result of attacks by villagers inland. Only canoes and small armoured motor launches could advance further upstream beyond the reach of the tides. ‘Roads and communications ... were the navigable rivers by means which carried the fleet with its cannons and armed soldiers.’<sup>3</sup>

In a report on Guinea’s Customs Department, a colonial official pointed out that Guinea was a territory intersected by many rivers which were in effect ‘roads’, some of them with a depth that allowed large ships to sail upstream into the interior. Due to slow boats and deficient signalling, it took a number of days to travel from the capital, Bolama, to Cacheu, a distance of 180 miles, and there were long passenger waiting lists.<sup>4</sup> Communication with Lisbon was limited to one ship a month; which showed ‘to what extent Guinea has been abandoned’. He added that if Guinea was to develop, it was necessary to carry out an

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<sup>3</sup> A. Leite de Magalhães, ‘A Guiné’, *Guiné*, special number, *Boletim da Agência Geral das Colónias*, 44 (1929), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Relatório Inspeção Alfandega Guiné, H.A. Gonçalves Cardoso, 4 January 1913; AHU, DGFC, 838.

economic survey of the colony and subsequently draw up an elaborate economic plan to guide the modernization of its infrastructure. Although mentioning the need to attract capital for the building of ports, docks and railways, the same official did not refer to the need for roads and motorized transport (*Ibid.* 173-74). However, he did compare the situation in the territory with the advances made in the neighbouring Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF), which he insisted should be taken as an example for Guinea's future.

The first stretches of road – about 70 km – were built during the pacification campaign in the North of the territory (1913-1915) to facilitate the movement of troops and equipment. In 1915 a thirty-km road was built in the groundnut-producing East of the colony, and a second section of 66 km was created in the same area in the following year. Immediately after military occupation, official reports highlighted the inefficiencies of domestic transport, referring to the 'great distances and the lack of (mechanised) transport that impeded natives to travel to the commercial centres already established' in the interior.<sup>5</sup> By 1917, roads had also been built in the North-West, as had a number of telegraph lines connecting administrative posts with Bissau. And from 1919 onwards a new road-building programme was carried out which increased the network by 185 km, until the new governor in 1921 took it upon himself to 'finish' the job. By the late 1920s, the hard road network totalled some 2,809 km, while telegraph lines stretched almost 700 km across the colony.<sup>6</sup> This rapid increase in a short period of time was quite a feat, especially in this forgotten corner of Africa.<sup>7</sup>

However French sources cast doubt on the accuracy of these and other data which they regarded as 'speculative'.<sup>8</sup> Statistics on infrastructure, trade and education were thought to be unreliable; and even the governor of the colony at the time confidentially regarded them with suspicion. One of the reasons was a lack of qualified personnel, another was the need felt by governors to enhance

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<sup>5</sup> Portaria 532, Boletim Oficial da Guiné Portuguesa (hereafter BOGP), no. 39, 29 September 1917.

<sup>6</sup> Leite de Magalhães, 'A Guiné', 15.

<sup>7</sup> Especially in view of the fact that over 2500 km of tarmac had already been laid by 1925, i.e. within a period of five years; see P.J. Havik 'Estradas sem Fim: O trabalho forçado a a política indígena na Guiné (1915-1945)'. In: E. Mea, J. Capela & M. Santos, *Trabalho Forçado Africano: Experiências coloniais comparadas* (Oporto, 2006), 229-47. As in neighbouring AOF, such a rapid advance had been achieved by recourse to forced labour (called *corvée* labour or *prestations* in French colonies). See B. Fall & Mohamed Mbodj, 'Forced labour and migration in Senegal'. In: A. Zegeye & S. Inshemo, eds, *Forced labour and migration: Patterns of movement within Africa* (New York, 1989), 255-68.

<sup>8</sup> E. Hostains, Bissau, 15 March 1930, to Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (MAE), Centre des Archives d'Outre Mer (CAOM), Fonds Ministeriels (FM), 1291.

their practical performance and political legacy.<sup>9</sup> One of the recurrent issues that came to haunt administrations over the following decades was the length of the road network, whilst the number of vehicles in circulation in the colony also remained uncertain. In the eyes of the French consul in Bissau, progress was ‘apparent’ rather than real (*Ibid.*).

Although Portugal signed the International Convention on Road Traffic,<sup>10</sup> its implementation in the colonies was problematic. Little importance was attached to formalities because there were only a few hundred vehicles on the roads in Portuguese Guinea until the mid-1940s. In the meantime, little was added in terms of basic infrastructure during the 1930s under the dictatorial *Estado Novo* or New State regime (1926-1974), which came to power in Portugal following a coup in 1926. Successive plans for a railway line to connect Bissau with the Thies-Kaye line in Senegal via Kolda were shelved. Such parsimony was by no means surprising given that the world slump and its aftermath prompted the local administration to make radical cuts in public spending, which had an immediate impact upon the colonies. Successive administrative reorganizations in the 1930s led to an overhaul of the civil service in all colonies, including Guinea, while regular inspections of services were introduced. The problems and tensions that surfaced showed just how badly organized and understaffed these services were. For example, the first road map was only made in 1946, and compulsory vehicle registration was also only introduced in the 1940s. In the case of Portuguese Guinea, official reports show that the development and public works departments, which were responsible for transport and communications, were a constant source of complaints, conflict and scandal. Administrators responsible for road building in their *circunscrições* (districts) were also accused of irregularities, including the waste and embezzlement of state funds on large projects such as state-of-the-art bridges, which quickly became white elephants.

In addition, official reports underlined the lack of vehicles and their maintenance, as well as logistical problems that seriously affected public-service efficiency. A large part of the network remained inaccessible during the rainy season, and a significant number of vehicles in the car pool were out of action for long periods or abandoned due to a lack of maintenance and spare parts. The way in which the roads and motor cars were (not) used and how chronic underfunding and mismanagement affected them are the subjects of this chapter. It also focuses on the underlying rivalry between the AOF and Portuguese attempts to match their neighbours’ performance. Data gathered from Portuguese

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<sup>9</sup> According to the French consul in Bissau, the only accurate information came from the annual tax revenues.

<sup>10</sup> League of nations, Geneva, 30 March 1931.



and French archives illustrate the situation in-colony and between Portuguese Guinea and the neighbouring AOF. The first part projects the positive imagery of roads and transport emanating from official reports written by governors and travellers, while the second deals with the critical picture that emerges from mostly unpublished sources in Portuguese and French archives. Given the decentralized nature of the colonial administration, the analysis shifts between the central administration, including the Public Works Department and districts run by local administrators, and their impact on the colony's infrastructure and transport network. The final section discusses the marked contrasts that emerge from a comparison of this source material, and takes a closer look at the underlying reasons for dashed hopes and disenchantment with progress, which appeared to be much more elusive than expected.

### Paving the way for progress

The first references to motor cars date back to the early 1900s when legislation was introduced concerning import duties on vehicles and motorcycles.<sup>11</sup> However, devoid of suitable roads until the continent was occupied militarily in 1915, motor cars were only later imported into the colony.<sup>12</sup> Official reports indicate that a few terrestrial routes were opened from 1910 onwards by district administrators to facilitate the passage of caravans from the interior to the coast. Some small bridges were also built and a few rudimentary ferries (*kambansas*) were introduced. In 1914, the possibility of building roads to link the Corubal River in the East to Buba on the Rio Grande inlet in the South-West was being studied, as well as a stretch from Farim in the East to Mansoa in the coastal area.<sup>13</sup> A governor concluded that 'almost all goods are carried round on people's backs' and inhabitants such as 'Europeans, *assimilados* and many natives travelled by horse, or simply on foot'.<sup>14</sup> Horse, donkey or cattle-drawn carriages were seen as a viable future means of transport, while motorized vehicles remained a distant dream. A 1917 travelogue refers to an excursion made by the daughter of a colonial official who was taken round Bolama Island – the site of the colony's capital – on an adapted cart.<sup>15</sup> At the time, the territory's sole form of mechanized transport was the *Décauville*, a narrow-gauge railway

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<sup>11</sup> C. Pereira, *La Guinée Portugaise* (Lisbon, 1914), 66-67.

<sup>12</sup> Available photographic material does not register the presence of motorized transport before that date.

<sup>13</sup> Pereira, *Guinée Portugaise*, 103.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Fitted with a few boards and seats, the horse-drawn cart was normally used to carry stones and sand for construction purposes; M. Archer, 'A Guiné em 1917', *O Mundo Português*, 3, 21 (1936), 179-84.

along which small carriages and wagons transported cargo from the wharfs to the customs depot in the ports of Bolama and Bissau.<sup>16</sup>

The first laterite road dates back to 1915-1916 when the island capital of Bolama was linked by a four-km road to the Western side of the island. The then head of the Public Works Department stated the following in his annual report: 'Apart from this stretch of road there are no means of communication in Guinea that could be classified as roads'.<sup>17</sup> Some of the 'wide roads that had been cut through the bush' by district administrators and military commandants on the continent 'were prepared for traffic, i.e. if there were any cars in the province'. At the time only 20 km of tarmac road had been laid of the 185 that were planned, apart from the 100 km that had been put down during the 1913-1915 campaigns in the Canchungo area in the North of the colony. In a petition to the governor, the Guinean Trade Association demanded the building of new roads to connect Bolama with Bafatá, the main urban centre in the groundnut-producing East of the colony, while bitterly complaining about its 'very bad postal, telegraph and telephone service'.<sup>18</sup>

In the first report of its kind, the then director of the Department for Development (Repartição de Fomento), which was established in 1917, provided a lengthy summary of the colony's needs in terms of modernization.

Without roads villages do not form, land is not cultivated, industry does not develop and trade does not exist. Transport connections which always precede the establishment of villages are means of circulation which are just as necessary as money and credit are to industry and trade. The ease with which transactions are made, the proximity and size of markets, the comfort and low costs of transport, are factors of great importance for the development and material and social progress of the different peoples. The impact of man-made communication such as roads and motorways, as well as of natural means such as riverine and maritime connections (...) is a token of the extent to which progress depends on them.<sup>19</sup>

Among the four main targets for development, which included urban avenues and sewers, harbours and docks, and public buildings, the same official added the construction of a road and transport network, including a railway line from Bissau to the border with Senegal.

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<sup>16</sup> A proposal by a private Belgian consortium to build a *Décauville* line which would not only serve the port but also the town of Bolama itself was rejected for legal reasons. In its tender, the firm offered to open the line to passengers.

<sup>17</sup> R. Pinto de Sousa, *Relatório, Serviços das Obras Públicas 1915-6*, Bolama, 1 March 1917; Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino (AHU), Direção Geral do Ultramar (DGU), 247.

<sup>18</sup> Associação Comercial da Guiné, Bolama, 28 July 1919; AHU, DGU, 247.

<sup>19</sup> José Guedes V. Quinhones de Mattos Cabral, Bolama, April 1920, *Relatório, Repartição de Fomento*; AHU, DGU, 247.

One of the most important issues regarding Public Works which need to be dealt with in the province, and which has priority over all others, is communication, which includes not only road, maritime and riverine transport, but all the means which connect people. Today, the different urban nuclei of the province of Guinea are interlinked by way of roads, which are used by motor cars.<sup>20</sup>

But he added that the Public Works Department ‘has not been able to intervene directly in the building of these important roads’ due to a lack of personnel. Without an overall plan for the network, it proved impossible to adopt a standard profile for the territory’s roads. Great emphasis was placed on the need for good drainage which was extremely relevant in a country with a tropical climate, a problem that would continue to plague hardened surfaces until roads began to be tarred in the second half of the 1950s. The first prospective map of the road network showed all the roads fanning out from the commercial capital of Bissau on account of its privileged location at the mouth of the Geba River. Its implementation would mean that extensive public works would have to be carried out in Bissau, including the building of a new port and docks, for which the director of the department submitted a detailed sketch. Only then he said ‘would agriculture and industry develop, as the major part of produce would be channelled to Bissau’. He warned however that although ‘the economic and administrative history (of the colony) had only just begun’, what was needed was a ‘well organized stimulus which would launch Guinea on the road to prosperity’.<sup>21</sup>

A year later, the newly appointed governor embarked on an ambitious road-building programme that gave a free hand to district administrators. Although a small part of the new road system was financed by loans from the central administration in Bolama, the biggest source of funding was taxation, while the works themselves were carried out by large-scale forced labour.<sup>22</sup> Roads were seen as an effective means of controlling new subjects by an administration that was transformed into a civil organization in 1918. However, the French consul in Bissau warned that ‘a drive by motor car on a good road (...) is not an administrative tour, for it is not in the vicinity of the areas frequented by Europeans that the natives usually prepare their rebellion against the authorities’.<sup>23</sup> Despite these reforms, the underlying attitude over the following decades

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> For details of the use of forced labour for road building, see Havik, ‘Estradas sem Fim’. The main source of the administration’s revenue was the Hut Tax (*imposto de palhota*) introduced in 1903, which became a key priority after 1915 and a veritable obsession from the late 1920s with the *Estado Novo* regime

<sup>23</sup> E. Hostains, Bissau, 10 March 1921; MAE, K Afrique, Possessions Portugaises (PP) 4.

continued to be one of exacting tribute from a conquered people, and roads and motor cars were seen as the best means to do this.

In his published Annual Report (1921-1922), the governor mainly focused on the roads themselves rather than on the means of transport. Nevertheless, he was the first governor to travel the territory's new roads to visit administrative posts and inaugurate buildings and bridges.<sup>24</sup> He praised the efforts of his administrators who had built 'splendid roads' that allowed anyone to reach the farthest recesses of the colony.<sup>25</sup> However, although some of the administrators had access to vehicles, many had to rely on private transport, mostly trucks, to travel around their districts. Fleeting references are made to cars, for example in the case of a stretch close to Bissau, which had become an 'obligatory Sunday outing for the wealthy population of the town, both national and foreigners'.<sup>26</sup> By the mid-1920s, the few firms that had mechanized their operations were the bigger foreign (French and German) trade houses based in the colony's main port of Bissau. A few commercial enterprises based in the interior, such as the Sociedade Agrícola de Gambiel which processed sugarcane, used tractors.<sup>27</sup>

While motor cars were in evidence in the first travel account published by officials in the 1925 Yearbook, which also contained the first photographs of vehicles, roads received the most attention. Eager to show the rapid progress being made in the colony, its authors illustrated the report with photographs of motor cars driving along deserted roads through lush, tropical vegetation. But at the same time, another current of thought emerged from these accounts: the thousands of kilometres of hardened tracks that covered the region by the mid-1920s were also regarded as roads of subservience: 'The road (from Bissoram to Bula) is magnificent, hardened and solid as if it was one whole stretch, obliging the natives to show respect by sweeping it clean.'<sup>28</sup> Similarly, when officials drove into the small town of Fulacunda to meet the administrator of the Southern region, they received a warm welcome: 'From one and the other side of the road, the natives form rows under the waving of banners suspended over it. Enthusiastic and vibrant cries of welcome meet us, more than in any other part of our voyage.'<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Voz da Guiné*, no. 5, 1 June 1922.

<sup>25</sup> J. Vellez, *Caroço Relatório Anual do Governador da Guiné (1921-1922)* (Coimbra, 1923), 7-11.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 103. The only factor that disturbed this idyllic panorama was that the administrator in a town along this 'beautiful' road was still living 'in a mud-brick house and the district secretary in a hut!'

<sup>27</sup> They employed Clayton, Ransomes, MacLaren, Holt Caterpillar and Fiat tractors; *Anuário da Província da Guiné* (Bolama, 1925), 133.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 23.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 32.

While the authorities consistently presented roads and motor cars as the welcome benefits of modernity, the fact that they crossed recently unlocked territory also led them to incorporate Guinea's native population into the image of development they were attempting to convey.

The main road across which the car speeds is built upon rice fields, an awkward and unstable foundation, consisting of floodplain paddies. All this construction work was carried out by native labour, in the present case by the Balanta, active and full of initiative, to the point of acting on their own accord, encouraged by their own sense of well-being, by making new ramifications of secondary roads which branch off the main road as from a tree. There they are, always at the ready, acting like good housekeepers, watching over their own backyard.<sup>30</sup>

The description of an appointed native chief in his newly acquired motor car is particularly revealing. 'The chief or *régulo* Jaoquim Batican who steps down from his motor car when arriving at Bula invites us to appreciate his court of (ten) women like a grand sultan.'<sup>31</sup> The same chief wore 'a panama hat, civilised boots and will soon be the owner of a motor car, the purchase of which is guaranteed by his annual income of 200 *contos*' (*Ibid.*).

The message emanating from this account is one that underlines the assimilation of modernity: not only had natives adopted roads, they had also adopted the motor car itself, the supreme symbol of European progress and power.

Colonial tropes, however, took other considerations into account, namely Portugal's ability to compete with its French neighbours. When the governor of Portuguese Guinea was invited by his French colleague in Dakar to attend the inauguration of the 130 km of road and telegraph lines from the port of Bissau via the towns of Farim and Kolda to Dakar, an official brochure was published in Bolama to celebrate the occasion. In a telegram to the Colonial Ministry in Lisbon, he underlined the importance of relations with the AOF in the drive towards progress:

The French colony is very important to our Guinea. They praise our work with regard to the development of the colony which demonstrates the visible perfection of our roads and viaducts. In my opinion, they are highly relevant for our relations with the French colony as a means of propaganda and prestige of our national capabilities. Highly placed foreign personalities can thus verify our progress which also makes itself felt in the discipline and cleanliness of our natives.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>32</sup> Vellez Carozo, Bolama, 23 January 1923; AHU, Direcção Geral dos Serviços Centrais, 1921-36. Shortly before this visit, the governor received the *Brevet d'Officier du Legion d'Honneur* from the French consul in Portuguese Guinea. Note that the AOF had already boasted railways since the 1880s and roads from the late 1890s; see A.L. Conklin, *A mission to civilize: The republican idea of empire in*

Underpinned by nationalist sentiments, which in the Portuguese case had a long history, a sense of pride surfaced at the achievements of a small nation in building and maintaining an empire with comparatively limited resources. But instead of informing his superiors about the modernization of the colony's transport system, the governor started off by launching a diatribe against those who had frustrated his efforts to bring progress to the province. He claimed that the quality of Guinea's roads was incomparably better than those of its French neighbours across the border.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the 'colossal effort' made to build a comprehensive network was advertised in a series of publications such as the aforementioned yearbook and a special issue of a colonial bulletin four years later.<sup>34</sup> According to these, Portuguese Guinea had thousands of miles of 'magnificent' roads, boasting an average of 78 metres of road per km<sup>2</sup>, whilst the AOF – with 35,000 km of road – only managed a mere 7 metres per km<sup>2</sup>. In fact, the authorities talked about a staggering annual advance of 400 km during the first half of the 1920s, but without indicating the way in which the network was being used. By omitting any mention of the number of registered motorized vehicles and those on the colony's roads, the sources avoided a rather less favourable comparison with the AOF. Nevertheless, by the mid-1920s, the French consul in Bissau had associated the rise in exports with the wider use of trucks in the transportation of groundnuts from the East of the colony to the port of Bissau.<sup>35</sup>

Foreign visitors added to the image of a postcard colony that was advancing on the road to progress. Arriving in the territory from French Guinea in the South, a British lady travelling by motor car from Conakry to Dakar in the 1920s commented that the 'most backward part of Portuguese Guinea (...) showed very definite signs of the rapid strides made by the Portuguese in a colony that till only some twelve years ago was a stronghold of savagedom'.<sup>36</sup> 'Motoring in the heat', the colony is reconnoitred by means of 'excellent' roads in a shaky old Ford 'that had seen its best days' or comfortable Dodges, followed by a *camion* with her luggage; and sometimes, for shorter distances

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*France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford, 1997) and Fall and Mbodj, 'Forced Labour'.

<sup>33</sup> V. Carço, *Relatório Annual* (1923), 99.

<sup>34</sup> 'Guiné', *Boletim da Agência Geral das Colónias*, 44 (1929).

<sup>35</sup> E. Hostains, Bissau, 25 May 1925, to Gouverneur Général AOF, Dakar; MAE, K Afrique, PP5.

<sup>36</sup> Lady Dorothy Mills, *The golden land: A record of travel in West Africa* (London, 1929), 74.

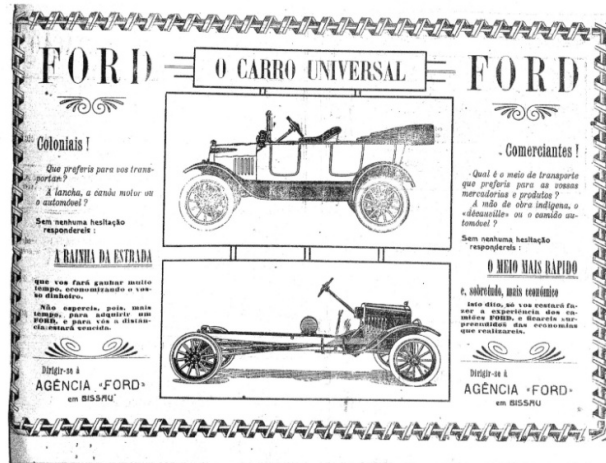


Photo 2.1 Ecos da Guiné  
Source: Ecos da Guiné, no. 6, 14-3-1920.

Translation of the text is as follows:

'Colonials! What do you prefer for your transport? A launch, a canoe with outboard motor, or a motorcar? Traders! What is your favourite means of transport for your merchandise and products? Native labour, the *décauville* or the truck?'

she relied 'on the crossed arms of two strong natives'.<sup>37</sup> Another British traveller who was provided with modern transport facilities on the insistence of the governor of Portuguese Guinea when he visited the colony in the mid-1930s, painted a picture of a 'forest Utopia' where people enjoyed an 'idyllic existence' in the interior and delighted children caught 'first rides'.<sup>38</sup> After motoring along in official cars 'with chauffeur and petrol' on 'two thousand kilometres of (...) roads', he concludes that 'they are first class', praising the feat of engineering performed by road builders in crossing swamps.<sup>39</sup> Contrary to the island capital of Bolama that was far 'removed from the hurly burly', the commercial town of Bissau had 'easy communications with all parts of the colony'.<sup>40</sup> He observed that rather than motor cars, the 'usual mode of conveyance' in the country was the *camionete*, a light-weight lorry, which transported luggage,

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 99, 106. Modern transport at times proved not to be as reliable as she was led to expect, for example when the *camion* – and with it her luggage – ended up in a river (*Ibid.* 178).

<sup>38</sup> A. Lyall, *Black and white make brown: An account of a voyage to the Cape Verde Islands and Portuguese Guinea* (London, 1938).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 208.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 181.

servants and ‘the innumerable natives who cadge lifts from you along the road. It makes a very sort of travelling Noah’s Ark.’<sup>41</sup> Contrary to what he had been told before embarking upon his voyage, the journalist found that instead of being in ‘the back of beyond’, the territory was a ‘model colony’ with regard to the ‘ease of communications’.<sup>42</sup>

### The price of modernity

Despite repeated references to roads and vehicles by officials and travellers who reconnoitred the interior by motor car, the image projected is of a colony that, apart from seasonal traffic in the groundnut-producing East of the country, had only recently entered the modern age, and then only partly so. In fact, information on motorized transport in the 1920s and 1930s remains extremely scarce. Apart from a few cars owned by the administration and the *camions* (trucks) and *camionetes* or *carrinhas* (pick-up trucks) belonging to private traders, the network appeared to have been underused. The frequent references to vessels such as canoes, motor boats and steamers suggest that they were crucial to the transport network. From the early 1920s, the minutes of meetings of the Conselho do Governo or governing council in Portuguese Guinea refer to requests for additional funds for the purchase and maintenance of motor cars and trucks for the administrative districts.<sup>43</sup> Roads, despite eulogies on their modernity, appear to have been little more than straight lines on a map linking administrative posts. In fact, some observers, such as the French consul in Bissau, saw roads as a cause of regression rather than progress due to the dubious methods used in their construction, including forced labour and the embezzlement of funds by less scrupulous administrators.

The construction of this excellent road network which should have been an incomparable factor of prosperity in a colony which was in the throes of development, has become the cause for impoverishment and depopulation as a result of lack of judgement and the impropriety of the officials charged with the programme.<sup>44</sup>

By the late 1920s when the network was in place, the newly appointed director of the Public Works Department was one of the first Portuguese officials to openly criticize the random road building, non-existent traffic regulations and lack of transport facilities. In his view, works of this nature should only be implemented once projects and budgets had been approved, a condition

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 235.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 240.

<sup>43</sup> See the minutes of meetings of the Conselho do Governo from 1921 to 1925; AHU, DGAPC, 588.

<sup>44</sup> E. Hostains, Bissau, 25 May 1925, to Gouverneur Général AOF, Dakar; MAE, K Afrique, PP5.



which had recently been enacted in legislation.<sup>45</sup> In addition, he noted that the Traffic Code, which had been passed in 1925, was only regulated for the towns of Bolama and Bissau, and excluded the interior. Barely hiding his indignation, he said that: 'its publication is essential in order to put an end to a situation which has no parallel in any other colony where the circulation of motor cars has evolved on a par with Guinea'. With regard to transport in the interior, he added that trucks from the Public Works Department were often requisitioned by other government departments to carry water, furniture and baggage, even though they were not allowed to do so. Such services had, he claimed, been provided free of charge but he argued that the oil and petrol costs should be refunded. To improve state transport services, he advocated setting up a single organization to be responsible for all the transport services.

Vehicles were now being registered following the introduction of legislation regulating trucks and motor cars that had been introduced three years earlier in 1920.<sup>46</sup> Although these registers have not yet been located, occasional references to makes of cars, such as Overlands and Hudsons, show that the vehicles imported at the time were mainly American. However other references, as in the case of Berliet and Opel trucks, also indicate car imports from France and Germany. Minutes of the meetings of the colony's executive council reveal the extent to which orders for vehicles were conditioned by additional benefits offered by car manufacturers. For example, an order for an Opel truck was strongly contested by the director of the Public Works Department who argued that the administration – which had hitherto purchased Fords – should strive for a uniform government car pool rather than diversifying to save money on spare parts and repairs. Defending the order, the governor countered that the trucks in question were well suited to the local terrain and that the factory had promised to open a workshop when a certain number of vehicles had been purchased.<sup>47</sup> Rather than relying on private inputs, the Public Works Department preferred to have workshops funded by public resources in strategic locations throughout the colony.

At the same time, a report following an audit of the colony's treasury department concluded that the situation regarding motorized transport was parti-

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<sup>45</sup> Caetano Marques Amorim, Bolama, 31 August 1928, Relatório, Obras Públicas, 1927-8; AHU, DGSC, 354-2.

<sup>46</sup> Regulamento de Automóveis e Camions, Portaria, 12 July 1920. Within three years, proposals for reforms were made for the town of Bissau, where the majority of cars were to be found. Driving tests (for motor vehicles, motorbikes and bicycles) were introduced in 1922.

<sup>47</sup> Actas do Conselho Executivo da Guiné, 13 June 1928, AHU, Direcção Geral da Administração Política e Civil (DGAPC), 1002.

cularly critical.<sup>48</sup> Listing all the vehicles owned by the civil service, the inspection report found that out of the 46 cars and 21 trucks, 23 were being repaired and 24 had been sold. This left the administration with a mere 20 vehicles to share between twelve districts, two town councils and the customs, health and postal services. In addition, the report accused some administrators of the excessive use of official cars and trucks, which had gradually turned these vehicles into ‘heaps of spare parts, which could not be assembled or repaired’.<sup>49</sup> This prompted the administration to regulate the sector in an attempt to reduce expenditure and improve efficiency.<sup>50</sup> The decree highlighted the ‘breakdown and non-serviceability of the great majority of vehicles acquired, and the great expenditure on petrol and oils, as well as the incompetence and the irregularities of civil servants who were entrusted with these cars’ (*Ibid.* 205). At the same time, the governing council decided to close down the state workshop for the repair of motor cars and other machines belonging to the district administrators ‘in view of the fact that it had not satisfied the aims which had determined its creation’.<sup>51</sup>

Recognizing the need for rigorous checks and cost reductions because of the colony’s budget deficit, the decree proposed measures to curb excesses and target the district administrators who, having benefited from a special regime, were seen as the main culprits concerning material damage and over-expenditure. The Treasury was put in charge of the acquisition and registration of all government vehicles (*Ibid.*). The use of state cars without prior permission was expressly forbidden, and departments and districts were required to estimate average petrol and oil consumption rates, and submit a map indicating distances. Any budget proposing excessive expenditure on travel would be rejected. So although Guinea could boast an extensive road network in the 1930s, the problems associated with transport sometimes forced Europeans in the interior to travel on foot in cases of emergency. The case of the daughter of a *chefe de posto* who had malaria during the rainy season showed just how fragile

<sup>48</sup> J.M. d’Oliveira e Castro, Inspecção extraordinária aos serviços da fazenda, bolama, 18 September 1927; AHU, Direcção Geral das Colónias do Ocidente (DGCOcd), 89.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 19. Early references to the short lifespan of motor cars date back to the 1920s. The municipal commission of the town of Bafatá requested permission to sell a motor car and a truck in a public auction in order to replace them with one motor car or truck; Conselho do Governo da Guiné, Bolama, Acta 31, 3-11-1923; AHU, DGAPC, 588.

<sup>50</sup> Portaria 65, Boletim Oficial da Guiné Portuguesa (BOGP), 16, 1927.

<sup>51</sup> Conselho do Governo da Guiné, Acta 5, 15 January 1927; AHU, DGAPC, 1002. The governor at the time remarked that these measures were inevitable due to the serious financial problems the colonial government was facing, having accumulated an enormous deficit. The budget cuts also included the dismissal of the drivers in the Public Works Department and the cutting of their posts.

the infrastructure actually was. Having waited a week for a car to transport her to the nearest town, the party had to walk, carrying the girl on a stretcher for 55 km. On the way to their destination they came across two official cars that had broken down trying to reach them.<sup>52</sup>

The need for such drastic measures not only reflected serious maintenance problems regarding the state car pool but also the generalized abuse of privileges by (senior) administrative personnel. In the early 1930s when the *Estado Novo* regime began to take a firmer grip on colonial policy, a newly appointed governor filed a critical report to his superiors in Lisbon. One of the problems he focused on was the Department for Development, the *Serviços de Fomento*, which was responsible for the maintenance of the administration's car pool and organizing supplies of petrol, oil and spare parts. The naval workshop was responsible for repairs on the more than 100 motor cars and trucks. The governor stated that he would like to sell them all but that nobody would buy them given the state they were in. By centralizing these services in the *Secção de Transportes Terrestres*, he intended to monitor the use of vehicles more closely and achieve a significant reduction in operating costs.<sup>53</sup> The new section was expected to guarantee the availability of vehicles for regular inspections of the colony's health, veterinary and agricultural services. His successor's reports clearly illustrate that the problems affecting the administration's car pool continued and, in fact, worsened despite these measures.

All (state owned) vehicles should be replaced, with the exception of a Chrysler which had been bought for official use by the governor (...) The *Secção de Transportes Terrestres* (STT) has weighed heavily on the colony's budget, without providing the services one might expect (...). It was created in 1932 in order to centralize services, given that each department had until then been responsible for its vehicles.<sup>54</sup>

Apparently, the costs of the STT increased twenty-fold within six months: 'the STT grew accustomed to spending blindly (...) based on the conviction that the government would have to foot the bill.' As a result, spending was significantly reduced to guarantee that the 23 motor cars and trucks that had to travel long distances to satisfy the requests of the health, agricultural and justice departments and also carry out border patrols, remained operational.<sup>55</sup> The use of vehicles was reduced to a minimum because expenditure on spare parts, oil

<sup>52</sup> M. Rosa, 'Folhas do meu diário', *Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa (BCGP)*, III, 11 (1948), 759-73. The narrator (the girl's mother) was carried in an improvised hammock.

<sup>53</sup> J.J. Soares Zilhão, 'Confidential Report', Bolama, 7 January 1932, to Colonial Ministry, Lisbon; AHU, DGAPC, 368-2.

<sup>54</sup> L.A. Carvalho Viegas, *Relatório, 1933* (Bolama, 1934), 347; AHU, DGCocd, 417.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 248-49.

and petrol went far beyond the limits of the budget.<sup>56</sup> Departments and districts turned to renting cars and trucks from private enterprises to transport personnel and goods. With such costs weighing heavily on their limited budgets, the governor ordered district administrators to curb expenditure, stating that ‘for the price of a Dodge truck one could buy two Fords, or better even a Ford motor car and a puck-up truck’.<sup>57</sup>

These measures eloquently demonstrate how attempts to curb expenditure and limit abuse of state vehicles failed. Apart from the STT, the Public Works Department was also singled out as one of the worst examples of mismanagement and incompetence. For example, there was the case of an ex-director who was put on trial in the early 1930s for pocketing large sums of money to cover petrol and spare parts for his private car trips.<sup>58</sup> Witnesses argued that budgeted expenditures reserved for buying petrol had been systematically redirected to serve other undeclared purposes by means of elaborate schemes.<sup>59</sup> Auxiliary staff would double as architects and even as directors of Public Works, turning the department which was in ‘a state of complete disorganisation’ and its treasury ‘in a horrible mess’ into a ‘swindler devoid of scruples and highly cynical that corrupted good men’.<sup>60</sup>

Statistical data on vehicles confirm this disastrous state of affairs. While there were only 225 cars and lorries in the colony in 1929 – most of them imported in the late 1920s – over half were in private hands, leaving the administration with a mere 67. By 1931 when the STT was set up, the government boasted 100 vehicles, although only two years later the governor’s report quoted above showed that this figure was actually a mere 23 due to a lack of maintenance. In a confidential report, the same governor complained that the cars belonging to the public administration looked as though they came off a ‘scrap yard’, with only three or four being in working order.<sup>61</sup> The governor’s motor car was in a particularly sorry state, breaking down regularly and having to be pushed by natives to get it going again. Expenditures on petrol – which was supplied free of charge for any official upon request – were astronomical. Civil

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<sup>56</sup> Henrique Artur Gonçalves Cardoso, Ministério das Colónias, Lisbon, 19 March 1934; AHU, DGAPC, 193-2.

<sup>57</sup> António Leite de Magalhães, Bissau, 15 June 1932, to Intendente Canchungo, Henrique de Vasconcelos; AHU, DGSC, 335.

<sup>58</sup> R. Osório de Castro, delegate of Procurator General, to Governor, 9 October 1934; AHU, DGAPC, 997.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* Firmino Mendes Moreira, 21 February 1934.

<sup>60</sup> L.A. Carvalho Viegas to Minister of Colonies, Bolama, 18 May 1937; AHU, Direcção Geral da Fazenda das Colónias, 2154.

<sup>61</sup> L.A. Carvalho Viegas, Bolama, 15 June 1933, to Minister of Colonies; AHU, Direcção Geral das Colónias do Ocidente, 417.

servants' wives were having themselves driven in official cars for visits to the cinema or a run into the country with the children at the Treasury's expense. The use of vehicles for festive occasions, such as carnival processions in which decorated cars and trucks figured prominently, was also frowned upon.<sup>62</sup> When visiting the different districts, the same governor found 'pieces of cars' all over the colony, *camionetes* or pick-up trucks rusting away for lack of wheels and others grounded while awaiting spare parts. 'Sending a car for repairs, was its death sentence', as all the usable parts would be replaced by old ones. The state car pool was in bad state. The governor freely admitted that severe cuts in public spending had obliged him to reassemble a number of vehicles with the help of spare parts from abandoned wrecks. A few years later, a joint report submitted by all the trade associations and labour unions in Guinea to the Colonial Ministry in Lisbon found that the car pool of the transport department, on which hundreds of thousands of escudos had been spent, was little more than 'a useless mound of scrap metal'.<sup>63</sup>

But motor cars were not the only form of modern transport to suffer from the neglect and incompetence of Guinea's civil service. On his arrival in Guinea in 1933, the newly appointed governor found himself unwittingly the centre of attention when, approaching the capital Bolama, the fuel in the sloop ran out, leaving him highly embarrassed and stranded within view of the multitudes awaiting him on the quayside.<sup>64</sup> When visiting the naval dockyard, he found that of the four steamships, three were in for repair and had been so for months. The one operational vessel was in such a bad state that more than once it had ended up drifting along with the strong currents of the Geba River due to boiler trouble. Motor boats also spent more time in dock for regular repairs than in service. This often turned out to be self-perpetuating. Apart from ships, the dockyard held more surprises, such as motor cars in for repair and others ready for the scrap yard, some belonging to the administration and others to private owners. Apparently, personnel had been earning money on the side with repair jobs for friends.<sup>65</sup>

Proposals to solve the crisis not only included improving maintenance but also the purchase of new vehicles. One example was the case of the heavily under-funded and ill-equipped health services. The need to have regular visits by doctors and nurses and to supply medicines and materials to the health posts

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<sup>62</sup> *Comércio da Guiné*, no. 12, 23 March 1931.

<sup>63</sup> *Exposição*, Bissau, 30 January 1936, Associação Comercial, Industrial e Agrícola de Bissau, Associação Comercial de Bolama, Sindicato Agrícola de Farim, e Associação dos Empregados no Comércio, Indústria e Agrícola da Colónia da Guiné, to Ministro das Colónias, Lisbon; AHU, DGAPC, 989.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* Viegas, 15 July 1933.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

in the interior required motorized transport. The authorities purchased pick-up trucks or *camionetas* to allow each post in the interior to reach distant villages, especially in frontier areas. When Senegal was suffering from an outbreak of bubonic plague and a yellow fever epidemic in 1931, the administration in neighbouring Portuguese Guinea advocated precautionary measures. However it was forced to admit that the colony's limited budget, which had been further reduced in 1932 due to the global economic crisis, did not even allow for the purchase of petrol, oil or spare parts for the vehicles required to undertake health inspections.<sup>66</sup> Apparently, the situation had not changed much by 1935 when the governor announced that four trucks were required to patrol the colony's frontiers.

With these means of transport, medical aid can be given to indigenous villages as well as permitting the control of border areas and countering the spread of epidemics such as yellow fever and bubonic plague. Without these vehicles, such vigilance is not feasible. The extension of sanitary inspection is an absolute priority.<sup>67</sup>

These plans recognized the advantages of utility vehicles by proposing to equip all the health posts in the colony with 'light lorries that are easy to drive', and which could double up as ambulances.<sup>68</sup>

From the early 1930s, the authorities also started to take stock of traffic-related problems, amongst which trucks were to figure prominently. Decrees begun to express this concern in terms that demonstrated the increasing impact heavy trucks careering through the interior were having on the quality of the road network. The roads were not made to withstand speeds of up to 100 km an hour on certain stretches, security was non-existent, there were increasing numbers of accidents; no road maps were available and even road signs were non-existent. The first administrative inspection report on Portuguese Guinea commissioned by the Lisbon government acknowledged these and other problems.<sup>69</sup> While some roads allowed cars to travel at high speeds (up to 95 km. an hour), others were intersected by 'horrible and dangerous bridges' or little more than dirt-tracks. The surface of the roads deteriorated as a result of the increase in traffic, the weight of heavy trucks and the rains. Rudimentary repairs carried out under the supervision of administrators were insufficient to keep the roads open and in working order. As a result, pressure was brought to bear upon administrators by the trading community to improve the quality of the roads and

<sup>66</sup> Portaria 122, Boletim Oficial da Guiné Portuguesa, 26, 1932, supplement to no. 50.

<sup>67</sup> L.A. Carvalho Viegas, Bolama, 10 September 1935, to Minister of Colonies; AHU, Gabinete do Ministro, 2894.

<sup>68</sup> L.A. Carvalho Viegas, Relatório, 1935, Bolama, 28 June 1936, p. 161; AHU, GM, 2879.

<sup>69</sup> J. Salvação Barreto, Relatório da Inspeção, Lisbon, 18 March 1938; AHU, Inspeção Superior da Administração Ultramarina, 1665.

to repair bridges, even though they did not have the funds needed to do so. Traders blamed them for the damage their trucks suffered as a result of deeply rutted roads and broken bridges, leaving them stranded at considerable financial loss. In a publication on Portuguese Guinea and a series of unpublished reports, the then governor admitted that the 'beautiful' roads which had been 'much admired' by their French neighbours ten years earlier, were now seriously lagging behind the tarred main roads that the AOF had laid in the meantime.<sup>70</sup> Whilst both Senegal and French Guinea boasted tarmac, Portuguese Guinea's network had no asphalt roads; the first tarred roads would only be laid in the mid-1950s.<sup>71</sup> Reporting on his visit to Portuguese Guinea, the French administrator of the Casamance region in Senegal concluded that 'The colony (i.e. Portuguese Guinea) is rich but its *mise en valeur* and the exploration of its resources are less advanced than in our colonies.'<sup>72</sup>

To deal with the worsening situation in Portuguese Guinea, legislation was passed which, while acknowledging the bad state of the colony's main roads, blamed their worsening state on the 'excessive speed of heavily laden trucks'.<sup>73</sup> As a result, the administration decided to make automatic speed limits compulsory for trucks that weighed over a ton. The maximum speed was 50 km an hour and heavy fines were imposed for those exceeding it. Trucks whose limiters had been tampered with would be confiscated and, in view of the lack of police personnel, administrators were allowed to enforce the law and fine drivers or confiscate vehicles. At the same time, the administration filed reports to Lisbon that underlined the problems associated with policing and road safety. The case of a trader who was caught for having run over a native and being in possession of a counterfeit driving licence well illustrated the dangers of slack

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<sup>70</sup> A. Carvalho Viegas 'Guiné Portuguesa', vol. I, Lisbon, Typ Severo Freitas, 1936: 601/2. From the late 1920s, these colonies had made significant advances with regard to improving the quality of road surfaces; see Fall & Mbodj, 'Forced Labour', 260. From 1937 onwards machines were introduced and free contract labour used.

<sup>71</sup> The first stretch to be tarred was the 13 km of road between Bissau & Safim in the Biombo region.

<sup>72</sup> M.J. Chartier, Administrateur Supérieur de la Casamance, Ziguinchor, 10 December 1934, to Governor Senegal; CAOM, FM, 599. In the case of French Guinea, which was less advanced than Senegal in 1933, there were 6365 km of roads, of which 2121 km were *intercoloniales*, 943 km were *coloniales* and 3301 km were *pistes d'intérêt local utilisable en saison sèche*. While the extent of the first two categories had increased significantly in the 1932-1933 fiscal year by 1472 km, local roads had only been extended by 66 km, demonstrating the focus on modernizing the network (A. Vadier, Gouverneur GF, 'Rapport sur la Situation Politique en Guinée Française en 1933', CAOM, FM, 982).

<sup>73</sup> Portaria 90, 26 July 1937, Boletim Oficial da Guiné Portuguesa, 30.

controls.<sup>74</sup> Although legislation had been passed in 1929 regarding the tasks of the police in regulating traffic in towns, there was ‘no police corps that specifically dealt with road traffic in the interior’ so district administrators were, in effect, responsible for policing the roads. ‘It comes as no surprise’, the report added, ‘that under these conditions information on transgressions and accidents was rare because vigilance could not be guaranteed by such dispersed entities.’<sup>75</sup>

Motorised road traffic has increased to such an extent that its regulation has become imperative, especially with regard to speed. Besides causing accidents, the introduction of heavy trucks which can travel at high speeds has also led to a pronounced deterioration of the roads of this colony (...) which cannot cope with the constant heavy and rapid mechanical traction. (...) The increase in traffic had completely damaged road surfaces (...) which were excellent (...) until recently having been built at a time when only a dozen light motor cars circulated in the colony. Heavy and fast trucks now already numbered more than a hundred which transported goods and produce between commercial centres and from the interior to the coast. During the annual groundnut campaigns the traffic is so intense that a few months into the dry season (October/November to May/June) the hardened laterite surface looked like it had been ploughed by a tractor.

To improve road maintenance, the authorities proposed the introduction of a surtax on petrol and oil; otherwise ‘Guinea’s road network would soon become unusable, and constitute a “dead factor” of its economy’.<sup>76</sup>

### Back to basics?

It is worth quoting the words of a Portuguese governor who served in Guinea for most of the 1930s:

Roads constitute important markers of public life and are the principal means by which to determine the wealth of a country or colony. There is a close correlation between the degree of civilisation of a people and the roads of their country. The more perfect, the longer and better appointed they are, the greater is the level of civilisation.<sup>77</sup>

Within a decade and according to these criteria, Guinean roads, which were initially hailed as the standard bearers of progress, lagged behind the tarred

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<sup>74</sup> L.A. Carvalho Viegas, Bolama, 10 July 1934, to Minister of Colonies; AHU, DGAPC, 1002.

<sup>75</sup> L.A. Carvalho Viegas, Bolama, 26 May 1937, to Minister of Colonies; AHU, DGOPC, 56.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* Viegas, 26 May 1937.

<sup>77</sup> L.A. Carvalho Viegas, Relatório 1935, 28 June 1936; AHU, GM, 2879.



surfaces in neighbouring colonies.<sup>78</sup> And despite silence and denial, the way the road network was built and maintained carried the hallmark of forced labour and administrative malpractice.<sup>79</sup> However, given the nature of road surfaces and the methods used in their construction and maintenance, this criterion had little to do with technological progress but instead underlined Guinea's backwardness. And in view of the above, by no means coincidentally, the same source made no mention whatsoever of the use of motorized transport. In fact, during the 1930s government reports highlighted the dismal state of the colonial car pool, which had progressively decreased in size, condition and efficiency due to mismanagement. Despite attempts to control repairs by centralizing them, these services failed to improve levels of maintenance. This begged the question – aptly put by the French consul – about the reasoning behind the building of roads and bridges when they only benefited a few hundred vehicles.<sup>80</sup>

Car imports show the extent to which Portuguese Guinea was affected by the world crisis: whilst 47 vehicles were imported in 1930, only 7 arrived in 1931, 17 in 1932, 15 in 1933, 17 in 1934 and 28 in 1935, mostly from the US.<sup>81</sup> The figures increased somewhat from the mid-1930s onwards but never exceeded 60 vehicles a year: 53 in 1936, 59 in 1937, and 57 in 1938.<sup>82</sup> In the course of that year, reports indicate 'massive imports of motor cars of Italian origin and of German trucks'<sup>83</sup> and motorbikes (*Meister*) were being imported from Europe. Certain products such as petrol and oil continued to be imported from the US, as well as most of the colony's lorries and pick-up trucks. By 1940 a total of 462 vehicles were officially registered, of which only 57 (8 motor cars and 49 trucks) belonged to the state.<sup>84</sup> While the number of state-owned vehicles had actually decreased in comparison to the 64 in 1927, the composition of the car pool had changed: the number of trucks greatly increased compared to the

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<sup>78</sup> In 1948 the then governor reported that tarring Guinea's roads was not feasible, owing to the astronomical costs which were far beyond the colony's means. However, he added that the building of bridges had enabled 'continental Guinea to be reached by car without recourse to ferries' (Sarmiento Rodrigues. In: *Relato da 1a Conferência dos Administradores de 1948*, Bissau, 6 June 1948, AHU, ISAU).

<sup>79</sup> Havik, 'Estradas sem Fim'.

<sup>80</sup> E. Hostains, Bissau, 24 April 1926 to Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, K Afrique, PP5. According to this source, only about 300 vehicles were registered in the colony by the mid-1920s (*Ibid.*).

<sup>81</sup> L.A. Carvalho Viegas, *Relatório 1935*, Bolama, 28 June 1936; AHU, GM, 2879.

<sup>82</sup> L.A. Carvalho Viegas, *Relatório 1938*, n.d. (1939); AHU, Inspeção Superior Administrativa das Colonias (ISAC), 544.

<sup>83</sup> Gouverneur Général AOF to Minister of Colonies, Dakar, 10 October 1938; CAOM, Archives Nationales de Sénégal, 17 G 185.

<sup>84</sup> A, Carvalho Viegas 'Guiné Portuguesa', Lisbon, Typ. Severo Freitas, 1940: 178.

number of motor cars. The early days when administrators would be driven around in sleek motor cars were over as they had been replaced by the less comfortable but more practical lorries and pick-up trucks.

Inspection reports submitted during the 1940s indicated that the dearth of vehicles belonging to the colonial administration had encouraged civil servants to request the cooperation of private traders in transporting goods, generally in return for favours.<sup>85</sup> Rumours circulated about prebendial relations between officials and private interests, such as Guinea's largest trading house, the Casa Gouveia. Besides causing serious problems at an operational level, the lack of transport facilities also provoked conflict between different services.<sup>86</sup> The use of vehicles was hotly disputed and sometimes personal enmities served to further complicate matters, as in the case of the chief medical officer and the administrator in Bafatá District who refused to sit 'shoulder to shoulder' in a truck.<sup>87</sup> Sometimes, a lack of transport kept officials grounded, as in the case of a medical officer in the interior who was unable to visit his district.<sup>88</sup> In another instance, prisoners were housed temporarily in the local garage of the district administration 'whose doors were wide open day and night' while awaiting transport.<sup>89</sup> In an official report, the head of the Public Works Department blamed the shortage of personnel and the lack of funding for the inefficiency of services.

... if there is some car or machine that breaks down, there is no way to repair it because the mechanic who doubles as chauffeur is dispensed with as soon as the works in question have been carried out.<sup>90</sup>

The war had also created other problems for an isolated colony such as Portuguese Guinea: 'There was a serious shortage of petrol which had completely paralyzed motorized transports'.<sup>91</sup> But not only transport facilities were affected: by the early 1940s the road network itself had actually shrunk, from 3,000 km in 1930 to 2,772 km in 1940 and 2,600 km in 1942, if the notoriously

<sup>85</sup> C.H. Jones da Silveira, *Relatório Inspeção, Guiné, 1940*; AHU, ISAU, 1669.

<sup>86</sup> As a result, prisoners had to wait for transport, sometimes for a year or more, until a truck was allocated to transport them. In one case, they were kept in the district administration's garage (*Ibid.* 18).

<sup>87</sup> State Prosecutor's Office, Bissau, 7 April 1941, against Dr Antonio dos Santos Petronilho, Chief Medical Officer, Bafatá; AHU, DGAPC, 1057.

<sup>88</sup> Annual Report, 1941, *Delegação de Saúde de Bissoram*; AHU, ISAU, 64.

<sup>89</sup> C.H. Jones da Silveira, *Relatório Inspeção, Guiné, 1940*; AHU, ISAU, 1669. The same inspection report also mentions less palatable uses of trucks, such as the case of a trader who, after murdering a native, transported the corpse in secret to bury it.

<sup>90</sup> Viriato de Macedo, Bissau, 4 July 1942, to Governor; AHU, DGAPC, 1004.

<sup>91</sup> Nunes de Oliveira, Lisbon, 19 March 1942, to Minister of Colonies; AHU, DGAPC, 1002.

unreliable official statistics are to be believed. But the native population had also decreased by approximately 15% from the mid-1920s, according to population censuses.

Immediately after World War II and with the appointment of a new, dynamic governor, the authorities began to take stock of the problems surrounding Guinea's infrastructure: discourse shifted from quantity to quality.<sup>92</sup> Launching new projects without careful planning was out of the question, and complaints had to be taken into account. Lessons had to be learned from past mistakes. Certain essential services, such as the police, medical posts and public works, needed to be equipped with motorized transport. A more paternalistic and conciliatory approach was followed in the case of road construction and maintenance, which would be 'explained to the natives' in an effort to reconcile economic need with justice. The use of violence and forced labour was, he said, a thing of the past. Civilization and modernity had to be 'paced' and 'nurtured': 'progress had so far been understood as smashing up trucks, paying drivers, consuming petrol, and little else'.<sup>93</sup> Even though car imports were on the rise, vehicles were still in short supply when needed, although he said that there were always private vehicles, thereby implicitly recognizing that the same problems of old still persisted. Bad maintenance and negligence continued to haunt the car pool. Official statistics showed that while Guinea's road network had – miraculously – expanded (to 3,013 km in 1946), the number of registered vehicles had declined during the war years from 462 in 1941 to 354 in 1946.<sup>94</sup> In fact, in 1946, the rural districts, where most of the network was located, accounted for only 133 vehicles.<sup>95</sup> In some cases, the local population referred to the presence of a *camion fantasma* or ghost truck that was said to transport native labourers for road construction and maintenance. However the colloquial expression was regarded as being particularly disconcerting by government officials given the connotations with forced labour.

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<sup>92</sup> For example, the first road map was published and a traffic code for the whole colony was also introduced. At the same time, scientific studies of the road network were undertaken, emphasizing the need for professional, mechanized maintenance.

<sup>93</sup> M.M. Sarmiento Rodrigues, Bissau, 29 July 1946; AHU, ISAU, 1731.

<sup>94</sup> *Anuário da Guiné Portuguesa*, 1948, Bissau, 1948: 181. One of the reasons was that the administration initiated a registration campaign to improve road security. New laws were introduced in the following year to tighten the rules regarding driving licences and car inspections. The number of vehicles rapidly rose to 503 in 1947 and in the same year 117 vehicles were imported.

<sup>95</sup> 'Anuário da Guiné Portuguesa, 1946', Bissau, 1946. Out of this total, only 22 were passenger cars, based in the capital Bissau, where most of the trucks were also registered. Most of the remaining trucks were used in the groundnut-producing part of the colony.

A number of government bodies were created within the Public Work Department in 1946 to improve and monitor road safety, as well as the registration of vehicles. A report by the Public Works Department stated that the ‘lack of policing and traffic controls, as well as of a Traffic Code, had put Guinea at the bottom of the league of colonies and of progress’.<sup>96</sup> Bottlenecks such as ferries should be eliminated, especially as one of them, North of Bissau, was the main gateway for all traffic, including trucks, to the colony’s interior. It urgently needed replacing by a bridge. Upon closer inspection, the transport network in Portuguese Guinea was clearly underdeveloped, certainly in comparison to its French neighbours. Taking stock of private domestic transport, the French consul concluded that the colony could boast only three regular services from the capital Bissau that were maintained by trucks.<sup>97</sup> However, their timetables were limited to weekly or fortnightly departures to the towns of Cacheu, Farim and Bafatá, while the former capital Bolama could only be reached by a four-to-five-hour boat trip that covered the 36 km from Bissau once a week. Overland connections with Senegal left only every fortnight, while there was no regular link at all with French Guinea.

All road transport is maintained by trucks which are rather uncomfortable owing to the potholes in the roads and the passengers travel loaded with products. They are (...) only used by natives. The authorities and Europeans travel in *vedettes* and private automobiles. (*Ibid.*)

Whereas administrators had initially shown off their gleaming sedans, they soon found that the lighter pick-up trucks or *camionetes* were better suited to the rough terrain. Reports from the 1930s illustrated a hierarchy of technology, but also of personnel. Indeed, motor cars were mostly driven by *civilizados*, i.e. Europeans and Cape Verdeans, while Africans often chauffeured (pick-up) trucks. Even in the early 1920s the local press made a distinction between motor cars that were ‘driven by their owners’, while the chauffeurs of trucks were depicted as being ‘incapable’.<sup>98</sup> This point was underlined again in the 1940s when campaigns for improvements in road safety were introduced. This social stratification, which closely emulated the *indigenato* laws, was also made within the administration itself. Whereas administrators – and some appointed chiefs – had a right to motor cars and trucks, middle-ranking and lower cadres rode around on motorbikes. Lower-level, mostly African, administrative person-

<sup>96</sup> Bernardo de Sa Nogueira, Relatório, Bissau, 1947, 15 September 1948; AHU, DGOPC, 2618.

<sup>97</sup> Bogaers, Bissau, 17 June 1946, to Ministère des Affaires Etrangères; CAOM, FM, 2662.

<sup>98</sup> Pro Guiné, no. 1, Bissau, 17 August 1924. ‘It was a miracle,’ the article stated, ‘that somebody wasn’t run over everyday’.

nel had to be content with ‘buzz bikes’, while the rural, native police, the *cipaios*, were supposed to go around on bicycles, if they were lucky. Searching scrap yards for components and revamping previously stranded vehicles showed that, in certain cases, existing personnel and material could be put to good use. But such interventions depended on the direct hierarchical intervention of a few inspired officials, whose enthusiasm dissipated with time. To some extent, private initiative captured a burgeoning market for repairs and spare parts, owing to the failure of government services. A case in point was the former clerk of a trading firm who, after having won the tender for the colony’s postal services when the services were contracted out in the early 1930s, lost it a few years later when he was caught for cross border smuggling.<sup>99</sup> He then set up his own business and became the biggest supplier of spare parts in the colony. As a result of the huge stock he imported from Lisbon, he made substantial profits satisfying the growing demand for spare parts, especially for vehicles that were already out of production. ‘He shamelessly sells some articles for 100 Francs when they would have cost only 5 Francs only three years ago (...) The favours he receives from the authorities are the talk of the town’ (*Ibid.*).<sup>100</sup>

In the absence of regular transport facilities, private initiatives, including garage proprietors, organized shuttle services with *ambulâncias* from Guinea to Senegal from the early 1930s onwards.<sup>101</sup> The old Public Works Department trucks that had become an important means of transport in the interior were no longer functional and needed to be replaced. Some of the spare parts of the strong Bedford trucks had begun to suffer from wear and tear but even though they had been ordered through local suppliers, none had been forthcoming so that ‘soon they will be out of service too’.<sup>102</sup> The first detailed information on car imports compiled by the *Secção de Viação e Automobilismo*, which was created in 1946 and collected the newly introduced car tax, issued driving licences and ordered mechanical checks on cars, showed that the colony’s trucks were mainly of American (Chevrolet, Ford, GMC, International, Studebaker) and British (Austin, Bedford) origin. While pick-up trucks and motor cars also came from the US (Buick, Chevrolet, Dodge, Ford, Studebaker) and

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<sup>99</sup> Bulletin de Renseignements, Direction Générale des Études et Recherches (DGER), Paris, 13 June 1944; CAOM, FM, 360.

<sup>100</sup> The report explained that ‘his political ideas are changeable. He has been long branded as a communist’, demonstrating the extent to which he had become indispensable in a colony which was a known destination for all kinds of political deportees (see Lyall, *Black and white make brown*) and a place where spare parts were considered strategic and lucrative assets.

<sup>101</sup> Lyall, *Black and white make brown*, 256-97.

<sup>102</sup> Bernardo da Sa Nogueira, Bissau, 15 September 1948, Relatório, Reparticao Técnica dos Servicos de Obras Públicas e Minas, 1947; AHU, DGOPC, 2618.

the first Willy's jeeps had been imported too, motorcycles were French (Griffon, Motobecane, Peugeot).<sup>103</sup> However, of the seventy vehicles imported in 1949, only one was destined for the colonial administration, all the others were purchased by private owners, most of whom were resident in Bissau. The director of the Public Works Department complained that in view of the mission attributed to his department to carry out works in the interior, the number of vehicles it had at its disposal was clearly 'insignificant'. As a result, the car-pool drivers, who were already under great strain given the large distances covered, were ordered to check and repair vehicles on Sundays and public holidays.<sup>104</sup>

Why, the governor asked, buy new cars when they would soon be ready for the scrap yard? He confessed to having

... grave doubts about how these engines will be used. (...) I fear that the blind-spots of many self-styled technicians in Guinea, will lead them to declare, for reasons of ignorance or stupidity, that the engines are badly made, and that there is no harm in running them down.<sup>105</sup>

Not only colonial personnel but also some of the appointed native chiefs, the *régulos*, were negligent. 'Everybody wants a truck,' the governor observed. Some had actually been distributed to local chiefs at their request to enhance their authority among their subjects, as was the case of one such *régulo* who was spotted transporting a cargo of rice.

But in what an awful state! The wheels were painted, one of them had a bolt missing, and another had been mounted the wrong way round! The authorities should check on them, instructing and accompanying the native. These simple machines should be cared for, preserved, repaired and multiplied, all in loco, with local resources.<sup>106</sup>

But he added there were good examples too, such as the motorbike belonging to Santos, the gardener. 'It was, he said, an old machine but owing to the skills of its owner, it was always in running order, and therefore everyone wanted to buy it. Without realizing that in the hands of incompetents not even motorbikes would work.' Maybe animal traction was better, he added, than the 'noisy, costly and ruinous motor cars'.

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<sup>103</sup> Bernardo de Sa Nogueira, Bissau, April 1950, Relatório, Repartição Técnica dos Serviços de Obras Públicas e Minas, 1949; AHU, DGOPC, 2618.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* The same official also lamented the fact that despite the urgent need to upgrade the hardened road surfaces 'to the requirements of modern life', this could not be done with the current personnel, equipment or funding.

<sup>105</sup> M.M. Sarmiento Rodrigues, Bissau, 29 July 1946; AHU, ISAU, 1731.

<sup>106</sup> From 'Primeira Conferência dos Administradores de 1947' (n.d.). Quote courtesy of Alexander Keese, SOAS, London.

**Barbosas & C.<sup>ta</sup>** IMPORTAÇÃO  
E EXPORTAÇÃO  
**"GUICOL"**

Agentes de: Macedo & Coelho L.<sup>da</sup> — LISBOA  
Internacional General Electric Company — U. S. A.  
The Studebaker Export Corporation — U. S. A.

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**1947 Studebaker Shows Revolutionary Style**



Endereço Telegráfico: Caixa Postal — 47 Telefones:  
 GUICOL — Bissau **BISSAU** ESCRITÓRIO — 60  
 GUICOL — Lisboa Guiné Portuguesa ARMAZEM — 92

*Photo 2.2* Studebaker  
*Source:* Anuário da Guiné Portuguesa, 1946, Bissau.

## Vehicle of sedition: The role of transport workers in Sawaba's rebellion in Niger, 1954-1966

Klaas van Walraven

### Introduction: Sawaba and Niger's 'little folk'

In 1954, a number of young men in Niger founded a new political party, the Union Démocratique Nigérienne (UDN). Their aim was to fight colonial rule and achieve the social transformation of what, until then, had been a French colony, part of the inter-territorial federation known as Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF). The UDN's leader was a charismatic political activist, Djibo Bakary, who articulated an impassioned nationalist discourse with militant Marxist-inspired undertones. As a teacher, he was what the French condescendingly called an *évolué*, or what in Niger was known as a *commis*, i.e. someone who had been to a colonial school or worked in the lower echelons of the colonial administration.<sup>1</sup> The son of a chief in Soudouré (near the capital, Niamey) but of low birth, Bakary had received a modern education. He was a dynamic organizer with a background in the scouting movement and was involved in union work, including establishing contact with communist unions in France. As a one-time commercial gardener, he founded a union for marginalized agricultural workers in Niamey and made a point of associating himself politically with the lower classes. In 1953 Bakary organized the first general strike as a protest against wage levels in Niger, which were the lowest of all

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<sup>1</sup> M. Djibo, *Les transformations politiques au Niger à la veille de l'indépendance* (Paris, 2001), 43. See also his memoirs, *Silence! On décolonise!: Itinéraire politique et syndical d'un militant africain* (Paris, 1992).



AOF countries. This led to substantial wage increases and made his name among the poorer strata of Niger's urban communities.

His political record then was a far cry from that of other politicians with a *commis* background, most of whom showed a strong predilection for European-inspired luxury styles.<sup>2</sup> The majority of *commis* after World War II did not hail from aristocratic chiefly families but came from the ranks of the *talakawa*<sup>3</sup> (commoners) who were often from former enslaved families and continued to suffer from low social standing in a society still largely marked by status ascription. Most *commis*, like Bakary, joined Niger's first political party, the Parti Progressiste Nigérien (PPN), which was affiliated to an AOF-wide mother organization, the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA). Bakary, however, abandoned the PPN when the RDA severed its links with the French communists (1950-1951). At the time, he was one of Niger's first full-time nationalist politicians, who had broken with the colonial administration in 1948 by refusing a forced (teacher) transfer in retaliation for his anti-colonial campaigning. Dependent on money from the PPN and, later, on gifts from political friends and the union world, he became less vulnerable to pressure from the French.

Niger was still an overwhelmingly rural society but one that had undergone significant changes. Chiefs had been transformed into colonial civil servants and had compromised themselves in the eyes of the population by the role they played in tax collection, labour recruitment and the abuses that went with them. It was not only the *commis* who had a conflict of interest with chiefly authority but also groups of rural folk who were lower on the social ladder but through their economic activities had broken free of the confines of village life.<sup>4</sup> With the onset of colonialism, commercial activity gained new dimensions as a result of technological innovations such as the motor car and the telegraph, while the demands of the modern administration led to the introduction of new professions and activities. Domestic servants, office boys, artisans, manufacturers and petty traders as well as telegraphists, postal workers, lorry drivers and mechanics all began flocking to Niger's emerging urban conglomerations. Many of these were referred to as *petit peuple* – 'small people', 'little folk' – who, like most *commis*, belonged to the ranks of the *talakawa*. With the new investments after World War II, they developed into a semi-urban proletariat whose members retained close links with the rural areas,<sup>5</sup> assuring a constant flow of goods

<sup>2</sup> F. Fuglestad, *A history of Niger 1850-1960* (Cambridge, 1983), 172.

<sup>3</sup> Singular: *Talaka*.

<sup>4</sup> This played partly on older traditions of pre-colonial trade, which had taken people, especially from Hausaland, to the far corners of the West African region. See P.E. Lovejoy, *Caravans of Kola: The hausa Kola trade, 1700-1900* (Zaria, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> Fuglestad, *History of Niger*, 171, 181.

and ideas between the city and the countryside. Their interests depended on a high degree of social mobility and, like those of the *commis*, were at variance with a chiefly class whose power was grafted on a rural status quo and the benevolence of the colonial master. Both these new, horizontally structured groups constituted a small minority in the newly urbanizing Niger<sup>6</sup> but they were present in all areas with urban centres – the West where the capital was, and in the centre and the East, which formed the colony's economic core and where there were new urban concentrations like Maradi and Tahoua in addition to the old city of Zinder (see Map 3.1).

It was these 'little folk' and associated, slightly better placed strata as drivers, mechanics, postal clerks or lower placed administrative cadres, for whom the *commis* seemed to belong to a higher class, who formed the backbone of the UDN. Among the party's founding members were – with the exception of a few *commis* – a bar tender, two master-masons and a baker, as well as a veterinary nurse, a bookkeeper, an assistant interpreter and a telephone operator, many of whom were active in the union world.<sup>7</sup> Apart from a broadly defined anti-colonial programme geared at the conquest of political power, the UDN began to agitate for the interests of the lower paid, against social misery in general and against the emergence of a parliamentary 'caste' of 'petits bourgeois' (read: the *commis* of the PPN) and chiefly authorities portrayed as forces of feudalism who exploited the rural masses.<sup>8</sup> This was not empty rhetoric but a message informing agitation at every stage. The party's anti-colonial programme also represented a project of social transformation that was as much

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<sup>6</sup> By 1960 only 5% of the population lived in towns. See R.B. Charlick, *Niger: Personal rule and survival in the Sahel* (Boulder, San Francisco and London, 1991), 23. Fuglestad estimated the urban proletariat at less than 1% of the population, see Fuglestad, *History of Niger*, 171.

<sup>7</sup> See the list of founding members in C. Fluchard, *Le PPN-RDA et la décolonisation du Niger 1946-1960* (Paris, 1995), 384. In Niamey there were a few *commis* among its founders, while the towns of Tessaoua and Zinder together had only one member who could lay claim to that status. F. Fuglestad, 'UNIS and BNA: The Role of "Traditionalist" Parties in Niger, 1948-1960', *Journal of African History*, XVI, 1 (1975), 132-33. Abdoulaye Mamani in Zinder had gained the CEPE (a primary school-leaving certificate). C. Maman, *Répertoire biographique des personnalités de la classe politique et des leaders d'opinion du Niger de 1945 à nos jours* (2 vols, Niamey, 1999 and 2003), vol. 1, 333. In Tessaoua, Abdou Ali Tazard, a teacher, had been a UDN member since its founding. Interview with Abdou Ali Tazard, Tessaoua, 9 February 2006.

<sup>8</sup> See Union Démocratique Nigérienne: Lettre ouverte aux Nigériens, Paris, 30 April 1954 (text in Fluchard, *Le PPN-RDA*, 374 ff.).



Map 3.1 Niger, 1950s–1960s

directed against certain socio-political segments of Nigérien society as against the colonial administration.<sup>9</sup>

The UDN rapidly developed a mass following – the first party in Niger to achieve this.<sup>10</sup> To the alarm of colonial officials, its message spread among the peasantry and brought modern politics to the rural world for the first time.<sup>11</sup> As

<sup>9</sup> Details in *Ibid.* and Parti Sawaba, *Pour un front démocratique de la patrie* (Bureau Politique: Niamey, 1962), 10–20.

<sup>10</sup> M. Djibo, ‘Les enjeux politiques dans la colonie du Niger (1944–1960)’, *Autrepart*, 27 (2003), 48 and Fuglestad, *History of Niger*, 181.

<sup>11</sup> As Fuglestad duly noted in *History of Niger*, 181.

it also managed to gain the backing of a certain intellectual elite,<sup>12</sup> the party attracted support from different strata and assumed the hallmarks of an (emerging) social movement – again the only party in Niger to do so. This was reflected in the name by which it was greeted among the rural populace: ‘Sawaba’, a name borrowed from a similar group in Nigeria (NEPU)<sup>13</sup> and related to the Hausa word *sawki* meaning ‘relief’ or ‘solace’, i.e. deliverance from a situation of misery or constraint and involving a deep-seated, almost millenarian anticipation of or desire for change leading to the coming of the (vaguely defined) good life.<sup>14</sup> The fact that the population began to refer to the UDN as ‘Sawaba’ points to the longing for relief from poverty or domination and was directly linked not so much to the party’s more formal political goals as to its ideas of social upliftment.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Of school teachers, for example, even if they mostly went for the PPN. K. Idrissa, ‘La dynamique de la gouvernance: Administration, politique et ethnicité au Niger’. In: K. Idrissa, ed., *Le Niger: Etat et Démocratie* (Paris, 2001), 47; Djibo, *Les transformations*, 54.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Northern elements progressive union’. See, among others, A. Abba, ed., *The Politics of Mallam Aminu Kano: Documents from the independence struggle 1950-1960* (Kaduna, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> During campaigning, party delegations were greeted with jubilation along the following lines: ‘Sawaba! Sawaba Guwa! Sawaba sawkiga Allah!’ (‘Sawaba! Sawaba the Camel! Sawaba the Blessing of God!’) (translation courtesy of Issa Younoussi). Fluchard, *Le PPN-RDA*, 198, 215. The leader of the party, whose symbol was the camel, was seen as a saviour or ‘the righter of wrongs, the invulnerable, the prophet who [travelled] by camel’ (‘le redresseur des torts, l’invulnérable, le prophète qui se déplace à chameau’). A. Mayaki, *Les partis politiques nigériens de 1946 à 1958: Documents et témoignages* (Niamey, 1991), 58. When the party came to power, Bakary gave a speech noting that the cry of ‘Sawaba’ represented a ‘cry of hope and courage’ expressing the will of a people that things would ‘CHANGE’, with Sawaba leading ‘the masses ... to happiness and prosperity’ (‘cri d’espoir et de courage’ ‘CHANGE’ (capitals in the original); ‘les masses ... vers le bonheur et la prospérité’). Rapport moral présenté par le secrétaire général du mouvement socialiste africain (M.S.A.), no date, (text in A. Talba, *Une contribution à l’étude des partis politiques nigériens: Le témoignage de Adamou Mayaki* (Bordeaux, 1984), 135 ff. See for different forms of millenarianism (but predominantly religious), *Millenarian movements in Africa and the diaspora*, Bulletin des Séances, Royal Academy of Overseas Sciences, 47 (2001, suppl.), 3. For its link with politics, Y. Talmon, ‘Millenarism’, *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York and London, 1968), vol. 10, 359.

<sup>15</sup> Bargery’s Hausa-English Dictionary ([www.koshigaya.bunkyo.ac.jp/hslaiman/](http://www.koshigaya.bunkyo.ac.jp/hslaiman/)), accessed 10 October 2006; Djibo, *Les transformations*, 54; *Ibid.* ‘Les enjeux politiques’, 52; and Salifou, *Le Niger* (Paris, 2002), 163. Its party organ and that of its union affiliate (*Le Démocrate & Talaka*) also point to this social dimension. On the concept of social movement, see D. McAdam, J.D. McCarthy & M.N. Zald, eds, *Comparative perspectives on social movements: Political opportunities, mobilizing*

Sawaba's message of transformation was closely bound up with the social core of its support, i.e. Niger's 'little folk' and some related strata. Some of the latter commanded modern skills useful in a technologically modernizing society, such as telegraphists, veterinary nurses, postal employees, mechanics, meteorological assistants, even the odd cinema operator. These were professions that afforded wider horizons than 'traditional' life in Niger could offer. Many other party followers had occupations or callings that did not necessarily involve modern technology but that allowed them mobility in a spatial sense. One could think here of lorry drivers, bus drivers, a variety of (petty) traders, marabouts (Muslim preachers) and *karuwai* (prostitutes).<sup>16</sup> All of these people, who were mobile, endowed with broader horizons and eking out a new existence in Niger's (sub)urban worlds, were to a greater or lesser degree confronted with a socially inferior position and had a strong interest in upward social mobility.

Spearheaded by Niger's 'little folk' and with the help of a coalition representing other groups, Sawaba managed to win Niger's first general election under universal suffrage in March 1957. These were held under the *Loi Cadre* introduced by France's Fourth Republic, which provided for limited autonomy under French supervision. However, Bakary's reign as Niger's first prime minister was short-lived as the *Loi Cadre* became caught up in the political maelstrom of 1958, which was sparked off by the crisis in Algeria where Algerian nationalists fighting for independence faced dogged resistance from European colonists and the French army. This led to the arrival of General de Gaulle, a new French constitution and the establishment of the Fifth Republic. The Sawaba government disapproved of the constitutional transformation of the French empire that was put to the vote in Niger in a referendum in September, and demanded outright independence. It clashed head-on with the much tougher rulers of the Fifth Republic who refused to let go of a colony deemed to be of

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*structures, and vultural framings* (Cambridge, 1996) and J. Nash, ed., *Social Movements: An Anthropological Reader* (Malden, MA, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Adherents of Islamic brotherhoods such as the Tijaniya occupied a marginal social position combining a broad horizon with a spiritual authority competing with chiefly powers. Djibo, *Les transformations*, 46; Charlick, *Niger*, 21, 48; Fuglestad, *History of Niger*, 131. *Karuwai* were women who were generally divorced or widowed and did not originate from where they now lived. They had no connections to fall back on but enjoyed a freer life, relative material independence and enlarged personal horizons as a result of their marginalized but tolerated existence. F. Mounkaila, 'Femmes et politique au Niger: présence et représentations'. In: K. Idrissa, ed., *Le Niger: Etat et démocratie* (Paris, 2001), 380-81. Although prostitutes and brothel madams also played a role in the PPN-RDA, the *karuwai*, as well as the marabouts, generally had social profiles similar to those of the *petit peuple*.

great strategic importance.<sup>17</sup> They decided to topple Bakary's cabinet by unconstitutional means, and the party lost the referendum as a result of a combination of coercion, threats and electoral fraud. With all the resources at its disposal, the colonial administration proceeded to set up the PPN-RDA as Niger's next so-called 'autonomous' government.<sup>18</sup> As Sawaba was considered a threat to French interests and the politically weak PPN-RDA (RDA for short), it became the target of systematic persecution.

Niger's new autonomous administration and security apparatus, under combined RDA/metropolitan control, began to emasculate Bakary's movement, persecuting its leaders, repressing its followers and driving the party underground in October 1959. Although for a while Sawaba attempted to wage conventional forms of opposition and even entertained ideas of national reconciliation, this came to nothing, partly because of the uncompromising attitude of the hawks within the RDA (known as 'the Reds').<sup>19</sup> Faced with unrelenting repression, which made the lives of all those associated with the movement well-nigh impossible and led to a steady stream of political exiles into neighbouring countries, Sawaba's leaders began to plan the violent overthrow of the RDA regime, which, almost in spite of itself, acceded to a belated formal independence in August 1960 under French supervision. With assistance from the governments of Algeria, Ghana, and the Eastern Bloc, Sawaba embarked on a protracted course of guerrilla infiltrations (1962-1966), which only petered out when a full-scale attack across Niger's Southern and Western borders in the

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<sup>17</sup> Due to its uranium reserves, its border with Algeria and Niger's proximity to Nigeria (which was then on its way to independence), West Africa's economic powerhouse and an obsession with French officialdom. On the significance of Algeria, see K. van Walraven, 'From Tamanrasset: The struggle of Sawaba and the Algerian connection (1957-1966)', *Journal of North African Studies*, 10, 3-4 (2005), 507-27; on uranium, see G. Pallier, 'L'uranium au Niger', *Les cahiers d'outre-mer*, 37, 146 (1984), 175; on Nigeria, see Bulletin Trimestriel de Renseignements. Extérieurs. Deuxième Fascicule. 1. Partie. Afrique Occidentale Britannique et Libéria. Sources: SDECE. Presse. Secret. Exemplaire no. 11/65, n.d. but between July and October 1958; and 94 Niger. 944 Etats Indépendants d'Afrique. Origine S.D.E.C.E.; Archives Nationales, Section Outre-Mer (hereafter ANSOM), FM Aff. Pol. Cart. 2195/D.7 and 2197/D.10.

<sup>18</sup> For details, see Djibo, *Les transformations*; F. Fuglestad, 'Djibo Bakary, the French, and the Referendum of 1958 in Niger', *Journal of African History*, XIV, 2 (1973), 313-30; K. van Walraven, 'Revising revisionism: The historiography of Niger and the fall of Sawaba (1958-1959)'; paper presented at the Centre of African Studies, Cambridge University, 30 January 2006.

<sup>19</sup> 'Les Rouges'. Interview with former RDA official Abdou Adam, Niamey, 29 November 2003.

autumn of 1964 failed. From then on, Sawaba's followers suffered under a regime of persecution and imprisonment.<sup>20</sup>

This chapter concentrates on the role of one particular social, occupational group – transport workers – in the chequered history of the Sawaba movement, both in its initial phase when the party was fighting its way to and trying to maintain power, and during its period of clandestine activities. The following section discusses the occupations grouped under the rubric of transport workers who were active on behalf of the movement. This is followed by a discussion of a particularly sensitive period in party history: when in April 1958 the party was still in government it successfully fought off an RDA attack with the help of drivers, chauffeurs, lorries and other vehicles used to transport party cadres who were mobilized for street battles with supporters and leaders of the RDA in Niamey. The subsequent section analyzes the role of transport workers – after Sawaba's fall from power – in spreading the party message, building up and maintaining a clandestine network of intelligence, and their contribution to infiltration and communication work, culminating in participation in guerrilla attacks. A concluding section assesses the significance of transport workers as archetypal examples of Niger's *petit peuple* or immediately associated strata and their contribution to the pursuit of modern politics in both conventional and seditious forms.

### Transport workers and Sawaba

Transport workers were loyal Sawaba supporters and included, most importantly, drivers whose lorries plied the routes between urban centres. They also operated along import-export routes, a vital responsibility in a landlocked country with no railways and whose closest connection to the sea was the port of Cotonou, more than 800 km to the South. Lorry drivers played an important role in handling the export of Niger's groundnut crop. They were employed by private French companies such as SCOA,<sup>21</sup> Dumoulin or Entreprises Vidal, the giant conglomerate run by Pierre Vidal, a businessman with interests in the construction industry and transport sector and reported to be the richest man in Niger.<sup>22</sup> To name a few of the Sawabists thus employed one could mention Bara

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<sup>20</sup> This history is relayed elsewhere: the writing of a monograph entitled 'The yearning for relief: A history of the Sawaba rebellion in Niger (1954-1975)' is currently underway.

<sup>21</sup> 'Société Commerciale de l'Ouest Africain'.

<sup>22</sup> He was nonetheless appointed as a minister in Bakary's cabinet. While very rich, he did not, however, come from Niger but was born in Mexico. He was loathed by much of French officialdom. Thus, in a way, this 'petit blanc' turned nouveau riche

Sani who was born in Tessaoua in 1940 and worked as a driver for SCOA in Niamey, Tiecoura Traoré who was a driver at Dumoulin, and Amadou Ide Niameize who was employed by Vidal.<sup>23</sup> Some of these men were very young, which made them ideal for political mobilization. Politics was culturally associated with the young (*yara* in Hausa) in terms of age or conduct, as it could involve argument, the mockery of opponents or even violence – behaviour considered inappropriate for the elders. Thus, it was the youth, like the horizontal category of *petit peuple*, who by definition had low social status and an interest in upward social mobility, who were more amenable to mobilization for political action.<sup>24</sup>

Another group of transport workers were bus drivers, who usually worked for what was known as ‘Transafricaine’, a company that had routes within Niger and manned the routes linking the country with its neighbours. These drivers, such as Elhadji Hamidou of Niamey,<sup>25</sup> would not man the bus alone but have an *aide-motoriste* or assistant driver with them who could take over the wheel at intervals. Garba Saley, a young man born in Niamey, was a Sawaba supporter employed in this way.<sup>26</sup> Several of these bus drivers or their assistants worked for the party cause, while other drivers loyal to Sawaba were employed during the party’s reign at the government garage where they served, for example, as the personal chauffeurs of party leaders or government personnel.<sup>27</sup>

A special group was formed by the men who helped drivers to attract clients for a small commission, and are known in Francophone Africa as *coxeurs*.<sup>28</sup> As

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shared his social profile with Niger’s ‘little folk’. Maman, *Répertoire biographique*, vol. 1, 403; Fuglestad, ‘Djibo Bakary’, 323.

<sup>23</sup> Bureau de Coordination et de Liaison, No. 879/BCL: Etudiants et Boursiers du Sawaba de Retour des Pays de l’Est, 18 October 1968, 4; Archives Nationales du Niger (hereafter ANN), 86 MI 1 E 8.14; Renseignements, 6 November 1959, ANN, 86 MI 3 F 3.8; Jean Colombani, chef Sûreté, to Minister of the Interior, 13 September 1961, ANN, 86 MI 3 F 3.10.

<sup>24</sup> M. Last, ‘Towards a political history of youth in Muslim Northern Nigeria, 1750-2000’. In: J. Abbink & I. van Kessel, eds, *Vanguard or vandals: Youth, politics and conflict in Africa* (Leiden, 2005), 37-54.

<sup>25</sup> Bureau de Coordination et de Liaison, no. 867/BCL, Note d’information, 19 October 1967; ANN, 86 MI 1 E 8.14.

<sup>26</sup> Etudiants et Boursiers du Sawaba de Retour des Pays de l’Est, 5.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Renseignements, 11 September 1959, ANN, 86 MI 3 F 3.9; Haut Commissariat Général à Dakar. Conseiller Politique – Bureau de Synthèse: Recueil des principaux renseignements reçus par le Bureau d’Etudes de Dakar pour la période du 4 au 10 Mars 1960, no. 71 ex. no. 27, secret, ANSOM, FM Aff. Pol. Cart.3690; Etudiants et Boursiers du Sawaba de Retour des Pays de l’Est, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Also spelt ‘cockseur’ or ‘cockser’. Probably derived from the English ‘to coax’, i.e. persuading someone to come along. For ‘coxeurs’ in a more contemporary setting



also noted in the next chapter in this volume, *coxeurs* were archetypical marginals, mobile and endowed with a horizon far beyond village life as a result of their work. Sawaba purposely attempted to mobilize these people as they had links that were ideal for spreading the party message in rural areas. Among Sawabist *coxeurs*, one could mention Labo Moussa from the town of Galmi in the centre of the country, who was *chef coxueur* and had others working under him; Amadou Foulani, a *coxueur* from the Western town of Téra; and Mahamane Dogo and one Massaki, both *coxeurs* from Tahoua. Kanguèye Boubacar, a Sawaba guerrilla leader executed in 1964, was a peasant who became a *coxueur* in Ayorou on the border with Mali.<sup>29</sup>

After Sawaba's fall from grace, *coxeurs* became useful for underground work. A 1962 party pamphlet argued that *coxeurs*, like itinerant traders, *tabliers* (traders with a small market stalls), *piroguiers* (those who manned canoes on the river Niger) and people using pack animals, constituted a category of people who were less well-off than ordinary traders under the *commis*-dominated RDA. As they could not afford to pay bribes the way bigger traders could, they were subject to abuse by customs officials and they missed out on trading licences granted to people loyal to the new regime. Many had been forced out of their marginal businesses, pushed into labour migration or back into the peasant life they had hoped to escape. This only embittered people, who subsequently became ideal candidates for recruitment by Sawaba.<sup>30</sup>

However, evidence suggests that more skilled transport workers, namely mechanics, were also active in the party, corresponding to the technological sophistication that marked some strata associated with Sawaba's 'little-folk'

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see S.N. Kwa, 'Coxeur, un emploi pour les jeunes', *Diagonales*, 48 (November 1998), 10 and P. Chilson, *Riding the demon: On the road in West Africa* (Athens, GA and London, 1999), *passim*, discussing the *komasho*.

<sup>29</sup> Another Sawabist 'coxueur' was a certain Nouhou, who came from the same region as Labo Moussa. Bulletin Mensuel de Renseignements, no. 472.3, 1-31 October 1964, Konni, ANN, FONDS DAPA: Bulletins Mensuels de Renseignements no. 417 – October 1964; November 1964; République du Niger. Ministère de l'Intérieur. Direction de la Sûreté Nationale. Surveillance du Territoire (Bureau de Coordination), no. 396/SN/ST, 29/9/66: Secret. Organisation Terroriste "Sawaba" (Recueil des dirigeants et militants actifs en fuite); exemplaire no. 000148, destinataire le Sous Préfet de Dosso. This document can be found in the archives of the Gendarmerie Nationale, Niamey. Personal copy provided by H.E. Sanda Mounkaïla, Minister of Youth Affairs for UDFP-Sawaba (2003); *Le Niger*, 16 November 1964.

<sup>30</sup> *Pour un front démocratique*, 15-16. See E. Hobsbawm, *Uncommon people: Resistance, rebellion, and jazz* (New York, 1998) on the roles of lower social strata or professions in spheres beyond their established social or vocational position (as politics, resistance, and intellectual activity).

core.<sup>31</sup> Mechanics, as shown below, were meant to play a special role in party attempts to unseat the RDA, as part of a technical and managerial counter-administration trained and built up before the eventual takeover of government was attempted.

### Riots and modernity: Motor vehicles and mob violence, April 1958

From 1954 onwards, rivalry marked relations between Sawaba and the RDA. The former had a nucleus of *petit peuple* at its core, with geographical strongholds in the centre and East of the country, besides constituting a substantial minority in the capital and enjoying considerable support in towns along the Niger river valley to the West of Niamey. The RDA was dominated by the more comfortably placed *commis*, in addition to being the party of Niger's Western region and, by extension, of a substantial part of Niamey's population (whether *commis* or the lower ranks). With a history of bitter competition between the two political formations, the RDA began to engage in total opposition from the moment Bakary started leading Niger's first autonomous administration under French supervision from March 1957 until September 1958. To this end, it played on a range of conflicts and fissures within Niger society. By April 1958, the RDA was also beginning to try to gain a foothold in Sawaba strongholds in the centre and East, something that was considered as trespassing in the conceptions of political power that prevailed at the time. Throughout the month,

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<sup>31</sup> To name just some of those who were active for the party at different stages: Marc Foly, from Niamey but of Dahomean origin; a certain Moussa from Filingué; Ousseyni Djibo, born ca. 1924 in Bandé (between Magaria & Zinder) and persecuted by the RDA; Soumana Magawata dit Balle Ali, a driver and mechanic at the government garage in Niamey; Mounkaila Mahamane dit Lamama, a mechanic at the same place and a boxer; Louis Bourguès, a half-caste from Agadez who trained as a driver and mechanic; and Djibo Issa, an apprentice driver and assistant mechanic from the Dosso region. Organisation Terroriste "Sawaba"; Direction de la Sûreté, Surveillance du territoire, no. 630/SN/ST, Examen de situation de nommé Souleymane Hako, 20 July 1967; ANN, 86 MI 1 E 8.14; Cour de Sûreté de l'Etat, Arrêt de condamnation no. 9 June 1969; ANN, M.27.26; Etudiants et Boursiers du Sawaba de Retour des Pays de l'Est, 10 & 13; Délégation pour la défense de la zone d'outre-mer no. 4 Etat-Major – 2<sup>ème</sup> bureau, Abidjan ?, 1964; Bulletin de Renseignement Particulier, 18 October 1964, no. 1234/2/S - Note d'information, in Complôt contre la sûreté de l'Etat: affaire Diallo (3-5 décembre 1963); subversion au Niger, parti Sawaba, attaques contre le Président Diori; organisation des forces de police, sûreté nationale, milices populaires (1959-66); 1. "Niger 1964-1965"; Archives Nationales, Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre (hereinafter as ANSHAT), 10 T 717, dossier 2; various files in ANN, 86 MI 3 F 18.9; Direction de la Sûreté Nationale/-Commissariat de Police de la Ville d'Agadez: Notes d'Information Concernant le Sawaba en liaison avec Tamanrasset.

incidents took place as youths on both sides became involved in brawls and skirmishes and the first death was recorded on 21 April. Sawaba began to feel taunted by what was a full month of systematic propaganda tours by high-ranking RDA officials travelling the length and breadth of the country. On 27 April, incidents reached the capital with women on both sides of the divide becoming involved in scuffles. The Sawaba administration then decided to go for a showdown.

What stands out most from the riots was their organized character as of 29 April. This is most evident among the high-ranking party officials who regularly arrived by car at the scene of riots during or shortly before they broke out, mostly to whip up passions but possibly also to direct attacks on the enemy side and coordinate a capital-wide strategy. Moreover, the rapid spread of the fighting on that day was partly the result of the deployment of lorries – of the open pick-up type – by the Sawaba government to transport what became known as ‘Bellas from Gao’. These men were brought to different locations in the capital, usually the compounds of RDA leaders, to mock, attack or abuse members of the opposition.<sup>32</sup>

When a woman and girl loyal to the RDA were beaten up early on 29 April by Sawaba women, RDA supporters called in Diamballa Yansambou Maïga, a senior RDA official who had played a central role in party agitation during that month. Maïga, a heated character, hurried to the scene, driven there by his chauffeur in a vehicle called a ‘command car’. Maïga became engaged in a scuffle with none other than the brother of Djibo Bakary, the prime minister. This led to a massive fight, with women on both sides punching their opponents as well as the two men – Sawaba’s ‘little women’ in the process tarnishing Maïga’s position as scion of a noble family tracing its descent to the rulers of the Songhay empire. Maïga was rescued by his chauffeur who drove him to RDA headquarters, probably to report back to the party leadership. The French authorities, whose supervision of Bakary’s administration was beginning to

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<sup>32</sup> This reconstruction is based on the report by a French inspector sent by Paris to conduct an on-the-spot investigation during the second half of May. Filed in France’s colonial archives, it has so far never been used despite the wealth of details it contains. I/D 2 Juin 1958. Strictement Confidentiel. L’Inspecteur de la France d’outre-mer Marcel Boyer à Monsieur le Ministre de la France d’outre-mer Paris. Objet: Incidents au Niger (Report); I/E 2 Juin 1958. Strictement Confidentiel. L’Inspecteur de la France d’outre-mer Marcel Boyer à Monsieur le Ministre de la France d’outre-mer Paris. Objet: Incidents au Niger et en Guinée – Exécution de mes instructions no. 944/DC du 13 Mai 1958 confirmées par T.O. chiffré du 22 Mai 1958 (Conclusions); Confidentiel Niger 1958 Annexe au rapp. 1 D du 2 Juin 1958 de M. l’Inspecteur Général Boyer “Incidents au Niger”. Fascicule des Pièces Annexes du Rapport sur les Incidents de Niamey Avril 1958. Maintien de l’ordre (the Annexes); all ANSOM, FM Cart.1041 & FM Aff. Pol. Cart.2255/D.2.

falter, were alerted. An hour and a half later Maïga and his driver reappeared at the scene of the troubles, where Sawaba too would have sent a representative: Amadou dit Gabriel, a high-ranking Sawabist and deputy mayor, was brought by his driver in a municipal vehicle known as a ‘Versailles’, i.e. a Ford Versailles, a car sold by Ford in France during the 1950s.<sup>33</sup> If this was true, Gabriel’s presence would merely have added to the unrest: Maïga’s ‘command car’ ended up in the midst of a hostile crowd that launched a barrage of stones, seriously raising tensions.<sup>34</sup>



*Photo 3.1* Ford Versailles  
 Source: GrandStrateguerre (<http://cp43.over-blog.com/article-1870706.html>) © Olivier Rivière, 2006).

Fights then broke out near the Great Market and at several points along Salama Avenue, one of the capital’s main arteries skirting the Lakouroussou district. Lakouroussou was one of the liveliest and most diverse districts ethnically but claimed by the RDA as its fiefdom.<sup>35</sup> Made up of a dense network of streets that made policing difficult, it saw a major scuffle erupt involving sup-

<sup>33</sup> [www.answers.com/topic/ford-versailles](http://www.answers.com/topic/ford-versailles)

<sup>34</sup> In trying to escape the fracas, Maïga’s chauffeur reversed the car, hit a ten-year-old boy whose leg was broken, and took off. Mission Boyer, Annexes, and Telegram Rollet to France Outre-Mer. *Priorité Absolue sans délai*. Confidential. no. 113, 29 April 1958; ANSOM, FM Aff. Pol. Cart.2181/D.1 bis.

<sup>35</sup> S. Bernus, *Niamey: Population et habitat; documents d’enquêtes* (Etudes Nigériennes ‘documents’ 11; IFAN – CNRS: no pl., ca. 1964), 5. Originally it had a population of Zarma from the Kalle subgroup.

porters of the RDA, whose attacks on a Sawaba woman led to the arrival of a high-level delegation of Sawaba leaders (most of them hardliners), brought in the car of Hima Dembélé, a former cinema operator, important Sawaba unionist and the editor of the party organ. The delegation must have tried to whip up anti-RDA sentiments, boost the morale of supporters and give instructions. The French inspector who later investigated the riots observed that none of the party leaders of either Sawaba or the RDA had exercised any moderating influence over their rank and file. It comes as no surprise, then, that Sawaba's delegation was attacked and its car severely damaged.

The rapid spread of the fighting was partly caused by groups of armed men transported to trouble spots by lorries from the transport company owned by Pierre Vidal, who Bakary had made cabinet minister responsible, ironically, for public health. It is important to realize that the lorries were not simply confiscated by Sawaba supporters, who were well represented in Entreprises Vidal. Vidal's interests in the building industry meant it employed many unskilled or lower-skilled workers who typically belonged to Sawaba's social core. In fact, the health minister himself had ordered the lorries pick up Sawabists in the city and the surrounding countryside the previous evening and early on the morning of 29 April.<sup>36</sup> Vidal was thereby acting in accordance with the wishes of Bakary's cabinet, which had decided to resort to what it saw as self-defence in the face of the police's inability to maintain law and order, but that actually represented forcing a violent face-off with the opposition. The men and boys transported included many 'Bellas', which in Songhay and Zarma referred to black slaves of Tuareg masters but by then was a generic term for people of former slave origin or, in the process, people of low social status. Many of these Bellas had migrated to Niamey from Eastern Mali (from the area around the ancient city of Gao) and were employed in menial jobs – of which there were many in Vidal's construction company.<sup>37</sup> Vidal's inclusion in Bakary's cabinet therefore provided Sawaba with vital resources, not just men and money but also vehicles.

Thus when Delarozière, the French Commandant de Cercle of Niamey who had supervised riot control from early in the morning, returned to his headquarters after midday, he spotted a grey pick-up truck touring the area round the Great Market. It was loaded with a dozen individuals brandishing clubs, shout-

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<sup>36</sup> Le Procureur de la République à Monsieur le Chef du Territoire du Niger, 27 Août 1958. Confidentiel; ANSOM, FM Aff. Pol. Cart. 2189/D.12.

<sup>37</sup> On Bellas (in Hausa: 'Bugaje'; singular: 'Buzu') see Fuglestad, *History of Niger*, 28; S. Baier, *An economic history of central Niger* (Oxford, 1980), 16; S. Decalo, *Historical Dictionary of Niger* (Metuchen, NJ and London, 1979), 48; interview with Mounkaila Beidari, Niamey, 2 December 2003.

ing ‘Sawaba!, Sawaba!’ and clearly looking for trouble.<sup>38</sup> The fact that the riots were now more orchestrated and rioters were being transported by vehicle to different points in the capital meant that the police were becoming overwhelmed. Large concentrations of Bellas armed with steel rods appeared at Sawaba’s headquarters at 14:30 and from there they were taken in lorries to Salama Avenue. Walking in closed formation (according to the RDA), they became engaged in clashes with RDA cadres close to the water tower near the RDA office. Further down the avenue, police separated combatants as reserve units were put in place and a mobile platoon pushed protesters back. But about 15:30 rioters (presumably Sawabists upset about the interference) overwhelmed the police, seizing their truncheons and chasing them away. Lorries full of Bellas meanwhile descended on RDA leaders’ compounds. One of these parties attacked an RDA family, leading to several injuries. Another Bella convoy, according to the RDA led by Hima Yenkori, a nurse attached to the cabinet of Pierre Vidal, would have visited the house of Altine Diallo, RDA MP for Niamey. And yet another group attacked the compound of El Hadj Hima, a 59-year-old RDA man from Niamey, who suffered two broken ribs while his son Boubacar was worked over with a machete. At another scene, Garba Issa, a former member of the PPN governing committee, fired shots in the air, probably to scare off a lorry of Bella assailants. Although Delarozière’s forces charged to break up crowds in the streets adjacent to Salama Avenue, they could not prevent an assault on the house of the hated Maïga. The RDA alleged that two lorries of Bellas went to his address and that stones and other objects were hurled into his compound.<sup>39</sup>

In their struggle to regain control, the police were also in danger of going under at the Northern end of the Great Market in the Banizoumbou<sup>40</sup> district, where they clashed with demonstrators armed with sticks, bottles and knives. One European officer narrowly avoided being struck down by a ‘Hausa sabre’ and Delarozière could only free himself from a group of assailants by seizing the steel pole from one of the protesters. When the auxiliary forces were confronted by fifty well-armed fighters, another French officer ordered them to fire tear-gas grenades to disentangle themselves. In the course of these engagements, a detachment of troops was photographed by an unidentified individual.

By 22:00 and with a lull in the fighting, Sawaba’s motorized columns once more went into the city to assist its foot soldiers, this time equipped with shot-

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<sup>38</sup> Mission Boyer, Annexes.

<sup>39</sup> Mission Boyer, Report and Annexes.

<sup>40</sup> Meaning ‘peace has arrived’.

guns.<sup>41</sup> At midnight on 30 April, a large crowd of Sawaba supporters turned up at Maïga's residence. According to the RDA, a 'Versailles' belonging to city hall appeared and a scuffle broke out that ended with shots being fired from and into the compound. One or two protesters were injured and two people were killed, including Maïga's brother-in-law.<sup>42</sup> Sawaba supporters took off as the gendarmerie arrived to evacuate the wounded. The showdown had produced its first fatality, striking right at the heart of the RDA leadership. The governor was informed of the situation, the whole Niamey garrison was put on alert and troops were positioned at sensitive points around the capital. The violence then began to die down but 98 people were officially registered as injured – probably an underestimate – in addition to the two deaths and 13 people who had been badly wounded.<sup>43</sup> The effect of the showdown was that the RDA was considerably cowed and the outcome of the riots was widely seen as a victory for Sawaba. It then proceeded to take full control of the National Assembly and appoint some of its own supporters to the territorial administration (then still in French hands). It also forced the resignation of Delarozière, ostensibly for biased policing but probably because he had tried to stop the showdown and witnessed the Bellas at work.

The way the Sawaba government cut the RDA down to size offers a unique insight into the use of mob violence in modern Africa for political gain. Suppressing the RDA by targeting its militants and high-ranking officials paralyzed its campaign and undermined its position in the country as a whole. From the perspective of Sawaba's rank and file, the riots were seen as part of the party's 'revolutionary' programme that, rightly or wrongly, legitimized the use of violence by a Marxist-inspired populist rhetoric defending the cause of the *talakawa*. The fact that Sawaba's mobs were also confronted with people from their own social class as a result of the vertical lines of support that also marked the RDA's following did not matter by the time the party leadership decided to go for a showdown and tempers had reached boiling point. Since Sawaba's scheme also aimed to deliver control of parliament, the bureaucracy and the country's chieftaincies, these events in fact amounted to a creeping coup d'état in the context of a near-revolutionary government takeover that sought its legitimacy in the cause of the *talakawa*, guided by Sawaba's 'little folk' who

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<sup>41</sup> Mission Boyer, Annexes. Most RDA leaders would have regrouped in the residence of Boubou Hama (RDA president), which would also have been attacked. Fluchard, *Le PPN-RDA*, 233.

<sup>42</sup> Mission Boyer, Annexes and telegram of rollet to France Outre-Mer Paris, copy to Dakar. *Priorité Absolue*. no. 116, 30 April 1958; ANSOM, FM Aff. Pol. Cart.2181/D.1 bis.

<sup>43</sup> Mission Boyer, Annexes and Le Procureur de la République à Monsieur le Chef du Territoire du Niger, 27 Août 1958.

saw themselves as the avant-garde. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that the French were caught completely off guard. With police and Territorial Guards infiltrated by Sawaba and the intelligence apparatus unreliable as a result of interference by Bakary's cabinet, they were in the process of losing control,<sup>44</sup> as was symbolically witnessed by the mysterious photographer who registered the faltering French riot police in action.

This photographer, of whom nothing is known, highlights another dimension of the April events: these constituted Niger's first truly 'modern' riots involving not just semi-urbanized mobs but also new technological facilities that literally affected the pace and nature of political interaction. Throughout the month, party sections across Niger's vast interior kept in touch by car, telephone and telegraph.<sup>45</sup> RDA vehicles enabled its leaders to embark on an ambitious campaign that led to incidents in numerous cities, the news of which travelled fast as violent scuffles in faraway towns was frequently phoned through to Niamey, heightening tensions in the capital.<sup>46</sup> The showdown there was to a large extent facilitated by the use of modern transport and communication equipment. 'Command cars' and the Ford 'Versailles' as well as communication by telephone enabled party officials to move quickly from one part of town to another, assisting and directing the rank and file and communicating with headquarters.

However, with the exception of the lorries transporting the Bellas, the use of personal vehicles – while an unmistakable demonstration of leadership status – was ineffective in the fighting as such. They could even be counter-productive by raising the animosity of the crowds they got stuck in, only to be damaged and thus humiliate the politicians involved. This happened again in parliamentary elections in December 1958<sup>47</sup> when the French forced Sawaba out of power and RDA mobs attacked its cars, preventing vehicles from entering towns,

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<sup>44</sup> The French inspector sent to investigate even contemplated the possibility of a partial French pull-out. Mission Boyer, Report and Conclusions. This was *before* the installation of the Fifth Republic and the takeover of the metropolitan government by de Gaulle's team, more determined than the wavering rulers of the Fourth Republic. See for example, P. Vianson-Ponté, *Histoire de la République gaillienne: Mai 1958-Avril 1969* (Paris, 1971), 37-51.

<sup>45</sup> There is extensive archival evidence to show how sections of both parties in different cities kept in contact with the help of telegraphic messages during the December 1958 election campaign. ANSOM, FM Direction de Contrôle Cart.1040 (Mission Pinassaud 1958).

<sup>46</sup> Mission Boyer, Report and Annexes.

<sup>47</sup> Through which the French completed the process of setting up the RDA as Niger's next government.



forcing them off the road in near-collisions or completely destroying them – windows and bodywork included.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, the pretext the French used to topple Bakary's cabinet in September that year, i.e. his use of administrative vehicles for canvassing in the referendum, points to the underlying importance of motor cars since the *Loi Cadre* forced political parties to become mobile nationwide to gain the support of an electorate that had been vastly expanded under universal suffrage. Thus, throughout 1957 and 1958 motor vehicles represented an important additional tool in seizing and/or maintaining political power. In the April 1958 riots, Sawaba's deployment of lorries<sup>49</sup> was even decisive. Dispatched simultaneously and directed towards RDA leaders' compounds, they not only proliferated and speeded up the fighting and overwhelmed the French-controlled police but also paralyzed the RDA's direction of the rank and file, forcing it onto the defensive.

### Transporters underground, 1959-1963

After April 1958, Sawaba's position began to deteriorate rapidly as a result of wider developments engulfing France and its empire, leading to Bakary's fall in the autumn. Party leaders and the rank and file were persecuted and driven underground by the combined forces of the RDA and French administrators. With the RDA helped into power in December 1958, the new regime began to exact a terrible revenge. Initially, Sawaba tried to maintain its network of cadres simply to survive. This necessitated the construction of a system of communication that, as of about 1961, was increasingly put to work for more subversive purposes when it became clear that a rapprochement with the RDA would not come to anything. It was not difficult to find people willing to lend their services since the regime's repressive policies produced its own recruits. Drivers employed by the Sawaba government or Sawaba-run municipalities (Niamey and Zinder) had been sacked to make way for people loyal to the RDA. This naturally created resentment, which found its way into pro-Sawaba activities. For example, Amadou Songhoi [*sic*], who used to work as a driver for the government (*chauffeur au palais*), articulated fiercely anti-government

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<sup>48</sup> Djibo Bakary to Senghor, Dia, Lamine Guèye, Maradi (telegram) and Sawaba Maradi to Commandant de Cercle Maradi (letter), 11-12 December 1958; P. Brachet, l'Administrateur en Chef Commandant le Cercle de Maradi, to Monsieur le Gouverneur de la FOM Chef du Territoire du Niger (letter), 14 December 1958; message Commandant Escadron Maradi to Commandant Groupe Niger Niamey no. 422/4, 12 December; telegram Sawaba Maradi to Sawaba Niamey, n.d.; all Mission Pinassaud 1958.

<sup>49</sup> There is no way of estimating their number.

views and participated in a clandestine Sawaba cell in Niamey.<sup>50</sup> Drivers in private employment were also retrenched and engaged in Sawaba activity, such as Tiecoura Traoré mentioned earlier, who was part of a union cell in Maradi.<sup>51</sup> Even some *coxeurs*, though probably often self-employed, abandoned their jobs, possibly because of persecution by the regime or favouritism towards those loyal to the RDA. However, many drivers faithful to Sawaba continued manning lorries or the ‘Transafricaine’ buses, which were to prove crucial for the party’s communication system.

At first, Sawaba transmitted messages with the help of cadres employed as postal workers in different towns. For example, Sallé Dan Koulou, a hardliner high up in the party hierarchy, was employed as a clerk at Niamey’s post office, from where he sent messages to party workers in other cities.<sup>52</sup> For some time Abdoulaye Mamani, one of the most important Sawaba leaders living in Zinder, communicated with Aboubakar Ibrah through the intercession of Barmou Batouré, who also worked at the capital’s post office.<sup>53</sup> The party had people based at other strategic sites as well, such as Niamey’s airport, where meteorological assistants were employed. They were typical of the skilled and slightly better placed stratum associated with Sawaba’s ‘little folk’ core. Thus, Sawaba commanded the loyalty of Sékou Beri, an airport meteorological assistant,<sup>54</sup> and Mounkaila Beidari, a young, fiercely anti-government Sawabist (his father had been murdered by the RDA in 1960), who worked for Air Afrique. The latter used his job to open mail and luggage and transmit messages and material to Sawaba’s wing abroad. In addition, these men could keep a close watch on the comings and goings of members of the regime.<sup>55</sup>

However, it was not long before the government discovered that, for example, Barmou Batouré and one Arzika Issaka, both ‘agents des PTT’ [were

<sup>50</sup> Renseignements, 4 November 1959, ANN, 86 MI 3 F 3.9.

<sup>51</sup> Renseignements, 6 November 1959, ANN, 86 MI 3 F 3.8.

<sup>52</sup> ANN, 86 MI 3 F 3.7.

<sup>53</sup> Note d’information, 23 June 1960, ANN, 86 MI 3 F 8.5.

<sup>54</sup> Note d’information, 12 October 1961, ANN, 86 MI 3 F 8.19. Meteorological assistants were organized by a Sawaba-affiliated trade union. One could mention here Oumarou Yacoudima & Joseph Akouété, a Sawabist of Togolese origin who had known Djibo Bakary since his early days of protest against colonial rule. Haut Commissariat Général à Dakar. Conseiller Politique – Bureau d’Etudes: Recueil des Principaux Renseignements Reçus par le Bureau d’Etudes de Dakar pour la période du 13 au 19 août 1959, no. 43, ex. no. 1, secret, ANSOM, FM Aff. Pol. Cart. 3687.

<sup>55</sup> Beidari later facilitated the attempt by Amadou Diop, lorry driver and Sawaba hardliner, on the life of the president. Interview with Mounkaila Beidari, Niamey, 28 November 2003. See also below.

making] use of their functions to render services to ... Sawaba'.<sup>56</sup> The French-run Sûreté began to intercept, read and copy messages and then put them back in circulation. Sawaba found out what was happening and began to avoid the post office,<sup>57</sup> putting bus and lorry drivers to good use. By the spring of 1959, mail from Senegal destined for Bakary (then still in the country) was relayed through Gao and there entrusted by Saloum Traoré, a deported Sawabist of Malian origin, to a lorry driver who brought it to Niger.<sup>58</sup> It was not long before this system was being widely practised in the party's liaison with Sawabists in neighbouring countries and for maintaining communication inside Niger itself. Drivers as well as traders and marabouts thus distributed valuable information and political propaganda and pressed the party's cause by word of mouth or through the distribution of tracts, pamphlets and photographs of Bakary. In addition, they provided intelligence on the regime and carried money to fund Sawaba activities, assist cadres in distress and help the families of imprisoned activists. There is some evidence to suggest that Sawaba deliberately mobilized the transport sector for this, as well as related occupational groups.<sup>59</sup> The reason, of course, lies in the mobility and communication these professions embodied. *Coxeurs*, for example, were considered by the party as a professional category 'particularly well placed for furnishing intelligence on the movements of people'.<sup>60</sup> Conversely, the regime tried to restrict the party by literally immobilizing its leaders, confiscating cars or arresting their owners on charges of abusing fuel tickets at the government garage.<sup>61</sup> It also had informers at bus

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<sup>56</sup> Léopold Kaziende, Ministre des Travaux Publics, to ?, 24 June 1960, ANN, 86 MI 3 F 8.5 ('mettent à profit leurs fonctions pour rendre des services ... au ... Sawaba').

<sup>57</sup> In which cases the Sûreté noted immediately that it was much harder to gain intelligence on Sawaba's activities. It surmized that in one development in Zinder, it was being double-crossed by a Sawabist working at the post office. A. Espitalier, Zinder, to Directeur de la Sûreté, 8 September 1961, ANN, 86 MI 3 F 8.5.

<sup>58</sup> Haut Commissariat Général à Dakar. Conseiller Politique – Bureau d'Etudes: Recueil des principaux renseignements reçus par le Bureau d'Etudes de Dakar pour la période du 21 au 27 mai 1959, no. 31, ex. no. 1, secret, ANSOM, FM Aff. Pol. Cart. 3687.

<sup>59</sup> For example, Recueil des principaux renseignements reçus pour la période du 15 au 21 Janvier 1960, no. 64, ex. no. 27. secret, ANSOM, FM Aff. Pol. Cart. 2252.

<sup>60</sup> *Pour un front démocratique de la patrie*, 15 ('particulièrement bien placée pour fournir des renseignements sur les déplacements des personnes').

<sup>61</sup> ANN, 86 MI 3 F.8 (a document dated July 1960); Chef de la Brigade Mobile du Niger-Est, Zinder, to Chef des Services de Police, Niamey, 9 February 1960 and R. Roger, Commissioner of police, Zinder, to chef des services de la police, Niamey, 19 March 1960, both ANN, 86 MI 3 F 8.5.

stations to monitor the comings and goings of motor vehicles, in particular those arriving from or heading to foreign destinations.<sup>62</sup>

Exactly how important the role of lorry drivers and associated professionals were to Sawaba's communication and intelligence gathering can be gauged from the way that its so-called Northern, Southern and Western networks operated.

The Northern network extended from cities in Southern Niger to Agadez and beyond, to Tamanrasset and Algiers.<sup>63</sup> By 1963, Sawaba's cell in Tamanrasset was run by two people, one of whom was Louis Bourgès, a half-caste driver and mechanic from Agadez who had gone into exile in Algeria, corresponded with Sawabists in different towns in Niger, organized party meetings in Tamanrasset and liaised with Algerian officials. The cell in Agadez comprised a clerk at 'Transafricaine' in addition to traders and marabouts. The cell in InGal, some 100 km West of Agadez was run by a certain Kollo who, as an intermediary cattle trader, was ideal for sending letters to Tamanrasset and returning with money for propaganda activities among Niger's nomads. Letters were sent, among others, via traders, some of whom travelled by camel since the desert tracks to the North were not easy to negotiate by car. Further to the South, a certain Ramane, who was employed as a driver on the route Maradi – Agadez – Bilma (an isolated oasis town where many Sawabists were incarcerated), formed part of Sawaba's network in Maradi. A *dioula* (itinerant trader) from Tahoua collected intelligence on the government ministries in Niamey and from districts across the country. The Northern network thus made it possible for letters, photographs, propaganda material and money to be smuggled into Niger, while information found its way to Tamanrasset and on to exiled party leaders in Algiers and to other countries in West Africa.<sup>64</sup>

Sawaba's Southern network, which was centred on Kano in Nigeria, functioned in similar ways. For example in March 1962, a lorry driver from Birni N'Konni carried a letter to Elhadji Ibro in Tahoua, after which Adamou Assane Mayaki, a former Sawaba minister, went on a secret mission to Konni and Madaoua.<sup>65</sup> Dandouna Aboubakar, an important unionist in Maradi and a Sawaba hardliner, remained active underground for a long time, holding meet-

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<sup>62</sup> Bulletin de Renseignements Hebdomadaire, 25.463, no. 13, 25-31 March 1963, 2<sup>ème</sup> partie, ANSHAT, 5 H 123.

<sup>63</sup> This northern network is discussed in van Walraven, 'From Tamanrasset'.

<sup>64</sup> See the files contained in ANN, 86 MI 3 F 18.9 (Footnote 31 above).

<sup>65</sup> Renseignements, 13 March 1962, ANN, 86 MI 3 F 8.19. Elhadji Ibro was either Ibro Alirou or Ibro Garba, both former Sawaba MPs from Konni. It was possibly the latter who was arrested many times for political reasons. See Maman, *Répertoire biographique*, vol. 1, 282-84. He was a commercial transporter by profession.

ings with Sawabists who included Issaka Diori, a mechanic.<sup>66</sup> In the Western network that centred on Gao, transporters played an active role as well. One could mention Djadile Ibrahim, a transporter, possibly from the ‘Petro(kokino)’ company in Niger, and an unidentified bus driver at ‘Transafricaine’ who assisted Hima Dembélé in his liaison work. A certain Bondiéré, possibly a driver, took part in a secret party meeting in September 1960, together with others. Such examples are numerous.<sup>67</sup>

As they afforded a network of contacts across West Africa, lorry and bus drivers played an important role in the implementation of ‘Opération Formation Cadres’, a strategy whereby the party tried to build up its own counter-cadres of technical and administrative personnel with which to run the government in the event that it managed to unseat the RDA. This began early on in the party’s clandestine existence, and for which it mobilized its contacts with the communist world to fund foreign travel and the education of its militants. Many young men went to Eastern Europe this way for vocational or university education as well as for trade union and political training. Networks of sympathizers provided false identity papers and helped recruits to leave the country and be taken under the wing of Sawabists in Mali, Ghana or Nigeria where they were vetted and then sent on to their final destination.<sup>68</sup> While several young men left Niger by air, *pirogue* or on foot, many left with the help of transporters. Some of these had themselves amassed considerable funds with which Sawaba trainees could be helped. In other cases, cadres would hitch a ride with lorry drivers heading for foreign destinations or use the regular ‘Transafricaine’ service, especially to Gao.

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<sup>66</sup> Madi Konaté, comité local de la sous-section du PPN-RDA du Maradi, au Ministre de l’Intérieur (n.d., about 1960-61), ANN, 86 MI 3 F 3.8. In Niamey such meetings were naturally held as well. One involved some twenty Sawabists – including people high up in the party hierarchy – and was held in January 1960 at the house of Mamadou Diori, a transporter. It is not known whether there was a family connection with Issaka Diori who was mentioned earlier. Recueil des principaux renseignements reçus pour la période du 8 au 14 Janvier 1960 no. 63, ex. no. 28. Secret, ANSOM, FM Aff. Pol. Cart. 2252.

<sup>67</sup> Haut Commissariat Général à Dakar. Conseiller Politique – Bureau de Synthèse: Recueil des principaux renseignements reçus par le Bureau d’Etudes de Dakar pour la période du 29 octobre au 4 novembre 1959, no. 54 ex. no. 1, secret, ANSOM, FM Aff. Pol. Cart.3688; Note d’information, 20 July 1961, ANN, 86 MI 3 F 3.10; Georges Clément, Chef de Section ST et Frontières, to Directeur des Services, Niamey, 16 September 1960, ANN, 86 MI 3 F 7.10.

<sup>68</sup> It is difficult to give a precise figure. The Sawaba students numbered at least eighty to ninety, while one intelligence file mentions that Bakary obtained a total of 180 scholarships in the Eastern Bloc. This is a huge number when set against Niger’s underdeveloped educational system. Note d’information, 13 September 1961, ANN, 86 MI 3 F 3.5 (Niger’s Sûreté file on Djibo Bakary).

Thus, Tahiro, a transporter in Bamako, sent an air ticket to Gatakoye Sabi, a Sawaba unionist who became a mechanic in Niamey after being fired from SCOA. The ticket was sent ostensibly to employ Sabi in Mali but in reality it helped him on the first leg of a trip to China and Eastern Europe (1960-1961). Another transporter, Soumah Maïga from Kidal, was also suspected by the authorities of assisting in what could be dubbed the 'Mali Trail' along which cadres were helped to leave the country. In this way, for example, Ali Amadou, a Sawaba activist who had worked for the government's Service des Mines, left with a group of four, first by car before embarking on a *pirogue* with which they made their way across the border.<sup>69</sup> A certain Paraiso Ara crossed the border into Upper Volta by giving customs officials the excuse that he had to go there to repair a lorry. Others were not so lucky and were caught, such as Oumar Traoré, a former *chef de bureau* in the Sawaba government, who was arrested on 20 May 1962 on a lorry that was owned by Entreprises Vidal and was heading for Gao. Hima Dembélé, who carried out liaison duties with Sawaba leaders in Bamako, tried different ways to cross the border, usually via Gao but at other times via Upper Volta or, once, via Dosso, East of Niamey, and on to Togo. On 1 February 1961 he went by 'Transafricaine' en route to Mali but got off the bus a few kilometres before the border to cross the frontier along the Niger River by *pirogue*. In the meantime, Abdoulaye Mamani, still in possession of a car, left Niger via Upper Volta, to meet up with Dembélé and Bakary in Bamako later. In the summer of that year, Dembélé tried in vain to leave the country by travelling first to Tillabéri with the intention of going on by car to Ayorou on the border. In the autumn he again failed to leave Niger, this time travelling via the town of Say to Upper Volta, while sending his luggage directly to Gao with Amadou Ide Niameize, a lorry driver at Vidal.<sup>70</sup>

The recruits who benefited from Opération Formation Cadres were themselves at times transport workers, usually drivers or mechanics. A certain Moussa, a mechanic in Filingué, left the country for Bulgaria in December 1962.<sup>71</sup> The education it was possible to get could include courses in mechani-

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<sup>69</sup> Interview with Ali Amadou, Niamey, 28 January 2003.

<sup>70</sup> See different correspondence in ANN, 86 MI 3 F 8.3 (file on Gatakoye Sabi); ANN, 86 MI 3 F 12.32 (files on Soumah Maïga and Paraiso Ara and, for Oumar Traoré, B. Moussa, Directeur de la Sûreté, to Ministre de l'Intérieur, ca. May 1962); and for Mamani & Dembélé, Notes d'information, 20 June, 20 July and 12 September 1961 and Jean Colombani, Chef de la Sûreté, to Ministre de l'Intérieur, 13 September 1961, all ANN, 86 MI 3 F 3.10.

<sup>71</sup> Direction de la Sûreté, Surveillance du territoire, no. 630/SN/ST, Examen de situation de nommé Souleymane Hako, 20 July 1967 (see Footnote 31).

cal engineering.<sup>72</sup> Bara Sani, who had been employed as a driver at SCOA in Niamey, gained a mechanic's certificate in West Germany, while Soumana Magawata dit Balle Ali, a driver and mechanic at the government garage, trained as a mechanic in the GDR.<sup>73</sup> Garba Saley, an *aide-motoriste* at 'Trans-africaine' in Niamey, also went there to be trained as an agricultural mechanic, as did André Jean dit Lamarche.<sup>74</sup> Others, such as Mamadou Farka and Sow Boubakar, studied to be car mechanics or did other forms of mechanical engineering in the Soviet Union. Diesel mechanics also attracted Sawaba followers, such as Ali Hamadou dit Tanda Mamadou.<sup>75</sup>

### Drivers of the rebellion, 1963-1965

Transport workers also took part directly in Sawaba's armed rebellion through infiltration work, guerrilla training and by participating in guerrilla attacks. One of the more remarkable cases is that of Djibo Issa. The evidence available suggests that Issa was a hard-core activist and part of the Tamanrasset-based network around Louis Bourgès and Boukari Karemi dit Kokino. In 1963 Issa, a Zarma apprentice driver and assistant mechanic, was sent by Sawaba's external leadership to Niger to assess the strength of the regime, possibly by trying to create a disturbance at the annual Republic Day celebrations on 18 December. After travelling from Algeria to France – where he was temporarily imprisoned because he would have fought a policeman with a knife – Issa got in touch with a Sawaba representative in (East?) Germany before returning to Algeria by plane, paid for by Sawaba's Ghana-based leadership. Issa's presence in Algeria suggests that he may have undergone some of the military training that hundreds of Sawaba followers took there in preparation for infiltrations and the attacks of 1964.<sup>76</sup> Upon his return to Algiers, he went to Tamanrasset and from there by car to the border with Niger, with uniforms (presumably from the

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<sup>72</sup> Other vocational courses especially attended by Sawaba trainees were in agriculture and veterinary services.

<sup>73</sup> Magawata was later, after Sawaba's rebellion, again employed at the government garage, which rarely happened as many remained unemployed because they were tainted by their Sawaba past. *Etudiants et Boursiers du Sawaba de Retour des Pays de l'Est*, 4, 13.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* 4-5.

<sup>75</sup> Ironically later in October 1968, Ali Hamadou became an employee at the presidential garage. *Ibid.* 9, 12-13.

<sup>76</sup> There is one other positive identification of a Sawaba follower and mechanic who did military training in Marnia in the West of Algeria, in addition to being trained in radio communications in Algiers. This was Mounkaila Mahamane dit Lamama, a mechanic at the government garage and a boxer, who also trained as a mechanic in the Soviet Union. *Ibid.* 10.

Algerian army that was assisting in the training of the Sawaba guerrillas) and Sawaba propaganda stuffed in his luggage. At In Abbangarit, nearly 500 km North-West of Agadez, his car must have broken down, for Issa was caught there, in uniform, trying to steal a Land Rover belonging to a local European mechanic. Issa would have insulted the mechanic and was then apprehended and interrogated by a French officer in Agadez. He did not seem particularly intimidated, as he boasted that Djibo Bakary had planes and pilots to fly at his disposal and he kept prison staff busy by throwing things around, banging on his cell door, shouting ‘Sawaba! Sawaba!’, and trying to indoctrinate other inmates to the point that he was considered ‘a bad example among the bandits’ and was transferred to the Sûreté in Niamey.<sup>77</sup>

Among the guerrilla fighters who participated in the attacks on the regime, including the assaults in 1964 and 1965, were also some transport workers. First, there were people based in Niger who assisted the commandos with food, money and shelter during the attacks in the autumn of 1964. These included, among others, Ousseyni Djibo, a mechanic from Bandé, who helped the commandos but was arrested, tried in a mass trial in 1969 and sentenced to three years in prison.<sup>78</sup> Others were themselves part of the guerrilla units that penetrated the country’s Southern and Western borders.<sup>79</sup> Thus, Kanguèye Boubacar (the *coxeur* in Ayorou mentioned earlier) was part of the squad that included Ali Mahamane Madaouki, Amadou Roufaï Malam Garba and Souley Chaëbou, and infiltrated from Northern Nigeria into the Magaria region South of Zinder. This unit was caught during the autumn infiltrations in 1964. Kanguèye, who would have been undaunted for telling his tormentors that truth would triumph one

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<sup>77</sup> No other data on him have been found. His behaviour suggests he might possibly have suffered from a psychotic disorder of some sort. Most Sawabists who fell into the hands of regime interrogators were severely intimidated and suffered bullying, beatings and torture. Fiche de Renseignements, 23-25 November 1963; Telegram Commandant de Cercle Agadez to Gendarmerie Niamey, 29 November 1963; Message Brigade Gendarmerie Agadez to Gendarmerie Niamey, no. 43, 24 November 1963; Message Chiffre Démarqué, no. 63, Commandant de Cercle Agadez to Commandant Gendarmerie Niamey, 24 November 1963; Message no. 61, Ministre de l’Intérieur to ?, 23 November 1963; all in ANN, 86 MI 3 F 18.9 (‘un mauvais exemple parmi les bandits’).

<sup>78</sup> As noted above, he had been persecuted and incarcerated by the regime before. Cour de Sûreté de l’Etat, Arrêt de condamnation no. 9, June 1969.

<sup>79</sup> Adamou Loutou, a Sawaba student who followed a diesel mechanics course in East Germany, did not take part in the actual fighting even though he had had military training in Nanjing in China, which was generally only provided to the higher cadres. Etudiants et Boursiers du Sawaba de Retour des Pays de l’Est, 2, and Organisation Terroriste “Sawaba”.



day, was publicly executed in Magaria, an event that created considerable shock among the local population.<sup>80</sup>

The guerrilla fighter who caused the biggest commotion, however, was Amadou Ibrahim Diop, the son of a Senegalese father and a Tubu mother, who was born in Zinder in 1929. He was a lorry driver and a hard-headed individual with socialist convictions coupled with strong Sufi Islamic beliefs. Diop fled persecution in 1959 by going to Bamako and made several trips in West Africa and to Europe.<sup>81</sup> He also visited North Vietnam and went to communist China where he travelled extensively and worked as an announcer on Radio Beijing's Hausa service. After that, in 1963, he got his military training in Algeria and left for the Sawaba base camps in Ghana. In mid-1964 his unit was ordered to move to the frontier zone of Northern Nigeria and Niger, crossing the border at Birni N'Konni. Acting as assistant to the *chef de groupe*, Dandouna Aboubakar (the Maradi unionist and a determined activist),<sup>82</sup> Diop and his unit were captured near Dibissou (Konni). Here Aboubakar shot a school teacher who had betrayed him and he was subsequently lynched by the local population. His body was then brought to the capital and, in an act of desecration, thrown on the ground in front of Niamey's police station and the presidential palace to rot. Diop, however, escaped, possibly from Konni prison, burying his weapons and making one other reconnaissance mission, either in 1964 or 1965.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Interviews with Oumarou Janba, Zinder, 10 February 2003 (who claimed mistakenly that the execution took place in 1966); Ali Mahamane Madaouki, Noga Yamba and Amadou Roufai Malam Garba, Zinder, 14 February 2003; and Amadou Ibrahim Diop, Zinder, 13 February 2003; *Le Niger*, 16 November 1964; UDFP Sawaba, Liste des Nigériens militants ou sympathisants du Sawaba morts dans les prisons du régime de Diori Hamani (courtesy of Ousmane Dan Galadima, Madaoua, 7 February 2003). Kanguèye, who was born in Kokoro northWest of Téra, was a youth member of the UDN and participated in a conference on neo-colonialism in Algeria.

<sup>81</sup> Including Guinea, Belgium and France.

<sup>82</sup> And a typical representative of the *petit peuple*. An illiterate joiner, he learnt to read and write later in life thanks to the work of French communist trade unions, which also enabled him to travel to Eastern Europe, as well as to go to New York. He would also have been to North Vietnam for guerrilla training. Recueil des principaux renseignements reçu pour la période du 5 au 11 novembre 1959, no. 55, secret, ANSOM, FM Aff. Pol. Cart.2251; interview with Amadou Ibrahim Diop, Zinder, 13 February 2003.

<sup>83</sup> Fiche sur les événements qui se déroulent au Niger depuis le début du mois d'Octobre 1964 and telegrams Genedef Abidjan to Minarmees Paris, no. 5448/CH and Genedef Dakar to Minarmees Paris, no. 8358/CH (latter dated 14/4/65), both in Complôt contre la sûreté de l'Etat ...; ANSHAT 10 T 717, dossier 2; interview with Amadou Ibrahim Diop, Zinder, 13 February 2003; *Le Niger*, 26 October 1964 (text interrogation Maman Alke); *Le Temps du Niger*, 16 October 1964.

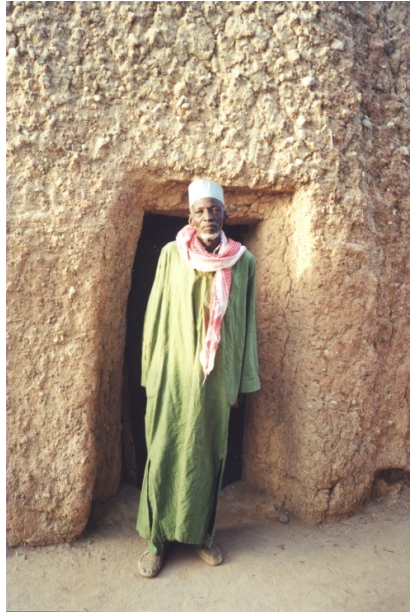
After the horror that befell Dandouna Aboubabar and the failure of the autumn attacks, Diop was more than willing to embark on a dangerous mission to avenge his comrades. He returned to Ghana, spoke to Bakary and went back to Niger in April 1965, planning or having been ordered to assassinate the president. Upon his arrival in Niamey, he contacted members of the local Sawaba cell, who would have counselled him against the attempt. Diop, however, decided to go ahead. When an occasion at the airport came to nothing, he decided, with the assistance of some Niamey-based cadres, to make another attempt in front of the Great Mosque on 13 April when the president was to take part in a prayer meeting on the occasion of the Muslim festival of Tabaski.<sup>84</sup> That day, Diop took up his position early and, when prayers started with some government dignitaries present, began to work his way slowly forward, together with two accomplices. When he was some thirty metres from the president he threw a grenade that exploded but killed a little boy instead and wounded several people. Diop then tried to throw a second grenade but was overpowered. He was badly tortured with electric shocks and beaten and a Sufi fetish under the skin of his shoulder was pulled out without anaesthetic.<sup>85</sup> Diop barely survived. Faced with the death penalty, his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. After the 1974 coup that toppled the RDA regime, he was released and found employment in Niamey's building industry. Later, he returned to his native Zinder, where he was still living in 2006, frail but unbroken. Indeed, during two interviews, in 2003 and 2006, he went out of his way to criticize what he derided as France's continued domination of Niger and its political economy, commenting also on a host of current international issues.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> The attempt would be accompanied by attacks on the installations of Radio Niamey on the road to Ouallam. This suggests that Sawaba cadres hoped the assassination would lead to the fall of the regime and that Diop's act cannot be reduced to a suicidal mission of a lone individual as surmised by a Ghanaian diplomat at the time. See Footnote 86 below.

<sup>85</sup> During my first interview with him he showed me his scars. Interview with Amadou Ibrahim Diop, Zinder, 13 February 2003. When his first grenade missed its target, Diop would have bitten his finger in disappointment. See the letter of the Ghanaian diplomat cited in the following footnote.

<sup>86</sup> Interviews with Amadou Ibrahim Diop, Zinder, 13 February 2003 and 15 February 2006 and Mounkaila Beidari, Niamey, 28 November 2003; *Événements survenus en Afrique Francophone pendant la semaine du 12 au 18 Avril 1965*, secret, ANSHAT 10 T 210; *Fiches du 2ème bureau de l'E.M.A.T. donnant les principaux événements survenues en Afrique Noire francophone (mars 1964 - juin 1965)*, Ministère des Armées. Etat-Major de l'armée de terre. Bureau Outre-Mer/2ème Bureau; Genedef Dakar to Minarmees Paris, no. 8358/CH (dated 14/4/65); Premier Ministre. SDECE. Destinataire no. 541, Secret, 17 and 29 April 1965, ANSHAT 10 T 719, dossier 2: activités du parti Sawaba d'opposition, enquête au sujet de l'attentat manqué en 1963 [*sic*] contre le président Diouri (1962-1966); affaire Diallo, décembre 1963



*Photo 3.2* Amadou Ibrahim Diop,  
Zinder, 13 February 2003

*Source:* Klaas van Walraven

### Concluding reflections

Amadou Diop was the archetypal lorry driver turned revolutionary. As Hobsbawm has pointed out for commoners or lower-ranked professional categories elsewhere, he developed activities beyond what one would immediately associate with his station or profession.<sup>87</sup> Diop was part of a large group of ‘little folk’, or slightly higher placed professional strata, who broke the confines of their rural lives in ways that brought them not just to Niger’s urban centres but also to the far corners of West Africa – and indeed the world.<sup>88</sup> Transport work-

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(1962-1966); Ambassador B.L. Placca to H.E. M.F. Dei-Anang, African Affairs Secretariat, 16 April 1965, Ghana National Archives, N/POL/66; *Le Niger*, 19 April 1965.

<sup>87</sup> On unconventional roles of certain professional categories, see also Hobsbawm, *Uncommon people*.

<sup>88</sup> Identified trajectories of Sawabists in Eastern Europe and Asia are to be found in K. van Walraven, ‘*Sawaba’s* rebellion in Niger (1964-1965): Narrative and meaning’. In: J. Abbink, M. de Bruijn & K. van Walraven, eds, *Rethinking resistance: Revolt and violence in African history* (Leiden, 2003), 218-52.

ers were, of course, just one professional group among Niger's *petit peuple*, although they were well represented among Sawaba's cadres and were among the party's archetypal members in terms of background and mobility. This mobility was one of the characteristic features of the 'little folk'. It had several dimensions<sup>89</sup> not just in terms of social stratification but also in a literal, spatial sense and in the realm of the *imagination*, as shown by the case of Hima Dembélé, the union activist whose horizons underwent the celluloid expansion of the cinema.

Building on pre-colonial traditions of travel,<sup>90</sup> these men developed new technical know-how that they put to use to gain knowledge of the wider world, either by embarking on arduous journeys across West Africa<sup>91</sup> or by enquiring about life in a fixed place of abode: the mechanic, the postal worker, the telegraphist and the bus or lorry driver, as well as the *coxeur* – all had access to new world views that made them more critical of accepted truths, 'traditional' or ascribed patterns of authority, as well as the (neo-)colonial status quo. As the lower placed among the social climbers in the community of *talakawa*, their vision of politics was fed by an underlying social anger, empowered by their mastery of new technologies. Yet, while they understood that these technologies affected social relations in novel ways and that they could be used to further their interests in both a conventional and incongruous fashion, the horizon encompassing their social and political revolution did not provide insight into the potentially negative repercussions that their violent actions might have. Nevertheless, the deployment of Vidal's lorries drives home the point that modernity changed politics forever and that a command of its tools could be decisive.

'Victory' in that context was temporary, but that had more to do with wider political circumstances such as the intervening crisis in Algeria, the arrival of de Gaulle and the establishment of the Fifth Republic. In any case, Sawaba, having been driven underground, continued to build on its innovative tradition by deploying modern technology such as the postal service, the motor vehicle and the professions they had brought into being in Niger, to ensure its survival and topple the powers of the day. While some transport workers participated in the guerrilla infiltrations and were, therefore, among the leading actors in the revolt, it was in the construction of Sawaba's communication and intelligence network that they were able to contribute decisively to the movement's fortunes.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> See also, M. de Bruijn, R. van Dijk & D. Foeken, eds, *Mobile Africa: Changing patterns of movement in Africa and beyond* (Leiden, 2001).

<sup>90</sup> See Lovejoy, *Caravans of Kola*.

<sup>91</sup> See also Chilson, *Riding the demon* and Chapters 9 and 10 in this volume.

<sup>92</sup> The reasons for the failure of Sawaba's rebellion go beyond the confines of this chapter and are treated in a monograph. See Footnote 20 above.



## PART II

# ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES



# Hug me, hold me tight! The evolution of passenger transport in Luanda and Huambo (Angola), 1975-2000

Carlos M. Lopes

## Introduction

Angolan society went through marked changes following independence in 1975. The period 1975-1992 was characterized by single-party rule on the basis of a socialist ideology. In 1992, a new constitution introduced multipartyism but failed to end the civil war, which had erupted at independence and continued until 2002 and had a clear impact on the country's economic and social structures. Violence displaced many people, disrupted transport and the movement of goods, destroyed infrastructure and increased poverty. During single-party rule, economic activities were strictly regulated by various administrative mechanisms that after 1992 gave way to a transitional process towards a market economy. Structurally, economic development following independence resulted in a decline in production in the non-oil sectors, a sharp fall in employment in the formal economy, a deterioration in the government's financial position, high inflation and debt, and the development of a substantial black market. Parallel economic activities developed in this context, which after 1987 began to assume the characteristics of a steadily expanding informal economy.<sup>1</sup> In social terms,

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<sup>1</sup> A parallel economy is associated with activities not socially accepted in an economy controlled by the state and marked by centralized regulation. Conceptually, this differs from informal economic activities, both in character and context. See Footnote 6 below. The progressive transition to a market economy softened state rigidity,



these developments involved a sharp reduction in the state's capacity to provide services, accelerating urbanization, increasing poverty – both in rural and urban areas – and fundamental changes in the country's social demography.

The geographical focus of this chapter<sup>2</sup> is Luanda, Angola's capital, and Huambo, the provincial capital of the administrative region with the same name. Besides being the political and diplomatic heart of the country, Luanda is also Angola's main industrial and manufacturing centre, has the country's principal port and airport and is where most commercial activities are concentrated. It has therefore always attracted a lot of migrants, whose numbers increased substantially during the civil war. In 2000 the capital's population was estimated at 2,534,800 inhabitants,<sup>3</sup> i.e. 19.3 % of Angola's population, and generated up to 60% of industrial GDP and 20% of the activities in other sectors such as agriculture, commerce and the building industry. However as a result of the war, the importance of Luanda's industrial and manufacturing capacity as well as its commercial activities declined significantly, while informal economic activities grew in scope and importance. In this context, urban transport conditions were badly affected and to a much worse extent than in other Angolan cities.

Huambo, too, was seriously affected by the war, as fierce fighting between the government army and UNITA rebel forces led to a huge influx of people looking for food and safety. In total, 17% of the province's population were displaced, which drastically changed the demographic structure of places like Huambo city. According to official statistics, the urban population grew from 99,956 inhabitants in 1970 to 821,224 in 2004. This was accompanied by an intense occupation of land characterized by the emergence of spontaneous squatter settlements. A study conducted by the Ministry of Planning in 2003 estimated that 47% of the population of Huambo Province was concentrated in

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however, while also increasing the social acceptance of those involved in informal economic activities.

<sup>2</sup> This study is based on a survey of the literature on Sub-Saharan urban transport systems, relevant statistics, press publications on *candongueiros* and *kupapatas* in the *Jornal de Angola*, and interviews in Luanda with eight drivers, seven fare collectors, nine owners, three vehicle washers and three passengers; and three interviews in Huambo with individual *kupapatas* and one group interview with three *kupapatas*. In addition, trips were made by minibus and taxi-bike: 57 trips on 18 short and long *candongueiro* routes from 22 July to 4 August 2004 and four trips on taxi-bikes in Huambo between 5 and 7 August 2004.

<sup>3</sup> AIDA/ICEP, 'Estudo de Mercado de Angola: Luanda e Benguela' (draft da Missão Empresarial a Angola: Luanda, 2004).

Huambo's urban districts, which today have an annual growth rate of about 12%.<sup>4</sup>

### Luanda's minibus taxis

Luanda's minibus industry has had a troubled history characterized by fierce competition between owners, drivers and other workers as well as by the exclusion of many of its operators from the country's formal economy. These operators, called *candongueiros*,<sup>5</sup> form an interesting case study of socio-economic actors confronted with rapid and profound changes in the regulatory framework and institutional environment of the political economy. These changes have been marked by ambiguous relationships between formal and informal (or illegal) economic operators and a high degree of ambivalence in government attitudes.

Between 1975 and 2000, public transport became increasingly inefficient, expensive and scarce, thus providing a powerful stimulus to the growth of Luanda's minibus taxi industry. The *candongueiros* became the most commonly used form of public transport, particularly among the poor. The minibus taxi industry, poorly organized and strongly atomized in terms of its providers, grew into a large employer playing a critical role in the lives of most people in the capital. By 2004, many of its operators worked as informal and illegal economic actors<sup>6</sup> since they were not registered tax payers, did not register their employees or adhere to minimum employment standards. However, in 2003 about 600 of the 3,200 operators did have licences from the central or provincial authorities, a figure that increased during 2004.<sup>7</sup> In 2002 *candongueiros* ac-

<sup>4</sup> AIP/Ministério do Plano, Perfil económico e social do Huambo (Luanda, 2003), 16-17.

<sup>5</sup> The word refers to actors who do *candonganga*. This expression derives from a Kimbundu term for illegal business with speculative goals. At the end of the 1970s, the word was used to describe a whole set of parallel activities. Today it denotes the operators of non-official passenger and goods transport.

<sup>6</sup> Conceptually, an informal economy involves agents who operate illegally (in whole or in part) in the sense of not being registered or authorized to perform activities otherwise considered normal and legal, or who do not follow (all) government rules regulating those activities. An illegal economy refers to illegal economic activities performed by economic actors licensed by the government as economic operators (or not). Illegal transport refers to private agents providing passenger transport on an occasional or regular basis with the aim of earning extra money. Illegal transporters usually drive cars. Sometimes drivers and other people working for private or state companies use company vehicles, much to the irritation of *candongueiros* who work independently.

<sup>7</sup> *Jornal de Angola*, 27 March 2003; Provincial Direction of Transport and Communications (DPTC); interview, 28 July 2004.

counted for 45% of all public transport (about 480,000 passengers a day)<sup>8</sup> and it was estimated that the minibus industry directly employed around 13,000 to 15,000 drivers, fare collectors (conductors), vehicle washers and passenger coaxers.

Conditions of employment were and are precarious and unstable. Most workers do not have formal contracts and operators do not abide by government minimum standards or wages. Owners' expectations of profit result in a high turnover of drivers and fare collectors, who face strong competition over short distances and have to grapple with large numbers of passengers (12, 15, 24 or even 32 in one vehicle). Yet, operators are confronted with low costs and flexible conditions which to some extent offset the negative aspects such as over-saturation on the supply side and corruption. Many additional jobs are indirectly associated with the minibus industry, such as manufacturing, the provision of supplies, maintenance, and the importation of vehicles.

Illegal or informal operators do not respect defined routes but choose the most popular ones.<sup>9</sup> Approximately 3,200 *candongueiros* were thus operating on non-defined routes in 2003 and with fixed fares, a figure that rose to around 5,000 the following year.<sup>10</sup> Research showed that most drivers do not own their own vehicles. While a large proportion have fewer than three cars, most owners own only one. The number of vehicles on the road has been growing but at the same time most are becoming increasingly old. All of them are second-hand cars that have mostly come from South Africa, Namibia, Portugal, the Netherlands and Asian countries. Some have been stolen, while many have been imported illegally.<sup>11</sup>

The *candongueiros* have increased in size as well as economic and social importance despite some of the negative dimensions involved, such as poor passenger safety and convenience, pollution, exploitative labour practices and disrespect for traffic laws and regulations. In spite of the low level of formal organization, a provincial body representing taxi owners – the Luanda Taxi Owners' Association (ATL)<sup>12</sup> – was founded in 1990 and currently has about 600 members. ATL has a legal statute of employers' organization focused on the legalization process of its members, fixed fares and the supply of services

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<sup>8</sup> KPMG/Ministério do Plano, Perfil económico e social de Luanda (Luanda, 2003), 45-46.

<sup>9</sup> Provincial Direction of Transport and Communications (DPTC); interview, 28 July 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Provincial Direction of Transport and Communications (DPTC) or Direcção Provincial de Transportes e Comunicação.

<sup>11</sup> Toyota Angola, S.A.; interview, 26 July 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Associação de Taxistas de Luanda. In Luanda's urban transport context, the word *taxistas* refers mainly to taxi owners, i.e. minibus owners.

and other benefits.<sup>13</sup> As will be shown below, sweeping changes involving the economic and organizational formalization of Luanda's minibus taxi industry have taken place since the early 1990s. This coincided with the capital's unregulated and accelerated growth against a background of prolonged civil war, inefficiency, absence of management and urban planning, and a deterioration in infrastructure.

### Huambo's taxi-bikes

As in so many other African cities,<sup>14</sup> taxi-bikes play an important role in the mobility of Huambo's urban population. They consist exclusively of motorcycles, which in the national language, Umbundu, are called *kupapatas*, meaning 'hold me tight' or 'hug me'. The name appeared in 1998 after the second wave of civil war,<sup>15</sup> as motorcycles arrived on the city's streets that had been emptied of buses as a result of the fighting between UNITA rebels and government forces. Much of the bus fleet was destroyed, roads were damaged, and fuel and spare parts became increasingly scarce, driving up maintenance costs. In addition, state and private transport companies faced growing management difficulties as a result of a reduction in government subsidies, credit limits and a lack of skilled personnel.

In this context, taxi-bikes expanded rapidly, effectively taking over the minibus industry. This success is not difficult to understand since they are convenient and efficient, and offer a flexible and fast service to customers who are literally taken from door to door. Much of the advantage of the *kupapatas* over buses and minibuses lies in this ability to meet demand and offer a quick service that reduces the time people spend moving from one place to another and makes a walk to and from the bus stop unnecessary. In addition, the *kupapatas* are better adapted to Huambo's road conditions, and their start-up and running costs involving purchase, maintenance, spare parts, fuel and repair costs are significantly lower than for (mini)buses. On the supply side, employees and civil servants with motorbikes were forced by the difficult economic circumstances to use them to earn additional income. The availability of motorcycles later increased when the Ulisses factory that assembles them resumed activity.

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<sup>13</sup> The Luanda Taxi Owners' Association; interview, 26 July 2004.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, B. Gebzo, 'Benin's Zémidjan: Informal sector solves transport blues', *World of Work*, 28 (1999), 18-19; 'L'économie informelle s'est imposée comme stratégie de survie au Bénin', *Le Monde*, (Paris), 26 June 2001.

<sup>15</sup> *Journal de Angola*, 23 July 2003.

### Minibusing in an African capital

A few years after independence, Luanda's public transport company ETP<sup>16</sup> experienced a downturn. Organized according to specific colonial demand and to work in a specific urban context, it became inefficient in the context of a socialist management model and was incapable of adapting. Poor management, financial difficulties, the degradation of roads, and poor maintenance were all contributing factors. At the same time, Luanda's population continued to grow with newcomers settling into suburban areas a long way from the capital's commercial and residential heart. ETP buses, called *machimbombos* (the Angolan expression for ordinary buses), did not service Luanda's expanding periphery and so even way back in 1977-1978 the first private vehicles engaged in passenger transport appeared. Being illegal, they were suppressed by the authorities. ETP was subsequently replaced by Luanda Urban Collective Transport (TCUL)<sup>17</sup> which failed to maintain normal and frequent public transport,<sup>18</sup> despite government efforts to protect it against competition from any private operators.

*Candongueiros* transport therefore grew against all the odds and became increasingly well organized. Government attitudes began to change, first becoming more ambivalent and finally rescinding the state monopoly on passenger transport, allowing *candongueiros* to operate legally. In 1990, minibus owners formed their own organization, ATL. However, as there was no legislation regulating the private sector, tensions developed about administrative practice and the reality on the ground involving constant harassment by officials of the National Transport Police (*Polícia Nacional de Trânsito*), including the confiscation of vehicles, restricted access to transport permits and corrupt practices. Competition with minibuses was taken on by three private bus companies (Macon, Tura and Angoaustral) created in 2001 and another, SGO, that was established in 2004.<sup>19</sup> In June 2004 five companies owned roughly 800 ordinary buses, challenging the minibuses' hold on the market.<sup>20</sup>

*Candongueiros* satisfy about 45% of Luanda's transport demands. Their vehicles are more regular and faster than the service provided by the bus companies, although they are also more expensive and less safe. In addition,

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<sup>16</sup> Empresa Pública de Transportes.

<sup>17</sup> Transportes Colectivos Urbanos de Luanda.

<sup>18</sup> Luanda Urban Collective Transport (TCUL); interview, 29 July 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Provincial Direction of Transport and Communications (DPTC); interview, 28 July 2004. Macon, Tura, AngoAustral and SGO are commercial designations (and not acronyms) of private bus companies.

<sup>20</sup> Provincial Direction of Transport and Communications (DPTC); interview, 28 July 2004.

poor road maintenance and the lack of any secondary road network in suburban areas mean that only *candongueiros* can provide services to residents there.

Overall, the Ministry of Transport and Communications is responsible for the transport sector at the national level. The Provincial Direction of Transport and Communications (DPTC), working under the Luanda Provincial Government (GPL),<sup>21</sup> coordinates and regulates transport in Luanda Province. Business permits for fixed routes are granted by DPTC for a period of one year. A legalized minibus has a sign identifying the itineraries (for example: IN – Ingombotas, SP – S. Paulo, RA – Rangel), which officially totalled 186 for Luanda city in 2004. Yet, according to the DPTC only around 1,100 of the 4,500-5,500 minibuses operating in the capital were legal. The GPL consequently set a deadline of 14 September 2004 for the completion of minibus legalization. By that date however, only 2,000 minibuses<sup>22</sup> had been authorized to ply Luanda's road network and service passengers. To be legalized, *candongueiros* required DPTC registration<sup>23</sup> as well as vehicle registration, documents attesting to a clean criminal record, ID, a vehicle owner certificate and insurance,<sup>24</sup> taxpayers' card and a technical inspection certificate,<sup>25</sup> in addition to proof of payment of traffic taxes and other duties. The process involved the Ministry of Justice and Finance, the Provincial Direction of Transport and Communications, the National Direction of Traffic<sup>26</sup> and insurance companies and in July 2004 cost around Kwanza 45,000 (€ 495) to complete, over a 30-45 day period.<sup>27</sup> Fares were fixed by the National Direction of Finance, through the Department of Competition and Prices,<sup>28</sup> following ATL advice, and, in July 2004, the rate was Kwanza 30 (€ 0.33) for short routes and Kwanza 50 (€ 0.55) for longer ones.<sup>29</sup>

Although the DPTC fixes itineraries for all operators, they tend to work any route they choose. The informal owners' association does not regulate the distribution of specific routes and the police exert only unofficial influence regarding the use of itineraries. They stop vehicles demanding to see docu-

<sup>21</sup> Governo Provincial de Luanda.

<sup>22</sup> This number is considered sufficient to respond to market needs. It assures transport needs and gives owners the opportunity of making a profit. Provincial Direction of Transport and Communications (DPTC); interview, 28 July 2004.

<sup>23</sup> The so-called model 5 RTA.

<sup>24</sup> However, insurance certificates often do not comply with official requirements.

<sup>25</sup> MOT, model 21.

<sup>26</sup> Ministério da Justiça; Ministério das Finanças; Direcção Nacional de Viação e Trânsito.

<sup>27</sup> Luanda's Taxi Owners' Association (ATL); interview, 26 July 2004. Between September 2003 and August 2004, the average Euro-Kwanza exchange rate was fixed at € 100 = Kwanza 9,090; US\$ 100 was equal to Kwanza 8,400.

<sup>28</sup> Departamento de Concorrência e Preços da Direcção Nacional de Finanças.

<sup>29</sup> Luanda's Taxi Owners' Association (ATL); interview, 26 July 2004.

ments, whereupon children working for them appear to beg for money (Kwanza 150 to 200, i.e. € 1.65 to € 2.20) in return for a password that the driver can give if stopped by another policeman on the same route.

With an estimated population of 4 million people, of whom half travel daily to and from the city for professional, social and domestic reasons, Luanda's demand for transport reaches approximately 2.8 million journeys a day. A third of these are made in personal vehicles.<sup>30</sup> While the DPTC considers that the ordinary bus companies and the minibus operators could, in principle, cope with this demand, constraints such as poor road conditions, inadequate traffic and parking regulations, congestion and dangerous driving need to be overcome. As far as the ordinary bus companies are concerned, four zones, which were created in 2001, give exclusive rights to each of them to operate, apart from routes which all of them can service.<sup>31</sup> TCUL and Macon are the two largest bus companies, with TCUL a public enterprise but without special privileges, and Macon also owning a small fleet of metered taxis (about 40 vehicles).

Other transport needs are met by the fleet of minibuses that work a saturated market, and a small number of taxi-bikes (motorcycles) in the Cacuo area. With the establishment of ATL, a step was made towards the legalization of the *candongueiros*, only 45% of whom were legal in 1991.<sup>32</sup> By 2004, 570 taxi-owners were ATL members and 702 were trying to obtain government recognition. However, these 1,272 members only represent around 20% of the vehicles operating in the capital, although ATL subsequently expected a significant rise in legalized vehicles due to DPTC moves to formalize the sector including the introduction of a permit system, minimum labour standards, safety regulations, revenue taxation and, as a result, a reduction in the size of the minibus industry. However, while the required DPTC registration is route-based and linked to a specific driver, in practice drivers operate on all routes and anybody can drive the vehicles.<sup>33</sup>

ATL plays an important role in this context by providing legal protection for members, fulfilling legalization requirements, representing members in collective bargaining and advising the National Direction of Finance on fares.<sup>34</sup> There is also a sectoral trade union, the Road Transport Workers' Trade Union

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<sup>30</sup> KPMG/Ministério do Plano, Perfil económico e social de Luanda (Luanda, 2003), 45-46.

<sup>31</sup> Provincial Direction of Transport and Communications (DPTC); interview, 28 July 2004.

<sup>32</sup> Luanda's Taxi Owners' Association (ATL); interview, 26 July 2004.

<sup>33</sup> Provincial Direction of Transport and Communications (DPTC); interview, 28 July 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Direcção Nacional de Finanças.

(STTRA),<sup>35</sup> which draws its members from the ordinary bus companies as well as related sectors (TCUL, Toyota, Tecnocarro, Unicargas, etc.). Founded in 1997, the STTRA focuses on collective bargaining and providing legal and social protection to its different categories of workers.<sup>36</sup> Despite attempts to this end, STTRA was unable to attract members, – drivers or fare collectors – among *candongueiros*.

The *candongueiros* sector of Luanda's transport encompasses not just vehicle owners or owner-drivers, drivers and fare collectors but also passenger coaxers and vehicle washers. The precise number of owners is unknown. According to ATL, about 1,200-1,500 owners own vehicles operating in the capital, with most having one or two vehicles. A minority own three or more and only a very few have more than ten *hiasses*.<sup>37</sup> Vehicle owners are, therefore, not a homogeneous group, not least because some work as drivers themselves, others are civil servants, and yet others are trained mechanics or active as traders. Owners have accumulated capital from a variety of sources: trade, the diamond business and savings from other jobs. The vast majority have not borrowed from a bank to finance or expand their minibus activities.

The majority of drivers work for the vehicle owners and most are young men with little educational background and limited skills. Women drivers are rare. Instead of formal written contracts that respect minimum labour standards, conditions of employment are agreed verbally. Drivers take responsibility for employing fare collectors and vehicle washers, and usually do not receive any basic wage but keep a day's earnings while handing over the rest to the owner (the last day of the week is for maintenance). Some drivers pay a fixed sum per day to the owners, keeping any other earnings as income. Those receiving a regular wage are an exception. Both drivers and fare collectors admitted that attempts are sometimes made to boost earnings by shortening itineraries, increasing fares during rush hour, overloading vehicles or encouraging a rapid turnover of passengers. This was usually justified by referring to the large amounts of money demanded by the vehicle owners.<sup>38</sup> According to vehicle owners, drivers and fare collectors, family and other social networks are important for reducing operating costs, since these can encourage those operating vehicles to report full earnings, reduce all manner of expenses, help during vehicle inspection procedures and assist in maintaining good relations with police officers. Nevertheless, some owners alleged that up to 30% of their

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<sup>35</sup> Sindicato dos Trabalhadores dos Transportes Rodoviários.

<sup>36</sup> Road Transport Workers' Trade Union (STTRA); interview, 25 July 2004.

<sup>37</sup> This is the name Angolans give to minibus vehicles and is an adaptation of 'Hiace', the Toyota model.

<sup>38</sup> Speeding and dangerous driving are often blamed on the congestion of Luanda's road network.



earnings were being stolen by drivers and fare collectors. It was not possible to draw any conclusions about the role of ethnic networks in the minibus industry.

Fare collectors or conductors number between 4,500 and 5,500 (one for each vehicle) and, besides collecting payment from passengers, are responsible for seating customers, assuring safety and advertising routes. Coaxers, in turn, represent the smallest category of workers in the minibus sector, numbering no more than 300. They work near the main markets and at the most important bus stops, guiding and organizing the flow of passengers, usually on the basis of an agreement with the drivers. Finally vehicle washers are employed by the drivers, some on a permanent basis, others casually. Some of them are very young boys including children that were displaced during the civil war, orphans and street children. It is estimated that they number approximately 600.<sup>39</sup> As far as the vehicles themselves are concerned, Toyota and other Japanese brands are the most commonly used vehicles, most of which transport between 12 and 15 passengers. As noted above, some have actually been stolen, while many of the spare parts originate from illegal sources in urban retail markets and in Luanda's *musseques*.<sup>40</sup> The Golf Market<sup>41</sup> features prominently in this respect. The required initial and periodic vehicle inspections are often circumvented.

### *Candongueiros*: Economic and social dimensions of minibusing

When in need of a minibus, passengers stand on the edge of the road pointing their index finger downwards to indicate that they are waiting for transport. A minibus may appear and stop, with loud music being played on board<sup>42</sup> and drivers and fare collectors busily going about their duties. *Candongueiros* start work early in the morning, the working day lasting from five o'clock in the morning till nine or ten in the evening. Teams choose the most profitable routes and keep lunch breaks as short as possible. All the daily costs are borne by the drivers: fuel, small repairs, washing, parking, simple maintenance, the team's lunch, payment for the fare collector and coxer, bribes etc. In this respect owners complain about the enormous wear and tear on their vehicles. Some spare parts, such as brake discs, have to be replaced frequently because of the

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<sup>39</sup> Assuming five vehicles per vehicle washer.

<sup>40</sup> *Musseques* is the Angolan word for peripheral quarters, slums and squats.

<sup>41</sup> 'Golf' is the name of the area where the market is situated. C.M. Lopes, 'Elementos para a compreensão do sector informal urbano nos países em desenvolvimento: anotações sobre o retalho informal em Luanda e Maputo', *Africa Debate*, (1999), no. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Various forms of music are played in minibuses: Angolan music (*semba*, *kizomba* or *kuduro*), hip-hop, rock and roll, and Cuban, Cape Verdean, Portuguese and French West Indian islands (Antilles françaises) music.



Photo 4.1 *Candongueiros* near Asa Branca market, Luanda  
 Source: Carlos M. Lopes, 2003

congestion, poor roads and rough *candongueiros* driving. Owners that were interviewed receive around Kwanza 6,000-9,000 (€ 66-99) a day, which they argue is not enough to pay back the loan with which vehicles were sometimes purchased. Their main worries are unfair competition, the high cost of spare parts, official permits, insurance and taxes (if they work legally), poor roads and constant harassment by police intent on *gasosa* or bribes and who fine drivers ostensibly for overloading their vehicles.

To gain a more vivid picture of what the working lives of *candongueiros* under these circumstances are like, we can refer to the life stories of J.P., aged 24 and from South Kwanza who drives an *hiasse* plying the route from Roque Santeiro to Asa Branca markets, and L., aged 17 and from Bengo, who has worked on J.P.'s team as a fare collector for five months. J.P. has worked for 14 months for the vehicle's owner, who chose the route:

This vehicle has already been operating on this route. Its driver was a relative of mine. Then, he got sick and I started ... I think that the boss wants this route because there are many clients all the time ... there are many clients that sell in Asa Branca Market that come to Roque Santeiro Market to buy products ... the only problems are traffic jams and too many *hiasse*s ... we've got to be smart, man, each passenger

pays Kwanza 25 ... the *hiasse* takes 9 (laughs) ... but when policemen are not nearby we take more passengers. No one is left behind ... at the end of the day, the boss receives \$ 100 ... we've got to drive fast, otherwise we lose money ... How much do passengers pay to transport products? ... well, it is related to the size and the number of products ... the fare collector controls that issue ... we start (working) very early at 5.30 a.m. and we finish after 7.00 p.m. ... How much does the boss pay us? He doesn't pay anything. If we don't receive \$ 100 dollars to pay him it is our loss. We make real money for us on Saturdays ... we pay for the gas, lunch, car washing, the boss only pays for breakdowns ... we've got to work a lot or we won't make any money ... How much does the fare collector receive? The more we work, the more he earns, if we work hard and the police doesn't bother us ... the licence is a problem for the boss. Our business is working.<sup>43</sup>

Daily incomes depend on a number of factors such as demand, the route length, traffic congestion, the number of passengers carrying goods, speed and the drivers' knowledge of alternative routes. Drivers and fare collectors reported that they could make Kwanza 11,000-12,000 (€ 121-132).<sup>44</sup> Since owners and employees are not usually registered tax payers, government statistics exclude *candongueiros* from data on the transport sector. Consequently, the economic significance of the minibus industry to GDP and employment is difficult to gauge but its importance is clear as far as direct and indirect job creation is concerned, household income generation, satisfying the transport needs of Luanda's city population, and the socio-professional integration of large numbers of unemployed, both young and old.

K.L., a minibus driver who owns a Toyota Hiace, is 41. He was born in Uíje and at the time of our interview had lived in Luanda for 20 years, first working as a mechanic in a state public transport company that collapsed, then as a

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<sup>43</sup> Luanda, 26 November 2003. 'este carro já trabalhava nesta rota. Era um parente o motorista. Depois ficou doente e comecei eu ... acho que o boss quer esta rota porque há sempre cliente ... há bué clientes que vendem no Asa Branca e que vêm ao Roque comprar os produtos ... o problema é que também há bué de engarrafamentos. E muitos hiasses ... temos mesmo que ser vivos, meu cota ... cada passageiro paga 25 kwanzas. O hiasse leva 9 ... [risos]... mas quando os polícias estão distraídos levamos mais gente ... ninguém quer ficar à espera ... e no fim do dia o boss leva 100 [dólares] ... temos que acelerar muito, senão é prejuízo ... quanto pagam os passageiros pela mercadoria? ... tem mesmo a ver com o tamanho e é muitos produtos ... aí o cobras é que controla esse mambo ... nós começa muito cedo, às 5h30 já estamos a andar e quase sempre só termina depois das 19 horas ... quanto é que o quanto é que o boss paga? Não paga nada, se não entregar 100 dólares é mesmo prejuízo ... dinheiro mesmo só o dia de sábado ... pagamos gasolina, almoço, lavagem, o boss só paga mesmo avaria grande ... temos que andar muito senão não está a dar ... quanto ganha o cobras? Ganha mais se andamos mais, se andamos bem e se a polícia não chateia ... a licença é mesmo maka do boss ... nosso assunto é mesmo só trabalho.'

<sup>44</sup> *Jornal de Angola*, 25 February 2004.

*candongueiro*. Initially, he worked as a minibus driver and then bought his own second-hand minibus ‘with an uncle’s support’. He worked with different fare collectors because ‘the team doesn’t work if we don’t trust each other and we’ve got to be careful or else our income will decrease, that’s why I’m working with a neighbour’s nephew’. K.L. said that, despite fierce competition from other minibuses, the activity was profitable ‘if you don’t have bad luck’.

The gains are enough to pay for food, children’s education, water and electricity bills, medicines and, in the better months, to save some money in case the minibus breaks down ... I’d like to buy a new minibus, to run a car station in Palanca Quarter ... I know a lot of people there and I’m good as a mechanic but the bank doesn’t provide any support, nor does ATL ...<sup>45</sup>

M.F., from North Kwanza, is a 19-year-old fare collector on K.L.’s minibus and saw his job as temporary: ‘I’d like to work in a company, at the office, it isn’t possible right now ... I’d like to go back to school ... His testimony graphically illustrates the hard life of *candongueiros* fare collectors:

The working day is too long. I don’t have any free time ... there are many conflicts with passengers, with robbers that get into *hiasses* only to rob passengers ... it is dangerous, you see ... there are some drivers that drive in a crazy way and the police don’t do anything. The only thing they do is nag you and ask for bribes ... the wage is bad and if the vehicle breaks down or has an accident we don’t work and there’s no money ... there’s no insurance, no guarantee fund ... if you stick around too long, you lose your mind.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Luanda, 10 August 2004. ‘com o apoio de um tio’; ‘sem confiança a equipa não funciona e é preciso ter sempre atenção senão a receita fica sempre mais pequena ... por isso agora estou a trabalhar com o sobrinho de um vizinho’; ‘se não houver muito azar’; ‘os rendimentos da actividade permitem pagar a alimentação, educação dos filhos a água, luz, medicamentos e, nos meses melhores constituir um fundo de poupança para o caso de avarias’; ‘comprar outra viatura e montar uma pequena oficina no bairro Palanca ... conheço lá muitas pessoas e sou bom mecânico ... apoio do Banco não há, nem da ATL’.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* ‘gostava de trabalhar numa empresa, trabalho assim de escritório... agora não dá mas quero voltar a estudar’; ‘é muito tempo, num dia não sobra tempo para mais nada, é muita confusão, muita maka com os passageiros, com bandidos que andam nos hiasses só para roubar os passageiros, é mesmo perigoso, há aí uns candongas que são muito malucos nos hiasses, e a polícia também não faz nada, só chateia mesmo e quer gasosa ... ganha-se mal e se o carro avaria ou se há acidente ficamos sem trabalho e sem dinheiro ... não há seguro, não há fundo de garantia...andar muito tempo aqui, acabamos por ficar também sem juízo.’

### Taxi-bikes in a provincial town

As in the capital, the state transport company ETP was given the monopoly of Huambo's transport service after independence. Its ability to meet urban transport demands, however, soon decreased. The result of war, failures in different areas of management (personnel, storage and maintenance) as well as the negative aspects of centralized bureaucratic control aggravated the company's structural and financial difficulties. As Angola's political and economic liberalization unfolded, Huambo's state transport system underwent a number of changes between 1987 and 1992. With the lifting of the state transport monopoly, *candongueiros* minibus operators made their way onto the scene.

At the height of the civil war between 1994 and 1999, all transport operators were seriously affected. Most roads in Huambo Province, including those between *comunas*, were badly damaged.<sup>47</sup> In 1992 all fifty of ETP's 45-seater buses were destroyed. Five years later the company bought ten second-hand vehicles (60 seaters) and their exploitation was granted to a private company, which went bankrupt as a result of bad management. The government licence was rescinded. In 2002, it was given to the private National Road Movement (MNR) company, a subsidiary of Valentim Amões Corporation, a conglomerate that included a company operating lorries and Ulisses, which assembles motor-bikes and bicycles.<sup>48</sup> DPTC had by then already bought another ten buses. Five private companies were operating in Huambo Province at that time, four servicing passengers and one transporting goods. The vehicles in operation included 30 buses and trucks and 73 cars.

In August 2004 there were 18 buses run by MNR, 16 of which were functioning.<sup>49</sup> The buses, which operate on routes in the urban areas between the *comunas* and the different municipalities, are in fact the property of the provincial government. In addition, there are around 200 minibuses concentrated on routes linking different municipalities and Huambo Province with other provinces. Although the official bus fare for passengers was Kwanza 25 (€ 0.28) in 2004, MNR charged Kwanza 30 (€ 0.33) to cover its expenses.<sup>50</sup> MNR then had 62 employees. By July 2004 the buses had covered 30,050 km and transported 38,800 passengers that year. Daily average earnings were Kwanza 5,000-7,000 (€ 52-85) but MNR's manager still claimed that the business was

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<sup>47</sup> Intermediate administrative areas that are integrated in Angola's municipalities. AIP/Ministério do Plano, Perfil económico e social do Huambo (see Footnote 4 above).

<sup>48</sup> Movimento Rodoviário Nacional.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Huambo's Provincial Transport and Communications Direction, 3 August 2004.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with manager of National Road Movement (MNR), 4 August 2004.

not profitable and faced problems such as absenteeism; personnel siphoning off part of the earnings; and high maintenance and repair costs (notably for brakes, wheels and shock absorbers) as a result of poor roads and the heavy goods loads carried in an attempt by drivers and fare collectors to raise additional revenue.

### *Kupapatas*: Economic and social dimensions of taxi-bikes

Buses face strong competition, not just from the more flexible *candongueiros* but also from the *kupapatas*. The latter appeared in Huambo in 1998 and by 2004 300 were operating in Huambo city and between the city centre and the surrounding *comunas*. Although they may be of different age and social and educational background, most *Kupapatas* are young men (the youngest interviewed was 19, the oldest 43). Some are even under sixteen and therefore have no driver's licence. They include all sorts of people – civil servants, employees of private companies, students as well as illiterates – who all attempt to earn a living or augment their incomes. For most *kupapatas*, however, this was and is a full-time job and their only source of revenue. Of those interviewed, four



Photo 4.2 *Kupapata* in Huambo – driving a passenger  
Source: Carlos M. Lopes, 2005

*kupapatas* came from Huambo Province, one from South Kwanza Province and the other from Benguela Province. Most had been working as *kupapatas* for only a short time.

L.A., 23 years old, came to Huambo because of the war and began working as a *kupapata* in 2000. Single, he was living with his mother, sisters, brother-in-law and nephews in the S. João quarter. 'I finished 7<sup>th</sup> grade ... I left school because of the difficult conditions.' One of his brothers-in-law was an auxiliary lorry driver while his two sisters sold tins of food in Kanata market. L.A. himself had bought a second-hand Yamaha DT 50 for US\$ 850, borrowing the money from his sisters. At the time of the interview he did not have a driving licence and, in his opinion, competition was cutthroat.

The competition comes from the other *kupapatas*, there are many young people on the roads ... you just have to check near the markets ... you see, there are no jobs and to attend school it is necessary that your family can afford it ... *hiasses* don't offer competition because they don't take people where they want ... we take people to their front door ... [I'd like to go back to school] to be an electrician ... I like it and I believe I could earn more money ... when I save some money, I'll go back to school at night ... I'll get tired, since I will start working at 6.00 a.m. and finish at 6.00 p.m., riding from the airport to the markets and public services. However, it will be good to have a better life ... I don't know when it will happen ... first of all, I need to get a driving licence so that I can drive and the police won't bother me.<sup>51</sup>

Although most *kupapatas* are driver-owners, there are also owners who rent their vehicles to drivers. This is usually done by civil servants and employees of the Ulisses Company and occurs particularly in the context of family networks. While most owners possess only one bike, some have more. The business model is similar to that of the *candongueiros*: the driver gives the owner the earnings from five working days, retaining one day's revenue while the vehicle spends the other day being maintained, often by someone else, usually a confidant. Maintenance expenses are paid by the owner.

Groups of *kupapatas* are found in places where people need transport, such as Huambo's different markets (the central market, S. Pedro, Kanata), the air-

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<sup>51</sup> Huambo, 5 August 2004. 'tenho a 7<sup>a</sup> classe ... deixei de estudar porque não havia condições'; 'uma Yamaha DT 50, em segunda mão'; 'a concorrência são mesmo os outros *kupapatas*, tem muitos jovens aí a rodar ... é só ir ver ao pé dos mercados ... também não há emprego e para ir na escola é preciso que a família tenha condições ... os *hiasses* não são concorrência, porque não levam as pessoas onde elas querem ... nós levamos mesmo na porta de casa ...; ... para ser electricista ... eu gosto e acho que posso ganhar mais dinheiro ... quando conseguir juntar algum dinheiro vou voltar a estudar à noite ... vou ficar cansado, começar às 6h00 e acabar às 18h00 sempre a rodar entre o aeroporto, os mercados e as repartições do estado, mas pode ser bom para ter vida melhor ... não sei quando vai ser ... primeiro tenho que tirar a licença de conduzir para a polícia não chatear.'

port or government buildings. The *kupapatas* are not registered with the DPTC nor do all of them have a driver's licence. Neither the drivers nor the passengers wear helmets although this is compulsory for vehicles over 100 cc. The DPTC estimates there are 500 to 700 *kupapatas* in Huambo Province alone. *Kupapatas* interviewed confirmed this. Most *kupapatas* drive 50 cc vehicles but there are also 125 cc vehicles, with Yamaha being the most common make. A significant percentage of vehicles were purchased in Namibia, others from retailers associated with the Valentim Amões Corporation. The remainder were obtained from Ulisses, which sells Yamaha 50s for US\$ 2,200 and Yamaha 50 DTs for US\$ 2,600. Its employees can buy motorcycles with the help of a company loan which is paid back at a rate of US\$ 50 a month.<sup>52</sup> This facility helps to develop the informal transport sector as it enables employees to employ their relatives as *kupapatas* or sell the bikes to other drivers.

The life story of 34-year-old A.C. is illustrative. He was born in Huambo, is married and has two children. He finished 6<sup>th</sup> grade and worked as an auxiliary in a school but his 'wages didn't last for more than a week'. Since 1996, he has been working as a *kupapata* because

you need to get some money to help at home. My wife sells cosmetics and hygiene products in S. Pedro market, she owns a stall there ... she makes more money than I do ... I bought the motorbike from my cousin who works in Ulisses. I'm still paying him, and he is still paying US\$ 50 a month to Ulisses ...

A.C. has a driving licence but is not registered. In his opinion:

the money I earn is too little, barely enough to survive ... Many young people are in this sector because of unemployment ... also the town is still very quiet ... people are afraid of the war, they are returning slowly ... on a good day, I earn Kwanza 2,000-2,500 [€ 22-€27.50 C.M.L.] but you have got to consider gas, oil, breakdowns, replacing tyres because the roads are in bad condition ... there is hardly any tarmac and besides that, when it rains passengers prefer to travel in the *hiasses*.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Workers at Ulisses pay only the price of the motorcycle, excluding interest.

<sup>53</sup> Huambo, 4 August 2004. 'mas o salário nem dava para uma semana'; 'é preciso arranjar algum dinheiro para ajudar lá em casa...a minha mulher vende produtos de higiene e beleza no mercado de S. Pedro, tem lá uma banca ... ela é quem leva mais dinheiro para casa'; 'A moto comprei a um primo que trabalha na Ulisses'; 'ainda estou a pagar, porque ele também está a pagar 50 dólares por mês'; a actividade pouco mais permite que sobreviver; 'Há muitos jovens na actividade, devido à falta de emprego ... e a cidade ainda tem pouco movimento ... as pessoas ficaram com medo por causa da guerra e estão a regressar devagar ... num dia bom dá para ganhar 2,000/2,500 Kzs, mas tem que contar com a gasolina, o óleo, avarias, mudança de pneus, porque as estradas e os caminhos estão muito maus, quase não tem asfalto ... e ainda tem a época das chuvas, onde as pessoas preferem ir nos hiasses.'



*Kupapatas* travel around the city looking for passengers or park where they know they will be needed. Taxi-bikes usually transport one passenger at a time, except when passengers are carrying a child. Passengers frequently have goods that need to be taken along too. The fare takes into account both the distance and the road conditions but there is a certain uniformity among the operators. In August 2004, the fare was Kwanza 50 (€ 0.55) for short distances, such as from the airport to the Sonangol clinic; Kwanza 100 (€ 1.10) for slightly longer trips, like from the airport to the central market, and Kwanza 150 (€ 1.65) for much longer distances such as from the airport to Kanata market. *Candongueiros* charged Kwanza 50 (€ 0.55) and bus tickets cost Kwanza 30 (€ 0.33). Some *kupapatas* try and extract higher fares from passengers who are not local. Passengers carrying goods have, of course, to pay more and the *kupapatas* usually keep this extra income for themselves. According to our sources, a *kupapata* can earn Kwanza 850-2,500 (€ 9.35-27.50) on a profitable day. This has to be offset against costs, particularly fuel, maintenance and other expenses such as bribes for policemen. By 2000, negative externalities from working on unsafe roads (accidents and injuries) and environmental hazards (air pollution and noise) were limited as the *kupapatas* were not operating on a large scale.



Photo 4.3 *Kupapatas*: Waiting for passengers near Kapango market, Huambo  
Source: Carlos M. Lopes, 2005

However, these problems could get worse as traffic increases. In August 2004, there was still no body representing either owners or taxi-bike drivers.

## Conclusion

During the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, minibus taxis played a structural role in passenger transport in Angola's capital. Being adaptable and flexible, they were able to provide a more efficient means of urban transport. One of their advantages has been their complementarity with other modes of transport, in spite of the drawbacks involved for the *candongueiros* themselves, such as unsafe roads and pollution. Nevertheless, while its informal organization carries certain risks, in economic terms the income and work generated are important elements in the daily struggle by *candongueiros* to cope with the high levels of unemployment and galloping inflation that have marked Angola since independence. There are also the concrete problems *candongueiros* face in their work, such as fierce competition and exploitation. In social terms, the *candongueiros* provide public transport for Luanda's rapidly expanding urban sprawl and, for the *candongueiros* themselves, there are opportunities for professional and social integration – an aspect that can be deemed as positive, even if drivers and fare collectors work in insecure conditions and generally have no social protection.

Road transport in Huambo has also undergone significant changes. Following extensive involvement of the state as the supplier and regulator of public transport, the system came to a standstill as a result of war, economic crisis and mismanagement, which affected private operators too. This, in turn, led to the development of taxi-bike passenger transport with hundreds of operators working beyond the control of the authorities, a typical survival strategy tolerated by the government on the premise that this was only a temporary situation. The *kupapatas* can be viewed from different angles. It provides an efficient service for passengers in an urban context characterized by a rapidly growing population and a predominantly horizontal expansion of housing, in which high-rise buildings are absent and mobility needs over large distances are developing correspondingly, further aggravated by poor road conditions.

*Kupapatas* – or 'hug me', 'hold me tight' – just like *candongueiros* in Luanda, provides a vital lifeline for an impoverished population struggling to survive the combined onslaughts of civil war, unemployment and an economy and infrastructure that have ground to a halt. As such, it may be taken as a symbol for the fighting spirit and resilience of Angola's luckless people refusing to bow to a situation that outsiders might regard as hopeless. In this context, it should be realized that there are numerous other economic activities that have developed in connection with *kupapatas/ candongueiros*, such as the sale of

taxi-bikes and fuel and the expansion of mechanics' workshops – all boosting opportunities for social and professional integration of the unemployed, especially the young. The development of *candongueiros* and *kupapatas* transport, involving the emergence of new professional activities (passenger coaxers, vehicle washers, etc.) coincided with fundamental socio-demographic shifts, producing ever-younger less well-educated job seekers with educational skills that were only to some extent compensated for by the development of informal professional talents.

In the medium and long term, the *kupapatas* will suffer from negative external conditions such as road safety and pollution. The transition from state-run transport companies to a plural system where state companies coexist with private ones and independent operators has also led away from employment relations based on written contracts involving some degree of social protection towards a situation in which different models of payment coexist, verbal contracts predominate and social protection is almost non-existent. In this context, family and other social networks have gained increased relevance as a way of reducing both the risks and expenses involved in Angola's public transport sector.

## Striking gold in Cotonou? Three cases of entrepreneurship in the Euro-West African second-hand car trade in Benin

Joost Beuving<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction: African traders and European cars

One Wednesday afternoon towards the end of 2002, my Beninese friend Folivi looked at me and sighed as he stared out at the virtually deserted car market. We were sitting alone in his *paillote*, a plank-and-pole construction on stilts with a corrugated iron sheet for a roof. He leant listlessly against the railing. The approximately quarter of an acre around the *paillote* was full of cars but it had been weeks since Folivi had last sold a car, and ‘the last one, I even sold at a loss,’ he explained. ‘If this situation carries on, it’ll soon be over for all of us.’

Motor cars play an important role in everyday life in modern West Africa. Most of these vehicles are second-hand and come from overseas markets, mainly in

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is based on fieldwork undertaken between June 2000 and December 2003 in West Africa and Europe during PhD research that was funded by the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research NWO/WOTRO. All the quotes included are from interviews conducted, in French, during this period. The chapter draws on J. Beuving, *Cotonou's Klondike: A sociological analysis of entrepreneurship in the Euro-West African second-hand car trade* (PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2006). This chapter has benefited from comments by Tessel Jonquière, John Kinsman, Judith de Wolf and the editors of this volume.

Western Europe. This chapter shows how this Euro-West African second-hand car trade network has expanded rapidly over the past two decades, and discusses the significance of a new form of entrepreneurship connected to it.

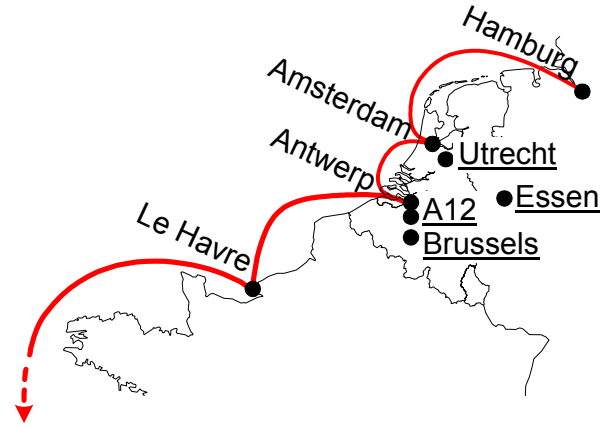
The second-hand car trade from Western Europe to West Africa has seen four important changes since the 1980s. Firstly, the volume of cars traded increased from a few tens of thousands a year in the 1980s to more than half a million a year around the year 2000. These figures match a wider trend: the estimated monetary value of cars exported to West Africa as a whole increased from a few million euros in the early 1980s to a little under a billion euros by the turn of the century.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, whereas cars used to be mostly driven overland (across the Sahara to West Africa's savannah zone) or transported as additional freight on regular cargo ships, the 1990s saw the introduction of roll-on/roll-off ships, specialized vessels that can carry up to a few thousand cars and be unloaded in a short space of time. These vessels are used by a small number of shipping companies operating on the Hamburg–Amsterdam–Antwerp–Le Havre–West Africa route, with all the ships docking at Antwerp, the central port for European car exports (see Map 5.1).

Thirdly, new categories of traders have emerged with this expanding trade. European tourists, development specialists and young West Africans studying at European universities exported cars during the 1970s and 1980s but this bimodal form of trade changed when African businessmen became increasingly involved in sourcing European cars. They started buying cars at organized sales in Western Europe's second-hand car belt (roughly confined to the Essen-Brussels-Utrecht triangle). However, after some initial expansion, West African traders faced growing international competition with the liberalization of Eastern European economies in the late 1980s. In response, West African traders started to purchase cars from second-hand dealers, garage owners and other suppliers.

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<sup>2</sup> Export figures have been compiled on the basis of official European trade statistics. See Eurostat, *Theme 6: External Trade* (Brussels, 1999) and F. Lejeal, 'Spécial Bénin', *Marchés Tropicaux*, (2002), 2311-14. Consultancy reports were also checked. See Serhau-Sem, *Projet véhicules d'occasion: Étude des problèmes environnementaux liés à la circulation urbaine* (Cotonou, 1999) and World Bank, *Analyse de la filière des véhicules d'occasion au Bénin* (Cotonou and Washington, 1998). Discussions were held during 2000-2001 with the following shipping company representatives: A. Carez from Unamar; P. Page from OTAL and F. Plomteux from Hessenatie. These statistics primarily cover second-hand cars. None of the data sources consulted for this study showed a proportion (in units) of new cars that exceeded 1%.

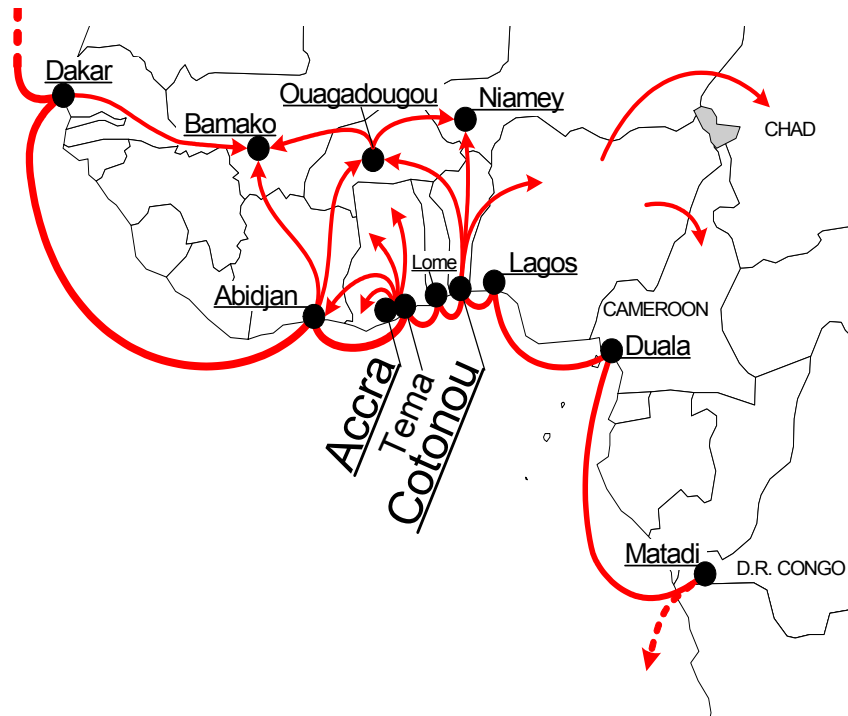


Map 5.1 Shipping route, ports and major car markets in Western Europe.  
Source: Joost Beuving

Fourthly, special market areas were set up in various parts of West Africa, usually in or around sea ports, during the 1990s to receive the increased flow of used cars from Europe. Nowadays car ships from Europe to West Africa typically ply the following route: Dakar–Abidjan–Tema–Lomé–Cotonou–Lagos–Duala–Matadi (see Map 5.2), but do not call in at all these ports. Most of the cars are unloaded in Cotonou in Benin. From there, they find their way to local markets and those further afield in neighbouring countries. A relatively small city in one of West Africa's smallest countries, Cotonou has become an important hub in the Euro-West African car trade, and hence seemed a good starting point for further study of this transnational trade flow.

The large-scale Euro-West African second-hand car trade developed in an era when most West African governments were adopting Bretton Woods-imposed neo-liberal development policies. By cutting foreign-exchange controls, curbing import licensing and making it easier to acquire travel permits, West African governments tried to create an enabling economic environment in the 1980s and 1990s in which to conduct trade. The second-hand car boom that started in the early 1990s was, therefore, embedded in the deregulation of commodity and money markets and in the removal of trade barriers. This allowed room for a new type of entrepreneur in the car business 'who perceive[d] profitable opportunities, [was] willing to take risks in pursuing them, and [had] the ability to organize a business'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> World Bank, *Sub-Saharan Africa: From crisis to growth* (Washington, 1989), 135.



Map 5.2 Shipping route, ports, trade flows and major markets in West Africa  
Source: Joost Beuving

The observation by Mr Folivi, a well-established car trader in Cotonou, however, indicates a more complex reality. Since about 2000, traders have begun to experience uncertainties about future developments in the trade, and stagnation and financial losses in the car business are now increasingly common. Further observations even suggest that bankruptcies have become rampant among these traders but this does not appear to discourage them from continuing their businesses. For instance, out of the 108 car traders consulted during this research project, only three were successful in the car trade between 2000 and 2003. In a similar vein, of the 21 key informants selected among these car traders for more intensive study, four had neither gained nor lost money during this period. The rest had suffered considerable financial losses. Nevertheless, none of those who had seen their capital subside, abandoned their businesses during this period.

A common-sense, though somewhat unkind, explanation of this peculiar phenomenon would be that second-hand car traders in West Africa are typical examples of sub-standard entrepreneurs. This implies that the traders failed to identify promising business opportunities and became unsuccessful in assessing

the financial risks involved. However, viewing second-hand car traders as failures is difficult to reconcile with the impressive expansion of their trade during the 1990s when it grew by more than 20% a year on average. Another explanation could be that the car traders, despite the corrective measures imposed by African governments, still operate in an institutional environment that is hostile to carrying out trade. People with practical commercial experience in the region will point out that, in addition to the burgeoning problem of corruption, banks are often reluctant to issue credit, telecommunications present a major cost that has to be reckoned with, and transportation – especially inland – remains a problem due to bad roads. These practical problems can of course arise in any type of trade. The argument leaves unresolved the reason why so many traders are clinging to the car business in the face of financial loss.

To appreciate the economic decision-making of Mr Folivi and his colleagues in Cotonou and to cast light on the principles underpinning second-hand car trading in West Africa, this chapter focuses on the entrepreneurial behaviour of individual car traders. It highlights the significance of non-economic factors in investment decisions that become logical when viewed from the car traders' perspective.

The car traders studied here were generally reluctant to talk. This had consequences for data collection and the claims that can be made. The possibilities for quantitative data collection are obviously limited. For example, to gain an overview of the traders' social profile, I designed and administered a survey among selected traders. It proved to be an unsatisfactory method since most traders reacted suspiciously and responded to the listed questions by answering them in the most general way possible. It therefore invoked the need to slowly gain the trust of traders by spending long periods of time with them and then getting introductions to some of their contacts. While collecting information in this fashion, mostly by engaging in casual conversation, I noticed that my presence did not appear to influence the course of events. Initially, the traders saw me as an amusing source of distraction but when they became accustomed to my ongoing presence, they carried on their business as usual with me around. After gaining the confidence of a number of them, I started conducting more focused conversations, aimed at reconstructing their life histories (including their professional careers) and trade practices. I also followed traders from one setting to another. In combination with ethnographic observations, this enabled me to develop an understanding of their economic behaviour 'from within' in different social situations.

To prepare the ground for a more detailed discussion of the entrepreneurship of West African second-hand car traders, the chapter first presents a brief history of the Cotonou car market. This reveals that within a short time, this market became a complex business environment that brought an increasing



fragmentation of the trade, followed by fluctuating prices and reduced profit margins. To appreciate how the traders responded to the changed environment at the Cotonou market, the chapter discusses the case studies of three individual car traders: Mohammed Kabbani, Djiouma Bureima and Luckman Omichessan. These cases are not representative in the sense that a properly conducted survey can be: they do not present all aspects of car trading in Cotonou, nor of the Euro-West African second-hand car trade in general. Instead, they were selected with the aim of highlighting elementary social principles underlying entrepreneurial decision-making in the second-hand car business that I encountered during my fieldwork.<sup>4</sup> The chapter then shows how the career patterns that emerged in Cotonou, alongside the tendency of traders to organize their businesses on the basis on kinship and ethnic affiliation reveals a burgeoning entrepreneurship that led to little capital accumulation. Characteristically, rather than balancing costs against benefits, these traders have stayed in the expectation of striking gold. The last section of the chapter contrasts this insight with the narratives of success that characterize contemporary entrepreneurial studies.

In addition to these highly visible aspects of the car trade, the expanding trade has made a significant impact on macroeconomic figures. Cotonou's car imports skyrocketed from a few thousand a year in the mid-1980s to about 200,000 by 2000.<sup>5</sup> These car imports have way exceeded Benin's domestic consumption so nowadays most of the cars eventually end up in Nigeria, with the large urban centres of Kano and Lagos being immediate destinations.<sup>6</sup> This increased trade flow has been realized by capital inputs from private funds (mainly individual savings) or capital coming from groups of investors.

The second-hand car trade is capital intensive, with even cars in the lower price range exceeding the annual income of most of the people in the trade. A survey carried out at the Cotonou car market shows that prices vary between € 500 and € 5,000, with 63% of the second-hand cars sold fetching prices

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<sup>4</sup> This inductive qualitative method is particularly associated with the Manchester School of Social Anthropology. Gluckmann's analysis of the opening of a bridge in modern Zululand is a well-known example. See M. Gluckmann, *Analysis of a social situation in modern Zululand* (Manchester, 1958). The method is also referred to as the analysis of social drama or as the extended case-study method. See J. van Velsen, 'The Extended-Case Method and Situational Analysis'. In: T.S. Epstein, ed., *The craft of social anthropology* (London, 1967), 129-49 and C. Mitchell, 'Case and situational analysis', *The Sociological Review*, 31 (1983), 187-211.

<sup>5</sup> I. Bio-Sawe, *Le port de Cotonou d'hier à aujourd'hui* (Cotonou, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> The proportion of domestic consumption to total car imports between 1998 and 2000 varied between 4% and 6%. See République du Benin 2001, *Rapport sur l'état de l'économie nationale: Développements récents et perspectives à moyen terme* (Cotonou, 2001).



*Photo 5.1* A view from a car-carrying ship on the crowd waiting at the quay, port of Cotonou.

*Source:* Reprinted by courtesy of Jeroen Bruggeman

ranging from € 1,000 to € 2,000.<sup>7</sup> A quick calculation reveals that at the height of car imports, an annual investment equalling a staggering 14% of Benin's GDP was being made in the second-hand car business. This figure doubles if the value of the import tax involved is included too.<sup>8</sup> The second-hand car business also generates employment: probably about 15,000 people make a living as

<sup>7</sup> J. Beuving, 'Cotonou's Klondike: African traders and second-hand car markets in Benin', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 42 (2004), 535.

<sup>8</sup> In the absence of reliable statistical information, this figure was arrived at as follows: € 1690 (average f.o.b. second-hand car price in 2000, see Beuving, 'African Traders', 535) times 204,676 (the number of cars imported in that year, see Beuving, *Cotonou's Klondike*, 21]) divided by € 2.41 bn (for Benin's GDP, see [http://www.undp.org/hdr2002/indicator/cty\\_f\\_BEN.html](http://www.undp.org/hdr2002/indicator/cty_f_BEN.html))

car traders, and this figure roughly doubles when auxiliary activities such as transport, repairs and retailing spare parts are added in.<sup>9</sup>

The rapid expansion of the car trade, which locally became known as the ‘Cotonou miracle’, had three significant effects on its organization during the 1990s. Firstly, it attracted traders from all walks of life and this led to an increased structural complexity in the trade. When a handful of specialized traders controlled the trade during its early days, car sales were essentially dyadic – involving only buyers and sellers. A veteran trader remembers: ‘In those days we worked in the port, in the open air, and we knew each other!’ After the trading community expanded, more varied arrangements evolved involving wholesalers (travelling to Europe where they purchased cars for export or imported cars through their overseas contacts), retailers (buying cars in the port for resale elsewhere) and their intermediaries (bringing together buyers and sellers of second-hand cars). Simultaneously, there was the emergence of a large service industry, mainly in the fields of transport/shipping, handling and money transfers. This ongoing process of specialization had one important effect in the sense that one’s position in the car trade influenced one’s access to trade resources.

Secondly, Cotonou saw an influx of migrant traders from all parts of the region, who became associated with specific car markets. The form that this association took appears to have been largely shaped by the nature of car market ownership. From 1993 onwards, a small group of wealthy businessmen obtained permission to levy special fees on second-hand cars under a system of concessions granted by the Beninese government<sup>10</sup> and started establishing specialized car markets in Cotonou. This process started with several Yoruba-speaking Beninese businessmen from Porto Novo. Lebanese traders, however, quickly copied their initiative, followed by Fon-speaking Beninese traders and, finally, Nigérien cattle traders and lorry owners. Together this has resulted in the segmentation of the car business in Cotonou along socio-ethnic lines.

Thirdly, the selection of cars available became more heterogeneous in a short space of time. Whereas French cars had dominated sales in Cotonou until

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<sup>9</sup> There were about 700 registered wholesalers that sold cars in Cotonou (see *Chambre de Commerce, Répertoire des opérateurs économiques au Bénin* [Cotonou, 2002]), plus 2,000-4,000 retailers and 8,000-10,000 intermediaries. See C. Perret, *Le commerce des véhicules d’occasion au Bénin: Problématique régionale et impacts nationaux* (Cotonou, 2002) and Beuving, *Cotonou’s Klondike*, 55.

<sup>10</sup> This procedure was part of an economic restructuring programme under Soglo’s civilian regime in an attempt to rebuild Benin’s devastated economy after a seventeen-year period of Marxist-Leninist rule ended in 1989. See C. Strandsbjerg, ‘Kerekou, God and the Ancestors: Religion and the Conception of Political Power in Benin’, *African Affairs*, 99 (2000), 395-414 and P. David, *Le Bénin* (Paris, 1998).

the mid-1990s, more than 90% of the cars sold since the turn of the century have been German and Japanese. Furthermore, while the trade initially consisted mainly of quite dilapidated vehicles, the cars traded in later years ranged from nearly new to practically antique. Estimates of the average age of an imported car in the late 1990s and the first few years of the twenty-first century are between 14 and 16 years<sup>11</sup> with 1% to 5% of cars imported into Cotonou being new or nearly new, according to official import statistics. At the other end of the scale, cars up to 25 years old are still being sold in Cotonou. Cars are generally in good shape, although a significant number are damaged or lack basic parts as a result of the sea voyage from Europe to West Africa or during transportation between the port and the car markets. In summary, the car trade in Cotonou has become more complex technically and therefore increasingly dependent on specialist knowledge.

The 1990s was a decade of unprecedented growth in the car trade, embedded in changes in the organization of the Cotonou car market. To better appreciate the responses of individual traders to the complexities of car trading in Cotonou, the next section presents three case studies of African entrepreneurs whose accounts describe the workings of wider processes that are central to the informal Euro-West African car trade. They highlight the importance of personal relations in mobilizing capital and credit and in negotiating market access. The cases, moreover, point to the significance of market information. Second-hand car trading takes place at geographically separated markets, characterized by differences in price and conditions of supply and demand. Finally, these accounts uncover an important aspect of the entrepreneurship of car traders. Investment decisions appear to be informed by a strong belief in the profitability of the car business.

### A career in the car business: Mohammed Kabbani

Mohammed Kabbani is a bilingual (Arabic and French) Lebanese in his early forties who was born and raised in Beirut. He went to school there and when he was a teenager he worked in his father's small dairy firm. Around that time, Mohammed's younger sister married Abu Zeid, a young man who had previously worked across West Africa as a textile trader. After Benin's Marxist government was ousted in 1989, Abu Zeid opened a travel agency in Cotonou. Following a common practice of family-based apprenticeship, Mohammed, then aged 18, was sent to live and work with Abu Zeid. But faced with increased

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<sup>11</sup> See for the higher figure, Perret, *Véhicules d'occasion*, 8. The lower figure comes from a survey administered among 25 car traders in Cotonou between June 2000 and December 2003. The survey included 2,315 registered transactions from which selling prices, car make and model, and age were derived.

competition during the early 1990s the agency proved less profitable than expected, which meant that Mohammed had to look for another job. Through his frequent visits to El Dorado, a popular beach club in Cotonou, Mohammed had learned that a Paris-based African trading company connected to the well-known Yoruba cotton exporter, El Hajj Sefou, had sourced an abundance of second-hand cars for its first few shipments to West Africa. It created a temporary trade surplus in Cotonou. Mohammed stepped in and, with capital saved from the travel agency, started reselling cars near and in the port. Mohammed's business as a 'reseller' at first followed the upswing of the second-hand market during the mid-1990s: 'It was a good time; there were few of us and plenty of Nigerian clients who brought money'.

With his business expanding, Mohammed felt sufficiently confident to make a sizable downpayment on an apartment in Cotonou, where he settled with Fatina, a matrilineal cousin of his who he had married a few months earlier. However, things soon took a turn for the worse. A number of unfortunate sales, mostly connected to the unexpected mechanical failure of expensive cars shipped to him by Fatina's older brother Jaulon in Brussels, set him back considerably. At the same time, the local practice of selling cars on credit had gained in popularity. Mohammed repeatedly failed to recoup large sums that were due to him and found he was spending increasing amounts of time tracing unreliable buyers. Through a close friend of Abu Zeid, Mohammed came into contact with two Lebanese brothers who were car dealers in Northern Nigeria. Following Nigeria's ban on the import of older second-hand cars in 1996, they were looking for ways to avoid official border controls. Mohammed offered a way out. His time in the port over a number of years had brought him into day-to-day contact with young West African men (working as local cleaners, mechanics and metal workers) and he had developed a basic command of a number of African languages, which proved useful in negotiating unofficial crossings on the Northern Benin-Nigeria border. For a while, Mohammed ventured into the profitable business of organizing such cross-border car convoys. The work proved dangerous, however and at one point he even sustained a bullet wound from the Nigerian police.

After about six months he returned to Cotonou and tried reselling cars again, but with limited success. The car business was no longer located at the port and he had difficulty gaining access to a suitable selling pitch at one of the new car markets. Once more, his contact with his Lebanese brothers helped Mohammed out because one of them, Khaled, was also a part-time employee at a German-Lebanese shipping company. The car trade is a capital-intensive business and in those days most shippers in Europe were aiming to speed up turnover rates by shifting the settlement of freight costs to Cotonou. However, the company, imaginatively called 'Beauty Cars Germany', needed a reliable agent to handle

the local payment of shipping fees. They approached Mohammed, who eagerly accepted the offer and arranged the required collateral. Although it took most of his savings from the convoy business, he gave an optimistic assessment about his career move: 'Now I can get my business going and maybe even start importing cars myself'.

### Of friends and family: Djiouma Bureima

Djiouma Bureima is a Fulani-speaking Nigérien in his early forties. He was born and raised in Niamey, where he worked for most of his teenage years as a driver. He started by joining an older cousin's taxi company after his family could no longer pay his school fees. It proved to be a difficult period. Competition was stiff and the meagre returns barely paid the rent of the cab and the repayment of the substantial loan he had taken out to cover getting his driver's licence. A few years later, Djiouma's reputation as a reliable driver brought him to the attention of another kinsman, Moukwaija. This older man, Djiouma's paternal uncle's brother, had recently moved from trading cattle in the Sahel to reselling cars in the port of Cotonou. Needing a driver to transport the cars to different markets in the region (notably Niamey and Ouagadougou), Moukwaija called upon Djiouma, who came down from Niger. Over the next few years, Djiouma alternated increasingly long stays in Cotonou, where he lodged in simple guesthouses to keep expenses down, with occasional visits to his family in Niamey. Taking on a rented apartment in Cotonou in 2002 and finding a spot at a large market (incidentally owned by a wealthy Nigérien businessman) coincided with an important change in Djiouma's life: he started handling car sales after Moukwaija ventured into the European market.

In the months that followed, car sales in Cotonou dropped unexpectedly: (mainly Nigerian) clients visited less frequently and the prices they offered did not even cover running costs.<sup>12</sup> With Moukwaija being away most of the time, Djiouma at first resorted to a common practice: he started selling cars below par hoping that the market would soon recover. For a while he continued in this fashion but the capital he collected appeared not to be sufficient. Anxiously facing the problem of refunding Moukwaija a considerable sum in the short term, Djiouma shifted to another strategy: he offered a number of Nigérien traders the possibility of selling their cars on his pitch. Until the creation of a new set of car markets outside Cotonou in 2004, selling space was in short supply. The majority of the traders therefore spent a great deal of their time

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<sup>12</sup> Car prices dropped during this period by up to 7%. See Beuving, 'African Traders', 535. Sales fell by up to 50% on figures recorded for previous years. Beuving, *Cotonou's Klondike*, 21.

negotiating selling pitches. Djiouma's shift seemed odd as he was supposed to manage the selling pitch for his boss but he explained his decision retrospectively as follows:

What could I do? I cannot tell an old man that business is no longer what it used to be. It is my problem now and I should deal with it!

One day, a few weeks later, Moukwaija unexpectedly arrived in Cotonou. After a brief visit to his *pailote* he went straight to Djiouma's apartment, to which he had a key. Later that day Moukwaija called Djiouma, explaining that he wished to settle the bill. Following the conversation, Djiouma immediately left the car market and headed home to wait for Moukwaija. Fortunately, Djiouma had just succeeded in collecting the parking fee from his friends and this, together with the downpayment on a car that he had received earlier, he was able to reimburse Moukwaija without raising suspicions. Towards evening, Moukwaija handed Djiouma a scrap of paper listing the details of another shipment: six cars, all with European licence plates and all expensive models. The next day I met Djiouma on his way to the port. Clearly unhappy with the situation he asked: 'How can I do business like that? He sends me cars I cannot sell here!'

#### 'Car business is good business': Luckman Omichessan

Luckman Omichessan is a bilingual (Yoruba and English) Beninese in his early thirties who was born and raised by his mother in Lagos. His father came from Porto Novo but later went to the North of Nigeria. After joining the Nigerian army, Luckman tried to run a beer parlour in Lagos, but with only limited success. In 2001, Luckman's paternal cousin Youssouf asked him to help out with his car-trading enterprise in Cotonou. A few years earlier, Youssouf had married a Togolese woman who was granted residence in Germany and as Youssouf was now allowed to travel to the EU under a family reunification scheme, he needed someone to oversee the sale of cars he planned to ship to West Africa. For a while Luckman contented himself with selling cars on his cousin's account at a small car market in the centre of Cotonou. In those days, Youssouf sourced cars in Germany and the Netherlands and then handed them over to Luckman who, as a form of credit, was allowed to delay payment. Luckman recalled that back then, 'on every ship there was a clean car for me and they never got far before being sold!'

Following a period of relative prosperity, Youssouf unexpectedly stopped shipping cars. For a while Luckman tried to contact his older kinsman but Youssouf did not answer the phone. Cut off from his lucrative source of livelihood, Luckman made a decision common among Cotonou car traders: he

started running errands for an acquaintance, a businesswoman from Porto Novo named Mrs Mouly. Every now and then, her only son shipped cars to Benin from Paris where he was working in the food-processing industry. While Luckman was at first assigned the little-liked job of washing and rinsing the cars that she displayed on her selling pitch, he was later on allowed to take care of them while Mrs Mouly was on business elsewhere.

Luckman did the job well, so one morning Mrs Mouly asked him to collect one of her cars, a Toyota Corolla, at the port. While there, Luckman was approached by several resellers. As he was supposed to hand the car over to his boss, he brushed most of them aside but made one important exception: he agreed to sell the Toyota Corolla to a distant kinsman, Henri, for what seemed a reasonable price, about € 1,220. Luckman explained later:

Youssef only sends me cars if he is ready for it. This young man here I know, he's also from my place, and maybe I can do business with him.

After the car was unloaded, Luckman received the money from Henri. In return, he handed him the duplicate bill of loading, a document generally taken as proof of ownership. Luckman drove the car from the port to the market and confidently contacted Mrs Mouly but to his dismay, she flatly refused the deal, claiming that her son had paid considerably more for the car in Paris. Risking loss of face if he acted otherwise, Luckman agreed with Mrs Mouly to settle for € 1,300 – without conveying the details of the duplicitous arrangement to Henri. Fortunately, Mrs Mouly accepted Luckman's request for delayed payment, giving him sufficient time to find the remaining € 80. Although Luckman had saved some money from previous activities, it appeared not to be enough and the following day I found him at the car market, once again washing cars for Mrs Mouly. When asked what he would do next, Luckman said:

Who knows? Perhaps Youssef will send me another car, or maybe someone else I know will ask for me again. Don't forget that this car business is good business!

### Striking gold in an era of economic opportunity

The career histories of Mohammed, Djiouma and Luckman highlight a diversity in patterns of second-hand car trade and entrepreneurial careers. In a local understanding of entrepreneurial success, Mohammed presents an example of a trader who had made it, while Djiouma and Luckman were less fortunate. The career histories are to a large extent situated in the booming Cotonou car market and the question that therefore arises is how the differential outcomes of entrepreneurial careers in a situation of economic opportunity can be explained. The next section addresses this question, firstly, by discussing the significance of career patterns in the car trade in shaping the options available to the traders;



secondly, by analysing how the practice of carrying out business with kinsmen, but also with other social contacts, shapes the availability of important market information; and, thirdly, by unravelling the significance of the entrepreneurship of the traders through an analysis of the role of (high) expectations in economic decision-making.

### Careers in the car trade

The aspirations and actions of the traders are shaped by what is locally understood to be a respectable career. Mohammed's business activities embodied in this regard what Cotonou car traders consider the culmination of a career in the car trade: working as an independent businessman. This ideal follows a number of occupational steps. It starts by investing (a part of) one's capital in reselling cars at the port. Once sufficient money has been made, one moves to importing cars, first via overseas business contacts and then by travelling to a European country to purchase cars oneself. This career ideal reflects to some extent the career opportunities in the car trade during the upswing of the early 1990s. Mohammed's professional history, typical for (African and non-African) traders who entered the business at an early stage, shows how, at the beginning, access to the business was unproblematic and how it was possible to make money from reselling cars. In contrast, as the career histories of Djouma and Luckman demonstrate, in order to set up a car business, one has increasingly had to rely on other traders. By the same token, the plurality of credit arrangements after 2000 (the delayed payment in Luckman's case and Djouma receiving cars ahead of payment) opened up the possibility of entering the car trade without (much) capital. The case material tentatively suggests that it attracted another type of trader: young, aspiring businessmen with little financial back-up.

It is significant that many car traders in Cotonou engaged in economic activities that delivered more stable returns at earlier points in their careers. Djouma, for instance, was able to save up for his wedding while driving imported cars to Niamey and Ouagadougou, while Luckman earned surplus cash from cleaning cars. These two examples closely correspond to the experiences of the key informants in this chapter: most of them accumulated (some) capital while working as petty traders at the Dantokpa market (Cotonou's largest open-air daily market where foodstuffs, clothing, fabrics and metalwork are traded), as doormen, on the minivans running long-distance transport in the region, and as mechanics in the countless workshops scattered across town. Clearly, these occupations were far removed from the ideal of leading a grand life and, in fact, represented a tiring and tedious way of getting by. However, it is contended here that, along with its expansion, the idea of making a career in

the car trade became a desirable goal in itself, to be chosen ahead of many other feasible career moves.

The economic careers of the traders discussed in this chapter illustrate another important aspect of the second-hand car trade: the complex way it is embedded in other forms of economic activity. For most traders, it meant that their professional lives were organized as multiple enterprises. They carried on trading in combination with other, usually previous, pursuits and their professional lives showed a pattern of combining or switching between various economic activities or occupations. This pattern was exemplified, for instance, by the way Mohammed combined organizing cross-border convoys and reselling cars or the way Djiouma sublet his pitch while selling vehicles. Embedding the car trade in other forms of economic activity accompanied the downswing of the Cotonou market. It led to patterns of resource mobilization in which capital scarcity came to play an increasingly important role and introduced the need to rely on credit and revenue from other economic sectors. This could help to spread economic risk as gains in one segment of the enterprise could cover losses in another. As Mohammed's career history showed, it made one less dependent on a particular set of social contacts. If a business partner proved unreliable, one retained sufficient room for manoeuvre to abort a particular business activity and resume elsewhere. On the other hand, Djiouma's experiences showed how the practice of crosswise financial compensation by (junior) managers had an important bearing on the organization of car-trading enterprises. It complicated the possibility of (senior) investors properly assessing a firm's profitability. Moukwaija's desire to continue trading cars therefore reflected a commonly observed pattern, with investment decisions grounded in an inflated impression of commercial success and not accurately reflecting the state of the market.

Multiple enterprises were – and still are – organized alongside ongoing personal contacts. Changes in economic careers therefore coincide with changes in the network of social contacts. To better understand how the business operations of car traders relate to the uncertainties of transnational car trade, an appreciation is needed of the nature of business contacts. The empirical material basically points towards a preference by car traders to work with ethnic peers in general and with kinsmen in particular. One has to rely mainly on family contacts to get a basic foothold in the trade, especially in the early stages of one's career. And the wider the network of family contacts, the larger the area an individual can venture into. In principle, this contributes to developing a multiplicity of economic activities. Marriage may also bring one into contact with well-established entrepreneurial families and is often an important springboard to starting a business. On the other hand, working with kinsmen does not always work out well. Conflict and misunderstanding appear rampant and point

to an underlying pattern of distrust.<sup>13</sup> The next section examines the social dynamics of these contacts in an attempt to understand how the outcome of economic transactions interlocks with business contacts.

### Social dynamics of market information

Transactions in Cotonou often involve a high degree of uncertainty. The arrival of ships carrying cars is erratic and difficult to predict and few car traders have direct access to information about market conditions in Europe. Despite the mushrooming use of cell phones and the Internet, traders depend on overseas contacts to get reliable price and market information. This can cause problems, as Mohammed's contact with Jaulon demonstrated. Although the importing of damaged cars became a widespread practice later on in an attempt to cut back on expenses, the shipment of a number of wrecked cars caught Mohammed by surprise. Jaulon shipped expensive cars to Cotonou at a time when there was no local demand for them and rather than trying to persuade Jaulon to act otherwise, Mohammed responded by moving into a set of non-kin social contacts, which took him beyond the immediate domain of the car business.

Resorting to an evasive social strategy to reduce uncertainties is not always possible. The case of Djiouma suggests that the social hierarchy operating within kinship has an authoritarian flavour: one does not contradict one's social superiors, particularly not older (paternal) kinsmen. This could explain Djiouma's reluctance to inform Moukwaija about his disappointing car sales. To some extent, this response is a function of the closed nature of the social universe of Cotonou car traders, who often live and travel together. The case histories of Mohammed and Djiouma show that migrants travelling to Cotonou build on a widespread practice of family-based chain migration, involving providing accommodation for visiting family members. The fact that Moukwaija had a key to Djiouma's house suggests that putting up kinsmen is not always voluntary. It also enhances the possibility of checking on each other's conduct and this, in turn, reinforces social hierarchies. Luckman's case shows how authoritarian control is exercised. Youssouf stopped sending cars to Cotonou without informing his younger cousin: 'Luckman doesn't understand, he's just a child. I don't send cars if he wants me to; what I do is my affair'. Djiouma

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<sup>13</sup> This observation contrasts with ideas found in the social-capital literature where shared 'culture' and sociocultural bonds are thought to facilitate interpersonal trust. See J. Humphrey & H. Schmitz, 'Trust and inter-firm relations in developing and transition economies', *Journal of Development Studies*, 34, 4 (1998), 32-61. According to Putnam, dense networks of social exchange supposedly promote social trust. See R. Putnam, *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy* (Princeton, 1993), 163-85.

presents another example of this control in the sense that veteran traders often arrive in Cotonou unexpectedly.

Local contacts with members of the same ethnic group are not a reliable source of information either. In Luckman's case, it would appear that Mrs Mouly's overpriced car was rooted in a troubled relationship with her son who she suspected was squandering her money. Whereas Luckman knew both the potential seller and buyer fairly well, this was hardly to his advantage as he could not fully grasp Mrs Mouly's relationship with her son.

For younger traders, business contacts with peers with whom they develop a friendship is growing in importance locally. This presents a mode of contact mobilization that typically stems from previous contact. For instance, some of Djiouma's friends in Cotonou were former Niamey taxi drivers, and Mohammed's contacts at the shipping company were made in the bars of Cotonou. However such ties do not easily transform into a dependable source of mutual support. Unlike kin-based business contacts, they often remain one-off occasions, with little else at stake than the transaction they embody. For instance, the collaboration between Djiouma and his friends ended abruptly when Moukwaija returned to Cotonou to start selling cars himself.

The analysis so far has focused on the way economic decision-making is embedded in ongoing personal contacts. Rather than sharing whatever knowledge of the car business is available in an attempt to reduce information uncertainty, most car dealers are economical with the truth because information regarding, for instance, prices or agreements with third parties or the technical state of a car, is one of the risks of the trade. The conflictive nature of business contacts reflects attempts by traders to resolve the tension between, on the one hand, knowing a number of people to access elementary information from regarding the state and distribution of socio-economic resources and, on the other, keeping them at bay to create what they experience as sufficient room for manoeuvre. Information asymmetries between different economic agents are therefore the outcome of a complicated pattern of scheming and counter-scheming between business partners who operate in a sphere of suspicion. This form of economic behaviour is difficult to appreciate with a universal notion of entrepreneurship in mind. Luckman's final comment on his failed transaction – 'car business is good business' – shows that it is necessary to delve deeper into car traders' expectations of economic decision-making.

### Expectations in economic decision-making

For most car traders in Cotonou, financial losses and declining profits are now part of everyday life. Yet car traders still tend to express themselves in an idiom of entrepreneurial success and demonstrate continued efforts to remain in

business. This is related to the absence of a calculating logic. The case studies suggest that, in running their businesses, the traders do not balance costs against benefits. This is consistent with three additional observations. Firstly, few traders keep track of their sales. For instance, adopting a widespread local practice Mohammed filled out a sales receipt when selling a car but threw away his carbon copy after concluding the transaction. Secondly, whereas the case studies pointed at viable alternatives (washing cars, driving taxis, organizing convoys), the traders did not calculate their time and energy as labour costs and therefore did not evaluate the cost of trading cars against the returns of an alternative opportunity. Thirdly, as demonstrated by Luckman, the next transaction that the traders considered was usually not determined by any additional costs involved but by the amount of cash one was able to mobilize either directly or through one's contacts. Instead of building on previous profits, the traders tended to engage in credit arrangements in an attempt to maximize the number of cars purchased. This practice worked well when the second-hand car market was expanding and profits were still possible but resulted in a large number of unsettled bills when the car boom turned to bust – hence Mohammed's failure to recoup the money owed to him.

The absence of calculation is strongly related to the motivations of second-hand car traders. Luckman's last remark indicates why he wanted to carry on with trading second-hand cars even in the face of financial loss. Like many Cotonou car traders, he had an expectation of progress in the trade. This expectation made him reluctant to leave the car trade altogether and diversify his business into more profitable economic arenas – as illustrated by Mr Folivi's remark at the beginning of this chapter. It is significant that businessmen who were not (or no longer) directly implicated in the trade shared this belief in profitability. This accounts for Mohammed's stated wish to move up to importing cars. Similar ideas are found further up the hierarchy as well: the chief director of the port explained in a newspaper article that the car trade was Benin's lifeline for the twenty-first century.<sup>14</sup> It is a belief that proves to be a strong motivational force. For Cotonou car traders, buying and selling cars seems the natural thing to do, regardless of one's success in pursuing a trading career. Business success in this social universe has two dimensions. Firstly, it is perceived as the outcome of a zero-sum game. There is a strong conviction that one can only win at the cost of another, which explains the secrecy that surrounds transactions in the car business. Sharing information is seen as showing one's hand. This, for instance, is expressed by Luckman's switch to the duplicitous sale of the Toyota. Apprising Mrs Mouly in advance would have spoilt an opportunity for personal gain. Secondly, the expectation of business

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<sup>14</sup> 'Interview with M. Sagbo, 'DG de la douane', *Bénin Espoir*, 20 December 2002.

success takes the shape, not of a gradual build-up of profits, but of an unexpected windfall. Luckman's impulsive social relations management is thus common among Cotonou car traders. They do not usually invest in their contacts but seize any occasion that arises in the hope of making a fortune.

Such high expectations of the car business bring to mind the gambling behaviour of gold diggers. The stories of Mohammed, Djouma and Luckman suggest that the motivation of individual traders to set up a car business in Cotonou resembles the way gold diggers were drawn to the gold fields: they are driven by the prospect of striking gold. An important element is that they exaggerate their chances of winning and, equally significantly, underrate their prospects of losing, which signals the relative unimportance of calculation.<sup>15</sup> At a collective level, the prospect of large gains resulted in the rapid growth of fortune seekers. The arrival in Cotonou of tens of thousands of migrant traders from across West Africa in the heyday of the car business is not unlike the mass migration of hundreds of thousands of fortune seekers in the North American or Australian gold rush in the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Observing the way gold diggers took their colleagues as adversaries – avoiding them as much as courtesy would allow – resembles the way car traders compete with their colleagues (often social intimates) for capital, information and, most importantly, profit.<sup>17</sup> In the olden days, gold diggers had little factual knowledge of the soil they were working. Striking gold was therefore the result of chance. Likewise, Cotonou car traders operate in an insecure economic environment. They have limited access to accurate information about car prices and their business partners. Planning ahead is difficult.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter started by questioning why some businessmen in the Euro-West African second-hand car trade are more successful than others. Analysis of the

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<sup>15</sup> See C. Porsild, *Gamblers and dreamers: Women, men and community in the Klondike* (Vancouver, 1999) and H. Brands, *The age of gold: The California gold rush and the new American dream* (New York, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, P. Berton, *The Klondike fever: The life and death of the last Great gold rush* (New York, 1958).

<sup>17</sup> For insight into the antagonistic social relations underpinning life in the gold-mining camps in nineteenth-century California, see S.L. Johnson, *Soaring camp: The social world of the California gold rush* (New York, 2000). A similar image is offered by K. Werthmann, 'The president of the gold diggers: Sources of power in a gold mine in Burkina Faso', *Ethnos*, 68, 1 (2003), 95-111.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of the difficulties early gold diggers in South Africa faced when prospecting the Witwatersrand, see E. Rosenthal, *Gold! Gold! Gold!: The Johannesburg gold rush* (Johannesburg and London, 1970).

empirical material, however, took a different tack and found that many car traders are successful at times, but mostly they are not. Although the car business has become more complex organizationally and technically, differential access to trade resources resulting from different positions in the trade appears to play a limited role in explaining the success of car traders. Whether a reseller, an importer or an intermediary, few traders are able to structurally gain in the business. Car traders lack the dependable business contacts they need to deal with the enormous uncertainties of the car trade. In such a situation, stagnating sales and declining profits easily come as an unpleasant surprise and repeatedly lead to business failure.

The entrepreneurial behaviour of car traders in Cotonou reflects a form of economic decision-making that is difficult to reconcile with the optimism that characterizes the current literature on entrepreneurship. One voice in this literature, for instance, argues that entrepreneurs are innovative individuals who do things in novel ways.<sup>19</sup> Innovations have been central in transforming Cotonou into a transnational hub of the second-hand car trade, with the importation of damaged cars, as a case in point, being an attempt to curb expenses. The advantage of innovations for individual businessmen remains limited due to the observed tendency of quick replication by colleagues, which is reinforced by the ongoing influx of new traders trying their luck in the business. Another perspective in entrepreneurial studies suggests understanding entrepreneurs as brokers who 'bridge discontinuities in a social system by linking hitherto unconnected individuals with control over specific resources'.<sup>20</sup> The case studies highlight the importance of social contacts in the car business in gaining access to capital and information. However, the *carpe diem* mentality of most car traders towards their social contacts prevents them from drawing a structural gain from their social position.

Conversely, it was argued in this chapter that the entrepreneurship of car traders bears a strong resemblance to the gambling behaviour of gold diggers. This insight builds on the work of the British economist Keynes who argued that '[i]f human nature felt no temptation to take a chance ... there might not be much investment merely as a result of cold calculation'.<sup>21</sup> Like gamblers, the car traders in Cotonou exercise little effective control over the outcome of their

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<sup>19</sup> This Schumpeterian perspective views entrepreneurs as the engine for economic transformation. For an entrepreneur to be successful, s/he requires the 'willpower to break down the resistance that the social environment offers to change'. J. Schumpeter, 'The creative response in economic history', *The Journal of Economic History*, 7, 2 (1947): 157.

<sup>20</sup> R. Burt, *Structural holes* (Cambridge and London, 1992), 31.

<sup>21</sup> J.M. Keynes, *The general theory of employment, interest and money* (Cambridge, 1936), 150.

actions and are operating in the dark. Thus, they bet on a business jackpot, with the outcome of their investments largely determined by chance and fortune. Though not a rational form of economic behaviour, gambling is a logical response in an economic universe where uncertainties are large and (financial) stakes are high. This is a form of behaviour that may be associated with economic booms resembling the gold rush and is, therefore, a subject for further study.





PART III

ANTROPOLOGICAL  
PERSPECTIVES



## The art of truck modding on the Nile (Sudan): An attempt to trace creativity

Kurt Beck

### Introduction

Everybody who has travelled in Asia, Africa or Latin America is familiar with the sight of ingeniously modified and highly decorated trucks. They shape the scenery of the city streets as well as the dirt tracks of even the most remote hinterland. Exceptionally impressive pieces may be found on the roads of Nigeria, the Philippines and Pakistan where they tower above the ordinary traffic like ceremonial elephants. One observer searching for a fitting metaphor has aptly described them as dinosaurs adorned in full courtship colours.<sup>1</sup>

These trucks deal with most of the freight haulage and passenger transport in these regions. Anthropologists, like me, use them quite naturally as a means of transport into and around their fields.<sup>2</sup> They have, however, not yet been

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<sup>1</sup> J. Elias, *On wings of diesel*, <http://www.arttrucks.com/>, (2001) [12 December 2004].

<sup>2</sup> Since 1975 I have been travelling on Sudanese trucks. I have been deeply impressed by the drivers' confidence in their trucks, by their skill both as navigators and as mechanics, and I have been intrigued by this wonder of reliability, namely the Sudanese Bedford truck. It was only in 2003, however, when I found the opportunity to take a closer look at these trucks that I discovered that this reliability had its reasons. This present contribution is based on field research undertaken in Sudan from October to December 2003 and from January to March 2006 which was made possible by a grant from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (2006) and the Universitätsverein München (2003). I owe a special debt of gratitude to my students in Munich who accompanied me to Sudan and to colleagues in Bayreuth, Munich and Halle, all of whom provided valuable criticism and advice. I also acknowledge the discussions and advice I received at the AEGIS conference in London in 2005,

awarded the legitimacy of research in their own right<sup>3</sup> – with one notable exception, they have been treated as pieces of art and bearers of signs. The focus has been on inscriptions, symbols, meanings and decoration. To judge from the available literature, this is an interesting line of research.<sup>4</sup> However, one central thing is missing here – the truck itself. It is like looking at the outer shell of something and ignoring what is inside.

Below this skin of symbols and supposedly deep meanings there is another world to be explored, the interior world of technology, technological appropriation and human creativity. This contribution is not about adornment and decoration on the surface, instead I propose to concentrate on the materiality and the technology of the truck.

Then there is another equally fruitful perspective, mainly espoused by social historians, which offers the view of the motor vehicle as a means of power in the colonial context and preaching the gospel in Africa. Research like this can go a long way in explaining what the motor vehicle did to Africa or what has been done to Africa by using the motor vehicle in terms of fostering domination and development, spreading markets, religions and HIV.<sup>5</sup> I propose looking at

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as well as the thorough reading and comments by the anonymous reviewer and the editors. The contribution draws on earlier work, compare K. Beck, 'Bedforde Metamorphose, Eine Ethnographie der Aneignung des LKWs im Sudan'. In: K. Beck, T. Förster & H. Hahn, *Blick nach vorn* (Köln, 2004), 250-63 and K. Beck, *Brutstätten der Kreativität – Die Aneignung des LKWs im Sudan*, [www.fak12.uni-muenchen.de/vka/Africars](http://www.fak12.uni-muenchen.de/vka/Africars), 2005.

- <sup>3</sup> Daniel Miller, the editor of the first volume looking at the motor vehicle from an anthropological perspective, relates his experiences when searching for the automobile in the anthropological literature by bluntly stating: 'I could think of almost no relevant literature'. D. Miller, *Car cultures* (Oxford, 2001), ix. One of the contributions to his volume should be highlighted as coming close to my own ideas about automobility, namely J. Verrips & B. Meyer, 'Kwaku's car: The struggles and stories of a Ghanaian long-distance taxi driver'. In: Miller, *Car cultures*, 153-84.
- <sup>4</sup> A.K. Awedoba, 'A note on lorry names in Ghana', *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, 12 (1981), 63-64; E. Date-Bah, 'The inscriptions on the vehicles of Ghanaian commercial drivers: A sociological analysis', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 18, 3 (1980), 523-31; Elias, 'On wings of diesel'; O. Lawuyi, 'The world of the Yoruba taxi driver. An interpretative approach to vehicle slogans', *Africa*, 58, 1 (1988), 1-13; J. Pritchett, 'Nigerian truck art', *African Arts*, 12, 1 (1978), 27-31; A. Schmid, *Pakistan express: Die fliegenden Pferde vom Indus* (Hamburg, 1995); A. Schmid, 'Fliegende pferde vom indus. Die welt der pakistanischen Trucker', *Geographische Rundschau*, 55, 11 (2003), 12-19; G.W. Rich & S. Khan, 'Bedford painting in Pakistan', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 93 (1980), 257-75.
- <sup>5</sup> E. Alber, 'Automobilismus und Kolonialherrschaft. Zur Bedeutung des Autoverkehrs für die Herrschaftsstrukturen in der Westafrikanischen Kolonie Dahomey', *Paideuma*, 46 (2000), 279-99; E. Alber, 'Motorization and colonial rule: Two

the motor vehicle from a reverse angle. By concentrating on a Sudanese tradition of modifying imported lorries, mainly Bedford lorries, I want to explore what Africa did to the motor vehicle – hence the title: truck modding on the Nile.

Modding, modifying, adjusting and customizing are probably not very good terms for what is actually happening, for these trucks are being totally deconstructed and then reconstructed. This is done in small workshops in the economy's informal sector. Informal in this context does not imply that they employ a rudimentary technology or that they do not pay taxes. They do pay a whole range of fees and taxes and their technology is certainly not industrial, but it is equally far from being rudimentary. It might be characterized as a highly sophisticated craft technology. Informal simply means that the workshops under consideration cater for the needs of the common people and that they are far removed from formal vocational training and state or development assistance. The final product of their craft is a completely new truck that barely resembles the original Bedford truck. Surprising technological innovations have found their way into its unorthodox construction. For this reason, the second part of this chapter examines the context of the creativity which is so obviously involved in the craft.

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scandals in Dahomey, 1916', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 15, 1 (2002), 79-92; J-B. Gewald, 'Missionaries, Hereros, and motorcars: Mobility and the impact of motor-vehicles in Namibia before 1940', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 35 (2002), 257-85; T. Kirsch, 'Religious logistics. African christians, spirituality, and transportation'. In: J. Pina-Cabral & F. Pine, *On the margins of religion* (Oxford, 2006). Urban transport systems are analyzed in A. El Mamoun, 'The public transport in greater Khartoum', *Sudan Notes and Records* (1997), 105-12; X. Godard, *Les transports et la ville en Afrique au sud du Sahara* (Paris, 2002); X. Godard & I. Fatonzoun, *Urban Mobility for All* (Lisse, 2002); X. Godard & P. Teurmier, *Les transports urbains en Afrique à l'heure de l'ajustement. Redéfinir le service public* (Paris, 1992), among others, from the perspective of urban planning. Historians like H. d'Almeida-Topor, C. Chanson-Jabeur & M. Lakroum, *Les transports en Afrique (XIX-XX siècle)* (Paris, 1992) and P. Drummond-Thompson, 'The development of motor transport in Nigeria: A study in indigenous enterprise'. In: d'Almeida-Topor, Chanson-Jabeur and Lakroum, *Les transports en Afrique*, 222-46 describe the introduction of the motor vehicle to Africa. Sociologists of development analyze the automobile's micro economics in the informal sector, see for instance S. Berry, 'From peasant to artisan. motor mechanics in a Nigerian town', Working Paper 76, (African Studies Center, Boston University, 1983) and P. Kensok, *Fitter – Entwicklung aus der Werkzeugkiste. Informelle Ausbildung von Kraftfahrzeughandwerkern in Ghana* (Saarbrücken, 1987). Michael Featherstone has recently edited a volume looking at cars and drivers from a new European perspective, see M. Featherstone, 'Automobilities: An introduction', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 21, 4-5 (2004), 1-24.

Readers familiar with Science and Technology Studies will realize that my views of the technological processes involved are much indebted to the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) approach which emphasizes that technological development should be regarded less as a process of invention by a producer and its passive adoption by consumers – a conviction so dear to the conventional diffusionist approach – but rather as a broad social process comprising different relevant groups who develop their own visions of a technology and are thus involved in the definition and construction of the artefact or technology. Only when these differing views are converging and dominant views of the technology have evolved will closure occur, i.e. the stabilization of a technology.<sup>6</sup> In the early years, SCOT largely concentrated on the design process before a product or technology went to end-users, and less on the users' power to reopen the construction process by adding new meanings and modifications to seemingly stable technologies. It was only later that researchers in the fast-growing SCOT tradition had to acknowledge that technologies, even long after their stabilization, can continue to be modified by users.<sup>7</sup>

We all know that users can and do alter technologies but more often than not, being lay persons, they are helpless in the face of technical artefacts. They can sometimes modify technical artefacts if they are able to appropriate the

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<sup>6</sup> Compare Trevor Pinch & Wiebe Bijker's pioneer research on the social construction of the bicycle in W. Bijker, T. Pinch & T. Hughes, *The social construction of technological systems. New directions in the sociology and history of technology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984).

<sup>7</sup> W. Bijker, 'Technology, social construction of'. In: N. Smelser & P. Baltes, *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (London, 2001), 15522-27. N. Oudshoorn & T. Pinch, *How users matter. The co-construction of users and technologies* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), especially 1-7. R. Kline & T. Pinch, 'Users as agents of technological change: The social construction of the automobile in the rural united states', *Technology and Culture*, 37, 4 (1996), 763-95. In this study, the authors show how interpretative flexibility, the fact that technologies and artefacts lend themselves to differing interpretations and visions as to their use, can reappear at the use stage of a technology. Before, it was largely taken for granted that interpretative flexibility ended with closure in the design process. I am grateful to my colleague Richard Rottenburg who drew my attention to this piece of scholarship by two of the leading figures of the Social Construction of Technology approach. Had the proponents of SCOT had a closer look at their immediate environment at MIT, they would certainly have become aware of what end-users can do to a technological artefact long after its design process has ended in closure. In this case, their own students had already turned the computer – which was then still firmly believed to be a monster tool for serious research – to computer gaming, today one of its most important uses but in the 1960s totally unforeseen by its producers. The story is related in M. Graetz, 'The origin of spacewar', *Creative Computing*, 7, 8 (1981), 56-67.

technologies involved,<sup>8</sup> and they can put them to uses unintended in the original closure process with small adjustments and slight modification and, as consumers, can also put pressure on producers to make adjustments. But the fact remains that reopening a stable technology at the user level – modding – rests on a foundation of conditions, mainly skills and creativity, which are still largely unaccounted for. What seems still to be missing is a richer ethnography of the breeding grounds for the creativity involved and an account of the social organization of the skills implied.

### A thoroughly appropriated piece of industrial technology – converting the Bedford TJ into the Sudanese *sifinja*

Nobody is likely to compare the Bedford TJ (Photo 7.1) to a ceremonial elephant or a dinosaur. Its overburdened and modest appearance would rather lead one to call it the donkey that carries the burden of Sudanese society. It can be found all over Sudan and in all shapes and forms, as a tanker carrying fuel and water, as a bus carrying passengers, and as a lorry carrying whatever a society largely based on agriculture needs to transport, like live animals and petrol drums, bags and boxes, but mostly sacks, which are the typical freight of an agrarian society. And on top of it go the passengers with their own possessions. It can be encountered on all sorts of roads from highways to dirt tracks, but its natural habitat is off-road.

Travelling off-road means crossing the swamps, savannahs and uninhabited deserts of Sudan. Given the vast extent of Sudan and because long-distance transport goes far beyond Sudan's borders to Ethiopia or Eritrea, to Chad, to the Central African Republic and Nigeria, and in many cases through the Great Desert to Egypt or Libya, one journey may take anything from a few hours to

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<sup>8</sup> One example of Nile peasants reopening the construction process of the diesel pump in a new environment is detailed in K. Beck, 'Die Aneignung der Maschine'. In: K. Kohl & N. Schafhausen, *New Heimat* (New York, 2002), 66-77. The reopening of the construction process applies to mechanical artefacts like the diesel pump as well as to social technologies such as a bank. Cf. K. Beck, 'Die Verbäuerlichung der Bank'. In: M. Schulz, *Entwicklung: Theorie – Empirie – Strategie* (Hamburg, 1997), 81-98. One ethnography of users reworking highly complex technological artefacts was given in A. Knorr, 'The Online Nomads of Cyberia', in a presentation given at the workshop 'Understanding Media Practices' at the 9<sup>th</sup> EASA Biennial Conference in Bristol in September 2006. The author described a community of 'game modders', computer-game enthusiasts who devote themselves with considerable talent and skill to reworking standard computer games. He mentioned one site on which there were up to 500 fully functional 'gamemods' alone of the popular computer games Max Payne and Max Payne 2 available for free download. Variation indeed!



several weeks. Thus, the Bedford TJ has acquired a role far beyond that of being a simple means of transport. Like a ship navigating the ocean, it is regarded as a home for the crew and its passengers, if not as an island of security and comfort in a space full of danger and desolation. On long journeys, the crew and random passengers become companions and develop a deep emotional attachment to their truck.

Sudanese people lovingly call the Bedford TJ the *sifinja*, after the cheap but comfortable plastic sandals available throughout the whole country that are the footwear of the common people. Obviously the *sifinja* does not appear as stiff as the 1980s model of the Land Cruiser, which is called *thatshir* after a former British prime minister, nor does it appear as shiny as the *laila alwi*, the new model of the Land Cruiser, which is apparently perceived as being beyond the reach of the common man as much as the popular Egyptian actress who gave the name.

The original Bedford TJ was designed by Vauxhall's engineers at Luton (just North of London) in the 1950s, drawing on World War II experiences in truck manufacturing. Vauxhall Motors Ltd, itself owned by General Motors Corporation in Detroit from 1925 onwards, entered the commercial vehicle market in 1931 under the name of Bedford. Their trucks soon became very popular and were stiff competition for Ford. After the post-war years of financial restrictions and raw-material bottlenecks were over, Bedford's engineers successfully developed their first diesel engine and joined the commercial vehicle market with a whole range of new models. The so-called J or TJ range was introduced at the 1968 Commercial Motor Show and came with a small range of six-cylinder petrol and diesel engines with 100 to 115 hp,<sup>9</sup> a standard four-speed gearbox with the option of a five-speed gearbox and hypoid rear axles on the larger models, plus the option of a two-speed axle in later models. Payload capacities were from 25 cwt to 7 tons and wheelbases from 3 m to roughly 4.5 m. The simple design, including the fact that it was a normal-control truck where the driver sits behind the front wheel and there is ample space for the engine under the large bonnet, makes the TJ especially repair- and maintenance-friendly, although the trade-off obviously is that there is less space for the load than in the later forward-control cab-over-engine TK models in which the driver sits in front of the front axle. After the end of the Bedford Motor Company in 1987 following an unexpected GM decision in Detroit to close it, the TJ was subsequently produced by the AWD Company that took over part of Vauxhall's medium- and heavy-weight truck production, and later by Marshall SPV for export. And after the plant at Luton shut down, production was taken over by

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<sup>9</sup> Only the three-ton short wheelbase TJ, locally called *bu'aiwa* (dwarf, pygmy), comes with a four-cylinder engine.

Hindustani Motors in India. Clearly a rather old-fashioned sight in England by the late 1980s, the vehicle remained a great success overseas.<sup>10</sup> Its simplicity compared to modern high-tech trucks, its versatility, its comparatively cheap price and its robustness made it, like the donkey, an ideal vehicle for a rural habitat far from the centres of automobility.<sup>11</sup>

In the long run, however, no motor vehicle, not even the robust Bedford TJ, could cope with the challenges posed by Sudanese roads. In fairness to Bedford's engineers however, it should be noted that the TJ was originally designed for on-road, not off-road, cargo transport. On the other hand, the Sudanese environment offered opportunities for realizing the full potential of the Bedford TJ, especially if the truck kept clear of inner-city traffic control, which the design engineers at Luton could probably not even have dreamt of.

In short, the Bedford TJ has been thoroughly appropriated, adjusted and redesigned in its new Sudanese habitat. In a time span of roughly fifty years since the TJ reached Sudan with the first big wave of automobile modernity, local craftsmen have created their own version of it and produced a completely new truck only superficially resembling the Luton version. This history of appropriation is the history of a chain of small technical conversions, modifications and reconstructions, some abandoned and others developed further but as a whole adding up to a revolutionary innovation in truck construction. And it is also the history of the emergence of a highly skilful and sophisticated community of practice.

Photo 6.2 shows the unequal twins: in the foreground is a tipper lorry used for local construction work that is close to the Luton version and in the background is the thoroughly modified long-distance Sudanese version. Note the twin tyres at the rear of the tipper lorry, the construction of the driver's cabin, the sagging chassis that is a result of overloading and heavy use on construction sites, and the magic protection on the wing.

By Sudanese aesthetic standards the redesigned vehicle is a real beauty. She resembles her Luton sister only superficially, exhibiting the original motor bonnet and wings, the original mirrors and the original windscreen. But (beyond decoration and protection) it differs in the locally designed bodywork including the ladder, the single rear tyres, the larger tank, the open and enlarged driver's

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. L. Geary, *Bedford. The commercial vehicle for all purposes* (Romford, 1991) for Bedford's fleet history, especially 2-3, 29.

<sup>11</sup> Marianne de Laet & Annemarie Mol have called the attributes of an artefact that allow for a crossing of techno-societal borders – adaptability, flexibility and responsiveness to modding – 'fluidity'. They argue that an appropriate technology 'traveling to intractable places' should easily lend itself to be appropriated in intractable places, M. de Laet & A. Mol, 'The Zimbabwe Bush Pump: Mechanics of a fluid technology', *Social Studies of Science*, 30, 2 (2000) 225-63.

cabin with enough space for five instead of two, the wooden roof of the cab and on top of it the luggage rack with boxes for provisions and spare parts, which also acts as a seat for the driver's assistants (compare Photo 6.1). From this position they learn to navigate from the vantage point of the driver. The vehicle's upper-body construction, which is partly covered with metal sheeting on the exposed surfaces, uses timber support beams to offer the body the needed elasticity to cope with rough terrain. There are other versions of the body as well, one using bent iron bars instead of wood. In this case, iron is also used for the casing of the body which runs like a fence around the lorry. It should also be noted that the rear tyres are bigger than those at the front.

What all versions have in common is that they only use part of the original driver's cabin. The reason is that, in addition to gaining extra space for passengers and allowing the air stream to cool the driver's space, the thin metal of the cabin would not stand the extreme twisting caused by driving over rough terrain: cabin doors would jam and the metal would simply crack. With the locally designed seats and roof attached to the upper body structure, the driver's seat becomes a comfortably cool but still protected place.

Photo 6.3 shows the truck in a half-finished state, still without wings and bodywork and with only part of the original driver's cabin. The larger rear tyres can also be noted here – 12.00 x 20 on the rear axle and 9.00 x 20 front tyres as opposed to the original 8.25 x 20 on both axles on the Luton model. This is supposed to give the truck enhanced traction over soft ground and to prevent the vehicle from getting stuck in deep sand. The main chassis beam is extended at the rear, allowing more freight space, as does the modification of the driver's cabin. After all, the basic justification for most of the modifications is to convert the truck into an even more robust vehicle and to enlarge its freight-carrying capacity.

There is, however, much more to these modifications than pure instrumental considerations. After the parts of the original cabin that are no longer required have been cut off and the remaining parts remounted to protect the passengers and cover the engine, the interior of the new cabin is converted into a driver's nest, provided with a sound system and comfortably lined with silk and velvet. This is done in a style which obviously finds the approval of everybody committed to prevalent Sudanese ideas in interior design, even if it seems slightly overdone at times to produce a condensed version of that style. The craftsmen call it the 'bedroom'. There can be no doubt that the Sudanese version of the

Bedford TJ is meant to be much more than a mere work place. It is constructed, materially in this case as a home.<sup>12</sup>

To ensure the Bedford TJ matches the visions of Sudanese drivers and artisans, it has to be totally deconstructed. Usually, a Bedford TJ has served for some years as an original Luton model and when it becomes run down and needs a complete overhaul the opportunity is taken to convert it into a Sudanese truck. Additional modifications may be added at any time, usually if there are plans to operate the truck on particularly exacting routes such as for long-distance desert transport to Egypt or Libya, but some features are deemed essential on any TJ which wants to pass as a *sifinja*.

The TJ is totally dismantled – engine, gear box, brakes, suspension – until only the bare bones remains. From Photo 6.4 it should be clear why the simplicity of the post-World War II design makes the Bedford TJ so very convenient for modification. It is user- and maintenance-friendly, a quality lost on or even consciously omitted from high-tech trucks. The nuts and bolts are within easy reach, all the parts can be easily removed and reassembled and no special tools are needed. In fact to totally dismantle the TJ, a pair of competent craftsmen committed to their task would need no more than three to four hours.

When rebuilding the truck, the first and most important task is to increase stability and longevity. The frame is strengthened by reinforcements along the main chassis beams. This is achieved by riveting sheets of iron to the beams on the outside and welding reinforcements to the inside. This is considered the backbone of the enhanced carrying capacity and longevity. The cross beams also have to be adjusted as they are known to crack under stress. They are strengthened by welding enforcements to their juncture with the main chassis beam. Finally, springs are added to the rear and front suspension. Adding springs increases the distance between the chassis frame and the axle, so the shock absorbers have also to be lengthened.

This is done by simply welding the mounting of an old shock absorber to the new one.

The art of modding, and this is a general principle, largely consists of being able to re-use any available parts economically. By the same token, the steering link at the front wheel has to be lengthened (compare Photo 6.6). Photo 6.5 shows Mr Adila an-Nur, one of the master-craftsmen in the industrial area at Shendi, exhibiting a newly welded steering arm. The lengthening of the steering link also tightens the turning circle and allows the driver to put additional force

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<sup>12</sup> Similar observations may be made on any European highway as well as in places as far away as Pakistan. See H. Khan, 'Mobile shelter in Pakistan'. In: P. Oliver, *Shelter, sign, and symbol* (London, 1975), 183-96.

on the wheel, thus improving the vehicle's handling. A six-ton Luton model is thus converted into a nine-ton Sudanese model.

The metal sheeting of the driver's cabin is particularly unsuited to Sudanese conditions and was obviously not designed for maximum overload combined with Sudanese off-road strain, which simply tears the thin metal. The strain in the driver's cabin, or what remains of it, is eliminated by placing the rear edge on rubber pads that were originally taken from the engine mount of the 1970s model Land Cruiser (see Photo 6.6). This points to another principle of truck modding which is to search the vast archive of potentially usable spare parts in a manner reminiscent of Lévi Strauss's *bricoleur*, even if these parts seem at first glance far removed from the task at hand and appear to belong to other mechanical realms, for instance irrigation agriculture or even domestic appliances.

At the front, the cabin is mounted on a locally designed suspension known as a 'swimmer' (*ʿawwâma*). The swimmer is basically made of two freely moving U-shaped iron parts, as shown in Photo 6.7, moving round an axle originally taken from the rear suspension of a 1970s Land Cruiser. The swimmer is inserted between the main frame and the cowling, and very effectively absorbs the worst shocks. Note part of the archive of potentially usable spare parts in Photo 6.7.

Additional features are routinely added when the original parts wear out or are thought to be in need of replacement by more appropriate technology, for instance, if a truck comes from Eastern Sudan's gravel desert and is to continue its life in the sandy desert in Western Sudan or if long-distance desert travel is anticipated. Trips to Kufra or Egypt obviously require vehicles that are better equipped than vehicles just transporting onions to town, especially if the drivers need to avoid the well-beaten track for whatever reason. For particularly challenging routes, drivers try to get newer parts manufactured in India or China replaced by old original parts;<sup>13</sup> for desert trips water drums have to be mounted at the rear to complement the ubiquitous water skin called *qirba* or *suqqa* hanging at the side of the *sifinja*, as shown in Photo 6.1. A second fuel tank might also be added and the rear axle differential should be overhauled.

One important conversion relates to the strengthening of the rear axle traction unit. Photo 6.8 shows a detail of the wheel connected by bolts to the rear axle. With heavy use and especially in deep mud or sand, the threads of the bolts tend to wear out in no time at all, as the manufacturer's steel was obviously not designed for off-road strain in Sudan. The artisans replace the front ring of the rear axle that has to bear the full impact of the traction at the bolts by cutting off the worn part and fitting a new steel ring, and also by cutting new

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<sup>13</sup> See below for the local assessment of parts.

and enlarged threads for stronger bolts to replace the original ones. As indicated in Photo 6.8 by the different colours of material, the replacement ring is manufactured using heavy-duty railroad steel from railroad repair yards in the nearby town of Atbara. This is another example of not only confining one's search to the automobile sector when looking for potentially useable parts. The inner and outer rims are different colours, reddish and yellow respectively, because they originally come from different rims that were cut and welded together to produce a longer-lasting wheel, the inner part of which has to bear the full impact of traction on the bolts originating from a much heavier truck. Aiming for longevity routinely involves the principle of strengthening original parts, as in the above example of reinforcing the truck's frame with iron sheets or, if reinforcing is prohibited by a lack of materials, by selectively replacing and adjusting low-quality parts with long-lasting heavy-duty parts, as in the example of strengthening the wheel.

Photo 6.1 shows the final product of the craft, the thoroughly appropriated vehicle once called a Bedford TJ and now known under its Sudanese name of *sifinja*, which was originally designed by Bedford's engineers at Luton and has since been redesigned collectively by a chain of Sudanese craftsmen. These craftsmen claim that they have designed a much finer truck than the Luton engineers and everybody familiar with Sudanese conditions would probably agree.

### The social organization of creativity

So what is meant by appropriation? Appropriation is certainly not a wholesale diffusion of innovations, as the still influential Diffusion of Innovations School led by the sociologist Everett Rogers wanted it to be.<sup>14</sup> The creativity displayed by truck modding in these under-equipped workshops and by craftsmen with no formal training except on-the-job experience points to processes that differ radically from the usual understanding of passive acceptance. The whole terminology of invention, diffusion and acceptance from the modernization approach of the Diffusion of Innovations tradition does not fit the Sudanese case of truck modding. Even more so since, instead of sharing the user's view, they focus on the perspective of a change agent that aims to spread new and supposedly beneficial ideas, artefacts and practices like farm implements, school curricula or

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<sup>14</sup> E. Rogers, *Diffusion of innovations* (New York, 1962); E. Rogers & F. Shoemaker, *Communication of innovations: A cross-cultural approach* (New York, 1971). It should be acknowledged, however, that Everett Rogers, after thirty years of upholding his narrow perspective, recognized the role played by user modification and reinvention in the last edition of his otherwise path-breaking book; cf. E. Rogers, *Diffusion of innovations* (New York, 1995), 17.

new brands of detergents to the passive masses in need of enlightenment. Instead, this chapter is looking at the appropriation of the TJ from the perspective of the user's environment. The reconstructed Bedford TJ is seen as having undergone a radical technological transformation – a transformation far beyond the confines of orthodox truck manufacturing – and it is still (and better) working whereas modifications in Roger's original perception of diffusion tended to be interpreted as deficits in the wholesale adoption of the artefact designer's pre-established instructions for use. Instead of seeing deficits, the appropriation of the TJ, as well as the appropriation of a host of other artefacts handled by users in a manner not intended by the manufacturer, should be regarded as more akin to reinvention.

The *sifinja* is, however, still confined within the ideational realm of a motor vehicle. It has not been deconstructed and used as an artefact serving purposes totally unintended by the manufacturers, like Henry Ford's famous Model T, which served, for example, as a snowmobile, for ploughing fields and, with a blocked-up hind axle and a connecting conveyor belt running over a rear wheel, as a stationary source for powering various farm machinery such as cream separators, wood saws, washing machines, corn grinders and whatever else could be powered by running wheels.<sup>15</sup> The story of the TJ resembles the story of the Model T inasmuch as it has also been appropriated by a new milieu, the TJ by Sudanese truckers and mechanics and the Model T by farm folk in the United States. It differs, however, as it is used as a technical artefact for its specifically intended function – cargo transport – although in a new habitat. Still, interpretative flexibility, the term used in the Social Construction of Technology approach for imagining new functions and radically different contexts for artefacts, is apparent, albeit at a different level. It is certainly used as a vehicle although uses as a coop for chickens or pen for goats and as a source for recycling materials for amulets, hoes or donkey carts can be disregarded for the moment. However, components such as the driver's cabin have been flexibly interpreted. The *sifinja* is still situated within the confines of truck technology but is manipulated beyond the confines of orthodox truck manufacturing.

Non-orthodoxy is probably part of the explanation for the creativity displayed. The craftsmen form an uncaptured community of practice: they have largely maintained their cultural autonomy against the prevailing North Atlantic orthodoxy in truck manufacturing and have maintained control over their craft. The point might even be made that the lack of development interventions and state assistance in vocational training has encouraged imaginative initiatives whereas training entails orthodoxy in the definition of tools and artefacts. But the point of a totally uninvaded and uncolonized imagination can also be over-

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<sup>15</sup> Kline & Pinch, 'Agents of technological change'.

stretched, as the biographies of many practitioners feature varying experiences of work in or near the country's formal repair workshops like the shiny Mercedes, Toyota, or Rover agents in Khartoum, or they look back on a history of labour migration to other Middle Eastern countries where they have come into contact with North Atlantic-informed traditions of vehicle maintenance and repair.

Still, there are arguments in favour of the proposition of uncaptured practitioners. The art of truck modding displays a self-confident and bold creativity that points to the unity of hand and mind which is characteristic of traditional craftsmen who are independent of a central management and development departments.<sup>16</sup> During research in the Sudanese habitat of the TJ, it became abundantly clear that the pride and status of the craftsmen derive from the experience of mastery of the truck and its materials. (Note the apprentice's attitude of unreserved admiration in Photo 6.9). The fact that the workshops under consideration are small shops, that they are owner operated and that they use an intermediate craft technology as opposed to industrial manufacturing means that craftsmen own their skills in a specific way. They are in full control of their work and their vision is not bound within the confines dictated by management and design departments.

Another, related, part of the explanation certainly involves the evolution and social organization of technical knowledge and skills. After the automobile revolution reached Sudan, traditional blacksmiths in remote parts of the country that were not serviced by central maintenance departments have been confronted with the fragility of automotive modernity. Eventually, small workshops in different parts of the country specialized in repair and maintenance, first of the Commer truck, then of the Bedford TJ. Other makes, like the different Ford models, though preceding the Commer and the TJ, tended to be operated in the proximity of central maintenance departments or even to come with their own maintenance and repair departments, like army vehicles, and tended to be used

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<sup>16</sup> The point about the unity of hand and mind in independent craft production is emphasized in H. Braverman, *Labor and monopoly capital. The degradation of work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1974) and later in Douglas Harper's excellent account of work in a small rural workshop, see D. Harper, *Working knowledge. Skill and community in a small shop* (Chicago, 1987). I am aware that the accompanying deskilling argument so forcefully advanced thirty years ago for North Atlantic industrial workplaces can be overdone. Fordist manufacturing environments, which were thought by Harry Braverman to totally estrange the labourers from their original craft skills, thereby reducing the labourer's bargaining power against the management too, also tend to rely on a certain foundation of skills, albeit not as visible or specific as the traditional craft skills but nevertheless essential to a smooth working of the whole machinery. Still, the original point about the unity of hand and mind in independent craft organizations is amply illustrated.

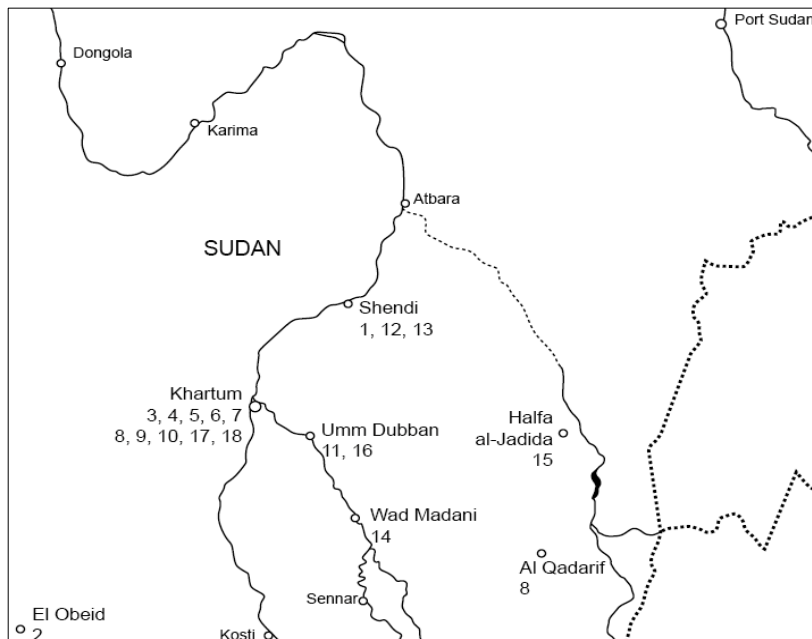


exclusively by high-ranking British administrative personnel and the nabobs of Sudanese society. The Commer, the Austin and the Bedford TJ first crossed these techno-social boundaries, though the Austin was discontinued by its manufacturers a long time ago. The folklore of the drivers and mechanics includes stories of traditional blacksmiths finishing screw threads with only a file at hand, while other stories are told of the promethean heroes who first devised the *‘awwâma*, and still others about the manufacturers in the early 1980s adopting some of the reinforcements on the body frame from the Sudanese craftsmen. Though research into the history of the truck modding community is far from complete, it is clear that through borrowing from the artisans of Sudan Railways, learning from mechanized river transport and army maintenance departments and by a good deal of trial and error, several local traditions of repair and modifying have emerged, first in Shendi, El Obeid and Khartoum North, and later in places like al-Qadarif and Wad Madani in the Gezira. And these local traditions have developed into a widespread community of practice by branching off and weaving new innovations into the practice of truck modding and maintenance.

Map 6.1 offers a partial view of the spatial location of Bedford’s community of practice in Sudan. Port Sudan, Sudan’s main commercial harbour, is the TJ’s main port of entry into the country. The network of workshops stretches from Shendi to El Obeid in Kordofan, to al-Qadarif and Halfa al-Jadida and to the industrial area of Hillat Kuku in Khartoum North where there is a large concentration of workshops today. The network of workshops is reinforced by ties of kinship, marriage and apprenticeship, with successful apprentices branching off from the main tradition but tied by lasting personal attachment to their masters through partnership, friendship or marital and kinship ties. Many of the owners of the workshops today are descendants of the founding ancestors of the craft and, in common with Northern Sudanese practice; they tend to marry within the wider family and into their master’s family.

The legendary founder of the main tradition is at-Tayyib al-Aqib (1). He came from a family of blacksmiths working for the nomads of Abu Dilaik in the savannah Southeast of Shendi and started the tradition of repairing and modifying trucks, first the Commer truck and later the TJ in his workshop at Shendi in the 1950s. He is credited with developing the first version of the *‘awwâma* (see above). Later he worked in al-Qadarif for some years and then in Khartoum where he died. When he left his workshop at Shendi, it fell into decay as none of his sons felt any affinity for their father’s trade. But he had two collaborators, one by the name of Wad Abu Sitta (2) who went to El Obeid in the early 1960s to start his own workshop there and which is still flourishing, the second at-Tayyib Faddul (3) was a maternal cousin as well as an apprentice to at-Tayyib al-Aqib and he opened a workshop in 1965 at Khartoum, where he is still living.

At-Tayyib Faddul in turn had three main apprentices. The first was his nephew Ali Faddul (4) who opened his workshop at Khartoum-Bahri in 1969 and is still working, though on a much reduced scale after his workshop had to close. The second is his son Nur ad-Da'im (5) who opened a workshop in Hillat Kuku, Khartoum North in 2000. His third and most influential apprentice was Tayyib Hajju (6), the ancestor of the famous Hajju tradition who opened a workshop in Hillat Kuku in 1970. Tayyib Hajju started a whole group of sons and cousins in the trade, first Omar Hajju (7) who opened a workshop in Hillat Kuku in 1984, Salah Hajju (8) who with Hassan Hajju started a workshop at al-Qadarif in 1992, Himaïd Hajju (9) who opened his own workshop in Hillat Kuku in 2002, and Osman Hajju (10) who works in his workshop opened for him by his brother Omar (7), also in Hillat Kuku since 2001.



*Map 6.1* Spatial location of Bedford's community of practice in Sudan

*Source:* K. Beck

From Omar Hajjus's workshop (7) in Hillat Kuku came his apprentice and relative Ammar Osman (13) who is also a descendant of at-Tayyib al-Faddul (4). He opened a workshop in Shendi with his younger brother Yusif at at-Tayyib al-Aqib's (1) deserted place in Shendi in 2002. At Shendi there is also the independent workshop of Adil Yusif an-Nur (12) who was apprentice to his

father Yusif an-Nur but not related to the other traditions by kinship or apprenticeship. Ahmad Akkasha (14), a maternal cousin of Ammar (13), started a workshop in Wad Madani in 1988. Another maternal cousin by the name of Muhammad al-Jaili (16) owns his own workshop at Umm Dubban and a paternal cousin and former partner of Ammar, Ahmad Khalid (18) has owned a workshop in Hillat Kuku since 2001. Mahmud wad Na'i (11), another descendant of at-Tayyib Faddul (3) has recently started his own workshop at Umm Dubban after working in Saudi Arabia, Ahmad as-Siddiq Ahmad al-Faddul (15), a descendant of at-Tayyib Faddul's (3) family and brother of Ali al-Faddul (4), has opened a workshop in Halfa al-Jadida, and another distant relative, related through the grandmother to Ammar (13), by name of as-Sirr Ali, is also working in his own workshop.<sup>17</sup> As in the case of the workshop owners, the craftsmen and apprentices are often relatives, even if only distantly related. On the other hand, working relationships in this community tend to grow into partnerships and equally often into relationships by marriage, thus creating multi-stranded relations. In addition, relations of kinship, marriage and lasting friendship also extend to the families of truck owners and drivers, weaving the whole truck community (*ahl al-lawârî* – the truck people) together by multiple strands. Boys from this milieu who grow up in the shadow of these trucks with their brothers and cousins are drawn deeply into the practices and cultural orientation of the workshops.

The evolution of a relatively broad community bound together by common practice and involving different local traditions is probably one of the key explanations for creativity. Its very foundation on independent though connected local workshop traditions of getting things done has served as a seedbed for an evenly broad process of differentiation and consolidation of innovations.<sup>18</sup> Besides apprenticeships and the movement of individual craftsmen learning from distant traditions, the trucks themselves have served as the most efficient media for the dissemination of innovations by circulating through Sudan's network of workshops in search of maintenance and repair, thus freely offering the materialized knowledge incorporated into their metal bodies to everybody able to make sense of it.

In addition to the repairmen, another highly specialized community of practice has evolved, namely the brotherhood of drivers. Drivers and their assistants usually attend during the dismantling and rebuilding process. The

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<sup>17</sup> Information presented here is mainly derived from conversations and interviews with Mr Adil Yusif an-Nur in 2003 and 2006, Mr Ammar Osman in 2006, and Mr Ali al-Faddul in 2007.

<sup>18</sup> 'Variation and selection' in the evolutionary jargon of the social construction of technology approach, cf. T. Pinch & W. Bijker, 'The social construction of facts and artefacts'. In: Bijker, Pinch & Hughes, *Social construction of technological systems*.

crew thus acquires unparalleled practical knowledge of their truck, which has certainly saved quite a number of crew and passengers in desperate situations. On the other hand, this offers the opportunity for drivers and repairmen to develop a common language and practice around the truck. It creates the interactive space for the drivers' experience and the repairmen's knowledge to flow together and map out visions of a better truck. This creates the space for socially constructing technology. The art of the skilled craftsmen consists of realizing these visions in the material, as any other artist also does.

Another part of the explanation regarding creativity probably derives from the relative poverty of the Sudanese economy and the trade ban in recent years. Spare parts deemed 'original' are expensive and in low supply, and cheaper parts of Nigerian, Indian or Chinese origin, even if produced under licence, are considered low-quality fakes. Craftsmen are always on the look-out for original parts which, even if they are worn out and in need of laborious repair or adjustment, fetch much higher prices than brand new parts from India and China. Many come to Sudan via a network of mostly Pakistani scrap dealers operating from the Gulf who acquire the parts from scrapyards around the world and keep a close eye on the sale of old stocks in the Bedford's original habitat. Craftsmen are thus forced to manufacture, adjust, repair or otherwise make fit parts which in a wealthier environment would be considered beyond use. Artisans summing up a widespread informal-sector ethos regarding the potential use of worn-out spare parts and the prudent treatment of possibly recyclable materials claim that nothing is considered totally unusable (*hâja hîna bibûz nihâ'î mâfî*). Everyday repair and maintenance thus demand a considerable amount of ingenuity, creativity and skill, which in a Western environment can at best be acquired in development departments but certainly not in the standard practice of spare-part exchange, which is becoming more dominant in workshops. Moreover, labour in Sudanese workshops is cheap beyond competition. This means that any TJ, even if it is considered to be scrap in its Sudanese habitat, 'can be made shiny and beautiful to look like a bride' again. And this, together with the mastery of the material, provides the basis for the proud conviction that "the *sifinja* will never ever die (*as-sifinja mâ timût abadan, nihâ'î*), even if there is no trace of the manufacturer's plant in Europe left!"<sup>19</sup>

Finally, to come back to symbols: not every TJ lives up to the high standard reserved for a bride in Sudanese society but drivers like to think of their TJs in terms of feminine attraction and companionship. Its function as an island of consolation and shelter has already been alluded to. In Photo 6.10 it does not

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<sup>19</sup> Mr Ammar Osman from the famous Hajju family of Bedford craftsmen, the owner of a workshop in the Sudanese town of Shendi where some of the pictures were taken, in an interview, 27 March 2006.

appear gendered, it appears sexed up at least as far as this is possible without risking offence in the Sudanese public. After all, its habitat is in a man's world, and certainly a lonely world in terms of domestic comforts. This can be inferred from Photo 6.10 which depicts the back of one of the bridal beauties, with calligraphy claiming *wahashtûn* (your charms drove me crazy) and with prospects for a further meeting – *illâ liqâ'*. The rear door lock of nearly every Sudanese *sifinja* is made as a plate designed in the shape of a Russian MIG jet fighter. And on this plate the name of the workshop owner is engraved. This symbol points to the origins of the practice at the time when the MIG 21 was becoming known to a Sudanese public as a miracle of mobility, power and modernity in the 1960s.<sup>20</sup> Symbols in this case appear to be tied to the practice in the community of drivers and mechanics. In fact, the meaning here evolves in the process of doing.

Even if a worn-out TJ is not restored to the 'bridal beauty' referred to by its admirers, there is every reason for the respect accorded to the craftsmen by people sharing their social environment. For these craftsmen have seized a piece of foreign technology, made it their own and have thus empowered their society with the undoubted potentials of motor mobility and the easy control of vast spaces. If ever the term 'appropriate technologies' can be well applied, this is certainly the case. The artisans work for longevity and to keep rural Sudan mobile.

Appropriating automobility in the milieu of the Sudanese truck modders should be understood as something quite different from appropriating automobility in the original homeland of the Bedford TJ. Appropriation in one context may be understood as consumption, and the work of appropriation in that case is making a choice between equally glittering automobiles (which admittedly can become burdensome work given the symbols involved), paying its price, taking it into one's possession and loading it with personal meaning.<sup>21</sup> This is why it may legitimately be studied by consumption studies and the perspective can be reduced to trace symbols and the practice of shopping.<sup>22</sup> Appropriation

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<sup>20</sup> Rumour has it, that at-Tayyib Hajju, one of the early Bedford master artisans who learned his trade from the legendary At-Tayyib Faddul and opened a shop in Hillat Kuku in 1969 or 1970, at a time when the Free Officer's Movement took power in Sudan, introduced the MIG 21 symbol as a workshop plate on the back door of Bedfords coming from his workshop.

<sup>21</sup> That consumption of automobiles may involve considerably more than paying the price and using it, especially its loading with personal meaning. This is amply documented in the case of customizing, modding and pimping cars. See H.F. Moorehouse, *Driving ambitions: An analysis of the American hot rod enthusiasm* (Manchester, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> See for instance, D. Miller, *Material cultures. Why some things matter* (Chicago, 1998).

in the context of the *sifinja* is about mastery in a technical sense, in terms of the mastery of materials and technology, about maintenance, about extending the life of automobiles and creating values, and in this perspective it is not about consumption, let alone shopping, but production, skills and labour. This is why, in this case, some things matter, namely in their materiality.

This story of the Bedford TJ and its technological appropriation can certainly be considered another instance of African agency and African creativity in dealing with global goods.<sup>23</sup> Since the beginning of the globalization debate, the notion has been upheld in anthropology – most forcefully probably by Marshall Sahlins<sup>24</sup> – that technical modernity in Africa (and other places in the Third World) is harnessed to local cultural aims and values. But the main issue has been consumption and cultural appropriation, the study of how imported goods are invested with new local meanings, in short, the study of categorizing and symbolizing. My hope with this contribution was to make a case for the notion that there is an interior world of materiality and practice to be discovered beyond the surface. As Bryan Pfaffenberger once put it: symbols do not create meaning, activities do.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> P. Probst & G. Spittler, *Between resistance and expansion. explorations of local vitality in Africa* (Münster, 2004) and W. van Binsbergen & R. van Dijk, *Situating globality. African agency in the appropriation of global culture* (Leiden, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> For instance in M. Sahlins, 'What is anthropological enlightenment?', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 28 (1999), 1-23.

<sup>25</sup> B. Pfaffenberger, 'Symbols do not create meanings – activities do: or, Why dymbolic anthropology needs the anthropology of technology'. In: M.B. Schiffer, *Anthropological Perspectives on Technology* (Albuquerque, 2001), 77-86.



*Photo 6.1* Bedford TJ with passengers  
*Source:* K. Beck



*Photo 6.2* Bedford TJ Tipper Lorry and its modified twin  
*Source:* K. Beck





*Photo 6.3* The process of modifying a truck  
*Source:* K. Beck



*Photo 6.4* Bedford TJ dismantled  
*Source:* K. Beck





*Photo 6.5* Mr. Adila An-Nur, master craftsman  
*Source:* K. Beck



*Photo 6.6* Swimmer of Land Cruiser  
*Source:* K. Beck



*Photo 6.7* Reinforcing the cabin  
*Source:* K. Beck



*Photo 6.8* Wheel connected with bolts  
*Source:* K. Beck



Photo 6.9 The mechanic and his apprentice  
Source: K. Beck



Photo 6.10 Adorned rear door of Bedford TJ  
Source: K. Beck

## The Hilux and the ‘Body Thrower’: *Khat* transporters in Kenya

Neil Carrier<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The stimulant *khat* (or *miraa* as it is known more widely in Kenya and as I refer to it in this chapter) is a substance strongly associated with life lived at a fast and furious pace.<sup>2</sup> Much of this reputation comes from the high speeds reached by the transporters responsible for driving sacks of this highly perishable commodity from its production zone in Kenya’s Nyambene Hills to Nairobi. Over the course of the last century, trade in Kenyan *miraa* has grown from just a local phenomenon to being in demand as far away as Manchester and Minneapolis. This globalized demand and the perishability of the substance means that the few hundred kilometres between the Nyambenes and Nairobi (where *miraa* is repackaged for air transportation) have to be covered at speed.

The Toyota Hilux pick-up is the vehicle usually used along this crucial section of the *miraa* network and this chapter, after describing the Nyambene to Nairobi run and those who own and operate the vehicles, draws out perceptions of these pick-ups and their dare-devil drivers. One such dare-devil is nicknamed *Ntã Mwiri* (Body Thrower), as his driving suggests a man prepared to throw his and his passengers’ bodies away. The image of a Hilux over-laden with sacks of

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<sup>1</sup> My research on *miraa* was first undertaken for my PhD which was sponsored by a Carnegie grant, then by an ESRC studentship, and finally as a research assistant on an ESRC/AHRC-funded project entitled ‘The Khat Nexus’. My thanks go to Roy Dille, Paul Baxter, Noel Lobley, David Anderson and, in particular, Nicholas M’Mucheke and my other Kenyan friends.

<sup>2</sup> See N. Carrier, ‘The need for speed: Contrasting time-frames in the social life of Kenyan Miraa’, *Africa*, 75, 4 (2005), 539-58 for an account of the different time-frames of importance in the social life of *miraa*.



*miraa* and driving at high speed has become iconic in the Kenyan *miraa* trade and is an image used even in Kenyan cartoons. This chapter looks at the development of this image, the factors behind it and the mixed reactions it provokes in Kenya, a country deeply concerned about its high number of road accidents. The chapter ends by arguing that perceptions of *miraa* and its transporters are interlinked, with both being regarded in wider society with considerable ambivalence. The reputation of the Hilux – in the Nyambenes at any rate – owes much to *miraa* and the urgency required in delivering it fresh to consumers.<sup>3</sup>

### The cargo

*Miraa* is the most commonly used name in Kenya for the stimulant leaves and stems of *Catha edulis* (Forsk.) a tree that is indigenous to much of Africa, and is cultivated – either in the form of a tree or a shrub – throughout East and Southern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. It is strongly associated with Yemen, where the *qat* session has become an important social institution,<sup>4</sup> and also with Somalis, whose fondness for the substance has led to a lucrative trade serving both Somalia and the Somali diaspora. Besides Kenya, *miraa* is cultivated and consumed in Ethiopia,<sup>5</sup> parts of Uganda,<sup>6</sup> Madagascar (especially around the Northern town of Antsirananana) and even Israel. Consumption of wild *miraa* is common in the Eastern Cape.<sup>7</sup>

*Miraa* trees in Kenya grow wild in the forests and are cultivated in various locations, the most important of which is the Nyambene Hills, the mountain

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<sup>3</sup> This chapter is based on sixteen months of anthropological fieldwork on *miraa* in Kenya, combining participant observation with key informant interviews. My friend and research assistant, Nicholas Mugaa M'Mucheke, conducted some further interviews in late 2005, meeting drivers, vehicle owners and insurance agents. He even took participant observation to its extreme and travelled to Nairobi in a Hilux! His material added a great deal to what we had previously collected together on Hilux drivers and owners, and nicely nuanced previous findings on *miraa* transport. See N. Carrier, *The social life of Miraa: Farming, trade and consumption of a plant stimulant in Kenya* (PhD thesis, University of St Andrews, 2003) and N. Carrier, *Kenyan khat. The social life of a stimulant* (Leiden, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> J.G. Kennedy, *The flower of paradise* (Dordrecht, 1987) and S. Weir, *Qat in Yemen* (London, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> E. Gebissa, *Leaf of Allah: Khat and agricultural transformation in Harerghe, Ethiopia 1875-1991* (Oxford, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> S. Beckerleg, 'What harm? Kenyan and Ugandan perspectives on Khat', *African Affairs*, 105, 419 (2006), 219-41.

<sup>7</sup> M. Hirst, 'The utilization of *Catha edulis* in the household economy of Xhosa Farm inhabitants of the Bolo reserve, Eastern Cape', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 15, 1 (1997), 119-44.

range to the Northeast of Mount Kenya. The Nyambenes are home to two sub-groups of the Bantu-speaking Meru: the Tigania and Igembe.<sup>8</sup> Members of both sub-groups cultivate *miraa*, although Igembe grow it most intensively as their region is more conducive to its cultivation and is particularly geared up for its trade. The *miraa* trade evolved over the last century. It is an indigenous crop that was commercialized at a time when other Kenyan farmers were planting crops like coffee which were viewed as 'progressive' thanks to their 'importance for the settler economy and its connection with modern sector institutions'.<sup>9</sup> *Miraa* is cultivated on smallholder plots and offers farmers a very good return per acre in comparison with crops such as coffee and tea.<sup>10</sup> One farmer who is mentioned in a UNDCP report<sup>11</sup> reckoned that every shilling invested in tea brings a return of two shillings whereas every shilling invested in *miraa* gives a return of four shillings. Farmers also appreciate the frequent harvests that *miraa* trees provide (every few weeks or so, depending on the season), pointing out that income from crops like coffee is not only disappointingly low but also comes in just one yearly payment. For the Tigania and Igembe, *miraa* is far more than a successful commodity, it is also a tangible link to their ancestors who first cultivated it, a valued part of many ceremonies<sup>12</sup> and a source of great pride.

An efficient network distributes *miraa* from the Nyambenes to feed a large national and international market. Somalis have much control over the international trade, exporting the commodity to Somalia and their diaspora in Europe and beyond.<sup>13</sup> Somali control has, however, created tension as some Meru see

<sup>8</sup> For a comprehensive account of Igembe agriculture (with extensive mention of *miraa*), see P. Goldsmith, *Symbiosis and transformation in Kenya's Meru District* (PhD thesis, University of Florida, 1994). Also, see F.E. Bernard, *East of Mount Kenya: Meru agriculture in transition* (Munich, 1972) and Carrier, *Social life of Miraa*. The Tigania and Igembe generational system is well covered by A. Peatrik, *La vie à pas contés* (Nanterre, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> P. Goldsmith, 'The production and marketing of Miraa in Kenya'. In: R. Cohen, ed., *Satisfying Africa's food needs* (London, 1988), 75.

<sup>10</sup> Goldsmith contrasts well the success of *Miraa* – a crop grown with little government help using traditional intercropping methods – with the dramatic recent failure of coffee, often grown as a monocrop in a modern way. See Goldsmith, *Symbiosis*.

<sup>11</sup> UNDCP, UN international drug control programme (1999), 27.

<sup>12</sup> A special ceremonial bundle of *miraa* known as *ncoolo* is used on occasions such as wedding negotiations or in the settlement of disputes. It is distinguished from marketed *miraa* by the way it is packaged. See Carrier, *Kenyan Khat*, Chapter 6.

<sup>13</sup> On *khat* use amongst the Somali diaspora, see P. Nencini, M.C. Grassi, A.A. Botan, A.F. Asseyr & E. Paroli, 'Khat Chewing spread to the Somali community in Rome', *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 23 (1989), 255-58; M. Stevenson, J. Fitzgerald & C. Banwell, 'Chewing as a social act: Cultural displacement and *Khat* consumption in the East African communities of Melbourne', *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 15 (1996),

themselves as being exploited by the Somali network. Tension was most evident in 1999 when a Tigania man who traded *miraa* died in London. Suspicion that he had been killed by Somalis jealous of their monopoly led to clashes between Meru and Somali back in the Nyambenes and Nairobi.<sup>14</sup> In recent years, relations between Meru and Somali over *miraa* appear less rancorous and between them they ensure that consumers in all parts of Kenya, as well as Somali consumers as far afield as Manchester and Toronto, receive fresh supplies of the commodity.<sup>15</sup>

The succulent stems and leaves are harvested regularly and have stimulating properties. These come from pharmacological constituents including *cathine* and *cathinone*, the latter being approximately ten times stronger than the former. *Cathinone* affects the central nervous system in a manner similar to amphetamines, 'it increases heart rate, locomotor activity and oxygen consumption'.<sup>16</sup> *Cathinone* is unstable and requires a highly efficient network to deliver it to consumers while still potent and appetizing,<sup>17</sup> although there is now a growing trade in dried Ethiopian *miraa* – particularly in North America where the substance is illegal – which obviously requires less urgency in transportation. However most consumers, whether in Kenya or Canada, still prefer their stems fresh. *Miraa*'s effects are used to boost stamina and preclude sleep: it is often chewed by long-distance lorry drivers, night watchmen and students staying up to revise, and is also prized at social occasions where the effects help generate conviviality. In Kenya it has become absorbed into youth culture,<sup>18</sup> being regarded by some as *poa* (a Kiswahili word meaning 'cool', used in a similar colloquial way to the English word). It is a commodity regarded with great ambivalence in Kenyan society generally but is praised by Tigania and

73-82; P. Griffiths, M. Gossop, S. Wickenden, J. Dunworth, K. Harris & C. Lloyd, 'A transcultural pattern of drug use: Qat (*khat*) in the UK', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 170 (1997), 281-84, and Carrier, *Kenyan Khat*.

<sup>14</sup> P. Goldsmith 'The political economy of *miraa*', *East Africa Alternatives*, March/April (1999), 15-19; F. Grignon, 'Touche pas à mon khat!', *Politique Africaine*, 73 (1999), 177-85.

<sup>15</sup> *Miraa* is now illegal in the US, Canada and elsewhere, and this has led to numerous smuggling operations from London, where *miraa* remains legal. It is a substance that often travels in and out of a legal status, leading Cassanelli to term it a 'quasilegal' commodity, L.V. Cassanelli, 'Qat: Changes in the Production and Consumption of a Quasilegal Commodity in Northeast Africa'. In: A. Appadurai, ed., *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), 236-57.

<sup>16</sup> Weir, *Qat*, 46.

<sup>17</sup> Carrier, 'Need for speed'.

<sup>18</sup> N. Carrier, '*Miraa* is cool: The cultural importance of *Miraa* (Khat) for Tigania and Igembe Youth in Kenya', *Journal for African Cultural Studies*, 17, 2 (2005), 201-18.

Igembe for forming the foundation of the Nyambene economy and for its absorption in the local culture. Many beyond the Nyambenes regard it disdainfully as a ‘drug of abuse’ and as an unseemly habit of the North, an area marginalized socially, politically and economically. Some religious groups (especially Pentecostal Christians and more conservative Muslims) condemn its use, while the very vocal NACADA (the National Campaign Against Drug Abuse) frequently laments *miraa* consumption in press briefings. Though it is a controversial substance sporadically subjected to legal restrictions, it is currently legal in Kenya (although illegal in Eritrea, Tanzania, the US, Canada, New Zealand and several European countries). Given *miraa*’s economic worth for Kenya as a source of foreign exchange, as well as its importance for farmers and traders throughout the country, it seems immune from any imminent danger of prohibition despite the disapproval of those waging the global war on drugs.

### The social life of *miraa*

Delivering a perishable commodity to consumers far from the Nyambene Hills requires many stages, and the following is an idealized summary of the stages in *miraa* journeys from tree to chewer’s cheek. *Miraa* is usually harvested early in the morning (often by young boys who can earn relative riches for their efforts, although many lament that their education suffers as a consequence), graded into different varieties<sup>19</sup> and packaged in banana leaves, then brought by foot, bicycle or Land Rover to nearby distribution points in the Nyambenes (the most important of which are large wholesale *miraa* markets like Muringene, Lare and Mutuati) where it is sold on to agents and local retailers. Agents operating on behalf of retailers and exporters in far-off locales collect enough *miraa* of the requisite varieties to fulfil their orders and package their *bundas* – wholesale bundles consisting of ten *kitundu*, the standard retail unit of *miraa* – in either plastic bags or sacks, with an *ndabari* attached – a label with the name and address of the person being supplied, as well as any messages about the price paid for the *miraa* in the Nyambenes.

Agents then give their consignments over to those in charge of transporting the commodity to its many destinations. In some cases, buses and other public-service vehicles are used, while in others – especially in the case of *miraa* being sent to Nairobi and to towns in Kenya’s Northeast – specialized *miraa* transport

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<sup>19</sup> For details of the many varieties of Kenyan *miraa* and an idea of their relative strengths and values, see Carrier, *Social life of miraa*, N. Carrier, ‘Bundles of choice: Variety and the creation and manipulation of Kenyan Khat’s value’, *Ethnos*, 71, 3 (2006), 415-37. Some consumers take great pride in their knowledge and appreciation of *miraa* varieties and these connoisseurs frequently debate their relative merits.



vehicles are used. For the journey, *miraa* is packed into sacks, loaded onto the back and often covered with a tarpaulin to protect it from the sun (*miraa* is sometimes rejected by agents in Nairobi if it has become damaged by the sun in transit). Drivers then speed off by about 1 p.m. or 2 p.m. reaching Nairobi a few hours later, where eager exporters, wholesalers and retailers are waiting expectantly for their supplies. After unloading the *miraa* in Nairobi, the Hilux vehicles return to the Nyambenes to repeat the process the following day.

These vehicles operating between the Nyambenes and Nairobi supply both the national and the international trade: for the former, *miraa* is brought to Majengo in Nairobi, where hundreds of retailers and wholesalers wait to collect it for sale in the city, and many other locations across Kenya; in the case of *miraa* destined for Europe and beyond, vehicles deliver the commodity to Nairobi suburbs like Eastleigh and Pumwani where it is unloaded at premises usually run by Somalis. There, the *miraa* is checked, retied into differently configured bundles, repackaged in banana leaves and tissue paper, then dispatched in boxes of forty bundles to Jomo Kenyatta International Airport where it is cleared by freight companies and sent off to Europe-based importers. In Europe, these importers pass on the supplies to retailers who sell to consumers at venues known as *mafrish*, which act as social clubs where chewers can gather, chew, chat, listen to Somali music or watch satellite TV. The sensations of *miraa*'s effects, in combination with the company of fellow Somalis, the sounds of Somali music and language, and the taste of spicy tea, recreates Somalia in microcosm, even when the *mafrish* is located, say, in a terraced house in Manchester. Much of the *miraa* that reaches Europe is not consumed there but is instead sent on to North America where demand is still high amongst diaspora communities despite its illegality. For this, the riskiest stage in its 'social life', either couriers (usually European) are hired and given a suitcase full of *miraa* to smuggle in return for air tickets, spending money and a night in a plush hotel, or smaller quantities are parcelled up and sent across the Atlantic using such delivery services as DHL. The risk for couriers is great, as *miraa*'s status as 'Schedule I' in the US means that heavy prison sentences can be imposed on traffickers.

Far more Kenyan *miraa* is exported to Somalia than reaches Europe. Pick-ups bring large consignments to Nairobi's Wilson Airport at night and these are then sent off the following morning with a swarm of light aircraft serving such cities as Mogadishu, Baidoa and Kismayu. From time to time such flights are banned on the grounds that they are involved in arms or people smuggling. These bans have a big impact on the trade, and newspapers publish pictures of vast piles of *miraa* going to waste at Wilson Airport, alongside vivid reports of Meru farmers and Somali traders suffering financial hardship as a result of the ban. Much publicity was given to the ban on *miraa* by the Islamic Courts when

they held power in Mogadishu and this ban also had serious consequences for Kenya's *miraa* farmers and traders. Publicity was also given to the glee with which *miraa*'s return was greeted by chewers after the Transitional Government (with the help of Ethiopian troops) forced out the Islamists.

The network transporting *miraa* to all these far-off and hard-to-reach destinations has to be highly efficient given the perishable nature of the commodity; indeed, so smooth is the network, generally speaking, that some ask rhetorically why medicines and foodstuffs cannot be delivered with equal efficiency. *Miraa* transporters clearly bear much of the responsibility for ensuring the efficiency of this network and form the focus of this chapter. While Land Rovers operating in the Nyambenes are often used in bringing *miraa* from farms to central distribution points, it is vehicles serving the route from the Nyambenes to Nairobi that will be given most attention, such is their fame (and notoriety) in Kenya today and their importance for the *miraa* network.

## The vehicles and their operators

### *The Hilux*

The main vehicle assigned the responsibility of speeding *miraa* from the Nyambenes to Nairobi is the Hilux (or Hi-Lux), a pick-up truck introduced by Toyota in 1969.<sup>20</sup> It is now a common sight throughout the world, owing much of its popularity to its durability, a characteristic tested to the extreme by the BBC's *Top Gear* television show in 2004 when it was subjected to various tests including having a caravan dropped onto it, putting it on the roof of a block of flats being demolished, setting it on fire, and allowing it to be submerged by the incoming tide. After all the tests, the vehicle could still, after a little repair work, be driven away. The Hilux has changed a great deal over its thirty-seven-year history, and now comes in several models, some are basic utility vehicles and others are more luxurious in design. For the *miraa* trade, the more basic models are used with a two-door cabin and large rear storage area. Most vehicles are bought new for over Ksh 1 million (around £10,000), although second-hand models can also be bought in Kenya. One driver reported that new vehicles can last four or five years on the *miraa* run if well maintained, while second-hand ones last two to three years. Others are much less sanguine about the Hilux's longevity, and suggest that the *miraa* run takes such a toll on vehicles that many are retired after about only a year. This is perhaps an exaggeration derived from the vehicle's notoriety, however. Meticulous attention is

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<sup>20</sup> See the Toyota website: <http://www.toyota.co.jp/en/history/1960.html> (accessed March 2006).

paid to the vehicles within their working lifespan to maintain them in the best possible condition.<sup>21</sup>

Those in the business estimate that there are around thirty Hilux vehicles operating daily between the Nyambenes and Nairobi, with two further vehicles operating between the Nyambenes and Mombasa. Some of these serve Majengo, a suburb of Nairobi where hundreds of *miraa* wholesalers and retailers – mainly Meru – congregate each day to pick up fresh *miraa* from the Nyambenes and either sell it in the capital or speed it on to other locations elsewhere in the country. Most vehicles serving Majengo are Meru-owned, whilst those serving the international network are mainly owned by Somalis.<sup>22</sup> Some wealthy Somali exporters have invested in Hilux pick-ups, using them to transport *miraa* to Nairobi for retail purposes in Europe. Owners are reckoned to do very well out of their investment: one former driver estimated that his ex-employer was making Ksh 15,000 for each trip if the vehicle was fully loaded. Within a few months, he reckoned that the owner could afford to buy another Hilux. However that was some time ago and one Hilux driver recently reported that he transported 900 *bundas* at Ksh 50 each. This means the vehicle owner was receiving Ksh 45,000 in total. Enough fuel for the Hilux to make the return trip to Nairobi costs Ksh 4,800, and the driver and his assistant are paid Ksh 2,200, while the local council levies a fee of Ksh 1,000. Deducting such expenses still leaves the Hilux owner with Ksh 37,000 for a full load, which is a considerable sum (around £300 at today's rate). Some successful *miraa* traders and Hilux drivers have invested in their own pick-ups. One Igembe man nicknamed Kanda Bongo Man followed such a career trajectory. He had worked as a *matatu* (Kenya's public-service minibus vehicles) driver on the Meru-Maua route, a *miraa* Hilux driver, and a broker for these pick-ups in the Nyambenes (acting as a middleman between *miraa* traders and Hilux owners), before investing in his own *matatu*, and more recently his own Hilux which serves on the Nyambene to Mombasa route.

Many aspire to buying a Hilux and becoming involved in *miraa* transportation, although owning such a vehicle is no guarantee of business. Some pick-ups have regular clients, while others turn up at Muringene – the main wholesale *miraa* market in the Nyambenes – in the hope that there will be more business than the regular transporters can handle. The amount of business for

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<sup>21</sup> Cassanelli, 'Qat'.

<sup>22</sup> Somali-owned vehicles have been targeted because of the Meru-Somali tensions in the trade. In 2002 a day-long suspension of trade was organized by a Meru *miraa* traders' association to allow a meeting at which the disproportionate profits made by Somalis in the trade were discussed. Some Meru ignored this suspension and tried to get *miraa* through to Nairobi. One Somali-owned vehicle turned up at Mutuati for this purpose and was stoned by angry locals.

transporters is seasonal because when the rains come there is a significant increase in *miraa*, and consequently a lot of cheap *miraa* to transport to traders and consumers. The day of the week also affects the amount transported: a much larger volume is consumed on Fridays and Saturdays and on holidays, while Sundays see a decrease in volume as many traders attend church.

Hilux drivers are generally in their thirties or forties, and are usually Meru. Many are Tigania and Imenti (another sub-group of the Meru), while there are said to be only a few Igembe drivers. This was explained by one driver as a result of Igembe elders advising Hilux owners not to employ local Igembe drivers as so many had died, and suggesting that Tigania and Imenti drivers be employed instead. One Tigania driver explained the lack of Igembe drivers as follows: Igembe men are notoriously heavy drinkers and vehicle owners are reluctant to entrust their property to those liable to be under the influence. Many, like Kanda Bongo Man, begin their careers as *matatu* drivers, gaining sufficient experience to impress Hilux owners. Drivers are reckoned to do very well out of their job, although the notoriety of the *miraa* pick-up ensures that many perceive it as too risky a career. Drivers are not only paid a wage by the owner (around Ksh 1,000-1,500), they also make money by carrying a couple of paying passengers on their way to Nairobi, and passengers and luggage in the back on the return trip to the Nyambenes. One famous driver from Karama reported that he was paid Ksh 1,000 per trip and also given Ksh 500 for the small bribes required at police barriers known by the acronym TKK (Kiswahili: *Toa Kitu Kidogo*, remove something small).<sup>23</sup> He made an extra Ksh 1,000 from carrying passengers to Nairobi, another Ksh 1,000 by carrying passengers on the return trip, and up to Ksh 3,000 for carrying luggage on the return journey. He estimated his average income per round trip as Ksh 6,000, quite a large sum, although well deserved given the responsibility of carrying such a valuable yet perishable commodity. He also reported that drivers avoid carrying passengers if they make the return journey at night as there is a danger that they might turn out to be thugs.

Hilux drivers have a great deal of responsibility, as not only do they have *miraa* to look after, they are also given money on the return journey to pass on to agents back in the Nyambenes. Hilux owners employ *karanis* (clerks) both in the Nyambenes and in Nairobi and Mombasa to keep records of all transactions. For each vehicle there is one *karani* who travels with the vehicle to, say, Muringene, and who writes down (and makes a carbon copy of) the names of agents whose *miraa* is being loaded up, the quantity and who the *miraa* is going

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<sup>23</sup> There is a joke in Kenya that TKK began as *toa kitu kidogo* (remove something small), then developed into *toa kitu kubwa* (remove something big), before finally becoming *toa kila kitu* (remove everything).

to. Once all these details have been noted, the *karani* gives the sheet of paper to the driver, keeping the carbon copy. Upon arrival in Nairobi or Mombasa, the driver hands over the sheet to another *karani* (paid not by the Hilux owner but by the Nairobi and Mombasa agents), who proceeds to read out the names of retailers while the *miraa* is unloaded. Yet another *karani* notes down all transactions and writes a new list containing details of money sent back to Nyambene agents. This list is sealed up so that it cannot be tampered with, and is given to the driver along with envelopes addressed to individual agents containing their money. The exact amount of money is also written on the envelope, providing the system with further protection from unscrupulous types.

I met one *karani* working with a Hilux that collects *miraa* from Muringene. He is in his thirties and is a Muringene local. He looks after the figures for a Meru-owned Hilux and related how his Hilux transports 350 *bundas* (wholesale units of *miraa* consisting of ten *kitundus*, retail units) to Nairobi on an average day, whilst the largest possible load, he claimed, is 812 *bundas*. Sundays see the smallest load transported (200-250 *bundas*) and fewer agents work then as many are devout churchgoers. From his jacket pocket he drew out a crumpled piece of paper on which was written a checklist of names and agents' money. Usually there are around 35 of them, hence his estimate of the average load being 350 *bundas*, calculated by assuming that each agent sends ten *bundas*. It is his responsibility to ensure each agent gets his dues, and it is he who hands out shilling-stuffed envelopes, as well as compiling a new list for *miraa* sent to Nairobi. He claimed to enjoy his work, appreciating the fact that he only has to work for two hours: he arrives at Muringene market at around noon in the Hilux and performs his duties until the vehicle speeds away. The rest of his day is free for relaxation.

Hilux drivers like to travel in convoy so that if one should meet with difficulties, then help is close at hand. Between the two Nyambene towns of Lare and Maili Tatu, I and my fellow passengers in a bus were taken aback at the sight of a Hilux on its side: it had hit another car on the road. Two other Hilux pick-ups were soon on hand, however, and their occupants set to work assisting those with the troubled pick-up to tip it back on its wheels. The bus left before the vehicle was righted but I was told that experienced Hilux drivers would easily sort out such a situation. (*Miraa* vehicles have one advantage over ordinary vehicles in such situations: their usually immense load of sacks can provide protection so that if a vehicle turns upside down it has cushioning to land on.)

By law, all vehicles in Kenya have to be insured and given the cost of a new Hilux, owners are keen to ensure their vehicles are covered. All the vehicles used in the *miraa* trade have comprehensive insurance policies, and the premiums depend on the cost of the vehicles: for a new Hilux (and most used in the

*miraa* trade are new), one company estimated the premium at around Ksh 60,000 per year, while a second-hand one would have a much lower premium. Companies do not charge higher premiums for *miraa* transporters than they would for, say, maize transporters, despite the fearsome reputation of the former. One driver had made a small fortune out of an insurance claim following a bad accident and received so much compensation for his injuries from the insurance company that he was able to invest in land.

#### *Toyota Land Cruisers*

Hilux pick-ups are not the only vehicles used to transport *miraa* over long distances. There is also a fleet of around 25 Toyota Land Cruisers, all owned and driven by Somalis (the drivers are often relatives of the owners), which bring much of the *miraa* to Wilson Airport<sup>24</sup> from where it will be sent to Somali cities including Mogadishu, Kismayu and Baidoa, and also deliver *miraa* to the very hot North-Eastern town of Garissa. Such vehicles are more expensive than the Hilux but are reckoned to have a long working life of three to five years before they are traded in by owners for new ones.

Land Cruisers for Nairobi depart between 5 p.m. and 9 p.m. after *miraa* has been brought to Maua by Land Rover. Upon delivering the consignments, drivers return to Meru town, arriving early the next morning. They can then get a few hours' sleep prior to returning to the Nyambenes for the next round. These Land Cruisers are usually very heavily laden with sacks of *miraa*, which thus curtails their speed. They are estimated to take four hours to reach Nairobi, although very fast drivers can make it in three. It is imperative to reach Wilson Airport quickly because if you are not at the airport when your cargo space on the aircraft is due to be filled, that space will be given to someone else.

Land Cruisers for Garissa depart late at night, preventing the cargo drying out in the heat of the sun. Such vehicles drive quickly not only to expedite their cargo but also to avoid theft while journeying through an insecure region. Drivers' assistants in such vehicles now carry powerful torches which they shine on people they pass en route to prevent attempts to jump on the vehicle and steal a sack or two, as sometimes occurs.

#### *Toyota Corollas*

An experiment with a new vehicle in the *miraa* trade has recently ended: Somalis had taken to bringing Europe-bound *miraa* to Nairobi in the back of Toyota Corolla saloon cars. These vehicles hold about 300 *bundas* of *miraa*, and reached Nairobi more quickly than pick-ups, making them ideal for the

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<sup>24</sup> Wilson Airport derives much of its income from *miraa* transport to Somalia and suffered financially during recent, short-lived bans on flights to the country.

operations of many Nairobi-based exporters as they could cut down on the expense of paying Hilux transporters. They are also much cheaper to insure than pick-ups and used only Ksh 3,000 worth of petrol for each return journey from the Nyambenes to Nairobi. These vehicles were introduced in 2003 and their numbers have risen to about 24, reducing the business of some Hilux operators. Although some traders distrusted them as they offer little ventilation for the *miraa*, potentially drying out the stems and making them unappetizing. However, the Transport Licensing Board clamped down on their use for transporting *miraa*, as their capacity is less than a ton, making them ineligible for transport licenses. In April 2005, many such vehicles were stopped by government officials on these grounds and all their *miraa* cargo had to be offloaded, disrupting the day's trade. There is some suspicion that other transporters forced the government to act on this matter, such was the impact they were having on the business.

### Reputation and iconic status

Nicely illustrative of the notoriety of *miraa* transporters is Ntā Mwiri, the driver mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, whose notorious reputation earned him his name 'the body thrower'. According to one young *miraa* trader in the Nyambene town of Karama, the body thrower has a chilling reputation for having survived several accidents unscathed while his passengers have either died or met with serious injury. He also has the less-than-reassuring line of 'either we reach our destination, or we will be with Jesus' with which he greets his passengers. Some even claim that public-service vehicle operators spread the word through mobile phones when the body thrower is about to set off so they can clear the roads. Not having met the 'body thrower', I cannot vouch that his notoriety is deserved. However, as a stereotypical dare-devil Hilux driver, he illustrates well the fearsome reputation that such drivers – and by extension the *miraa*-filled vehicles themselves – have gained.

Such a reputation is also evident in the cartoon book *Gitonga* by Stanislaus Olonde<sup>25</sup> – popularly known in the Kenyan press as Stano – in which the eponymous hero is a *miraa* trader whose business relies on a pick-up truck to transport his *miraa* to Nairobi. The pick-up is frequently illustrated as loaded up to twice its height with sacks of *miraa*, which might be thought of as a cartoon-like caricature. This is no caricature, however, and many *miraa* pick-ups – especially in the rainy seasons – can really be seen loaded as high as this. On the back cover, a cartoon illustrates the full *miraa* network from the Nyambenes to Nairobi to the jets taking the commodity to its international destinations.

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<sup>25</sup> S. Olonde, *Gitonga* (Nairobi, 1996).

Within this cartoon there is a depiction of two *miraa* pick-ups, both brimming with sacks, trying to outdo each other for speed. As both speed towards a corner, the driver of the pick-up bringing up the rear states '*huyo haniwezi kwa mbio, wewe ngoja uone vile nitamuovertake kwa corner*', which translates from *sheng* (a mixture of Kiswahili and English) as 'he will not outdo me for speed, just wait and see how I overtake him at the corner'. Hurling towards the same corner in the opposite direction is a lorry certain to be hit by one of the racing pick-ups. The humour in that scene is dark indeed for such accidents have not been uncommon in the history of the *miraa* trade, and there is concern in Kenya about the high level of road traffic accidents in general, and with good reason: 'Over three thousand people are killed annually on Kenyan roads [and there has been] a four-fold increase in road fatalities ... over the last 30 years.'<sup>26</sup>

One tragic tale involves the recent death of a much-loved Tigania called Munene. After some experience in his twenties working as a broker in the Igembe zone, he switched jobs and began to drive Hilux vehicles from Ntonyiri up to Wajir in the Northeast of Kenya. He would drive all night to reach his destination in the morning before promptly returning to the Nyambenes. He derived much fame from an incident where he avoided a head-on collision with a DC's Land Rover using a manoeuvre described by some witnesses as 'miraculous'. After a couple of years on that route, he switched to ferrying *miraa* from the Nyambenes to Nairobi for the international trade, earning a lot of money in the process. He eventually decided to retire from Hilux driving, buying a *miraa* kiosk and some land in Isiolo with his earnings. Competition between traders was fierce, however, and financial problems meant he had to sell his kiosk and return to Hilux driving. Thus, at the beginning of 2002, he started driving on the route between Nyambene and Nairobi. After several exhausting trips, even *miraa* could not keep him alert at the wheel, and sleepiness affected him just as he had to tackle some sharp bends: the vehicle ploughed into a ditch, and he and a trader were killed.

This is not the first tragedy to befall a *miraa* Hilux: a Somali agent in Maua estimated that there are 99 sharp corners on the road between Meru and Embu, and although the road is in good condition, the Hilux drivers' speed inevitably creates dangers that sometimes even skilled drivers cannot handle. Hospitals along the Meru – Embu road are said to admit numerous road victims, and a Catholic Sister working in Garba Tulla reported that nurses in those hospitals attribute much of the blame to speeding *miraa* vehicles. Whilst it is true that road accidents are desperately frequent throughout Kenya as a whole, one can

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<sup>26</sup> W. Odero, M. Khayesi & P.M. Heda, 'Road traffic injuries in Kenya: Magnitude, causes and status of intervention', *Injury Control and Safety Promotion*, 10, 53-61 (2003), 53.



see that the Meru – Embu road is dangerous given its winding nature and the fact that it plays host to vehicles of such repute.

I witnessed one accident involving a *miraa* Hilux. In July 2001, I was travelling from Nairobi to Meru in a Peugeot. Another Peugeot was just ahead, with a private car between us. Just before reaching Embu, a green *miraa* Hilux coming in the opposite direction pulled out into our lane to overtake, giving the Peugeot in front little option but to brake suddenly and pull onto the grass at the roadside. Unfortunately, the driver of the private vehicle did not react quickly enough and slammed into the back of the Peugeot. No one was physically hurt, although those inside the cars that crashed were shaken. The nonchalance of the Hilux driver was perhaps the most revealing aspect of the incident: he coolly gestured with his arm for the Peugeot to let him pass as he was approaching in line for a head-on collision, and then once he had overtaken and pulled back onto the left-hand side of the road, he sped on, seemingly indifferent to the plight of the vehicles that had collided. The Hilux driver involved in that incident comes from Karama and is highly regarded by Hilux owners after he once managed to avoid an almost certain collision which could have been very serious: his cool kept himself and his vehicle in one piece. The drivers of the Peugeot and the private car that collided might not hold him in such high esteem.

Such bravado in the face of danger has earned these drivers a reputation as either exceptionally brave or exceptionally reckless. They are regarded reverentially by some and disdainfully by others. So fearsome is their reputation that many avoid travelling on the Meru – Embu road, not because of the road itself but because of the *miraa* vehicles that use it.<sup>27</sup> People reckon that *miraa* vehicles avoid slowing down at all costs and urban legend has it that if one took a lift with a Hilux by hanging on to the back and then fell off, it is very unlikely that the vehicle would stop for you to get back on again. If a sack of *miraa* fell off, that, of course, would be a different matter. Hilux vehicles also have a reputation for having a proprietorial attitude to the roads on which they travel. Thus, any vehicles that get in their way are likely to be dealt with menacingly: one man reported an incident that he had seen involving two lorries unintentionally blocking a Hilux just North of Nairobi. When the Hilux finally overtook them, those inside waved knives at the lorry drivers.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> An Italian working at the mission in Isiolo refused to travel to Nairobi via Meru and Embu, despite the road being in better condition than that between Isiolo and Nanyuki, on the grounds that *Miraa* vehicles made the journey far too dangerous.

<sup>28</sup> One friend suggested that Hilux drivers even have the power to fine those who hold them up. No one else mentioned this, however, but it does serve to illustrate their reputation.

Whilst other vehicles in East Africa are notorious for their reckless speed (cf. Rizzo on the *dala dala* of Tanzania, the equivalent to Kenya's *matatu*),<sup>29</sup> it is clear that *miraa*'s fleeting economic viability combined with the exigencies of flight schedules generate some frighteningly fast driving and the urban legend of the body-throwing Hilux driver. Also relevant in such speeding was the practice of awarding bonuses to drivers who arrived first in Nairobi, adding extra incentive for them to speed. Delivering *miraa* became not only a race against plane schedules and the *miraa*'s perishability but also a race between drivers. Yet another factor was the state of the roads on the journey. Many drivers reckon this was a major cause of accidents, as sections of the road full of potholes made many vehicles swerve to the other side of the road to avoid damaging the vehicles, only to smash into oncoming traffic. From Munene's case mentioned above, one can also see the dangers inherent in driving when tired, and many blame the speed of the vehicles on the fact that drivers consume *miraa en route*. There is currently a debate underway on the effect of chewing *miraa* on driver reaction times, some suggesting that *miraa* impairs reactions.<sup>30</sup> Some thus argue that the 'speedy' nature of the commodity's effects on the driver's body transforms into the speedy motion of the vehicles. The stereotype of the dare-devil Hilux driver might reinforce such driving too, as some drivers are likely to thrive on such an image. While many Kenyans view such driving with disdain as reckless and the cause of many accidents, others seem quite awestruck by the courage shown by such drivers, and individual drivers can become famous for their skill and exploits. The appeal of such an image and fame might well tempt some drivers to press slightly harder on the accelerator.

However, the drivers interviewed recently report that the situation has changed of late, and think that there has been a reduction in the number of accidents on the *miraa* run. One driver reckoned that in the mid-1990s there were often four accidents a month involving *miraa* pick-ups, but this is not the case any more. Top of the list of reasons given for this change are improvements to the roads. Most of the potholes on the route have now been filled in, and so speeding *miraa* pick-ups no longer need to swerve onto the wrong side of the road. Also, there are now more speed bumps along the route, forcing drivers to slow down. The practice of giving bonuses is said to have ceased, so reducing the incentive to race with other drivers, and now more of the vehicles travel in convoy anyway, further reducing competitiveness.

<sup>29</sup> M. Rizzo, 'Being taken for a ride: Privatisation of the Dar es Salaam transport system 1983-1998', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 40 (2002), 133-57.

<sup>30</sup> See S.W. Toennes & G.F. Kauert, 'Driving under the influence of Khat – Alkaloid concentrations and observations in forensic cases'. *Forensic Science International*, 140 (2004), 85-90. Their findings on the effects of *miraa* chewing on driving ability are inconclusive.

It seems unlikely that these changes perceived by the drivers themselves will become widely appreciated amongst the general population. For those living on the Nyambene to Nairobi route, the Doppler Shift experienced as a Hilux pick-up brimming with *miraa* sacks passes at high speed will continue to be a defining feature of the trade in a controversial commodity.

## Conclusion

*Miraa* transporters operating between the Nyambenes and Nairobi are responsible for delivering the commodity fresh to consumers across the globe. Delays along the route they follow can result in whole shipments going to waste, causing the *miraa* to dry up in the sun or to be late for air transport. The time-scale in which such drivers operate is highly compressed,<sup>31</sup> but thanks to their skill in controlling their pick-ups, delays are rare. The highly efficient system described above that has evolved to ensure the right consignments of *miraa* are delivered to the right traders in Nairobi also plays its part in expediting the trade, as do the *karanis* and other crew associated with the vehicles. Transporting *miraa* can be extremely profitable for the pick-up owners, and drivers also do well financially out of their job, earning far more than most other Kenyans.

Of course, even if the above-mentioned claim of the drivers that accidents are now less common than they were a decade ago is accurate, driving overloaded Hilux pick-ups at high speed along winding roads is still a risky way to make a living, and some drivers have lost their lives in the course of delivering *miraa*. Accidents linked to their fast driving combined with the stereotype of the body-throwing Hilux driver means that they are regarded with great ambivalence, mutually reinforced by the ambivalence evident in Kenya towards the commodity they are transporting. Both *miraa* itself and the iconic image of the speeding *miraa* Hilux generate a range of responses, from reverence and awe through bemusement to outright disapproval. Hilux pick-ups in the Nyambenes derive their fame not so much from their cargo-capacity or ruggedness but more from their association with this perishable and controversial commodity and the speed at which they must drive when transporting it.

Ironically, it could be argued that despite their notoriety, the high level of maintenance afforded *miraa* pick-ups and the fact they are generally bought new might in some ways actually make them safer than the majority of Kenyan public-service vehicles. That more care is given to vehicles transporting a lucrative, perishable, commodity than to those transporting people is perhaps not all that surprising.

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<sup>31</sup> Carrier, 'Need for speed'.

## Modern chariots: Speed and mobility in contemporary ‘small’ wars in the Sahara

Georg Klute

### Introduction

At Christmas 1991, about 18 months after the Tuareg rebellion in Northern Mali had started,<sup>1</sup> an NCO in the Malian army was ordered to travel from Tessalit, a

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<sup>1</sup> The rebellion started in June 1990 after 2,000 Tuareg migrants had been sent back to Mali from neighbouring Algeria and Libya earlier that year, among them a few hundred men who had fought in Libya’s Islamic Legion. The rebellion had three distinct phases. The first was marked by a successful struggle against the Malian army that ended with the Treaties of Tamanrasset in January 1991. The second was characterized by the splintering of the rebel movement and ended with the ‘Pacte National’ peace agreements in April 1992 between the (re)united rebel movements and the Malian government. From 1993 onwards, the war entered its third and bloodiest phase with ethnic strife between black and white Malians, particularly in 1994. By the end of that year, the civilian population of northern Mali had become so war-weary that traditional leaders and rebel spokesmen initiated meetings of reconciliation between the ethnic groups of the north. These culminated in a solemn peace ceremony – *La Flamme de la Paix* – in Timbuktu in March 1996. For an overview of these events, see P. Boilley, *Les Kel Adagh: Un siècle de dépendances, de la prise de Tombouctou (1893) au Pacte National (1992). Etude des évolutions politiques, sociales et économiques d’une population touarègue (Soudan Français, République du Mali)* (PhD thesis, University of Paris VII: 1994); B. Lecocq, ‘*That desert is our country*’: *Tuareg rebellions and competing nationalisms in contemporary Mali (1946-1996)* (PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam: 2002); G. Klute, *Die Rebellionen der Tuareg in Mali und Niger* (Habilitationsschrift: Cologne, forthcoming); G. Klute & T. von Trotha, ‘Roads to peace: From small war to parastatal

village near the Algerian border, to the regional headquarters in Kidal to pick up the Tessalit garrison's salaries. The men accompanying him in three pick-up trucks were equipped with machine guns, bazookas and assault rifles. And to avoid possible encounters with groups of Tuareg rebels, the unit took a rarely used track rather than the main road.

By coincidence, 80 Tuareg rebel combatants, members of the recently created *Armée Révolutionnaire de Libération de l'Azawad* (ARLA),<sup>2</sup> were traveling in the opposite direction along the same track in six off-road vehicles. The day before, after crossing enemy territory for several hundred kilometres, the group had risked attacking the strongly defended garrison at Timbuktu, not for military gain but for psychological reasons. The attack aimed to demonstrate to the Tuareg population the ARLA's military power and to win over new supporters.

Fearing an ambush, the rebels staged a frontal attack the moment they had the army convoy in sight. In the same style as pre-colonial attacks by Tuareg cavalry, all six vehicles drove at full speed towards the military party, firing their automatic weapons. While trying to defend themselves, seven soldiers as well as their commanding NCO were killed and the others fled into the bush, soon to be picked up by herders who had been alerted by the shooting. These herders were, like the rebels, of Tuareg origin and took the soldiers into their care, fed and hid them and informed the nearby Aguelhok garrison that 'some heavy shooting had been noticed'. The garrison alerted the army headquarters in Kidal and troops were sent out to hunt down the rebel party.

The rebels did not pursue the soldiers who had managed to flee but contented themselves with letting down the tyres of the army vehicles in case some of the soldiers returned. They still thought – wrongly, as we now know – that the Malian army would operate an organized pursuit in response to the Timbuktu attack the day before and that the unit they had fought was only one part of a larger army contingent. The rebels left the location of the clash as quickly as possible to look for a hide-out from which they could stage an ambush. They

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peace in the north of Mali'. In: M.C. Foblets & T. von Trotha, eds, *Healing the wounds: Essays on the reconstruction of societies after war* (Oxford, 2004), 109-43.

<sup>2</sup> ARLA was founded in November 1991 as a splinter group of the original rebel movement of the Malian Tuareg, *Mouvement Populaire de l'Azawad* (MPA), according to ARLA's founders because of the assumed dominance of the tribal group of *Ifoɣas* Tuareg within the MPA. See *Armée Révolutionnaire de Libération de l'Azawad, Statuts adoptés au congrès de Tegharghar du 4. 11. 1991 au 8. 11. 1991*, and for historical background of the MPA's disintegration, G. Klute, 'Hostilités et alliances: Archéologie de la dissidence dans le mouvement rebelle des Touareg au Mali', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 35, 137 (1995), 55-71.

found a suitable place not far away in Aoukenek in the Wadi In Settefene, 50 km Southeast of Aguelhok and 100 km Northwest of Kidal. The army unit sent out from Kidal did in fact fall into this ambush and only managed to escape with the greatest of difficulty.

When I was told of these events in November 1993,<sup>3</sup> almost two years after they had taken place, I was travelling in Northern Mali in rather the same way as the rebels and Malian soldiers had done: in a four-wheel-drive car, accompanied by an armed escort in an open pick-up truck. I was then working on behalf of an international NGO and trying to identify possible programmes to help refugees repatriated from neighbouring Algeria. My fellow consultant, Sidi Mohammed ag Ichrach, was at the time one of the ARLA's leading figures. The group of soldiers escorting us were made up exclusively of former ARLA rebels, most of whom had participated in the Timbuktu attack and the subsequent ambush. The ARLA men had been integrated into the Malian army some months before, according to arrangements stated in the 1992 *Pacte National* between the rebel movements and the Malian government.<sup>4</sup>

During this two-week mission and the long hours spent on the road (over more than 3,000 km of desert track), I became aware of the crucial importance of speed and mobility in desert wars. We drove fast across open terrain and took all the precautionary measures necessary in situations of war, because the ARLA men in our escort feared encounters with rival rebels from the MPA. It was three months later in the spring of 1994 that the old tensions between the MPA and the ARLA led to open warfare among the Tuareg of Northern Mali that would last until nearly the end of the year.<sup>5</sup> Apart from our own precautions, the soldiers in our escort also amused themselves by demonstrating tricks they had used to outwit the Malian army. As I showed some interest, they not only demonstrated how they handled their weapons and vehicles in different tactical situations but also urged me to take the steering-wheel of their pick-up

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<sup>3</sup> The Tuareg version is confirmed in the autobiography of the former military and administrative commander of the *Cercle de Kidal*, Commander Amidou Mariko. See A. Mariko, *Mémoires d'un crocodile: Du sujet français au citoyen Malien* (Bamako, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> République du Mali 1992, 'Pacte national conclu entre le Gouvernement de la République du Mali et les Mouvements et Fronts Unifiés de l'Azawad consacrant le statut particulier du Nord du Mali', *Journal Officiel de la République du Mali*, 34 (1992), 3 (special issue).

<sup>5</sup> See in particular, G. Klute, 'L'islamisation du Sahara (re)mise en scène: Les idéologies légitimatrices dans la guerre fratricide des Touareg maliens'. In: L. Marfaing & S. Wippel, eds, *Les relations transsahariennes à l'époque contemporaine: Un espace en constant mutation* (Paris, 2003), 361-78, and Klute, *Die Rebellionen der Tuareg*.

or shoot with their weapons in combat-like fashion to prove I had learnt what they had been teaching me.

This chapter will show that the mastery of time and space is of crucial importance, particularly in so-called ‘small’ wars, i.e. conflicts of relatively low intensity. Time and space are inherently social and cultural constructions rather than absolute conceptions and it is in small wars that different conceptions of time and space compete.

During the pre-colonial era, nomadic warriors, in general, easily surpassed the armies of sedentary groups in speed and mobility since they owned and raised large numbers of horses and camels, which were the decisive means of destruction at the time. However, when the colonial armies began to introduce motor vehicles at the beginning of the twentieth century the nomads lost their edge in speed and mobility, only to win it back when they themselves started to use light, civilian, off-road open trucks (pick-ups) for warfare. The nomadic Tuareg succeeded in regaining their superiority through the invention of what could be called the modern ‘chariot’. The metaphor of the chariot is used here to inform our analysis of the Tuareg upheavals in Niger and Mali because of the way rebels manipulated their weapons and their vehicles bore at least some resemblance to Bronze Age war chariots.<sup>6</sup> Like the classic chariot, the modern version combined the existing techniques of cars and weapons, welding them together into a new technology of war. This gradual process of appropriating and merging two technologies into a new one represented a creative act that could be called ‘combining invention’. The process of appropriation was facilitated by the compatibility of off-road pick-ups and camels, both of which are held in high esteem by the nomadic Tuareg.

### Time and space in small wars

The strategy of any type of war is geared at the preservation of one’s freedom of action in time and space. Arriving at the right place before the enemy does allows one to decide whether or not to engage in combat and, if one resolves to do battle, to decide when and where to do so. Mastering the time factor is of particular importance in guerrilla warfare for two reasons. Firstly, guerrilla warfare seldom sees decisive battles but rather many separate strikes or clashes. Guerrilla warfare thus involves a lot of waiting, which in turn assumes an

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<sup>6</sup> The findings and ethnographic data in this chapter come from fieldwork carried out between 1991 and 1998 in Algeria, Mali and Niger on the Tuareg rebellions and from interviews held in Tamashaq. From March 1995 to October 1998 research was carried out with Trutz von Trotha within the framework of the project entitled ‘Ethnicity, state and violence’. It was funded by the German Research Community (DFG) and. I would like to thank them for their support.

ability to bide one's time and endure long periods of inaction in order to find the right moment to attack.<sup>7</sup> Guerrilla fighters have to deliberately extend a war in the hope of demoralizing their opponents. When confronting guerrillas, conventional armies are forced to mobilize large quantities of high-quality technical materiel to compensate for the more primitive means of the guerrilla fighter. Such efforts cannot be sustained over unlimited periods of time, not even by the United States, today's military superpower. This, of course, is even more the case in countries like Mali and Niger that do not have their own arms industry and have to import all their armaments from abroad.

The opponents of guerrilla forces rarely win decisive victories. Instead, the permanent danger of an attack, which could take place at any time and any place, creates enduring unrest. Despite all their efforts, conventional armies can neither force guerrilla fighters to decisive encounters nor protect themselves effectively against attack, let alone protect their civilian population. The longer such a situation lasts, the more likely it is that conventional armies will be willing to make concessions.

The disposal of time seems to be more important than the disposal of space. Two of the best-known examples in military history in this respect are surely Kutusow's decision to retreat to Moscow and beyond when his army was being pursued by the *Grande Armée*, and, secondly, Mao's Long March in 1946-1947 during the war against the Kuomintang. Kutusow refused Napoleon's offer of a further battle after the one at Borodino, while Mao gave up space he had already conquered. Both men exchanged space for time to regain their freedom of action.

It is assumed here that time and space are relative and relational notions.<sup>8</sup> As the two concepts are intimately linked, this chapter employs the term 'time-space' as proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein.<sup>9</sup> Time and space are understood as social and cultural categories, constituted through the relationship between things, persons and events. This theoretical approach places a particular emphasis on the creativity and modelling of time and space by social actors. The relative-relational idea of time-space is the opposite of the absolute concepts of time and space, which are usually employed, at least implicitly, in the social sciences literature: things, persons, events or processes within time and space are often analysed on the assumption that time and space are absolute notions that exist independently of the phenomena being examined. Markus Schroer, for

<sup>7</sup> F.A. von der Heydte, *Der moderne Kleinkrieg als wehrpolitisches und militärisches Phänomen* (Wiesbaden, 1986 [1972]), 103.

<sup>8</sup> These notions are dealt with in more detail in an essay entitled 'About time-space in small wars'.

<sup>9</sup> I. Wallerstein, 'Der Zeitraum der Weltsystemanalyse'. In: D. Bögenhold, ed., *Moderne amerikanische Soziologie* (Stuttgart, 2000), 93-117.



example, has argued that the absolute concept of time and space is particularly suited to describing phenomena of power and violence. This concept implies that persons or objects can occupy but one position in time and space. Whenever we observe processes in which this particular and unique position is contested by others, we are actually dealing with phenomena of power and, eventually, violence.<sup>10</sup> Contrary to Schroer, this chapter argues that time and space are not absolute but are permanently constructed and reconstructed categories. Indeed, it is precisely phenomena of power that demonstrate the extent to which these categories are constructions.

In war, we are dealing not only with one concept of time-space but several competing ones. These competing concepts touch on the core of military strategies – preserving one's freedom of action. To this purpose, one has to impose one's own concept of time-space on that of the enemy. This is even more important in guerrilla warfare since conventional armies are militarily superior to guerrilla forces in terms of supplies, weaponry, equipment and training. Guerrillas, however, are very difficult to defeat because they frequently succeed in imposing their concept of time-space onto the enemy. They attempt to show that they can hit anywhere at any time. The guerrillas determine the stage of war; time of battle prevails only when they want it to. Their enemy remains in the dark about where and when the next attack will take place. If successful, guerrillas construct what one could call a 'fourth dimension' of time-space from which they can emerge and into which they can disappear whenever they wish, like the proverbial fish in water or, to adapt this saying to the conditions of desert war, like jackals in the desert.

The second reason for the importance of time in guerrilla warfare lies in the fact that it is mobile warfare *par excellence*. Sudden attacks are followed by a rapid withdrawal involving evasive action and movement over large distances into the hinterland. Guerrillas do not attempt to conquer and occupy space, and frontlines are neither fixed nor shifting. The central characteristic of guerrilla warfare is permanent, rapid movement. Mao Tse Tung described it as follows:

Our strategy should be to employ our main forces in a broad, flexible, but never fixed front – a strategy, if successful, that needs a high degree of mobility even in difficult terrain, and that is characterised by fast attacks and retreats, rapid concentration and dissolving of troops. It will be mobile war to the greatest extent – and no static war.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> M. Schroer, *Räume, Orte, Grenzen: Auf dem weg zu einer Soziologie des Raums* (Frankfurt, 2006), 175.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in J.L. Wallach, *Kriegstheorien: Ihre Entwicklung im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt, 1972), 300.

During the Tuareg rebellions of the 1990s, the rebel forces never succeeded in controlling the first dimension of the time factor in guerrilla warfare. None of the movements involved waited until their opponents were demoralized and physically exhausted, which would have meant that their original objectives would have been achieved. On the contrary, time worked against the rebels. The protracted nature of the conflict demoralized and exhausted not just the governments of Mali and Niger but also the Tuareg. On the other hand, the rebels mastered the second dimension of the time factor – speed and mobility – very skilfully. In this respect they largely surpassed their opponents, particularly in the early phase of the war. Their advantage was based both on the tradition of nomadic warfare and on the technology of the chariot.

### Losing the edge in Tuareg warfare, 1900-1960

Before 1900, cavalry were generally the decisive weapon of war in West Africa. Firearms were not available in sufficient numbers and artillery was absent. This was true in areas where troopers could use the high speed of their animals, as in the wide expanse of the savannah, the Sahel and the Southern edge of the Sahara desert where cavalry were superior to foot soldiers. All polities in the area therefore employed troopers. Nomadic groups were the most suitable to such combat because they, rather than sedentary communities, raised camels and horses and consequently always had a sufficient number of these 'means of destruction' at their disposal, to borrow the term used by Jack Goody.<sup>12</sup> A second reason is that the nomads were born troopers as they were used to dealing with these animals. Thus, the Tuareg sub-group *Kel-Ewey* of the Air region in Niger could 'without doubt, and without counting their slaves [who served as foot soldiers; GK], gather a power of 10,000 armed and mounted men', as the German explorer Heinrich Barth noted at the time.<sup>13</sup> While in nomadic communities most adult males could serve in war, sedentary groups were able to mobilize far fewer soldiers. Kano Province, which in the middle of the nineteenth century was part of the Sokoto Caliphate and inhabited by a sedentary Hausa population estimated at 'nearer to one than to half a million', supported an army of only 7,000 horsemen and about 20,000 foot soldiers.<sup>14</sup>

Although there had been firearms around for several centuries, the cavalry still remained superior until the end of the nineteenth century. During his six-year stay in West Africa, Heinrich Barth reported that no event caused more concern than the news that the *tabu* was approaching. The *tabu* was the army of

<sup>12</sup> J.R. Goody, *Technology, tradition, and the state in Africa* (Oxford, 1971).

<sup>13</sup> H. Barth, *Reisen und Entdeckungen in Nord- und Centralafrika in den Jahren 1849 bis 1855* (Gotha, 1857), 5 vols; vol. 1, 387.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* vol. 2, 163.

the *Iwillimidan*, a Tuareg sub-group, that was made up of horsemen whose attacks in the Niger river bend could not be prevented or contained. People fled to safety with their belongings and ‘even the nature of the atmosphere seemed to confirm the news of the advance of numerous enemies; for the whole air was filled with thick clouds of dust’.<sup>15</sup>

Only colonial armies could break the supremacy of the nomadic cavalry. Apart from better organization and an overwhelming material superiority, based on the industrial production of weapons in Europe, it was the tactics of the square that doomed nearly all West African cavalry attacks to failure. The tactics of the square had been developed in the age of the flintlock to counter massive cavalry attacks. Until that time, cavalry could easily overwhelm infantrymen positioned in lines before foot soldiers were able to load or reload their muskets. This ended when the soldiers were positioned in squares with the front rank kneeling down and firing at advancing horsemen while those at the rear were loading their weapons and would then fire from behind as those in the front rank reloaded.<sup>16</sup> In addition, in (semi)desert regions, colonial armies began to recruit nomads for their camel corps.<sup>17</sup> Imitating the tactics of (pre-colonial) cavalry men, they operated in small, mobile and independent units although they were better equipped than their predecessors.<sup>18</sup>

Cars were also used quite early on for military purposes. From 1915 onwards both the British and the French began to use motor vehicles in the Sahara in

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* vol. 5, 62.

<sup>16</sup> P.W. Turner & R.H. Haigh, ‘Military tactics and technology within a context of industrialism’, *Military History Journal*, 8 (1990), 3  
[<http://rapidhttp.com/milhist/vol083th.html>].

<sup>17</sup> The first mounted camel unit in the French army, the *Régiment des Dromadaires*, was however set up in pre-colonial times by Napoleon during the Egyptian campaign in December 1798. It was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that General Lapérrine invented the famous *pelotons méharistes*, which recruited their members among Saharan nomads, thus making the conquest of the Sahara possible. E.F. Gautier, *La conquête du Sahara: Essai de psychologie politique* (Paris, 1925), 101, 107 ff.

<sup>18</sup> The revitalization of the camel corps by the Malian army in the late 1990s, after the Tuareg rebellion, was an anachronism. These units (see photo 8.1) appear as warlike as their colonial predecessors but are unable to fulfil military functions. It is said that they were suggested by officers of the former colonial army and financed by French money. With trafficking and banditry widespread in the Sahara region, in addition to the activities of all manner of rebels and Islamists armed with automatic weapons and driving off-road pick-ups, these units only satisfy the nostalgic sentiments of their founders. For a short survey of the activities of one of al-Qaeda’s allies in the Sahara, the *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*, see J. Keenan, ‘Terror in the Sahara: The implications of US imperialism for North and West Africa’, *Review of African Political Economy*, 31, 101 (2004), 475-96.

earnest, although it would be some time before they rivalled camels. Particularly in impenetrable areas, the first automobiles were hardly any faster, or were in fact even slower, than camels or horses. High fuel, oil and cooling water consumption, possible mechanical failure, comparatively small engine performance and tyres that were unsuited to desert conditions all limited the range of these vehicles and substantially limited their speed. Comparing the performance of camels and lorries in sand dunes or on difficult terrain from an economic perspective clearly shows that, even today, the running costs of lorries can be many times higher than those of camels.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, by the middle of the twentieth century, the cavalry era had come to an end. In the meantime, automobiles had developed technically in such a way as to exceed camels in speed and range nearly everywhere. The nomads had thus lost their past advantages of speed and mobility. This is well illustrated by the story of a Tuareg warrior from Northern Mali who participated in a Tuareg rebellion against Mali's socialist government in the 1960s:<sup>20</sup>

Did you use vehicles at that time? None. Even when we got material from the enemy, we had to abandon everything because nobody could make use of it! Nobody could work a machine gun, and we only took food, if there was food on board [in a vehicle] ... Only groups of camel riders fought. Of course, every group had its chief, and they fought against vehicles whenever they met them ...

Do you know the road leading to Tinzaoutène? Do you know the exact place where the road crosses a *wad* [river bed] named Tintédjnouten? There was an encounter; exactly there.<sup>21</sup> After we arrived, we left some of our group; the others went down the *wad* to prepare an ambush on the road ... Our chief called us, El-Khader and I, and he told us, we had better stay in the *wad*, and that the group should dig a trench. He explained that vehicles would overturn if their wheels got into a hole that is covered like a pitfall ... Magdi called us, Al Khader, Akhmadou and me, and he asked us to go up the opposite hill and to dig out trenches. That was all. We went up the hill and stayed there until the next morning ...

The first vehicles that arrived were a lorry transporting soldiers, a Land Rover and a tank ... We opened fire immediately. The tank was hit and it went backwards ... When the tank had been hit and had gone backwards, we said to ourselves that our fire had made it withdraw. But, in fact, it only went back to the lorry in order to pick up the soldiers.

<sup>19</sup> G. Spittler, Dürren, *Krieg und Hungerkrisen bei den Kel Ewey (1900-1985)* (Stuttgart, 1989), 131.

<sup>20</sup> Interview conducted by my colleague Ibrahim ag Litny with one of the participants, Makhamad Daghada, Kidal, September 1993.

<sup>21</sup> The exact date of this encounter is unknown. Ag Baye and Bellil give 22 July 1963. See C. Ag Baye & R. Bellil, 'Une société touareg en crise: Les Kel Adrar du Mali', *AWAL: Cahiers d'Etudes Berbères*, 2, 1986, 74. Two different dates (22 February 1963 and early June 1963) are given in Boilley, *Les Kel Adagh*, 304-305. The encounter lasted from early afternoon until nightfall and about 45 Tuareg rebels are said to have participated.

Then, the tank attacked us furiously, like a female camel-cow whom you are going to take away her young. Our continuous fire apparently had no consequence. The tank itself started to fire until it killed two of us. We were very shocked about this loss.



*Photo 8.1* Malian army camel corps  
*Source:* Artur Beifuss, in Menaka, Northern Mali in 2005-2006

### Regaining the initiative with the chariot: Tuareg warfare in the 1990s

In contrast to their predecessors, today's Tuareg rebels would never call attacking tanks furious 'camel-cows'. They are familiar with modern automatic weapons and can use them effectively. During the conflicts of the 1990s logistical problems were resolved – just as Mao Tse Tung had advised – as a result of the booty the rebels captured from the Niger and Malian armies. The most remarkable difference with their predecessors in the 1960s, however, was that the rebels in the 1990s regained the advantage of nomadic warfare, i.e. speed

and mobility. During the upheavals of the 1960s the motorized units in the Malian army easily surpassed Tuareg camel riders in speed and mobility but in the 1990s motorized units found themselves up against motorized units. At first, the armies of Mali and Niger only used vehicles that were designed for military purposes: light tanks, transport vehicles, armoured cars equipped with heavy machine guns or rocket launchers, open jeeps, supply vehicles, etc. The rebel forces, on the other hand, used civilian vehicles exclusively, mainly four-wheel-drive pick-ups equipped with weapons, i.e. a combination of vehicle technology – conceived for civilian use – and weapons technology that in form and application bore some resemblance to the technology of the old-fashioned chariot.

Preceded by ox-driven vehicles equipped with disc wheels, the classic war chariot with spoke wheels is an invention dating from the second millennium BC.<sup>22</sup> Most scholars agree that chariots were used both for hunting and in war for about a thousand years, starting around 1700 BC.<sup>23</sup> It is widely acknowledged that chariots were superior to infantry but exactly how chariots were used in battle, either against infantry or other chariots, is a subject of controversy. One group of scholars thinks that the chariot was mainly a battle taxi that took soldiers to and from the battlefield. A second, and larger, group claims that they were mainly offensive weapons. A war chariot needed two men – a driver and an archer using a composite bow<sup>24</sup> – and it is quite possible that chariots used the same tactics against infantry as nomadic warriors later employed against their sedentary enemies, relying mainly on speed and mobility.<sup>25</sup>

The following general features seem to characterize both the historical and contemporary chariot. In both cases, the technology of the vehicle and that of the weapons employed when using the chariot were developed independently of

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<sup>22</sup> If not noted otherwise, the following overview of the classic war chariot is based on M. Littauer & J. H. Crouwel, *Wheeled vehicles and ridden animals in the ancient near east* (Leiden, 1979), 74-98 and R. Drews, *The end of the Bronze Age: Changes in warfare and the catastrophe ca. 1200 B.C.* (Princeton, 1995), 104 ff.

<sup>23</sup> One group of scholars denies that the chariot had any serious use in warfare, assuming thereby that it served as a vehicle of prestige only. In *The end of the Bronze Age*, Drews argues that the war chariot was of crucial importance in warfare for only about 500 years, from 1700 to 1200 BC. He attempts to show in an imaginative and well-constructed argument that from about 1200 BC onwards, chariot armies were outmatched by infantrymen who employed guerrilla-tactics, using mainly the long slashing sword and the javelin.

<sup>24</sup> See the discussion on the use of the chariot in battle in *Ibid.* 119 ff, including the numerous references.

<sup>25</sup> In *Die Kultur des Krieges* (Berlin, 1995 [1993]), 244 ff, John Keegan argues that nomadic riders as well as war chariots played on their superior mobility and speed, attacking in a half-moon line, riding (or driving) forward to intimidate the enemy with volleys of arrows from a distance of about 200 metres and retreating as soon as they encountered serious resistance.

each other, and the vehicle and arms technology could, and still can, be used separately. The technologies require different abilities: skill in steering the vehicle over open terrain and a knowledge of its mechanics, and experience in combat and knowledge of how to use weapons. Historical and modern chariots are used in war in two ways: as a means of transport (the battle taxi) and as a mobile combat platform. Both are lightweight constructions. The modern chariot avoids armour plating<sup>26</sup> in favour of mobility, speed and range and clearly differs from contemporary military combat vehicles, especially tanks, which can be unwieldy due to their armour, thus limiting their use in combat. The modern tank must, however, often be transported on other vehicles to the scene of operations. The chariot's advantages in speed and mobility have another consequence too. The modern chariot is a small but independent combat unit that can operate over long periods of time because it is independent of outside supplies. Weapons, ammunition, food and water are carried on the vehicle and its speed, mobility and range combined with high firepower and independence of outside supply make it a weapon particularly suitable for mobile wars. Chariot technology was so superior to conventional military equipment, particularly with regard to mobility and speed, that the conventional armies of Niger and Mali adopted it later on<sup>27</sup> and, as nearly everywhere else, had to imitate guerrilla tactics and techniques to overcome their original, conventional inferiority.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Charioteers, however, used to wear corslets and helmets. The corslets, estimated to have weighed between 37 and 58 pounds, were made of leather covered with bronze scales and reached down to the knees. The helmet was likewise made of leather and covered with strips of bronze or copper. And occasionally, even the horses wore coats of mail. See Drews, *The end of the Bronze Age*, 111.

<sup>27</sup> Both armies, however, took their time before adopting the technology of the chariot in full. The Malian army, for example, requisitioned civilian four-wheel-drive cars at the beginning of the war, using them mainly for transport purposes. In July 1992, i.e. two years after the beginning of the war, two special anti-guerrilla units – *Détachements d'Assistance Militaires d'Infanterie* (DAMI) – were set up with the support of French advisers. These units exclusively used four-wheel-drive military vehicles of French design (VLRA). Two years later, in August 1994, the technology of the chariot had won general recognition and the Malian army imitated rebel tactics: 'Les spécialistes de la guerre s'accordent à reconnaître que l'armée malienne est une armée classique, c. à. d. formée et préparée pour la guerre des frontières; or, la situation au Nord n'est plus ni moins qu'une guérilla. C'est dans ce cadre que l'armée malienne vient se voir doter de 70 Toyotas 4 x 4 tout terrain' (*Le Malien*, 22 August 1994, 5).

<sup>28</sup> Conventional armies tried early on to combine civilian vehicle and military weapon technologies. In Tunisia in 1916, the French officer Max de La Fargue modified civilian lorries, equipping them with supplementary tanks containing fuel, oil and water, and tripods for machine guns. These lorries, however, could only reach a

### Processes of appropriation

In an essay dealing with the introduction and spread of diesel engine pumps in Northern Sudan, Kurt Beck demonstrated that the introduction of technical innovations have to be understood as a dialectical process of appropriation in which both the external technical artefact and the society importing it undergo changes.<sup>29</sup> Beck's standpoint clearly differs from conventional approaches in studies of technical innovation. Studies in the tradition of diffusion theory ask whether and how technical innovations diffuse from one society to another. Is the new technology accepted, and under which circumstances and what kind of causes? This approach mainly pays attention to the receiving societies and the changes they undergo through the importation of technical innovation. Such studies are, however, not interested in the technical artefact itself, which is simply taken as unchanged and unchangeable.

A second approach, called the 'recycling perspective' by Beck, emphasizes the creativity of the receiving societies but does not actually deal with the processes of appropriation of the technical innovation. Instead, this approach describes the creativity and imagination of receiving societies that transform complex and sophisticated technical artefacts into objects of daily use. This is neither diffusion nor appropriation but decomposition and transformation of the original artefact into single components that are given other meanings in their new context. Beck argues for the study of processes of social appropriation of

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speed of about 30 km/hour (with a cubic capacity of 3.4 l and an engine power of about 20 h.p.). Their range was limited to 300-400 km, despite supplementary 90-litre tanks plus their normal 65-litre tank. Apart from this particular case, all the other vehicles in use by the French army had been conceived for military purposes only from the very beginning. See W. Nöther, *Die Erschließung der Sahara durch Motorfahrzeuge 1901-1936: Chronik einer Pionierepoche* (Munich, 2003). The British army ordered 6,173 lightly armoured cars on the basis of the famous Rolls Royce Silver Ghost, some with small turrets. The maximum speed of the Silver Ghost was 80 km/hour but at this speed it would wear out up to a dozen pairs of tyres a day. The British also used the civilian version of the Silver Ghost, the most famous case being the open vehicles that Lawrence of Arabia brought into action. See T.E. Lawrence, *Seven pillars of wisdom: A triumph* (Oxford, 1922). The civilian version of the Silver Ghost could reach a speed of 110 km/hour. They were also used as 'chariots' by Bedouins for hunting and raids. These cars, however, did not have any particular arms but just transported men armed with carbines. See C.R. Raswan, *Im Land der schwarzen Zelte: Mein Leben unter Beduinen* (Berlin: 1951 [1934]), 95 ff.

<sup>29</sup> K. Beck, 'Die Aneignung der Maschine'. In: K.H. Kohl, ed., *New Heimat* (New York, 2002), 66-77.





*Photo 8.2* Chariot of the Malian army

*Source:* Artur Beifuss, in Menaka, Northern Mali in 2005-2006

technical innovations, assuming that both the development of new techniques and the question of their acceptance, refusal or modification in ‘variation and selection processes’ are negotiated socially. He further argues that different social groups accept, modify or reject new techniques in different ways (see Chapter 6 in this volume).

Applying Beck’s approach to modern chariots<sup>30</sup> yields the following, albeit preliminary, insights. Firstly, the development of the motor vehicle, equipped with modern weaponry does not appear to have been based on one single

<sup>30</sup> The historian Daniel Headrick describes a process which in many ways resembles that of the ‘invention’ of the modern chariot: the introduction of the armed shallow-draft steamer, or gunboat, in the nineteenth century. As in the case of the chariot, two independent techniques, the steamer and the ship’s armaments, were combined to create a new technology. Another analogy with the case of the modern chariot is the gunboat that allowed Britain to make use of its overwhelming and devastating military power, which it enjoyed as ‘Mistress of the Seas’, to penetrate inland. See D. Headrick, ‘Secret gunboats of the East India company’. In: *Ibid.*, *The tools of empire: Technology and European imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York and Oxford, 1981), 17-42.

original preconception that was subsequently developed into a technical lay-out and implemented. Rather, the invention, if one can call it that, of the modern chariot appears to be the result of a long, cumulative process of various technical innovations or modifications based on the principle of trial and error. Daniel Headrick pointed to the fact that, prior to the twentieth century, technological advances and innovations often preceded scientific explanation. Headrick therefore argued that one should not think of 'technology as "applied science" ... but rather of science as "theoretical technology"'.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, in contrast to the invention of the gunboat, the modern chariot has been an invention 'from below'. First developed by smugglers, it was guerrillas fighting against states who adopted the modern chariot for warfare, with conventional armies only following much later.

The vehicle preferred by Tuareg rebels was the Toyota pick-up which, from the 1980s onwards, became the standard vehicle of Saharan smugglers. Many Tuaregs were, therefore, well aware of its mechanics and other features. These civilian pick-ups were superior in speed and range compared to all military vehicles then in use in Mali and Niger, reaching 150 km/hour or more, also off-road across open terrain.<sup>32</sup> Even before the Tuareg rebellion began, Saharan smugglers had improved Japanese engineering technology and adapted it to smuggling requirements and conditions in the Sahara. Firstly, they increased the vehicles' range to several hundred kilometres with the help of auxiliary fuel tanks by installing either a 200-litre barrel on the platform or by adding auxiliary fuel tanks that could hold up to 400 litres. Due to its low fuel consumption, particularly compared to that of military vehicles, pick-ups can cover distances of between 700 km and 3,200 km without needing refuelling. Their range can be further increased by secret fuel depots in the countryside. For smugglers and rebels alike, the ability to cover great distances and be independent of outside supplies over a long period of time is, of course, a central requirement.

When the uprising started, the Tuareg rebels' war chariots still looked very much like the vehicles that smugglers used. The smugglers' items seemed simply to have been replaced by armed men and their supplies (see photo). For both groups it was equally important to be able to carry additional loads without compromising their car's handling. The more goods a smuggler can transport, the higher his profits. But the Tuareg rebels, too, had to load their vehicles over the prescribed weight with combatants, weapons, ammunition, food and water.

<sup>31</sup> D. Headrick, 'Malaria, quinine, and the penetration of Africa'. In: *The tools of empire*, 65.

<sup>32</sup> The 1978 FJ55 with a six-cylinder gas engine and 135 h.p. can reach up to 155 km/hour. Later models, particularly the FJ 60, the HJ 60 and the HJ 61 (with its diesel engine and turbocharger), were even faster. The neWest models with 200 h.p. can reach speeds of 200 km/hour or more.

They therefore strengthened their vehicles' suspension and the shock absorbers by attaching an additional leaf spring to each spring block. The body of the leaves was attached to the chassis with a piece of wood, preferably *balanites aegyptiaca*, which worked like a hard rubber buffer. A simple method of repairing broken springs or of preventing the springs from breaking was to tape the spring block with tyre hose so that one could continue driving even if the springs broke.

During journeys over open terrain, punctures are common. Smugglers and rebels exclusively use tyres with inner tubes because they can be repaired more easily than tubeless ones. Engines, too, were improved. Until Japanese engineers had the idea of leading the end of the air cleaner up outside the engine compartment, the cloth of traditional turbans was used to filter the air. The original Toyota diesel filters often became blocked with dust particles mixed with low-quality diesel. They were replaced with larger filters from lorries, mostly from the French Berliet.

In the open desert, vehicles are visible from a long way off so smugglers and rebels preferred a sandy camouflage varnish or they sprayed their vehicles themselves to make their shape camouflage with their natural surroundings. Lights and reflectors are particularly dangerous, as they are spotted before the contours of a vehicle become visible. Flashing parts were therefore dismantled and painted, and glass was rubbed with sand to remove any reflective qualities it might have had. Similar camouflage techniques seem to have been employed by the rebels of the POLISARIO front in the Western Sahara some years earlier. Camouflage techniques also involve a certain awareness of the morphology of the landscape. One must be able to see where the soil drops or forms dips, for example, to hide one's car.

Naturally, the driver's general driving skills are of crucial importance, notably during off-road journeys where garages or repair shops are few and far between.<sup>33</sup> These skills derive from the nomadic background of the Tuareg and were often acquired during their travels as trans-Saharan smugglers. Like nomads with animal tracks, they read the tread marks of other cars to identify

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<sup>33</sup> It is noteworthy that the British army's famous 'Long Range Desert Group', which operated mainly in North Africa during World War II, had difficulty recruiting suitable men for its reconnaissance missions. A large number of appropriate personnel were eventually found in Australian and New Zealand formations where competence in vehicle maintenance was high and requirements such as self-reliance, adaptability and the ability to endure physical hardship and boredom were common amongst men who came from isolated rural locations back home. See R. Jenner & D. List, *The long range desert group 1940-1945* (Oxford, 1999) and B. O'Carroll, *Kiwi scorpions: The story of the New Zealanders in the long range desert group* (Honiton, 2000), 2 ff.

the time, number, type, direction and the approximate load of the vehicles that have passed by. The ground writes clear 'minutes' of vehicle movements over the previous days and the Tuareg can differentiate known from unknown and friendly from hostile cars, which is naturally important for smugglers and rebels alike.

Driving off-road demands a certain sense of orientation. As nomads, or at least as people with a nomadic background, most Tuareg have certain abilities in this respect, being able, for example, to easily indicate the cardinal points and the relative position of localities they have come to know. Orientation in a motor vehicle, however, differs from orientation when travelling by horse or camel. While driving cars off-road, one often has to drive around obstacles, which may render orientation difficult. A further challenge is timing. Orientation in cars requires different, namely quicker, timing skills and excellent camel caravan men are not therefore necessarily excellent guides in cars.

Orientation during off-road car travel is done in two different but complementary ways. One is by taking bearings of landmarks and is similar to using a compass and map. As long as the chosen landmarks are visible, one can drive round obstacles and follow the general direction. In the absence of appropriate landmarks, deviations to the general direction are recalculated in terms of distance and angle. Experienced drivers seem to develop a kind of mental map, a condensed web of potential roads. Besides notions of distance and direction, each and every mental representation of a road also contains visual impressions of morphology, vegetation and soil, which facilitate the recognition of a particular road, even if the driver comes from a different direction. The mental map is regularly complemented by descriptions provided by other drivers of unknown roads. The representation and recognition of such descriptions is made possible by numerous topographic terms in the Tuareg language. These mostly refer to morphological particularities, the presence of certain species of animals, characteristic vegetation or the presence of certain minerals – most of which have metaphors that are derived from human anatomy.<sup>34</sup> Thus, nomadic familiarity with desert life, certain mechanical skills and experience with off-road travel in the course of smuggling have turned the rebels into perfect chariot drivers.

The second element of the chariot is its weaponry. A Tuareg rebel chariot was usually manned by twelve people armed with a machine gun, a bazooka and ten assault rifles. Three of them – the driver, the commander of the chariot unit and a third combatant – occupied the cabin. The rest were on the platform. The machine gun towered above the cabin roof, its base in a tube that was

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<sup>34</sup> E. Bernus, *Touaregs nigériens: Unité culturelle et diversité régionale d'un peuple pasteur* (Paris, 1981), 65 ff.

welded or screwed onto the chassis frame. This arrangement had two advantages. The rifleman handling the machine gun could easily turn the gun around and fire in every direction, and it could be taken off the vehicle if the unit had to fight on foot.

Such a chariot can muster considerable firepower if everyone concentrates their weapons on a single target with a combination of serious firepower, high speed and a wide range. However, the welding together of two existing techniques into a new one (i.e. the chariot) is not the simple and straightforward combining of already existing technical artefacts but represents a creative act of its own. This combining of inventions results in the creation of a new chariot on the basis of the assembly of existing techniques, which the Tuareg have interpreted in their own ways.

How was the technology of the chariot as a weapon and a vehicle of combat put into practice? Direct attacks by chariots were rare, as was fighting from the combat platform and firing at the enemy in the distance. In general, rebels only fired from the platform while driving, if they had to ward off pursuing vehicles or, conversely, if they wanted to stop vehicles they were hunting. Cavalry-style attacks, like the one described at the beginning of this chapter, are successful only if they involve an element of surprise and speed. Attacks will certainly fail if the opponents have enough time to select a favourable position from which to defend themselves and to set up and align machine guns or anti-tank weapons, which will halt civilian pick-ups in their tracks. The well-known and spectacular attacks by off-road pick-ups against Libyan positions in Northern Chad, led by Hissène Habré between December 1986 and August 1987, were successful only because they contained the elements of speed and surprise. The assault on the strongly defended Libyan air base at Wadi Doum in March 1987 is a case in point.<sup>35</sup>

Fighting distant adversaries from the combat platform of a pick-up is dangerous. A pick-up in the range of fire offers an excellent target and only its high speed can save it and its occupants. A few combatants on foot are able to stop a relatively large number of chariots if they prepare an ambush in such a way that escape is difficult or even impossible. High speed and mobility are vital, as illustrated by a chariot in October 1990. It was taking weapons that rebels had stolen from a Libyan army depot near Sebha to the rebel base in Northern Mali – a distance of about 1,600 km as the crow flies. The vehicle met a Malian army unit heading up both sides of a valley towards the base. The rebels seized the moment more quickly than the army and went up the valley at high speed, expecting the soldiers to hesitate before firing for fear of hitting

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<sup>35</sup> For details see <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/chad.htm>.

their comrades. This calculation proved right and the soldiers' hesitation gave the chariot enough time to reach the base unharmed.

The Tuareg did not usually fight from the combat platform but jumped off and fought on the ground. If one met other vehicles, there was a series of coordinated movements of vehicle and combatants, a technology of movement that was frequently implemented and whose sequence was as follows: the vehicle would drive just out of enemy fire and turn around to create a wall of dust. This would temporarily conceal the combatants who would jump off the platform, roll away, run for cover and take up firing positions. How such coordination of vehicles and combatants took place in practice is illustrated by the following report of a clash in 1994 between a group of rebels and a light tank from the Malian army.<sup>36</sup>

We drove very fast, 120-130 km/hour. There were eight people in the first car. I was the driver of the second [car]. Suddenly, a BRDM [light tank of Russian design] blocked our way. He made signs with its headlights: 'Stop!' Having no suspicion whatsoever, the first car stopped. At that very moment the tank hit the car with a burst of fire which killed four of the people on the spot and wounded the other four. I arrived at high speed, drove the car out of the firing zone, driving circles [to create a wall of dust]. The boys jumped off the car and started to shoot at the tank. I warned the others [in cars], who tried to escape off the road to the North. I took a North-Westerly direction to divert the tank, and happily the tank followed me. I led it to bad terrain. Then I returned, very fast, came to that place, took the corpses, the wounded and all the weapons and continued North to meet my friends. We buried the guys. Then I took my car and brought the wounded to Timéaouine that same night. The ambush was around 2 pm; the next morning at about 4 am I arrived at the Algerian border.<sup>37</sup>

As in many other cases, the chariots' high speed and mobility saved them from disaster and allowed them to escape. And it enabled the rebels to be at the right place at the right time to (re)start combat. This was one of the basic principles of the long-distance mobile war that the Tuareg rebels fought, and which made the government army assume that the rebels, in spite of their limited numbers,<sup>38</sup> were apparently everywhere.

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with the driver of the vehicle, Sheikh agg Awsa, Ibdagqan, Mali, 4 January 1996.

<sup>37</sup> This is a distance of about 800 km which was covered in less than 12 hours at an average speed of about 65 km/hour, a considerable speed indeed, especially if one takes into account that the car was driving off-road all the way.

<sup>38</sup> The number of armed Tuareg rebels in Mali grew from several dozen men at the beginning of the fighting in 1990 to nearly 3,000 in 1996, when peace was finally achieved. Klute, *Die Rebellionen der Tuareg*, 419 ff.

### Concluding reflections

The concept of ‘combining invention’ assumes that both the vehicle and weapons technology were appropriated by the Tuareg without making any changes and that the invention only pertained to their combined use as a chariot. There were very few changes made to the armaments, although weapon magazines were often patched together to allow a rapid change of ammunition during combat. Similarly, magazine pockets were sewn onto jackets to allow for greater ease of movement than would be possible if wearing belt pockets. Finally, the heavy machine guns were sometimes fired in an upright position, although such guns were originally designed to be fired while fixed on a tripod, with the man handling the gun lying down. The vehicles were adapted in more far-reaching ways, firstly by smugglers and later by the rebels, to suit the smuggling and warfare conditions in the desert. In fact, the vehicle was reworked so much that even such a complicated artefact as a jeep, designed according to the latest Western technological standards, was not just creatively modified but practically reinvented. Application is part of technology. In assembling vehicle and weapons techniques into the technology of the chariot, the Tuareg appropriated two imported technical artefacts to enable them to regain the initiative in desert warfare, thanks to speed and mobility.

This conclusion presupposes a willingness to give up the selective, traditionally bounded and somewhat exotic perspective through which Western sociologists still appear to perceive African societies. Significantly, the countless photographs that exist of Tuareg communities almost exclusively show camels as their main means of transport. Very rarely are donkeys seen and motor vehicles are totally absent. If cars can be identified in pictures, then it is only inadvertently in the background or as an illustration of their negative impact on the camel caravan trade. Such illustrations or, rather, the absence of illustrations, do not do justice to the growing importance of motor vehicles and the changes in the behaviour and thinking of the Tuareg in this respect.

Younger generations of Tuareg appear to be less centred on the camel and increasingly favour the pick-up. In a nomadic culture that has focused attention on the camel as a central element of mobility and sung its praise in literary traditions, this change is prompted by the fact that the camel and the pick-up are, in fact, highly compatible<sup>39</sup> and have a lot in common. Both are suited to

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<sup>39</sup> The term ‘compatibility’ was suggested by Everett Rogers to better explain the ‘degree to which an innovation is perceived as being consistent with the existing values, past experiences, and needs of the receivers’. See E.M. Rogers & F. Shoemaker *Communication of innovations: A cross-cultural approach* (London and New York, 1971 [1962]), 21.



*Photo 8.3* Chariot of Flaa rebels, Niger  
*Source:* M. Kaka 1992

the desert, have a long range and serve equally as a means of mobility or fighting, whether in straightforward robbery or war. Finally, both the camel and the pick-up serve as a means of trade and can themselves be sold off easily. Their high degree of compatibility is symbolically driven home by the *tende* festival,<sup>40</sup> a wooden mortar transformed for this festive occasion into a drum, around which the women folk congregate to sing and play. In the past, riders on richly decorated camels circumnavigated the women to show off their artistic horsemanship. Now, pick-ups have taken their place, driven in circles by men around their female kin to demonstrate their newly found technical prowess.

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<sup>40</sup> Plural: *tandiwen*. Its conversion into a drum is a beautiful example of the transformation of material and ordinary objects for festival use. *Tende* is also the term for the artistic performance described in the text above.



## Religion on the road: The spiritual experience of road travel in Ghana

Gabriel Klaeger<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Ghanaians travel constantly and many spend a great deal of time on the road. While some are lucky enough to have their own private car, others use the typical yellow taxis. These are not just found in the city but also operate as shared taxis for shorter journeys on intra-regional roads. For travel on major highways between the regional centres, people might board a State Transport Company coach. It is even more convenient to travel in an American Ford type vehicle, like the Club Wagon with a larger engine. However, the most affordable and famous mode of transportation is the *trotro* or lorry.<sup>2</sup> While *trotros*, the popular term for minibuses found on urban and regional roads, usually travel shorter distances and stop wherever passengers want to be dropped, lorries serve the longer routes. Mostly converted Mercedes 207 trucks and Nissan Urvans, these lorries are not necessarily more powerful but are definitely faster than *trotros* since they go from their lorry park to a fixed destination without any stops in between. What both have in common is that they frequently impress with their doubtful roadworthiness, obvious overloading and the high

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<sup>1</sup> I appreciate the valuable comments of the editors of this volume. Participants at the Anthropological Colloquium at the University of Bayreuth (November 2005) and at the joint seminar organized by SOAS and the Centre d'Etudes Africaines/EHESS in Paris in March 2006 also provided inspiring suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> For the sake of convenience, I use only the term 'lorry' in this chapter.

speed they achieve once their drivers have left the lorry park and are on the open road.

On the many times I boarded a lorry in Accra for a trip up North along the Accra-Kumasi road, I observed how my fellow passengers prepared themselves for the exhausting ride.<sup>3</sup> Some actually start their journey with a silent prayer; others can be seen reading a passage from their pocket Bible. For their spiritual needs, they also get help from street hawkers who sell religious booklets. Occasionally, support might be provided by itinerant preachers whose mission it is to spread good news among the waiting or already-moving passengers. Particular beliefs are likewise proclaimed on the front or back of commercial vehicles. Sign painters decorate the latter with inscriptions, proverbs and slogans which are thus carried along the road. I have come across large colourful slogans such as *Dr. JESUS, Psalm 23, Hosanna* or *Fear the Lord Almighty*, but there are countless others, occasionally in Twi, the local language. Yet other slogans are displayed in more subtle, almost obscure ways. On one of my journeys, I noticed that the lorry's owner or driver had decorated the interior with three stickers. One proclaimed *In God we trust*, while another announced *Thank you Jesus. Have you said it today?* What had been given an eye-catching place – on the dashboard just above the radio – was a sticker saying *RELAX. God is in control.*

Why do people in the transport business stick these inscriptions in and around their vehicles? Scholars have provided various interpretations of a large number of the never unambiguous inscriptions found in Ghana. Relating vehicle slogans to the life and concerns of commercial drivers, they have looked at their semantics and symbolism and tried to classify them.<sup>4</sup> With regards to travel and

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<sup>3</sup> The following descriptions are informed by my own travels on Ghana's roads. Journeys took place during several tours of Ghana, when doing fieldwork for my MA in 2001-02 and, most recently, in the course of my PhD research (since July 2006) in which I focus on the lived experience of roads and travelling in Ghana.

<sup>4</sup> They were recently reviewed by S. van der Geest, "'Anyway': Lorry inscriptions in Ghana. About cars and highlife as means of transport' (n.d.). For an extensive collection of Ghanaian lorry inscriptions, see A.K. Awedoba, 'A note on lorry names in Ghana', *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, 12 (1981), 63-64; E. Date-Bah, 'The inscriptions on the vehicles of Ghanaian commercial drivers: A sociological analysis', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 18 (1980), 523-31; M.J. Field, *Search for security: An ethno-psychiatric study of rural Ghana* (New York, 1960); J.W. Jordan, 'Role segregation for fun and profit. The daily behavior of the West African lorry driver', *Africa*, 48 (1978), 30-46; G.H. Lewis, 'The philosophy of the street in Ghana: Mammy wagons and their mottos – A research note', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 32 (1998), 165-71. For Nigeria, O.B. Lawuyi, 'The world of the Yoruba taxi driver. An interpretative approach to vehicle slogans', *Africa*, 58 (1988), 1-13.

transport, I suggest that these vehicle inscriptions point to several noteworthy circumstances on roads in Ghana. Indeed, the aim of my contribution here is to illustrate that specific road situations give rise to spiritual and religious practices which, in turn, become part of the making of roads and travelling as a lived experience.

What the stickers reveal, first of all, is that vehicles constitute tangible places for the expression of religious convictions (*In God we trust*) and that travel by road creates social communities available for worship and evangelization. This becomes obvious when itinerant preachers address passengers waiting on a bus prior to its departure. These travellers assemble as a mobile congregation with an – at least temporary – common destiny and destination.

The stickers undeniably also allude to the danger of accidents, which form, perhaps, the most striking occurrence on Ghanaian roads. For instance, *RELAX. God is in control* can be read as reassurance for the many occasions when travelling is anything but a relaxing experience and requires the protection of a controlling God. The numerous, often fatal, accidents that Ghanaians witness on their roads underscore this necessity. While for road safety experts it may seem obvious that road accidents are caused by human and material failure, in some people's perception accidents can equally be provoked by spiritual forces, bewitched vehicles or curses on sections of road. In any case, it is control and travelling protection from God and other powers that travellers seek when they pray before their lorry hits the road, when they consult shrines for amulets or when ritual specialists engage in appropriate roadside rituals.

These spiritual means of protection are known to be employed in particular by drivers. In their case, stickers are not merely attached to remind them of the general dangers of accidents. They instead have to be seen as referring to a broader professional context of road travel, namely to the engagement of commercial drivers in the economically and socially ambiguous transport business. The latter not only brings income and status but also vulnerability, since these opportunities are likely to be contested by others, envied and may trigger witchcraft attacks. Thus, messages of thanksgiving (*Thank you Jesus*), but also warnings (*Have you said it today?*) and assurances (*God is control*) serve as a hint that the rewarding but insecure conditions of commercial driving are faced with prayers, cleansing rituals and the use of protective amulets.

### Paving an anthropology of roads

In this article I address the three previously mentioned road situations and their respective fields of spiritual experience in turn. The underlying questions are: In which cases are spiritual phenomena intrinsically linked to the everyday practice of driving and travelling? When do they serve as a tactic for the integral

practice of road travel instead of incidentally happening on the road? More importantly, I want to elaborate on how religious and spiritual practices shape the everyday experience and performance of travel by road. The latter is at the core of what I consider a suitable anthropological approach to roads.



Photo 9.1 View from a minibus  
Source: G. Klaeger, 2006

To date, scholars have approached roads from an infrastructural and functional perspective and, within the social sciences, mainly in terms of politics, development and social impact.<sup>5</sup> Of interest are also those works focusing on the representational aspects of roads through the study of the semantics of symbols, metaphors and narratives. One outstanding contribution is Masquelier's description of Niger's Route 1 as a hybrid space which embodies the

<sup>5</sup> See F. Wilson, 'Towards a political economy of roads: Experiences from Peru', *Development and Change*, 35 (2004), 525-46; P. Harvey, 'The materiality of state-effects: An ethnography of a road in the Peruvian Andes'. In: C. Krohn-Hansen & K.G. Nustad, eds, *State formation: Anthropological perspectives* (London, 2005); F. Colombijn, 'Introduction; on the road'. In: F. Colombijn, ed., *On the road: The social impact of new roads in Southeast Asia* (Leiden, 2002), 595-617.

experiences of colonial history and the ambivalences of modernity.<sup>6</sup> These are reflected in the narratives concerning the road, particularly in stories about restless road spirits that cause accidents. To assess the dangerous road sections feared by some Ghanaians, Masquelier's reference to a moral geography is valuable. She understands these fears as 'an important dimension of the imaginative practices through which people read the landscape, invest it with moral significance, and assess their personal vulnerability'.<sup>7</sup>

This approach stands in sharp contrast to Augé's earlier claim that roads are a typical 'non-place' which engenders experiences of anonymity, solitude and detachment between the individual and the space traversed.<sup>8</sup> In his elaborate critique, Merriman warns that with the use of the notion 'non-place' we risk losing sight of the hybrid socio-technological networks that roads constitute. His advice is to pay attention to the 'habitations, practices of dwelling, embodied relations, material presences, placings and hybrid subjectivities associated with movement through such spaces'.<sup>9</sup> Viewing roads as multiple 'placings' provides a suitable approach to understanding how road users – drivers, passengers and vehicles – perform in and are constituted through the roads' complex networks of sociality. According to Merriman, the latter include weather conditions, safety regulations, engineers' plans, politicians' visions, the intervention of road labourers and many more. This approach, though, is likely to be too broad to give justice to people's experiences and practices at the micro-level. While we learn from Merriman in detail how the road is placed and 'produced', we do not know how the road is actually 'consumed'.

The social practice of road use has recently been approached by a number of scholars. Sociologists focus on such phenomena as driving and passengering,<sup>10</sup> vehicles and emotions,<sup>11</sup> or the assemblage of the driver-car.<sup>12</sup> For instance, Dant claims that these can be assessed by looking at 'the routine, everyday, lived, embodied relationships between human beings and the material objects

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<sup>6</sup> A. Masquelier, 'Road mythographies: Space, mobility and the historical imagination in postcolonial Niger', *American Ethnologist*, 29 (2002), 829-55.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 845.

<sup>8</sup> M. Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* (London, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> P. Merriman, 'Driving places. Marc Augé, Non-places, and the geographies of England's M1 motorway', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21 (2004), 145-67, 154.

<sup>10</sup> T. Edensor, 'Automobility and national identity; representation, geography and driving practice', *Theory Culture & Society*, 21 (2004), 101-20; N. Thrift, 'Driving in the city', *Theory, Culture & Society* 21 (2004), 41-59.

<sup>11</sup> M. Sheller, 'Automotive emotions: Feeling the car', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21 (2004), 221-42.

<sup>12</sup> T. Dant, 'The driver-car', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21 (2004), 61-79.

around them'.<sup>13</sup> He draws from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* because of its concern for the embodied *experience* of the material world.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to cognitive approaches to perception, Merleau-Ponty shows that perception is 'situated and orientated to the kinaesthetic awareness of body so that [...] the body is "geared" to the world, which is how it becomes available to the senses'.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the relationship between people and the phenomenal world of experience is seen as a form of communication.<sup>16</sup> Dant makes it clear that visual ability is a key element in the communication between driver, car and road, perception allows for 'an orientation of the whole body to the world through which it moves'.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, visual sensations are complemented by the body's other senses. The experience of driving on the road is informed by 'the sounds of the engine, the road and the wind on the car, by the resistance of steering wheel, accelerator and brakes – even the feel of the road through the wheels of the car'.<sup>18</sup>

Another way of putting this is to approach driving as being linked to a 'taskscape'. Edensor explains that action and practices on the road are a mode of 'being-in-the-world', of 'mundanely organizing and sensing the environment of familiar space'.<sup>19</sup> He argues that skills needed for driving in particular road conditions – shaped by the infrastructural limitations imposed by the state, climate, driving practices etc. – necessitate a multi-sensory engagement with the environment. Well-trained drivers respond to the contingencies of the road, generating practices which

... make space, are part of how people inhabit space and come to belong in it. [...] Inhabitants have an everyday practical orientation to the 'taskscape' which interacts with its materiality, its surface and contours, and towards the affordances of vehicle, which foster a range of actions [...] This practical use of inhabited space inheres in how people 'dwell' in cars, how they coordinate their movements and organize routes and nodes, adapting everyday practices and assumptions of the past.<sup>20</sup>

I believe that it is useful to study roads from such a phenomenological perspective as it allows us to demonstrate how roads are inhabited by their users, i.e. how they engage with them through their social, embodied and sensory practices. Such an agenda also encourages us to consider the 'road perspective' of road users. The latter consists not only of drivers but also of

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 72.

<sup>14</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception* (London, 1962).

<sup>15</sup> Dant, 'Driver-car', 71.

<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 320.

<sup>17</sup> Dant, 'Driver-car', 72.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* He calls this 'kinaesthesia of the body and its trajectory as a whole'.

<sup>19</sup> Edensor, 'Automobility and national identity', 110.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

passengers or road travellers, who have been widely neglected in the social sciences. The inquiry should take into account how lived experiences of roads and of their various, often ambivalent, circumstances shape people's everyday practices of driving and travelling and, likewise, how these experiences are an expression of people's practices of 'being-on-the-road'.

This contribution illustrates what an anthropology of roads can help to understand. The focus on spiritual practices and experiences on the road puts the limelight on everyday travellers on Ghana's roads, namely commercial drivers and passengers, and their preoccupations with the paradoxes and ambiguities of the roads. Moreover, it permits us to explore crucial issues and circumstances of current road travel in Ghana, the most salient of which is that of road safety in its connection with a variety of spiritual practices and beliefs. The circumstances of road travel will be explored in the following three sections. The concluding section takes a distinct phenomenological perspective on road travel and the related religio-spiritual practices.

### Roads as mission fields and places for worship

Ghana's lorry parks show that vehicles and roads constitute public places for spirituality, religious discussions and even proselytism. First of all, people use the surface of vehicles to express faith and beliefs. Among the variety of vehicle inscriptions we find messages with Christian and biblical themes, and others alluding to Islam or 'traditional' beliefs.<sup>21</sup> Particularly in Christian-dominated Southern Ghana, bumper stickers proudly reveal affiliation to one of the numerous churches, while others clearly emphasize the notion of success and wealth through faith, a crucial element in the so-called 'new' churches that preach the 'Prosperity Gospel'.<sup>22</sup> More subtle religious expressions are devotional paraphernalia, such as patron saints' figures, crosses or prayer chains, which are displayed on dashboards or hanging from rear-view mirrors.

Secondly, road travel and public transport create public places inhabited by travellers. Evangelists and itinerant preachers take advantage of the congrega-

<sup>21</sup> See Date-Bah, 'Inscriptions', 527-28; and van der Geest, 'Anyway'. Gifford suggests that about 50% of vehicles carry Christian slogans although van der Geest's estimate is only 10%. P. Gifford, *African christianity: Its public role* (London, 1998), 61. See also B. Meyer & J. Verrips, 'Kwaku's car: The struggles and stories of a Ghanaian long-distance taxi driver'. In: D. Miller, ed., *Car cultures* (Oxford, 2001), 153-84.

<sup>22</sup> Or 'Gospel of prosperity', 'health-wealth gospel'. See P. Gifford, *Ghana's new christianity: Pentecostalism in a globalising African economy* (Bloomington, 2004), 48; B. Meyer, 'Commodities and the power of prayer: Pentecostalist attitudes towards consumption in contemporary Ghana', *Development and Change*, 29 (1998), 751-77.

tions in lorry parks or in cramped vehicles to preach, pray, proselytize and attempt to convert non-believers. Some of the preachers I encountered in Accra and Kumasi turned out to be just regular passengers. Others got off after a few miles and after finishing their sermon and prayers for ‘travelling mercies’. I also met evangelists who were assigned to specific lorry parks by their churches and wandered from one vehicle to another prior to their departure. This chapter does not deal with the specific institutional background of these preachers who take up the challenging environment of dirty, hectic lorry parks and exhausted travellers. The preachers one encounters on the road represent a whole range of churches and religious organizations. The scope of church denominations in Ghana is overwhelming. Besides the ‘mainline’ churches – Catholic and Protestant, i.e. Presbyterian, Methodist and Anglican – there are the established Pentecostal churches and what are seen as African Independent Churches. However, with the ‘charismatic explosion’ of the past two decades, various charismatic (or neo-Pentecostal) churches have emerged and present a new, highly mediatised and dynamic Christianity that now has a strong presence in Ghana’s public sphere.

Is this display of spirituality and religious endeavour inherently functional to the practice of road travel? From a functional perspective, these forms appear to be somewhat incidental. Choosing vehicle inscriptions and preaching may well *happen* on the road but is not necessarily *meant* for the road – unless explicitly attached, for instance, to the context of travel dangers, like the sanctifying inscriptions. The road might therefore present a platform for spirituality just as many other public places and surfaces do (e.g. markets, shops, houses). From a phenomenological perspective, however, I suggest that these practices actually do become intrinsic to road travel since they contribute to the social and sensory experience of being on the road.

I want to illustrate this claim further by depicting a lorry trip I made with a friend who is a fervent charismatic Christian. The trip to the North started badly when at nightfall a heavy rainstorm at the Accra Neoplan station soaked the waiting passengers. Wet and shivering, we were pushed onto our lorry, which then took off at speed. As my friend recalled days later, what had been crucial to her on this trip was the cassette with Gospel music that the driver started playing very loudly: the singer was *Elder Miredu*, a charismatic pastor from Koforidua who produces ‘uplifting’ praise and worship songs. His overly slow and repetitive tunes of adoration created an intense but calming atmosphere which my friend (and I too) enjoyed enormously, but which also had an evidently somniferous effect on other passengers. This tangible atmosphere mingled obscurely with the harshness, speed and vibrations of the vehicle on the pitch-black Accra-Kumasi road. My travelling companion recounted that it felt just like flying through the night. To her, it was a highly sensory travel experi-



ence which the Gospel music, as a spiritual phenomenon, had clearly contributed to.

Occasionally, too, travellers have experienced how the presence of an itinerant preacher worked to reinforce the sense of community among the passengers. A young man described to me how his journey from Accra to his hometown started with a preacher's visit. As soon as the latter had got on the waiting bus, he led the passengers to sing a hymn and then started preaching, citing from his Bible. He closed with a prayer for travelling mercies. My informant was pleased that the preacher first requested the passengers' protection during their journey before commanding the driver into the hands of God: 'The passengers need to be prayed for separately,' he explained. 'That's how I always pray myself. Because we, the passengers, are one. We have come to join one vehicle and are all taken to our various homes.' He felt, too, that through joint singing, prayers and blessings, the passengers had been tangibly addressed as a distinct community. They constituted what I would term a mobile congregation, a true *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*.<sup>23</sup> Such a community is not only forced to congregate to share one vehicle to a common destination. Its passenger-members are also destined to endure the same hardships of travelling in a cramped vehicle and often on a rough road. Members are subjected to the mood and manoeuvres of their driver-leader who acts in front of a more or less silent and powerless audience, one which – unlike in true religious gatherings – frequently feels disrespected, even cheated and abused, by their unfaithful leader. 'Many drivers are not respectful,' someone complained. 'For instance, they will not mind you when you tell them to slow down. They would rather insult you. All they care about is making quick money.'

Some of the mobile congregation's sufferings are directly addressed by preachers and other charitable persons. Once, when I sat in a *trotro* waiting to depart, we were visited by a woman dressed all in white. She first attended to two young women with babies and helped them to get seated properly. She held their babies and made sure they would not get harmed when getting on the vehicle. After asking the waiting passengers to join her in an opening prayer, the woman turned out to be selling medicine, and was not a preacher at all. What she was promoting was ointment that she claimed worked perfectly against impending stomach pains due to the bumpy road. The crying baby would also feel better during the trip if its mother applied some of the ointment. Most passengers were receptive to the seller's performance. While the driver complained that she was disturbing the loading procedure, the passengers found it quite amusing how she enacted the sufferings of travelling in a comic way.

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<sup>23</sup> The German term *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* (community of fate) denotes a group of people who are, coincidentally, exposed to a common fate, e.g. a risky situation.

Indeed, laughter, high spirits among fellow travellers, good music or a stimulating radio show can compensate for suffering. Many told me that what they liked about travelling was the conversations they had during the trip (which others perceived as disturbing). 'We are all strangers but have to sit so close to each other. This even makes people socialize in vehicles.' A friend explained that buying food on a journey leads to cooperation among passengers. They help each other out when hastily buying their favourite travel snacks that are on offer from street vendors who come running up to the moving vehicle and also compete for a congregation's attention and bodily needs.

What distinguishes this mobile congregation from a congregation in the ecclesiastic sense is that the former gathers merely on a temporary, unintentional and arbitrary basis, while the latter forms a principally religious body and – at least ideally – a community of choice, which appears to be more homogenous. However, some travellers' communities excel at being quite corporate, even spiritually and ritually. Such is the case when groups travel to and from funerals. At weekends, I have seen a great many people dressed in dark mourning attire boarding public transport in groups in order to attend or return from funerals. On one occasion, I was on a vehicle with a group of women who were on their way home from a funeral in Accra. Some had obviously enjoyed alcoholic drinks at the event and monopolized the climate in the packed minibus with their laughter and noisy conversation, occasionally annoying other passengers and the conductor with cheeky remarks. As the radio played Highlife songs, the women were singing along and started weeping and swaying in time to the tunes of popular funeral songs. Such collective expressions of emotion were particularly strong among the bereaved who were in charge of transporting the coffin, a performance with ritual features. Before escorting the coffin to the funeral ground (which usually takes place on Friday afternoons), I met family members assembling in front of the mortuary with vehicles decorated with strips of red cloth. A highly emotional crowd, they wept, shouted, drank and quarrelled before the body was finally released and placed into one of the vehicles which spearheaded the slow but noisy convoy of mourners. Here, vehicular mobility and transport had become a constituent part of the funeral celebration and the mourners' emotional and spiritual practices became intertwined with the experience of travelling as their grieving was taken onto the road.

This entanglement of events, places, practices and experiences is equally obvious when church groups turn into mobile congregations. I occasionally travelled with youth groups and church choirs to attend out-of-town programmes. One of their vehicles carried the slogan *Pray without ceasing*. In this very sense, and in line with the church's liturgy, these journeys were always framed by opening and closing prayers said by one of the group's leaders. At

times, the so-called ‘eyes closed!’ episodes inside the vehicle turned out to be quite lengthy as they contained elements of worship and thanksgiving as well as an intensive period of intercessions. In the latter, God was generally asked for his guidance throughout the day, for the success of the upcoming event and of course for travelling mercies. Usually, too, when the church programme at the final destination was to be opened with prayers, the fact that God had protected the travellers from the road’s dangers was clearly acknowledged once again.



Photo 9.2 Praying on the road  
Source: G. Klaeger, 2006

### Dangers of the road: Spiritual practices and perceptions

Talking of the road’s dangers, the *Ghanaian Chronicle* reported that there is ‘a serious national crisis because road traffic accidents are becoming very common and are robbing the nation of its valuable human resources’.<sup>24</sup> Figures show that road accidents claim 1,800 fatalities every year, allegedly causing

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<sup>24</sup> ‘Mercedes Benz 207, Ford express and road accidents in Ghana’, *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 23 February 2006.

more deaths than AIDS in Ghana.<sup>25</sup> This national crisis has led the National Road Safety Commission, other state agencies and NGOs to embark on various road-safety campaigns in recent years, flanked by heated debates in newspapers and on radio stations about people's responsibilities. The public particularly blame the commercial *trotro* and minibus drivers for the crisis, accusing them of speeding, overloading and irresponsible driving in vehicles – or 'moving coffins' – which are unroadworthy. The deplorable state of the country's roads is also held responsible by many for a lot of the accidents.

The 222-km Accra-Kumasi road, the most important highway to the North, is known to be a death trap for motorists. This corridor has acquired 'notoriety for gruesome accidents owing not only to its poor physical nature, but also its improper design'.<sup>26</sup> This was confirmed by a road traffic study conducted by the Ministry of Road Transport to identify hazardous places or black spots on Ghana's roads. It was particularly Potroase, a village close to Kyebi, that was found to be notorious for fatal accidents and one of the most dangerous stretches of road in the country.<sup>27</sup> This death trap, a bendy section of road at Potroase, is roughly 60 km from the capital. The road gently climbs up into the Atiwa Mountains of the Eastern Region and suddenly plunges into an idyllic green valley. Drivers are warned about the 'treacherous curve' and about 'death on the hairpin bend around the cliff', as vehicles crash there all too often.<sup>28</sup> To remove these hazards, the road and traffic agencies responsible have constructed a safer 10 km diversion. As part of the still-ongoing major Accra-Kumasi road reconstruction, this dual carriageway was completed in 2004 and now simply diverts the main (but not all) traffic from Potroase village and other places like Kyebi.<sup>29</sup>

In contrast to how road safety experts have approached the hazards of the Kyebi-Potroase section and the technical solutions presented, a journalist referred to the site as a 'Bermuda Triangle' with a spiritual connotation.<sup>30</sup> He discussed the possible presence of gods and ghosts that could torment passers-by, as well as controversies over suggestions for pacification rites at these identified road spots. In particular he mentioned rituals which had been per-

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<sup>25</sup> 'More deaths result from road accidents than HIV/AIDS, Says GRSC Chairman', *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 15 April 2004.

<sup>26</sup> 'The suhum "Bermuda triangle"', *Ghanaweb*, (n.d.).

<sup>27</sup> '40 Death spots identified' *Ghanaweb*, 26 November 2005. More than 50% of all accidents occurring along the Accra-Kumasi corridor are related to speeding. See National Road Safety Commission, *Annual Report* (2003).

<sup>28</sup> 'Elegy from the bowels of Kwaebibirem', *Ghanaweb*, 28 February 2003.

<sup>29</sup> Ministry of Roads and Transport, 'RSDP Report', (2005).

<sup>30</sup> 'Bermuda triangle on our roads', *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 18 February 2002. The same notion has also been applied to the dangerous Suhum intersection close to Potroase.

formed to ‘remove [or] drive away’ ghosts from accident spots, presumably the ghosts of victims of road accidents.<sup>31</sup> The chief of Potroase, on the other hand, is reported to have ‘debunked claims that there was a “witch pot”, which spiritually drew human blood manifesting in the frequent fatal motor accidents’ in Potroase.<sup>32</sup> But people continue to tell me about the alleged presence of witches in this particular village and they remember that even the late King Kuntunkununku II was once involved in removing such bad spirits from its bends – and in cleansing the village of its bad reputation. Today, the village chief sees its reputation being finally saved and since the opening of the new diversion and the absence of heavy traffic, not a single accident has occurred in Potroase. For him, it is a clear sign that machines and their operators, and not witchcraft (Twi: *obayi*), were the root of all evil.

Still, for many Ghanaians, the horrifying wrecks of cars that can be seen abandoned along the roadside offer tangible evidence of the unusual powers that must have been involved in such accidents. In conversations, people expressed their amazement at the heavy articulated trucks that had tipped over on newly constructed and therefore on straight, pothole-free and smooth motorways. These accidents appear mysterious and some believe them to be caused by witchcraft imposed on roads and vehicles, or by destructive forces or devilish powers waiting along the roadside.<sup>33</sup> Some Ghanaians also believe in dangers emanating from bad travelling days (*dabone*). All these can be seen as images of an occult and destructive road, the latter calling for appropriate countermeasures.

In terms of protection and control, a commentator in the *Ghanaian Chronicle* complained that the transport business ‘is killing us’, and called for various behavioural and material changes.<sup>34</sup> He also suggested that

... for our survival [...] we need to be very virtuous, and religious both as drivers, and as passengers [...]. [T]he facility of our travelling and transportation ease must be acknowledged to the Creator God who endows us with the invention of the automobile which constitutes the foundation of the cars in our streets. [...] Indeed we need to brace ourselves *spiritually* for the journeys we make in our cars and trucks, if some fatal accidents are to be avoided. There is something beyond the *physical* we must care to commandeer for our continued survival on the journey of life.<sup>35</sup>

What is intriguing about this appeal is the supposed distinction between the spiritual and the physical. Many Ghanaians are convinced of such a twofold

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Mcglobal*, ‘There is no “witch-pot” at Potroase – Chief’ (2001).

<sup>33</sup> Masquelier has written extensively on road spirits in Niger; see Masquelier, ‘Road mythographies’, 838-44.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Deaths on our roads’, *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 23 April 2004.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* (G.K.’s emphasis).

approach towards road dangers. Being well aware of the physical disposition and consequences of what is popularly known as ‘bad roads, bad cars, bad drivers’, they also see the need to protect themselves spiritually. Some of the various means available have already been mentioned. They can be subtle and intimate practices, occasionally requested from ritual specialists such as pastors, Muslim *malams* or traditional priests (*akomfo*). In Kyebi, I knew one man from Burkina Faso, a *marabout*, who sold expensive talismans that would help prevent ‘bad encounters’ on journeys and protect their owners from injury or death in road accidents.<sup>36</sup>

Other measures are on a larger scale. In 2002 when I was doing fieldwork near the Royal Palace in Kyebi, I witnessed how palace traditionalists performed a grand ceremony to pacify *Birim*, the local river deity.<sup>37</sup> In the presence of her medium (*Birimkomfo* from an Akuapem-based shrine) and the local caretaker-priest (*Birimsofo*), rituals – such as animal sacrifices, pouring libations into the Birim River and sprinkling its water in town – were performed. These extraordinary cleansing rituals had apparently been ordered by *Birim* because of the many accidents occurring around Kyebi. However, it was not clear whether *Birim* had been the cause of the accidents herself, or whether she could actively prevent them. Like other deities (*abosom*), *Birim* is thought to be ambiguous, both dangerous and protective.<sup>38</sup> On another occasion, the Akyem Abuakwa king’s Mercedes Benz was ritually purified in front of the palace in the presence of the *Birimsofo*. A circle of sacrificial blood was drawn around the vehicle to cleanse it of evils it might have met along the road and to protect it during its frequent trips on the hazardous Accra-Kumasi road.

Crucial to the shrine priests’ powers and the cleansing rituals is the fact that they meet the concrete needs of people’s road practices. What counts for road users is that, both practically and tangibly, these powers and procedures convey a sense of roadworthiness. The protective measures against road accidents are, therefore, to be assessed as intrinsic to road travel since they directly serve the roads’ prime purpose, i.e. accommodating the movement of vehicles (and, of course, passengers and goods). From this perspective, the measures differ significantly from those religio-spiritual practices that are employed by commercial drivers. These practices target the economic realm of commercial road professionals and are less intrinsic to roads as they could actually be found in any other risky enterprise.

<sup>36</sup> Masquelier, ‘Road mythographies’, 844; Meyer & Verrips, ‘Kwaku’s car’.

<sup>37</sup> See Klaeger, *Kirche und Königspalast*; *Ibid.* “‘A monarch of his time’: Traditional leadership and the staging of AIDS awareness campaigns in Ghana’. In: J. Reuter, C. Antweiler & C. Neudorfer, eds, *Strand Bar Bügelzimmer Internet; Neue Orte einer Ethnologie der Globalisierung* (Hamburg, 2006), 141–65.

<sup>38</sup> Gilbert, ‘Sources of Power’, 69.

### Ambiguous opportunities and the spiritual challenges of commercial driving

In her article on roads in Niger, Masquelier describes how roads are 'pathways to wealth and status for those who know how to use them', particularly as they provide jobs for drivers and other related income-generating occupations which can be found around and departing from the parking areas that spawn 'a complex economy of services, trade, and exchange'.<sup>39</sup> In Ghana, driving as an occupation emerged with the construction of roads accessible to motorized vehicles, and was linked to the boom in the cocoa industry at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>40</sup> Transport historians describe this period as the beginning of the 'lorry age' with its ever-increasing number of African owners and drivers of commercial motor vehicles, the so-called 'mammy waggons'.<sup>41</sup> Today, the public transport system in Ghana is organized by multi-sectoral transport enterprises but predominantly by private-sector operators. They are organized and controlled by a number of unions and cooperatives, such as the Ghana Private Road Transport Union (GPRTU), which also operate the terminals, the lorry parks and *trotro* stations.<sup>42</sup> Union members are made up of owner-drivers of taxis, *trotros* and minibuses, entrepreneurs who hire their vehicles, and drivers and the entrepreneurs who employ them.

All social scientists who have dealt with commercial taxi or lorry drivers in Ghana<sup>43</sup> point to the ambiguities inherent in their profession. Though it provides respect, prestige and income, success is unpredictable and their positions are vulnerable.<sup>44</sup> For instance, drivers who work for a 'master', i.e. the actual vehicle owner, are caught in a patronage relationship which regularly creates conflict situations. Many feel constantly challenged, even envied, by other people for their financial success and see various threats against themselves, their economic position or everyday driving performance, or even against their vehicle. Field's early interpretation of vehicle inscriptions, which van der Geest confirmed through his own 'lorry park conversations', suggests that the slogans

<sup>39</sup> Masquelier, 'Road mythographies', 836.

<sup>40</sup> See Date-Bah, 'Inscriptions', 40.

<sup>41</sup> On 'mammy waggons' and for an economic review of early lorry driving, see P.R. Gould, *The development of the transport pattern in Ghana* (Evanston, IL, 1960), 78.

<sup>42</sup> See E.A. Kwakye, 'A multi-disciplinary approach to the urban transport problems in Ghana', *Third World Planning Review*, 17 (1995), 421-38. On transport unions, see A. Joshi & J. Ayee, 'Taxing for the state? Politics, revenue and the informal sector in Ghana', *IDS Bulletin*, 33 (2002).

<sup>43</sup> These include Date-Bah, 'Inscriptions'; Field, *Search for security* and Jordan, 'role segregation'. For Nigerian drivers, see O.B. Lawuyi, 'Yoruba taxi driver'; A. Peace, 'The politics of transporting', *Africa*, 58 (1988), 14-28.

<sup>44</sup> Meyer & Verrips, 'Kwaku's Car', 162.

allude to envy, jealousy and witchcraft – dangers that commercial drivers see themselves constantly confronted with, and that necessitate counteractions.<sup>45</sup>

Field writes:

Among young men [...], there is no more widespread ambition [...] than to drive, and if possible own, one of the thousands of passenger lorries that rave about the roads. Having achieved this ambition, the driver is acutely conscious of himself as an object of envy, and has much anxiety lest those seeking his humiliation should bring it about by bad magic designed either to wreck his lorry or to bring it financial disaster. Therefore he seldom neglects to take his new lorry to a shrine for protection.<sup>46</sup>

What Field hints at are the shrines of new or newly revived deities, distinguishable as the *obosom-brafo* type of shrine in Ashanti and the ‘drinking medicine’ type introduced from the Northern parts of the country in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>47</sup> Commonly labelled as ‘anti-witchcraft’ shrines, they are headed by priests who might become possessed by the *obosom-obrafo* or, for the second type, who act as medicine makers (*aduruyefo*). The latter are able to issue cleansing powers in the form of talisman or ‘magical’ medicine (*suman*, resp. *aduro*) and, if necessary, rid bodies of witchcraft – even through the healing power of the Bible.<sup>48</sup> Field observed that a large number of lorry drivers, with their particular troubles and desires, frequently attend shrines for consultations (*abisa*). She noted how some turn up because their business is not prosperous, inquiring whether an envious person might have made ‘bad medicine’ or to see whether witches had caused financial misfortune. Others seek help for new enterprises ‘bringing their new lorries and themselves for protection from accidents, enemies and financial ruin’. Again, drivers with debts implore the deity to help them acquire money.<sup>49</sup> Many years later, Parish gave an account of young men in the Brong Ahafo region who regularly visited the village shrines, including one who consulted the shrine priest about his car troubles. Having been caught smuggling foodstuffs in his car, he was convinced that the vehicle was possessed by an evil spirit conjured up by his ex-wife, even

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<sup>45</sup> Field, *Search for security*; van der Geest, ‘Anyway’.

<sup>46</sup> Field, *Search for security*, 134.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 88.

<sup>48</sup> J. Parish, ‘The dynamics of witchcraft and indigenous shrines among the Akan’, *Africa*, 69 (1999), 426-47. Parish explicitly discusses the contemporary functioning of Akan anti-witchcraft shrines. On the classification of deities and powers among the Akan, see M. Gilbert, ‘Sources of power in Akuropon-Akuapem: Ambiguity in classification’. In: W. Arens & I. Karp (eds) *Creativity of power: Cosmology and action in African societies* (Washington, 1989).

<sup>49</sup> Field, *Search for security*, 108.



more so when he was involved in a near-fatal accident. He then acquired a powerful talisman and hung it from the windscreen.<sup>50</sup>

The religio-spiritual practices and ideas of Kwaku, a commercial driver in Accra, are vividly recounted by Meyer and Verrips. His taxi started giving him trouble when it was involved in accidents in which he suspected destructive spiritual means were present. The driver then let his church elders bless the car through prayers to protect it through the Holy Spirit from *juju*, i.e. black magic, evil forces and Satan. He claimed that other drivers would use *juju* themselves to protect the car driver and encourage business, and hide special objects under the hood or the pedals. Car accidents, the Christian believed, might be caused by the devilish forces employed by envious and greedy persons as acts of spiritual killing, by strange beings roaming along the roadside or even by the ghosts of deceased people in vehicles, which therefore needed to be ritually purified.<sup>51</sup>

What all these accounts reveal is that the professional engagement with road travel affords spiritual measures which are directed towards prosperity and protection. Both are strongly intertwined and form, with deliverance and ritual cleansing, important elements within the preaching and practices of Ghana's charismatic Pentecostal churches.<sup>52</sup> But prosperity and protection are equally approached by practices at the *aduruyefo* shrines and are visibly referred to by the numerous spiritual vehicle inscriptions. *Suro nipa* (Fear humans) and *Onipa ye bad* (Man is bad) are slogans that I found on an old, metallic-blue Bedford truck in the provincial town of Kyebi. These can be interpreted as warnings of people's constant evil-doings against others and against lorry owners in particular. As such, they are not necessarily directed at the functional and pertinent issues of roads and travelling but at their ambiguous socio-professional context. However, when accidents inflicted by those wishing evil and their powers are at stake, then the line between the risky enterprise of commercial driving and the concrete dangers of roads and travelling, to which all road users are subject, becomes blurred. Under both circumstances, people fall back on similar spiritual means and measures.

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<sup>50</sup> J. Parish, 'Black market, tree market: Anti-witchcraft shrines & fetishes among the Akan'. In: H. Moore & T. Sanders, eds, *Magical interpretations, material realities; modernity, witchcraft and the pccult in postcolonial Africa* (London and New York, 2001), 124-25.

<sup>51</sup> Meyer & Verrips, 'Kwaku's car', 165-76.

<sup>52</sup> See B. Meyer, 'Christianity in Africa: From African independent to pentecostal-charismatic churches', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33 (2004), 447-74; Gifford, *Ghana's new christianity*, 85-90.

### Religion on the road: A dwelling perspective

Does all this suggest that there is some kind of spiritualization of the road and travelling in Ghana underway? One might be tempted to argue that we are dealing with a set of religious concepts – mentally constructed with the help of various beliefs and current dogmatic discourses – which Ghanaians bring to lorry parks, attach to vehicles and, eventually, take for a ride along the road. Such an approach would presume a certain religious worldview of people on the basis of which road travel is perceived, namely concepts that people arguably reveal through meaningful lorry inscriptions and upon which they build their religio-spiritual practices. However, as Ingold has outlined, this ‘building perspective’ of representationalist theory, one which takes conceptual representations or a worldview as a premise for human activity and dwelling, is problematic.<sup>53</sup> He instead calls for a ‘dwelling perspective’ that is based on the phenomenology of Heidegger who states that ‘[w]e do not dwell because we have to build, but we build and have to build because we dwell, that is, because we are *dwellers*’.<sup>54</sup> Following this perspective, it is fundamental for Ingold to acknowledge that ‘the forms people build, whether in the imagination or on the ground, arise within the current of their involved activity, in the specific relational contexts of their practical engagement with their surroundings’.<sup>55</sup> It is this specific context and surrounding which Merriman is able to grasp when making roads out as multiple and heterogenous ‘placings’ and as networks of sociality.<sup>56</sup> This context is equally considered by Masquelier when she recognizes roads as a hybrid space which condenses and concretizes the past and the ambivalent experience of modernity.<sup>57</sup> However, she strongly emphasizes the representational dimension of road experience when dealing with the beliefs – expressed by people in their ‘fantastic tales’ about roads and travelling – as mere imaginative practices.<sup>58</sup> In line with Ingold’s ‘dwelling perspective’, one instead has to move away from the semantics and symbolics of beliefs towards the ‘concreteness of everyday practical experience’ when assessing the phenomena on Ghana’s roads.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> T. Ingold, *The perception of the environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill* (London and New York, 2000), 172-88.

<sup>54</sup> M. Heidegger, ‘Building, dwelling, thinking’. In: D.F. Krell, ed., *Martin Heidegger: Basic writings* (London, 1993), 350.

<sup>55</sup> Ingold, *Perception*, 86. See also R. Willerslev, ‘Spirits as “ready to hand”’, *Anthropological Theory*, 4 (2004), 400-408.

<sup>56</sup> Merriman, ‘Driving places’.

<sup>57</sup> Masquelier, ‘Road mythographies’.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 845.

<sup>59</sup> Willerslev, ‘Spirits’, 401.

In this sense, I suggest that the protective spiritual means are to be seen as instrumental rituals which drivers and passengers employ in a matter-of-fact fashion without paying them as such any attention in daily practice. Instead, attention is directed towards the very practices involved in road travel: people's intentions seem to pass through the spiritual powers addressed towards the purpose of their activity, namely reaching their destination successfully.<sup>60</sup> From this perspective of practical engagement, prayers, slogans and attached amulets are simple routine practices that, according to Sheller, induce 'a sense of having taken security measures'.<sup>61</sup> They make the occupants of the vehicle feel that appropriate precautions have been taken and can therefore be described as bodily and experiential practice and are shaped by the daily and never unambiguous tasks of dwelling on the road. In this context of road travel, one could say that the spiritual powers present themselves 'with a kind of available being', as tools 'ready to hand'.<sup>62</sup>

A further argument supporting the 'dwelling perspective', in contrast to an alleged worldview as a premise for practices, is people's indifferent attitude towards theorizing on the spiritual powers employed. Ghanaians do not usually talk about these routine practices, nor do they have a clear-cut, transparent idea of a spiritual world that could be unanimously related to roads – an impossible assumption in the light of religious pluralism in Ghana. Christians did not have much to reveal about the prayers they said when boarding a lorry, only that 'this is how I do things as a Christian': you say prayers as part of your travel preparations. This pragmatic attitude, Willerslev claims, is 'intrinsic to [people's] practical mode of being, in which [spiritual forces] effectively vanish as objects of attention in favour of pragmatic concerns'.<sup>63</sup> This is not to suggest that theoretical thinking on the issues raised is impossible, as both ordinary people and religious specialists demonstrate. Of course pastors are able to reveal their understanding of the theological dimension of prayers. *Akomfo* priests have a clear idea of how the protective powers of their shrines operate in the world and do not merely provide the prototypical reference to *ammamere*, i.e. to 'tradition' or to 'the ways we do our culture'.<sup>64</sup> What must be emphasized is that such abstract reflection is only possible when one disengages from the current of

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 402-403.

<sup>61</sup> Sheller, 'Automotive emotions', 227. See also Lawuyi who writes that '[t]he presence of *juju* in vehicles is a resort to symbolic action in the face of uncertainties', in 'Yoruba taxi driver', 4.

<sup>62</sup> Willerslev, 'Spirits', 403.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> See G. Klaeger, 'Palastbräuche versus missionarsrechte: Traditionspluralismus und angefochtene souveränitäten im konflikt um das Ohum-festival in Kyebi (Ghana)', *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, (forthcoming).

one's activity, when a 'mode of contemplative detachment' has been achieved.<sup>65</sup> In following Ingold, the crucial distinction remains that the religio-spiritual conceptions of Ghanaians are not just *expressed* in their daily road practices but rather that they *subsist* in the flow of the practices.<sup>66</sup>

Again, it is when the flow of practices is disrupted that a theoretical standpoint towards the spiritual dimension of road travel can be adopted. Disengagement from daily routine is likely to imply some experience of 'crisis' or a situation of continuous failure that encourages people to critically assess the actual practice.<sup>67</sup> Take, for instance, the permanent experience of fatal road accidents around Potroase village. It has not only led newspaper commentators to deliberate on the possible presence of specific spirits and ghosts around this ill-famed section of the Accra-Kumasi road. More importantly, the villagers deemed it necessary to thoroughly negotiate appropriate ritual measures to tackle the carnage on their doorsteps. Other incidents for such spiritual deliberations are the festive seasons in Ghana, particularly the Christmas and Easter holidays, when people spend significant time on the roads going to their home towns to visit relatives. Whilst these accident-prone seasons force the National Road Safety Commission to intensify its road-safety campaigns, they seem to have fostered the perception among some 'that road accidents particularly during Christmas festivities were linked to a spiritual deity'.<sup>68</sup> A final example is road-building which people experience as a decisive moment of change in various senses. From the perspective of the spiritual entanglement of roads, newly constructed roads can be seen as passing through 'wild' and dangerous landscape, even through ritually prohibited areas. They thus necessitate particular attention, the inquiry of specialists and appropriate practices. In this case, when the daily routine of roads and travelling is disrupted, I suppose it will just not feel reassuring to merely rely on an unobtrusive sticker and its faithful reminder '*RELAX. God is in control*'.

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<sup>65</sup> Willerslev, 'Spirits', 404.

<sup>66</sup> Ingold, *Perception*, 162.

<sup>67</sup> Willerslev, 'Spirits', 404-407.

<sup>68</sup> 'GPRTU Official enumerates causes of accidents', *Ghananews*, 16 December 2005. Around the festive season, explicitly Christian messages are sent out to commercial drivers.

## A chief's fatal car accident: Political history and moral geography in Burkina Faso

Sabine Luning

### Introduction

The car crash that is central to this contribution highlights contemporary political processes in Burkina Faso. The chapter presents a range of interpretations offered by people in Burkina Faso when this fatal crash took place on 10 March 1995, killing Chief<sup>1</sup> Sanem, the newly appointed chief of one of the Mossi chiefdoms. Only in June 1994 had the chief been nominated to the chiefdom of Maane, which lies some 100 km North of the capital, Ouagadougou, and has the administrative status of a *département*. Chief Sanem's nomination was the result of a particularly fierce succession struggle. The following newspaper article shows that this car accident generated a plethora of interpretations:

*L'Observateur Paalga* of 17-19 March 1995 reported what happened:

Chief Sanem of Maane died on Friday 10 March 1995 (it was actually Saturday 11 March, SL), a victim of an accident while on the road to Boussouma for a courtesy visit to the paramount chief of the region, *Naaba* Sonre. A lot of interpretations are circulating about this tragedy since it is just a year since this illustrious citizen was inaugurated, after the throne had been vacant for over a year for political as well as other reasons. For some, it was a massive blow from the side of the guardians of tradition. For others, it corresponded to a logic stipulating that the successor to a chief who has reigned for a very long time (over thirty years) cannot last long. The

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<sup>1</sup> In Moore, the local language, a chief is called a *naaba*.

population is living in anxiety, having already suffered the demise of Chief Tigré, the predecessor to the person they are mourning today.<sup>2</sup>

The newspaper article informs the reader that the chief met with this fatal accident on his way to visit the paramount chief of the region, the Chief of Boussouma. A crucial player in the succession struggle, the paramount chief had finally decided to nominate Chief Sanem, despite the fact that, according to generally accepted rules, he was not considered a legitimate candidate. The article refers to the variety of interpretations surrounding his death. Was he killed by traditional power holders or had his predecessor's long reign been the cause of his demise?

This article deals with the numerous explanations this car accident engendered, many referring to the struggles and the rituals connected to the succession, breaches in correct social behaviour and the dangers of being on the road.

Sally Falk Moore<sup>3</sup> demonstrates beautifully how events that take place during fieldwork can be used for writing current history. Events with even the least temporally stretched-out episodes, 'chopped-off anecdotes' as she calls them, can be indicators of processes at many levels.<sup>4</sup> Two of the three cases she uses to write history in this manner involve fatal car accidents that took place in the Mount Kilimanjaro region shortly after Tanzania's independence, each highlighting a larger political arena, economic conflict over land, and/or historical processes related to interactions between local and Christian beliefs.

In this chapter I follow Sally Falk Moore's example and centre on interpretations of a fatal car accident to write a contemporary history, in this case of political developments in the central part of Burkina Faso. Interpretations of the accident are used to illustrate features of the political relations and ritual events characteristic of the recent succession struggle. However, the case also illustrates more general features of the explanations a dramatic event like a car accident may trigger. Car accidents take place on the road, they occur when making journeys away from home. How do the spatial specificities of a car

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<sup>2</sup> Le naba Sanem de Mané s'est éteint le vendredi 10/3/95, victime d'un accident alors qu'il se rendait à Boussouma pour une visite de courtoise au 'dima' de la localité, le naba Sonré. Bien de supputations courent au sujet de cette tragédie puisqu'il y a à peine un an que l'illustre disparu a été intronisé, après plus d'un an de vacance de trône pour des raisons multiples dont celles politiques. Pour certains il s'agirait d'un coup fourré au niveau des dépositaires de la tradition. Pour d'autres ceci répond à une logique, le successeur d'un chef ayant régné longtemps (plus de trente ans) ne pouvant 'faire long feu'. Quant à la population, elle vit dans la hantise, elle qui a déjà souffert le martyr après le décès de naba Tigré, prédécesseur de celui qu'elle pleure aujourd'hui.

<sup>3</sup> S. Falk Moore, 'Explaining the present: Theoretical dilemmas in processual ethnography', *American Ethnologist*, 14 (1987), 727-36.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 734.

accident recur in explanatory frameworks? Why are roads talked about as perilous places that may require (ritual) protection? Various authors have addressed the question of the dangers of the road, in particular in West African ethnographic works.<sup>5</sup> Masquelier's article<sup>6</sup> analyzes the interpretation of car accidents by Hausaphone Mawri in present-day Niger. These accidents are attributed to spirits that are located along the road, in particular along the only tarred road – running on an East-West axis – that was first constructed as a colonial project. She describes how this road-building project was based on forced labour and how its trajectory disregarded the places inhabited by spirits. In present-day road stories, dislocated spirits are portrayed as the primary agents causing disaster on the road. She argues that even though the state of the cars and roads leave much to be desired and drivers may be speeding, interpretations of the accident will generally implicate spirits. Tinkering with space and its inhabitants can be dangerous since it may upset the 'moral geography', as Masquelier aptly calls it. The notion of 'moral geography' urges anthropologists<sup>7</sup> to study how value is attributed to different places and how similar acts can be regarded as correct when performed in one place but wrong, or even dangerous, in another. It is important to investigate how ideas about conduct are placed or situated. How do people connect the issue of their own morals to the spatial setting in which they act, and how do spatial settings of events feature in moral judgments?

The morals that guide social life and spatial arrangements are articulated in the interpretations of car accidents in Maane. They are seen as events loaded with moral judgments: Dying in a car accident is considered the worst way of

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<sup>5</sup> P. Chilson, *Riding the demon: On the road in West Africa* (Athens GA, 1999); G. Klaeger, 'Religion on the road: The spiritual experiences of road travel in Ghana', in this volume; A. Masquelier, 'Road mythographies: Space, mobility, and the historical imagination in postcolonial Niger', *American Ethnologist*, 29 (2002), 829-55; S. van der Geest, "'Anyway!'" Lorry inscriptions in Ghana. Commercial cars and highlife as a means of transport', in this volume; J. Verrips & B. Meyer, 'Kwaku's car: The struggles and stories of a Ghanaian long-distance taxi driver'. In: D. Miller, ed., *Car cultures* (Oxford and New York, 2001), 153-84.

<sup>6</sup> A. Masquelier, 'Road Mythographies'.

<sup>7</sup> The notion of 'moral geography' is used in various fields of study, for example in geography and political science as well as in the study of religion, in each area with a different meaning. For geographers, the term 'moral geography' evokes issues of mapping. Why would certain places be mapped and others not? And what do these practices of mapping tell us about processes and forms of expansion and settlement? Political scientists may study Samuel Huntington's clash of civilization as a particular moral geography or they may ask why conflicts in the Middle East trigger so much more media attention than conflicts in Africa. And scholars of religion, in turn, may study why particular places are worshipped or why specific sites are seen to represent special historical events constituting *lieux de mémoire*.

ending one's life and raises immediate questions about why, who and where? The worst death is to be struck down in a violent manner away from home. In studying ideas about such terrible deaths – in the wrong way and in the wrong place – ritual practices need to be considered.

Ritual is important since travelling by car in Maane, and West Africa generally,<sup>8</sup> requires precautions that are ritual in nature. Moreover, in Maane a 'bad death' from a car accident is dealt with by adjusting the burial rites to prevent a repetition of the tragedy. Funeral rituals for people who are believed to have died a normal and 'good' death take place in the residential space of the deceased. Acts performed in this ritual context primarily consist of altering this space; for example, a wall of the house will be demolished and mourners will make a ritual tour of the house. These spatial acts aim to transform relations between the deceased and the living. However, victims of car accidents are never taken back into their homes. The spatial characteristics of their burial rituals are changed as a form of social damage control. This is a good example of how ritual acts express as well as produce a moral geography: by tampering with the spatiality of the ritual, one hopes to tamper with social life.

The example illustrates a more general relationship between rituals and features of automobility and travel. It has long been acknowledged that ritual activities resemble journeys or passages.<sup>9</sup> The fact that ritual acts often take the shape of performing journeys, and that ordinary travel requires ritual acts to ensure safety and success, gives rise to interesting connections between car travel and rituals. In this chapter, connections are made between ritual practices and the interpretation of car accidents. First of all, both sorts of events demonstrate how people shape and interpret social relations and how power play is

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<sup>8</sup> See ethnographies mentioned in Footnote 5.

<sup>9</sup> This is clearly the case for rituals such as pilgrimages. However the similarity applies to a much larger domain of ritual acts. In many contexts, ritual acts take the shape of specific gestures of movement and trajectories, which has led scholars to equate ritual transitions to spatial movements. See A. van Gennep, *The rites of passage* (Chicago, 1961) and R.P. Werbner, *Ritual passage, sacred journey* (Manchester, 1989); Turner's 'liminality' (passing over thresholds) in V. Turner, *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure* (London, 1969); Bloch's notion of 'rebounding violence' in M. Bloch, *From blessing to violence: History and ideology in the circumcision ritual of the Merina of Madagascar* (Cambridge, 1986); and Parkin's definition of ritual as bodily movement and gestures in D. Parkin, 'Ritual as spatial direction and bodily division'. In: D. de Coppet, ed. *Understanding rituals* (London, 1992), 11-25. See also D. Parkin, *The sacred void: Spatial images of work and ritual among the Giriama of Kenya* (Cambridge, 1991). J.Z. Smith has captured this quality of ritual brilliantly in his title *To take place: Toward theory in ritual* (Chicago, 1992).



part of the political arena. Secondly, car travel and rituals can be identified as 'events of passage' and as 'movements on the road'.

The case of the Chief of Maane's fatal car crash on Saturday 11 March 1995 not only allows us to write a particular political history but does so by showing how, in the comments of different people, social morals, spatial settings and ritual practices were articulated. To appreciate how the study of this car accident illuminates recent political developments in the region as well as central features of ritual events, I describe the social and ritual process leading up to this fatal outcome. The connections become clear between politics and ritual, as well as between ritual, journeys and what I call 'motorized mobility'. The chapter then moves to the actual car accident itself and the different interpretations that were subsequently voiced. These comments are analyzed as part of a particular moral geography.

### The chiefs in Burkina Faso's recent political history

In colonial and post-colonial times, the position of traditional Mossi chiefs has been subject to change. During most of the colonial period, Mossi chiefs were the local representatives of the colonial regime as either *Chef de Province* or *Chef de Canton* and acted as intermediaries between villagers and the French *Commandant de Cercle*. However a trend set during the 1950s remained the norm, also after independence: for administrative jobs at *préfecture* level, recruitment started to be done on the basis of educational qualifications.

In the early 1960s, soon after Upper Volta had gained independence, Mossi chiefs were excluded from the political and administrative realm.<sup>10</sup> However, the position of the chiefs kept changing and periods in which the chiefs were excluded from public affairs alternated with times when new situations gave rise to them having a more influential role. Some chiefs and their kinsmen managed to obtain powerful positions in the national administration, while others depended solely on their traditional positions. A good example of a chief who was successful in combining modern and traditional sources to build up a position of authority is the Chief of Boussouma, who had always been an administrator and during democratic periods would have a seat in parliament. The Chief of Maane and male family members, on the other hand, were never very successful in 'modern' careers. With the exception of a job as clerk for the eldest son of Chief Tegre, the royal family in Maane was always dependent on the space formally allotted to traditional chiefs in the public domain.

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<sup>10</sup> E.P. Skinner, *The Mossi of Burkina Faso: Chiefs, politicians and soldiers* (Illinois, 1989); S. Luning, *Het binnenhalen van de oogst. Ritueel en samenleving in Maane, Burkina Faso* (Leiden, 1997).

In this respect, the worst period, from the perspective of the chiefs, was between 1983 and 1987 during the military regime of Thomas Sankara, when chiefs were targeted by his radical policies. In Sankara's view, the feudal chiefs had to be removed from national as well as local political organizations. He attacked their intermediary position in tax collection by simply abolishing head tax altogether and from the mid-1980s onwards only civil servants paid income tax. Nowadays, villagers pay tax on certain property such as cattle and bicycles, with payments being made directly at the *Préfecture*. Chiefs who used to combine their traditional title with a position as a civil servant were given a hard time and would be given a job as far away from their traditional home as possible. The Chief of Boussouma, for instance, was assigned a post near the frontier with Côte d'Ivoire.

Even though this radical spirit was killed by the 1987 coup, the position of the chiefs remained marginal in administrative matters. Long after Blaise Compaore had violently taken power from his former ally Thomas Sankara, he was still a revolutionary in the sense of fighting feudalism. He was, for instance, no greater a friend of the Chief of Boussouma than Thomas Sankara had been and Compaore's regime was responsible in 1989 for a personal blow to the Chief of Maane. Compaore continued Sankara's struggle against corruption: the eldest son of the Chief of Maane was dismissed amid accusations of corruption, a dismissal that was a tremendous shock to his father. And until 1991 this son was not able to show his face in Maane because of the damage he had inflicted on his father's prestige. In 1991 however, an option for 'rehabilitation' emerged.

In the early 1990s the road to political pluralism was paved. Compaore, with his own political party in a stronger position than other political parties due to its proximity to state power, set up the *Front Populaire* as a forum for debate on the return to democracy. For instance, the ODP/MT (*Organization de Démocratie Populaire – Mouvement du Travail*) had the financial resources to persuade people to join their party. One group was targeted in particular, namely the Mossi chiefs who were considered valuable intermediaries in obtaining villagers' votes.

The arena of party politics created new possibilities for the chiefs and in October 1991, the Chief of Maane, Chief Tegre, was optimistic about his future saying that 'Sankara made us suffer, but things are clearing up now'. Compaore did indeed start to turn the political agenda of the Sankara period upside down: tradition was fine as long as it was on his side politically. In Maane, at least in the chief's house, opportunities were seized. The Chief of Maane was clear as to his position: the party that would take his son back would get his support. Of course only one political party was in the position to do so and only the

ODP/MT could decide about civil-service appointments. His oldest son was once more given a job.

The Chief of Boussouma, on the other hand, decided not to side with the party of Compaore, his former enemy. From the start he had emphasized that he would oppose the ODP/MT and affiliate himself to the CNPP (*Convention Nationale des Patriotes Progressistes*). He ordered the minor chiefs to do the same. The Chief of Maane was uncomfortable about his divergence from the paramount chief's wishes. What would happen at Chief Tegre's succession? The Chief of Boussouma would have the right to intervene and propose an alternative candidate but at the time this was only a hypothetical concern. No one could have known then how soon this question would become a real issue. Relations between Maane and Boussouma became particularly tense during parliamentary elections on 25 May 1992. And the Chief of Boussouma almost failed to get elected due to the tremendous support for the ODP/MT. Against this backdrop, the succession rituals had to be set out. And then the Chief of Maane died unexpectedly in January 1993. Panic broke out over who would be a suitable candidate and who would be chosen as a successor by the Chief of Boussouma.

### The death of the chief of Maane: January 1993

In January 1993, Chief Tegre died of old age. No one doubted that the Chief of Boussouma would use the occasion to demonstrate his dissatisfaction with the political choices of the deceased in the arena of national elections. As it turned out, he eventually nominated the chief who subsequently died in the fatal accident in March 1995. In describing the events leading up to this car crash, the focus<sup>11</sup> is on the tensions in the succession struggle, the aspects of the ritual process that were referred to in the comments that followed the accident, and issues that allow us to consider the relationship between ritual journeys and means of (motorized) transport.

The Chief of Boussouma was very influential in the ritual process following Chief Tegre's death. He had a major voice in the choice of successor as well as the power to delay the ritual process following the demise of Chief Tegre. He used both these assets to punish the deceased chief's children. Right after the chief's death, it was not clear who would stand as a candidate and who could count on the support of the court officials (the people in the palace who had served Chief Tegre). Normally, they would be expected to remain loyal to the

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<sup>11</sup> For a more extensive description, see Luning, *Het binnenhalen van de oogst* and S. Luning, 'Royal rituals and national politics in Maane: A comparison of two cases of succession in 1963 and 1993'. In: G. Madiéga, ed., *Burkina Faso. Cent ans d'histoire, 1895-1995* (Paris, 2002), 853-76.

deceased chief by supporting his eldest son, who should be the strongest candidate. The oldest son is the one and only candidate who engages in a ritual tour. Such a tour is a good example of a ritual act that literally consists of a journey, a trajectory to be travelled in space. During the passage, the son is considered to be vulnerable and while on the road is said to be an easy target for his opponents. But when he has successfully managed to circumvent the trajectory and to have had sacrifices made by so-called 'earth priests' at sacrificial places associated with the earth, he manoeuvres himself into the strongest possible position for the fight for succession. With the sheepskins of the sacrifices on his shoulder, he can pose as the preferred candidate of the earth.

However, the court officials did not seem too keen to support this son and most preferred his younger brother. They almost certainly tried to trap the eldest son into making a ritual error and argued that he was too modern to be expected to do the ritual tour since he was not accustomed to sitting on a horse, and that an uncle should perform the ritual instead. 'Do we not now live in different times, so certain things cannot really be abolished but they can be changed. It is of no great importance, is it?' they suggested. The son, on the other hand, sensed that this ritual passage would help to position him favourably in relation to his rivals, which included his brother as well as more distant kinsmen. He borrowed a horse and chose to circumvent the ritual trajectory.

Simultaneously, another journey had to be made: a delegation from Maane had to go to Boussouma to inform the paramount chief of the death of the chief. Two men left on a moped but they came back with a most alarming account of what had happened in Boussouma. Upon their arrival in Boussouma the messengers had been told:

We have not heard this message because it has been brought in the wrong manner. The announcement of the death of a chief is not done with words and certainly not transported on a moped. Come back on a horse, with leaves attached to its tail. This horse is the message of death and will stay here as our property. So will the man riding the horse, since he should be a slave and will become our property.

On hearing the account, a sense of panic struck the court officials as it was blatantly clear that this was only the beginning of a long series of humiliations. Yet, at the mercy of the paramount chief's power play, the people of Maane used their sense of humour as a way of reducing the humiliation. When the man left on his horse – with leaves on its tail – someone said to him: 'Hope to see you back, sooner or later'. The man was accompanied by someone riding a moped to show Boussouma that modern times would not allow for such customs as slavery anymore. Eventually, the messenger did return on the back of the moped, having been submitted to yet more humiliations. He bravely reported on his terrible trip, amid laughter and hilarious comments.

This debate on the motorization of the transporting of messages illustrates what Catherine Bell, borrowing from Gluckman, has called ‘ritualization’.<sup>12</sup> In her book, she states that ritual is not *a priori* a separate domain of specific activities. For instance, a ritual requires different activities just to be organized: errands have to be run to alert people, in meetings dates have to be set, millet for beer brewing has to be fetched, etc. Which of these acts are preliminaries and which are parts of the ritual practice itself? How can running an errand – as an ordinary journey – be distinguished from a ritual journey to announce the death of a chief? The ‘ordinary’ and the ‘ritual’ passage will have to appear differently, hence the ritual passage will have to be marked as being ‘out of the ordinary’ by formalizations stipulated in rules.

In the case under discussion in this chapter, there was agreement that there should be rules as to how the message concerning the death of a chief was to be transported. However, opinions differed as to what these rules were. The rules were subject to debate and the discussion in Boussouma showed, in line with Bell’s analysis, that insistence upon them may serve to increase authority and power positions. Moreover, the choice of topic for debate – vehicles of transport – can be appreciated when acknowledging that ritual practices in Maane are largely made up of making movements along trajectories, singling out these passages as extra-ordinary, ritual in nature. In this respect, the discussion on the ritual tour of the eldest son is just as telling. Again prescriptions as to how the journey had to be made were stipulated, i.e. the trip would have to be made on horseback. Apparently this rule could not be changed: the eldest son could be replaced by his uncle but a moped could not be substituted for the horse. Or perhaps, in their attempt to disqualify the eldest son’s candidacy, the court officials did not want to come up with this option. The ride on horseback was presented as inevitable even though the person who was to perform the ritual tour could be changed.

Since ritual acts so often involve movements along specific trajectories, it is worth following discussions on how these journeys should be made and by what means of transport. As the examples show, there is no inherent reason why motorized transport could not be used for these journeys. On the contrary, changes are possible, even in the mode of transport. The examples do, however, show that journeys that people want to see qualify as ritual events often raise the issue of ‘proper transport’.

To return to our case, Boussouma’s tough attitude obliged the people in court in Maane to close ranks immediately. They had to defend the case of the

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<sup>12</sup> C. Bell, *Ritual theory, ritual practice* (Oxford and New York, 1992), 77, 88-93; M. Gluckman & C.D. Forde, *Essays on the ritual of social relations* (Manchester, 1962).

deceased chief, since it was clear that Boussouma was after revenge for his disloyalty. From now on, competition between the two brothers – both were sons of the deceased – was out of the question. Closing ranks was also necessary because other candidates were presenting themselves. A brother of the chief as well as an uncle (a son of a father's father of the deceased) announced that they wanted the chieftaincy. Both had had a career in state service: the brother had just retired from a position as a nurse and the uncle had served in the national army. The latter's candidature raised strong opposition since, on the basis of collateral elimination,<sup>13</sup> he was considered ineligible and could not be considered.

The people in Maane wanted to keep the interregnum as short as possible. They hoped to conclude the funeral rituals within two weeks and a delegation from Boussouma could then come to nominate a new chief. The haste was understandable since the palace would have to be uninhabited during the entire interregnum. Again we see a major ritual act during the succession ritual that involves spatial movement: all the people that were close to the deceased had to move out of the palace and settle in Koulgo, the nearby village where the royal tombs are located. In all, over 100 people needed to be hosted and fed by this village. Serious quarrels about matters of provisioning were likely to be unavoidable so the need to settle things quickly was painfully clear.

The chief of Boussouma was well aware of this, so he let the people of Maane wait. Delay was a major tactic in his power play. Time and again the Chief of Boussouma postponed matters or simply did not turn up in Boussouma when a delegation from Maane had requested an appointment with him. This game lasted for months. Eventually at the beginning of the rainy season in May, visitors were forced to leave Koulgo and go home to work their fields. I left Burkina at the end of April 1993. There was no point in waiting any longer since it could have taken a long time to nominate a new chief. In fact, it was not until a year later, in June 1994, that the Chief of Boussouma nominated a successor.

### The fatal accident: March 1995

In February 1995 I went back to Maane and heard about the events that had taken place in the meantime. Chief Sanem's nomination had clearly been forced upon the people of Maane. Court officials had initially objected to the nomina-

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<sup>13</sup> The term 'collateral elimination' was used by Goody to describe the fact that no one from a generation senior to the chief whose succession had to be arranged was allowed to be nominated. See J. Goody, *Succession to high office* (Cambridge, 1966), 33. In Maane, a successor can only be chosen from the generation of the deceased or from a younger generation.

tion but in the long run they had had no choice but to accept it. The new chief could have dismissed all the court officials who had supported Chief Tegré's eldest son but he chose not to do so. From the start, he styled himself as a peaceful chief who was open to friendship and stressed that the time for quarrels was over.

Socially, the atmosphere seemed calm. In addition, Chief Sanem demonstrated wealth. He had served in the French colonial army<sup>14</sup> and so was entitled to a pension, and was the first chief of Maane to have a car (which he had recently bought) although he still had his horses in the central courtyard and outside the palace. He was also planning to completely rebuild the palace. This situation of apparent peace and prosperity was cruelly broken by the car accident in which he died on Saturday 11 March.

The chief had never driven the car himself since he did not have a driver's licence and so had engaged a man who had recently returned from Côte d'Ivoire as his driver. I had personally been shocked by the man's reckless driving style and in particular by the fact that he could only see with one eye. In the village of Silmidougou where only the cars of development workers and a few merchants would pass by from time to time, his speed was a threat to the children running about. A week prior to the accident, I had gone to see the chief to (discreetly) point out the dangers his car was posing to children playing at the side of the road. I received a warm welcome but clearly did not get my message across to the chief.

On his trip to see the Chief of Boussouma, three court officials accompanied the chief and his driver, and were sitting in the back of the car. On the road between Maane and Kaya the car hit a donkey. The chief died and the others escaped with just minor injuries. I was informed of the accident by my research assistant, Idrissa Ouedraogo, the son of one of the court officials who had been involved in the accident. My assistant came to my house to ask if I could take him to Kaya on my motorbike. His father was in hospital and only the fate of the chief was known at the time: he had died instantly and his body had already been brought back to Silmidougou. It was not taken to the palace but to the local medical centre because victims of car accidents are never taken back to their former homes. My first reaction was anger at the driver but this feeling was clearly not shared by my assistant, or by the friend whose house I was staying in. I was alone in my attempts to blame the driver. My host immediately evoked the discursive framework that provided the space for the interpretations that were going to be voiced. She told me about the conversation she had had with another woman in the village that morning about the terrible heat that had prevented them from sleeping properly the night before. The night had been full

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<sup>14</sup> He was an ancient combatant.

of noise from restless animals. She said that these had been signs indicating that a disaster was about to happen. She sketched a feeling that would be shared by many: this death had been coming, and the question that needed answering was why and who or what had caused it.

Shaken, Idrissa and I took the road to Kaya. I was stopped at the side of the road by a man who had been my colleague when I had worked for a development organization years earlier. The organization was engaged in constructing a road between Silmidougou and Maane. It was a Saturday and he was alone on the road with his bulldozer. He did not mention the chief's death but simply asked my advice: 'Shall I go home, back to Kaya?' 'I think you should,' I responded. The sense of disaster, which was so clear from this former colleague's body language, made this seem the only possible reply. I started to worry seriously, not just about the fate of Idrissa's father but also about the social consequences of the chief's death. Would people be accused of having caused this death? What quarrels and tensions were ahead? While on the way to the hospital, we heard that Idrissa's father had not been seriously injured. After brief medical checks, all the passengers in the car had been released from hospital. When we met them on the road, Idrissa's father asked whether we were looking for them and announced that they were all OK. Later in the week he would even boast: 'You have to be strong enough to survive such a car accident.'

In the meantime, a heavy silence had come to hang over Silmidougou. Even the children were silent. Most people stayed indoors and, my host and I tried to go to bed early. I shied away from the places where preparations for the burial were taking place. I had been told that some ritual objects had been brought to the medical centre and that the digging of the grave had begun in Koulgo. Chief Sanem would be buried at the site for chiefs who had died a so-called 'red death', for those who had been killed in war or a long way from home, perhaps in the bush. Far-removed from the burial site for the other chiefs, this specific area already contained the graves of two former chiefs of Maane who had died 'red' deaths. At three o'clock in the morning I woke up: I heard a car passing slowly by. I looked out of the window and saw its flashing rear lights. The chief's body was being transported to the burial site to be buried in the dead of night. The motorized transport of the corpse from the medical centre to the burial site was certainly a ritual passage, and one in which the use of a car was an innovation. This fitted well with the major rules for this type of death: in this case the rituals had to be done quickly, with minimal fuss and away from the places that are used for those who have not died unnaturally or violently. The availability of a car to transport the chief facilitated the requirements linked to a death caused by a traffic accident.



The next morning, rumours started to spread. I first went to see the driver. He was suffering only minor injuries but was still shaken. He was shocked at what had happened but showed no trace of guilt or sense of personal responsibility. He did not give a clear-cut argument but said: 'there must have been something', the most general of expressions that pave the way for further speculation.<sup>15</sup> In the discussion, the purpose of the journey was mentioned. I was told that the chief had been on his way to settle an awkward matter. The Chief of Boussouma had recently given Chief Sanem a new wife but the girl was already pregnant when she married him. For a chief it is dangerous to have sexual relations with a woman who has slept with another man. Had she been open about the situation, the chief would have given her for marriage to another man. However she had remained silent, thereby putting the chief in a difficult position. The chief had been on his way to Boussouma to discuss the issue with both the Chief of Boussouma and with the girl's parents. Even though his dismay was understandable, so commentators insisted, he had been advised not to deal with the issue himself. Prior to his departure, his advisors had urged him to send one of his court officials and when, in his anger, he had dismissed this option, he had been advised against travelling to Boussouma on that particular day. He had been reminded that Saturdays were bad days for travel (see below) and by ignoring this advice, the chief had brought his own death upon himself by being on the road in the wrong state of mind and at the wrong time.

The construction work was also brought up. It was said that part of the road was to be built precisely on the route that had to be followed when taking the chief's corpse to the burial site at Koulgo. This trajectory should have been left untouched if deaths of chiefs were not to be provoked. Ritual trajectories, specifically those involving the movement of deceased chiefs, have to be kept separate from ordinary road travel.

However, the majority of the possible causes of the accident that were mentioned referred to the struggle over succession and the rituals performed in that period. One opinion soon began to dominate, particularly among court officials. Chief Sanem had been killed by one of his own kinsmen. One of Chief Tegre's children must have tried to avenge their defeat in the nomination. The brutal death and the fact that none of the other passengers in the car had been hurt reinforced this interpretation, as did yet another argument. Some of the comments suggested that the deceased had brought this type of death upon himself. He had been too kind in his attempts to be everyone's friend. A new chief should not behave like that but should keep his distance, using his court officials as a *cordon sanitaire*. Only after a few years could he have relaxed his

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<sup>15</sup> See R. Pool, *Dialogue and the interpretation of illness: Conversations in a Cameroon village* (Oxford, 1994).

decorum. His friendliness had been an invitation to his enemies to harm him. His kind behaviour indicated that he might be easy to attack and destroy.

Interestingly, the accused – the former chief's sons – appeared to fuel the idea that the killer might be one of them. When one of Chief Tegre's sons arrived in Silmidougou he exclaimed: 'Who is behind this? There is something.' Even while saying this, he must have known that he himself was one of the suspects yet he supported the idea that someone had killed the chief. In so doing, he stressed the strength of the members of the chiefly family and capitalized on expectations of disasters as a result of their fierce internal competition. Members of the chiefly family are thought to be particularly 'good' at killing with medicine, and such medicines could certainly produce fatal car accidents. Clearly, the death of Chief Sanem allowed the sons of Chief Tegre to boost their reputation. From being plain losers in the succession struggle, they had turned into possible killers of the chief. This image did not entail any social risks: members of the chiefly family can be suspected of being involved but not be accused of killing with the aid of medicine.<sup>16</sup> Such a position – as we know from the literature<sup>17</sup> – significantly adds to one's reputation.

Yet another explanation came from people close to the earth priests involved in the eldest son's ritual tour. They stated that the struggle between members of the chiefly family was currently out of all proportion, since it was no longer confined to the context of the ritual tour. In the past, the competing candidates would try to eliminate the eldest son before he could finish the tour. Successful completion was accepted as proof that the earth itself supported this candidate. Consequently, once the eldest son had managed to conclude the tour, the other candidates would withdraw. Nowadays, however, there is no limit to the competition, with disastrous results such as this car accident.

The court officials brushed all these arguments aside, particularly the explanations in which ritual mistakes were seen as the cause of the accident. Ritual mistakes would have had repercussions for them, and not for the chief, they

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<sup>16</sup> Burials for ordinary people in Maane are often accompanied by ritual tests to determine whether the deceased has been a victim of sorcery. For deceased chiefs, such an act is strictly forbidden because members of the chiefly family are always supposed to be involved in fierce competition and it is better not to reveal how they can harm one another. For more details see Luning, *Het binnenhalen van de oogst* (Chapter 8) and S. Luning, J. Jansen, B. Timmer & E. van Hoven, 'Autochthony and strangerhood in the Mande-Volta area'. In: A. van der Kwaak, R. Spronk & K. Willemsse, eds, *From modern myths to global encounters. Belonging and the dynamics of change in postcolonial Africa. A Liber Discipulorum in honour of Peter Geschiere* (Leiden, 2005), 127-45.

<sup>17</sup> M. Augé, *Théorie des pouvoirs et idéologie: Étude de cas en Côte d'Ivoire* (Paris, 1975); M. Augé, *Pouvoirs de vie, pouvoirs de mort: Introduction à une anthropologie de la répression* (Paris, 1977).

argued. They had decided upon the procedures and had performed sacrifices, so they would have been punished in cases of ritual misconduct. They added a second argument: ritual misconduct can be fatal if the ancestors decide to punish someone. Had this been the case here, the chief would have succumbed to illness since that is the ancestral way of provoking death. Ancestors do not cause fatal car accidents or other types of 'red' death.

Last but certainly not least, the widows of the deceased vehemently denied that the chief's death had been caused by others or by transgressing ritual rules. When I visited these women to pay my condolences, they volunteered their interpretation of why it had happened. The mourning widows insisted that the cause of death had been the 'personal destiny' (*pulemde*) of the deceased. A death due to one's destiny is always a good death, even if it is 'red' such as a death in a road-traffic accident. They were of course sad but absolutely certain that the event could not have been prevented nor could anyone be blamed for it. The chief's death had been the work of God, not of anybody in particular.

With these comments, I think, the widows tried to dismiss stories that emphasized the tensions between the kinsmen of their deceased husband. After the funeral rituals, each widow would have to remarry within this circle of kinsmen and if the men continued to fight one another, this would certainly have repercussions for the plans surrounding the widows' remarriage. In a peaceful environment, the women themselves would have more of a say in their own marital destinies and they therefore had good reasons to project a friendly and civilized atmosphere.

### Analysis of interpretations: A moral geography

All the arguments presented above fit in a certain moral geography, an interpretative framework in which social morals, spatial arrangements and ritual practices are connected. In the speculation about the chief's fatal car accident, three types of argument can be distinguished. The first refers to the risks of being on the road at the wrong time, the second to excessive social tensions, and the third to ritual mistakes.

Some people emphasized that the chief had been on the road at the wrong time. Two features of the accident were mentioned in support of this argument: the journey was being undertaken on a Saturday and the chief's angry state of mind made this car trip – retrospectively<sup>18</sup> – a dangerous undertaking. The importance of good timing when travelling has been mentioned in ethnography on

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<sup>18</sup> For an analysis of the timing of such comments, see S. Luning, 'Representing rituals: To do and to see ritual practices'. In: P. Crawford & M. Postma, eds, *Evaluating visual ethnography. Research, analysis, representation and culture* (Leiden and Aarhus, 2006), 270-93.

West African societies. Klaeger<sup>19</sup> elaborates upon the names used for good and bad times for travelling. Masquelier also mentions the importance of choosing the right time to travel. 'Heavy days'<sup>20</sup> are identified through divination as inauspicious times when no journey should be undertaken because bad things will inevitably follow. Travellers often ask diviners to set the date of their departure before they make any plans.<sup>21</sup> In Maane, people also visit diviners before travelling but it is general knowledge that Fridays and Saturdays are not good days for serious travel plans, by car or otherwise.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, this does not inhibit people in Maane from travelling on these days. First of all, the rule only applies to the first day of a journey. If the journey is going to take several days, the traveller's caution is needed only when selecting the initial day of travel. If there are valid reasons to start the journey on a Friday, a simple ritual gesture may resolve the problem. On the Thursday night, the traveller makes an initial start to the trip by carrying a bundle of clothes to a nearby homestead, preferably in the direction of the actual journey. By doing so, the beginning of the journey is placed on an auspicious day, namely the Thursday. This 'proper' start to the journey, even if performed in a ritualized manner, will affect the remainder of the trip. At whatever stage or moment, the whole journey will be seen as being undertaken in the right time frame.

Two things are to be noted on this issue. First of all, there is an interesting interplay between 'real' and 'ritualized' journeys: the ritualized travel scheme is inserted as a fake departure so as to create room to circumvent ritual prescriptions. Ritual is often seen as a rigid domain of activity full of straight-jacketing rules. This example, however, shows just the opposite: 'as if' and 'simulating that' types of performances are part and parcel of the strategies to ritualize activities. Precisely because ritual has to be constructed as a practice that is out of the ordinary – it cannot be identical to real acts – its work can be done in surprising ways. The symbolic nature of ritual behaviour provides ample room for creative forms of problem-solving, even when motivated by precautions and ritual prescriptions. Secondly, the idea that a good start suffices for an optimal result is not specific to travel plans and also applies to other activities requiring accurate timing, such as sowing. As long as a (ritual) start has been made on the right day or during the right phase of the moon, the rest can be done at any time. Hence, going to a diviner for advice on (the right time to start) travel is mostly done for broader purposes than just the prevention of disaster. Masquelier states: 'Another effective way to ensure both one's safe return home and the

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<sup>19</sup> Klaeger, 'Religion on the road'.

<sup>20</sup> Masu nauyi.

<sup>21</sup> Masquelier, 'Road mythographies', 845.

<sup>22</sup> For a more extensive analysis, see Luning, *Het binnenhalen van de oogst*, 119-20.

success of one's travel venture is to ask the *bori* spirit's help. ... I often heard would-be travellers promise the spirit they prayed to a sacrificial offering if he or she helped them achieve what they set out to do.<sup>23</sup> This quote shows that travel is always considered an enterprise, in the broadest sense of the word: it is an undertaking with aims that the traveller hopes to achieve. Ritual precautions do not only serve to escape the perils inherent to travel but also to seek a good result in the undertaking as a whole, whether this includes commercial activities, the solving of conflict or a visit to friends.

What can be said about the argument that anger enhanced the chief's risks on the road? Composure, in particular for chiefs, is an asset in demonstrating strength and near invulnerability. In Maane, anger is a risky emotion. It makes the person a topic for ridicule but also a possible target for those who want to cause harm. However, the vulnerability of this chief was not only attributed to his anger but also to his kindness: he was supposed to have brought the disaster upon himself by having a friendly, open attitude. The literature stresses the envy of others as a major menace for protagonists on the road.<sup>24</sup> In Maane both the emotional state of the victim as well as that of alleged attackers are mentioned as possible causes of the crash. The emotions of different protagonists – anger, envy and kindness – are all seen as dangerous since they may trigger bad behaviour.

What about the social tensions that were mentioned as a possible cause of this accident? This argument is linked to the previous one since having the right emotions are a requirement for good social relations. It is essential to stress that not all feelings and social tensions are considered a possible trigger of an accident. On the contrary, only the very serious disruption of social morals causes such a terrible disaster. In itself, tensions and quarrels are considered to be perfectly normal in the context of a chiefly succession. In Burkina Faso, the interregnum after the death of a traditional Mossi chief is even equated to war.<sup>25</sup> The question here was: did the accident prove that in this situation competition and tensions had gone too far? This was precisely what the people close to the earth priests insisted, whereas the widows of the deceased chief emphatically denied it. The first argued that the continuation of the succession struggle beyond the ritual tour to the earth priests showed that the bad behaviour of members of the chiefly family was not being restrained: they did anything, at any time to compete for power. Inappropriate behaviour – either in the form of bad feelings, immorality or ritual mistakes – will only come up as a possible explanation for a car accident if it is qualified as excessive. A mistake in a ritual

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<sup>23</sup> Masquelier, 'Road mythographies', 851.

<sup>24</sup> Klaeger, 'Religion on the road'; van der Geest, "'Anyway!'" Lorry inscriptions'.

<sup>25</sup> Luning, *Het binnenhalen van de oogst* (Chapter 8).

as such cannot lead to a car accident. In this respect, the reaction of the court officials was telling: they stated that the ancestral way of killing would never lead to such a dreadful 'red' death.

It is important to emphasize that a fatal car accident is a most exceptional disaster and it will be connected to exceptional behaviour and also require exceptional ritual reactions. Such a death is associated with transgression and violence and almost always occurs away from home. Examples of a 'red' death are death by suicide, drowning, snakebites in the bush, war or (car) accidents. These deaths should be kept separate from the space where people reside, and the victims are never brought back into their former house. They are either buried on the spot of the accident or a hut will be built to replace the home-house space in the context of the burial ritual. The corpse of Chief Sanem was, therefore, not brought back to the palace and was buried separately near the site of the tombs of chiefs who had died an ordinary, good death. Burials of victims of a 'red' death require spatial adjustment to prevent a repetition of the tragedy.

Two aspects of the relationship between morals and car accidents stand out. First of all, excessive wrongdoing is considered to mark behaviour in the present. In the view of many people in Maane, car accidents demonstrate what is currently wrong: the excessive loss of social morals is mostly portrayed as a feature of present-day social life. Members of the chiefly family may epitomize this extreme immorality but the problem is everywhere and affects almost everyone. Secondly, these wrongdoings and the reparations they require are linked to ideas about space: 'red' deaths occur away from home and can only be contained by ritual movements that play upon the distinction between the place where the home is and the space beyond, i.e. elsewhere. These features are crucial aspects of moral geography and tie in with more general lines of reasoning.

The relationship between present-day immorality, spatial arrangements and ritual activities comes out most clearly in debates on environmental problems in this part of Burkina Faso.<sup>26</sup> Explanations for the degradation of the natural environment illustrate the moral geography, which also informs the interpretations of Chief Sanem's fatal car accident. Earth priests are responsible for ritual practices that should ensure good rains and harvests but these rituals appear to have lost their efficacy. This, so many people in Maane argue, is due to a more general loss of proper social morals, in particular with respect to certain ritual prescriptions and practices. One transgression is considered to be particularly vital. In Maane, a good harvest depends on the right behaviour regarding the

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<sup>26</sup> S. Luning, 'Ritual territories as local heritage? Discourse on disruptions in society and nature in Maane, Burkina Faso', *Africa*, 77, 1 (2007), 86-103.

bush, *weogo*. The word *weogo* can be employed in different ways and meanings:

- If someone lives and works in Côte d'Ivoire, people say: 'a be *weogo*', 'he is in the bush', he is elsewhere, far away from home; and
- If someone is at work in the fields, people say: '*a be weogo*', 'he is in the bush'.

In these examples, the bush is contrasted to places of residence, and indicates a space beyond where one lives, where one is not at home. Today, rules about what can and cannot be done in the bush are no longer sufficiently respected. For instance, sexual activity should be strictly confined to the space of the house and certain bushes should never be cut. In the past, the bush itself and the spirits that reside there were strong enough to strike back in cases of transgression. However, now that the bush is disappearing, transgressions are not sanctioned in the same way as they used to be. In the past, if these transgressions occurred, direct punishment was inflicted upon the transgressors. The bush beings themselves were the punishing agents. A sacrifice by the earth priest was the only means of preventing the guilty from being devoured by wild animals (lions and serpents). However, there are hardly any wild animals left and nowadays the bush still strikes back but much more haphazardly: the number of fatal car accidents in Ouagadougou is taken as proof of this. Car accidents are the result and a sign of bad morals in bad times.

## Conclusion

This chapter followed Sally Falk Moore's example<sup>27</sup> and focused on a fatal car accident in order to write a contemporary political history. The case of the chief's accident constitutes a 'chopped-off event' but it has provided insight into the dynamics of current political struggles and social tensions. Moreover, the information has allowed us to see how people themselves situate this history in a wider moral geography, in which they elaborate ideas about changing times. The interpretations allude to the present as a time marked by 'things [that] are falling apart' as a result of a loss of morals.

The data presented in this chapter come close to Masquelier's findings<sup>28</sup> in Niger, where car accidents are often attributed to spirits that have been dislocated as a result of colonial road-building projects. Even though the spirits are the killers, the cause of them killing is human in nature. Masquelier's article emphasizes the colonial intervention but she also points out other forms of disruptive social behaviour that may cause road-traffic accidents. She mentions

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<sup>27</sup> Falk Moore, 'Explaining the present'.

<sup>28</sup> Masquelier, 'Road mythographies'.

conversion to Islam and, within its wake, the neglect of traditional rituals regarding spirits, and deforestation. In Niger, car accidents are not simply caused by spirits; they are caused by human actions upsetting the moral geography. Tampering with the correct spatial order by colonials as well as citizens of Niger is a major cause of car accidents. Masquelier describes these processes in terms of modernity, stating that 'By linking the road and its deadly spirits to the region's history of civil engineering, emergent capitalism, and religious transformation, I show that rather than simply being iconic of modernity, the road is a hybrid space that condenses past histories at the same time that it concretizes the perils and possibilities of modern life for rural Mawri'.<sup>29</sup> The road as a location of perils and possibilities is also stressed in ethnography on mobility in Ghana. In this context too, car accidents are often connected to emotions and social wrongdoing.<sup>30</sup> Fatal accidents are not just seen as a consequence of what Ghanaians identify as the B series: bad drivers, bad cars and bad roads.<sup>31</sup> Strife or jealousy of someone's success on the road is often mentioned as an explanation. This chapter has shown that car accidents in Maane are related to more than bad feelings between individuals. They are indications of people's disrespect for the very fundamentals of social codes and morals. To understand that this is the case, we first have to add to the B series: bad deaths. Dying in a car accident is one of the worst ways of ending one's life. Interpretations explain this worst-case scenario by describing the present as a whole, as the outcome of a worst-case scenario that could be summed up in a Burkina Faso variant of the Ghanaian B series: Bad deaths, bad morals, bad times.

Both in Burkina Faso and in Niger, car accidents are connected to a perceived loss of tradition and, more generally, the falling apart of a moral geography. As a result, ritual practices are currently less efficacious and, it would seem, more needed than ever. Correcting mistakes, preventing a repetition of bad events and travelling at the most auspicious time may all require ritual activities. One of the contributions this chapter has tried to make to the study of road travel and car accidents is its extensive attention to ritual. Ritual practice, defined as the tinkering with spatial arrangements, has been a major subject in this chapter. The choice of case led to this particular problem and the data for the chapter came from a social situation that in itself required ritualization: struggles in the succession of chiefs of Maane. This allowed an investigation of how distinctions between ritual and the non-ritual are brought about, as well as the relationship between 'ordinary' journeys, and ritual activities, which resemble movements in space and/or tinkering with spatial arrangements. As such, the

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 827.

<sup>30</sup> Klaeger, 'Religion on the road'; van der Geest, "'Anyway!'" Lorry inscriptions'.

<sup>31</sup> Klaeger, 'Religion on the road'.



case study was an exercise in line with ‘Gluckman’s “The Bridge” Revisited’.<sup>32</sup> ‘The Bridge’ can be seen as the major canonical text that launched the case study as an anthropological method.<sup>33</sup>

In all the attention Gluckman’s article has obtained, the fact that this prototypical case study was situated on the road is hardly ever mentioned. In this classic study, Gluckman takes the events and impressions obtained during a particular road journey as data to analyze the colonial situation in Zululand in the 1930s. Gluckman describes South Africa’s social make-up of that period on his way to attend the ceremonial inauguration of a bridge. The information he provides covered the time span of a day and on a map he shows the journey he made by car, as well as the location of the inauguration of the bridge and the seating arrangements of the white and African political power holders attending the ceremony. Even though the analysis has been criticized since, as any canonical text should be, it maps out very well some of the concerns of this chapter: the study of a highly politically loaded case, the positioning of the researcher in the course of events, moments of being on the road, connections between social and spatial arrangements, the rituals in which these arrangements were brought to the fore, as well as the road-building projects that may trespass upon moral geographies. In connecting the history of political relations to morality and the spatiality of rituals, this chapter has tried to pay tribute to Gluckman’s ‘case on wheels’.

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<sup>32</sup> R. Frankenberg, “‘The bridge’ revisited”. In: J. Vincent, ed. *The anthropology of politics* (London, 2002), 59-64.

<sup>33</sup> M. Gluckman, *The bridge’: Analysis of a social situation in Zululand* (Manchester, 1940, reprinted 1958).

## ‘Anyway!’ Lorry inscriptions in Ghana

Sjaak van der Geest<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Cars and Highlife<sup>2</sup> in Ghana are connected in several ways. Highlife music is played in cars and cars drive to Highlife songs. Highlife is mobile music; its

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<sup>1</sup> Among the many people who helped me with the collection, transcription and translation of Akan Highlife songs, I am particularly grateful to Kwasi Asante-Darko, Kwasi Anim & Gifty Anim. They and Fred Gales, Kodjo Senah, John Collins, Don Bloch, Frances Owusu-Daaku, Jonathan Dapaah, Ben Kwansa, Anthony Obeng Boama, Daniel Arhinful and the editors of this volume also gave useful comments on earlier versions of this article.

<sup>2</sup> In 1985 there were over a hundred professional Highlife bands in Ghana. Studies of Highlife include: K. Adum-Attah, *Nana Ampadu: Master of Highlife music* (M.Phil Thesis, University of Cape Coast, 1997); O. Brempong, *Akan Highlife in Ghana: Songs of cultural transition* (PhD Thesis, Indiana University, 1986); J. Collins, ‘Ghanaian highlife’, *African Arts*, 10, 1 (1976), 62-6, 100; J. Collins, *Music makers of West Africa* (Washington, 1985); J. Collins, *The Ghanaian concert party: African popular entertainment at the cross roads* (PhD Thesis, State University of New York, 1994); J. Collins & P. Richards, ‘Popular music in West Africa: Suggestions for an interpretative framework’, in D. Horn & Ph. Tagg, eds, *Popular music perspectives* (Göteborg, 1982), 111-41; D. Coplan, ‘Go to my town, Cape Coast! The social history of Ghanaian Highlife’, in B. Nettl, ed., *Eight urban musical cultures* (Chicago, 1978), 96-114; F. Gales, *Highlife* (MA Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1983); C.K. Sackey, *Highlife. Entwicklung und Stilformen ghanaischer Gegenwartsmusik* (Münster, 1995); R. Sprigge, ‘The Ghanaian Highlife: Notation and sources’, *Music in Ghana*, 2, May (1961), 70-94; G.A. Vondee, *The Highlife musician as an oral poet: A case study of King Bruce’s lyrics* (MA Thesis, University of Ghana, 2000); K. Yankah, ‘The future of Highlife’, *Glendora Review African Quarterly of the Arts*, 3 (1994), 108-10.

artists travel the country and take the city to rural audiences. John Collins<sup>3</sup> (1994) wrote an extensive study about Highlife concert parties and devoted a full chapter to his numerous journeys with the band he chose to study.

Back in 1985, Nana Ampadu, one of Ghana's most popular performers of Highlife, launched a number (in Twi) called *Driverfo* that became an instant hit.<sup>4</sup> An ode to lorry (public transport) drivers, it recounted the attractions and frustrations of their work. Ampadu sang about passengers' behaviour, the role of the police and solidarity among drivers. He ended it with a long list of inscriptions found on lorries that express both the bravura of the drivers as well as their anxieties. I have tried to compress these contradictory feelings into one single term 'Anyway', a word that drivers paint on their vehicles. What follows is an excerpt from Ampadu's song, translated into English.<sup>5</sup>

You wake up in the morning  
and take your seat behind the steering wheel.  
Everybody will see you and call something out to you.  
You wave at them.  
You feel proud because you are popular.  
You are somebody!  
One of the advantages of the work of drivers is  
that when your lorry is off the road,  
you go to the lorry station  
and they will make you a 'bookman'.<sup>6</sup>  
Your fellow driver will give you 'a spare'<sup>7</sup>  
so everyday you have something to eat.  
Another advantage: you are on the road  
and you meet one of your fellow drivers.

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<sup>3</sup> Collins, Ghanaian concert party.

<sup>4</sup> See Adum-Attah, *Nana Ampadu* on Ampadu's contribution to the development of Highlife in Ghana and Yankah 'Future of Highlife' on Ampadu as a singer of political innuendo. Ampadu's popularity at the time can be illustrated by the inventory in Gales's *Highlife* of the records at an arbitrarily selected music kiosk in Accra. Ampadu (the African Brothers Band) proved to be by far the most popular Highlife artist: fifteen of his records were available. In second place was C.K. Mann with five records.

<sup>5</sup> The transcription and English translation of Ampadu's song were made by Kwasi Asante-Darko, Gifty Anim and the author. The meanings of some of the more obscure lorry inscriptions in the song are explained in the notes. Most inscriptions are in Twi (Akan) or English; some are in Hausa, Ewe or Ga.

<sup>6</sup> Bookmen are the people at lorry stations who issue tickets and supervise the boarding of passengers and luggage. Usually they are fellow drivers who do not have a vehicle to drive or whose vehicles are not on the road because of repairs or because the owner has taken the vehicle back or sold it. They get tips from their colleagues in the business.

<sup>7</sup> 'To get a spare' means to stand in for another driver.

He greets you with a signal of his lights  
 and you do the same.  
 When the police are on the road,  
 he warns you by pointing his finger down.  
 Maybe you have given a lift to a policeman  
 and let him sit in front.  
 Then you are lucky;  
 no police will trouble you anymore on the way.  
 What I like about the work of drivers is  
 that every driver chooses a name  
 which he writes on his car.  
 Some drivers are called by the name  
 they have written on their car.  
 Some inscriptions on cars are very interesting.  
 Some are religious, some romantic.  
 Some are about family problems.  
 Some are insulting.  
 There are two types of inscriptions,  
 one for new, one for old cars.  
 When a new car approaches you, you can read on the front:  
 I love my car.

The following are inscriptions on new cars:  
 Cool and Collected, Lover Boy,  
 Envy No Man, *Pe Wo De* (Look for yours),  
*Aho Ya* (Skin pain), *eye Wo Ya* (It hurts you),<sup>8</sup>  
*Ôtan Nni Aduru* (Hatred has no medicine),  
 Yaa Baby, Still<sup>9</sup> Good Boy,  
*Ôdò Yè Owu* (Love is death)<sup>10</sup>  
 Sweet Jesus, Jar Bless,<sup>11</sup>  
 Raster Man,<sup>12</sup> Asoscar,<sup>13</sup> Honest Labour,  
 Anyway, I Shall Return, Roadmaster,  
*Girl Bi Nti* (Because of a girl)  
 Sea Never Dry,<sup>14</sup> *Abele* (Corn),<sup>15</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Skin pain', a literal translation of the Twi expression *Aho ya* (envy). *eye wo ya* (It hurts you) also refers to other people's jealousy. Both sayings point to witchcraft.

<sup>9</sup> The term 'Still' in lorry inscriptions means that the owner's previous car carried the same text.

<sup>10</sup> Meaning that, according to Asante-Darko, if you love someone deeply, you are prepared to die for that person.

<sup>11</sup> 'Jar bless' is a popular Rastafarian version of 'God bless'.

<sup>12</sup> The Rastafarian image, its music, and philosophy have become a cultural ideal for young urbanized Ghanaians. Asante-Darko described them as 'always happy.'

<sup>13</sup> 'Asoscar': happy man (origin unknown).

*Akwei Allah* (God is there),  
*elemawusi* (It is with God),  
*Lòlònyo* (Love is good), *Kamfo Yehowa* (Praise God),  
 Two Friends, *Fa Yònko Papa* (Choose a good friend)  
*Agya Pa Ye* (It is good to have a good father),  
*Ase Pa Ye* (It is good to have good in-laws),  
 God is King, Halleluyah.

When you meet an old car,  
 you will see the following text on the front:  
*W'Ano Pɛ Asem* (You like to gossip)  
 and when it has passed, look back.  
 What has been written on the back?  
*ɛfa Wo Ho Ben?* (Is it any of your concern?)  
 The following inscriptions can be found on old cars:  
 Slow but Sure, Poor No Friend,  
*Mokomoko Le Djen* (Nobody knows the world),  
*Djen Gbe Mɛ* (Mankind),  
*Ebaahi* (It will be all right),  
*Ebaa Tshake* (There will be a change),  
*Me Nyame Kae Me* (My God, remember me),  
*Onyame Bekyerɛ* (God will provide),  
*Oboafɔ Ye Na* (A helper is difficult to find),  
*Fayɛ Me Nkooa* (Do it to me alone),  
*Wayɛ Afere* (You have ended in disgrace),  
*Oserefo Nnim Awie* (You laugh at people's downfall  
 but you don't know your own end),  
*Ohia Ye Ya* (Poverty is painful),  
*emma Mpe Ohia* (Women hate poverty),  
*Sika Nti* (Because of money),  
*Ofie Mmosia* (House pebbles),<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> 'Sea never dry': The sea will never dry up, in the same way my car will never stop going. The saying also has sexual connotations, meaning never impotent.

<sup>15</sup> *Abele* is a Ga word for 'corn' but it is also used to express appreciation. People may just call out *Abele* when they see something they like very much.

<sup>16</sup> 'House pebbles' refers to close relatives who live in the same house and because of this are extremely dangerous. It is believed that those who are closest to you can hurt you the most with their witchcraft. Other inscriptions that speak of one's house or relatives express the same idea. Several Twi proverbs refer to the danger of witchcraft committed by those who are near: *Aboa a ohye wo ntoma mu, na ka wo* (The insect in your cloth is the one that bites you), *gya hye nea eda ano* (The fire burns what lies near it), *Abe mpopa nnim manni* (The prickly branches of the palm tree do not spare their neighbours), *Suro wo ynko* (Fear your friend), and *Suro nea oben wo* (Fear the one close to you). The last two proverbs are also common lorry inscriptions; c.f. W. Bleek, *Marriage, inheritance and witchcraft. A case study of a rural Ghanaian family* (Leiden, 1975), 361-64.

*Sɛ Asa* (It is over),  
*Sɛ Mopɛ Me A Ni* (This is how you want me to be),  
*Aka M'Ani O* (I am in trouble),  
*Ankonam Boafo* (Helper of a lonely person),  
*ebetò Da* (A day will come),  
*Obidɛɛ Aba* (Somebody's turn has come),  
*Dwen Wo Ho* (Think of yourself),  
*Onyame Nnae* (God is not asleep),  
*Abusua Yɛ Dòm* (Relatives become enemies),<sup>17</sup>  
*Abusua Te Sɛ Kwae* (The family is like a forest),<sup>18</sup>  
*Efiɛ Mpo Nie* (Even in my own house),  
*Nkum Me Fie* (Don't kill me at home),  
*Abuburo Nkosua* (Pigeon eggs),<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The literal translation reads: The *abusua* (matrilineage) is an army/consists of many people. This proverb appears in many songs, inscriptions and academic discussions as it touches a fundamental friction in Akan (and any) society, namely the conflict between individual and community interests. In *Akan Highlife*, Brempong cites a Highlife song by the Akwaboas' Band with the title '*Abusua te sɛ kwae*', in which the following lines appear:

'The extended family is like a forest.  
 If you view it from far away, it is together,  
 but when you get closer to it,  
 you can see that each tree has a specific location.'

J.G. Christaller, *Twi mmebusen mpensa-ahansia mmoaano. A Collection of Three Thousand Six Hundred Tshi Proverbs in Use by the Negroes of the Gold Coast Speaking the Asante and Fante Language* (Basel, 1879) quotes a longer version of the proverb (no. 685): *Abusua ye dòm, na wo na òba ne wo nua*, which Lange translates as follows: 'The extended family is like an army, but your mother's child is your real brother and sister'. See K.R. Lange, *Three Thousand Six Hundred Ghanaian Proverbs* (from the Asante and Fante language), compiled by J.G. Christaller, translated by Kofi Ron Lange (Lewiston, 2000), 57. The implication is that there are people in the family seeking your downfall. A similar interpretation is suggested in a Highlife song by Konadu, '*Mogya bi ye dòm*' ('Some Blood is an Army'):

'When I prosper, it is for the benefit of the family.  
 When I get money, it belongs to the family.  
 But the family seeks my downfall and disgrace.  
 The family is an army; the family is a big army.  
 The witch is never satisfied.  
 He has taken all my children away and brought them to the cemetery.'

<sup>18</sup> See previous note.

<sup>19</sup> The *abuburo* is a kind of dove that is believed to be lucky because its eggs do not spoil. Brempong, *Akan Highlife*, 206 explains: 'The bird is a poor nest-maker and its nest is always open, thus exposing the eggs to the hazards of rain and several predators. In spite of all these natural threats, the bird *aburuburo* is often able to

*enye Sei Ara Na Meye* (I will not remain like this forever),  
*Adom Wò Wim* (Blessing from above),  
*Medee Beba* (My turn will come),  
*Mese Hmm* (I keep quiet),  
*Ehuru Huru A ebebwo* (However hot it boils, it will cool down),  
 Psalm 91, Psalm 23,  
 The Lord is My Shepherd I Shall Never Want.

### The popularity of cars

Malinowski was so struck by the Trobrianders' love of canoes that he dubbed them 'Argonauts'. For the Trobriander, he wrote that the canoe

... is surrounded by an atmosphere of romance, built up of tradition and of personal experience. ... (It) is a marvellous, almost miraculous achievement, and a thing of beauty. ... He has spun a tradition around it, and he adorns it with his best carvings, he colours and decorates it. It is to him a powerful contrivance for the mastery of Nature, which allows him to cross perilous seas to distant places. It is associated with journeys by sail, full of threatening dangers, of living hopes and desires to which he gives expression in song and story.<sup>20</sup>

In a similar vein, one could say that in Ghana – as in many places around the world<sup>21</sup> – people love cars. The popularity of the automobile is all the more striking if we take into account the fact that, before the arrival of colonialism, there was almost no form of wheeled transport in Africa.<sup>22</sup> Now the automobile has become central to African cultures. It was indeed appropriate that

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hatch its eggs and to multiply because "God's hand is in it". The author refers to songs by Ampadu and other bands in which God's protection over man is compared with his special care for this bird. A proverb (Proverb no. 681 from Christaller's *Tshi Proverbs* says 'Aburuburu na obuu be se: Ade a ebeye yiye nsee', 'The dove uses a proverb saying: "A good thing never spoils"')

<sup>20</sup> B. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London, 1922), 105-106.

<sup>21</sup> D. Miller, ed., *Car cultures* (Oxford/New York, 2001) contains a collection of studies that describe the global popularity of cars. Miller speaks of the 'humanity of the car' (the car as an extension of the human body and person) and of 'intimacy with cars'. The popularity of cars in the US is beautifully expressed in popular culture such as 'Cole Porter songs, Fitzgerald novels and Hollywood movies' (D. Gartman, 'Culture as class symbolization or mass reification?'. In: *Ibid.*: 133-52). This was also the case in Ghana: in 1999, Ghanaian television (GBC) broadcast a soap called 'Taxi driver' that related the colourful experiences of a taxi driver in Accra.

<sup>22</sup> Law writes that the rare instances of wheeled transport in the pre-colonial era were mainly ceremonial or, to a lesser degree, were used in warfare. Wheeled vehicles as a regular means of transport were probably rejected because 'the enormous costs involved would outweigh any likely advantages'. In: R. Law, 'Wheeled transport in pre-colonial West Africa', *Africa*, 50, 3 (1980), 249-62.

Kopytoff<sup>23</sup> called for anthropological research into the meaning of the automobile in Africa.<sup>24</sup> Its neglect as an object of ethnography was typical of how Western anthropologists can be dismally farsighted. What originates in their own culture is too familiar to be visible in another setting: schools, factories, hospitals, pharmaceuticals and cars – all these exports have – until recently – been overlooked by Western anthropologists doing fieldwork in other cultures. Anthropological research would, however, reveal to what extent such phenomena assume ‘exotic’ features in new contexts. Indeed, they undergo profound cultural reinterpretation, emerging all but transformed.

The biography of a car in Africa would reveal a wealth of cultural data: the way it was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller to the buyer, the uses to which the car is regularly put, the identity of its most frequent passengers, and of those who borrow it, the frequency of borrowing, the garages to which it is taken and the owner’s relations to the mechanics, the movement of the car from hand to hand over the years, and in the end, when the car collapses, the final disposition of its remains. All of these details would reveal an entirely different biography from that of a middle-class American, or Navajo, or French peasant car.<sup>25</sup>

Kopytoff’s call has been heeded over the past two decades. Historians and anthropologists have studied the role of the car in the colonization and missionization of Africa<sup>26</sup> and described it as a manifestation of popular and material culture.<sup>27</sup> Ghana too has seen a growing interest in the culture of

<sup>23</sup> I. Kopytoff, ‘The cultural biography of things: Commoditization as process’, in A. Appadurai, ed. *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), 64-91.

<sup>24</sup> Peace’s interesting article about social aspects of transport in Nigeria deals less with cars than their drivers and owners. See A. Peace, ‘The politics of transporting’, *Africa* 58, 1 (1988), 14-28.

<sup>25</sup> Kopytoff, ‘Cultural biography’, 67.

<sup>26</sup> For example, K.B. Dickson, ‘The development of road transport in Southern Ghana and Ashanti since About 1850’, *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, 5, 1 (1961), 33-42; S. Heap, ‘The development of motor transport in the cold coast, 1900-1939’, *Journal of Transport History*, 11, 2 (1990), 19-37; H. D’Almeida-Topor *et al.*, eds, *Les transports en Afrique XIX-XX siècle* (Paris, 1992); J-B. Gewald, ‘We thought we would be free ...’ *Socio-cultural aspects of Herero history in Namibia, 1915-1940* (Köln, 2000); E. Alber, ‘Motorization and colonial rule’, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 15, 1 (2002), 79-92; and G. Stotz, ‘The colonizing vehicle’. In: Miller, *Car cultures*, 223-44.

<sup>27</sup> Miller, *Car cultures*; T. O’Dell, ‘Raggare and the panic of mobility: Modernity and everyday life in Sweden’, in Miller, *Car cultures*, 105-32; J.J. Beuving, ‘Cotonou’s Klondike: African traders and second-hand car markets in Bénin’, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 42, 4 (2004), 511-37; J.J. Beuving, *Cotonou’s Klondike: A*



trading, repairing and driving cars<sup>28</sup> and in mobility in general.<sup>29</sup> Klaeger (see Chapter 9 in this volume) looks at cars and travelling as new loci of religious belief and practice, and talks of the ‘automobilization’ of religion.

For most Ghanaians, purchasing a car remains a remote dream.<sup>30</sup> And unattainability exacerbates desire; people who drive cars are admired and envied. Young boys in the community where I stayed dreamt of becoming a driver. They played endlessly with toy cars and lorries, which they made themselves out of the lightwood of palm trees, old tin cans or wire.<sup>31</sup> Right in the middle of the town where I did my research there was the shell of an old Ford that sat as a monument and round which children acted out their dreams.

Forty years ago, a driver, who visited the capital five times a week, personified the mobility and freedom which most people in the rural areas longed for.<sup>32</sup> His lifestyle was flashy and impressed the younger generation. Glamour was

*sociological analysis of entrepreneurship in the Euro-West African second-hand war trade* (PhD Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2006). For an overview of the most relevant literature on motor vehicles in Africa, see J-B. Gewald, ‘The impact of motor vehicles in Africa in the Twentieth Century: A comparative socio-historical case study in Zambia and Ghana’ (forthcoming).

<sup>28</sup> For example, P. Kensok, *Fitter: Entwicklung aus der Werkzeugkiste. Informelle Ausbildung von Kraftfahrzeughandwerkern in Ghana* (Saarbrücken, 1987); J. Verrips & B. Meyer, ‘Kwaku’s car: The struggles and stories of a Ghanaian long-distance taxi-driver’, in Miller, *Car cultures*, 153-84; T. Verstappen, ‘*The Lord is my shock absorber*’: *Omgang met, opvattingen over en percepties van technologie met betrekking tot de trotro in het Kwahu South district, Ghana* (unpublished paper).

<sup>29</sup> M. de Bruijn, H. van Dijk & R. van Dijk, ‘Cultures of travel: Fulbe pastoralists in central Mali and pentecostalism in Ghana’. In: M. de Bruijn, R. van Dijk & D. Foeken, eds, *Mobile Africa. Changing patterns of movement in Africa and beyond* (Leiden, 2001), 63-88.

<sup>30</sup> Unlike, for example, in Norway where ‘a car is the one of your dreams you’re likely to see come true’, see M. Sawyer, *Park and ride* (London, 1999) mentioned in Miller 2001b: 240. According to Ferguson, buying a car used to be a possibility for Zambians with a good job: ‘A decade ago, young men in gainful employment were able to buy cars of all models. That era is gone, gone never to return again’. See J. Ferguson, *Expectations of modernity: Myths and meanings of urban life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999), 1.

<sup>31</sup> The Ghanaian artist Yaw Amankwaa has made bronze figures of cars and lorries. The anthropological museum in Leipzig hosted an exhibition of his work in 1995. See K-H. Krieg *et al.*, *Hubschrauber, Autobus, Feuerstuhl und Kettensäge. Technische Träume eines Westafrikanischen Künstlers* (Leipzig 1995).

<sup>32</sup> The driver connecting the city with the rural world is also the main theme of the film ‘Road to Kukurantumi’ (1983) by King Appiah. The ‘freedom’ of drivers may, however, give them a bad reputation of being morally loose. See D. Brokensha, *Social change at Larteh* (Oxford, 1966), 227. The AIDS epidemic is partly blamed on drivers who become infected on the road and spread the infection at home.

attached to him, Brokensha<sup>33</sup> wrote. Little helpers washed his car, showed passengers to their places, lashed luggage to the roof and collected the fares. The driver only appeared once the moment for departure had come. Smartly dressed, he took his seat behind the steering wheel, honked the horn and set off for the city.

The secret of a driver's success lay in his shuttling back and forth. At home, he was surrounded by an aura of the seething atmosphere of the city.<sup>34</sup> His urbanity was evident in his manners and in the commodities he had at his disposal: clothes, electronic goods, alcoholic drinks and cigarettes. On the other hand, in the city he represented 'the good country life' about which city people continued to muse nostalgically but to which they never wanted to return. He brought goods to the city from the village:<sup>35</sup> food from the farm, (more or less) undiluted palm wine, presents from rural family members and, most importantly, the latest news from home. On the way back he carried reciprocal commodities and stories. His car both brought him fortune and embodied the fortune he had already found.

This sketch may sound too romantic today. The driver has lost much of his former lustre<sup>36</sup> and the growing fleet of taxis and lorries has lowered his status somewhat. Many drivers are shabbily dressed and now clearly have a hard life. In *Driverfo*, Ampadu describes the hardships and frustrations of life on the road. In another song, *Driver Banza*,<sup>37</sup> George Jahraa criticizes drivers for careless or drunk driving, for speeding and killing people.

In 1994, I asked 61 students (aged between 16 and 24) in Kwahu junior secondary schools to complete the sentence 'The life of a driver ...'. The students' sentences reveal a highly critical attitude towards drivers. Out of the 48 who produced an intelligible answer, 33 emphasized the dangers of the job. The most frequent phrase was that a driver (and his passengers!) '... may die anytime'. Clearly, the road is a dangerous place to spend one's life, as drivers do. Road accidents are common and gruesome photographs of wrecked cars

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>34</sup> The emphasis in this essay is on rural-urban transport. Some of my interpretations (envy, for example) also apply to intra-city transport, others, however, do not.

<sup>35</sup> Here Ghanaians would use the term 'town', the usual translation of the Twi term *kuro*. 'Village' (*akuraa*) basically refers to a small farm settlement at some distance from the *kuro*. I use 'village' somewhat loosely in its European sense: a rural community of fewer than 20,000 inhabitants.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. E. Date-Bah, 'The inscriptions on the vehicles of Ghanaian commercial drivers: A sociological analysis', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 18, 3 (1980), 525-31.

<sup>37</sup> *Banza* is a Hausa term expressing disapproval: Unworthiness or chaos. The best Twi equivalent would be *basabasa*.

often cover the pages of daily newspapers. Fatal accidents figure prominently in the stories that are exchanged at funeral sites and in some of the Highlife songs played to mourn the dead.<sup>38</sup> During my own journeys in Ghana's commercial transport vehicles, I had ample chance to share the fear of the road with my co-travellers. Some of them said a short prayer before setting off and I often silently joined in.

Ten of the students writing about drivers focused on smoking and drinking (only one referred to sexual morals), which were always linked to the previous point of risk. Four students mentioned the responsibility drivers have and seven offered them advice on how to drive safely. Nearly all the responses were in some way related to the topic of danger and only one student was unequivocally positive about the life of a driver. Although these reactions do not necessarily mean that driving is completely 'out' for the new generation (the school environment encouraged moralistic answers), they do show a drastic drop in the popularity of driving. Nevertheless, driving or owning a car is still enviable in Ghana today.

### Inscriptions

You do not need to be a probing anthropologist to discover that Ghanaians have 'a thing' for cars; any passer-by can spot it at once. Drivers and car owners openly declare happiness and worries about their vehicles. Anyone who has travelled in Ghana, elsewhere in West Africa or, for that matter, in many other countries<sup>39</sup> is no stranger to painted texts on taxis, lorries and buses. Indeed 'sign-painting' has become a specialized art. It is impossible to imagine a Ghanaian street-scene without it. Names and sayings on vehicles, elegantly framed by entwining flowers, little figures or other decorative motifs, are only

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<sup>38</sup> A famous example is *bra biara twa owuo* (All hard work ends up in death) that relates the deadly accident of a man, Yaw Osei, travelling from Kumasi to Accra: 'Yaw does not come and Esther becomes nervous and starts to pray. She sits waiting for her husband in the sitting room. It is past bedtime. Suddenly someone knocks on the door and tells her to start crying because her husband Yaw has not been able to arrive in Accra. He has had an accident on the road and is dead.' In: S. van der Geest, 'The image of death in Akan Highlife songs of Ghana', *Research in African Literatures*, 1, 2 (1980), 145-74.

<sup>39</sup> Painted texts and figures on lorries are found in many countries, for example in Haiti. In: R.F. Thompson, 'Tap-tap, Fula-fula, Kiá-kiá. The Haitian bus in Atlantic Perspective', *African Arts*, 30, 36-45 (1996), 101-102; in Nigeria (J. Pritchett, 'Nigerian truck art', *African Arts*, 12, 2 (1979), 27-31), and in Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Philippines and Sierra Leone.

one category. Sign-painting is also applied to canoes,<sup>40</sup> beer and ‘chop bars, beauty saloons, barbershops, kiosks and other places of business.’<sup>41</sup> This visualization of wisdom and proverbs is a continuation of an old tradition of decorating gold weights, spokesman<sup>42</sup> staffs, umbrella tops, Fante *Asafo* flags, and *adinkra* and *kente* cloths, all of which were adorned with similar expressions of wisdom. More recently, wax prints and T-shirts have become bearers of similar messages.<sup>43</sup>

Texts on vehicles are directly visible but enigmatic. They speak out and remain silent at the same time. Tourists read them but do not understand them, not even when they are painted in English.<sup>44</sup> The texts are seldom original: they

<sup>40</sup> M.A. Coronel, ‘Fanti canoe decoration’, *African Arts*, 13, 1 (1979), 54-60; J. Verrips, ‘Ghanaian canoe decorations’, *MAST Maritime Studies*, 1, 1 (2002), 43-66.

<sup>41</sup> cf. C. Kirsten, ‘Sign-painting in Ghana’, *African Arts*, 13, March (1980), 38-41; W. Bender, ed., *Songs by Ebenezer Calender in Krio and English from Freetown – Sierra Leone. Song texts of African popular music No. 2* (Bayreuth, 1984).

<sup>42</sup> Kyeame.

<sup>43</sup> The ‘social life’ of textiles (cf. Appadurai, *The social life of things*; B. Spooner, ‘Weavers and dealers: The authenticity of an oriental carpet’. In: Appadurai, *The social life of things*, 195-235) in Ghana and elsewhere is another exciting field of research. The connection between Ghanaian wax prints and Highlife is particularly interesting. New cloth designs are sometimes given the names of Highlife songs, thus sharing in their popularity. A few examples are *Yaw Berko* (a name), *Aku Sika* (Golden Akua), *Ofie Nwansena* (Housefly), *Ofie Mmosea* (House Pebbles), *Okunu Pa* (Good Husband), *Abuburo Nkosua* (Pigeon Eggs), *Born Again*, *Onipa te se Kosua* (Man is like an Egg), and *Wbeka me ho asem a, fa Akonya* (If you Want to Gossip about Me, Take a Seat). The history and cultural meaning of modern textiles in Ghana has begun to attract researchers. See for example, W. Boelman & F. Holthoorn, ‘African dress in Ghana’, *Kroniek van Afrika*, 13, 3 (1973), 235-58; R. Nielsen, *The history and development of wax-printed textiles intended for West Africa and Zaire* (Berrien Springs, 1975); W. Kroese, *The origin of the wax block prints on the coast of West Africa* (Hengelo, 1976); L.M.A.M. Bartels, *Bedrukte textiel, toonbeeld van goede smaak in West Afrika* (Printed Textile, Model of Good Taste in West Africa), (MA Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1990); M. Kraamer, *Hand-woven textiles of the ewe-speaking regions of Ghana and Togo (1800-2000)* (PhD Thesis, SOAS, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> This also appears in the Ghanaian novel *Fragments* by A.K. Armah (London, 1974), 24. Juana is a stranger in Ghana: ‘On every journey Juana had passed and been passed by many lorries and little Mercedes buses bearing the sign OBRA Ye KO. One of the first things she had done, on beginning to learn Akan, was to ask what the signs meant. Oh, nothing, just life is war, she was told. There were other signs, cryptic to her until with time she asked and reached the realization that these were signs and words that had grown all too naturally from the place itself and the people here.’

are derived from and refer to a world well known to Ghanaians. The text may be taken from an old proverb, a modern saying, a Christian prayer, the Bible, a newspaper report, sport or a political event. The visitor is struck by the picturesque decoration but is at the same time put in his place: he does not understand; he is an outsider. Yet even Ghanaians may well fail to understand the specific point of a given text, not knowing exactly to what or to whom the words apply. The inscriptions tell a personal history which is only known to the driver himself or to the car owner and a few insiders. The text may be conventional but its full meaning is unique and private.

Indirect and ambiguous speech is called *akutia* in Twi. In an essay about Ampadu, the maker of *Driverfo*, Yankah<sup>45</sup> describes *akutia* as ‘a strategic verbal assault in which speakers in face-to-face confrontation avoid eye-contact with their targets and insinuate without mentioning names’. Many inscriptions can indeed be seen as *akutia* assaults on unknown enemies as will be seen below.

### Drivers and inscriptions: Anthropological interpretations

Anthropologists are drivers shuttling back and forth between two cultures. They interpret the texts of one culture for people belonging to another. Margaret Field was one of the first to try to decipher the meaning of lorry inscriptions in Ghana for Western readers. Her 1960 *Search for Security* presents extensive case reports on 146 patients who visited priest healers in Asante in 1956. The complaints and requests put before the priests ranged from bad luck in business to infertility and marriage problems. In many cases witchcraft was identified as the underlying cause of the problem. Field was struck by the large number of drivers among these clients and began to take an interest in their way of life and studied their histories and the texts they wrote on their vehicles. She collected 144 inscriptions and interviewed the drivers about what the inscriptions meant.<sup>46</sup>

Field also emphasized the appeal of driving to the young and noticed that there was hardly any ambition more widespread among them than to drive or own a lorry. But when that ambition had been fulfilled was when the worries started. A lorry is a risky investment. The new owner is likely to have to go deeply into debt, owing money to a rich relative in a business-like relationship. It is uncertain whether he will ever be able to pay off what he owes. Bad luck with the vehicle may ruin him. He is aware, moreover, that people regard him

<sup>45</sup> K. Yankah, ‘Nana Ampadu and the sung tale as metaphor for protest discourse’, in K. Anyidoho & J. Gibbs, eds, *FonTomFrom. Contemporary Ghanaian literature, theatre and film* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, 2000), 135-53.

<sup>46</sup> M.J. Field, *Search for security. An ethno-psychiatric study of rural Ghana* (London, 1960), 134-45.

with a mixture of admiration and envy so runs the risk of being struck by witchcraft. The same applies, if to a lesser extent, to a driver who does not own a vehicle. His position, too, is viewed with some envy. He, too, is insecure: if he fails to do well financially, he will be sacked.

Drivers [and owners, SvdG] express their worries and anxieties in lorry inscriptions, according to Field. Their greatest problem is uncertainty about the future, which, they believe, is largely in the hands of others. Some inscriptions reflect financial concern or flatter rich relatives. Envy, provoking witchcraft or other destructive actions form a particularly feared danger. Witchcraft must either be prevented or defeated. Inscriptions reflect a preoccupation with how to escape witchcraft. Some texts are characterized by 'paranoid anxiety and bluff' (Field's terms), others seek supernatural protection against enemies.

Field's inscriptions can be placed on a continuum ranging from defensive to offensive ways of contending with the dangers of witchcraft and bad luck. Pious words which thank God or a well-to-do relative or which invoke their help are essentially defensive. The owner/driver draws attention away from his own excellence, thus making himself a less likely target for witchcraft. In addition, he secures that relative's or God's help in case misfortune strikes him after all. Examples of defensive texts include: 'God is grace',<sup>47</sup> 'It is good to have a good uncle',<sup>48</sup> 'It is good to have a good father',<sup>49</sup> 'O God help me',<sup>50</sup> 'Patience is good',<sup>51</sup> 'It comes through somebody',<sup>52</sup> (i.e. I have got this car from someone), and 'A good name is better than riches'.<sup>53</sup>

It is striking, however, that aggressive texts are far more numerous, certainly in Field's collection. These refer in blunt terms to the envy that the lorry may provoke and seem to say: 'Come on if you dare, I am not afraid'. First a few examples derived from Field: 'Some are crying and some are laughing',<sup>54</sup> 'Mind your own',<sup>55</sup> (Someone does not like someone's success), 'Life is war', 'Kill me and fly', 'Good medicine',<sup>56</sup> (i.e. I am well protected), 'Fear people',<sup>57</sup> and 'Hatred has no medicine'.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Adom ne Nyame.

<sup>48</sup> Wòfa pa ye.

<sup>49</sup> Agya pa ye.

<sup>50</sup> Aboa a onni dua (An animal without tail ...; an ellipsis for: God chases the flies away for the animal that has no tail).

<sup>51</sup> Abotare ye.

<sup>52</sup> Enam obi so.

<sup>53</sup> Din pa ye sen ahonya.

<sup>54</sup> Ebi resu na ebi resere.

<sup>55</sup> Obi mpɛ obi yiye.

<sup>56</sup> Aduru ye.

Remarkably, some texts even go as far as accusing close – but unnamed – relatives of practicing witchcraft and undermining the driver's success. Witchcraft in one's own family is not a topic people like to talk about openly. Drivers may spell it out plainly, however, for everyone to see: 'House affair'<sup>59</sup> (i.e. the envy comes from my own family), 'Fear the one who is close to you',<sup>60</sup> 'The family loves corpses',<sup>61</sup> and 'Hatred comes from the home'.<sup>62</sup> As will be seen below, the same proverbs frequently appear in Highlife songs about the treacherousness of the lineage.

The provocative tone of these inscriptions casts the driver as a cultural hero. The general impression they convey is not one of concern and anxiety about an insecure undertaking, leading to paranoia, as Field asserts, but rather the note struck is one of bravura and self-assurance, in spite of the many dangers. Invincible optimism confirms the romantic image of the driver for whom everything seems within reach: money, travel, women – in short, the good life. Many inscriptions refer to this idea: 'Travel and see', 'Fine boy', 'Happiness', 'Sunny boy', 'Chicago boy', 'America boy on road', 'Sharp sharp', 'Playing is sweet'<sup>63</sup> (i.e. amorous play) and 'Kumasi Night Sports'. Nor is it coincidental that most of these brash sayings are in English: the English language adds to the driver's cosmopolitan image.

Field is not the only investigator who has taken special interest in Ghanaian lorry inscriptions. In 1971 Jordan,<sup>64</sup> an American anthropologist, became intrigued by the culture of drivers and travelled almost 2,500 km through West Africa. In Ghana his research included twelve days of trips between Accra and outlying towns and villages. He spoke with drivers and passengers on the road and noted down his observations, describing 'the driver' as a person living in two worlds. He uses Tönnies's terms *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* to distinguish these worlds. During a journey drivers are 'hard' and businesslike, but when not behind the wheel their behaviour complies with the more person-oriented traditional code of the *Gemeinschaft*. Jordan sees this ambivalence reflected in contrasting lorry inscriptions, for example, 'Time is money' versus 'God's time is the good'.

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<sup>57</sup> Suro nnipa.

<sup>58</sup> Òtan nni aduru.

<sup>59</sup> Ofie asem.

<sup>60</sup> Suro nea oben wo.

<sup>61</sup> Abusua dò funu.

<sup>62</sup> Òtan firi fie.

<sup>63</sup> Agoro ye de.

<sup>64</sup> J.W. Jordan, 'Role segregation for fun and profit: The daily behavior of the West African lorry driver', *Africa*, 48, 1 (1978), 30-46.

While Jordan's interpretation is interesting, his claim that drivers are involved in a role-conflict presents too schematic a picture of driver culture. I would instead emphasize that the driver's businesslike persona constitutes his charm and 'capital' within the home community. His cultural image is not so much a being torn between two worlds as someone who easily straddles both.<sup>65</sup>

There are three other pieces of research on lorry inscriptions in Ghana. One was carried out by the sociologist Date-Bah<sup>66</sup> who collected information about 384 drivers, interviewing them about the inscriptions on their vehicles. She sorted their answers into nine – merely descriptive – categories (e.g. work, expressions of gratitude, religion, politics) but did not interpret their texts. Lewis<sup>67</sup> wrote a brief note in response to an article about slogans on Brazilian lorries.<sup>68</sup> Lewis reads a growing individualism in the inscriptions but at the same time notices that they reflect 'a trial-ridden society and the near fatalistic resignation to such trials that seems to be all too typical in Accra, Cape Coast and other urban centres'.<sup>69</sup> I cannot disagree less: the texts would seem to express bravura and aggression.

Van Eijk<sup>70</sup> 'inherited' a collection of 2,369 lorry inscriptions from a Dutch missionary in Ghana, Sjeff Moonen, who died before he could interpret these 'testimonies, convictions, beliefs, pieces of wisdom and experiences'.<sup>71</sup> He was planning to write a 'car theology' on the basis of the collected slogans. 'Theology' may be too ambitious a word here but the texts certainly express the drivers' concerns about fortune and insecurity. Van Eijk, who did not interview the drivers, suggests three categories of inscriptions, those with a religious tone, those that are inter-personal, and others. This classification does not, however, help us to fathom the meanings of the slogans. Prayers addressing God or saints may in fact be very similar in intention to inter-personal texts.

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<sup>65</sup> Similar research was carried out in Nigeria by Lawuyi (1988) who interpreted inscriptions on taxis as expressions of drivers' concern about wealth, status and social mobility. Lawuyi, too, draws attention to drivers' attempts to ward off mystical attack.

<sup>66</sup> Date-Bah, 'Inscriptions on the vehicles'.

<sup>67</sup> G.H. Lewis, 'The philosophy of the street in Ghana: Mammy wagons and their mottoes. A research agenda', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 32, 1 (1999), 165-69.

<sup>68</sup> P. Burke, 'The philosophy of the Road in Brazil: Lorries and their mottoes', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 30, 3 (1996), 209-22.

<sup>69</sup> Lewis, 'Philosophy of the street', 166.

<sup>70</sup> R. van Eijk, *Car slogans in Ghana* (Cadier en Keer, 2003).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*: 1.



We owe an unusual publication on lorry inscriptions to two architects, one Ghanaian and one German.<sup>72</sup> Schreckenbach took pictures of buses and trucks bearing inscriptions, while Kyei discussed the texts' meanings with the drivers. He does not, however, provide a report of his conversations but, inspired by them, offers us poems that have an inscription as a theme. The result is poetic ethnography. One example is as follows:<sup>73</sup>

*Beware of friends*  
 Beware of friends.  
 Some can head you  
 Into a marathon of *plaba*;<sup>74</sup>  
 Some can fool you;  
 Some can really disappoint you;  
 Some can corrupt you;  
 Some can ruin you;  
 Beware of friends.  
 Some are snakes under grass;  
 Some are lions in sheep's clothing;  
 Some are jealous behind  
 Their faces of praises;  
 Some are bunkums;  
 Some are just no good;  
 Beware of friends.

Lorry inscriptions are so appealing that many have tried their analytical skills on them: scholars, journalists and even casual observers. Brempong<sup>75</sup> mentions in a footnote that he and Warren collected a number of inscriptions and 'are now working on the analysis for later publication', (which as far as I know never materialized). Lawuyi<sup>76</sup> used inscriptions for his study of the world view of drivers in Yorubaland, Nigeria, and Burke<sup>77</sup> did the same in Brazil, as we have already seen.

### Lorry park conversations

My own investigation into lorry inscriptions was carried out on frequent journeys – mainly in the South of Ghana – between 1969 and 2005. In those years I

<sup>72</sup> K.G. Kyei & H. Schreckenbach, *No time to die* (Accra, 1975).

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*: 59.

<sup>74</sup> *Plaba*: Palaver, i.e. trouble, difficulties.

<sup>75</sup> O. Brempong, *Akan Highlife*, 213.

<sup>76</sup> O.B. Lawuyi, 'The world of the Yoruba taxi driver: An interpretive approach to vehicle slogans', *Africa*, 58, 1 (1988), 1-13.

<sup>77</sup> Burke, 'Philosophy of the road'.

spent countless hours in lorry parks waiting for my bus or taxi to leave. I killed time by talking to drivers, 'bookmen', mates and fellow passengers.<sup>78</sup> Often the texts on the cars around us formed the beginning of lively discussions, with those who had written the texts and with those who read them and were travelling with them. Our conversation usually attracted a crowd of people and developed into a spontaneous focus group discussion – before the term had even come into existence. Whenever I asked those present if I could record the discussion, they agreed and continued even more fervently. The discussion often went on in the car after we had finally set off. Between 1990 and 2000, I recorded 569 inscriptions of lorries on the road and at lorry stations and asked drivers and passengers about their possible meanings.<sup>79</sup>

A few observations need to be made to sketch the development in inscription writing since Field's time. The first and most striking change is the Christianization of inscriptions. More and more inscriptions are coming from Christian sources, such as Bible texts, hymns and prayers. If we exclude inscriptions referring to *Onyame* (a traditional and a Christian term for God), we find only four inscriptions in Field's collection that could be regarded as Christian. None mentions the name of Jesus. Unless this observation is owing to a bias in Field's work, we must infer that the situation has changed considerably. Christian themes and prayers are very prominent nowadays on lorries, as they are on houses and elsewhere in public. In my own collection about 10% could be classified as undeniably Christian. That proportion would triple if inscriptions about God, *Onyame*, The Lord and *Awurade* (Lord) were included. Some typical Christian inscriptions are: 'Blood of Jesus', 'Christ is the answer', 'Clap for Jesus', 'Deo Gratias', 'Guy Jesus', 'Holy Spirit', 'Lamb of God', 'Psalm 35: 1-7', 'Rock of Ages', 'Thy will be done', and 'Jesus is the first'.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> The lorry park is an excellent research location for anthropologists. Stoller recounts his first and subsequent experiences in a lorry station in Niger and his uncomfortable travels in 'bush taxis'. At first he found himself 'in an alien universe of signs' but gradually began to understand them. See P. Stoller, *The taste of ethnographic things: The senses in anthropology* (Philadelphia, 1989), 69-83. Transactions and communication in and around the bush taxi proved an ideal introduction to the harshness of Songhay culture. My own experiences in Ghanaian lorry parks and lorries are similar, though far less dramatic: Ghanaian public transport is comfortable compared to conditions in Songhay regions.

<sup>79</sup> The English and twi texts are listed in Appendix 1. About a third of them also occur in Moonen's list (van Eijk, *Car slogans*, 35-101).

<sup>80</sup> *Yesu di kan*. My southern bias should be taken into account here; if I had travelled in northern Ghana, Islamic inscriptions would have been more prominent. Some

The general purpose of the inscriptions has, remarkably, hardly changed since Field's analysis. My informants still emphasized the danger that envy and witchcraft pose to drivers and explained seemingly very different texts as responses to this perceived threat. The following are fragments of a conversation at Nkawkaw lorry park when we were discussing the meaning of 'Someone's efforts',<sup>81</sup> an elliptic version of 'Someone's efforts annoy another'.<sup>82</sup>

A: I am the Chairman of the Local Union and somebody may be jealous of my chairmanship. It is my good service and the length of my stay here that have earned me this chairmanship. Somebody who has just spent one or two years in this station may want the post .... Or: someone may have four cars, so whatever he does or says will be interpreted wrongly and create jealousy. This can move him to write an inscription like *Obi mmòdenbò*.

Q: And what is the meaning of *Anibere enye*?<sup>83</sup>

A: Someone is not content with what he has. He looks for means to get someone else's property to add to his own and by doing so he will even lose what he already has.

I asked a driver about the meaning of *Ese wo ara*.<sup>84</sup> He answered:

If someone does not wish you well, he wants you to lose your job. Maybe he wants your car owner to sack you as a driver or he has been reporting you to your car owner and you, later on, get to know all that he has been doing. That person may come to you, as if he loves you or to wish you well. You then tell him *Ese wo ara*.<sup>85</sup> You are the one who has been undermining me all along; I have not lost my job. I am aware of all your plotting against me.

It struck me that the most divergent slogans were said to stem from fears of jealousy. Although this does not prove that drivers and owners are only preoccupied with this aspect of the business, it does suggest that there is a popular notion that texts on lorries have an element of envy. A few examples of such 'twistings': 'It is the Lord',<sup>86</sup> explained one driver, meant that only the Lord could protect him from witches in his family. About 'It may keep long time but it will come',<sup>87</sup> the driver made the following comment: 'In the night witches come and spoil the car. The car may be off the road for a long time, but eventu-

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examples that I did record were: *Akwei Allah* (Allah is there), *Allah Sarakyi* (Allah is King) and *Baa meyi shei Allah* (Nothing except Allah).

<sup>81</sup> *Obi Mmòdenbò*.

<sup>82</sup> *Obi Mmòdenbò ye obi ahyi*.

<sup>83</sup> 'Jealousy is not good'.

<sup>84</sup> 'Up to you'.

<sup>85</sup> 'It's up to you'.

<sup>86</sup> *Èye Awurade*.

<sup>87</sup> *Kye na ebekye*.

ally it will come back and everything will be OK.’ Another inscription read: ‘God wants us to be close to him’.<sup>88</sup> The driver, a Seventh Day Adventist, explained that a struggle was going on between God and the Devil; jealousy comes from the Devil so we should look for protection from God by staying close to Him. Another theme – work – proved to link up with envy as well: it is only by working hard that one succeeds. By implication, those who try to get rich without working are evil. But hard work is not enough; one must also seek protection to prevent those who are envious from destructive interference.

Several friends told me stories about cars and car owners that suggest that the inscriptions can also be messages that are not directly related to the car itself but to an important life event. One told me:

A prominent politician had a number of *trotros* in Accra. When Rawlings came to power in 1979, the man went into exile. Later, his vehicles, which had originally carried no inscriptions, were all inscribed with the saying: ‘I shall return’.<sup>89</sup> Another example. Some time ago, my uncle in the US came home and bought a taxi for one of my cousins who has been suffering from grinding poverty. Not long afterwards, my cousin inscribed on the vehicle ‘The Lord is my shepherd’, meaning that because the Lord guides him, he will not lose hope no matter what the difficulty because at the end of the day, a saviour (like my uncle) will come to his rescue.

Someone else told me a long story, which he again heard from a driver. The narrative may not be historically correct but it does illustrate the rich imaginations that are evoked by lorry inscriptions:

A certain man used to drive someone’s commercial vehicle. One day he decided that he did not want to continue that job because he was not making enough money. Ironically, the very night that he ended his employment, thieves broke into the vehicle and made away with the battery. Naturally he became a suspect and was arrested by the police and detained for two days. He felt humiliated and so peeved that he decided to seek spiritual intervention to settle scores for an offence he did not commit.

A few weeks after the incident, someone from the car owner’s family died in mysterious circumstances. Before the funeral retinue returned from the cemetery, another family member of the car owner died and a third followed. After these mysterious deaths, the family of the vehicle owner also decided to find out from the spiritual world what was going on. They were told that those deaths were happening

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<sup>88</sup> Onyame ninkuntwe.

<sup>89</sup> This has a striking resemblance to certain political warnings aired through Highlife songs. A story I often heard was that Busia from his exile in London requested a song on the radio to let his opponent Nkrumah know that his political end was drawing near: ‘*Nsu C a, mframa di kan*. a, mframa di kan’ (‘Before it starts raining the wind will blow’) (S. van der Geest & N.K. Asante-Darko, ‘The political meaning of Highlife songs in Ghana’, *African Studies Review*, 25, 1 (1982), 27-35.

to them because someone in the family had wrongfully offended another person. Upon further enquiries, the offended person turned out to be the former driver. To overturn the curse, they were asked to compensate the man. When the driver was approached to indicate what he would want for compensation, he asked for a Nissan Urvan mini-bus. The former boss agreed to provide a vehicle as compensation. To celebrate his exoneration and redeemed image, the driver inscribed 'The Truth' on the front of the car and 'Shall set you free' on the back to tell the world his story.

A recent development in vehicular texts is the growing popularity of stickers. These are printed with sayings ranging from 'No money no friends', '*Kakra yebedi nti*' (Because of the little we eat), and 'King of Kings' to the highly Westernized 'I ♥ my car' and 'I ♥ Ghana Airways'. Obviously, such stickers have lost most of their particular biographical depth. A related phenomenon that I observed was that texts are sometimes no longer painted in gracious letters but rather printed in simple block letters on the windscreen.

Some vehicles carry several sayings, at times a medley of painted inscriptions, stickers and printed texts. Occasionally the texts are related. What appears on the back may react to a question or remark on the front: 'Who is free?'/ 'Only Jesus' and 'Let us pray'/ 'That day'. A text on the back may also carry a translation or synonym of the one at the front: '*Ɛye me nkrabea*'/ 'It is my destiny', 'Fire'/ 'Holy Spirit' and 'Thinking'/ 'Scientific education'.

Some texts seem somewhat clumsy English translations of local idioms. 'It's not wonderful' is probably derived from 'It's no wonder'<sup>90</sup> which, according to one informant, can mean that there's no reason to be surprised that X owns the car because he has worked hard for it. The English text in this category that intrigued me the most was 'Observers are worried', which was a fairly common inscription. 'Worried' probably refers to the Twi expression *ani abre*, which literally means: the eyes are 'ripe' (or red). The idiom expresses a state of emotional tension that in most instances refers to envy. The original meaning of the inscription, therefore, is most likely to be that people who see the driver in his vehicle become jealous. There is, however, little point in speaking of an original or literal meaning. 'Observers are worried' can mean just about anything to anybody. It has become a Rhorsach blot that invites idiosyncratic interpretation.

I also suspect that certain orally transmitted texts have come to be misunderstood. In this way 'Naked I came' perhaps was transformed into 'Naked game'. Each new version of a text assumes meanings independent of its origins.

The custom of inscribing texts on vehicles is not limited to automobiles; people on bicycles and pushing carts and beggars in wheelchairs also decorate

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<sup>90</sup> Enye nwonwa.

their modes of transport.<sup>91</sup> In Techiman, probably the country's largest transshipment market, there were estimated to be a hundred wheelbarrows and four-wheel pushcarts, locally called *trɔk* (truck). Young boys hired a wheelbarrow for 600 Cedis per week (at that time, in 1996, about £2) and tried to make money by transporting goods back and forth between the (real) trucks and the market. The wheelbarrows carried inscriptions similar to those on lorries.<sup>92</sup> Lorries – and also wheelbarrows – belonging to one owner tend to carry identical inscriptions. Such an inscription often functions as the name of the person closely associated with the vehicle, either the owner or the driver. I observed how a driver is often called by the text written on his car, as if that were his name. Indeed, Nana Ampadu refers to this custom in *Driverfo*.<sup>93</sup>

Ampadu's popular Highlife song *Driverfo* offers yet another interpretation of lorry inscriptions. The text sounds like an anthropological sketch of drivers' mixed pleasures. Ampadu even proposes a dual classification of inscriptions, distinguishing those on old from those on new cars. Words on new vehicles convey bravura and self-confidence while those on old ones express modesty (often put in religious terms), self-mockery and anxiety. This classification, however, takes us only so far. Unless lorries pass from one owner to another, they are likely to keep their initial inscription from glorious beginning to inglorious end.<sup>94</sup> As a vehicle ages, the meaning of this text may change, although the words themselves do not. 'God will provide',<sup>95</sup> a modest boast of acquisition on a brand new car, matures in time into an anxious prayer of 'Oh God, keep me on the road'. The self-assurance of 'Roadmaster', 'Travel and see' and 'It hurts you'<sup>96</sup> on a new bus acquires an element of irony as the vehicle grows old and has reduced dependability. The provocative 'Even in my own house'<sup>97</sup> (i.e. witches want my downfall) has an increasingly apprehensive ring to it as the

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<sup>91</sup> A bicycle in Accra carried the text: 'The same people', a saying which continues: '... who are your friends will kill you'. Kodjo Senah drew my attention to the following inscriptions on wheelchairs: 'The handicapped too has wisdom' and 'I walk with Jesus'.

<sup>92</sup> A small collection of these inscriptions can be found in Appendix 2.

<sup>93</sup> See 'The boy', a poem that refers to using an inscription as someone's name in Kyei & Schreckenbach, *No time to die*, 53.

<sup>94</sup> A new owner is likely to change the inscription on a car unless he regards the existing text as fitting for himself as well. Other reasons for keeping the old inscription may be that it constitutes good publicity or simply to avoid the costs of repainting.

<sup>95</sup> Nyame bekyere.

<sup>96</sup> Èyɛ wo ya.

<sup>97</sup> Efie mpo nie.

years go by. Similar shifts in meaning occur with such inscriptions as ‘Because of money’,<sup>98</sup> ‘I won’t stay this way for ever’<sup>99</sup> and ‘Good father’.

### Cars and Highlife: Means of transport

Commercial vehicles and Highlife move together. Highlife music is played on journeys in buses and taxis, while the adventures of drivers and their cars become the topic of Highlife songs.<sup>100</sup> Brempong<sup>101</sup> quotes no fewer than 23 lorry inscriptions in the titles or texts of Highlife songs. Inscriptions and lyrics alike reflect everyday problems. The most salient correspondence between drivers and Highlife artists is that both facilitate communication. Highlife songs and cars are a means of transport that connects the village with the city, the past with the present, foreign culture with local life. Like the lorry that carries people, goods and news from village to city and back again, the Highlife song portrays the good and bad of village life to an urban audience and informs rural people of the pleasures and perils of life in the city. Interestingly, Highlife, although essentially an urban phenomenon (the medium is the message), draws much of its inspiration from rural life. Ampadu in particular favours rural settings for his narratives about human endeavours and failures, often ending his songs with a moral lesson.

One common Highlife motif is the ambivalence of the *abusua* (matrilineage), the traditional setting of family life. The *abusua* is the basis of existence and model of harmony, as well as a source of conflict, envy and misfortune. In the song, *Obiba Broke* (‘Someone is broke’), Ampadu sings:

My family is a *nsansòno*<sup>102</sup> family.  
 It has spread over my skin and itches me.  
 When I scratch, it hurts.  
 Ao Broke, who is my enemy?  
 My enemy is the one staying with me in the house.  
 Hatred comes from the home.

<sup>98</sup> Sika nti.

<sup>99</sup> Ènye sei ara na mēye.

<sup>100</sup> The same applies to popular music elsewhere in Africa. The song ‘Double Decker Bus’ by the Sierra Leonean Krio singer, Ebenezer Calender is famous. He sang out his welcome to the first double decker arriving in Freetown, Sierra Leone in 1951. See W. Bender, ed., *Songs by Ebenezer Calender in Krio and English from Freetown – Sierra Leone. Song texts of African popular music No. 2* (Bayreuth, 1984), 14-17.

<sup>101</sup> Brempong, *Akan Highlife*, 195-96.

<sup>102</sup> *Nsansòno* is a weed that causes itching.

Highlife's ambivalence about rural life captures fairly accurately the feelings of the urbanized: on the one hand, lyrics express nostalgia for the tranquillity of the village, while on the other they voice relief at having achieved a safe distance from the demands and intrigues of the *abusua*. Highlife songs thus provide city listeners with a rationalization for living away from the village.

A converse mechanism features in Highlife songs that portray city life to villagers. When Highlife bands crisscross the country to perform concerts in villages, they usually start with a medley of songs and end with a kind of soap opera.<sup>103</sup> The songs performed show both the opportunities of the city and the suffering of those who have not made it. Again, it is the pessimistic picture that prevails. After all, the singers are primarily interested in human drama. Bame<sup>104</sup> cites the story of a concert party at which a cocoa farmer who had come to a town was tricked out of all his money. The story reinforces the stereotypes of the deprived city dweller and the naive villager. Songs commonly concern the often unsuccessful struggle of people in the city. In 'Wo'ankɔ bi nti wose yeanko'<sup>105</sup> by Ampadu's African Brothers Band, a young man sums up all the financial problems he faces in town where nothing is free as it is in the village. He complains that the people at home do not understand his plight. The singer, at the end, comments:

This song we made to comfort our brothers  
working away from home  
and to plead to our elders  
to consider our hardships away from home.

Similar worries about economic hardship in the city are central to Wòse-wòsew'adwuma ase'<sup>106</sup> by Yamoahs. Brempong<sup>107</sup> collected ten songs about money, wealth and poverty.

It is not only Highlife texts, however, that bring the city into the village. The bands themselves are live representations of the glamorous city. Since its inception, Highlife has stood for urban progress and the prestige of a different – at first Western – lifestyle. Highlife is commonly regarded as a part of the

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<sup>103</sup> 'Concert parties' are discussed in K.A. Bame, *Come to laugh. A study of African traditional theatre in Ghana* (Accra, 1981); Collins, 'Ghanaian highlife'; Collins, *Ghanaian concert party* and A. Ricard, 'The concert party as a genre: The happy stars of Lome', *Research in African Literatures*, 5 (1974), 165-79.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*: 93-95.

<sup>105</sup> 'Because you did not go, you say that we have not fought'.

<sup>106</sup> 'They say you have lost your job'.

<sup>107</sup> Brempong, *Akan Highlife*, 556-600.



modern urban culture that, according to Ghanaian painter Ato Delaquis, included:

‘Star’ Beer, ‘Club Mini’, Ah Star posters, Football matches on Sundays, Garth and Kong strip cartoons, Dark goggles and beer bars, Coups d’états, Toyota taxis and Benz buses, The Microphone and Amplification equipments, ... Dances from 9 pm TDB (Till Day Break), the Soul and Popgroups, and the Big Bands. the Record Player and Foam Cushions, ... Beauty Parlours, James Bond films and Spaghetti Westerns, Funerals, Draughts at the roadside ..., Vulcanisers and roadside fitters, Sayings on Mammy trucks and Buses, etc.<sup>108</sup>

Highlife performers share the double role of drivers. The connection – presented in terms of contrast – between city and village at the same time provides a bridge between the past and the present, as Brempong<sup>109</sup> concluded some time ago:

... the contents of these modern songs still uphold and promote the traditional value systems and social practices; their dominant themes revolve around such central cultural and social institutions as religion, family and political power. .... Thus, highlife songs juxtapose the urban present and its uncertainties with the wisdom of the rural past.

The same mixed feelings about village versus city recur in the confrontation between old and new values. Highlife songs often cite proverbs and fables and are in many ways new versions of traditional wisdom. But they also picture aspects of modernity. The songs can be quoted in defence of the old *and* the new. Commutation between city and village is a voyage through time. Funerals and festivals, which draw city people back to the village, constitute a powerful convergence of past and present. It is not surprising that Highlife has become the dominant music heard at funerals.<sup>110</sup> More than traditional drumming and dancing, Highlife expresses the complexity of emotions felt by city people mourning their dead back home.

Finally, Highlife connects cultures. Coplan<sup>111</sup> has called Highlife a musical pidgin because it combines Western and indigenous musical elements into a new musical style. Sprigge,<sup>112</sup> though emphasizing the African part of the creation, says the same thing:

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<sup>108</sup> Cited in G. Brett, *Through our own eyes: Popular art and modern history* (London, 1986), 102.

<sup>109</sup> Brempong, *Akan Highlife*, 260-61.

<sup>110</sup> S. van der Geest, ‘Funerals for the living: Conversations with elderly people in Ghana’, *African Studies Review*, 43, 3 (2000), 103-29; M. de Witte, *Long live the dead: Changing funeral celebrations in Asante, Ghana* (Amsterdam, 2001).

<sup>111</sup> Coplan, Go to my town.

<sup>112</sup> R. Sprigge, ‘The Ghanaian highlife: Notation and sources’, *Music in Ghana*, 2, May (1961), 70-94.

I regard highlife music as a purely African product – a brilliant African invention. The claim that this is so is in no way affected by, let alone invalidated by, any evidence showing that the African has not produced the highlife from exclusively African ingredients. He has enterprisingly taken from outside his indigenous culture at least some of the ingredients of that attractive mixture, and he is, I believe, still incorporating others.

Highlife is believed to be a blend of military band music, church hymns introduced by Christian missionaries and local musical tradition. As such it stands as an example of creative syncretic imagination. This ‘pidginization’ or ‘creolization’ is not limited to the music, however. Highlife texts too literally ‘pidginize’. In many of Ampadu’s songs, for example ‘*Driverfo, Somu gye wakrantee*’<sup>113</sup> and ‘*Obiba broke*’,<sup>114</sup> as in everyday language, English and Twi intermingle. This conflation of English and Twi is also prominent in the songs of other Highlife bands, for example Senior Eddy Donkor, Jewell Ackah, A.B. Crentsil and Ahemfo Band. Many Nigerian Highlife artists, including Fela and Prince Nico, sing their texts in ‘proper’ pidgin. Thus Highlife becomes a vehicle that brings English and African languages closer together.

### Anyway

Starting with a Highlife song about drivers and lorry inscriptions, I have tried to sketch the connecting worlds of Highlife artists and lorry drivers. Both produce texts in which they express – and attempt to allay – the anxieties of life, particularly those that result from envy. They borrow freely from Christian prayers, biblical verses, church songs and proverbs. To some extent these texts, inscriptions as well as Highlife songs, remain ambiguous because their meaning is to be found both within and outside the text, in the personal history of the owner/driver, the singer and the reader/listener.

A more intriguing connection between the world of drivers and singers, however, is that cars and Highlife are both means of transport that allow ideas to travel. They are means of communication, cultural – indeed linguistic – brokers between village and city, past and present, local Twi and cosmopolitan English.

One of the lorry inscriptions mentioned by Ampadu in *Driverfo* beautifully captures this notion of multi-dimensionality: ‘Anyway’. In the first place, ‘Anyway’ confirms the mobility of cars and Highlife in Ghana, although it is unlikely that whoever wrote the word had this in mind. Secondly, ‘Anyway’

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<sup>113</sup> ‘Get back your grasscutter’.

<sup>114</sup> ‘Someone is broke’.

puts the worries of daily life into perspective. Nothing is certain or fixed. 'Anyway' expresses the doubt about something that was taken for granted a while ago. It announces insecurity and danger but at the same time 'relativizes' that feeling. The uncertainty of the moment dissolves in self-confidence and in the belief in help from above. The driver has braced himself; he is ready for anything. 'Anyway ...' is finally the beginning of an uncompleted sentence. It is left to those who read the word to finish the text. Drivers and Highlife singers carry their signs across the country. And passengers and onlookers choose their own interpretations.

### Appendix 1: Lorry inscriptions in Ghana

Most of these inscriptions were collected in August/September 1990 and during two research periods in 1994. I travelled extensively in the Kwahu region and made a journey from Accra to Kumasi, Sunyani, Techiman, Wa, Tamale, Yendi, Bimbilla, Hohoe and back to Accra. About two-thirds of the inscriptions were recorded while travelling in a car. Sometimes I had the opportunity to discuss their meaning with people travelling with me. The other third were collected at lorry stations, mainly in Techiman, Nkawkaw, Mpraeso and Kwahu-Tafo. There I had ample opportunity to converse with drivers, passengers and others about the meaning of the inscriptions.

There are various drawbacks to writing down inscriptions while on the road. Apart from the handicap of not being able to contact the driver, there is also the simple problem of reading the text. Various inscriptions were missed because the car went too fast or I was still copying down the text on a previous car. It also proved difficult to catch both the front and back texts of the cars coming towards me. The inscriptions listed below are in alphabetic order; those in languages other than Twi or English have been omitted. Multiple inscriptions that were found on one vehicle have been split up. Various inscriptions were spotted several times but they have been listed only once.

1001 Berlin

A friend in need

*Aboa a onni dua* = The animal without a tail (i.e. God will *Abotare* = Patience)

*Abrantee* = Young man

*Abura nkosua* = The eggs of the *abura* pigeon

*Abusua ne wo bra* = Family is your life (Don't depend on your *Abusua ne wo bra* = The family and your life)

*Aden?* = Why?

Adam Bros

*Adea mani na so* = Something I did not expect

*Adom ara kwa* = Only grace

*Adom ara kwa* = Only by (God's) grace

*Adom wo wim* = Blessing from above

*Adow na ye* = Farming is best

Africans

*Ah Abusua bone* = Ah bad family

Ahead

Aim high

*Aka mani* = It is left with my eyes (I am only watching)

Alaska Boy

Alhadji Ghana  
 All is good  
 All power belongs to Jesus  
 All shall pass  
 Aluta continua  
 Always  
 Amazing Grace  
 Amen  
 American boy  
 American Boy  
*Ampara Onyame* *yε* = Truly, God is good  
 And his blessing  
 And in everything give thanks  
 And so what  
*Anka meye den* (Title Highlife song) = What else should I have done?  
 Are you sure?  
 Arizona  
 As if (It is not true what they say)  
*Asa pa yε* = Good in-laws  
*Asomdwee mma* = Children of peace  
*Atamfo nyε Nyame* = Enemies are not God  
*Atea bisa* = When you hear, ask (it may not be true)  
*Atemmududa nti* = Because of the day of final judgement  
*Awie yε* = The end  
*Awiee ne asem* = The end is trouble  
*Awisia yε mmòbò* = An orphan is miserable  
*Awo Batan Pa* = Good (nursing) Mother  
*Awoò yε* = Childbirth is good  
*Awurade Adom* = God's grace  
*Awurade kasa* = Lord, speak

B.B. (Benjamin Boama, owner in Abetifi)  
 Baby face  
 Be bold  
 Beginning of wisdom  
 Behold  
 Believe in God  
 Big Boy  
 Big Joe  
 Big toss  
*Biribi hia* = Something is missing  
*Biribiara nsò Nyame yε* = Nothing is too difficult for God  
*Biribiara ni a bòkòò* = Everything slowly  
*Biribiara wo ne mmerε* = Everything has its time

*Bisa Nyame* = Ask God  
*Bisimilani* (Hausa) = God is great  
 Black Beauty  
 Blessed Assurance  
 Blood of Jesus  
*Boafo ye na* = Helpers are rare  
 Bob  
*Bòne ben* = What evil?  
 Brain behind (on the back of a car)  
 Brother sweet  
 Brotherhood  
 Buffalo and Sure  
  
 Captain of Israel's  
 Castro  
 Chase away the flies for the animal without a tail  
 Christ is the answer  
 City  
 Clap for Jesus  
 Clap for Jesus nicely  
 Come Jesus  
 Come to Jesus  
 Comedian  
 Comfort  
 Consider  
 Cool running  
 Counsellor  
 Cry for Jesus  
  
*Dabi asem nti* = Because of what may happen one day  
 Dada  
*Dee Onyame beka* = Whatever God will say  
 Deo Gratias (Latin) = Thanks be to God  
 Destiny  
 Determination  
*Dinseyee kwa* = Spoiling one's name without reason  
 Divine peace  
 Divine victory  
 Do  
 Do good  
 Do unto others  
 Don't give up

Don't forget  
 Don't rush in life  
 Don't touch my grass = Don't touch my glass (?)  
 Done?  
 Driver Christ is with me  
*Dwene wawie* = Think of your end

*E! Sika* = Oh Money!  
 Ebenezer  
*Ebi te yie* (title of a Highlife song) = Some are well seated (well-off)  
*Ebi wò mu fie* = Some people in your house  
*Èda w'anim* = It lies in front of you  
*Ehò* = Over there (i.e. Heaven)  
*Èmma w'ani nha* = Don't be lazy  
 Emmanuel  
*Emmere dane* = Time changes  
*Ènam obi nsam* = It is through someone's hand  
*Ènam obi so* = It is through somebody  
 Endless love  
*Ènkaa akyi* = It is not too late  
 Enemies are not God  
*Enni bòne akyi* = Don't follow evil (don't retaliate)  
*Ènsò maseda ni* = This is my reward  
 Envy no man  
*Ènye Nyame den* = It is not difficult for God  
*Ènye Onyame den se ....* = It is not difficult for God to ...  
*Ènye hwee* = It is nothing  
*Ènye me nko* = It is not only me  
 Error  
 Esprit  
 Even Jesus  
 Every misfortune is a blessing  
 Everything by God  
 Except the Lord  
 Exodus 14: 14  
 Expensive  
*Èye ntoboasee* = It is good to be patient  
*Èye Awurade* = It is the Lord  
*Èye me nkrabea* = It is my destination  
*Èye obi ahi* = It makes someone angry  
*Èye Awurade dea* = It belongs to the Lord  
  
*Fa woho bò Jehowa* = Be God's companion  
*Fa ma Nyame* = Give to God

*Fa wo ho bò Yesu* = Give yourself to Jesus

Fabulous

Fabulous all the way

Faith

Father forgive them

Fear God

Fear woman

Fears

Feeling Brother

Fine boy

Fire

For Christ we live

Freedom

Fresh

Friends today

Future is unknown

Gausu the Warrior

Gentleman

Glory be to God

Glory be to God in the highest

God Almighty

God dey

God did it

God first

God has written

God is able

God is always right

God is great

God is love

God is not for one man

God is the source

God is wonderful

God knows all

God loves you

God my defender

God never sleeps

God's case no appeal

Gods plan

God's power

God's time

God's time is the best



God's will  
 Good boy  
 Good brothers  
 Good Father  
 Good friend  
 Good luck  
 Good name  
 Good never lost  
 Good partner  
 Grace  
 Gracious  
 Gradually gradually  
 Great is thy God  
 Great to be young  
 Guy Jesus  
*Gye se wobre* = Unless you work very hard  
*Gye Nyame* = Except God  
*Gye Onyame di* = Have faith in God

Had I known  
 Hallowed be Thy name  
 Help me oh God  
 Holala (exclamation of surprise)  
 Holy Spirit  
 Hope in the Lord  
 Hope of Glory  
*Hwe dee Awurade aye* = Look what the Lord has done  
*Hwannea?* = Who?  
*Hwe Onyame asem* = Look at God's words  
 Hypocrite

I am afraid of my friends even you (sticker)  
 I ♥ Ghana Airways (sticker)  
 I ♥ my car (sticker)  
 In fact ...  
 In God we trust  
 Innocent  
 Isaac  
 Isaiah 48: 18  
 It is my destination  
 It pains you. Why?  
 It's not wonderful  
 It's the Lord

Jah love  
 Jah Power (God's power)  
*Jehowa ne me Hwefo* = God is my shepherd  
 Jericho boy  
 Jesus alone  
 Jesus is coming soon  
 Jesus is the bread of life  
 Jesus is the way  
 Joan of Arc  
 Jomo (someone's name)  
 Justice

*Keka kò* = Continue talking  
*Kae me brɛ* = Remember how I toiled  
*Kae deɛ mayɛ* = Remember what I have done (for you)  
*Kakra a yebedi nti* (sticker) = Because of the little we eat  
*Kamfo Yehowa* = Praise God  
*Kasa pa* = Good talk  
 Keep on  
 Keep smiling  
 Keep what you get  
 King David  
*Kwasea kakra* = Small foolishness  
*Kyɛ na ebɛkyɛ* = It may keep long, but it will come\*  
*Kyerɛ nea wobɛsom no* = Show the one you will worship (from the Book of Samuel)

Labour on  
 Lamb of God  
 Let them say  
 Let us pray  
 Let's give thanks to God  
 Liberty  
 Life  
 Life history  
 Life is how you make it  
 Life is war  
 Life Man  
 Little Tokyo  
 London Boy  
 Lord  
 Love all

Love and respect  
 Lovely  
 Lovely Brothers  
 Lover  
 Lucky  
 Lucky brothers

*Ma wònka* = Let them say  
*Magye me boy* = I have got my boy (lover)  
 Mambo (nickname)  
 Man will cry  
 Management  
 Master  
*Me Gyefo tease* = My saviour lives (sticker)  
*Mesre Onyame* = I pray to God  
 Messiah  
*Mfa nni agoro* = Don't take it as a joke  
 Mighty is Jehova  
 Mind your own  
 Mity God = Mighty God  
*Mmoa firi Onyame* = Help comes from God  
*Moma me ho ntò me* = Let me be free  
*Monka* = You may talk  
 More time  
 Mother is sweet  
*Mpaebò* = Prayer  
 My brother  
 My Lord  
 My happiness

*Na menim saa* = I know that  
 Naked I came  
 Naked game  
 Name A.A.A. (Akwasì Ampofo Agyei)  
 Nana Afari Minta (owner's name?)  
 Nana Kofi  
*Nana Kwasi nti* = Because of Nana Kwasi  
 Never loose hope  
 Never rush in your life  
 Next time  
*Nhyira anka Agya* = Blessed be the Father  
*Nhyira nka Nyame* = Blessed be God  
*Nhyira nka boafoò* = Blessed be the helpers  
 Nice

- Nipa dasani* = Human being ('You are ungrateful')  
*Nkrabea* = Destiny  
*Nnipa nyinaa nte saa* = Not all people are like that  
*Nnipa behwε yie* = People should be careful  
*Nnipa yε bad* = People are bad  
 No cross no crown  
 No fears  
 No hurry in life  
 No Jesus no hope  
 No king as God  
 No money no friends (sticker)  
 No problem  
 No victory without struggle  
 No wonder  
 Not you  
 Nothing bad  
 Nothing is too late  
*Nsem pii* = Many troubles  
*Nsisi wo yònko nni* = Don't cheat your friend  
*Nsò Nyame yε* = Not too big for God to do  
*Nte nsere* = Don't hear, don't laugh  
*Nte nsere* = Don't laugh (when you hear of my case)  
*Ntentan* = Spider's web  
*Nto boase* = Have patience  
 Number 1 in the world  
*Nyame mmerε ne mmerε pa* = God's time is a good time  
*Nyame ne ho yε hu* = God is wonderful  
*Nyame tumi so* = God's power is great  
*Nyansa nftiaseε ene Yehowa suro* = The fear of God is the *O.B.*
- Òbaa Alice* = woman Alice  
 Obey the will of God  
*Obi mmòdenbò yε obi ahyi* = One's perseverance annoys another  
*Obi nti* = Thanks to someone  
*Obi mpε* = Somebody does not like it  
*Obi mmòdeng mmò yε obi ahi* = Someone's struggle makes someone annoyed  
*Obiba T.K.* = Someone T.K.  
*Òbra ne nea wabò* = Life is what you make it  
*Òbra akwantu* = Life is a journey  
 Observers are worried  
*Odimafo Agya* = Father mediator (God)

*Òdò yε owu* (title of a Highlife song) = Love is death  
*Òdò yε dε* = Love is sweet  
*Ogyam* = Nickname among friends  
 Oh Christ  
*Oh Ewiase* = Oh World  
 Oh Man  
*Ohene ne Yesu* = Jesus is King  
*Oheneba* = Prince  
*Òkyena nso bio* = Tomorrow again  
*Òkyena bi* = Tomorrow too  
*Òkyeso Onyame* = God who provides for all  
 Once upon a time  
 One man no chop  
*Onipa wò baabikò* = Man has a place to go to  
*Onipa nyε aboa* = Man is not an animal  
*Onipa ye bad* = Man is bad  
*Onipa ye mmòbò* = Man is miserable  
 Only Jesus  
*Onua dò* = Brother love  
*Onua pa yε* = Good brother  
*Onua tie Onyame asem* = Brother, listen to God's word  
*Onyame akwan* = Ways of God  
*Onyame adom* = God's grace  
*Onyame bekyerε* = God will provide  
*Onyame na onim neε onibie asem* = God knows someone's trouble  
*Onyame mpε bòne* = God does not want evil  
*Onyame kwan dòdòsò* = God's ways are many  
*Onyame ne ho yε hu* = God is wonderful  
*Onyame nnae* = God does not sleep  
*Onyame tumi so* = By the power of God  
*Onyame yε kεsε* = God is great  
*Onyame ninkuntwe* = God wants us to be close to him  
 Opportunity  
 Original Peace  
 Original Father  
*Osanfoò* = Those who cause trouble (Title of a Highlife song)  
*Òsompá* = Good service  
*Otumfo ne Nyame* = God is powerful  
 Our Father  
 Our God is great  
 Our God reigns  
 Over to God  
 Over to you (cf. *Ese wo ara*)  
 Owner

*Oyaa suro* = A person is afraid

*Papa ye bre* = Father is tired

*Papa ye* = Father is good

Patience

Patience & Confidence

Patience pass all

Peace be with you

Penny wise

People

People will talk of you

Peoples Mandela

Person

Personality

Popular

Praise your maker

Praise the Lord

Pray for life

Pray without ceasing

Prayer is the answer

Prince of Peace

Promise never fail

Psalm 23

Psalm 35: 1-7

Psalm 86

Psalm 90: 17

Psalm 115

Rely on God alone

Remember

Renaissance

Repent

Respect

Road Master

Roaring Kungfu Fighter

Rock

Rock of ages

Royal class

*Se wo nua fom wo a, gyae ma no nka* = If your brother offends

*Se Yesu te ase yi* = If Jesus was living now

*Saa na esse se aba* = What was expected has happened

*Saa nti* = Because of that  
 Safe journey  
*Safo Nyame* = God the healer  
*Sakra Agya* = Father change  
*Salama* [Hausa] = good brother  
 Save me oh Lord  
 Saviour  
 Say Mohammed  
 School boy  
 Scientific education  
*Se wo ho* = Say yours  
*Sɛ wò bò adwo* = You are appeased, aren't you?  
 Sea Boy (someone from the coast)  
 See beyond  
 Seek for the coming Kingdom  
 Seek Yee  
 Seniority (still)  
 Seven brothers  
 Shade  
*Sika yɛ bad* = Money is bad  
 Silent driver  
 Simple man  
 Slow but sure  
 So is the world  
 So nice  
 Social  
 Social justice  
 Some friends  
 Some friends are ....  
 Sons of God  
 Speed the light  
 St Andrews  
 Step by step  
 Still Banda Boy  
 Still Joe  
 Still Know that I am your God  
 Still Officer  
 Still smart guy  
*Su nkwa* = Cry for life  
*Suban* = Character  
 Suffer to gain  
*Sunsum boafɔ* = Spiritual helper  
 Super USA  
*Suro obaa* = Fear woman

*Suro onipa* = Fear man (m/f)  
*Suro nnipa* = Fear people  
*Susu biribi* = Think something  
*Susu ka* = Stop talking  
 Sweet not always  
 Sweet Mother  
 Sweet Victory  
 Sympathy  
  
 Take some ...  
*Teasefo brɛ kwa* = People get tired for nothing  
 Tell me (still)  
*Tete wò bi ka* = The past has something to tell  
*Tete wò bi kyere* = The past has something to teach  
 Thank u Jesus  
 That day  
 The Angels  
 The boy in town  
 The boy Santo for peace  
 The Good...  
 The Light  
 The living Christ  
 The Lord is my shepherd  
 The same brothers  
 The same people  
 The same people (wish you evil)  
 The second coming of Jesus is near  
 The son of man  
 The Thing  
 The wages  
 The young will grow  
 There is hope  
 They act as lovers  
 Thinking  
 This rock  
 Thy will be done  
*Tie Agya asem* = Listen to Father's word  
 Time changes  
 Time tells  
 Time will tell  
 To beat man  
 Travel and see



Trouble no good  
 Trust and obey  
 Trust in God  
 Trust not  
 Try and see  
 Two paddy [two friends]

U.K.  
 Uncle great  
 Understanding  
 United we stand  
 Unity

*W'adwene no no* = Is that your mind?  
 We are going the bible way  
 Wet rain  
 Whatever you do  
 Where there is life  
 Who is free?  
 Who knows tomorrow?  
 Why not Jesus  
 Wisdom  
 With whom? Jesus  
*Wo sikae sua w'asem sua* = If your money is small, your word is small  
*Wo nti* = Because of you  
*Wo wò nkwa a* = If you have life  
*Wobeye nnipa den?* = What will you do to people?  
 Wonderful God  
 Wonderful Jesus  
 Wonderful world  
*Wope wo yie a* = If you want to have a good life ...  
*Woye papaapa* = You do well  
*Woyònko da ne wo da* = Your friend's day is your day

*Ye obidee yie* = Do good to someone  
*Yakode ne Onyame* = God is my helper  
 Yes Sir Master  
*Yese yese* = They talk and talk  
*Yesu dea* = Jesus's property  
*Yesu Mogya* = Jesus's blood  
*Yesu adi nkonim* = Jesus has triumphed  
*Yesu tumi wura* = Jesus master of power  
*Yesu nti* = Because of Jesus  
*Yesu ye* = Jesus is good

*Yesu mo* = Well done Jesus  
*Yesu anaa* = Jesus? (i.e. You can't challenge him)  
*Yesu di kan* = Jesus is the first  
 You lie  
 Young guy  
 Youngsters  
  
 Zimbabwe

## Appendix 2: Inscriptions on wheelbarrows

These inscriptions were collected at Techiman market on 29 and 30 August 1990. All wheelbarrows carried the letters TDA (Techiman District Area) and a number. Wheelbarrows belonging to the same owner had the same inscriptions, often followed by a number (see below).

Agyeiwaa No. 1 (someone's name)  
*Awieε ne Asem* = The end is trouble  
 Come back to Jesus No. 20  
 Envy no man No. 4  
 Express No. 7  
*Éyε Awurade deε* = It belongs to the Lord  
 God is king No. 1  
*Gye se wobereε* = Only when you get tired  
 Holala  
 Man no be God  
 Naty Pee (Krobo, name of owner; has 18 wheelbarrows)  
*Nkwa* = For nothing  
 No condition is permanent  
 Simple No. 3  
*Susu ka* = Stop talking  
 When



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