

1. Southern Diaries



The motorcycle taxis of Lomé: sounding boards for social and political movements

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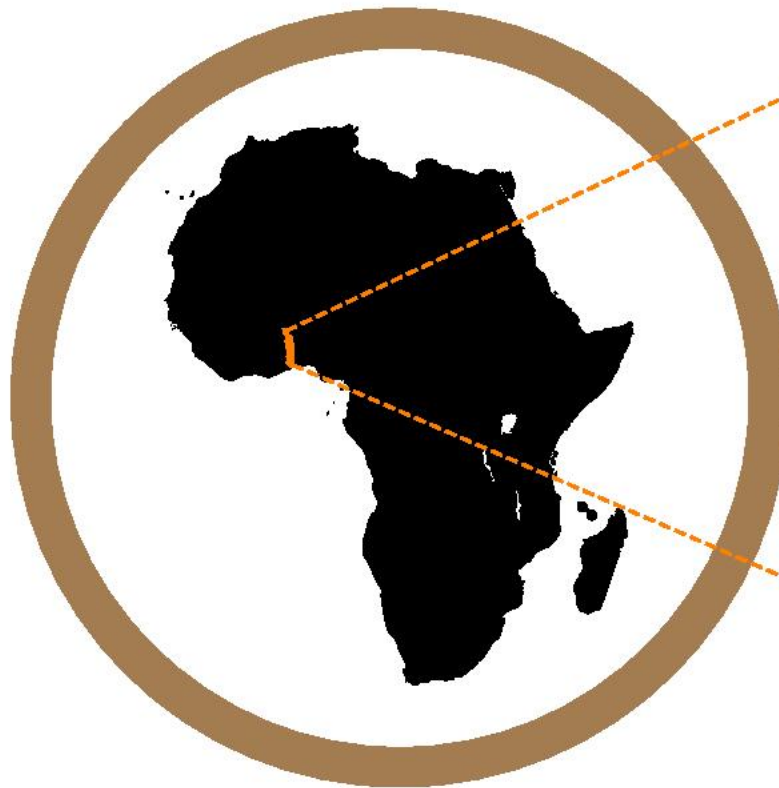
Africa

Since 1992, the motorcycle taxi phenomenon has reached an unprecedented scale in Togolese capital, a city stricken by poverty and important mobility issues. This so-called "informal" mode of urban transportation is a response to the lack of reliable public transportation service, allowing urban dwellers to access services, shops, etc. and thus stay in the city. Beyond questions of travel and transportation, Lomé's motorcycle taxis have actually created a new type of public space, from which researchers can observe social relations. They are also used by political parties for processions.

Research participants

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TOGO



Introduction

Before analyzing how motorcycle taxis serve as a sounding board for social movements and political parties, we should say a few words about Togo's political context. A former French colony, Togo gained independence on April 27, 1960. Its first President, Sylvanus Olympio, was assassinated in 1963 and succeeded by Nicolas Grunitzky, who in turn was overthrown during a coup d'etat in 1967 by Gnassingbé Eyadéma. The latter took power and imposed a dictatorship, dissolving the existing political parties and creating his own, the Rally of the Togolese People (RPT), which later became the Union for the Republic (UNIR) under the impetus of the current president, his son, Faure Gnassingbé. The democratization process began in the 1990s with popular demonstrations, general strikes and the birth of several opposition parties. Today, Togo boasts a record number of political parties. There are "heavyweights" such as the UNIR - the ruling party - as well as strong opposition parties like the UFC ¹, the NAC ², the ACR ³ and the DCAP ⁴. There are also a number of smaller, less powerful parties, some of which are resuscitated for the months surrounding elections. Today, all of these parties use motorcycle taxis to organize processions.

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Motorcycle taxis: a response to Africa's urban transportation crisis

Like most African cities, Lomé (with 1,500,000 inhabitants in 2010) is facing major urban transport problems, due namely to urban sprawl and the emergence of large peri-urban areas with a high percentage of informal housing. This is compounded by the lack of infrastructure, public services and, above all, efficient public transportation service. For this reason, in recent years, new, popular modes have emerged and are playing a regulatory role in the city's services. The development of these modes is actually changing urban space. Motorcycle taxis have replaced classic public transportation modes as more or less spontaneous response to a demand that remains

largely unmet today (Guézéré, 2008). Motorcycle taxis first appeared in Togo in 1992. Thanks notably to a sharp rise in the importation of Chinese two-wheel vehicles, motorcycles taxis have multiplied in Africa in recent years.



Agoè Assi yéyé peri-urban market in Lomé (© Guézéré A., 2012)

Drivers are typically aged 18-60. Motorcycle taxis can operate one of three ways:

- Uncontracted owner-drivers. As they own their vehicle, they work for themselves and have no financial accountability.
- “Work and pay contract” drivers. This is a rent-to-own agreement whereby the driver agrees to use the motorcycle for a given period and pay the owner twice the amount of the vehicle’s purchase price. This highly restrictive usury requires the driver to work long days in a very short period of time to amortize the cost of the motorcycle, which becomes his or hers at the contract’s term. The term (often fixed at 18 or 20 months) obliges the driver to pay a weekly fee of 12,000 to 15,000 FCFA.
- Drivers-renters. These are individuals who rent a motorcycle on a daily basis for 2,000 FCFA. As the bike does not belong to them, they must pick it up from the owner each morning in order to work hard in hopes of making enough to pay the fees and earn enough money for their family’s daily needs.

Drivers in the latter two categories find themselves in a very unstable situation, which can result in risky or even dangerous behavior in urban areas. Seemingly unaware of the danger, they drive fast and often aggressively, insult other street users and ignore road rules (Guézéré, op cit). According to our surveys, they are a threat to urban cohesion in public places, at intersections and on the streets

Motorcycles taxis satisfy local travel needs of customers, who can be dropped off wherever they wish (which Lomé’s anarchical organization typically does not allow for). Users also unanimously recognize motorbikes’ advantage in terms of speed due to their maneuverability on cracked roads and in traffic jams (Guézéré, 2013). Flexible and fast, they make travel in the urban space easier. Moreover, they are available at every street corner at any time of day in any season, offering door to door service and allowing users to save time. Parking areas are also places for exchanges and interactions between drivers, political actors and trade unions.

Negotiation, confrontation and protestation

The motorcycle taxi world is a world of negotiations (finding customers, agreeing on trip fares and luggage transport fees for personal belongings, bags of coal, etc.) (Guézéré, 2012). Prices vary from CFAF 100 to CFAF 1,000 depending on the trip length and items to be transported, as luggage transport is often more profitable than human transport. Prices are based on distance, street conditions and the customer him or herself. Agreeing on a rate is the most common point of contention between drivers and passengers. Though haggling is both possible and a common practice, prices are often exorbitant: drivers, in defense, invoke fuel price increases, the area’s isolation and poor street conditions. Customers respond by invoking low wages and the economic crisis that spares no one. Before the customer gets

on the motorcycle, the driver must have understood the exact destination, as streets and public squares are often nameless, in order to avoid an altercation upon arrival. Foreigners, especially Western tourists who do not understand Ewe, the local language, are the clientele of choice for certain drivers, who take advantage of their poor knowledge of the city to hike up fares.



Drivers and customers negotiate for the transport of bags of charcoal in a market in outside of Lomé. (© Guézéré A., 2012)

The motorcycle taxi world is also a world of rivalry and protest against the public authorities (police, tax services, town hall, etc.). Failure to comply with regulations (driving without a license, refusal to wear a helmet, non-respect of traffic laws and lights, not having an inspection sticker, overloading, refusal to pay operating taxes, etc.) results in sanctions and the risk of confrontation with tax service agents, who are responsible for collecting operating revenues from motorcycle taxis and thus feared, and police officers. When tax agents are accompanied by law enforcement officials, drivers may be bullied or, worse, have their vehicle confiscated. The latter are immobilized on the roadside or at pedestrian crossings, thus obstructing circulation. Once confiscated, owners must pay all of the back taxes due starting from the motorcycle's purchase, as well as pay the cost of the pound, which can be as much as the equivalent of 10 days earnings, in order to retrieve their vehicle. Tax collectors and drivers thus play a game of cat and mouse in the urban space; to avoid arrests, illegal drivers skillfully trick the police by violating traffic laws and signals during high-speed chases, which sometimes end in serious accidents.



Motorcycle taxis immobilized for non-payment by the tax department at an intersection. (© Guézéré, A., 2007)

The space vested by motorcycle taxis: political territory

Public space is physical space that more or less offers citizens opportunities whose nature is largely determined by the people/institutions that create and manage them. Streets, parking areas and markets are spaces of social interaction where people can relax, discuss, negotiate and gather, as can be seen in the picture below.



An area for rest and debate near a newspaper stand (© Guézéré A., 2008)

Motorcycle taxis also seem to be the source of the emergence of a "metaphorical public space" (Habermas, op cit, Fleury, op cit.) for discussion and public debate. As their work takes them to all areas of the city and allows them to encounter many people, motorcycle taxi drivers are excellent vectors of information. It is for this reason that they are often approached by political parties, associations, NGOs, marketing services and international institutions to participate in processions, campaigns and promotional activities for public, semi-public and private companies as traveling billboards

Though political parties generally rely on their supporters for leading motorcycle taxi processions, this is not always the case. Drivers who agree to wear the party t-shirt and participate in the procession receive a full tank of fuel and a daily stipend of 2,000 to 2,500 CFAF, or the equivalent of their daily earnings. As processions are often short (less than half a day), the drivers' full day salary is guaranteed, as is fuel that will be used for the rest of the day's trips. During legislative and presidential elections, drivers can enroll in campaign teams for a specified period of time and take time in the evening to go shopping to enjoy their free fuel. Drivers are thus sounding boards for political parties: they do an excellent job of spreading messages loud and clear to both passers-by and local residents. Such techniques also provide fertile ground for manipulation and the political maneuvering of the union demands of party-affiliated drivers. Drivers, for their part, end up affiliating themselves with the most convincing party or the highest bidder.



Opposition support (ANC) motorcycle taxi drivers occupy the streets during the 2015 election campaign in Lomé. (© Guézéré A., 2015)

Motorcycle taxi parking areas are also centers of diffusion for news and information. Discussions with customers during the trips help spread news throughout the city. Extremely talkative and proud of their role as primary informers, drivers often discuss socio-economic and political issues with their customers. After radio, television and print news, motorcycle taxi drivers are considered the country's fourth most important source of information and rumor transmission⁵. Drivers are fond of the written press, which explains their regular gatherings around newsstands, where they often socialize. When information reaches a driver's ears it is immediately relayed and propagated.



A procession for the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Water, marking the World Food Day, October 22, 2016. (www.radiolome.tg)

Conclusion

The urban dynamics created by motorcycle taxis in Lomé are not exceptional; they exist in many African cities, such as Cotonou, Douala and N'djamena. In each case, motorcycle taxi drivers gather and appropriate certain parts of the city, creating spaces of information dissemination, citizenship and sometimes political maneuvering. Motorcycle taxi drivers play an important role in inhabitants' mobility aspirations in a context of urban crisis where the lack of alternatives has made them indispensable.

Beyond the seemingly disorganized, anarchic nature of the motorcycle taxi transportation system - woven through resourcefulness⁶ and as a result of necessity - it is nonetheless a system that allows for flexibility. The advantages of using motorcycle taxis are many: they can get passengers to their destinations quickly, solicit potential passengers in the street, and bypass traffic congestion by weaving between vehicles. Moreover, they go anywhere and are always ready to drop passengers off exactly where they need to go, regardless of the state of the street or the weather. It is the only means of transportation suited to peri-urban areas and capable of saving the urban poor, low-level civil servants and undocumented workers from the fate of isolation (Guézéré, 2013). Drivers could benefit from using new technologies such as Smartphones with GPS, etc. to optimize their daily use of the urban space.

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Notes

5 A similar phenomenon can be observed in Cotonou in Benin: "the zemijan are the main rumor makers and propagators. Rumors sometimes are made around newsstands, because the information found in newspapers largely lends itself to such wieldings, and drivers enjoying adding a pinch of spice. The nature of their profession then carries this news throughout the city, where the rumors grow and spread." Agossou (2003).

6 See Xavier GODARD's book Les transports et la ville en Afrique au sud du Sahara, le temps de la débrouille et du désordre inventif, Karthala-INRETS, 408 p.

- 1 Union of Forces for Change
- 2 National Alliance for Change
- 4 Democratic Convention of African Peoples
- 3 Action Committee for renewal

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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