



# The reconstruction of shared taxis as rural transport due to the competition of motor bike taxis in Togo secondary cities



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## ABSTRACT

Motorbike taxis have transformed the Togolese transport system over the past 20 years. In the capital, Lomé, and in all of the country's secondary towns, the advent of motorbike taxis heralded a real threat to the livelihood of shared taxi drivers. In this article we analyse the relationship between shared taxis and motorbike taxis within the urban and suburban areas of Togo using data from three secondary towns. We will show how drivers of shared taxis have been forced to offer bush taxi services – serving small towns and surrounding villages – due to the dominance of the motorbike taxi network in urban areas. After describing the urban areas, this analysis shows how motorbike taxis took over the available space as soon as they began appearing and have now become completely dominant in urban areas. We illustrate the organisation and functional logic of the bush taxi network and its importance in terms of urban-rural connections.

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## 1. Introduction

Public transport in Togolese towns is essentially dominated by motorbike taxis and shared taxis. The creation of the Lomé Transport Company in 2005 marked the first step towards establishing a conventional public transport system, but the role of the company is still very marginal due to organisational difficulties which have prevented it from becoming a genuine public transport system. In this article, we are mostly concerned with transport in secondary towns, where the situation is made even more difficult by low populations, high levels of poverty and non-existent or deteriorated road infrastructure which is inadequate for public transport. Aside from walking and cycling, private motorbikes and particularly motorbike taxis are the main mode of transport. In Lomé, competition from motorbike taxis has not led to the disappearance of shared taxis, which have managed to adapt through a kind of conflictual coexistence. In secondary towns, however, shared taxis have been systematically pushed out of urban areas, resulting in a transformation of the transport system.

This article aims to contribute to the understanding of transport systems in secondary towns in Africa, which have often been overlooked due to the focus on large cities and capital cities. The towns studied in this article are Atakpamé, Sokodé and Kara, three

secondary towns which nonetheless constitute the primary urban areas of the northern region of Togo, where the role of motorbike taxis is important in terms of connecting surrounding areas. This study is based on a clearly observed trend away from shared taxis, which have served urban areas since the 1970s, in favour of motorbike taxis which have taken over the urban environment. In order to preserve their business, shared taxi drivers have had to convert to offering bush taxi services for small towns and surrounding villages. They have thus taken on the role of providing connections between towns and surrounding rural areas.

What were the characteristics of the shared taxi system in Togo before the arrival of motorbike taxis? Why has the situation come to favour motorbike taxis? How do shared taxis now serve the rural areas? How do the two modes of transport co-exist to offer a complete service for neighbourhoods and suburban areas? These are some of the questions addressed in this study.

In order to answer these questions, we began by using a quantitative survey carried out in June 2008 on a sample of 35 drivers working in Sokodé, where 130 shared taxis were in operation. Subsequently, a qualitative survey carried out in 2012, using an interview guide, allowed us to conduct in-depth interviews in Kara and Atakpamé with, respectively, 12 and 10 very experienced former drivers of shared taxis in order to better understand the sector. They were asked to answer different questions about themselves, their professional lives, competition and conversion to bush taxis, the routes served and fares applied. We chose to focus on these three towns because they are the only important medium-sized towns to have experienced this competition between the two

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**Table 1**  
Population trends in Atakpamé, Sokodé and Kara between independence and 2010.

	1960	1970	1981	1997	2010
Atakpamé	9500	16,791	24,337	50,299	69,261
Kara	2800	11,674	28,902	72,000	94,878
Sokodé	15,000	29,213	46,600	76,361	95,070

Source: National Office of Statistics and Finance.

modes, with the resulting conversion of shared taxis to bush taxis. This investigation, carried out through the use of questionnaires and first-hand observation, allowed us to gather material which would help us to understand the drivers' socio-economic characteristics and their decision to serve only rural areas.

Our article is structured in three parts. We begin by presenting the urban context of the towns studied. In the second part we analyse the organisation and modus operandi of town taxis before and after the arrival of motorbike taxis. We then move on to the appearance of motorbike taxis in Lomé and their subsequent expansion into secondary towns. Finally, in the last section, we show that shared taxis which served urban areas, far from simply disappearing in the face of competition, now provide services to outlying areas instead.

### 1.1. Secondary towns which drive socio-economic development in rural regions

When Togo obtained independence, the country's development was drastically imbalanced to the advantage of Lomé, the capital, which attracted large numbers of migrants from rural areas. In the south, the main secondary cities were Aného, Kpalimé and Atakpamé (see Table 1). The only large town of any significance in the north, at the time regarded as the second city of the country due to the size of its population, economic vitality and its role as a hub, was Sokodé. This town had been the regional capital of northern Togo since the colonial period. It had the advantage of being both the administrative and economic capital of the Central region and of the prefecture of Tchaoudjo. Its administrative functions led to its status as the capital of central Togo, which is still the case today. Other than Atakpamé, a little further south, Sokodé is the only real town in the north but it was not enough to counter-balance the urban weight of Lomé, a macrocephalic city and the country's only centre of power (Map 1).

In order not to worsen the regional imbalance created in the colonial era, and conscious of the delays in development of northern Togo, the political authorities decided to make Kara a regional hub to slow migration to Lomé and the south and to stabilise northern populations. With the independence of the country in 1960, the new authorities undertook to develop the north and showed strong political commitment to boosting the north and counterbalancing the dominance of Lomé, which had become too preponderant, in a uni-polar system (Nyassogbo, 1991). Kara, birthplace of deceased president Eyadema,<sup>1</sup> was to play a very significant political, economic and socio-cultural role in the national urban structure and would constitute the second national urban centre after Lomé. In this context of regeneration, many services were created between 1970 and 1980, including decentralised administrative and technical services, school establishments and teacher training schools, a regional hospital complex, radio station, modern hotels, a branch of the Central

Bank of West African States, a convention centre, a military base, industrial sites and various administrative services. These were some of the many urban services that made Kara a modern town, well-connected to surrounding rural areas and other regions of the country by a road network of which it was the central hub.

From then on, apart from Atakpamé, which was the most significant city in the centre-south and capital of the Plateau Region and Ogou prefecture, the north of Togo was dominated by Sokodé and Kara, two neighbouring cities 74 km apart, with similar demographic profiles and which, due to their role as drivers of development, experienced rapid urban and demographic growth, as shown in Table 1.

With regard to the urban evolution of the three towns, it should be noted that Atakpamé and Sokodé are the oldest because the German colonial administration had already been established there at the beginning of the 20th century. By contrast, Kara was not yet a town and at the time of independence in 1960 its population was still very small, just 2800 inhabitants, whilst Sokodé is recorded as having had 15,000 inhabitants and Atakpamé 9500 inhabitants, at the time. Since then, Sokodé's has remained firmly at the top of the demographic chart for the interior of the country and is still the second urban centre, with strong growth. According to the 2010 census, its population was estimated at 95,070 inhabitants, whereas Atakpamé occupies 5th position with 69,261 inhabitants, behind Kpalimé, the fourth-largest town.

The most spectacular urban development in Togo was the radical transformation of Kara. From a village of 2800 inhabitants in 1960, the urban population increased significantly thanks to inward migration. Its urban growth took off from 1970, at a rate of 8.1% between 1970 and 1980, reaching 94,878 inhabitants in 2010. Since then, Kara has moved ahead of the older secondary towns of Aného, Kpalimé, Atakpamé, Bassar, Tsévié, etc. and now ranks as the country's third-largest town. With the development of the urban infrastructure and, particularly, the creation of the University of Kara in 2004, the town has been experiencing a strong inward flow of young people, which will undoubtedly mean that it moves ahead of Sokodé as the country's second town within 5 years.

With their extremely rapid demographic growth, the three towns have all experienced urban sprawl – from 96 ha in 1960, Kara now covers 9000 ha. Sokodé's urban sprawl has been similar in scale, evolving from 1800 ha in 1960–8800 ha in 2010, whilst Atakpamé has gone from 127 ha in 1970 to more than 8000 ha today. Though the political decision to promote development of secondary urban centres in the interior and boost the development of the whole northern region was certainly a noble objective, unfortunately, with no viable urban development plan, the initiative was not able to match expectations. The towns are generally structured around an old core with haphazard and poorly constructed neighbourhoods spreading out from the centre and connected by a road network in poor condition.

Due to the unorganised development and lack of infrastructure in these towns, the road network remains mostly comprised of dirt roads. In Kara, at most, 30 km of roads are asphalt paved, compared with 21 km in Sokodé and 20.2 km in Atakpamé. The three towns are connected to the national road N1 which runs the length of the country from north to south and is the main artery connecting Lomé-Ouagadougou, passing through Dapaong and Cinkassé. In addition to this road, each of the towns features intersecting roads – an example of which is the N5 from Kpalimé to Atakpamé. In Sokodé, there is the N16 Sokodé-Tchamba which continues to Bénin, and the N17 which runs from Sokodé, to Bassar, to Ghana. In Kara, there is the N18 from Bénin via Kétau and the N19 from Natchamba to the border with Ghana. The structural effects of these national roads on the development and expansion of the

<sup>1</sup> Third President of Togo and a renowned dictator in sub-Saharan Africa, General Gnassingbe Eyadema came to power in 1967 and ruled the country with an iron fist until his death in 2005. Born in the region of Kara, he wanted to make the city of Kara a political capital of Togo, in the image of Yamoussoukro and Abuja. Although he did not succeed, the city nonetheless experienced rapid growth.

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