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Earning a living, but at what price? Being a motorcycle taxi driver in a Sub-Saharan African city

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ABSTRACT

Motorcycle taxis have become an essential part of the transport sector in an increasing number of Sub-Saharan African cities. An analysis of the way this activity operates in Lomé (Togo), based on field surveys, provides a better understanding of the reasons for the development of this transport mode. The majority of drivers earn enough from the activity to meet their day to day needs and to invest to increase human and economic capital. The arduous working conditions, the impacts on health and the risk of accidents and aggression explain however why the activity is perceived as temporary and undertaken for want of anything better. There is a need to identify measures to professionalize the occupation and improve its image, and also find the best way to implement them. The occasionally stated goal of doing away with motorcycle taxis in order to modernize urban transport systems would have negative effects on their livelihoods.

1. Introduction

The last two decades have seen an unprecedented increase in the commercial use of motorcycles in Sub-Saharan Africa. Motorcycle taxis have a strong presence in rural areas where as a rule the availability of public and private transport has been very limited (Ngabmen and Godard, 1998; Porter et al., 2007). But motorcycle taxis are also an essential part of the transport landscape in an increasing number of cities. In the early 1950s, they existed solely in the Senegalese city of Kaolack (Morice, 1981). They appeared in Nigeria at the beginning of the 1970s, in Yola and Calabar (Ogunsanya and Galtima, 1993; Olubomehin, 2012), before spreading rapidly to more of the country's cities (Oyesiku, 2001). In Benin, they arrived in Porto Novo in the second half of the 1970s and Cotonou in 1981 (Agossou, 2003). The "ville morte" urban strikes at the beginning of the 1990s helped them spread to Douala in 1991 (Sahabana, 2006) and Lomé in 1992 (Guézéré, 2008). But they have also existed since the end of the 1990s in several East African cities (Howe, 2003) and to a lesser extent in southern Africa, for example in Huambo in Angola (Lopes, 2010). The spread of motorcycle taxis in urban areas has speeded up since the beginning of this century, as reported in the scientific literature and the local press. Out of a sample of 203 cities with populations of over 100,000,[1] motorcycle taxis have been reported in 104, located in 25 of the 42 countries of Sub-Saharan Africa.

This success is explained by a wide range of factors (Diaz Olvera et al., 2012; Sietchiping et al., 2012). First, there is the economic and social situation that affects the cities of Sub-Saharan Africa: the economic crisis, the recessive effects of the structural adjustment plans that started to be introduced in the 1980s and massive under-employment, particularly among the young (de Vreyer and Roubaud, 2013). As the job required few qualifications, many poorly educated young people saw motorcycle taxis as an opportunity to earn money (Howe and Davis, 2002; Dorier-Apprill and Domingo, 2004; Meagher, 2013). But the mode's success is also partly due to

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[1] We have put together this list from the Geonames database (www.geonames.org), considering all the cities with a population of over 100,000 when there are ten or less of these, or the ten largest cities otherwise, in each of the 42 states of Sub-Saharan Africa (island states excluded). For each of the 203 selected cities, searches were made on Google and Google scholar (Fall 2014) using a combination of the name of the city with the general names for motorcycle taxis (either in French, English or Portuguese, depending on the country) as well as any local names. The representativeness of these 203 cities is determined by the quality, methodology and date of their population censuses, all of which are highly variable. Our figures depend on the availability on the web of the local press and academic documents, which varies from one country to another. Motorcycle taxis have no doubt spread even further than these estimates.

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the failings of urban transport systems: the transport authorities regulate them ineffectively, the major transport companies ceased their activities or are in decline, informal transport is both inadequate and expensive and road networks are often in a very bad state of repair (Cervero, 2000; Chile Love, 1988). Finally, their success is the outcome of their qualities as a transport mode: motorcycle taxis are quick, able to travel on roads that are in poor condition, provide door-to-door services, can be purchased with a very small capital outlay, in some cities in the Niger bend they are able to run on contraband fuel from Nigeria, and their fares are lower than for other vehicles for short distances (Agossou, 2003; Nwagwu and Olatunji, 2012; Kamahunda and Schmidt, 2009).

Nevertheless, attitudes towards motorcycles and their drivers are ambivalent. Although they satisfy a demand that other forms of public transport cannot, in the eyes of the authorities – and the general public too – they are often associated with acts of aggression, not to say violence and delinquency. This ambivalence is particularly marked in those cities which have experienced bloody civil wars. The motorcycle taxi provides unskilled former soldiers with a source of revenue, without calming the fears of a resurgence of past violence (Burge, 2011; Menzel, 2011; Peters, 2007). But the activity's image is not better in places with a more peaceful recent history (Konings, 2006; Meagher, 2013; Sadou, 2007). The real or imagined threat the drivers pose to society is the result of their ability to become mobilized for political or social causes, their solidarity when one of them needs or seems to need help (due to a traffic accident, a vehicle breakdown or a dispute with a customer or a policeman) and the involvement of some in thefts from passengers or attacks on them (Burge, 2011; Simone, 2005). It is further strengthened by the fact that the rise of motorcycle taxis has taken place at best with the "passive complicity" of the public authorities (Amougou Mbarga, 2010: 70). In some cases, this rise has entailed violent confrontations due to the authorities' tendency to try to restrict them to the outskirts or ban them completely from urban areas, as in Kampala (Goodfellow and Titeca, 2012), Calabar (Mahlstein, 2009), Jos and Maiduguri (Meagher, 2013) and Accra (Oteng-Ababio and Agyemang, 2012).

Even though its efficiency as a mode of transport is open to question and its external effects can be criticized, one can still ask whether the motorcycle taxi is an occupation that prevents individuals from sinking even deeper into poverty or if the job actually improves the living conditions of operators and provides a way for impoverished, poorly educated, city dwellers to escape from poverty. After presenting the empirical material (Section 2), we shall evaluate the economic benefits the operators derive from their activities (Section 3). A consideration of the difficulties they encounter, the arduous working conditions, the impacts on health and the risk of accidents or aggression (Section 4) will allow us to see why the activity is generally perceived as temporary and undertaken for want of anything better (Section 5).

2. Data and method

Lomé was one of the first capital cities in Africa where motorcycle taxis appeared, in the early 1990s. Today, they are the dominant form of public transport (2.1). The results we shall present in this paper have been obtained from the set of quantitative and qualitative data collected in 2011–12 (2.2) which, in particular, enable us to reconstruct cash accounts (2.3).

2.1. The city of Lomé

Lomé, the administrative and economic capital of Togo, is located in the Gulf of Guinea immediately to the east of Ghana. The city's activities are strongly centred on trade (Gervais-Lambony and Nyassogbo, 2008), and it boasts a very active seaport through which a variety of products pass to and from the landlocked countries of the Sahel. The conurbation, known as "Greater Lomé", had a population of slightly under 1.5 million in 2010 (Bureau Central du Recensement, 2011). The municipality of Lomé alone is home to almost 840,000 individuals, the rest of the population being distributed between the six peripheral cantons. Urban trips are made extremely difficult by the low density of the road network and its bad state of repair, even though a large programme of works to rehabilitate and improve the major roads began in 2010. Black-top or paved roads are mainly confined to the central districts and the primary network of the inner suburbs. Otherwise, the roads are made of earth or sand.

Household motor vehicle ownership rates are low. In 2011, only 9% of households in Greater Lomé owned a car, and only 28% a motorized two-wheeler (PNUD Togo, 2012). Most of the city's residents therefore depend on walking or public transport for their travel. Public transport is currently provided by motorcycle taxis and shared taxis, with the minor presence of a few buses operated by Sotral, a company set up in 2007. Motorcycle taxis first appeared in Lomé during the "unlimited general strike" of November 1992. They are referred to using the local names of oleyias ("are you coming" in Éwé, one of the languages spoken in Togo) or zemidjans or zems ("take me quickly" in Fon, also spoken in Togo).

Togo was one of the first countries to introduce specific regulations for commercial motorcycle transport. Since 1996 these have specified the authorizations that are necessary (in particular the licence issued by the Ministry of Trade, third-party insurance, a vehicle registration certificate and a vehicle inspection certificate), and the operating conditions (the motorcycle must be painted yellow, be fitted with specific number plates, display an identification number, carry no more than a certain number of passengers, and helmet use is compulsory). However, as in most of the cities in Sub-Saharan Africa where there are motorcycle taxis, the local authorities are not able to enforce the regulations.

Membership of a trade union was initially compulsory, and several trade unions were created to organize and regulate the profession. However, the regulations were relaxed in 1999 and membership became voluntary. This flexibility and the drivers' mistrust of unions explain why they have been abandoned by the profession, even though they remain the only interlocutors that are recognized by the authorities. Currently there is no comprehensive formal framework for the internal organization of oleyias. However, on a day-to-day level, motorcycle taxi drivers, particularly those working full-time, meet in the taxi stations, where they wait for clients (Guézéré, 2012). There are about a hundred taxi stations in the conurbation, near trip attractors, business districts and major intersections. The "members" of the station pay a daily fee that is used to provide minimal facilities and create a professional and social assistance fund which is used, for example, to pay large fines, help drivers in the event of an accident or illness, make a contribution to ceremonies that involve its members, etc. The other drivers operate freely, cruising for clients or parking in areas that are not yet occupied by motorcycle taxi stations.

The number of motorcycle taxis is difficult to estimate as there is no official count. There seem to have been approximately 66,000 in 2006 (Guézéré, 2008) and this figure may have risen to 90,000 in 2011, according to estimates from a trade union official who was interviewed for this study. Due to the absence of a comprehensive travel survey we are also unable to accurately estimate modal split and thus measure their current role in urban transport supply. However, the survey of public transport users undertaken as part of this study of motorcycle taxis shows they are the dominant type of public transport within the conurbation: four out of five of the trips the individuals were making when they were intercepted for the survey involved the use of an oleyia, either as the sole mode of transport (two out of three) or combined with walking or other modes (mainly shared-taxis).[2]

[2] For a comprehensive analysis of the role of motorcycle taxis in mobility in Lomé, see Diaz Olvera et al. (2015).

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