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**Speed Matters:
An Ethnography of a Ghanaian Highway,
its Perils and Potentialities**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD
2014

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Declaration

I certify that the thesis I have presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the University of London is solely my own work and based on my own original research. I also undertake that any quotation or paraphrase from the published or unpublished work of another person has been duly acknowledged throughout.

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Signed:

G. May

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Abstract

African roads give rise to ambivalence in both Africans and Africanists. Masquelier has pointed to the “profoundly contradictory nature of roads as objects of both fascination and terror”, spaces “of both fear and desire”. My research on the Accra-Kumasi road, one of Ghana’s major highways, bore out these tensions. Both now and in the past, Ghanaians have associated this road with perils and potentialities, notably those of excessive speed, in Ghanaian English ‘overspeeding’ (or *kɔ ntemntem* in Twi).

Drawing on a year of ethnographic fieldwork, I explore the everyday lives of the people who dwell, work and move alongside the Accra-Kumasi road. I aim to contribute to the small but growing body of anthropological work on roads and within this, to a phenomenology of the practices and experiences of different road users. I introduce this world via a discussion of the stories and rumours concerning a particular section of the Ghanaian highway, which have to be understood in terms of the changing historical, political, economic and infrastructural contexts that its residents draw upon. I then turn from discourse to the practical ways that people navigate the frequently complex tasks of roadside dwelling and trading, commercial bus driving, and travelling. My ethnography encompasses the kinetic, spatial, entrepreneurial, sociable and at times religious practices of road users as they explore the opportunities and perils and uncertainties that are thrown up by and around the road. In analysing these practices, I consider in particular the perceptions, skills, bodies and emotions as they engage in intricate temporalities, diverse rhythms, and sensations of speed.

Throughout my thesis, I demonstrate how the road as an experiential environment foregrounds people’s recurrent concerns with matters of speed. Speed (*ntemyɛ*), definitely a commercial imperative on the Accra-Kumasi road, is perceived and performed within a range of ‘dromocentric’ (fast or rushed) practices. Yet people also encounter slowness and even standstill, and stress the values of waiting, relaxing and patience (*boasetɔ*). I therefore trace Ghanaians’ engagements with differing paces of movement and action, and with their contradictory sides: both appealing and perilous, able to reward but also to backfire. Experiences of the road are complexly enmeshed with a range of practices and preferences; they provoke dilemmas when competing and ambiguous speeds are at stake. These dilemmas of speed are not peculiar to the road; they also arise when other concerns of life in contemporary Ghana are brought into focus as speeds, perils and uncertainties mount up.

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Contents

Declaration	2
Abstract	3
Acknowledgements	4
Contents	5
List of maps	8
List of figures	9

Chapter 1

Introduction: on the road in Ghana 12

The ritual roadblock	14
A brief history	18
Roads and anthropologists	19
Road and roadside practices	22
Engaging with perils and uncertainties	26
Negotiating speed(s) and time	31
Fieldwork on the road	36
Thesis overview	40

Chapter 2

Stories of the road: perceptions of power, progress and perils on the AKR 44

Asante great-roads versus Akyem authority	46
(Dis)connecting pathways to progress	51
The animate road: the causes of recurring crashes	61
Conclusion	68

Part I ROADSIDE DWELLING

70

Chapter 3

Routines, rituals and roadblocks: spatial practices of roadside dwellers 71

Routines at the roadside	73
Entertaining tarmac	79
Roadblock performances	85
Conclusion	92

Chapter 4**Trading with travellers: multiple engagements with a moving market 94**

Providing provisions at stations	99
Advertising by the roadside	104
Hawking in urban through traffic	106
Speeds, rhythms and tactics of toutting	110
Movements into emotions	117
Conclusion	121

Part II COMMERCIAL DRIVING 123**Chapter 5****Precarious business: navigating the uncertainties of commercial driving 124**

Bus drivers in Ghana and in Suhum	127
Employed and exploited: two biographies	131
Ways of navigating	136
Conclusion	143

Chapter 6**Rush and relax: the kinetic practices of competing for passengers 145**

Competition and loading modes	147
'Overlapping': A trip with Saa Nono	153
Mapping the market, reading the road	155
The need for speed?	161
Conclusion	164

Chapter 7**Kill your speed, fight your fear: confronting perils on the road 166**

On the road with Amoyaw	167
The causes of crashes	169
Attempts to prevent accidents	174
Conclusion	180

Part III TRAVELLING 182**Chapter 8****Important times: multiple means, socialities and occasions of travelling 183**

Means and ways of travelling to Accra	185
Sociable practices at the margins	192
The need to travel and the joys of returning	196
Conclusion	202

Chapter 9**Trapped travellers: personal safety and practices of ‘passenger’ 204**

Navigating the perils of bus travel	206
Passengers as ‘co-wayfarers’	211
Conclusion	218

Chapter 10**Conclusion: dilemmas of speed and immoral impatience 220**

Speed perspectives and directions	221
Preaching patience in Ghana	226
Recent developments on the AKR	228

Bibliography 232**Appendix I: Archival sources 256****Appendix II: Glossary and abbreviations 257**

List of maps

Map 1: The Accra-Kumasi road in Ghana	10
Map 2: The Accra-Kumasi road, the ‘old road’ and the ‘new road’ (Kyebe bypass)	11
Map 3: The Asante great-roads network in the early 19th century (Wilks 1975: 11)	47

List of figures

Figure 1: The road cleansing ritual in Ofankor	13
Figure 2: Entering the Akyem kingdom: roadside billboard in Nsawam-Adoagyiri	50
Figure 3: NPP billboard promoting progress and acceleration for the nation	58
Figure 4: The ‘old’ Accra-Kumasi road traversing Kyebi	74
Figure 5: Watching the road and traffic	80
Figure 6: Cleansing ritual for <i>Olila</i> , the Ofankor road deity	86
Figure 7: Suhum residents erecting roadblocks	89
Figure 8: Running and selling alongside passing vehicles	95
Figure 9: Bus station vendors attending to departing passengers	102
Figure 10: Roadside stall and bush rat vendor on the Accra-Kumasi road	102
Figure 11: Street vendors selling water sachets and oranges in Suhum	103
Figure 12: The <i>ɔhemmaa</i> (‘market queen’), one of Ofankor’s senior bread sellers	103
Figure 13: Chasing cars and customers	111
Figure 14: Displaying and touting <i>Christ</i> bread	111
Figure 15: Amoyaw relaxing in the backseat	134
Figure 16: Saa Nono sitting in his Mitsubishi minibus	134
Figure 17: Loading the <i>LION OF JUDAH</i> at the <i>CMB Station</i> in central Accra	149
Figure 18: Spotting a Sprinter, one of Saa Nono’s ‘enemies’, loading passengers	154
Figure 19: The driver’s ‘mate’ attempting to draw the attention of passengers	159
Figure 20: Dodging a ‘killer pothole’	170
Figure 21: Broken-down and damaged ‘Burkina truck’ on a hill slope	171
Figure 22: “Overspeeding KILLS”, message by National Road Safety Commission	174
Figure 23: Controlling the road via extra mirrors	176
Figure 24: Slogan on a taxi dashboard	179
Figure 25: Auntie Sissi and Elvis waiting for a ride to Accra	184
Figure 26: The presidential convoy on the Accra-Kumasi road	191
Figure 27: Enjoying the hometown visit	201
Figure 28: Passing by a scene of accident	206



Map 1: The Accra-Kumasi road in Ghana



Map 2: The Accra-Kumasi road, the 'old road' and the 'new road' (Kyebe bypass)

Chapter 1

Introduction: on the road in Ghana

“*Akwanyia wo ho anaa?* Is there an accident?” the man sitting next to me in the minibus wondered aloud. We were travelling on Accra’s arterial road to the north one Saturday morning in late 2006 as our driver suddenly jammed on the brakes. A tailback had built up in Ofankor, on the capital’s outskirts. Another traffic jam! The driver and some of the passengers sighed. Those who had dozed off in the cramped vehicle after its departure from the bus station were now awake again. It was getting hot inside. My fellow passengers and I craned our necks to spot what was causing this annoying traffic jam which stretched just a few hundred meters in front of the new, usually fast dual carriageway, the southernmost section of the Accra-Kumasi road.

The traffic jam was not caused by an accident. No rear-end collision with the usual spectacle involving infuriated drivers and amused onlookers. No tipper truck crashed due to brake failure after descending from the new flyover and the subsequent rush for victims, like only a few months earlier at the Ofankor junction. No roadside hawker knocked down whilst selling bread in busy through traffic by a ‘careless’ driver now facing the menacing gestures of angry residents. What kept us from travelling onwards was a gathering of chiefs and their entourage. Their presence was made manifest by ornamented royal umbrellas that we could see from where our vehicle had come to a halt. There was no doubt: what the chiefs were doing right in the middle of the road was *amammere*¹; they were performing a customary ritual.

“These people are wasting my time!” our driver railed. One passenger complained why the ‘traditionalists’ were not performing their ritual a day later, on a quieter Sunday, when their roadblock would have delayed fewer travellers. People were in a hurry. They discussed whether it would be wise to make a U-turn in order to find an alternative and hopefully faster way around the impasse, but our driver decided against it as he assumed that Ofankor’s backstreets would be too congested by now.

¹ *Amammere* translates as ‘culture’, ‘tradition’ or ‘custom’. Throughout this thesis, all non-English terms and sentences written in italics are Twi, the language spoken by Akans, and the lingua franca in southern Ghana.

Instead, he and some passengers decided to alight and get closer to see what exactly was going on. I followed them.

Among the crowd of curious pedestrians, roadside vendors and travellers stood a group of chiefs and other palace functionaries wearing red and black cloth. They watched as several ‘fetish priests’ (*akomfo*) and their helpers performed a large-scale cleansing ritual. When I arrived at the scene they had already killed a black fowl and a full-grown bull. Their next sacrifice was a sheep whose blood was poured on the asphalt, mixed with water and leaves, then sprinkled all over the place – sparing neither chiefs nor the dispersing crowd. After pouring schnapps on the ground, the chiefs left the scene whilst their helpers dragged the sacrificial accessories off the road. All they left behind was a large pool of blood.



Figure 1: The road cleansing ritual in Ofankor

While walking back to our vehicle and boarding, some of my fellow passengers were discussing the incident. It was obvious that the ritual was related to the fatal accidents that had recently occurred at Ofankor and on the highway behind the capital’s gateway. “The accidents are *too much*”, one man said. Someone explained, “The witches are there *oo!*” An elderly woman claimed that most of the accidents had a ‘spiritual’ source: the ‘souls’ of accident victims were still around, and a danger to travellers and to those living and working alongside the road. Such circumstances necessitated the performing of a cleansing ritual. The two young men sitting next to me had a different explanation for the fatal accidents though and thought the ritual was unnecessary. They claimed that the accidents were caused by careless drivers, especially those known as ‘*kɔ ntem, bra ntem* drivers’ (literally ‘go fast, come fast drivers’). I asked whom exactly they were referring to. “Commercial drivers!” one of the

men said, and explained “Those bus drivers who do overspeeding [sic] and dangerous overtaking so that they can return quickly for more passengers”. And he added, “You know, these commercial drivers, they like rushing – they *all* want money.”

Rushing was exactly what the drivers, who had been halted on the asphalt behind the pool of blood, were doing as soon as the traffic jam started dissolving. Drivers made hectic manoeuvres to get going and started driving on the still empty lane opposite to overtake vehicles that had not started moving yet. Our driver did the same and sped up on the opposite lane. Tailgating behind a Benz bus, he suddenly swerved to the left, halfway onto the shoulder. In an awkward attempt to overtake the bus, he hit a massive pothole that he had had no chance to dodge. We were all shaken by the unexpected noise and jolting. “Ey, driver!” one woman shouted angrily. “Why are you doing this to us?” We passed the bus, but there was another vehicle in front of it, and our driver seemed eager to pass it as well, speeding even more. “*Mesre wo, to bo ase oo!* I beg you, be patient, slow down! Or do you want to kill us?” the man next to me exclaimed. But our driver, who pretended not to have noticed the agitation among his passengers, continued at full speed.

The ritual roadblock

The cleansing ritual in Ofankor was an incident that interrupted in a more unusual way one of the many bus trips that I took during my fieldwork on the Accra-Kumasi road (AKR), the roughly 200 km long highway that links Ghana’s capital with the second largest city. Despite its unusualness, the incident provided insights into the everyday lives of those who dwell, work, drive and travel alongside the AKR and with whom this ethnography is essentially concerned.

First of all, the road ritual hinted at the various *movements* of local residents. There were the chiefs and their followers who had come to the road to perform an exceptional ritual. It temporarily restricted the movements of the roadside regulars: pedestrians walking along the road, commuters searching for a ride to central Accra, and hawkers running alongside vehicles to sell items to passing travellers. The incident also affected the (first halted, then rushed) movements and manoeuvres of private car drivers and many more professional drivers, the latter moving people and goods along the AKR (and beyond) in taxis, buses, coaches, lorries and articulated trucks. The majority of these were commercial drivers operating converted Mercedes Benz transporters (known in Ghana as ‘207’) and Japanese minibuses, and their passengers boarded at bus stations (or ‘lorry parks’), bus stops or by the roadside. Passengers’ destinations probably varied as widely as their purposes for being on the

move, although in this case most were probably on their way to a funeral, it being a Saturday morning.

The people whose paths I followed in Ofankor – and beyond, during my fieldwork – and who incessantly turn the AKR into a ‘place of movement’ (Hetherington 1997) constitute three distinct groups of road users. Each group is portrayed in one part of this thesis. The first group comprises residents who live in communities located near (and usually traversed by) the AKR. These *roadside dwellers* include pedestrians, performers, protesters and most particularly roadside vendors (Part I). The second group represents people driving on the AKR, and I mainly focus on *commercial bus drivers* who ply between provincial towns and the country’s capital (Part II). The third group of road users consists of *travellers*. Given that the majority of Ghanaians travelling on the AKR are on public transport, I consider those mainly travelling on the buses operated by the aforementioned commercial drivers (Part III).

In addition to exposing different road users, the Ofankor incident also illustrated the various *possibilities and opportunities* that people routinely explore in the realm of the road. The various vehicular and human movements alongside the road – in this case the ritual performance – provide a source of information and entertainment for roadside residents and pedestrians. Roadside hawkers (including bread sellers) take advantage of the busy through traffic in Ofankor, which continually brings new potential customers – unless the ritual distracts the hawkers from pursuing their roadside business. For the commercial drivers, working in the transport business and plying the AKR with passengers and goods provides an income-generating opportunity. Finally, for the passengers themselves, the use of these transport services is a means to staying connected to people and places along the AKR and beyond, to attend to their duties and to pursue various ventures.

The incident also brought up certain *perils and uncertainties* that arise in the context of the road with its manifold activities. For instance, our bus driver’s statement about the road ritual ‘wasting his time’ alluded to *economic* worries: the delay may reflect negatively on the driver’s daily takings, which depend directly on the number of trips made (and passengers transported) in a day. Losing money, or not making enough, is one of the critical issues of commercial driving. It is an occupation generally characterised by fierce competition, pressures and dependencies from vehicle owners, and an insecure income. Most obvious during the ritual were the references to the road’s *physical* peril of (potentially fatal) traffic accidents on the AKR. The chiefs dealt with these accidents by performing the cleansing ritual and by exorcising the roaming ‘souls’ of accident victims that threaten other travellers, as some passengers

claimed. Others argued that road accidents were caused by the manoeuvres of drivers, in particular to commercial drivers and their dangerous speeding (*ko ntemntem*, lit. 'to go fast fast') and overtaking. The road's perils were not only discussed by the passengers themselves, but could also be *felt* in a tangible manner as we continued the journey. Our driver's speeding up, his hectic overtaking and the harsh impact of hitting the pothole was felt in the passengers' bodies and caused a moment of fear and agitation. The driver's manoeuvre was perceived as something he was 'doing to us', as the woman put it, as a possibly harmful act towards his passengers.

The Ofankor incident thus provides a sense of how road users encounter the AKR as an ambivalent phenomenon, as an object of "both fascination and terror" and a "space of both fear and desire" (Masquelier 2002: 831). The incident alludes to some of the people's practical and experiential engagements with this phenomenon in their everyday lives and road activities, as well as their attempts to make sense of and navigate dangers and uncertainties. My aim in this thesis is to carve out these ordinary yet socially significant practices and experiences of road users, as they explore the potentialities and perils thrown up by and around the Ghanaian highway. This approach comprises pressing matters of speed and time, some of which clearly came to the fore in the context of the road ritual described above.

It was not just speed, but in fact *differential speeds* and their respective temporal implications that marked the Ofankor incident. We first experienced the standstill – zero speed – of vehicular traffic caused by the chiefs' ritual roadblock. The temporary akinesia allowed the ritualists to cleanse their road unhurriedly (and safely); it also enabled the bread sellers to take a break from their usual fast running, or 'chasing' cars, as they put it. For the passengers, the standstill meant waiting – and sweating – in a vehicle that was boiling inside (due to the sun and the suspended airstream), as well as a longer journey and perhaps a late arrival. The same applied to our driver who also expressed his impatience about the enforced wait, an impatience that is characteristic among waiting (or otherwise delayed) commercial drivers who worry about their takings.

The vehicular standstill was replaced by acceleration and by the drivers' 'rushing' as soon as the roadblock was lifted. Our own driver also sped up, which meant that the ordinary (and necessary) act of overtaking slower vehicles quickly turned into an excessive manoeuvre as he tailgated, suddenly swerved, and applied even more speed in order to pass not one, but several vehicles. He engaged in 'overspeeding'. This popular Ghanaian English term denotes quite graphically excessive driving speed, which is regularly part of overtaking, tailgating and other (often dangerous)

manoeuvres. To be clear, ‘overspeeding’ in the context of the AKR does not imply exceeding any prescribed speed limit – drivers and travellers remain mostly ignorant of any speed limits and the few traffic signs on the AKR are usually ignored.² Rushing through Ofankor, we could not tell whether our driver was overspeeding and overtaking out of desire (or frustration), to make up for the time wasted in traffic, or because he was one of the infamous (and allegedly money-seeking) *kɔ ntem, bra ntem* (‘go fast, come fast’) drivers referred to by one passenger. Either way, the passengers were displeased with their driver’s speeding, despite having initially complained about the delays. Startled and fearful, they appealed to the driver to exercise patience and to slow down by exclaiming “*Tɔ bo ase!*”³

This incident has revealed the occurrence of varying speeds alongside the road. It also gave a sense of the ambiguous and contradictory values attributed to particular paces of movement, and therefore people’s competing (and conflicting) needs for different paces. For instance, where slow (or zero) speed was attractive for some road users in certain contexts, others favoured fast (or faster) speed. These paces also had their unattractive, even destructive aspects, associated with possible loss and bodily harm. For my fellow passengers, this was particularly true for speeding. Like other travellers in Ghana (and throughout the world) they acknowledged that “the value of [fast] speed is often exchanged for human lives: speed kills” (Lamont 2013: 370).

On the Ofankor through road, speed was not merely about death. It was a matter of time, giving rise to waiting and rushing, (im)patience, delays and durations, and timing. The multiple speeds with their ambiguous values and the involved temporalities produce an intricate economy of speed with its own associated dilemmas and I will demonstrate that the *dilemmas of speed* that I encountered in Ofankor are paradigmatic for people’s speed-related practices and experiences on the AKR. My aim in the following chapters is to explore these dilemmas and the ways in which different road users are implicated in them. In so doing, I unravel how people engage with the road as a space and lifeworld that is pervaded by speed and time (cf. Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012).

² For this reason, speed limits play only a very marginal role in this thesis.

³ The literal translation of *tɔ bo ase* is ‘to lay down the breast’, meaning ‘to be patient’, ‘to take one’s time’. It is a common Twi expression, here used as an appeal to drivers to reduce their speed.

A brief history

For almost three centuries, people have been living, working and travelling alongside the Accra-Kumasi road, although with certain interruptions. According to historical sources (see Dupuis 1824; Wilks 1975), the route used to be part of a system of eight ‘great-roads’ (*akwan-tempon*) that radiated from Kumasi, the capital of the Asante kingdom, into all parts of the pre-colonial Gold Coast and they were maintained by the central government of the same kingdom. The great-road to Accra that passed through Akyem Abuakwa, one of the neighbouring Akan kingdoms, the so-called ‘Akyem route’, is reported to have been opened in 1766 after Akyem had been conquered and incorporated into Greater Asante. For the Asante rulers, the ‘Akyem route’ thus became a means of communication and trade with the Dutch on the coast and a means of power and political control over conquered territories, in particular over the Akyem forests. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the ‘Akyem route’ fell into disuse after the southern routes of the ‘great-roads’ system started being controlled and were partially closed by the British colonizers (Yarak 1990).

With the advent of the automobile and the massively expanding cocoa production in the Gold Coast colony around 1900, a new era began for the ‘Akyem route’. Several attempts were necessary for what would eventually become the Accra-Kumasi road to be motorable in its entire length. At first, the British colonial government did little to promote motor road construction as it was still favouring railroads (Dickson 1962). This explained in part why local residents, in particular chiefs, entrepreneurs and cocoa traders, launched their own initiatives. They reckoned that access to roads and to transportation would boost economic activities and bring progress to their communities (Wrangham 2004). The king of Akyem Abuakwa (Okyenhene), Nana Ofori Atta, had exactly that in mind for Kyebi, the kingdom’s capital. Upon several occasions in the 1920s, the Okyenhene invested large amounts of money and enforced communal labour in order to repair impassable road sections in his kingdom and to revive the ex-trade route leading through Kyebi.⁴

In the decades that followed the initial motor road building, people residing along the country’s main artery to the north witnessed a continuous increase in traffic. They also observed that the AKR regularly deteriorated, a phenomenon mostly linked to economic and political crises. The repair of the road (on some occasions even realignment) was determined by when colonial and post-colonial governments had the necessary means to do so, as well as an appropriate developmental and political

⁴ See Chapter 2 for a more detailed account of the Okyenhene’s road building initiatives.

agenda (Gould 1960). The latest road building programme affecting the AKR was initiated in 2002 and was still ongoing whilst I was doing fieldwork. At the centre of the programme was the reconstruction and expansion of the entire AKR and the building of two important bypasses. According to the initiating government (under President Kufuor), these measures were to improve and accelerate transportation and to contribute to ‘national development’. They were also meant to reduce the number of accidents on the AKR – a road that Ghanaians have often labelled as ‘death trap’.

In August 2006 I moved to Kyebi, the capital of Akyem Abuakwa, to start fieldwork on the AKR. One of the two mentioned bypasses had just been completed: a new, smooth and fast road section directly linking the towns of Apedwa and Bunso, thus diverting the main course of the AKR away from Kyebi and its neighbouring townships (see Map 2, p. 11). The ‘new road’, as people in Kyebi call the bypass, gave rise to a set of discourses, to tales, rumours and to other narratives among the town’s inhabitants, which I followed closely. Their discourses provided different explanations and speculations as to why the bypass was built and what consequences the diverted traffic and reduced access to the main AKR had on their lives and community as a whole. The discourses also revealed how people perceive the AKR as rooted in historical, political and economic contexts and framed by political power relations (including the age-old Asante-Akyem rivalry), economic opportunities and development, as well as physical and occult dangers. Here is not the place to explore these discourses in detail; this shall be done in Chapter 2. My aim here is to briefly outline how the themes that I recognised in people’s discourses coincide with the main concerns of those anthropologists who have acknowledged that “[r]oads are worthy of our scholarly attention” (Colombijn 2002a: 615).

Roads and anthropologists

Scores of anthropologists have first of all been intrigued with the fact that roads serve as “paths of authority” (Fairhead 1993). For instance, Alber (2000) describes roads in the French colony of Dahomey as a form of ‘imperialism’, claiming that colonial officials used road construction projects to ‘civilize’ local populations, to appropriate ‘wild’ space and to create order as well as to establish control over the country. Roads, and the processes of road construction in particular, were disciplinary measures and a form of authority and ruling (ibid.: 288; see also Boni 1999: 62). In a similar vein, Wilson (2004.: 526) argues for an approach that situates roads and mobility within relations of power and an enveloping political economy. She claims that roads have

“great symbolic and political resonance for both states and subjects/citizens” and that they therefore become “a vital element in a state’s territorializing project, enabling sovereignty to be extended up to the frontier” (ibid.). Roads can thus be seen as a geographical and a political idea, “both an end and a means” (Ispahani 1989: 2).⁵ Such was the case not only for the pre-colonial Asante great-roads, which historians have depicted as means for conquest and flow of authority (Wilks 1975, 1992; Yarak 1990), but also for the new bypass, which was perceived by Kyebi’s residents to reify the ongoing desire of Asante for domination over Akyem.

Anthropologists have also taken a strong interest in how roads can be seen as a path of development and progress (Porath 2002: 872). This is not to be misunderstood with the often (in my view) essentialist stance towards the alleged benefits of roads that is promoted by some scholars. Human geographers, for instance, have argued that existing roads lead to access, whereas the lack of roads isolates localities.⁶ This same argument was also taken in Kyebi where the ‘new road’ was perceived to isolate their town and to bring economic decline. It was contrasted with pre-bypass times, when the local economy was alleged to have benefited from the AKR and its traffic passing right through their town. Taking a more nuanced approach, Rigg (2002) looks less at the impacts and more at the economic *motives* for road construction (such as market integration, bringing ‘development’ to marginalised areas), which are often inseparably linked with political motives.

Scholars examine not only people’s enthusiasm about roads, but also their negative experiences with them. For instance, Fairhead (1992) discusses the depletion and impoverishment of a region in former Zaire due to the construction of roads.⁷ Dalakoglou (2010) describes how a cross-boarder highway in Albania is perceived by locals to permit the outflow of Albanian wealth to Greece as well as the influx of politically dangerous objects. Further anthropological contributions on roads address the phenomenon of traffic accidents, for instance Árnason et al. (2007) for Iceland, Lamont (2012a) for Eastern Africa and Masquelier (2002) who connects road

⁵ On the political motives for road construction by states, see Colombijn (2002a), Fairhead (1993), Kirksey and van Bilsen (2002) and Rigg (2002). Harvey (2005) however points out that roads may not only manifest the presence of the state, but also allude to its absence through the weakness of national infrastructure and the limits of effective political control.

⁶ On the diverse ‘impacts’ of newly built roads, see Colombijn (2002b); Harvey (2012), Harvey and Knox (2008, 2012), Stellrecht (1998a, 1998b). On the effects of living in ‘off-road’ contexts and the ‘tarmac bias’, see Porter (1997, 2002).

⁷ Scholars from different disciplines have questioned whether roads can function as envisaged by governments and planners with their “occasional, seemingly blind enthusiasm” (Colombijn 2002a: 606). For accounts on the negative impacts of roads, see Cleuren (2001), Colombijn (2002a), Janjua (1998), Kamal and Nasir (1998), Rigg (2002) and Wadley (1998).

dangers with mobility and modernity in Niger.⁸ Accidents (and their diverse possible causes) were also part of people's discourses in Kyebi as residents commented upon the frequent road casualties on their road section (particularly at the village of Potroase) prior to the opening of the 'new road'. According to the residents, the alleged economic rewards of the formerly busy through road used to conflict with the road's dangers. Today, with the bypass, the perceived decline of their town seems to be the price to have been paid for a less accident-prone environment.

Kyebi's residents attach the same profound ambivalence to roads as people do in many other places. The observation that roads can be a "mixed blessing" (Trankell 1993: 92) has been emphasized in several anthropological accounts. Masquelier, in her "pioneering study in the ethnography of roads" (Campbell 2012a: 498), analyzes in detail how roads – in her case Route 1 in southern Niger – provide "overlapping and contradictory fields of experience" (Masquelier 2002: 837) since they bring among other things, jobs and economic opportunities, but they also lead to fatalities. Masquelier claims that people therefore perceive roads as spaces that concretize "the perils and possibilities of modern life" (ibid.: 829). Her analysis has been a source of inspiration for several scholars who have explored the intricate entanglement of people with (auto)mobility, space and modernity in a similar vein, both in Africa and elsewhere (Dalakoglou 2010; Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012; Hart 2011; Khan 2006; Lamont 2013; Melly 2013).⁹

Anthropologists exploring this phenomenon have also found it particularly useful to focus on road-related narratives. I adopt this approach in Chapter 2 by examining the tales, rumours and speculations brought up in Kyebi in connection with the new bypass. In Kyebi, like elsewhere, roads "trigger people's imaginations and are frequently incorporated into the tales and stories of those who travel on or live close to them" (Dalakoglou 2010: 144).¹⁰ Within these stories, or "culturally specific images" (Masquelier 2002: 831) such as representations of road spirits, people can express their profound ambivalence towards roads, mobility and mass transport. Such narratives, Dalakoglou (2010) explains, encapsulate people's attempts to make

⁸ For further anthropological (albeit at times marginal) discussions on accidents, see Jain (2004), Lamont (2010, 2012a), Luning (2009) and Moodie (2006).

⁹ For earlier accounts on the contradictory nature of roads in Africa, see Hunt (1999) and Weiss (1993, 1996). Several African writers (Okri 1991; Soyinka 1973; wa Thiong'o 1987) have regularly used the road as an image of deceptions and dangers, but also of summoning "worlds of endless wonder and generating wealth" (Masquelier 2002: 842).

¹⁰ For a listing of works dealing with roads and narratives, see Dalakoglou (2010) and Argounova-Low (2012).

sense of the social, economical and political circumstances that do not only frame roads, their flows and disruptions, but also dominate people's lives more generally.

These briefly sketched anthropological approaches towards roads provide useful perspectives for my material presented in Chapter 2. I argue however, that with their strong focus on the political, economic (or developmental), symbolic and representational dimensions of roads, these approaches however tend to lose sight of what actually *happens* alongside the roads studied. The majority of anthropologists who attend to roads see the object of their study as a window onto (or merely a metaphor for) larger issues. In doing so, they neglect – and at times bypass entirely – the practical and experiential dimensions of mundane road usage. Their neglect becomes manifest in their anthropological writings, many of which are relatively devoid of detailed ethnography in this respect.¹¹ This tendency is striking given that certain scholars are keen to depict roads as the “complete antithesis to non-places” (Dalakoglou 2010: 146), that is, *not* devoid of sociality and interactions, as suggested by Augé (1995), but rather filled with “anthropological richness” (Tomlinson 1999: 112).¹² Nevertheless ‘road anthropologists’ often seem to stop where ‘real’ and socially significant life alongside roads starts, or they touch on it only *en passant* and in an anecdotic manner. In this regard, the present ethnography of the AKR with its micro-level analysis provides a hitherto neglected perspective to the anthropological study of roads.

Road and roadside practices

I begin this ethnography with a discussion of the stories and rumours that my interlocutors in Kyebi brought up concerning the Accra-Kumasi road and its newly built bypass (Chapter 2). I then turn from discourse to address the practical ways that people navigate the frequently complex tasks of living and working next to and travelling on this Ghanaian highway. For instance, there are the residents from roadside communities who spend time by the roadside, routinely or for particular occasions (Chapter 3). For them, the roadside opens up as a ‘heterotopic space’ (Edensor 2004: 110), as a place accommodating various dwelling practices, interactions and other activities (including commercial ones). The roadside dwellers become part of this space through their own engagements with the road's physical

¹¹ There are, of course, some exceptions such as Lamont (2013), Melly (2013), Pandya (2002), Porath (2002) and Truitt (2008), which are journal articles or chapters in edited volumes, but no full-length ethnographies. I will refer to some of these works in the course of the thesis.

¹² For a critique of Augé's concept of roads (and other spaces of transit) as ‘non-places’, see Merriman (2004) and Tomlinson (1999: 112).

space, its materiality and traffic, and of course with its various other users. I find it useful to frame their corporeal movements (as pedestrians), their discussions (of things and people observed) and staged events (such as cleansing rituals) as ways of *spatializing* the road in a de Certeauian sense. Their everyday practices are tactical ‘ways of making’ (or ‘operating’) that allow dwellers to ‘reappropriate’, domesticate and tangibly experience space (cf. de Certeau 1984: xiv).¹³

The appropriation of road space by roadside vendors (Chapter 4) occurs through the intricate process of the vendors’ engagement with through traffic and passers-by on the AKR. Here the notion of engagement, which I borrow from Weiss (1996: 3), helps to capture the sense of reciprocal interchange between the vendors and the world that takes place during their everyday vending activities. Vendors engage with (and appropriate) the road and its traffic through their entrepreneurial practices (such as advertising) and corporeal movements (including running), but they also become *engaged by* the road, its vehicular rhythms and other features of this ‘moving market’, both practically and experientially. From a phenomenological perspective, the vendors (and other road users I deal with) thus inhabit the road as part of their ‘lived world’: constructed in the course of mundane, everyday activities, and “a product of everyday practices at the same time that it produces these practices” (Weiss 1996: 3).¹⁴

A similar perspective can be applied to drivers. According to Edensor (2004), driving practices are connected to roads as ‘taskscape’. Introduced by Ingold (2000: 195), the concept of taskscape denotes “the entire ensemble of tasks”, an array of related, mutually interlocking and socially embedded practices and activities of people as they engage – skilfully and perceptually – with their lived worlds (cf. Mazzullo and Ingold 2008: 35). It is through the taskscape that places, including roads, come into being. Inspired by this approach, Edensor (2004: 110) perceives driving and other road-related practices as modes of “mundanely organizing and sensing the environment of familiar space”. For the commercial bus drivers that I worked with, one of their crucial tasks consists of their multisensory engagement with the AKR particularly when it is encountered as a competitive workplace (Chapter 6) and as a

¹³ Like de Certeau, other scholars (Ingold 2000; Thrift 1996) also claim that space is constituted through people’s physical presence, myriad activities and movements, whereas Lefebvre (1991) stresses the involved social, historical and political processes. Casey (1996) and Feld and Basso (1996) focus on places as encountered experientially by their dwellers, providing the very structure and possibility for experience and ‘senses of place’.

¹⁴ Weiss’ phenomenological perspective is inspired by Bourdieu (1977), de Certeau (1984), Lefebvre (1991) and most obviously by Merleau-Ponty (1962). Practices and experiences as ways of inhabiting the environment and ‘being-in-the-world’ are central to the works of Ingold (2000) and Jackson (1996).

perilous terrain (Chapter 7). Central to the transport workers' embodied driving practices are their visual efforts, including the "skilled capacity to look" (Grasseni 2004: 43). These skills and efforts are required to make skilled judgements of what is perceived en route.¹⁵ Both come into play in the drivers' attempts to 'read the road', as they say, and to communicate with other road users (drivers and competitors; pedestrians and potential passengers; cf. Dant 2004; Merriman 2004: 158). Similar sensory practices are also important for roadside vendors and bus passengers, as both have an (albeit disparate) interest in gearing their attention to vehicular movements and drivers' manoeuvres.

Skilled and sensory attention is especially required by those bus drivers (known as 'overlappers') who continuously search for and 'chase' customers whilst *en route*, instead of simply loading passengers at bus stations. This mode of driving and loading usually involves (at times fierce) competition with other drivers who ply the same route with similar intentions. In Chapter 6, I show that their competitive and profit-oriented driving is a form of 'wayfaring' in the Ingoldian sense (Ingold 2007, 2010). For the 'overlappers', wayfaring consists in their 'feeling' their way through the 'moving market' characterised by the movements and continuous (dis)appearance of competitors and customers, as the trip unfolds in an unpredictable manner. In combination with sensorily grasping the movements of these other road users, the drivers' task of wayfaring consists in adjusting and 'fine-tuning' their own movements accordingly through "continual tactical manoeuvring" (Ingold 2000: 127). 'Overlapping' and wayfaring can therefore be seen as the antithesis to 'transport'. According to Ingold (*ibid.*), 'transport' represents the mode of movement of those whose interest is literally to get from A to B, ideally as quickly as possible and without engaging much with what happens along the way. Such is the case with drivers who load at bus stations and who do not usually engage with competitors and customers en route – unlike their wayfaring colleagues whose task is to be highly attentive and kinetically engaged.

I therefore argue that what permits gaining deep insights into the daily routine of commercial bus driving is paying close attention to and assessing the drivers' *kinetic practices* – practices pertaining to physical (vehicular) movement.¹⁶ During my

¹⁵ For general discussions on skilled sensory practices (in particular 'skilled vision'), see Classen (1993), Grasseni (2004; 2007) and Ingold (2000). For sensory practices and driving, see Argounova-Low (2012) and Dant (2004).

¹⁶ Several human activities involve kinesis (from the Greek *kinēsis*, movement) or are constituted by kinetic practices and actions, for instance walking (Ingold and Vergunst 2008; Lee and Ingold 2006; Lorimer 2011; Sheets-Johnstone 1999b), dancing (Sheets-Johnstone 1979) and driving (Dant 2004; Edensor 2004; Laurier and Lorimer 2012).

numerous trips with bus drivers, I became acquainted with the wide repertoire of kinetic practices that arise in the course of their trips and that are continuously negotiated. These tactical practices are mostly characterised by different paces of movement, ranging from waiting and slow driving (or ‘relaxing’) to accelerating and overspeeding (including overtaking and other ways of ‘rushing’). Similar kinetic practices are also employed by roadside vendors. In their case it is through *corporeal* kinetic actions that they engage with and attune themselves to the rhythms and changing speeds of through traffic which brings potential customers.

From a phenomenological and lived world perspective, the road users’ kinetic practices can be seen as ways of ‘making’ space and ‘forming’ the road (cf. Mazzullo and Ingold 2008: 32).¹⁷ From a pragmatic and work-oriented perspective, which I also take in this thesis, kinetic practices are *tactical* practices that arise in the context of the drivers’ and vendors’ entrepreneurial efforts to navigate the potentialities and uncertainties of doing business on the road. Bodily and vehicular movements also need to be assessed in the context of (often collective) emotions and sociality that can arise among all types of road users once they become kinetically engaged. One striking example of the close entanglement of kinetic and affective is the joy and amusement that bread sellers experience when they run alongside moving vehicles. Their joy confirms Sheets-Johnstone’s (1999: 269) assertion that affectivity is tied to the tactile-kinaesthetic body, and that motion and emotion can be dynamically congruent.¹⁸ The kinetic-affective context of bread selling certainly fosters a particular jovial and convivial atmosphere by the roadside. Emotions rise too when people are implicated in the movements and manoeuvres of *other* road users, such as when young roadside dwellers watching road traffic are thrilled by the ‘big’ cars that pass by at great and impressive speed. The opposite emotions are at stake in situations like in Ofankor, when speeds and rushed manoeuvres – perceived as perilous – evoke fear and agitation.

¹⁷ For recent (in parts non-representational) perspectives of human geographers and sociologists on the movements and mobilities of driving and travelling in the Western world, see Canzler et al. (2008), Cresswell (2006), Cresswell and Merriman (2011), Featherstone et al. (2005), Merriman (2007), Urry (2000, 2007) and Vannini (2009). For archaeological perspectives, see Snead et al. (2009).

¹⁸ See Evans and Franklin (2010: 178-180), Löfgren (2008), Sheller (2004: 2) and Tolia-Kelly (2008) on the nexus and intertwining of motion and emotion in different contexts.

Engaging with perils and uncertainties

The perilous movements of drivers, vehicles and maybe also spiritual beings on the Ghanaian highway seem to cause concern for all types of road users. This was noticeable during the road cleansing ritual described at the start of this chapter, from the passengers' discourses about accidents, and from their tangible fear about speedy and endangering manoeuvres. For the commercial bus drivers that I worked with, these road dangers arise in addition to the socio-economic uncertainties and challenges that they face in the road transport business. In other words, the users of the AKR engage with the risks of accidents, even death, whereas drivers also engage with the risks of financial loss, even to the extent of not surviving in the transport business. Like other risks that people face, these road risks may be described as "a matter of volatility in expected outcomes, both negative and positive" (Power 2004: 12). In the context of the AKR, however, viewing risk as a neutral concept – where risk can be 'good' as well as 'bad', with possible losses and/or gains (Lupton 1999a: 8) – contradicts the users' daily experiences. Here, risk is rather perceived as "the probability of a loss or hazard" (Cashdan 1990: 2), as the probability that an *undesirable* event or result will occur, such as roadside vendors being hit by a car or bus drivers running at a loss.¹⁹ What seems particularly pertinent for an insight into my interlocutors' engagement with road risks is their varied perceptions of who and what accounts for the road risks, as well as their tangible and immediate experience of some of the involved perils.

The question of "who is perceived to be responsible for causing hazard to whom" (Fardon 1999: 153) was addressed in Douglas' work and is related to her view that people's perception and acceptance of risk is socially and culturally constructed. In *Risk and Culture* (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982), Douglas and her collaborator Wildavsky claim that risk perception is a matter of social selection of risk, taking place on the basis of "shared beliefs and values" (ibid.: 194), that is, 'culture'. Boholm (1996: 65) explains that the authors see this selection – a person's ideas of risks and danger, and the extent to which they worry about them – as selection made on the basis of the 'way of life' or 'world view' that the person adheres to. This provides an explanation of why different societies and different groups within complex societies

¹⁹ Today's general understanding of risk as denoting exclusively danger, threat, hazard or harm, and *high* risk denoting *a lot* of danger (Douglas 1992: 24) has largely replaced the view of risk as a neutral concept, one involving "the probability of something happening, combined with the magnitude of associated losses or gains" (Lupton 1999a: 8). See Caplan (2000), Grätz (2003) and Lupton (1999a, 1999c) for risk approaches in anthropology and sociology.

view risk and danger differently (Caplan 2000: 12).²⁰ With regards to how responsibility for risk and hazard is identified, Douglas draws from familiar anthropological analogies of blame pinning and witchcraft accusations. In *Risk and Blame* (Douglas 1992), she suggests that “a culture needs a common forensic vocabulary with which to hold persons accountable” (ibid.: 22), as a way for people (as members of certain social groups or communities) to explain misfortune by looking back to what might have caused it.²¹ Douglas therefore argues that there exist regular patterns of blame allocation within particular institutions and groups.

Such patterns can be made out to some degree among the different groups of road users on the AKR. The community of commercial bus drivers that I worked (and travelled) with stands out most clearly. The young men partly blame the socio-economic risks of their work on their employers (the owners of the buses) and the enormous financial and employment-related pressures that they exercise on their drivers. They also relate their struggle for survival to the high level of competition in the informal transport business, to the surplus of commercial vehicles, and to the lack of customers. The result may be unproductive waiting times at bus stations or unprofitable trips due to driving with empty seats, and from which emerges drivers’ felt ‘need for speed’ (cf. Carrier 2005). With regards to the *bodily* risks of their work, the drivers primarily blame the poor material condition of the AKR for the numerous accidents, as well as the lack of knowledge and driving experience of *other* (particularly foreign) road users. They do not only locate blame externally, in a possible attempt to divert attention away from themselves (cf. Douglas 1985: 59), but also consider their own share of the responsibility for some of the critical road situations and accidents. One example is the ‘fearful mind’ of some drivers concerning accidents and death, an attitude that is believed to paralyze drivers in the face of critical road situations and to diminish their ability to cope accordingly.

A distinctive ‘forensic vocabulary’ is prevalent among Ghana’s road safety experts. Although they bring up a broad variety of factors that account for the high death toll on Ghana’s roads and the AKR in particular, the experts are keen to refer to their statistical figures that reveal that ‘human error’ is a major contributing factor. Consequently they stress the agency and great responsibility of drivers (cf.

²⁰ Reviews and critiques of Douglas’ writing on risk and ‘cultural theory’ have been provided by various scholars (Boholm 1996, 2003a; Boyne 2003; Caplan 2000; Fardon 1999; Wilkinson 2001).

²¹ See Lupton’s *Risk* (1999a: 45-49) for a detailed analysis of how Douglas links sin, taboo, danger and risk with the functional mechanism of blame to establish what she calls the ‘forensic theory of danger’ (Douglas 1992: 5).

Featherstone 2004, Lamont 2010), above all, commercial drivers who are considered as particularly ‘careless’. Among the experts’ road safety discourses, there is no room for blaming occult forces for accidents – in contrast to some of the roadside residents who reckon that the infamous accident black spots on the AKR are linked to spirits and witchcraft. Such a notion is also irrelevant for (even rejected by) other Ghanaians and road users who – in line with their ‘world view’ – may advocate more technical explanations, and such is the case for the young men whom I regularly joined on their bus trips on the AKR. The latter pay particular attention to the roadworthiness of the buses and the trustworthiness of drivers that they meet and join (or neglect to join) at bus stations, and this is part of their attempt to predict whether a trip will be safe or not. All this is proof of the often “complex and contradictory ways in which people perceive [...] the risks they face in the social contexts of day-to-day life” (Wilkinson 2001: 2).

A particularly prevalent aspect in the commentators’ discourses on dangers is speed, or ‘overspeeding’. As I noted earlier, dangerous speeding is not usually understood in terms of exceeding speed limits. It is rather condemned for the involved overtaking, hectic swerving, tailgating, harsh braking and other kinetic manoeuvres – with their potential to produce damage, injury and even death in case of crashing or overturning. In people’s forensic endeavours, they do not see drivers as speeding for the sake of pleasure and thrill, but mostly because they are impatient and in a rush. In the case of *commercial* drivers, this impatience (embodied in the ‘go fast, come fast’ behaviour) is generally interpreted as an expression of the drivers’ desire for more money, even of greed. Whilst people generally acknowledge that speeding forms a commercial imperative for drivers, they often do not consider the precarious work conditions that produce this very need for speed, or the ‘compulsion to speed’ (Morris 2010: 602), as drivers themselves claim. Noteworthy, however, is the element of morality that arises when people blame drivers and their speeding. This resonates with Douglas’ observation that those blamed for putting others at risk are seen to act in an immoral way, and that to be ‘at risk’ is “equivalent to being sinned against, being vulnerable to the events caused by others” (Douglas 1992: 28). In other words, to be ‘at risk’ means being placed in the role of the victim and threatened by the dangers imposed upon oneself (or the community) by other agents. In the same vein, pedestrians, vendors, passengers and drivers also regularly feel they are being ‘sinned against’ and threatened by those who are impatient and engage in dangerous speeding.

It is important to note that the road users perceive these threats not only on a cognitive and ideational level, but also on a corporeal level through their capacity (at times efforts) to tangibly *feel* them. The sensory engagement with risks and perils has been addressed by social scientists who advocate a focus on “the more complete sense of the everyday, where risks become concrete embodied experiences” (Zinn 2008: 172).²² For instance, Lupton (1999b) discusses the corporeal sensations of pregnant women and how these sensations may cause anxiety or ambivalence, given the women’s heightened awareness of the possible threats to their health. Parr (2010: 10) describes the bodily encounters of people with potentially hazardous technologies, environments and everyday practices, and notes how these encounters occur profoundly through the senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. Something similar took place in Ofankor, after the roadblock was lifted, and in other situations that I describe in Chapter 9, where passengers were confronted by their driver’s rushing through the physical shocks and perceptible speeding, which conveyed a very immediate threat. Once perceived as careless and perilous, these kinetic manoeuvres can give rise to negative emotions, anger and agitation, and moral condemnation.

Sensing perils is not restricted to passive acts of passengers who are victims of dangerous driving. Sensory engagement can also become part of the passengers’ conscious efforts to ensure their safety during trips. This happens through their careful (mostly visual) monitoring of the road, the movements of other vehicles and most importantly the manoeuvres of their own driver. In situations that are perceived as critical, the passengers’ monitoring may result in (individual or concerted) verbal acts of warning and reprimanding the driver. These are attempts to interfere – at least verbally – in the driver’s manoeuvres and in the latter’s own sensory and kinetic efforts of wayfaring (in the Ingoldian sense, see above) through a perilous road environment (Chapter 7). In these situations, the passengers’ sensory engagement becomes part of what I term ‘co-wayfaring’, a practice geared towards their safety and physical protection en route.

Protective practices among road users – as ways of ‘managing’ road risks – also occur on other levels and are found in diverse road contexts.²³ One example is the cleansing rituals of residents in roadside communities who are eager to expulse the alleged spiritual sources of road accidents and deaths. Another example is the acquisition of

²² For works on risk as an aesthetic, affective-emotive and hermeneutic phenomenon, see Lash (1993, 2000) and Wynne (1996). Beck (1992: 21) however argues that risks – by which he means the ‘big’ risks of civilization – escape sensory perception.

²³ See Boholm (2003a, 2003b) and Grätz (2003) for discussions on ‘risk minimization’, ‘risk management strategies’ and ‘coping strategies’.

protective powers (including ‘apotropaic medicines’; Morris 2010: 596) by some of the commercial drivers. The majority of travellers in Ghana’s south however turn to Christian practices and rely on prayers and faithful assurances, some of which are expressed in the slogans imprinted on commercial vehicles. As I noted above, young male travellers that are joining minibuses to Accra are keen to assess the technical state of vehicles and the drivers’ appearance before the trip. Provided the circumstances allow it, they search for a (hopefully) better alternative when they fear that their personal safety might be at stake. Bus drivers avoid fearful thinking and try to make themselves *feel* secure and protected, which they claim can be achieved with the help of faith-related practices and attitudes. Seen from a functionalist Malinowskian perspective these are ways of raising courage and confidence in a situation of tangible uncertainty (Malinowski 1965).

The reassuring practices of bus drivers further constitute a means of navigating the socio-economic uncertainties and pressures of working in the transport business. In Chapter 5, I use ‘navigating’ deliberately and in Vigh’s (2006a) sense of ‘social navigation’, namely as people’s *tactical* practices (cf. de Certeau 1984) of moving within a (social) environment that is characterized by crisis, uncertainty and instability. ‘Navigating’ thus stands for people’s actions and agency through which they engage with current constraints, but also with what awaits them in the near future.²⁴ Commercial drivers navigate the pressures from employers and the risks of financial loss (even ruin) in multiple ways, such as by investing in professional networks and in different types of relationships for future employment purposes, or by diversifying their loading practices. Here the two basic alternatives are either loading passengers at the bus station (which may involve long waiting times), or picking up passengers from the roadside, whilst en route (‘overlapping’). The latter promises (but does not necessarily fulfil) quicker and therefore higher returns in the long run, and it involves among others the speedy and ‘rushed’ kinetic manoeuvres that I referred to earlier. At the same time, the drivers’ navigating also involves their regular appeal for patience (*boasetɔ*) in finding economic success and new (or at least better) entrepreneurial opportunities. In their appeals they stress the positive value of waiting (in contrast to ‘rushing’, which may backfire), and of drawing upon faith and confidence to rely on better times in the future.

²⁴ For the uses and meanings of what Vigh (2006a, 2006b, 2009) calls ‘social navigation’, see for instance Archambault (2013) and Langevang and Gough (2009).

Negotiating speed(s) and time

The commercial drivers' practices and appeals reveal two crucial and related components: speed and time. One example of the intimate connection between speed and time is the drivers' practice of 'rushing' on the road, also known as *kɔ ntem*, *bra ntem*. This Twi expression implies that a driver who 'goes fast' (*kɔ ntem*) will also 'come fast' (*bra ntem*) – he will arrive at his destination at an earlier point in time.²⁵ Being fast therefore means spending less time on the road or in the drivers' words, 'beating time'. In this thesis, I demonstrate that exploring this and other road-related practices and attitudes allows me to illustrate the analytic value of speed and time for an ethnography of the AKR and its multiple users.

Time has been a concern to many anthropologists, leading to "diffuse, endlessly multiplying studies of sociocultural time" (Munn 1992: 93)²⁶ whereas the phenomenon of speed has received rather limited and mostly fleeting attention in anthropological works. Miller (2001: 11) even claims that there is hardly any "serious study of the meaning of speed".²⁷ Certainly, various social theorists (mainly sociologists) have shown a great interest in the nexus of modernity and speed, and of globalisation and acceleration. In this context, scholars like Giddens (1990), Harvey (1998) and Thrift (1996) have declared speed, acceleration and what is treated as 'time-space compression' as one of the key markers of post-modern (Western) society. Yet they have also sometimes been criticized for their "rushed conclusions" (Miller 2001: 11) and for "[taking] the speed of globalizing dynamics pretty much for granted" (Tomlinson 2007: 8).

In anthropological works, speed has been touched upon in several monographs, but it does not represent a major object of analysis and is rather treated as a sideline. For instance, Munn (1986: 17) demonstrates how speed versus slowness (or stasis) may stand for a "cluster of polarized elements" in a Papua New Guinean society, with speed conveying positive and desirable values and slowness the very opposite, depending on the context. Weiss (1996: 184) explores how the pace of movement (its speed or slowness) is "a general quality and cultural category" among the Haya in Tanzania.

²⁵ In some contexts the term *ntem* translates as 'fast' and 'early' interchangeably. The term is part of idioms such as *pe ntem* (to be in a hurry, literally 'to want fast/early'), *ye ntem* (to hurry up, literally 'to do fast/early') and *kɔ ntemntem* (to go very fast, literally 'to go fast fast'). Other idioms are *da ntem* (to sleep early) and *sɔre ntem* (to wake up early).

²⁶ For various approaches to (and reviews of) the anthropology of time, see Munn (1992), Gell (1992), Gingrich et al. (2002), and James and Mills (2005).

²⁷ Tomlinson (2007: 5) claims that classical sociologists, functionalists, structuralists and phenomenologists have hardly ever directly addressed the issue of speed.

For instance, he draws out the importance of speed in the context of food production, but also points to the drawbacks of excessive speed on the necessary balance and control in contexts of sociality and bodily well-being. More important for my work, however, is the central focus on speed within a small series of fairly recent journal articles (Árnason et al. 2007; Carrier 2005; Harvey and Knox 2012; Lamont 2013; Morris 2010). The authors of these contributions look at speed in order to ethnographically explore roads, transport and driving in different localities worldwide, and in ways that are of particular relevance for my own perspectives in this thesis. I will refer to their works and perspectives in more detail below and in the following chapters.²⁸ What is worth noting here is that most of the authors find it useful to refer to the work of Virilio, the intellectual ‘high priest of speed’ (Redhead 2004). They do so in order to critically assess his theorizing on speed and politics, to build on it, or to challenge it in the light of their own materials and analyses.

Virilio (1986) claims that the analysis of speed must be based on reading the history of modernity as a series of time-compressing innovations in the technologies such as transport (leading to shortened travel time), communication (replacing succession and duration with simultaneity and instantaneity) and the development of military technology in particular.²⁹ In his *Speed and Politics* (1986), Virilio proposes a ‘science (or logic) of speed’, or ‘dromology’ (from the Greek word *dromos*, meaning ‘road’, or ‘running’).³⁰ Dromology allows Virilio to paint a rather apocalyptic picture of “ever-increasing velocity overwhelming humanity” (Cresswell 2010: 23), claiming that acceleration – which is crucial to the ‘dromocratic condition’ of modernity – ultimately leads to catastrophe, destruction and accidents of various sorts (Virilio and Lotringer 2005: 99).³¹ In this thesis, I borrow from some of Virilio’s perspectives (and terminology) when I explore the *dromocentric* agendas, practices, needs and attitudes that are found in the realm of the AKR. I show however that what is dromocentric (in favour of fast pace, or implying speed) cannot be solely negative and destructive, otherwise people would not embrace the dromocentric practices and stances as readily as they do.

²⁸ In brief, speed in these articles is dealt with in the contexts of accidents and the nation state in Iceland (Árnason et al. 2007); commercial *khat* transporters in Kenya (Carrier 2005); road construction in Peru (Harvey and Knox 2012); road safety and the Kenyan state (Lamont 2013); automobility and accidents in South Africa (Morris 2010).

²⁹ For reviews and critical assessments of Virilio’s work, see Armitage (1999), Árnason et al. (2007), Breuer (2009), Connolly (2009), McQuire (1999) and Redhead (2004).

³⁰ The Greek *dromos* is also translated as ‘race’ or ‘racecourt’.

³¹ For more recent and less alarmist discussions of the processes of acceleration in modern societies, see Rosa (2003), Rosa and Scheuerman (2009), Tomlinson (2007) and Wajcman (2008).

The AKR itself is the focus of a dromocentric agenda that the Ghanaian government has promoted with its Road Sector Development Programme (RSDP). Initiated in 2002, the RSDP had as its goal the gradual reconstruction and rehabilitation of Ghana's entire road infrastructure – a project envisioned as a core contribution to the nation's 'growth and development' thanks to improved transport. As I show in Chapter 2, government officials, planners and engineers involved in the AKR's reconstruction were obsessed with speed and acceleration, not least with regards to the progression of the roadworks themselves, which, despite all optimism, were often terribly slow. By presenting their vision of shorter and faster travel as a pathway to progress and to an 'accelerated nation' (Árnason et al. 2007), they associated the road with the 'promise of speed', which constitutes one of 'the enchantments of infrastructure' (Harvey and Knox 2012: 523; see also Lamont 2013).

Far removed from the developmental agendas and visions of politicians and planners are people's daily, often fast steps on the asphalt. In Chapter 4 I explore the corporeal-kinetic practices of roadside vendors in their daily attempts to make good business on the road. This involves above all (but not exclusively) their skilful running and what the vendors call 'rushing' as they engage with often speedy vehicles and with the narrow timeframes for business transactions. Their dromocentric movements are less intended as a tactic to 'beat time' (as in the case of speeding bus drivers) but more as a means of attuning to the temporalities of traffic and competing with other vendors.

The commercial bus drivers' dromocentric practices and vehicular manoeuvres have already been referred to above. These practices reflect drivers' 'need for speed' (Carrier 2002)³² or put more drastically, the "seemingly continuous necessity of 'reckless' speed for drivers" (Lamont 2013: 370). The compulsion to speed may arise from a structural context (pressures and competition) or from a personal economic context (entrepreneurial ambitions, greed). Both usually converge in what I term entrepreneurial impatience and lead to speed as a general commercial imperative. Doing 'fast business', as drivers often say, basically follows the economic logic of speed that is also implicit in the 'go fast, come fast' principle. In other words, speeding and 'beating time' converts to higher takings for the commercial drivers (cf. Lamont 2013: 370; Rizzo 2002: 147), although I demonstrate in Chapter 6 that this may not always be the case in all circumstances.

³² Carrier (2005) describes the "frighteningly fast driving" (554) among Kenyan pick-up truck drivers who transport *khat*. Their 'need for speed' arises from the highly perishable nature of *khat*, a good that has to be transported and traded on a highly compressed timescale in order to be sold fresh.

Finally, bus passengers on the AKR have their own dromocentric interests, and many are in a hurry too (*pe ntem*, literally ‘to want fast/early’). Fast travelling and an early arrival at one’s destination is desirable for various (mostly practical) reasons, but it is often hampered by long waits at the bus station, regular stops en route, traffic jams and the occasional road ritual. This can lead to impatience and, once on the road, to the passengers’ desire for a quick journey. The ultimate desire of many Ghanaians who rely on public transport is to travel by private car, ideally also to own one. In chapter 8 I show how Ghanaians see private car ownership as highly attractive not only for its comfort and the prestige and status it conveys (Chalfin 2008; cf. Morris 2010), but also for its dromocentric advantage. Using one’s own car does not necessarily mean travelling at higher speed, but it means avoiding the delays and other temporal inconveniences of public transport travel.

This brief overview reveals that dromocentricity emerges on various levels that interrelate in different ways. For instance, speed is found on the level of *ideology*, where the state is interested in an accelerated *economy* that relies on *technologies* of speed, including road infrastructure, transport and automobility. Speed is also central in *commercial* contexts, flowing into the *economic calculations* of transport workers and, in turn, into their kinetic *vehicular manoeuvres* that are part of the road’s taskscape. By the roadside, speed characterizes the vendors’ *corporeal practices* that respond to the rhythms and paces of through traffic. For bus passengers, speed is a practical matter of *travel convenience*, but also a matter of *perception*, such as when they enjoy a smooth and fast journey – or when fear overcomes them in the case of their drivers’ excessive dromocentric manoeuvres.

The passengers’ mixed feelings hint once again at the fact that speed – appreciated for its positive role and potentialities on many levels – also comes with risks and dangers. Whereas Virilio’s work on speed is obsessed with accidents, other scholars rather note that speed is “profoundly ambiguous” (Connolly 2009: 177) and they stress the “contradiction-laden values of speed” (Lamont 2013: 371). Árnason et al. (2007: 209) note that speed and acceleration may be productive in many respects, but “may [also] open up a road that can lead to destruction”.³³ Consequently, in many contexts, the dangers and drawbacks of speed produce the need for *slowness*. Such is the case when passengers ask overspeeding drivers to exercise patience and to slow down. Yet slow pace with its positive value is not always merely an effect of

³³ Árnason et al. (2007) describe the acute ambivalence that characterizes modernity and speed in Iceland. They show how the rising number of accidents is linked to acceleration in transport and vehicular speed which, again, is intertwined with the accelerated development in the nation’s thriving economy.

(or reaction to) speed and acceleration (as is the case with the so-called ‘slow movements’³⁴), but it can be a value on its own. At the same time, slowness may prove to be equally undesirable, even dangerous, as Connolly (2009: 177) notes, “the crawl of slow time contains significant injuries, dangers, and repressive tendencies too”. In the AKR’s context, this is the case with ‘slow business’ and the unprofitable long waits of bus drivers at the station, or with slow vehicles on the road that force other drivers to engage in dangerous overtaking (cf. Árnason et al. 2007: 209).

What produces an intricate economy of speed is therefore not only the contradictory values of speed and slowness respectively, but also the “variability of speed” (Lamont 2013: 382). The latter means the presence and practices of “differing paces that regulate roads, drivers and automobiles” (ibid.), a phenomenon that Rosa (2009: 103) describes as ‘desynchronization’.³⁵ In this thesis I show how Ghanaians grapple alongside the AKR with the intricate economy of speed – and with the *dilemmas* that arise from ambiguous and differential speeds, as well as from people’s varying, at times conflicting *needs* for specific speeds. Such a dilemma arises, for instance, when bus drivers have to negotiate what speed to apply in the process of competing for passengers. From the drivers’ perspective the basic alternatives are to ‘rush’ (accelerate, speed, overtake) or to ‘relax’ (go slow, exercise patience or even wait). In some situations, both seem necessary at the same time. Then drivers face the ‘aporia of speed’, an idiom used by Derrida (1984: 21) to describe “the need to move both slowly and quickly” that arises within a singular practice or phenomenon.

When road users negotiate different speeds, they also negotiate time. They are concerned with lengths of time (including waiting and delays), points in time, and notions of earliness and lateness. Much of this is about timing. Timing can be defined as a way of ‘time-reckoning’, of ‘telling time’ and of asking when something will or should happen (Munn 1992: 102). This task is crucial for bus drivers who compete with other drivers for passengers en route. In the process of ‘wayfaring’, they often have to choose a (or *the*) moment for a particular kinetic action (accelerating, overtaking, driving slowly, stopping). Such “temporality of action” (Munn 1992: 107; cf. Bourdieu 1977) also characterizes the movements of roadside vendors. They certainly do a lot of running, in particular when an opportunity for selling arises, but

³⁴ The ‘slow movement’ (promoting for instance ‘slow food’ and ‘slow cities’) is seen as a reaction to the accelerated (Western) ways of living and working. Its discourses are informed by ‘slow values’ such as abstention, patience, focus and balance (Rosa and Scheuerman 2009a: 97; Tomlinson 2007: 159).

³⁵ Desynchronization (or multitemporality) arises when “fast and slow paces [...] can be observed on one and the same street” (Rosa 2009: 103). Urry (2009) refers to the ‘simultaneity’ of fast and slow, and Lamont (2013: 382) to “contradictory temporal frames”.

this opportunity must be seized at the right moment and by applying the right bodily (not necessarily fast) speed. The vendors' timing also includes choosing when to desist from their actions, usually in accordance with the rhythms of traffic and the speeds they bring. For instance, they take time out and relax by the roadside when travellers pass at too fast speed (as approaching them would be pointless).

'Relaxing' in the commercial drivers' vocabulary refers to their low-speed kinetic practices, one of them consisting in akinesia. For the drivers, not moving is a temporary and therefore temporal practice – it means waiting (*twen*) for a certain period of time before the next movements set in (setting off, accelerating). When drivers wait at the station for their turn to load passengers and for their departure, this is seen as unproductive and wasted time. When drivers are searching for passengers on the open road, they may purposely wait ('relax') to get going only when they estimate that the time is ripe for finding passengers. In this case, waiting is not "idle time, or time spent not working" (Argounova-Low 2012: 85). It is what Masquelier (2013: 487) describes as a "tactical *modus operandi*", an attempt of drivers to meet customers, avoid competitors and to maximize profits. In other words, waiting can be a tactic for 'fast business'. This is once again evidence that matters of speed on the AKR are not only about speediness, but also about slowness, even zero speed. By tracing how road users engage with and negotiate differing speeds, I aim not only to develop the work of anthropologists concerned with roads, but also to contribute to the hitherto rather fleeting discussions on speed.

Fieldwork on the road

The place that constituted my fieldwork site for a good thirteen months was the stretch of asphalt – in some parts cracked and pot-holed, in other parts amazingly smooth, or again un-surfaced, rough and dusty – that links Accra with Kumasi and in between them, a number of towns and settlements. One of the country's main arteries and the major corridor from the coast to the north, the Accra-Kumasi road traverses three of Ghana's regions (Greater Accra, Eastern, Ashanti) as well as the territories of several kingdoms or 'traditional areas' (Ga, Akyem Abuakwa, Kwahu and Asante).

When I began fieldwork in August 2006, I settled in Kyebi, a provincial town in the Eastern Region counting roughly 9,000 inhabitants.³⁶ The town was a convenient

³⁶ Information provided by an employee of the East Akim Municipal District administration. Kyebi is the capital of East Akim.

point of departure (quite literally) for a number of reasons. Firstly, it provided a relatively easy start for ethnographic fieldwork as I had already been acquainted with the town and some of its residents for several years. My long-term engagement with the town (and with Ghana more generally) began with brief visits in 1995 and 1998 as a participant of a Ghanaian-German youth exchange programme. After studying for one term at the University of Ghana in 2002, I lived in Kyebi for a period of six months in order to carry out an ethnographic case study on the *Ohum* festival and the conflicts between the local chief's palace and the Presbyterian Church (which formed the topic of my Master's thesis in social anthropology at the University of Munich; see Klaeger 2007a).

Secondly, the town was convenient since it is traversed by the AKR. This was ideal for exploring how the road affects people's living in a roadside community. Some of the evolving issues became particularly explicit due to the changes that had occurred since the opening of the 'new road' – the new road section on the AKR that bypasses Kyebi. Thirdly, many of Kyebi's residents are regular travellers on the AKR, mostly going to Accra (and back) by using public transport vehicles. The town is also frequently visited by travellers from the capital. The town's travellers and its visitors therefore formed a more or less consistent sample group for exploring the practices of long-distance travelling on the AKR.³⁷ Finally, the town's bus station is located just near the through road. The fairly small and hustle-free station provided easy access for gaining initial insights into the profession of commercial driving and the structures of the 'informal' transport business.

Whilst living and working in Kyebi, I also used the initial stage of my fieldwork for a survey of the southern part of the AKR that I had chosen to focus on exclusively (the entire length of the AKR would have been too long and logistically inconvenient for my regular trips). I surveyed the various road sections³⁸, nearby towns and villages³⁹ and (where existent) bus stations and documented the road's material conditions, ongoing construction works, the presence of roadside vendors and other economic activities, as well as available transport services. Through this I gained a broader picture of the road with its 'multiple placings' (Merriman 2004), as a site of social interactions, enterprises and entertainment. A few months into my fieldwork, I found

³⁷ It would have been more difficult to single out a consistent group of people regularly travelling on the AKR if I had chosen Accra as the base for my research instead of a provincial town, given that residents in the capital embark on trips to all corners of the country.

³⁸ The sections were Accra-Nsawam, Nsawam-Suhum, Suhum-Apedwa, Apedwa-Bunso (both old and new road) and Bunso-Anyinam and covered roughly 80 km.

³⁹ I mainly visited Accra, Ofankor, Nsawam, Suhum, Potroase and Anyinam and occasionally smaller roadside communities.

that living in Kyebi had become rather inconvenient for exploring (and regularly taking part in) the daily activities of commercial bus drivers going to Accra, which were central to my research agenda. Since Kyebi's bus station does not have an Accra branch, local drivers do not take passengers straight to the capital but to the next town (Suhum) where passengers would have to find an Accra-bound vehicle. Driving only relatively short distances, Kyebi's bus drivers' daily experiences on the AKR, with its materiality, traffic and respective challenges seemed rather limited for my ethnographic interests. I therefore decided to look for a place with better research opportunities and chose to settle in Suhum. Suhum is a bustling commercial town with a population of about 30,000. The town forms an important crossroad on the AKR from which roads lead east and west, deeper into the Eastern Region. The size, activities and infrastructural location of Suhum explains why it is a transport hub with several bus stations, some of which provide direct transport to Accra.

Shortly after moving to Suhum in January 2007, I started spending a lot of time at the bus stations in order to get acquainted with the commercial drivers who regularly ply the Suhum-Accra route.⁴⁰ Their breaks and often long waiting periods at the stations – in station kiosks or inside vehicles – were ideal situations to learn about and document their business practices and professional careers with the help of informal conversations, semi-structured and biographic interviews. In addition to the 'off-road' enquiry, I regularly joined bus drivers and their 'mates' (their young assistants) on their trips. I used 'ride-alongs', an ethnographic research tool described by Kusenbach (2003: 464) to observe and discuss drivers' skilled practices and occurrences on the road in situ and en route.⁴¹ On many trips, however, conversing with drivers was difficult, impossible or simply inappropriate. I therefore complemented some of the 'ride-along' episodes with post-travel discussions, occasionally supported by video footage from our trips that I could use for recorded video elicitation sessions. Whereas all the drivers I met were happily willing to take me along on their trips (not least because I and my assistant paid our transport fare just like normal passengers), only a handful of driver informants were able to put up with such time-consuming enquiries. Intensive cooperation and even solid friendships with some of them, in particular with Amoyaw and Saa Nono (to be introduced in Part II), allowed me to become part of their lives beyond the road and

⁴⁰ Although I constantly shifted between and spent time with drivers at all of the town's important stations, I spent most of my time at the *Roundabout Station*, located on both sides of the AKR, near the main junction.

⁴¹ For this purpose, I regularly met up with drivers as early as 5 o'clock in the morning and then followed them through their workday with all its tasks.

the bus stations.⁴² Encounters with other transport workers (taxi and minibus drivers, stations workers and senior transport union officials) were more formal and impersonal, but many of them were available for semi-structured interviews or for focus-group discussions.

I relied on a similar set of research tools as those described above in order to capture the practices and experiences of people travelling to and from Accra in commercial buses. At the core were my numerous bus rides that turned into ‘travel-along’ episodes with the regular (and random) passengers of the bus I had taken, or with people I knew and whom I was accompanying purposely for research. Part of the latter were young men in their twenties or early thirties, all friends of mine from Kyebi and Suhum, who formed a relatively consistent sample group. The ‘travel-along’ episodes allowed us to jointly observe, comment and converse more easily than with drivers whilst en route, which were opportunities for me to learn through ‘shared social experience’ (Hastrup and Hervik 1994: 8). I gained additional insights into my informants’ practices as passengers, their experiences and attitudes through post-travel conversations and more explorative semi-structured interviews.

Large parts of my fieldwork were facilitated by working closely with two research assistants. Both were called Kofi. In Kyebi, I conducted my exploratory surveys of the mentioned road sections and bus stations with Kofi ‘Flipa’. Later, after settling in Suhum, I worked with Kofi Oliver who showed great interest in the sociological and ethnographic aspects of my work. Both assistants helped me access new sites and approach drivers and roadside vendors; they assisted me during conversations and interviews and translated from Twi into English whenever necessary⁴³; and they regularly took notes and helped in transcribing recorded interviews. Kofi Oliver proved particularly efficient for participant observation due to his extrovert character, his alertness and his ability to grasp ethnographic details.

Of further assistance to my research (in part also an ethnographic method and a learning experience), was the car that I bought a few months into my fieldwork: an Opel Astra Caravan, a 1993 model, which has known several owners in Germany and Ghana in its lifetime. Having the car was convenient for exploring the AKR’s various sections and communities, particularly for paying visits to scattered roadside vendors, which would have been more difficult if I had depended entirely on public transport.

⁴² This included mutual visits, getting to know their families and wives or girlfriends, attending church services with them, or eating together.

⁴³ My command of Twi is sufficient for everyday conversations, but not for elaborate discussions and interviews. The majority of informal conversations were held in a combination of English and Twi, whereas few interviews were conducted entirely in Twi.

At the same time, having the car helped me become socialized as a motorist on the AKR. By regularly plying the road myself, I gained valuable hands-on experience of what it means to cope with its varying material conditions, users, speeds and perils that were so central to my informants' everyday work as drivers. This practical knowledge, combined with hundreds of kilometres of close observation of commercial driving practices, and possessing a Ghanaian Class C driving licence⁴⁴ eventually gave me enough confidence and trustworthiness to drive a commercial minibus myself. On several occasions towards the end of my fieldwork, Saa Nono (one of my close driver friends) let me take his seat and do his job of collecting passengers on the road whilst he sat in the back, gave instructions and commented on my driving. Through this I entered into a (however temporary) apprenticeship-like situation⁴⁵ that significantly deepened my understanding of the intricate tasks of competitive driving on the AKR.⁴⁶

Thesis overview

This thesis follows the everyday activities, movements and speeds of various types of road users alongside a major Ghanaian highway. For this purpose, I have divided the thesis into three main parts, each focusing on a particular group of road users and their distinctive road practices and experiences: *Roadside dwelling* (Part I: Chapters 3 and 4), *Commercial driving* (Part II: Chapters 5, 6 and 7), and *Travelling* (Part III: Chapters 8 and 9).

Preceding my ethnographic explorations of everyday life on the road is a discussion on road-related discourses. In Chapter 2 I investigate the stories and rumours that residents in the town of Kyebi raised concerning the Accra-Kumasi road and its newly built bypass. I show how people's narratives evoke particular imageries that frame the AKR as a route for, and realm of, power, progress and perils. With their stories and imageries, the town's residents express how they perceive and experience the AKR as embedded in the wider contexts of politics, development and uncertainty. I then turn to the practical ways in which residents from communities near the AKR

⁴⁴ The Class C licence allowed me to drive cars, "goods carrying vehicles", buses and coaches (not exceeding 33 passengers). By mistake, the license states my nationality as "Ghanaian".

⁴⁵ See Coy (1989) for apprenticeship (or 'thick participation', Spittler 2001) as ethnographic research method.

⁴⁶ Through my Opel Astra I also learned about the meanings and burdens of car ownership in Ghana. This involved not only admiration by the people around me, but also obligations towards friends and acquaintances who demanded rides or had to be helped out with transport. Another obligation was to conform to certain aesthetic practices, including regular washing and spending money on paintwork for the car to look 'nice'.

dwell and work by the roadside (Part I). Chapter 3 is concerned with dwellers who observe traffic, walk, perform and stage protest and rituals by the roadside (or directly on the asphalt). I look at the ways in which these dwellers ‘reappropriate’ the road in a de Certeauian sense and become part of the road’s space through their everyday practices and engagements with the AKR, and with its materiality and human and vehicular movements. People can be seen to spatialize the road through their distinct corporeal and convivial practices, or through story-telling and at times disruptive actions, all of which give rise to certain forms of ‘roadside contacts’. Such contacts are also at the centre of Chapter 4 which explores the commercial practices of different types of roadside vendors. I demonstrate that selling goods to travellers is a particular form of engaging with the road and its mobile users, which involves strategic positioning, advertising and enticing potential customers. By focusing on bread selling in Ofankor, on the outskirts of Accra, I point to the intricate (including sensory and emotional) ways in which the sellers engage *with* and become engaged *by* traffic and travellers. Crucial for what can be hazardous hawking in traffic is their corporeal-kinetic attunement to the rhythms, speeds and (narrow) timeframes that constitute what I term the ‘moving market’.

A moving market is also what many drivers are confronted with on the AKR, especially those working in the public (so-called ‘informal’) transport sector. In Part II I deal with the most prominent type of transport workers, namely commercial bus drivers who ply the AKR between their provincial hometowns and the capital. As I demonstrate in Chapter 5, working in the transport business means facing various socio-economic constraints and pressures. I carve out the ways in which drivers ‘navigate’ the uncertainties of road transport by examining a group of young bus drivers from Suhum, their professional biographies and their multiple attempts not only to generate a decent income, but at times also to survive in the business. The drivers’ tactical navigating includes weighing up different driving and loading modes and the temporal (and dromocentric) advantages they may bring. It also involves searching for future opportunities, making efforts towards upward mobility, and employing occult and/or Christian means aimed at (ideally quick) personal success. The majority of drivers promote distinct faith-based attitudes concerning waiting and patience (*boasetɔ*) for better times in the future.

Matters of pace and time are at the core of ‘overlapping’, a distinct loading mode aimed at ‘fast business’, which I investigate in Chapter 6. ‘Overlapping’ is what bus drivers do when they pick up passengers waiting by the roadside (instead of loading them unhurried at the station), a practice that requires competing with other drivers

who have the same intentions. I lay out how ‘chasing’ passengers and competing with colleagues whilst en route requires drivers not only to map the moving market (through their knowledge and experience), but also to engage in ‘wayfaring’ in the Ingoldian sense. They have to grasp the immediate movements of passengers and competitors through ‘reading the road’ in a skilful and sensory manner, and to attune their own actions accordingly. I describe how these actions (and reactions) involve kinetic practices and dromocentric manoeuvres, yet also the full repertoire of differential speeds – ranging from ‘rushing’ to ‘relaxing’ – which are continuously negotiated in the process of ‘overlapping’. The perilous sides of some of these practices and manoeuvres are discussed in the chapter that follows, as Chapter 7 treats the risks of accidents that commercial drivers encounter on the AKR. I first discuss the drivers’ perceptions of causes of crashes and critical road situations – many of which relate to speeds of all sorts. Then I show how drivers confront the perils and try to avoid accidents through skilled and embodied practices en route, as well as through various protective (occult and religious) means. Some of the drivers also stress the importance of strong faith-based convictions, emotional self-control and attitude of fearless for safe driving.

In Part III, I turn to those who make use of the AKR for travelling. Chapter 8 begins with an assessment of how the employed means – and speeds – of travel largely correlate with the socio-economic background of travellers, providing insights into the stratification of Ghana’s present-day society. The social embeddedness of travelling can also be noted in people’s daily practices, such as in the interactions and communicative exchanges that regularly occur at the start and end of people’s journeys. Finally, I describe how travelling is crucial for, but also enables two distinct types of social occasions: events and meetings that require the physical presence and proximity; and the occasional and symbolically rich visits of city migrants to their hometowns. The actual act of travelling is explored in the next and last substantial chapter. The focus of Chapter 9 is on a particular group of bus passengers – young male travellers – and their attempts to care for their personal (physical) safety during trips. These attempts are part of their ‘passenger’ practices and become necessary in view of the perils that they expect to encounter in public transport buses and on the AKR. I illustrate what makes road trips safe and unsafe according to the bus passengers, what steps they take *before* trips to ensure they will not be harmed, and finally how they try to look out for and avert dangerous situations *during* the trips. I show that the risk-management en route involves their heightened sensory alertness towards the manoeuvres and speeds of drivers, their often emotional reactions to critical situations, as well as their occasional attempts to interfere in their driver’s

manoeuvres for the sake of their safety. The chapter also reveals that the many attempts to put safety first usually remain limited in practice, and that passengers therefore end up being somehow trapped – and often indignant over drivers who are blamed for putting their passengers at risk.

In the concluding chapter I discuss some of the implications of my work and point to some directions for possible anthropological research on matters of speed. By sketching several perspectives on speed I also bring together some of the core issues that arose in the different parts of the thesis. In particular I reflect on the dilemmas of speed and on immoral impatience, which arises not only in the everyday lives and work of road users, but also when other concerns of life in contemporary Ghana are brought into focus as speeds, perils and uncertainties mount up. Finally, I briefly review recent developments on the AKR and in the lives of the main protagonists in this thesis.

Chapter 2

Stories of the road: perceptions of power, progress and perils on the AKR

In the town of Kyebi, where I began my research on the Accra-Kumasi road (AKR), residents told me a tale about Potroase, a nearby village referred to as ‘Airport’:

A man once travelled in his car from Accra to Kumasi in the night. Upon reaching Potroase, the man realized that he was running out of fuel and decided to buy a few gallons. That night, the small village appeared to the traveller like a big city – or like an airport – with plenty of animation, modern lighting as well as a filling station. After paying for his fuel, the man continued his journey only to realize later that he had forgotten to get his change. He decided to collect it on his way back. But when he returned to Potroase, he was surprised to find neither lighting nor any filling station. For some mysterious reason, the place had turned back into what it usually is: a dull and underdeveloped village somewhere in the middle of a major trunk road.

Kyebi’s residents narrated this tale for different reasons. Some simply wanted to explain why the small village located both sides of the main road had come to be nicknamed ‘Airport’. Others were eager to draw my attention to the powers, such as spirits (*sunsum*) and witchcraft (*bayie*) that some of the residents (not necessarily the narrators themselves) assumed were at play in this village. It was possibly these powers that had transformed the village into a modern and lively place that night or that had tricked the traveller’s perception and bereft him of his money. The malicious powers alluded to in the tale further served to interpret the numerous fatal motor accidents that had occurred on the Potroase road – a section regularly referred to as ‘death trap’ or ‘death zone’. People also recounted the tale and referred to the road’s dangers to explain why a new road section – a bypass – had recently been built. They assumed that the main purpose of this bypass was so that travellers on the AKR would no longer need to pass through the Potroase ‘death trap’. Yet others claimed that the road’s powers and dangers were merely a pretext for building the bypass – a pretext used by those who had promoted the bypass in order to weaken the political and economic position of Kyebi.

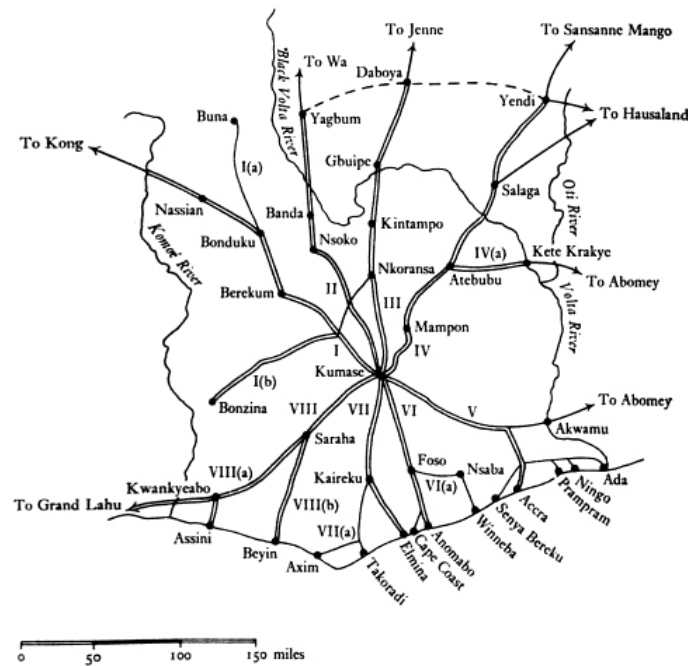
The bypass, called Apedwa-Bunso road or simply referred to as ‘new road’ (see Map 2, p. 11), was completed a few months before my arrival in Ghana, in early 2006. Most of the AKR’s traffic was now diverted away from not only Potroase, but also Kyebi, the capital of the Akyem Abuakwa kingdom. Among my friends and other Kyebi residents, the ‘removed’ road triggered heated debates about the diverse effects this road had on their community. At the centre of the conversations that I followed closely were a series of stories, often in the form of rumours. Similar to the ‘Airport’ tale, they geared towards who and what had promoted, or failed to prevent the building of the new road. My aim in this chapter is to examine the stories, beliefs and speculations that were brought forward by my informants at the decisive historical moment in the life of this community. I argue that these stories and rumours are narrative devices for articulating people’s concerns about the town’s recent detachment from the main AKR. Moreover, these narratives evoke particular imageries that frame the AKR as a route for, and realm of, power, progress and perils. Thus, the stories and imageries provide deep insights into the ways in which Kyebi residents perceive and experience the AKR as embedded in the wider contexts of politics, development and uncertainty. These perceptions resurface among people who are tangibly concerned with roads and road-building in various parts of the world (see for instance Dalakoglou 2010; Harvey 2005; Lamont 2012b, 2013; Masquelier 2002), and whose road experiences are framed by a sense of ambivalence and instability.

In the following account of road-related uncertainty and instability among local residents, I begin by describing the historical power struggle between Asante and Akyem Abuakwa, two Akan kingdoms that are connected by the AKR. Formerly an important trade route, the road was implicated in the two kingdoms’ rivalry over physical and symbolic dominance and their respective king’s authority. According to some people, the rivalry continues to be staged today and is at the core of the recent bypass construction. This leads to the second section in which I explore how Kyebi has undergone different phases of connection and disconnection over time, dependent upon the physical condition and thus the motorability of its access road. The new bypass – which is part of a state-led initiative to modernise and speed up the country’s road system – has not literally cut the town off from the road network, but has led to a sudden and sharp decline in through traffic and local activities. Among local residents this has given rise to widespread frustration, revealing people’s view of the presence of roads as imbued with the promises of progress. One of the drawbacks of roads, however, is the perils of motor accidents, which the new

road was intended to reduce in avoiding the accident-prone Potroase village. These perils are discussed in the last section where I address the different causes of the crashes that were brought to me and that were vividly described by a variety of commentators. The widely held view of the Potroase section, the AKR and Ghana's roads more generally as 'death traps' unites the – at times – contradictory views and discourses of road safety experts, journalists and roadside residents who try to make sense of the rampant road casualties.

Asante great-roads versus Akyem authority

Social scientists have described roads as means and contested objects in the struggle for political control and power (Alber 2002; Campbell 2012b; Fairhead 1993; Havik 2009; Ispahani 1989; Wilson 2004). The concept of roads as 'paths of authority' (Fairhead 1993) was also reiterated among certain people in Kyebi who associated the construction of the new road with a power struggle along ethnic lines. It was rumoured, for example, that the Asantehene – the king of the Asantes with his seat of power in Kumasi – had urged the country's president at that time, John Agyekum Kufuor, to build the bypass. Of course, Kufuor, an Asante himself and loyal to the Kumasi elite, had complied. But why was the Asantehene so keen on having that road built? Those who believed in the conspiracy theory explained that it was all connected to familiar themes regarding the long-established 'tribal' rivalry, even enmity, between the Asantehene and the Okyenhene, the king of the Akyems. The rivalry goes back to past inter-ethnic wars during one of which the Asantehene Osei Tutu was killed by the Akyems in 1717 (Fynn 1973: 64). Allegedly, since then, successive Asante kings have always sought to avoid passing through Akyem territory, or at least through Kyebi, the Akyem capital. The construction of the new road now enables the current Asantehene not only to travel more quickly to Accra, but also to bypass, and thereby ignore Kyebi. It could therefore be argued that the realigned AKR has an Asante-dominated route again. For Kyebi residents, especially those close to the royal palace, the new road stands for an attempt to symbolically weaken the Okyenhene's authority over 'his' road sections and to contest Akyem's political position more generally.



Map 3: The Asante great-roads network in the early 19th century (Wilks 1975: 11)

Asante power and the pre-colonial great-roads system

My informants who stressed the current ethno-political role of the AKR were generally aware, but had little detailed knowledge of how the road has been historically embedded in the often conflictual relationship between Asante and Akyem. A comprehensive account of the road's connection to historical processes of power and conquest is provided by Wilks (1975, 1992). Drawing mainly from colonial and missionary sources, Wilks describes how, at the beginning of the 19th century, the Asante capital of Kumasi had “free and unobstructed communication with all the leading provinces, by roads or paths, which [...] are collectively called great roads” (Dupuis 1824: xxvii; cited in Wilks 1975: 1).¹ In Twi, the ‘great roads’ were called *akwan-tempon*, from *ekwan-pon* (great-road) and *ten* (straight). Wilks identifies eight great-roads (Map 3) that include four northbound ‘inland roads’ (Route V-VIII) and four southbound ‘great maritime causeways’ (Route I-IV).² Route V is of particular interest here. It corresponds to the so-called ‘Akyem route’ (Yarak 1990:

¹ Wilks’ sources were, among others, the British Consul Dupuis (1824), Bowdich (1819) and the Basel missionary Christaller (1881). The geographer Dickson (1961: 33-4) who describes the early southern routes in his treatment of the development of road transport mainly draws from Dupuis’ account.

² It is further noted that the great-roads system was maintained by the central government in distinction from the smaller and local road networks that were under the responsibility of district authorities (Wilks 1975: 1).

123) that led through the Akyem kingdom to Accra and that strongly affected the course of the Accra-Kumasi motor road built at the beginning of the 20th century.

The great-roads system formed a network with a radial design, organized according to one central node, namely the Asante capital of Kumasi. The system was designed to achieve two different ends: “to promote the flow of trade, and to facilitate the maintenance of political control” (Wilks 1975: 16).³ Political control is the dominant context in which the great-roads system is placed. Wilks (1975: 18) stresses the fact that its evolution was closely related to the process of political incorporation of conquered territories in Greater Asante, yet that this process was not always a smooth one. He argues that, “opposition to the central government’s road building programme was one of the principal features of the syndrome of resistance to its imperial expansion, just as the closure of existing roads became one of the earliest indications of rebellion” (ibid.: 25).⁴

After the eight great-roads had been established in the early 19th century, apparently no further major highways were built. Indeed, some of them fell into disuse with the growth of British interest in the southern provinces of Asante and with the establishment of the Gold Coast Colony and later the Asante protectorate. This meant that Kumasi lost control over sections of the four southern great-roads. To hinder communication between Asante and Gold Coast towns, the British administration even closed some of the routes in times of conflict. The overall great-roads system ceased to exist when Greater Asante was occupied by the French, Germans and British at the end of the 19th century (Wilks 1975: 12-13).

Akyem’s claim to authority over the road

One of the instruments of pre-colonial Asante authority and rule was the aforementioned ‘Akyem route’ (Route V). It was at the core of the incorporative process of Akyem into Asante, and it was central to the recurring power struggles between the two kingdoms. For instance, in 1742, following the Asante invasion and the capture of the Akyem royal households, an agreement to guarantee Asante

³ The Asante great-roads are depicted as “instruments for the maximization of economic benefits (trade and production)” and as “instruments for the maximization of political control (government)” (Wilks 1975: 26); see also Yarak (1990: 115-126). Wilks (1975: 13) complains that Gould’s (1960) geography of transportation in Ghana shows the development of the communication network in the 20th century, but fails to consider its 19th century precedent.

⁴ Wilks (1992: 175) stresses again that creating the Asante road system involved the negotiation of numerous agreements with local chiefs through whose lands the roads were routed; the establishment of chains of appointed halting places; and the setting up of control posts manned by the ‘highway-police’ (*nkwansrafoo*) at strategic points.

protection to the Akyem countries and exemption from tribute was on the verge of being negotiated. In return, free passage through the Akyem countries to Accra was to be granted to the Asante. But Akyem Abuakwa refused, and the attempt to open a direct road – the later Route V – through Akyem territory to Accra had to be abandoned at this time (Wilks 1975: 25). It was only after the incorporation of Akyem Abuakwa into Greater Asante in 1766 that the route was finally opened (ibid.: 28).⁵ The road ceased to function as an instrument of Asante domination with the establishment of British colonial government in Accra, the centre of power thus emerging at the other end of the road. After 1957, the Government of Ghana became the new (official) authorities of the former Asante trade route. With their ministries, agencies and political and developmental agendas, they gradually transformed the route into today's existing motor road.

However, the rumour about the current Asantehene's influence on the bypass construction (see above) shows that people in Kyebi continue to regard the road as charged with ethnic ('tribal') and political authority. With respect to the section of the AKR that crosses Akyem Abuakwa territory, they claim that "it belongs to the Okyenhene" and that it is under the political and symbolic authority of the traditional ruler. To provide supporting evidence, some refer to the historical fact that during the colonial era, one important section of the road (the Apedwa-Kyebi section) was transformed into a motorable state by the then king, Nana Sir Ofori Atta I (see p. 53). A more contemporary piece of evidence, in people's view, is a huge billboard (Figure 2). It was erected some years ago near the AKR road in Nsawam-Adoagyiri, where the road crosses the Densu river that marks the boundary between the Akyem and Akuapim kingdom. Its bold letters read "WELCOME TO OKYEMAN The Kingdom of Akyem Abuakwa". On the left is a close-up picture of a roaring leopard, which stands for the king of all the animals formerly found in the dense Atiwa forests of Akyem (*Kwaebiribirim*), which travellers pass through on their way to Kumasi.⁶

⁵ See Affrifah (2000: 78-80; 102-103) for the crucial role of trade routes in the pre-colonial Asante-Akyem relations.

⁶ The leopard as a symbol of power also figures on the widely known state emblem of *Okyeman* (literally: the Akyem state).



Figure 2: Entering the Akyem kingdom: roadside billboard in Nsawam-Adoagyiri

People add that the Okyenhene's authority over the road is regularly manifested through ritual means. When travelling from his Accra residence to Kyebi for festive occasions, for example, the Okyenhene's car stops at Nsawam for one of his spokesmen (*akyeame*) to pour a libation by the roadside. I was told that praying to the deity of the river at the entrance of the kingdom is a way of showing the deity her due respect, but also reconfirms the king's sovereignty over the land that he is about to enter via the road. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter (p. 85), such ritual road performances occasionally allow turning the road into a public space for displaying chiefly power and authority.

These symbolic markers and practices nurture people's view of the road as a path of authority and a realm of power. The idea that the Asantehene may have been able to maintain control over a road section in Akyem – and contest the sovereignty of the Okyenhene, his rival – makes a similar point. Some of my interlocutors reasoned further that the Asantehene's move must have been motivated by his desire to weaken the Akyem capital both politically and economically. It is to this and to closely related suspicions held among frustrated Kyebi residents that I now turn.

(Dis)connecting pathways to progress

“They want to destroy the town”, I often heard people say in Kyebi. They claimed that the ‘new road’ was meant to make the town and its residents ‘suffer’, since it disconnected them from the main road and, most importantly, from the rewards of passing traffic. But whose intention could this have been? While some held the Asantehene responsible (see above), others looked to Accra and blamed the central government that is believed to continue marginalising the Akyem capital politically and economically, as it has done in the past.

The British colonial government, for instance, is remembered to have abandoned the royal capital following the sensational ‘Kibi murder case’.⁷ The case arose in 1944 after the sudden disappearance of one of the sub-chiefs to the then Okyenhene shortly after his death. The sub-chief had allegedly been murdered in Kyebi during a sacrificial ritual for the king’s burial.⁸ The murder case generated a lot of public attention in the Gold Coast colony and beyond and led to the stigmatisation of the town as backward, uncivilised and even dangerous. Such stigmatisation is recalled to this day by the popular phrase that “in Kyebi, they cut heads” (Klaeger 2007a: 112). As a consequence of the politicised (and in fact unresolved) murder case, the colonial government excluded the town from some of its investment and development initiatives. The situation did not improve in the years after Ghana’s independence, when one of the town’s most prominent figures and a member of the royal family, the scholar and politician J. B. Danquah, became the main adversary to Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s first president (Rathbone 2000). The fact that Kyebi was Danquah’s hometown and a stronghold of anti-Nkrumahism and thus anti-government sentiments did not redound to the town’s advantage.

I was nonetheless surprised by people’s claim that the government in power headed by President Kufuor was taking an anti-Kyebi stance. After all, Kufuor’s party, the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) is strongly supported in Kyebi. This is linked to party-historical reasons and to the fact that Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, at that time one of the leading NPP members and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, is a native of Kyebi. Yet it was precisely the relationship between Kufuor and Akufo-Addo that was questioned and became the subject of a road-related rumour. It is a well-known

⁷ Kibi (also: Kibbi) was the British notation for Kyebi; both versions are used today in written and spoken language.

⁸ See Rathbone (1989, 1993) for an historical account and the political circumstances of the alleged ritual murder that occurred in Kyebi in February 1944, after the death of the Okyenhene Nana Sir Ofori Atta I, and that provoked political and media attention beyond the Gold Coast colony.

fact that both politicians had aspired to the post of the NPP's presidential candidate in 2000 and 2004 and that Kufuor won the race both times, within the party as well as for the presidential elections. It was suggested that Kufuor had arranged for the new road to be built so as to reaffirm his superiority over Akufo-Addo. His internal rival would be demoralised and humiliated by 'removing' the main road, thus weakening the economic activities in his hometown.⁹ What these allegations hint at is not just political rivalry, but also socio-economic decline as one of the (intentional) consequences of infrastructural disconnection. The following sections bring to light how the road is perceived as a pathway to progress and development and how its absence or abandonment can be disadvantageous to the community affected (cf. Harvey 2012; Harvey and Knox 2012; Colombijn 2002b).

The Kyebi road: a history of neglect and frustrations

In Kyebi, aspirations for motor road access on economic grounds seem to be nothing new, and neither are the frustrations that town residents currently experience in this respect. This is confirmed by several historical sources such as those retrieved from the Akyem Abuakwa State Archives.¹⁰ In a letter dated 1921, a colonial administrator residing in Kyebi reported that the town residents "have had many disheartening experiences with this road".¹¹ He referred to the fact that despite the so-called 'road revolution' triggered by the growing availability of motor vehicles in the early 20th century, Kyebi was struggling to obtain, and to maintain, viable motor road access.

The former Akyem trade route was already reported to be in an unsatisfactory state around 1850. The geographer Dickson (1961) argued that one factor was the rapid growth of the vegetation; another was the apparent lack of interest of the British and Dutch administration in road construction. In 1870, the subject of roads was debated in the Legislative Council, concluding that "good carriage roads were too expensive to build and were, in any case, undesirable" (ibid.: 35). It was argued that "there was no prospect of concentrated traffic that would repay the public for making good roads" (ibid.) and that improving the existing pathways would be sufficient, the natives

⁹ Various commentators claim that the NPP-internal rivalry between Kufuor, an Asante, and Akufo-Addo, an Akyem, is influenced once again by 'tribalism'. The contest between the two came to an end when Akufo-Addo finally became the NPP flagbearer in 2008, following the withdrawal of President Kufuor who was not allowed to serve a third term in office. The NPP lost the 2008 elections against the National Democratic Congress (NDC). See Nugent (2001a, 2001b) on the 2000 elections and Jockers et al. (2010) on the 2008 elections.

¹⁰ The Akyem Abuakwa State Archives (AASA) are based at the *Ofori Panyin Fie*, the Okyenhene's palace and administrative seat in Kyebi. See Appendix A for a listing of consulted archival documents.

¹¹ AASA.10.45: Ass.DC to DC (3 November 1921)

favouring head-loading anyway.¹² A further objection was that the Administration had no power to carry out road building schemes, and that “[t]he natives themselves did not want good roads, because an enemy might use them in time of war” (ibid.).

According to Dickson, the turning point was the introduction of motor vehicles at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1901 the Governor of the Gold Coast colony pleaded for “the building of roads good enough for motor cars and traction engines. Such roads [...] would be easy to keep clear, and the use of motor vehicles would free, for other occupations, a large proportion of the country’s labour force” (ibid.: 36). Several roads were therefore constructed or repaired for the use of motor traffic – one among them was the road leading from Accra through Nsawam and Apedwa to Kyebi. In 1905 the *Goldfields of Eastern Akim Ltd*, with government assistance, completed the six yard wide motor road built specifically to reach areas of expanding cocoa production and gold mining in the Akyem area (ibid.: 37; Gould 1960: 15, 38). The laterite-surfaced road was, however, quickly ruined, as it could not stand up to heavy motor cars and lorries.¹³

By 1915, the colonial government published plans to reconstruct the drastically dilapidating Nsawam-Kyebi section, but to the great disappointment of local residents, the road works ended before they even reached the Akyem capital. In a letter sent from his palace, the Okyenhene Ofori Atta I complained:

It was extremely unfortunate that the Government found reasons to alter the original plan which resulted in the discontinuance of the reconstruction from Apedwa to Kibbi [despite] the growing importance of the road which is evidenced by a number of villages now in course of construction.¹⁴

The ‘discontinuance’ of road works by the British during (and after) World War I was a common phenomenon. It was connected to the war crises, lack of funds and to British officials’ relative neglect of roads in the Gold Coast in favour of railways (Wrangham 2004: 14).¹⁵

¹² A quite similar, and rather odd position is taken by the economists Moriarty and Beed (1989) with regards to present-day transport in ‘tropical Africa’.

¹³ The “complete revolution in road transport in the country” was the arrival of the light American Ford lorries in 1913 (Heap 1990: 38-9); also see Gewald (2002), Gewald et al. (2009a), Gould (1960: 66) and van der Laan (1981: 555).

¹⁴ AASA.10.20: Omanhene to DC (16 April 1917)

¹⁵ According to Wrangham (2004), the colonial administration promoted a ‘railroad imperialism’ that led to the complete neglect of the potentials of roads, actual transport needs and the growing use of motor lorries. On the competition between railway and motor transport, see Dickson (1961: 39), Gould (1960: 22-76) and Heap (1990: 25).

For several years, the road section leading to Kyebi remained neglected by the government and hence became “quite impassable for Motors”.¹⁶ By 1916, Ofori Atta I became exasperated. The king decided to make the Apedwa-Kyebi road fit for motor service at his own expense, as this was “one of his paramount interests” and was expected to be “a great acquisition to his people and himself”.¹⁷ His project triggered great excitement, for instance, Mr. Müller from the *Basel Mission Factory* in Nsawam heartily congratulated the king. He predicted that “soon the Motor Lorries [sic] would be able to reach [the king’s] town”, and that “Kyebi would in the near future be an important centre of business”.¹⁸

The widely anticipated boost to the local economy was, however, retarded once again. This time it was not the government, but the Italian contractor Mr. Dalberto (hired for the road works in 1916) who disappointed the king. For an agreed amount of £1,500 Mr. Dalberto and his employees were instructed to “reform, trim clear and widen to its old width and to generally make suitable for Motor traffic in the best workman-like-manner to the satisfaction of the Employer – the road from Apedwa [...] to Kibbi”.¹⁹ Six months after signing the contract, the king inspected the road in his Studebaker car – and was not at all pleased. Ofori Atta I wrote to Mr. Dalberto:

I awfully regret to have to state with regard to the condition of the road as I saw it, that never have I seen a work so half done, or so haphazardly brought into the so-called completion as this road work. [C]ertain parts of the road are so soft that every motor lorry is bound to sink seriously, thus causing considerable annoyance and trouble to the passengers.²⁰

What angered the king was not only that “it [would] be a matter of further heavy expense to make this road what it should be”, but more particularly that “owing to the bad condition of the road Firms [were] unwilling to send their lorries to Kibbi.”²¹

The struggle to incorporate Kyebi into the network of motor roads continued. In the years that followed, the king occasionally employed his own labourers and asked for a government grant, advocating that his people “had an ‘ardent desire’ to improve roads but lacked equipment” (Wrangham 2004: 12). In 1921, after another period of absolute neglect, the king ordered his subjects to take part in communal labour. Under his direct supervision, the road was cleared of grass, trees were felled, the road

¹⁶ AASA.10.8: Swanzy Ltd to Omanhene (16 September 1916)

¹⁷ AASA.10.8: Danquah to contractor (10 November 1916)

¹⁸ AASA.10.8: Müller (Basel Mission Factory) to Omanhene (19 January 1916)

¹⁹ AASA.10.7: Road Work Agreement (1916 [not dated])

²⁰ AASA.10.20: Omanhene to Dalberto (10 March 1917)

²¹ AASA.10.20: Omanhene to Dalberto (10 March 1917)

widened and gravelled, dangerous corners improved, bridges and culverts built, and signposts erected.²² Upon completion, a government official reported that it was due to the “greatest enthusiasm” displayed by the king and his people that the work had “turned out to be most excellent”.²³ Ofori Atta I also called the road “excellent and first class” and finally considered it suitable for motor traffic – ready for firms and commercial vehicles to come to Kyebi for business.²⁴

Indeed, the partially “African-constructed road system” of the Gold Coast (Wrangham 2004: 14), now also reaching Kyebi and neighbouring towns, enabled cars and lorries to enter in great numbers to the heart of Akyem for both commercial and administrative use.²⁵ Rathbone (1993: 13) notes that with improved road transport “the physical space of Akyem Abuakwa seemed to shrink as journeys, which had taken days on foot, now took hours by motor transport”. Thus the infrastructural development not only impacted strongly on local economies predominantly based on the cultivation of cocoa, but also “helped reinforce Akyem Abuakwa’s identity” (ibid.) more generally.

In the decades that followed, Kyebi continued to be one of the stops along the AKR. The road partially deteriorated during the Great Depression, but it was newly surveyed and completely realigned by 1938 (Gould 1960: 72). Further major reconstruction exercises were undertaken in the late 1950s, 1970s and early 1990s, none of which affected Kyebi’s access to the AKR (Rathbone 1993: 7). The most recent reconstruction of this road started in 2002 and was ongoing at the time of writing. It included the alteration of the AKR’s course around Kyebi where the already mentioned bypass was built and completed in early 2006.

Road (re)constructions and the promise of speed

After almost a decade of direct access to one of the country’s major traffic corridors, people in and around Kyebi feel that their established roadside communities have suddenly become isolated again. While rumours and allegations suggest that the road

²² Wrangham (2004: 1, 6) discusses local road building initiatives as an “African response to a lack of colonial government provision”. For similar initiatives in other places, see Boni (1999), Drummond-Thompson (1992) and McCaskie (2001: 128). Heap (1990) rather emphasises the joint initiatives of locals and colonial administrators.

²³ AASA.10.45: Ass.DC to DC (3 November 1921)

²⁴ AASA.10.45: Omanhene to DC (1921 [not dated])

²⁵ The importance of African ownership of motor vehicles is referred to by Cardinall (1932: 114-5), Dickson (1961), Gould (1960: 78-9), Hart (2011), Heap (1990) and Wrangham (2004).

was intentionally ‘removed’ to ‘destroy’ the town, the government’s activities suggest a different, if not contrary agenda that requires elaboration.

The bypass was one element in the reconstruction and partial dualisation (upgrading to dual carriageway) of the entire 222 km long AKR.²⁶ These works in themselves formed a core element of a large-scale project, the Road Sector Development Programme (RSDP). The RSDP was administered by the Ministry of Roads and Transport (MRT) between 2002 and 2008. It was jointly funded by the Government of Ghana and a range of international development partners and donors, including the World Bank, which provided a credit worth US\$ 220 million (World Bank 2008: 8).²⁷ In total approximately US\$1.2 billion was allocated for the RSDP for maintenance, rehabilitation, reconstruction and road safety works on Ghana’s entire road infrastructure (Ministry of Transportation 2007). The RSDP agenda was built on the understanding that transport is “a catalyst for growth and development” (ibid.), thus the MRT was confident that their programme would “[e]nhance the operational efficiency of the road network to promote economic growth and the delivery of social services” (World Bank 2008: 4). In line with this, the RSDP was intended to support the Poverty Reduction Strategy set up by the Government, based on the assumption that poverty reduction directly relates to accessibility to markets and services (Ministry of Roads and Transport 2003: 108).

The often-noted aim of road building (or at least upgrading) towards connectivity, progress and prosperity (Khan 2006; Árnason et al. 2007; Harvey and Knox 2012) was highlighted by stakeholders involved in the infrastructural project. For instance, the Ghanaian transport engineering company *COMPTRAN* described the road works as part of the Government’s goal of “poverty reduction, regional integration and economic development by improving accessibility of land-locked countries (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) to the ports of Ghana” (COMPTRAN n.d.). The company emphasised that the AKR works would allow for faster travel and therefore lower transport costs for passengers and freight, as well as bringing other economic and societal benefits. Road-building was associated here with the ‘promise of speed’ that Harvey and Knox (2012: 523) describe as one of the ‘enchantments of infrastructure’.

²⁶ For this purpose, the road was divided into six sections: Accra/Ofankor-Nsawam (17.6 km), Nsawam-Apedwa (41.6 km), Apedwa-Bunso (23 km), Bunso-Anyinam (11 km), Anyinam-Konongo (85 km), Konongo-Kumasi (44 km; Ministry of Roads and Transport 2004).

²⁷ Other donors were several governments, development agencies, development banks and funds in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

Speed and acceleration were recurring and at times critical themes in the process of the AKR reconstruction. For instance, when the modern Ofankor-Nsawam dual carriageway was inaugurated in June 2006, President Kufuor not only praised the Chinese contractors for the quality of the work carried out, but also for the fact that it was completed two months ahead of schedule (*Accra Daily Mail* 2006).²⁸ Nonetheless, works on most of the six road sections took much longer than anticipated so the reconstruction of the AKR was not completed when the RSDP ended in 2008. This result annoyed (and continues to do so) all those regularly driving and travelling on the AKR. Drivers and passengers are increasingly frustrated by dug-up roads, dust, mud and traffic jams and remain unconvinced of the nationwide acceleration, progress and prosperity that the project claimed to promote.

Speed was also at stake during the construction of the bypass, the new Apedwa-Bunso road section. In mid-2002, when signing the work contract with an Israeli construction company, the Minister of Transport declared that the project was scheduled to be completed in 24 months, but “urged the contractors to ‘fast track’ it to 18 months” (*Ghanaweb* 2002). The company’s representative pledged to complete it within 20 months depending on weather conditions (*ibid.*). In the end, the road was opened a few months *behind* schedule in early 2005. What is more, the works were unsatisfactory as small cracks started appearing in the surface and very soon repair works became necessary.

The planners were able to implement their concern with speed more effectively with respect to reducing travel time on the AKR. The most significant contribution to this aim was the new bypass (22 km) now cutting 10 km from the journey on the old Kyebi road (33 km). Both officials and road users now consider journeys to be faster because the AKR is shorter, but also because it avoids the steep hills and the dangerous bend around Potroase. Furthermore, traffic can move at higher speeds thanks to the new pothole-free road surface and the dual carriageway realised on some of the AKR’s sections. Despite its often fatal consequences, acceleration has been promoted, even praised, as a vital component of progress, nation-building and modernity more generally. This nexus seemed key to the Ghanaian government’s agenda to literally speed up economic development (cf. Khan 2006: 94).²⁹ It was also implied in the slogan used by the ruling NPP during the campaign for the

²⁸ The dual carriageway, including the flyover bridge at Ofankor, was built by the *Chinese Railway Engineering Co-operation*.

²⁹ Several authors have observed how roads in other parts of the world have equally become entangled in this very nexus, for instance Árnason et al. (2007) and Harvey and Knox (2012).

presidential elections in 2008: “WE ARE MOVING FORWARD”. The slogan alluded to the achievements of the Kufuor government, particularly with regards to road building and transport, as well as to the general drive and momentum that characterised – at least from an NPP perspective – the current state of the nation. Some of the huge NPP billboards urged to “BELIEVE IN GHANA” while the statement “WE ARE MOVING ►► FORWARD” visually hinted at the ‘accelerated nation’ (cf. Árnason et al. 2007) by means of a red fast-forward symbol (Figure 3).³⁰



Figure 3: NPP billboard promoting progress and acceleration for the nation

Moving backwards and slow business

It appeared that residents in Kyebi were not all that enthusiastic about the government’s dromocentric agenda. This became apparent when I visited the town in 2008, a few months before the presidential elections. Some of my friends scoffed at the optimistic slogan on the huge NPP billboard erected a few steps from the now quiet old road and joked about the irony. The only welcome aspect of the billboard was the image of Nana Akufo-Addo, pictured with a bright smile: finally, Kyebi’s big man in politics had become the party’s presidential candidate. Moving forward with

³⁰ A similar message was carried by the highlife song *Go Go High* (by gospel singer Philipa Baafi) that became the NPP electoral campaign song and a nation-wide hit.

Akufo-Addo as the new head of the government seemed a brilliant prospect. In town, many young men especially were confident that his victory would open up new job opportunities for his supporters and kin.

When I arrived in Kyebi in 2006 to carry out my fieldwork, people already had a strong sense that far from moving forward, the town was rather going backwards. Many of my acquaintances argued that business in town had gone down – “by 70%”, someone estimated boldly. People kept telling me that “Kyebi is quiet, too quiet” and complained that “our place has become dull, like a proper *kurase* (village)”. Others suggested that the town had “collapsed”, or become “like a cemetery”. “IS KYEBI DEAD?” a young man asked in a discussion thread on Facebook, claiming that “Kyebi is now suffering economically” from the new paradigm of highway development that avoided towns as thoroughfares. “Now the town is dying if not dead”, he commented further. As a local politician warned in a public address, Kyebi would soon turn into a ‘ghost town’ (*Ghanaweb* 2005a).

Many residents claimed they were feeling the impact of the diverted traffic. “The road, it meant a lot. The place was lively, so lively, business was booming”, a chop bar owner called Auntie Grace told me. Although the great majority of travellers passing through Kyebi in the past did not stop, some still needed a break and looked for food, drinks and provisions, such as the cargo truck drivers from Kumasi, Burkina Faso or Mali. At times they needed help from local mechanics or vulcanizers and remained by the roadside for several days. Very occasionally, entire busloads of travellers descended upon Kyebi, such as when a Benz bus or coach broke down. These transients were valuable customers for those selling and working in stalls, chop bars, drinking spots, telecommunication centres and workshops, all located along the through road and particularly in the environs of the bus station (see Chapter 4, p. 99).

Before the bypass was built, Auntie Grace was able to sell two large saucepans of palm nut soup with meat to travellers per day. “Now business is very slow” she said, and explained that she prepares only one smaller saucepan, mostly for local workers. The bakery behind the bus station was obliged to curb its daily production, while the mechanics and vulcanizers have little to do. Few of the small-scale entrepreneurs are as flexible as the fruit and vegetable sellers from neighbouring farming communities. Soon after the bypass was opened, many of them moved their stalls to the Apedwa Junction in order to gain access to the main AKR traffic, meaning more customers.

Frustration about the apparent decline in economic activities in Kyebi was most tangibly expressed by a group of young shoemakers in their early twenties, who run an open workshop by the roadside opposite the bus station. Appiah told me,

“Definitely, we miss the old traffic, it used to make the town hot”. A few months earlier, they had taken white paint and written “*COME BACK STREET*” in bold letters on the road in front of their stall. By using the asphalt to display their frustration about the ‘removed’ road they wanted to express their hope that something could be done to make the road and roadside business more lively again – maybe with the help of the Okyenhene, their king, or Nana Akufo-Addo, Kyebi’s big man in politics. Their request remained unanswered, just as their words on the asphalt slowly faded away.³¹

The fading words reveal how people view the road as potentially lively and economically active and as a pathway to progress and development. It was along similar lines that the Ghanaian government promoted their infrastructural project to link acceleration, movement and progress. For people in Kyebi, the reverse seemed to be taking place. This accounts for the rumour that all this could not have been accidental. Some suggested that denying Kyebi its laboriously acquired access to the main AKR was an intentional means employed by President Kufuor to make his adversary’s hometown ‘suffer’.³²

People have realised that there is more to the abandoned through road than merely its drawbacks referred to above. The change has brought some welcome improvements. Residents in the ‘cut-off’ roadside communities appreciate that reduced traffic has made living and working alongside the road much calmer and safer, as will be explored in the next chapter. Some have told me – and this leads to yet another road rumour – that the prospect of an accident-free road stretch had actually pushed the Okyenhene to secretly give his support for the new bypass. Could it be true that the king had been in favour of the redirection of ‘his’ road, to the disadvantage of the royal capital? Some of my interlocutors did indeed assume such a connection. Rumours circulated that the king’s concerns were specifically related to the accident-prone road section at Potroase, or ‘Airport’, the small village near Kyebi referred to at the beginning of this chapter.

³¹ According to one informant, the Okyenhene had tried to prevent the construction of the bypass at an early stage “to avoid humiliation”. Similarly, Urry (2007: 32) notes that “the redirection of a path, or its elimination with a new road, will often be viewed as vandalism against [the affected] community”.

³² The experience made by town residents of being ‘cut off’ (due to bad roads) and thus being left out of major developments – as a result of the deliberate actions of political leaders – has also been described by Lamont (2012b) in his ethnographic piece on road infrastructure in rural Kenya.

The animate road: the causes of recurring crashes

“The Okyenhene wanted the accidents to vanish, once and for all” I was told. Some people in Kyebi claimed that the king was supportive of the views of road engineers and road safety experts, or that he had been bribed. The experts maintained that the high number of accidents on the AKR was, in part, connected to poor road design and to drivers’ inability to cope with it – most obviously so in the case of Potroase. They argued that redirecting the Kyebi road was crucial to reducing further accidents and fatalities. People also claimed that the Okyenhene welcomed such a measure for another reason, that he hoped that ending the carnage on the Kyebi road would finally put an end to the common talk about the presence of malicious powers in Potroase, such as the spirits and witchcraft alluded to in the ‘Airport’ tale. This would eventually free Potroase and the road to the Akyem capital from being stigmatised as perilous, backward and mysterious. What draws my attention here is less people’s speculations about the king’s involvement in redirecting the Kyebi road, rather, how these stories invoke various perils that different commentators perceive as the possible causes of road accidents.

Black spots and death traps

Alongside economic and developmental agendas, it was the pressing concerns for road safety that triggered the reconstruction works on the AKR. One major cause of accidents was the road’s poor condition – as maintained by commercial drivers (see Chapter 7, p. 169) and the general public at the time of doing research, but also by early observers over a century ago. Dickson (1961: 34), for example, refers to an account of the Wesleyan missionary Thomas Birch Freeman who wrote in 1859 that in all his travels “he [Freeman] had seen no pathways worse than those in Akim. The traveller, he warned, could not take his eyes off the ground before him without risking a fall and broken bones.” Similarly, in his report about a journey from Kyebi to Kumasi undertaken in 1881, the Basel missionary David Huppenbauer (1888: 14, 18) complained about bad and dirty paths. They were so narrow that travellers got caught in the brushwood and had their clothes torn to pieces. Due to obstacles such as fallen trees, water puddles and swamps, the paths could accommodate neither horses, donkeys nor carriages. Not even travelling in a hammock was an option as its carriers would stumble over roots “as thick as a man” (*mannsdicke Wurzeln*) and drop the missionary. Huppenbauer writes that being carried was “torture” and he was forced to walk throughout most of his sermon journey (*Predigtreise*; *ibid.*: 14). About a century later, Rathbone (1993: 7) describes the AKR as “a much-ravaged

road which degenerated into mud-slides in the rainy season and potholed dust-storms in the dry season”, until it underwent extensive repairs in 1992. The AKR steadily gained a reputation as one of Ghana’s worst and most dangerous roads and was labelled a ‘death trap’ by press commentators – a term equally used for other road sections with a high concentration of black spots and accident casualties.³³

On the country’s numerous death traps, one newspaper reported it being “a serious national crisis because road traffic accidents are becoming very common and are robbing the nation of its valuable human resources” (*Ghanaian Chronicle* 2006b). In 2004, it was suggested that road accidents – estimated to claim around 1,800 fatalities every year – caused more deaths than AIDS in Ghana (*Ghanaian Chronicle* 2004). This ‘national crisis’ has led the National Road Safety Commission (NRSC) and other state agencies and NGOs to embark upon road safety campaigns, flanked by heated debates about who and what to blame for the crisis. At the centre of the debates was the AKR due to its “notoriety for gruesome accidents owing not only to its poor physical nature, but also its improper design” (*Ghanaweb* undated). These findings were confirmed in a road traffic study conducted to identify black spots on Ghana’s entire road infrastructure in 2005 following pressure to identify measures “to limit the carnage” (*Ghanaweb* 2003b). One of the (unsurprising) findings of the study, in which 40 ‘death spots’ were identified (*Daily Graphic* 2005), was that Potroase was deadly dangerous.³⁴

According to commentators, the Potroase section had recorded the highest number of accidents in the entire Eastern Region in 2004 because of its ‘improper design’ – its tricky course in a particularly challenging physical environment. About 60 km beyond Accra and 10 km before reaching Kyebi, the road gently climbs up into the thickly forested Atiwa mountains before suddenly plunging into a curved valley and climbing a steep slope at the other end again. At the foot of the valley lies Potroase. Where vehicles used to crash, literally falling into the village on both sides of the bend, road signs still warn motorists of the “treacherous curve” and of “death on the hairpin bend around the cliff” (*Ghanaweb* 2003a). In order to make the “Petroase problem [...] a thing of the past” (*Ghanaweb* undated), the road agencies – and allegedly the Okyenhene too – opted for the radical engineering solution of

³³ Apart from the AKR, the coastal roads (Accra-Aflao, Accra-Cape Coast) are frequently labelled ‘death traps’. Ghanaians also use the term ‘death trap’ as a label for *trottros*, taxis and other types of passenger vehicles (Hart 2013: 382).

³⁴ See National Road Safety Commission (2006) for figures on black spots.

redirecting the road. The Apedwa-Bunso bypass was built to “make [the AKR] safe”, as the Minister of Transport assured (*Ghanaweb* 2002).

Dangerous drivers, speeding strangers and carelessness

People blamed the numerous Potroase accidents on the road’s bad state and design, but also on the negligence of drivers. “Potroase was a death zone because of careless driving”, one Kyebi friend told me. His view resonates with the general assessment of Ghanaian road safety experts. Drawing from various (not specified) studies, they assert that “human error (70-93%) is the most cited contributory factor underlying the occurrences of road traffic crashes” (National Road Safety Commission 2009: 13). During road safety campaigns that I attended and in conversations with representatives of the NRSC, the experts were keen on repeating the precise 93% figure. This was done out of conviction, and to convince people that safe roads were ultimately the responsibility of their users, meaning drivers. Responsible driving was advocated as the only alternative to the high percentage of human error that included ‘unacceptable’ road user behaviour such as impatience, recklessness and non-compliance. Experts reiterated during campaigns and in interviews that these were all easily avoidable by simply “doing the right thing”. The media spread the same attitude. In a feature entitled “Death on our roads”, one journalist lamented that “our roads have turned into death traps; our vehicular facility has turned into moving coffins because our drivers continue to be reckless and careless. Such is our concern” (*Ghanaian Chronicle* 2004).³⁵

By placing the responsibility of drivers at the heart of road safety debates (cf. Lamont 2010, 2013) and thus perpetuating the “largely behaviorist model” (Morris 2010: 601) of educational initiatives, experts and the public tend largely to neglect – but still occasionally evoke – the complementary causes for accidents. These causes can be found on a physical-technical level (for instance, bad roads, bad vehicles) and in a legal-structural context (inadequate traffic law enforcement, bribery). They also include inexperience, lack of driving skills, fatigue and drunkenness, as well as economic pressures and competition among drivers, all of which contribute to the often-cited carelessness. The group of road users that are most associated with

³⁵ The stereotype of the ‘careless driver’ was already prominent over one hundred years ago. Heap (1990: 21-2) writes that, as a consequence of increasing motor transport, a Motor Traffic Ordinance came into force in 1908 “to protect the public from incompetent and careless driving” (see also Hart 2011). On careless and dangerous driving in other African countries, see Carrier (2005, 2009), Lamont (2012a) Lee (2012), Mutongi (2006), Morris (2010) and wa Mungai and Samper (2006).

carelessness is commercial drivers. Their attitudes towards and engagement with road safety and dangers will be explicitly dealt with in Chapter 7.

With regards to the Potroase accidents, my interlocutors from Kyebi and Suhum – many of whom are commercial drivers – equally stressed careless driving as a core factor. They reasoned that drivers, in particular inexperienced, foreign ones, used to employ excessive speed at Potroase. Some avoided applying their brakes when descending into the valley in order not to lose momentum – from fear that their heavy, often overloaded and weak lorries would otherwise struggle ascending again on the other side. Others simply misjudged their speed or were impatient, to save time and make profit (see Chapter 6). ‘Overspeeding’ (*kɔ ntemntem*) was believed to have caused many big vehicles to fail to negotiate the sharp bend, subsequently crashing in the valley and spilling their freight onto the lower township, where houses were sometimes destroyed and residents killed.

The issue of excessive speed on the AKR was regularly raised by road safety experts. For instance, one study conducted on the AKR revealed particularly astonishing speed figures (Derry et al. 2007). Vehicles plying two road sections with a prescribed speed limit of 50 km/h were measured travelling at an average of 87 km/h, within a range of 40 to 187 km/h. 95% of all vehicles were exceeding the prescribed speed limit. The report concluded that the excessive speeds, particularly when coupled with wide speed *variations*, contributed to the high incidence of traffic crashes and fatalities on the AKR. Other statistical figures used by experts showed that more than half of all accidents on the AKR were related to overspeeding (see National Road Safety Commission 2003) or, as cited by *Ghanaweb* (2005b), to “excessive over speeding [sic]”.³⁶ As I will explore later (Chapter 7, p. 173), it is the occurrence not only of excessive, but also of *differential* speeds that commercial drivers consider as one of the major challenges for their everyday work on the road.

At Potroase, overspeeding and fatalities have eventually become “a thing of the past” as nowadays few vehicles pass through the village. “You see, this place is no more dangerous”, the relieved residents told me and pointed to the children sitting and chatting undisturbed on the dented railguards – remnants of an attempt to prevent vehicles from crashing into the township. People have also observed that not only has traffic been diverted, but so has dangerous driving: soon after its opening, a series of fatal accidents started to occur on the new Apedwa-Bunso section. “Now they go even

³⁶ See Morris (2010: 601) on speeding as the primary explanatory factor for accidents in South Africa.

faster because the road there is so smooth”, people told me, furthering that the new, smooth road proves particularly fatal when it gets wet and slippery. The observation that drivers were now taking “undue advantage of the good nature of the road to over speed [sic], thus causing accidents” (*Ghanaian Chronicle* 2006a), as one traffic police commander explained, was also made for other newly-built sections of the AKR, such as the dual carriageway connecting Ofankor and Nsawam.

Observing how careless driving has shifted from the old to the new road, my Kyebi acquaintances found it ironic that new roads, built with the intention to reduce accidents on the AKR, continue to be a worrying source of danger. They also observed that it is the speed-up of the country’s development, fostered by an improved road infrastructure, which in turn fosters overspeeding – a correlation between nation-wide acceleration and increased, at times fatal, vehicular speed that is by no means solely a Ghanaian or African experience.³⁷ This reminds of Virilio’s (1986) theoretical idea of the ‘dromocratic condition’ and to his assertion that acceleration is crucial to modernity, yet also that ever-increasing speed necessarily results in various types of accidents.

Powers and spirits: roaming dangers in Potroase and beyond

Accidents at Potroase – and on the AKR road in general – were seen by many in Kyebi to be related to drivers’ carelessness, particularly to overspeeding. Concurrently, and often without sensing any contradiction, some brought forward a further cause for the accidents at the notorious black spots: spirits and witchcraft. They argued that the presence of malicious powers on and alongside the road was undeniable in view of the suspiciously high number of accidents at some spots. Speculations about the involvement of such powers were also nurtured by the views of crashed vehicles – of broken-down trucks in odd, almost impossible positions left behind by the road, or of incredibly mangled carcasses deposited at police stations. The ‘Airport’ tale recounted earlier is one of many popular depictions of the road’s occult dangers that are framed by rumours alleged to be very embarrassing to the Okyenhene. They speak of witchcraft that roadside residents have carried out in order for vehicles, especially cargo trucks, to crash, overturn and spill their goods that are then appropriated by residents approaching the accident scene. Potroase has regularly been referred to as a ‘witch pot’ as a result. The mentioned rumours also refer to bloodthirsty spirits that want to ‘suck’ the blood of accident victims. Such

³⁷ See Lee (2012) and Morris (2010) on South Africa; Lamont (2012a, 2013) on Kenya; Árnason et al. (2007) on Iceland.

spirits are involved in accidents that occur particularly during festive seasons, when everybody – including spirits and souls – wants to ‘enjoy something’; or else, during election times, when politicians are suspected to turn to occult powers that require human blood for their supportive actions (cf. Meyer 1998c; Blunt 2004).³⁸

While some powers may occur and strike at any place and road section (without particular reference of them being mobile and roaming), others are said to be residential and inhabiting distinct spots and road sections. Apparently, one such locale of occult dangers for travellers is Asuboi, a small roadside community in the Akyem area. Much attention has been paid to the short and narrow Asuboi bridge that leads over a small creek. Over the years, vehicles that did not quite make it through the narrow road segment have badly damaged the bridge’s cement railings and some have even ended up in the creek or its banks after colliding with oncoming vehicles. My friends in Kyebi had no doubts that these accidents were connected to the drivers’ failures to negotiate this tricky road section (see also Chapter 7, p. 172). Nevertheless, they brought up the ‘story’ they have been told about the bridge, that the Asuboi river is allegedly the home of a deity whose children come out in the dark to play on the bridge. People told me laughingly that drivers were advised to blow their horn when crossing, not only to scare the playing children away, but also to greet the spirit. “You have to give the spirit the appropriate respect”, a friend said, suggesting that failing to do so might result in an accident.

The frequent, sometimes fatal accidents on the bumpy and hilly road section in the Asuboi area have given rise to the popular belief, or at least narrative, about the perilous presence of the spirits (or souls) belonging to those who have died there in previous accidents. “At such places, they want more dead”, people claim, meaning that the souls are eager to find other souls to join them. Similar accounts of occult forces or “evil creatures roaming the highways” (Masquelier 1992: 60) are reported from other parts of Ghana (Meyer and Verrips 2001) and other African countries.³⁹ For instance, Morris (2010: 596) claims for South African contexts that “the road is frequently narrated [...] as the space of particular vulnerability to witchcraft”. Particularly rich is the account of road stories that Masquelier (2002) collected among residents living close to Niger’s Route Nationale 1. The stories reveal the

³⁸ Taxi drivers plying the Suhum-Kyebi route once told me in December 2006 that they often felt suddenly very sleepy when passing through Potroase. One explanation for this was ‘hungry spirits’ that were demanding blood during the Christmas season; another was that these drivers had probably eaten too much heavy food before setting off to Kyebi.

³⁹ See, for example, Chilson (1999), Geschiere (1997), Giles-Vernick (1996), Lee (2012), Masquelier (1992, 2002), Sanders (2008) and Smith (2004). On imaginations of the occult in Africa, see Comaroff and Comaroff (1999), Geschiere (1997) and Moore and Sanders (2001).

presence of, and people's tragic encounters with, bloodthirsty spirits and other "sinister forces" (ibid.: 841). Certain accident-ridden road sections have earned a reputation as particularly dangerous places harbouring "frightening road spirits" (ibid.: 844). According to Masquelier, the residents' (as well as the travellers') fears are to be seen "as an important dimension of the imaginative practices through which people read the landscape, invest it with moral significance, and assess their personal vulnerability" (ibid.: 845).

The occult and destructive road is not restricted to a matter of creative imageries and narratives. It encourages some road users in Ghana and elsewhere to employ certain preventive and protective measures to ensure their safety on the road. These measures will be discussed in detail in a later section (see Chapter 7, p. 174). Roadside residents equally engage in concrete actions, such as the performance of rituals at accident spots in places like Asuboi, to 'drive away' the ghosts of accident victims. Residents in Potroase recall that the late king Kuntunkununku II was once involved in a cleansing ritual at the Potroase bend as well. His successor, the current Okyenhene, is alleged by some to have been in favour of a rather secular measure, namely the building of the new bypass. Such a measure not merely avoids continuous accidents, but more importantly makes it less likely that – as an educated 'modern' traditional ruler – he would get himself involved in such ritual matters.⁴⁰

The only occasion of ritual road cleansing that I had the chance to witness during my fieldwork was the roadblock incident in Ofankor that I used in order to set the scene for the introduction of this thesis. As I noted earlier, the impressive ritual performed by the chiefs of Ofankor and their staff was believed by onlookers to respond to the high number of recent accidents on the southern section of the AKR and in Ofankor. This was confirmed by the main chief of Ofankor the following day. The chief, a very outspoken man in his late 60s, explained to me how he and his people had got involved in the ritual roadblock. It was *Olila*, a deity residing on the Ofankor road and in charge of its safety, who had initiated the ritual. She had informed her caretakers (*akomfoɔ*, 'fetish priests') through an oracle that sacrifices were urgently needed to exorcise the 'souls' of accident victims. The underlying reasoning, explored more systematically in Chapter 3 (p. 85), was that *Olila* had not been paid adequate ritual attention by the 'traditionalists' before reconstruction works had commenced on the Ofankor road section a few years earlier. Allegedly, due to the deity's grief, the

⁴⁰ The logic behind this argument is that the king is known to actively avoid involvement in such 'traditional' practices (customs, *ammamere*) in public. I discuss the Okyenhene's politics of negotiating his 'traditional' duties elsewhere (Klaeger 2007b).

souls were now lingering on the roadside and constituted a source of danger for travellers and roadside dwellers. Thus ritual compensation in the form of sacrificial blood had become necessary.⁴¹

Conclusion

At the centre of this chapter were stories and rumours surrounding a new road section recently constructed on the Accra-Kumasi road, and the various actors allegedly caught up in the construction process. These narratives provide insights into the ways in which the road is perceived as embedded in – at times channelling, even provoking – issues of power, progress and perils. I have shown how these issues have been and continue to be of immediate concern for the roadside community of Kyebi, its residents and politicians. For them, the road is clearly a two-directional phenomenon, leading both forward and backward. What is reflected in people's concern is a sense of modernity, but also one of uncertainty, instability and threat. The latter is nurtured by their tangible experiences of repeatedly losing control over 'their' road; of being sidelined from progress, national development and, most visibly, the main through traffic, which now fosters the town's dullness; and of being confronted with death and destruction. Here the provenance and locations of threats are varied, as is the case with the centres of power and politics that are located both in Kumasi and Accra, and with passing vehicles in contrast to stationary malicious forces. The threats are intrinsically connected with the AKR – whether it worked as a contested trade route that served as a path of authority, or emerges as a feared death trap in which travellers, sometimes residents as well, get killed.

Yet there remain further threats for this roadside community, namely those that come by the road and leave on it again, after having perpetrated what Kyebi's residents fear, and vividly debate, perhaps more than the above. It is the coming and going of criminals, mostly at night, such as the thieves who stole goats from a compound near the main road with their pickup truck in which they 'ran away' again; or the armed robbers who broke into a household in town in search of valuables and who shot and killed the landlord before escaping via the road by which they had allegedly come. Clearly, for Kyebi's residents, the experience of the road has been often, and recurrently, a negative and sobering one. Yet it is also worth noting that this experience is accompanied by people's current engagement with the road as a

⁴¹ Somewhat similarly, Masquelier (2002: 841-42) has witnessed conversations in her field about "the merciless spirit who had killed [passengers] because, after the opening of a new marketplace [...], she had not received the traditional offering of sacrificial blood she expected in return for ensuring the market's prosperity" (see also Masquelier 1993).

place and path imbued with possibilities, promises and rewards, some of which are realised and fulfilled in a regular, even routine manner. It is to such everyday engagements, namely the spatial (Chapter 3) as well as commercial (Chapter 4) practices of roadside dwellers, that I turn in the next section. This allows conveying some of the AKR's liveliness that is marked by the various movements, rhythms and paces of people and vehicles and by the ensuing roadside encounters.

Part I

ROADSIDE DWELLING

Chapter 3

Routines, rituals and roadblocks: spatial practices of roadside dwellers

The Accra-Kumasi road (AKR) has often been experienced and travelled by the historian Richard Rathbone. Obviously impressed by the AKR, he describes at great length the road journey to the royal town of Kyebi where he did archival research for his book on chieftaincy in colonial Ghana (Rathbone 1993), almost two decades before I went there for my own research.¹ His descriptions could also apply to a journey I recently made to Akyem Abuakwa, the Akan kingdom that the AKR enters when crossing the River Densu at Nsawam, just north of Accra: “From Nsawam onwards you are in the rainforest [where] small towns are scattered along either side of the road’s length” (Rathbone 1993: 7). Rathbone observes women at the roadside who trade from small stalls, selling a range of goods, such as locally baked sweet bread (“which tastes rather like brioche”; *ibid.*), soft drinks, pineapples and oranges “to cater to the needs of the regular passenger and freight transport that trundles up and down this, probably the most frequently used interregional road in Ghana” (*ibid.*: 8). The traveller passes hunters who offer their surplus prey for sale at the roadside. As he continues through rural areas, Rathbone sees “large numbers of children in yellow and brown uniforms [...] walking considerable distances to and from their schools”, as well as “the most ancient inhabitants [sitting] patiently absorbed watching the road traffic” (*ibid.*). Then he describes how, at the town of Apedwa, the main road

dives sharply to the left and now begins to follow the lush valley of the River Birim. On either side of the road, the valley’s sides become steeper and steeper; [...] The road swings through the towns of Amanfrom, Potroase and Akwadum; and then the valley broadens out and the scenery becomes even more impressive as the hills to the east and west are now joined by the Nkawkaw range to the north. [...] To the right of the road, in the middle of the valley floor, the royal capital is sited. Few

¹ Rathbone stayed in Kyebi in the late 1980s for his research in the Akyem Abuakwa State Archives (AASA).

people in transit between the great cities of Accra and Kumasi would take much notice of it. From the road, Kyebi is no more than a small, dusty lorry park and a cluster of market stalls serving travellers. (Rathbone 1993: 8-9)

Not much seems to have changed with this road or, more precisely, with its roadside. It continues to accommodate a diverse array of human activities and practices, even if some of them have attenuated due to the new bypass. I was able to witness and actively take part in some of these whilst living in Kyebi and Suhum and during my travels which included (often involuntary) halts on this arterial road. The activities provided insights into the numerous ways in which residents living near the AKR make use of the road and of the roadside at their doorsteps through their everyday, routine practices, but also through exceptional and at times staged performances. In this chapter I shed light on these usages by examining some of the routines, performances and rituals of what I call roadside dwellers. This focus allows portraying the AKR and its vicinity, not unlike many other roads in Africa (and in fact beyond), as a ‘heterotopic space’. Edensor (2004: 110) employs this term to describe how places adjacent to roads accommodate “a host of dwellings, industries and activities” and thus emerge as “sites for social interaction and enterprise”. For motorists, such spaces constitute a source of service and entertainment, at times also of potential hazard, and thus “form part of the habitual motorscape” (ibid.).² For roadside dwellers, I argue that these spaces are appropriated through, but also give rise to diverse activities and tactical practices in the de Certeauian sense. They are frequently marked by people’s distinct engagements with the motorscape, its traffic, users and materiality. As I shall demonstrate, these tactical engagements provide roadside dwellers the spatial context and means for pedestrian locomotion, for convivial gatherings and entertainment, and for the dissemination of claims to power and statements of protest. The following observations thus omit the entrepreneurial activities of roadside traders and hawkers, which are dealt with in Chapter 4.

In this chapter, I reveal the ways in which roadside dwellers conceptualize and *spatialize* the road and its roadside through distinct movements, localized storytelling and narratives, and self-reflection – as well as through disruptive and vigilante actions. All these can be regarded as “certain ways of making” (de Certeau

² See also Pandya’s (2002: 801) use of the Foucauldian notion of ‘heterotopia’ to describe a road in the Jarwa reserve forest (Andaman Islands): a space in which “a distinct form of interaction takes place” (ibid.) since all the real sites “that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986: 24; cf. Parthasarathy 2013); see also Chapter 4 (p. 121).

1984: xv), as people's engagement in practices of the everyday that are "tactical in character". De Certeau (ibid.: xiv) further describes these as "ways of operating", constituting various practices that allow users to "reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production". In this sense, spatial practices are at the core of the dwellers' 'anthropological' experience of the road and its roadside, a space that is continuously domesticated, appropriated and, thus, implicated in the mundane and everyday. It will also become clear throughout this chapter that these practices – including the *roadside contacts* they generate – are closely intertwined with the liveliness, socialities and opportunities the road affords, but also with its dangers and potential for destruction and death (as alluded to in the introduction for the case of the Ofankor ritual). Thus, the "ambivalent nature of road experiences" (Masquelier 2002: 836), namely the experience of the road as a space of both perils and possibilities, is crucial to how the AKR's dwellers socially produce this space.

Routines at the roadside

It was my friend Elvis who made me into a (temporary) roadside dweller in Kyebi. During large parts of my fieldwork and previous shorter stays in Kyebi, he put me up in his small house located about twenty metres away from the edge of the *lɔrɛ kwan* (literally 'lorry road'), on the northern outskirts of Kyebi.³ At that time, Elvis was also accommodating two of his 'brothers', Wayo and Shiboni.⁴ Whereas Elvis usually left the house early in the morning to work on little carpentry jobs around town, the others did not have any proper jobs. They were in charge of most chores that came up in the 'boys' quarters', as our all-male and all-bachelor household was often called by friends and girlfriends. They did all the cooking and washing, usually on the porch or under the orange and acacia trees, and made sure that the house and the surrounding land, especially the wide pathway to the road, were always kept tidy.

Initially, the nights in Elvis' house were not very peaceful. When the main traffic still passed through Kyebi, before the new bypass was built, our sleep would be disrupted regularly by the noise of heavy vehicles, mostly articulated trucks or buses rumbling over the deteriorated patches of asphalt. I wasn't the only one complaining about the

³ The house was built in the late 1990s by Elvis' father who has been residing and working in Accra for many years; occasionally he returns to Kyebi, his hometown, to attend weddings, funerals and other events.

⁴ Elvis was in his early thirties, his 'brothers' in their mid-twenties. They were matrilineal cousins and referred to as 'brothers' in accordance with Akan kinship classification (see Basehart 1961; Fortes 1950; Oppong 1974).

road's disturbing soundscape⁵; Elvis and the others admitted that when they were startled by noise, they often feared that a vehicle might leave the road – perhaps when trying to dodge a pothole in the dark – and plunge down the light scarp, finally crashing into their house. They recalled that many dwellers on the AKR had been killed in this way, while sleeping innocently in their beds. After the opening of the bypass, things changed significantly. Now the nights were calm, and residents slept more peacefully in their houses close to the road, and felt at ease when sitting, standing, waiting, watching or walking by the roadside (Figure 4). People in Elvis' neighbourhood now allowed their children to walk on the road, whereas they had been told to go via Kyebi's residential quarters when walking to school.



Figure 4: The 'old' Accra-Kumasi road traversing Kyebi

Walking alongside the road

Many people in Kyebi use the through road principally for walking, as a line connecting one place to another.⁶ For instance, children pass Elvis' house every morning, heading to their schools on the other side of town, and return on the same road in the early afternoon. Others walking on it are mobile vendors selling to pedestrians, or at people's porches. I know of many farmers who cultivate their lands

⁵ See Porath (2002: 786) on how the soundscape of an area is transformed by a road.

⁶ Ingold (2007: 72-103) provides an analysis of lines created by walking. For the tactics of 'walking in the city', see de Certeau (1984: 91-110).

in the forests, quite a long walk from their home in town.⁷ For them, the road constitutes the first (and, on returning, the last) and easiest section of their long march. With rubber boots and machetes and sometimes accompanied by dogs, they leave their houses early in the morning, often before dawn, and follow the main road until they have left the last settlements behind. Then they continue on the narrow footpaths worn into the green road shoulder, paths that demonstrate, in Ingold's (1993: 167) words, "the accumulated imprint of the countless journeys made as people go about their everyday business". Eventually, they branch off onto a bush trail, often barely perceptible from the main road, and head for their farmlands.

Ordinary pedestrians use the road in order to go to specific places – to work, to shop in town, or to visit a friend's house – and to transport all kinds of items. Unlike in other parts of the country, people are less keen on using bicycles or motorcycles and prefer to use their feet and carry things on their heads.⁸ People are also on the road in order to 'pick a car', as Ghanaians put it – to find a means of transport. As I will show in more detail in Chapter 8 (p. 187), they either walk to a specific spot, most often a junction or a wider road section where they try to hail a passing taxi or *trotro* minibus; or they walk straight to the bus station where they might find a more convenient mode of transport. In both cases, the physical act of walking on the road denotes the beginning (or ending) of a journey and thereby becomes part of the complex issue of human locomotion and transport. The body moving alongside the pavement is often engaged in a greater activity or event that becomes perceptible through the very way pedestrians carry themselves and through their 'ways of walking' (Ingold and Vergunst 2008).⁹ Such is the case too with groups of people walking to churches, mosques, weddings or funerals. Every Sunday morning, for instance, individuals or groups of people walk past Elvis' house leaving roadside observers in no doubt where they are going.¹⁰ Dressed impeccably, perhaps with their children in tow, or carrying a bible or hymnbook, they stride in a resolute, purposeful manner towards the church. After the service, they appear more relaxed, strolling and chatting on their way back home.

⁷ Many of the farmers in and around Kyebi are Ewe and Krobo settlers.

⁸ On walking in off-road villages, and the financial and cultural constraints of bicycle use in southern Ghana, see Porter (2002).

⁹ For phenomenological approaches to walking, see Ingold (2004, 2005, 2010) and Lee and Ingold (2006).

¹⁰ Elvis hardly ever hangs out by the roadside on Sunday morning, since he usually attends a church service, in contrast to his cousins who hardly ever attend church, although they clearly consider themselves as Christians.

Walking in the road is convenient and efficient and stands even more clearly for a tactic of the everyday, as a way of operating, when it involves practical considerations. For instance, when Elvis and his brothers walk to Kyebi's town centre, they either take the small bush pathways behind their house, or they walk on the main road. Depending where they are going, the former may be the shorter route. Yet they usually prefer the road: it is more comfortable to walk on as it allows less obstructed movement, especially when the backyard shortcuts become muddy and slippery from the rains, or have not been weeded. The road becomes particularly attractive in darkness, since it is more populated and better illuminated, at least in some sections. Still, they often take along a torchlight so as to avoid stepping into potholes and puddles, or stumbling over cracked road kerbs – and, most importantly, to be more easily spotted by drivers. Obviously cars are the greatest hazard when walking to town on the road, at any hour. They blind pedestrians with their 'high lights' (a local expression for high beam lights), which people find disturbing, and they become dangerous where gravelled or grassy soft shoulders are absent, thus compelling pedestrians to walk on the asphalt.

When human and vehicular road users compete for the same space, pedestrians intuitively arrange to walk in a single file, but when they see that vehicles are approaching dangerously – dodging potholes, overspeeding and overtaking others, or even just blowing their horn – they often have no choice but to jump to the roadside. Such moves thus become part of the dwellers' corporeal roadside experience and are regularly followed by emotive – angry, astonished or jovial – reactions. These reactions stem from the close entanglement of movements with emotion that I explore in more detail in the next chapter dealing with roadside traders (particularly p. 120).

Today, the threat of passing vehicles is less of an issue in Kyebi on the 'old road'. Residents perceive the road as less risky because of the smaller number of vehicles and because the predominantly local drivers are more familiar with the road's layout, more aware of human activities and are, supposedly, more vigilant towards pedestrians.¹¹ Yet the new sense of relative safety may backfire, as it makes people less vigilant about passing vehicles: pedestrians indeed behave in an increasingly careless manner. When driving myself, I frequently saw residents from 'old road' settlements around Kyebi either walk halfway into the traffic lane, hardly bothering to step aside when vehicles approach, or even walk right across the road without

¹¹ The knowledge and experience of local drivers and their impact on road safety are regularly emphasised by commercial bus drivers as well (see Chapter 7, p. 170).

looking. My driver informants confirmed my observations. They perceive the roadside settlements as particularly hazardous and are extra cautious at night, making excessive use of their horn and headlights when passing. Elvis once told me that “these villagers” were now so used to having the calm road to themselves that it would not surprise him if some even *slept* on it.

The roadside dwellers’ carefree behaviour is not only a result of decreased traffic and their trust in local drivers. I would argue that it also stems from their experience of ‘their’ road as an intimate place. It emerges as such precisely because it becomes an intrinsic part of their routine corporeality of walking and strolling, yet also as result of their hanging out there with others. This forms a further distinct (though related) social, sociable and spatial practice of roadside dwelling.

Hanging out by the roadside

“*Megya wo kwan*. Let me see you off”, Elvis normally tells his visitors when they are about to depart.¹² He then escorts them from his house to the main road and walks with them for a little while, maybe to the next junction or to the bus station. This task might also be delegated to one of his brothers, especially when it is mainly a matter of helping the visitors ‘pick’ a car. Seeing visitors off is one of the rituals of the highly praised ‘Ghanaian hospitality’ (see Chapter 8, p. 194). My friends also agreed that this is not just an obligatory gesture, part of etiquette, but quite often a welcomed occasion to enjoy the company of certain visitors for a bit longer and to continue conversing while strolling down the road.

These roadside walks seem particularly suitable for discussing matters not intended to reach the ears of the many present in the house or in the courtyard. The conversations – the gossip, secrets and laughter they involve – at times become so intense that the strollers slow down, even stop. Walks may also be interrupted countless times, for example, when people encounter other familiar faces, exchange greetings, or answer (at times reluctantly) the questions of those who are curious to find out where they are going. In communities like Kyebi, where social networks are closely knit and controlled, moving in public spaces unavoidably involves encounters, communication and scrutiny, and thus defies most attempts at privacy.

¹² ‘*Megya wo kwan*’ literally means ‘I will accompany you on your way’.

The roadside is also appropriated through socializing while sitting and standing in its vicinity.¹³ The young men who hosted me in Kyebi do that every day. In the early morning, they regularly hang out in front of the house, under the ficus tree near the road, and chat among themselves, sometimes eating the day's first meal, or simply waiting for time to pass. They also socialise with passers-by. There is, for instance, the joking relationship that Elvis maintains with Yaw Broni who regularly passes in front of the house. He is a distant neighbour and known by all to have a weakness for the locally brewed *akpeteshie* gin, and also for women. In the morning, Yaw Broni can often be seen staggering down the road, heading towards the nearby 'drinking spot' (local bar) in order to take his first few tots, though, of course, he would never admit this is the purpose of his stroll. When he approaches, Elvis always challenges him about his ambiguous morning walk, questions him teasingly about his partner the night before, and calls him suggestive names. In return, Yaw Broni demands money from Elvis for having been 'insulted' in public – money that would obviously be spent on *akpeteshie*, as Elvis argues back. So the two end up in an affected quarrel that amuses all those who are present at the roadside hangout.

Late afternoon is often the time for a similarly sociable roadside ritual. Shortly before sunset, the young men and their neighbour friends bring a wooden bench closer to the roadside, sit down and often share some food, just behind one of the huge royal palm trees that line the road. A frequent guest is Osmane, a young trader from Niger who stops there on his way home to the Muslim *Zongo* quarters at the outskirts of town. Osmane always has interesting goods in his bags, such as DVDs of African movies, or shoes and jeans imported from Togo. The guys like to look through his goods, assess their quality and, eventually, try to strike a good bargain. They occasionally tease Osmane about his foreign accent and call him jokingly 'cattle boy', knowing that the bride price in his home country is paid with cows.

These situations turn the roadside into a venue for relaxation and joviality; others bring out arguments and even fights. The roadside often invites people to express anger and other emotions. The roadside thus appears as a very lively and public place, with a distinctive appeal to its dwellers; it facilitates not only kinetic activities and locomotion, but also various forms of interaction and sociability.¹⁴ The roadside is, and probably always has been highly attractive in particular to dwellers in smaller

¹³ On the production of street meeting places ('bases') by young men in Accra, see Langevang (2008).

¹⁴ Similarly, Weiss (2004: 118) describes the streets in Arusha that constitute the lifeworld of many young people as places in which "the gathering together of people simultaneously constitutes the social relations *in* and *as* the locale they inhabit".

communities along the AKR, given the lack of communal places and other focal points for gathering. What further draws them to the roadside is the fact that the road provides a source of, and space for, entertainment in the dwellers' everyday.

Entertaining tarmac

One late afternoon, I returned home after a day at the bus station and met Elvis in front of his house, sweating and with a shovel in his hand. He was taking fresh soil from the roadside to fill a nearby pothole that we had seen growing considerably with the recent heavy rainfalls. I assumed that Elvis was sealing the pothole for the sake of passing vehicles whose tyres and chassis it might damage. What I learned, instead, was that he was fixing the pothole rather for his own protection: "What if a driver hits that pothole and gets a blast tyre?" he said. "If he can't control the car, maybe it will run to our side, and it will hit us where we sit." Very obviously, Elvis does not want to get killed in front of his house, where he and his friends like sitting in order to get some fresh air (*gye mframa*). I regularly joined them there to take advantage of the roadside as "a venue for conversation, a place to wait, to watch, to talk" (Weiss 2005: 109) or, as they say, to watch the road (*hwε kwan*) and to chat (*bɔ nkɔmmɔ*) and gossip (*di nseku*).

Watching the road

As we sat around with some friends, one late evening, sharing a few bottles of beer and enjoying the fresh breeze from the nearby forest, Wayo suddenly paused and looked intently into the pitch-dark. "*Hwε!* Look at that!" he said and drew our attention to two people he had spotted on the other side of the road. All were amazed: The couple we could see disappearing into the night were Banga, one of Elvis' work colleagues, with a young girl who had moved to our neighbourhood only a few months earlier. Banga must have met up with the girl at some place for 'romancing' and now had to escort her back home, the guys whispered. "I'm going to tell his wife", Wayo said jokingly, and they went on gossiping about him and other men in town who were known to go after 'small girls'.

I have learned a great deal about Kyebi, its people, their relationships and daily concerns from watching the road and its activities and, most crucially, from listening to commentaries from the interested onlookers by my side. They check on the girls, laugh about drunkards, comment on the attire of churchgoers, or ask themselves where those waiting for a bus intend to travel. They also comment critically on who walks with whom; they disclose who is friendly, who is a stranger, who is to be pitied,

and whom you can (or cannot) trust. The roadside gives rise to gossip, perpetuating and often embellishing rumours, both to inform and entertain. More precisely, it is the movements of passerby that the onlookers get to ‘read’ and that feed into their narrative practices, where gossiping is turned into a form of storytelling.

These instances of gossip are not just triggered by passers-by to whom onlookers often relate personally, but also by those who appear more ephemerally on the asphalted scene, namely people passing in vehicles. “People are inquisitive! Always we want to know who is driving and who else is sitting inside the car”, one of my friends explained. Certainly, the vehicular traffic traversing Kyebi is now less informative and entertaining than it was in previous years, a fact that contributes to the town’s bemoaned dullness that I described in the previous chapter. Now, maybe more than ever before, roadside dwellers scrutinize the few passing vehicles and travellers very closely, routinely turn around to watch them and follow them with their gaze. When they spot familiar faces, they usually greet them; they wave and shout and sometimes ask where the travellers are going, getting a response in the form of hooting or other expressive gestures (Figure 5).¹⁵



Figure 5: Watching the road and traffic

¹⁵ Such communicative interactions are often initiated by passers-by who spot someone familiar on the edge of the road. Onlookers also greet pedestrians who walk by; farmers, for instance, on their way back home with heavy foodstuffs on their head are usually hailed with ‘*Ayekoo!*’ (‘good job’) to which they reply ‘*Ya-ee*’.

Road observers, in particular males, are eager not only to spot travellers, maybe even someone 'big', but also to identify their vehicles. These are scrutinized in terms of makes, models, design, condition and roadworthiness. While old and dilapidated cars (as well as their owners) are not spared mockery and laughter, cars that are considered as 'nice' become a matter of discussion, even of admiration. "One day if I get money I will buy one like this", the young men often dream out loud. A typical eyecatcher might be a new (or seemingly new) VW Golf with chromed wheel caps and tinted windows.¹⁶ Particularly admired is the Chrysler C300, a sport and luxury type sedan, now very popular among Ghana's nouveaux riches. One day, a Chrysler passed and triggered a lengthy debate about 'nice' cars on the country's rugged roads. One of Elvis' friends, a barber by profession, went so far as to find the phone number of a well-known car dealer in Accra and called him up. "Good afternoon", he said in his best English, "please, the Chrysler C300, how much is the price for the brand-new one?" The staggering amount of several hundred million Ghanaian *cedis* left everybody amazed. Who could afford such a vehicle, they asked themselves, and what must one do to get all that money?¹⁷

One admired Chrysler that comes to Kyebi by the AKR on a regular basis (not many others get lost on the 'old road' these days) belongs to a famous lawyer who is based in Accra but also serves as one of the town's chiefs. He was counsel for an alleged drug baron on trial in a major court case at the time of my fieldwork. This explains why some of the critical observers call his Chrysler the 'cocaine car'.¹⁸ Yet big and new cars are not associated exclusively with the illicit accumulation of wealth among drug dealers, armed robbers and some politicians. They are also markers for the country's social, economic and political elites. I listened to countless debates about how their owners must have 'done well' in life, were successful in the city or, even more impressively, travelled overseas (*aburokyire*) or are still living 'outside', meaning in Europe or North America.¹⁹ My friends' and many other road observers' regular pastime and source of entertainment is thus their assessment of travellers in

¹⁶ Tinted windows are particularly popular among young Ghanaians as they provide a degree of privacy whilst driving through familiar terrain, preventing onlookers from seeing (and gossiping about) who else is sitting in the car.

¹⁷ See Archambault (2012) on young Mozambicans' attraction towards, and dreams about, big cars and mobility.

¹⁸ Most often associated with drug trafficking are big SUVs like the American Hummer which greatly enthused my hosts and the drivers I worked with – though many said they would not want to have a Hummer, even if they could, precisely because of its dubious reputation.

¹⁹ On how the 'outside' and thus also migration is associated by young Ghanaians with success and achievement, see Burrell and Anderson (2008), Fumanti (2013), Langevang (2008) and Slater and Kwami (2005).

terms of social status, but also their debates about vehicles as signs of prosperity and success (see also Chapter 8, p. 190). As Chalfin (2008: 428) observes, “Ghanaians notice cars and make much of the possibilities and distinctions they represent”; they function as a commodity of modernity and status markers whilst distinctively embodying an ‘elsewhere’.²⁰ Yet my friends’ narratives about modern consumption, as well as the imaginaries of admired wealth and lifestyles that diverge from their own, are also ways of questioning their own social and material condition. The dreams and desires triggered by passing cars, such as aspirations to ‘travel outside’ one day, are commentaries about their identity and everyday life as young men facing various uncertainties. These commentaries form what Archambault (2012: 393) describes as the articulation of “everyday frustrations in the idiom of mobility”.

The juncture of the local and personal with the distant and often unreachable also emerges when roadside dwellers watch travellers and vehicles that carry with them indications of remote events. In the pre-bypass era, for instance, numerous vehicles filled with passengers wearing black cloth could often be seen rushing through Kyebi on Saturday morning. Many cars meant big funerals, mostly in the Ashanti region or in the Kwahu mountains, where funerals are known to turn into important community events attended by large numbers of people, many of them coming in from the capital.²¹ Football team supporters equally left their traces on the then busy road when they were seen rushing to important matches. Elvis commented particularly on the posh cars of some of the *Asante Kotoko* supporters and on their ‘mad’, yet also impressive overspeeding. When Ghana’s President, or government ministers, passed in front of the house in a state convoy, the onlookers often knew about their trips long before it was announced on national television. In other cases, when an event of national interest had already been announced, they were able to conclude who exactly was escorted in the convoy, and where the person was heading.

Another trigger for the imaginations and narrations of roadside dwellers who observe traffic are other and often distant places. For instance, a speedy presidential convoy or a fleet of posh vehicles hints at politics, power and prosperity in the country’s urban centres. In a similar manner, very slow, overloaded trucks reveal something about their place of origin or destination. Trucks carrying tubers of yam, boxes of

²⁰ See also Roitman and Mbembe (1995: 330) on the automobile, class affiliation and “the attraction to, and fascination with, the most luxurious and expensive models”, and Morris (2010) on the lure of the (American) automobile.

²¹ Due to regulations, funerals in the Kwahu region can only be celebrated on specific dates, at intervals of two or four weeks, which results in high traffic volume on the AKR on particular weekends. For funeral celebrations in Kwahu, see van der Geest (2000, 2006); for Asante, see de Witte (2001, 2003).

tomatoes, or heavy container loads of live cattle evoke the conditions of work, climate and vegetation in northern Ghana, Burkina Faso and Mali, but also the markets and trading in Accra where some of the goods are being taken to.

The fleeting presence of road users, both familiar faces and strangers, right on the doorstep of roadside dwellers thus shapes their conversations, imaginaries and storytelling. Their presence and movements, apart from being informative and entertaining, provide onlookers with an opportunity to undertake an “imagined journey (Fumanti 2013: 134), to “travel while sitting down” (Archambault 2012; cf. Langevang and Gough 2009: 752). They create a certain sense of participating in, and integrating into, the world beyond their own. To the stationary onlookers, engaging with travellers, events and places means connecting transregionally, nationally and even internationally – at the same time as it allows them to occupy and (re)position themselves in the local and familiar.²² In this sense, the visual and narrative engagements form part of the dwellers’ spatial practices. I thus agree with Porath (2002: 770) that “[f]or roadside-dwelling people, the road is a major part of their landscape, spatial-temporal experiences, geographical positioning, and sense of direction. In short, it has become part of their way of life”. The road not only connects places, it also has “the capacity to occupy a place in the world-view and history of any social group” (Pandya 2002: 801).

Having fun: mobilizing the local youths

One aspect of the AKR dwellers’ ‘roadside lifestyle’ (Pandya 2002: 811) is their everyday engagement with what happens, and what passes, on ‘their’ road – and beyond – through the mundane practices I have just described. A not so regular, more deliberate form of making use of the road consists in ludic community-centred activities, some of which I briefly describe here. In Kyebi, most of them are in the hands of the local youths. One example is the young shoemakers from the *COME BACK STREET* spot close to the bus station, whom I have mentioned in Chapter 2 (p. 60). In 2007, they periodically revived the now ‘old’ through road, attempting to counter its relative post-bypass dullness, a source of economic concern for them and other roadside entrepreneurs who used to do business with passing travellers. On major holidays, as well as for the traditional *Ohum* festival, the shoemakers organised big parties in front of their stall. During my stay in Kyebi, Appiah invited

²² For the young men, hanging out by the roadside is thus a way of not doing much and of waiting, both for entertainment and for better times to come – a way of passing time which is far from being entirely purposeless (cf. Jeffrey 2010; Langevang 2008: 232).

me to their 'street jam' that was to take place on the evening of Boxing Day, and he promised that there would be good music, dancing and boozing. When I went to their spot, shortly after sunset, a huge sound system erected on the pavement was already roaring. A hired DJ played the latest *Highlife* and *Hiplife* tunes, and a lively crowd of teenagers and young adults was dancing in the middle of the road. They parted only for the most insistent passing cars, horns at full blast.

Whereas the shoemakers had been using the painted slogan to point to the frustrations that the 'new road' had brought to Kyebi, they were now taking advantage of the old road's altered condition in a creative and entertaining way. In the past, partying on the tarmac would have been unthinkable. Today, the bypass works for Kyebi as a sort of traffic-calming measure, yet it works ambivalently too, since it also prevents vehicles from coming to town. This ambivalence towards the new calm is hinted at through the street jams. From the shoemakers' perspective, the ability to use and, to some extent, revive the once busy road is not just about entertainment, but also articulates a measure of protest.

Many of the orchestrated (as opposed to spontaneous) road and street events in Kyebi are driven by a particular, even if only implicit agenda. For instance, I learned that, in late 2007, the *COME BACK STREET* boys had organised another street jam, this time with a dancing competition. Meant to honour the local MP and former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nana Akufo-Addo, who had just become the NPP's flag bearer for the impending presidential elections, the event was sponsored by a supporters' association backing his candidacy. Similar local youth activities are the so-called 'keep fit exercises': a combination of jogging exercise and political rally, organised by local politicians standing for re-election or by their supporter 'clubs'. The sporty youths, often more than a hundred in number, meet on a Sunday somewhere in town before sunrise. They jog through the side streets first, then up and down the main road. Equipped with all kinds of noisy instruments, and singing and clapping all the way, they make themselves piercingly audible, abruptly ending the sleep of less-sporty roadside dwellers, including myself. At the end of their exhausting circuit, they are rewarded with food and drink provided by the keep-fit club's sponsor, whose personal and political agenda was publicized during this dubiously entertaining event in the town's most extended public spaces, namely its through road and surrounding streets.

Roadblock performances

Having shown roadside dwellers to be predominantly concerned with movements on the AKR and with vehicular flows, either constituting or giving rise to distinct everyday practices, I now turn to the ways in which dwellers occasionally disturb – and successfully block – vehicular flows on their road. Such incidents reveal how the road, its space, and even its motorized users become appropriated by dwellers. The previously explored practices can in part be perceived as “the microbe-like operations proliferating within technocratic structures and deflecting their functioning by means of a multitude of ‘tactics’ articulated in the details of everyday life” (de Certeau 1984: xiv). However, setting up roadblocks – thus halting traffic – represents more than a minor operation and tactic, merging in the flow of the road’s everyday life. Rather, it appears as an intervention whose purpose is crucially, if temporarily, to deflect the road’s routine functioning.

Rituals for Olila: manifesting power and authority

One of the two spectacular roadblock incidents that I witnessed during fieldwork was the large-scale sacrificial ritual that was performed by the chiefs of Ofankor (see Chapters 1, p. 12, and 2, p. 67). The ritual was driven by a complex agenda that had taken the protagonists to the streets, quite literally, and that had motivated them to take advantage of the road as public space.

I noted earlier that the ritual had become necessary, according to the chiefs, since the local road deity *Olila* had not been paid adequate ritual attention prior to the reconstruction works at Ofankor. As I was told, only sacrificial blood could appease *Olila* and thus prevent further accidents on the newly reconstructed road (Figure 6). However, the more I enquired, the more I understood that the cleansing ritual, performed in the midst of a busy road on a Saturday afternoon, was not only driven by concerns for a safer road. What first became clear was that the chiefs had an agenda that arose in the delicate context of institutional pluralism.²³ Various state institutions and agencies, such as the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA), the Ghana Highway Authority (GHA) and several ministries, are in charge of the Ofankor road in legal and engineering terms. At the same time, the main chief of Ofankor, as the ‘traditional’ custodian of the land, also has authority over the road passing through his territory. At this particular occasion, the chief claimed that the other

²³ See Ray (1996) and van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal (1999) on the relationship between traditional authorities and state institutions.

stakeholders had not solicited him and his elders at the palace when plans were made to reconstruct ‘their’ road and that this had aggrieved both *Olila* and the ‘traditionalists’. Thus, for the local leaders, the ritual performance meant more than just fulfilling ritual obligations and preventing further deaths. It also meant taking a clear stand and showing presence in a contest between multiple stakeholders. Their agenda for claiming institutional recognition was also revealed when they asked the regional minister and the local District Chief Executive (DCE) for financial support towards the costly cleansing ritual. According to the chief, none of those approached was willing to assist.²⁴



Figure 6: Cleansing ritual for *Olila*, the Ofankor road deity

Later, I came to understand that there was another dimension to the staging of the ritual – one that makes it even clearer why the ‘traditionalists’ tried to stand their ground. It turned out that a group of charismatic Christians had shown equal concern for the road’s safety, thereby constituting a further challenge to the

²⁴ A similar situation arose a few months after the road ritual, when road construction works commenced on a previously untouched piece of land in Ofankor. Since the necessary ritual precautions had, once again, not been taken, the Chinese workers found themselves unable to cut down an allegedly sacred tree (referred to as the ‘Ofankor witch tree’ in the media) with their chainsaws. At each attempt, the heavy machines were destroyed. Only a pacification ritual enabled the Chinese workers and the highway authority to make progress with the construction works.

‘traditionalists’. Roadside hawkers whom I met after the ritual told me that members of the *Mount Zion Action and Power Ministry* in Ofankor had reported to the chief’s palace prior to the ritual, in order to discuss the alarming accident cases. A church delegation had also been sent to the roadside, where they prayed against the ‘powers’ assumed to be behind the accidents. This was confirmed by one of the church pastors. He emphasized that his church did not believe in gods or spirits, as the ‘traditionalists’ did, but in demons and other evil forces. Thus it had been necessary to take appropriate measures. These were later claimed to have been successful, since no more accidents occurred afterwards.

For the chief and his people, the Christian prayer session was a clear provocation to their institution, their religious beliefs and practices. It had led to a ritual-religious competition that was reminiscent of the conflicts surrounding the *Homowo* festival in Accra in past years. During the *Homowo* celebration, which involves a ban imposed by ‘traditionalists’ on noise-making (including at church services), Christian groups and chieftaincy followers had come to blows, which were at times considerably violent. Both groups were competing to capture the capital’s public arenas, asserting their respective beliefs, dogmatic stances and practices (van Dijk 2001).²⁵ Now, by performing the road ritual for *Olila*, the Ofankor chiefs and their people fell back on the same conflictual pattern: they made use of the road as a platform for openly displaying the beliefs and practices that are central to – and partially legitimise – the institution of chiefship. In doing so, they demonstrated their presence as ritually capable actors in a multi-religious urban environment. They also exploited the ritual demanded by *Olila* in order to assert their authority *vis-à-vis* those institutions that had sought to challenge and undermine it.

The chiefs’ agenda – securing great public presence and institutional recognition – ultimately explains why they had not only chosen the road as a venue for their performance, but also the particular timing, namely a busy Saturday afternoon. Could the ‘traditionalists’ not have performed the ritual on a traffic-free Sunday, instead of blocking the AKR at a time when, everybody knew, traffic was particularly dense? A roadblock leading to a serious traffic jam – which is what the public ritual created, to the annoyance of some travellers – was simply more effective: it turned the road into a stage, and the stuck travellers (like myself and fellow passengers) into an involuntary audience for the staged performance of power. I would even argue

²⁵ In my own work (Klaeger 2007a, 2007b), I have dealt with a similar conflict between the palace and the Presbyterian church at the occasion of the *Ohum* festival in Kyebi. The never unambiguous juxtaposition of chieftaincy (and ‘traditional’ religion) and Christianity has been explored by Asante (2006), Gilbert (1995) and Meyer (1998a).

that the temporarily blocked traffic, with its capacity to move on again after the performance ended, was itself part of this public performance. What the travellers witnessed was going to travel down the road with them, possibly be passed on and, thus, become even more public.

The roadblock thus involves the creative appropriation of the everyday of the road. More precisely, it involves the deliberate tactic of disrupting the flow of vehicular traffic. Indeed, all roadblocks are ways of manipulating the intrinsic stop-and-go rhythm of roads – the movement, arrest and eventually restored flow of vehicles (Lefebvre 2004) – by enforcing a radical suspension. Such stoppages are often ways of controlling access, of forcing travellers to get down and show their papers or to pay bribes, or of making them wait in order to exercise power (and, again, to extort money; see Beek 2011 and Lamont 2013: 379 on ‘roadside corruption’). In Ofankor, however, the halted travellers were made to witness the display of power and authority before continuing their journey and spreading the roadblockers’ concerns beyond the limits of the asphalt. Hence, roadblocks may be seen as a means of communication: provoking a particular kind of ‘ritual of roadside contact’ (Pandya 2002: 811) that confronts road travellers with roadside dwellers, and that displays and disseminates a particular stance.

The ‘Suhum riots’: disturbing traffic, disseminating concerns

The agenda of confrontation, display and dissemination was made particularly explicit during an incident that took place in January 2007, only a few weeks after the Ofankor ritual. By this date, I had relocated from Kyebi to the commercial town of Suhum, a major junction further south on the AKR. “They are killing people in Suhum!” my friends had warned me before my move. What they meant was that, for some time, a series of mysterious murder cases in and around Suhum had been fuelling fear and anger among the town’s residents. Four people had been found dead over the past two months, attacked and killed with machetes in the night. Since all the bodies had allegedly been mutilated – their private parts cut off – rumour had it that ‘ritual killers’ were haunting the residents. They claimed that the body parts were taken for *juju* (black magic) practices to obtaining ‘fast wealth’ and power (cf. Meyer 1998c; Smith 2001). It was suspected that the killers were either operating from within the town or, more likely, coming and going by the various roads that merge in the town. In order to appease the fearful residents and intensify criminal investigations, additional police personnel were deployed in Suhum. By the time I moved there, however, not a single suspect had been arrested. People felt it was

rather ironic that the local District Chief Executive (DCE) had stated on an FM station that the residents should not worry, and that it was all under control.

One morning, another body was found, only metres away from the AKR (and only a few hundred meters away from where I was standing that morning). A dead man was found lying facedown in an overgrown ditch. Within moments, hundreds of sensation seekers rushed to the site to get a glimpse of the partially decomposed body. People reacted with uproar: “They are killing us!” some shouted angrily and called on the police to do their job properly. Others called on the DCE to come and see “with his naked eyes” what atrocities continued to be committed in their town. People labelled him a traitor and were determined to let the world know that Suhum had a very serious problem.



Figure 7: Suhum residents erecting roadblocks

“*Y’ani abere!* We are angry!” some of the residents shouted at drivers and passengers who were passing the place of the discovery. Young men tried to slow down the approaching vehicles by waving at them with their T-shirts and palm branches. At one point, a government convoy coming from Kumasi announced itself with sirens and dispatch riders. At this stage, people decided to take more direct action: “*Gyina ha!* Stop here!” they yelled, while others added: “Come and see this, and tell your government people about it.” In order to force the official (apparently a minister) to stop and get out of his car, people threw branches and used tyres on the

road, but the speedy convoy negotiated the obstacles and yelling crowd. More debris was then pulled onto the asphalt and set on fire. The same acts occurred at the major junctions and entrance points in town, from where thick pillars of smoke started rising. Now the AKR and its through traffic were completely blocked (Figure 7).

For some of the Suhum residents involved in this emotionally charged incident, the roadblock was a means of shutting off the access roads by which it was assumed the perpetrators were entering their town. The residents' assumption was partially fuelled by the heavy presence of the additional police personnel patrolling the main roads to stop and search vehicles at night and whose measures had obviously not been effective. Consequently, some residents demonstrated their intention to take their own protective measures, such as the group of young men who, equipped with metal rods and sticks, ran up and down the now vehicle-free AKR section chanting war songs. The youths attacked vehicles that tried to pass the burning barricades, without causing any damage – although stones were thrown at the riot police who had been rushed to Suhum, hitting their vehicles.²⁶

The roadblock was intended to turn the road travellers into involuntary eyewitnesses of the residents' fear and frustration as during the Ofankor ritual. People kept emphasising that they wanted passers-by to *see* their emotional state and what was going on in Suhum, referring to the incident as a 'demonstration' and not as the 'Suhum riot', a term applied by the media afterwards. The residents were keen to have their burning concerns not only displayed, but also disseminated. Some encouraged me to take more photographs of their demonstration: "Show this to your people", I was told, "so that they know what's happening to us here". They also hoped that the media, especially the FM stations that had already reported on the Suhum killings, would now broadcast their frustrations as expressed by the burning barricades.²⁷ Finally, they were hopeful that their concerns would be transported by the road, its traffic and travellers – ideally even by a passing minister who could then report to the government.

Underlying both roadblock incidents, however, was not only the agenda for display and dissemination, but also vigilante efforts to address the dangers, and actual deaths, that come by or linger on the road. In Ofankor, the 'traditionalists' had felt

²⁶ Using tear gas and rubber bullets, the police later managed to disperse the angry rioters, and hundreds of bystanders, and finally opened up the road to traffic again.

²⁷ Radio stations had already warned travellers not to travel to or make stops in Suhum during night time. The role of the media was hinted at by some of the younger residents who imitated a TV crew reporting 'live' about the roadblock, a comical scene that underlined the partially jovial and entertaining character of the whole incident.

obliged to take their own ritual measures to protect and restore safety on ‘their’ road section, given that the state authorities had failed to cooperate with the chieftaincy institution. In Suhum, it was the town youths who took safety measures, at least symbolically, in view of the deployed security forces’ inability to protect their community from further killings. With their spontaneous formation of a vigilante patrol, the youths provided an alternative to the police patrols and engaged in a practice that can be read as the ‘mobilization of power’ (Pratten 2008b: 66). Each group of actors thus provided their very own responses to the (at least partial) failure of state agencies, a circumstance that often contributes to the emergence and legitimation of vigilantes (Pratten 2008a: 8).

As in many such cases, the vigilante efforts on the AKR carried a strong performative dimension and entailed what Kirsch and Grätz (2010a: 3) discuss as a ‘choreography’ involving a stage (in the described cases: the road), protagonists (chiefs, residents) and a projected audience (passing travellers). The vigilante ‘spectacles’ considered here were either well-planned, as in the case of the Ofankor ritual, or spontaneous and volatile, as with the ‘Suhum riot’. Yet both groups had recourse to “long-standing symbolic repertoires” (ibid.). This is perhaps best seen in the use of the same red and black cloth that the Ofankor chiefs wear for funerals or when court cases are being settled (*di asem*). This type of cloth was also tied around the heads and wrists by young Suhum residents, just as mourners or marchers do to express anger (*y’ani abere*, ‘our eyes are red’).²⁸

The vigilante efforts of AKR dwellers described here differ nevertheless significantly from the often violent and long-established forms of vigilantism set up for the policing and protection of villages, neighbourhoods, streets or markets in many parts of Africa and beyond.²⁹ The ‘roadblock vigilantism’ I encountered on the AKR was nothing more than a short-lived and fleeting measure of roadside residents who performed a one-off cleansing ritual, or who gathered spontaneously merely to communicate their need for protection – instead of taking long-lasting actions, such as setting up night guards and neighbourhood patrols (see, for example, Fourchard 2008; Higazi 2008; Pratten 2008b). Also, the subversive and ‘violent’ aspect of their measures is limited to the disruption of traffic via the erection of roadblocks – which

²⁸ The practice of parading and patrolling (including chanting, roaring and threatening) is an expressive element not only on the blocked AKR, but also more commonly in funeral celebrations, political rallies and, of course, demonstrations.

²⁹ See Kirsch and Grätz (2010b) on vigilantism in several African countries, Pratten (2008) on Nigeria and Buur and Jensen (2004) on South Africa, while Pratten and Sen (2007) take a global perspective.

is just as temporary and ephemeral as the performance of ritualists and protesters. Soon after, the road reopens to normality, allowing its motorised users and roadside dwellers to pursue their daily activities, movements and manoeuvres, in spite of the impending dangers and threats.

Conclusion

I have demonstrated in this chapter how the dwellers' everyday uses and makings of the AKR's public space turns the roadside into what Weiss calls "a recognizable place" and "a medium of traffic and movement" (Weiss 2004; cf. Langevang 2008). At the core of this production of space are roadside contacts. They take place when the dwellers hang out and socialize among themselves, or when they briefly exchange words and signs with passing acquaintances. They also occur when the people watching the road are entertained by travellers, their vehicles and destinations, as well as by the status, power and lifestyle that they embody. These contacts often lead observers to imaginative explorations. Finally, there are the contacts provoked by roadblocks that take place between residents and halted travellers, the latter of which are forced to become an audience to the power plays, emotions and fears staged on the asphalt.

Partially connected to these contacts and encounters are the ways in which dwellers appropriate and experience the heterotopic space of the road thanks to all sorts of kinetic practices. For instance, people undertake corporeal movements when they walk, dance, campaign, demonstrate or simply come to sit down by the roadside, thus inhabiting space through their corporeal routines and practices (cf. Porath 2002: 794; Tilley 1994: 22). They also engage with the movements of vehicles when they admire the speed, get frightened by careless driving, talk about the travellers' destinations, envy car owners and manipulate the traffic flow for their own agendas. Movements are thus regularly encountered as critical and destructive, and may even kill; in Suhum, killers are assumed to enter by the road. Yet movements and road traffic may also be fun and trigger different forms of sociality. Finally, the stop-and-go movements inherent in traffic can also be useful and exploitable, as evidenced by people's attempts at halting traffic and, later, letting travellers move on and carry along particular messages.

The stop-and-go movements of traffic may also entail a lucrative commercial component. In the following chapter, I explore the ways in which through traffic is turned into, and affords itself as a source of income for those who make use of the road for their entrepreneurial activities. I turn to sellers and hawkers and to their

intricate engagement with vehicles and travellers who come, go and occasionally halt on the AKR. I show how the kinesis, speeds and rhythms of traffic strongly mark the sellers' very own corporeal and tactical movements. What emerges is thus an incessantly moving market in which roadside contacts turn into commercial contacts.

Chapter 4

Trading with travellers: multiple engagements with a moving market

“Wait until a passenger calls me for my bread – then you will see my show”, Doris said laughingly while she stood by the roadside in Ofankor holding big square loaves of bread in her hands. Even though I knew, I still asked what she meant by ‘my show’. “Running, running, running!” the young woman replied and jokingly punched one of her colleagues who was just passing in front of us, running alongside a driving vehicle.

For Doris, the show of running was not a staged event – a performance meant merely to entertain spectators. In the context of selling bread in moving traffic, her show stood for a necessary corporeal and kinetic activity that revealed very naturally her uninhibited enthusiasm. At the same time, it would attract admiration and recognition from other sellers, yet also trigger joking, laughter and other affective reactions. Indeed, while hanging out with sellers on and alongside the Accra-Kumasi road (AKR), I often observed how movements turned into emotions, which resonates with Sheets-Johnstone’s (1999a: 259) observation that “[w]hat is kinetic is affective, or potentially affective”.

The roadside sellers’ affective experience of their own movements, the intertwining of motion and emotion, explored in this chapter’s last section, is quite a particular form of everyday engagement with the road, its traffic and its travellers. This phenomenon is part of the sellers’ more generic engagement with features of the road as a “reliable resource area to gather from” (Pandya 2002: 811), which offers more or less “quick access to alternative financial possibilities” (Porath 2002: 780).¹ My aim in this chapter is to explore the ways in which people engage with the commercial and kinetic features of the AKR. I do this to demonstrate that what comes and goes with (and at times waits in) traffic are customers and sales opportunities that have

¹ Porath’s detailed analysis of roadside dwellers among the Sakai in Riau (Indonesia) is one of the rare ethnographic works on this roadside phenomenon (see also Pandya 2002). He describes how the Sakai socialize, observe, beg, protest and sell fish on the edge of the new road that has become part of the “local, indigenous landscape” (Porath 2002: 770).

generated specific modes of doing roadside business. These modes are based on the small-scale entrepreneurs' idiosyncratic positions on and alongside the road and, more importantly, on the kinesis of traffic and travellers – in particular their speeds and rhythms – that the sellers engage with accordingly (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Running and selling alongside passing vehicles

In the following sections, I first describe vendors who sell in and around bus stations and who attend to momentarily stationary travellers. Then I turn to traders who operate from stalls and tables set up along the AKR and who encourage travellers en route to stop and buy the displayed goods. Finally, I closely examine in several sections the everyday work of urban hawkers who directly attend to, and often run alongside, moving traffic in order to align themselves to passing customers, as Doris and her bread seller colleagues do.

The case of *bus station vendors* I met in Suhum while working with commercial minibus drivers is an opportunity to look at how these entrepreneurs engage with the peculiar consumption needs of passengers using public transport vehicles. I will show that the different stages and movements of their journeys create a demand for specific goods that the vendors stock accordingly. The *roadside traders* I visited when making stops on my journeys to Accra are particularly interesting because their position on the open road requires them to advertise their goods in visible and attractive ways to persuade passing often speeding, travellers to stop and buy. The

traffic hawkers whom I got well acquainted with in Ofankor stand out for their corporeal-kinetic practices of running and what they call ‘rushing’. Their skilful practices emerge in the flow of engaging with often speedy vehicles, and thus, narrow timeframes for business transactions. Their practices are an expression of the imposition on them of a need for speed. It is important to note that some of these dromocentric practices also emerge in instances when hawkers grapple with slow, even halted traffic flow. The hawkers there engage with multiple temporalities, including differential speeds, rhythms and related timeframes that mark their everyday work. Finally, I explore how the hawkers’ presence and practices in what I call a ‘moving market’ is strongly entangled with sensory experiences and emotions, with distinct forms of joviality and sociality, all of which are connected to the dangerous nature of their work.

A helpful approach for this chapter is to view the roadside entrepreneurs’ work as what Weiss (1996: 3) calls “processes of *engagement* as they are culturally constituted” (original emphasis). This view of engagement “neatly captures the sense of reciprocal interchange between persons and the world that is entailed in any activity” (ibid.). It permits exploring the roadside workers’ implication in their work environment: their engagement and appropriation of the road, its vehicular traffic and travellers through commercial and advertising practices that often involve dromocentric movements. Simultaneously, it highlights how the roadside entrepreneurs become continuously *engaged by* the features of this moving market, including its intricate movements, temporalities and, at times, emanating dangers. This approach thus looks at the entrepreneurs’ lived everyday that produces and is determined by practices and experiences as ways of inhabiting and making sense of the environment (Ingold 2000; Jackson 1996). The approach also pays attention to the body and modes of embodiment that have been considered existential to human activity (Csordas 1994) and that seem to be particularly relevant for an appreciation of the lived everyday of traffic hawkers.

Strikingly present, grossly neglected

The phenomenological approach that I use for understanding the subjectivities of the small-scale entrepreneurs portrayed in this chapter has remained entirely absent in the large body of scholarly works that exists on markets, traders and manufacturers that form part of so-called ‘informal’ economies (Hart 1973). More striking is the fact that economic activities *by the roadside*, including the similar phenomenon of urban street vending, have not figured very prominently on the research agenda of scholars,

and even less of Africanist anthropologists – despite the vendors’ notorious presence on many African roads and streets. This reflects a more general trend in the social sciences.

In his foreword to the edited volume entitled *Street Entrepreneurs* (Bromley 2007), Ray Bromley notes that despite being “one of the world’s oldest and most widespread occupations” (xv), street vending has never received much scholarly attention. Its significance has been underrated by social scientists who view it as unimportant, destined to disappear, or parasitic: an occupation that was “unworthy of serious study because it had no future” (ibid.: xvi). Much more popular as a field of study, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, has been the analysis of marketplace trade: an “economic anthropological laboratory of social interaction and commercial behavior” that was considered “more authentic, traditional and worthy of study” (ibid.).² Even when the concept of formal and informal sector emerged (Hart 1973), the numerous case studies on small-scale occupations mainly served the purpose of illustrating features of the overall economic system. Again, the focus was on the more ‘productive’ small-scale occupations rather than on street vendors.³ Only in recent years have scholars (mostly in geography, economics, development or urban planning) explored the ‘street economy’ phenomenon more systematically.⁴

The same development can be observed in the study of street vending, hawking and peddling in African cities. For Ghana, for instance, social scientists (including anthropologists) have produced quite a number of studies on market places (Arhin 1979; Hill 1984; McCall 1962; Şaul 1987), market women (Clark 1994, 2010a, 2010b; Clark and Manuh 1991; Robertson 1983, 1984), traders (Attah et al. 1996; Clark 2004; Eades 1994) and on entrepreneurs and ‘informal’ work more generally (Gough et al. 2003; Hart 1970, 1973; Joshi and Ayee 2002; Yankson 2000). Street trading and hawking, however, are approached only in a very recent wave of publications (Asiedu and Agyei-Mensah 2008; King 2006; Langevang and Gough 2009; Lyon 2007;

² For studies on market places in Africa, see Bohannan and Dalton (1962), Hill (1963a, 1969), Hodder (1971) and Meillassoux (1971). For a focus on market women, see House-Midamba and Ekechi (1995), Mintz (1971), Seligmann (2001), Sheldon (1996) and Smith (2005).

³ An exception is Bromley’s own work on the street traders of Cali, Colombia (Bromley 1978). On ‘informality’ and entrepreneurship in Africa, see Clark (1988), Elkan (1988), Ellis and Faure (1995), Grégoire and Labazée (1993), Hansen and Vaa (2004), Hart (1970), Jalloh and Falola (2002), Lindell (2010a, 2010b), MacGaffey (1987), MacGaffey and Bazenguissa (2000), McDade and Spring (2005), Meagher (2010) and Spring and McDade (1998).

⁴ Here I refer to the edited volumes by Brown (2006b) and Bromley (2007), and to Agadjanian (2002), Çelik (2010), Cross (1998), Hansen (2004), Holness et al. (1999), Khayesi et al. (2010), Parthasarathy (2013), Seligmann (2004) and Yatmo and Atmodiwirjo (2011). For an overview, see Brown et al. (2010). Works on street trading in Ghana are listed below.

Overå 2007; Quayson 2010; Yankson 2007). Interestingly, not a single anthropological account exists of the prominent and much debated phenomenon of street vending in Ghana's cities. Neither was I able to trace any contributions (apart from newspaper articles⁵) that deal with vendors at bus stations, traders alongside the country's main arteries, or hawkers selling in through traffic, such as the famous bread sellers in Ofankor.

Station vendors were not very prominent on my own research agenda when I started my fieldwork on the AKR. Although I spent much time with minibus drivers in bus stations, I paid only little attention to the vendors, as I was primarily interested in the workings of the complex transport business. Also, when joining bus drivers on their regular journeys to and from Accra, I hardly ever got the chance to interact with the roadside traders selling fruits and vegetables, given that bus drivers tend not to make stops at roadside stalls. Road-to-roadside interactions were only possible, albeit fleeting, with traffic hawkers who approached us when our vehicle got stuck in bottlenecks. Here I did like my fellow travellers who often bought travel snacks offered at our windows, at times the so-called *Christ* bread in Ofankor or the famous sweet bread in Nsawam, widely known as *Nsawam brodo*. My approach changed after I had bought (and started driving) my own car, about four months into fieldwork. Not relying on crammed minibuses and taxis any longer, I was now free to pay regular and extended visits to vendors and hawkers along the road and to bring an additional perspective to my ethnographic road project. Yet what got me into the milieu of bread sellers in Ofankor in the end, was the huge road ritual that I have described earlier. My follow-up visits to Ofankor and my enquiries among the dwellers were a chance to get well acquainted with the bread sellers. They were particularly keen on having a look at (and possibly keeping a copy of) the pictures I had taken of the ritual, some of which were featuring them or their colleagues, watching the growing pool of blood on 'their' road. I forged new friendships by the roadside, and I spent significantly more time with them than with other roadside entrepreneurs. This explains why ethnographic material gathered in Ofankor fills the largest part of this chapter. But first I look at the case of station vendors and of roadside traders.

⁵ See for instance the article "Traffic vendors live dangerously" in Ghana's *Daily Graphic* (2008), or "Agony of a street hawker" in the *Business & Financial Times* (2009).

Providing provisions at stations

We know from historical sources that travellers on the 19th century trade routes of the Asante, one of which developed into the present Accra-Kumasi road, interacted with adjoining residents at so-called ‘halting places’. Wilks explains that halting places were an essential aspect in the building of the Asante great-roads and they were established according to the measure of one journey: equidistant one from another and separated by one *kwansin* (‘part of the road’), the journey of seven travelling ‘hours’. The purpose of halting places was the provisioning of travellers with lodging and foodstuffs (Wilks 1975: 2; Daaku 1971: 176).⁶ On the present-day AKR, only two main halting places exist. One is the longstanding rest stop at the outskirts of Nkawkaw, catering to travellers with several small restaurants, provisions shops as well as toilet and washing facilities. Another is *Linda Dor* at Bunso Junction, a modern motorway restaurant once located in Asiakwa (near Kyebi) on what has become the ‘old road’. When the through traffic ceased, the owner of *Linda Dor* relocated the rest stop to its current, more lucrative site. Business at both rest stops has been flourishing, thanks to the coming and going of a well-heeled segment of travellers who ply the AKR in private cars, 4x4 vehicles, air-conditioned vans and big inter-city coaches. Most public transport passengers travelling long-distance in minibuses and Benz transporters do not get the chance to spend money at rest stops.⁷ In view of this, and also uncertain whether they will get to buy from hawkers in bottlenecks, many supply themselves with provisions in and around the bus stations at the beginning of their journeys.

Bus stations in Africa are attractive sales points for small-scale entrepreneurs (Gewald et al. 2009b: 7). To illustrate this, I briefly describe the bus station in the provincial town of Suhum where I spent most of my time during fieldwork. It is located on both sides of the AKR and frames the main junction in town, commonly known as *Roundabout Station* (although there is no actual roundabout). Those who sell at *Roundabout* every day from early morning until after sunset (apart from Sundays) are mainly young women, many of whom are still in their teens and live in the surrounding quarters. On a normal workday, one can find about 35, even more,

⁶ See Gewald (2009: 43-46) for the same phenomenon in colonial Zambia. He claims that service industries (or ‘service nodes’) on former carrier transport routes ceased to exist with the arrival of motorized vehicles. Wilks (1975: 2) adds that halting places were centres of local authority and enjoyed special protection in times of war.

⁷ Truck drivers travelling on Ghana’s south-north arteries take breaks in Nsawam, in Nkawkaw, and in Kintampo, a town north of Kumasi with the country’s largest rest stop for inter-regional and international transport workers.

mobile vendors (often referred to as ‘hawkers’) who carry bowls, baskets and boxes with goods for sale in their hands or on their heads (Figure 9).⁸ Depending on the time of the day, they may easily outnumber the passengers who have come to the station and are waiting for their vehicles to depart. In addition, there are stationary entrepreneurs who run two drinking bars (*spots*), up to six food stands and small restaurants (*chop bars*) and four kiosks offering various provisions and items such as call credit cards. The entrepreneurs either rent a place or pay regular fees to the municipal administration or the local branch of the transport union so they can do their small business there. The vendors share the public space with other ‘informal’ workers, such as mechanics, welders, electricians, sprayers, tyre dealers and vulcanizers who line the entire arterial road with their workshops.⁹ Like so many other junctions and transport hubs in Ghana, Suhum’s *Roundabout Station* thus spawns “a complex economy of services, trade, and exchange” (Masquelier 2002: 836) that is marked by the often observed “hustle and bustle” (Hill 1984: 2).¹⁰

The vendors’ commercial activities go hand in hand with the *sales opportunities* generated by the bus journeys and their different phases. Waiting, time spent in transit, and anticipated arrivals at final destinations create needs and desires for travel-related consumption goods among travellers. Vendors engage with this specific demand by offering an adapted range of goods and items. For instance, the *chop bar* workers offer quick and inexpensive meals to those passengers and drivers who spend time waiting at the station before departing.¹¹ The mobile vendors have refreshments – drinks and snacks¹² – for passengers who are sitting often impatiently and restlessly in vehicles that are about to depart. The refreshments that are touted through the open car window are eaten straightaway or taken along in order to sweeten the upcoming journey.¹³ They are also cherished by travellers who

⁸ The figures are based on a survey I conducted at the *Roundabout Station* in January 2007.

⁹ On the relationship between transport, vehicles and the ‘informal’ economy in different African settings, see Beck (2013), Berry (1983, 1985), Beuving (2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2009), Gewald et al. (2009a), Grieco et al. (1996), King (1996), Okpara (1988) and Wainaina (1981).

¹⁰ In a dramatic tone, Hill (1984: 2-3) argues that bus stations and markets “provide the worst field conditions one can ever encounter” because of “the great heat, the lack of shade, the lack of breeze” and the “problem [...] that one often cannot perceive order in chaos”.

¹¹ These meals can be any local dish from the very simple fried yams with pepper sauce or rice with stew, to the heavier *fufu* with soup and meat.

¹² Drinks include the home-produced ‘ice water’ bags, ‘pure water’ sachets produced in factories, the ‘cocoa drink’ (chocolate milk sachets), canned or bottled soft drinks and fruit juice cartons. Popular snacks are pies (filled with minced meat or eggs), boiled eggs, fried yam, plantain chips, and *chofi* (fried turkey tail); there are also crackers, biscuits, ice cream sachets, peeled oranges and all kinds of ‘toffee’ (sweets).

¹³ Apart from travel snacks, the vendors also offer newspapers or credit for mobile phones to cater for the specific needs of travellers.

arrive from Accra, exhausted from city traffic and from spending hours sitting in crammed vehicles. Apart from items for immediate consumption, station vendors sell goods that people take along as supplies for their homes or as presents that are needed for hosts and family members who may ask arriving travellers – at times jokingly, or as part of welcome rituals – about the “little something” that they hope has been bought for them. Some goods are advertised accordingly, such as when ‘toffee’ and biscuit vendors shout “*Nkola wo fie!*” (literally, ‘The kids are at home’), a slogan reminding travellers of the children at home whom they might want to treat with sweets.

The advertisement practice, and the range of stocked items more generally, are all indicative of the vendors’ more or less deliberate engagement with travel-specific consumption, which can also be observed among other roadside entrepreneurs. Their business-oriented consideration for the travellers’ material needs en route and at their destinations does not only determine which goods are offered, but also *where* they are offered. The traders I met on the southern section of the AKR, for instance, sell agricultural products that are more likely to be bought by travellers en route to Accra, where foodstuffs are needed as provisions, than by those going north, where foodstuffs are more easily available (and cheaper). Thus the traders position their market stalls almost exclusively on the Accra-bound lane. In contrast to this, about 80% of traffic hawkers in Ofankor are lined up alongside the northbound lane of the AKR. They attend to those who are leaving the capital and are eager to purchase not only travel snacks, but also specific consumer goods from the city, such as bread loaves (see Awedoba and Hahn 2014). Bread is, among other staples and things, highly valued in the non-urban places where it is often taken to, unless it has been eaten en route.¹⁴ Travellers’ destinations thus play a significant role in establishing distinct segments of – and respective assembly points for – roadside entrepreneurs.

¹⁴ The remaining 20% sell mostly basic refreshments to travellers who are arriving in the capital.



Figure 9: Bus station vendors attending to departing passengers



Figure 10: Roadside stall and bush rat vendor on the Accra-Kumasi road



Figure 11: Street vendors selling water sachets and oranges in Suhum



Figure 12: The *ohemmaa* ('market queen'), one of Ofankor's senior bread sellers

Advertising by the roadside

The traders alongside the AKR have turned the road into a market for foodstuffs that the nearby farming communities harvest or hunt in the farmlands and forests not far off the main road. For their market to be patronized, the traders rely on the travellers' willingness to stop deliberately where the goods are offered; only then can both sides start bargaining over prices. In the traders' experience, what helps to attract travellers is displaying goods in an aesthetically satisfying manner. "Things have to look nice", Sister Joyce told me. "You arrange them so that it is sweet to [the passers-by's] eyes. If it's not nice, it will not attract their attention. They will not stop."

Sister Joyce, a middle-aged trader, owns one of four roadside stalls that are clustered together near Asuboi, a village south of Suhum, and offer almost the entire range of fruit and vegetable typically found in southern Ghana.¹⁵ She has been selling foodstuffs at this spot since 1980 and claims to have been the first one to work here in the roadside business. What sells best is cassava and plantain. Those who stop at her roofed stall, set up about two metres away from the asphalt, are mainly travellers who pass in privately or company-owned vehicles, occasionally taxis and heavy trucks, but almost never commercial minibuses and coaches. She told me that, in her long working life by the AKR, she has seen many big cars and big men passing. Many years ago, even the convoy of then-president J. J. Rawlings stopped at her place, and his people bought plenty of foodstuffs.

Sister Joyce showed me that, to make her place look appealing, she applies great care in assorting her goods "nicely" on and in front of her tables, and in bowls, baskets and plates that embellish the colourful arrangement. Bigger, particularly fresh-looking and colourful samples, of course, are placed and often piled up in a more prominent position. Making things look "nice", by creatively engaging with the items' material and aesthetic properties, is an habitual practice that is learned through imitation and apprenticeship from other traders. This embodied practice can be seen and admired among young female traders at different spots, such as in the village called Teacher Mante. Here they cluster juicy-looking oranges in an orderly manner on tables and trays by piling up five or even ten of them. The same happens, in an almost artistic style, with the freshly peeled coconuts that boys and young men try to sell to thirsty travellers. Hunters, again, often display their fresh prey – snails,

¹⁵ Roadside traders sell bananas, pineapples, mangos, papaya, oranges, onions, tomatoes, pepper, mushrooms, green beans, garden eggs, *kontumire* (cocoyam leaves), cabbage, avocado, palm kernels, etc. Some also specialize in products such as *gari*, palm oil and locally made charcoal.

smoked bush rats or grass cutters – by attaching them to carefully braided palm branches or to sticks that are tied together.

What is supposed to contribute to the attractiveness of the goods is *visibility*: traders make sure that (often speedily) approaching travellers can easily spot what is on offer. I spent some time with a group of three boys who were advertising their coconuts by piling them up on an old tyre that they put directly on the asphalt. They told me that the police had asked them several times to move back into the soft shoulder, as they were dangerously close to the passing vehicles. Soon the coconuts were put back on the road, since the boys argued “drivers will not see that we are selling here. Nobody will buy.” Yet they took precautions for themselves and mostly stayed further back so that, in case of a swerving vehicle, it was their coconuts that would get run over, and not them.¹⁶

Advertising goods by rendering them visible is a practice embraced by all types of vendors, as we shall see below with reference to traffic hawkers. Standing by the roadside, for instance, hunters hold their prey in the air in an ostentatious manner. Market women usually place bigger items, such as waist-high plantain branches, closer to the edge of the road, or they put baskets in an inclined position, by placing stones underneath, so that their contents can be seen (Figure 10). In addition, many traders whom I met told me that they had chosen to operate at sites where they could be spotted from far away.¹⁷ They assumed that setting up stalls on hilltops, instead of downhill, was more promising: drivers who climb a hill are less speedy and thus have more time to assess the displayed goods. Also, they will be more inclined to stop than they would be when gaining momentum going downhill, when stopping would be inconvenient, even unsafe. The traders claim that drivers’ ability to spot and stop is generally a matter of speed, in particular of overspeeding. This phenomenon is a drawback for traders located on downhill slopes and in valleys, as well as for those working along newly constructed or refurbished road sections. The market women who have moved from the old Kyebi road to the new, wider and smoother bypass complained that it proved so bad for business because it allowed cars to just fly by their stalls.

¹⁶ Similarly to how traders display goods to draw the attention of travellers, roadside workshops demonstratively place piles of tyres, used car parts (for instance, rusty exhaust pipes or mufflers) or car bodies by the road. Some also advertise their services with painted and highly graphic signboards (cf. Förster 2008).

¹⁷ Quayson (2010b: 78) claims that it is often for ‘strategic reasons’ that street vendors in the city choose corners.

Hawking in urban through traffic

Speed matters are even more crucial and critical in the everyday work of those who operate as traffic hawkers on the AKR, and who, according to Quayson (2010b: 77), are “trying to improvise a sale as they run alongside private cars and commercial vehicles”. Travellers encounter running hawkers like Doris on sections of the AKR where vehicles are regularly slowed down, or even made to stop. This is the case where the arterial road winds through the busy urban centre of Ofankor, through the market towns of Nsawam and Nkawkaw, and finally the suburbs of Kumasi. These chronic bottlenecks emerge as lucrative sales points for hawkers who engage with traffic and travellers by touting products in ways that I explore below.

Traffic hawkers are a phenomenon of the ‘informal’ economy in probably all African cities. In Accra they can be found operating at the bottlenecks of arterial roads, but also at major junctions and on the most busy roads and streets.¹⁸ Here they mingle with and are at times barely distinguishable from what is known as *street* hawkers (or street vendors).¹⁹ Both the traffic hawkers and street vendors operate in the capital’s public and often contested spaces where they offer a quite similar range of snacks, drinks, sweets and an almost unimaginable variety of articles of daily use (for instance, phone credit, newspapers, toilet paper, razor blades, dog chains, mirrors). In contrast to the traffic hawkers, however, the street vendors may also sell market goods such as fruit and vegetable, second-hand clothes and shoes, or household wares (Figure 11). For that purpose, they operate in a stationary mode, at improvised stalls and tables, or while walking around. They are usually found in and around bus stations, bus stops, permanent markets, car parks and public buildings, whereas traffic hawkers attend to (more or less moving) vehicles.

By occupying pavements, entrances and streets, the street vendors not only contribute to “the improvisatory carnivalesque character of street life” (Quayson 2010b: 84). In many people’s views, they also compete with other city dwellers, disturb the flow of city traffic and pedestrians, and add to congestion. This is why they are regularly blamed for creating major nuisance and ‘filth’ in the city’s public sphere. As a result, street vendors in the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA) have in recent years been targeted repeatedly by local authorities in their plans to

¹⁸ Prominent locations for traffic hawking are, for instance, the Kanda High Road/Achimota Road intersection as well as spots along Liberation Road (Akuafo Circle, 37 Hospital), Winneba Road (Kasoa) and Osu’s so-called ‘Oxford Street’.

¹⁹ The two categories do at times blur since different hawkers often mingle in one and the same place. See Asiedu and Agyei-Mensah (2008), Brown (2006a) and Quayson (2010) for attempts to classify different forms of street/traffic trading.

‘decongest’ the city. Attempts to ban their activities – to evict them from streets and public places and to relocate them to newly built markets – have, however, proven to be mostly ineffective.²⁰ This marks another difference between the “traders on the run” (Asiedu and Agyei-Mensah 2008) and the traffic hawkers, the latter usually operating on road sections that are out of reach of the municipal authorities’ operations, as in the case of Ofankor.

Ending up by the roadside

One day in January 2007, I counted around 65 hawkers in Ofankor; roughly two thirds were trading in bread.²¹ Steven, one of the young men I became acquainted with, told me that what attracted such a great number of hawkers was the fact that the place was ‘good’. The through road section in Ofankor was a ‘no-man’s land’: it was not controlled by the AMA and its task force, feared by street vendors in the city centre; no NO HAWKING signboards were found there. Steven and his colleagues did not need to seek any permit to work there, even if some of them set up tables by the roadside to display their goods. They were never harassed, neither did they have to pay any tax or fees to a landowner: “Anyone can come, no one can be sacked.”

Steven was 23 years old when I met him. He started working as a hawker in Accra’s streets and roads at the age of 17, after completing Junior Secondary School and being unable to pay the fees for further schooling. Like many other young city dwellers, he saw hawking as one of the few options to move on with life, and he first tried his luck selling *PK* (chewing gum) and *atadwe* (‘tiger nuts’). Steven often expressed how unsatisfied he was with his current work, even though he claimed that “once you are on the road, some money will always come”. His main complaint was about the physical constraints of traffic hawking, which I shall return to below. His aim was to get away from the roadside business, maybe to start as a ‘mate’ (the driver’s assistant and minibuss conductor) in the transport business (see Chapter 5, p. 128). When I returned to Ghana in 2008 and 2009, however, Steven was still selling bread alongside his friends, young men and women in their late teens and early 20s.

²⁰ In March 2007, I observed how the clampdown on street vendors was particularly strong in the run-up to the fiftieth anniversary of Ghana’s independence. As part of the ‘cleanup exercise’ to prepare for the celebrations, the infamous AMA task force (*aaba eei*, ‘raiders’; Asiedu and Agyei-Mensah 2008: 199) chased all vendors from the pavements around the busy Kwame Nkrumah Circle and in the central business district. The cleanliness of Accra’s streets was only temporary, however; due to inconsistent policies and lack of enforcement, the vendors had soon regained the streets.

²¹ The numbers varied between 40 and 80 on weekdays; Sundays were always less busy. Numbers started decreasing in early 2009 when heavy construction works for a multi-lane flyover resumed at Ofankor, which made vending increasingly difficult.

Somehow distinct from the youngest among the hawkers in Ofankor was the group of adult women, many of whom had been working there for a long time already. One of them was Doris, the 35-year-old woman whom I introduced earlier in this chapter. She had been selling bread on the Ofankor road section for roughly four years, Monday through Saturday. Before coming there, she was trading in second-hand clothes outside the Kantamanto market (central Accra), but eventually had to leave due to growing harassment by the AMA task force. With the money she gained from hawking, she was able to supplement the income of her husband, a carpenter, and to cover some of their household expenses. The couple made just about enough to be able to pay their two children's school fees, hopefully up to senior secondary school. Her daughters often joined her by the roadside after school. I observed how the elder one, 13 years old, occasionally tried to tout her mother's bread loaves to passing travellers, but often had no chance against the more mature and faster hawkers.

The mobile hawkers mingled and at times cooperated with some of the senior female vendors. The latter were more settled in terms of their age and work experience, yet also because they worked mainly while seated at tables, often under a sunshade, only a few steps away from passing vehicles and customers. The more prominent among them was Adwoa, called 'Adwoa *kɛsɛɛ*' ('big Adwoa'; Figure 12). She claimed to have been one of the first to come to the roadside, about 15 years ago, after finding that this was more lucrative than selling on Ofankor's regular market. She became the *ɔhemmaa*, the 'queen' of the roadside market.²² At one stage, newcomers had to gain permission from Adwoa to work at this site. Nowadays, anybody can freely enter the market, and Adwoa's function is reduced to collecting money from hawkers when one of them is in serious financial difficulties due to an illness or a funeral in the family. Adwoa remained mostly seated at her table and left the more exhausting running and touting to her young employees and helpers. They regularly returned to her table to get new bread loaves and deposit the earned money. Adwoa only got up when drivers – mostly private, at times also commercial ones – purposely stopped next to her table to buy from her, or when vehicles came to a halt due to heavy traffic.

Traffic, travellers and differential speeds

Besides its favourable legal status, Ofankor's notoriously heavy traffic, particularly at rush hour, is another reason why a significant number of hawkers have chosen to work there. This is linked to the suburb's position as the gateway to Accra, where

²² See Clark (2010) and Lyon (2007) for the role, responsibilities and authority of so-called 'market queens' in southern Ghana.

regional, long-distance and even international motor traffic descends from the dual carriageway. In the opposite direction, motorists are desperate to escape the crowded city. The junction at Ofankor with its bus stops adds local vehicles to the heavy through traffic. There used to be a police checkpoint at Ofankor, locally known as 'Barrier', which further slowed the traffic flow. It was removed in early 2007 when road construction works began, which later proved equally, if not more disruptive. The Ofankor road section continues to be referred to as 'Barrier'. For travellers, it stands as a metaphor for slow moving, even congested traffic, as reminder of tedious waiting, heat and dust, and annoyed drivers.

For the traffic hawkers, the heavy traffic presents a clear sales opportunity as it continuously brings new potential customers, and its slowness (sometimes standstill) makes it easier to attend to travellers, advertise goods and exchange them for cash through open vehicle windows. Furthermore, many travellers passing through Ofankor are very eager to buy things, since this could be their last chance to do so during their journey on the AKR. Ofankor's hawkers offer a wide range of attractive bread types, ranging from sugar bread, tea bread, butter bread and chocolate bread to bread sticks. The bread brand that Ofankor is best known for is the *Christ in You*, normally called *Christ*. This is a particularly soft type of tea bread – provided it is still fresh, a challenge to which return below. *Christ* is produced by a nearby bakery of the same name. Hawkers get their stock of bread directly from the bakery or from its delivery van that comes to Ofankor twice a day. The still warm loaves are stored in wooden cases, covered with sheets and later packed in transparent plastic bags. While some are displayed on tables, most loaves end up being carried around and touted by the younger hawkers.

On a regular workday, Steven would normally buy 40 loaves of *Christ* bread in the morning, Doris about 50. One was purchased from the bakery at the price of ₵4,000 (about 20p in 2007) and sold again for ₵5,000 (25p).²³ Steven's profit from selling the entire stock amounted to ₵40,000 (£2), Doris' profit to ₵50,000 (£2.50). Both said that sometimes not all the loaves could be sold in one day, which resulted in having to sell bread that was no longer fresh and soft. On good days, when traffic is heavy and travellers consume a lot, Steven claimed he is able to sell up to 150 loaves.

The hawkers were aware that the amount they sold, or the time required to sell the daily stock, is to some extent determined by the volume, but also by the *speed* of

²³ After the redenomination of the Ghanaian *cedi* in 2007, and due to inflation, prices in 2009 had completely changed: one *Christ* bread was now sold for one *Ghana cedi* (about 70p) while the profit remained 20%.

traffic. Business seems better when there is both high traffic volume and, often as a result of this, slower cruising speed. The absence of traffic – meaning only few and comparatively fast vehicles – is disadvantageous and is referred to as a ‘slow market’, or ‘slow business’. Interestingly, the hawkers also argued that halting traffic or, even worse, a complete standstill, often turns out to be just as unprofitable and ‘slow’. In their experience, and for particular reasons to be explored below, travellers who get stuck in traffic jams tend to be more reluctant to buy their products. Doris summarised that the best circumstance for their selling, which made traffic ‘good’, occurred when vehicles are “not too fast and not too slow”. This assessment may sound vague, but in fact reveals the close attention that hawkers pay to differential speeds and their implications. These ‘calibrations’ (Quayson 2003) of differential speeds also hint at people’s perception and relativisation of speed (Tomlinson 2007), a phenomenon that has most clearly been observed among road and railway travellers (see for instance Merriman 2007; Schivelbusch 1986). Finally, the need for differential speeds demonstrates how common views on hawkers are often misleading. The statement made in an article of Ghana’s *Daily Graphic* (2008), that it is “their prayer [...] that the traffic jam will never ease because that is when they expect [sic] good sales” does not necessarily hold true for Ofankor’s hawkers.

Speeds, rhythms and tactics of touting

Lefebvre (2004: 25) states that “to grasp a rhythm it is necessary to have been *grasped* by it” (original emphasis). This describes the Ofankor hawkers’ continuous engagement with traffic. The rhythms and intervals of traffic, that is, its varying volume, stop-go movements and, therefore, differential speeds afford the bread sellers different phases in their daily work by the roadside. My initial impression as a customer in a moving minibus was that bread sellers would attend to passing vehicles almost incessantly. But more than I had imagined, they spend a significant time of the day waiting. They wait for traffic to become ‘good’, as they say, or they take time out to relax. Steven, for instance, usually rests after having sold about 15–20 bread loaves; then he hangs out for a while with his colleagues a bit further away from the asphalt, or occasionally sits down at one of the tables. The hawkers chat, observe the road and make comments about their colleagues’ attempts to sell bread and they count their money and the bread loaves left in their stock. Such moments gave me the opportunity to discuss work and life with them. Occasionally, in the middle of a conversation, my interlocutors would suddenly run away – rushing off, without warning, to attend to a decelerating vehicle carrying potential customers.



Figure 13: Chasing cars and customers



Figure 14: Displaying and touting *Christ* bread

Rush, run, or relax

Through our conversations and my observations, I learned from the younger bread sellers that the success of their sales heavily depends on their embodied efforts to engage with traffic – to adjust themselves to varying vehicle speeds and to reach some degree of synchronicity. These efforts increase in response to a “slow market”, prompted by too fast or too slow vehicles. One tactic, then, is to move *with* traffic. Hawkers relocate themselves to a road section where congestions and tailbacks occur more regularly than elsewhere, such as spots where road works are underway or potholes have grown bigger. Moving with traffic also obliges their *continuous repositioning*, whilst selling, in line with the rhythms of traffic volume and the equally continuous shifting of tailbacks. This becomes particularly necessary after hawkers have been running alongside vehicles and end up at the point where vehicles accelerate again. This then requires moving against the flow of traffic.

Another tactic is to swiftly move *towards* traffic or, in the hawkers’ own terms, to try “rushing”. This involves running towards cars, often pushing other hawkers aside, and dealing with customers quickly enough to exchange money and goods before the drivers – often in a rush as well – speed off. There is a need for speed so as to compete with other hawkers and to sell successfully, despite the often restricted timeframe for business transactions. The most challenging and hazardous tactic to engage with more speedy vehicles is to move *alongside* traffic. ‘Chasing cars’, as the hawkers call it, fulfils the same entrepreneurial purpose as ‘rushing’. Indeed, rushing often leads to chasing and forms one single dromocentric act. “You have to run, you have to chase the car”, Steven explained, “because if you don’t chase the car, nobody will come and buy the bread”. At the same time, chasing stands for the indispensable dromocentric practice and the distinct corporeal attempts of attuning to (and keeping up with) the vehicles’ speed through sprinting off, running zigzag, overtaking other hawkers or clutching the body of the car one has chosen to chase (Figure 13).

The brisk business of traffic hawking thus seems to unfold as a dynamic interplay between the varying movements of vehicles and the tactical and corporeal movements of hawkers with, towards and alongside traffic. Through their kinetic engagement and their “body movement as dynamically embodied action” (Farnell 1999: 341), the hawkers become part and parcel of what emerges as an intricately moving market, as a spatio-temporal context “within which multiple rhythms are

produced and interweave” (Edensor 2011: 189).²⁴ The “collectively constituted rhythmic choreography” (ibid.: 195) requires corporeal skilfulness, swiftness and endurance at work, coupled with sensory agility, in particular visual and aural alertness. My interlocutors by the roadside demonstrate that they are alert to traffic developments and ready to ‘read the road’, as commercial drivers often say to describe how they grasp the movements, manoeuvres and rhythms of vehicular flows (see Chapter 6, p. 157; cf. Yatmo and Atmodiwirjo 2011). These practices and skills form part of what Edensor (2010: 5) calls “the corporeal capacities to sense rhythm, sensations that organise the subjective and cultural experience of place.”

The hawkers equally need to be alert to the signs that emanate from passing travellers. They showed me that it is crucial to watch out carefully for the looks and eye movements of travellers, as they reveal whether people are searching for goods that they may want to buy. Looks are often paired with more or less unmistakable gestures and signs (for instance, pulling money out of the pocket, waving with a note) and vocal signals (making sibilant sounds, shouting *brodo wura*, meaning ‘bread seller’). For hawkers endowed with ‘skilled vision’ (Grasseni 2007) and sensory attentiveness (Ingold 2000), these signs and signals tell them whether it is time to move, rush, run or just relax.

Some traffic hawkers are required to rush and run more than others. For instance, newcomers on the roadside and the youngest among the bread sellers are likely not to engage with moving traffic at all; they fulfil simple and stationary tasks and help out at the senior women’s stands. In contrast, the more experienced youths are the most active with rushing and chasing cars, usually more than those in their late 20s and early 30s (mostly female) who run only occasionally, often because they maintain a small table with stocks by the roadside. Again, senior sellers like Adwoa, the *shemmaa*, and her age mates hardly ever move; they are busy at their stands, managing their larger stock of bread, collecting money and supervising their helpers. Their differing tasks, involving varying degrees of corporeal-kinetic engagement with customer-vehicles, produce different rhythmic structures of work (cf. Guyer 1988: 254). The movements and rhythms thus appear to reflect and reproduce certain social distinctions – even a kinetic hierarchy – among hawkers that are connected to age, gender, experience, status and bodily fitness.

²⁴ It could also be described as a ‘market in motion’ or ‘moving workplace’, incorporating both the movements of vendors and customers. See Gewald’s (2009: 45) historical account of traveller-customers en route who constituted “the market [that] walked its way to the villages along the line of travel”.

Tricks with timeframes

“Even if the person [vehicle occupant] hasn’t called you, you just go fast – you run and show the bread to the person”, Steven explained to me. The hawkers emphasise the need for passengers to *see* what is on offer, and for hawkers to render their goods *visible* if they are to be sold successfully. Thus visibility and the adequate display of goods for the purpose of advertisement is not just a concern for roadside traders who are approached by travellers, but also for the hawkers who actively tout goods. Rendering them visible often involves the temporal constraint I have referred to earlier, namely the vehicles’ faster speed and the travellers’ limited time to spot what is offered. Given the fleeting encounters between hawkers and travellers, visibility can only be promoted by running and rushing, i.e. by the hawkers’ skilful and often risky corporeal efforts. Through these, bread can be displayed at the open and passing windows, even if only very briefly. The moves for vision are regularly accompanied by verbal and rhythmic touting – shouting “*Christ! Christ!*” or its price – as well as by non-verbal exclamations, all meant to attract the passing customers’ attention (Figure 14).

Doris and her colleagues explained to me that rushing, defined earlier as moving swiftly towards vehicles, is also a helpful tactic when business is ‘slow’ due to very slow, or standing, traffic. “When vehicles don’t move, they [drivers and passengers] become very unhappy. They don’t feel like buying”, the bread sellers told me. In their experience, travellers who get stuck in traffic jams at Ofankor – producing heat, dust, sweat and increasing annoyance inside the immobile vehicles – are reluctant to buy bread. Some bus passengers may have spent time waiting for their vehicle to finally depart after boarding it in a central Accra bus station. *Trotro* and other bus drivers become impatient as well, as they are often in a rush and worried about losing time and money if they do not get moving.

My acquaintances claimed that travellers stuck in traffic are more likely to buy water and snacks to refresh their bodies and endure the tedious waits, than bread. They figured that turning up quickly at the standing vehicles, holding up bread loaves in front of the travellers’ eyes, and at times even pushing them inside, is a persuasive sales pitch.²⁵ It actually seems to work. Hawkers’ rushing turns not just into a means of displaying their bread, but also into a means of enticing reluctant and ‘unhappy’ travellers – and, in that sense, rushing *them* – into buying it. Here, the corporeal

²⁵ This sales pitch is equally employed by hawkers at bus stops or bus stations whose swift attending to arriving and potentially soon departing vehicles is not simply about competition and limited time, but about advertising and encouraging travellers to buy their products.

swiftness of hawkers actively engages with the slowness, immobility and waiting of travellers and, indeed, with the moods and emotions that these moments trigger. They are moments that entail what Urry (2009) describes as the simultaneity of fast and slow, which Rosa (2009: 103) calls ‘desynchronization’.

Once traffic on the Ofankor road section has accelerated, however, the hawkers face the challenge of brief and fleeting interactions with customers. Apart from running, this requires the skilful and rushed exchange of goods and cash, a transaction that often fails. Cars are at times simply too fast or they accelerate very suddenly, while travellers are too slow in deciding whether and what to buy. The short encounters are also problematic for travellers. It is commonly known that they are worried they will not get back the correct change in time, or that they are being sold something which later – too late – turns out to be of poor quality. This concerns bread in particular. Most travellers are keen on finding bread that is ‘nice and soft’, a quality cherished by all those who get to eat it, either en route or at the destination. Unfortunately, though, the *Christ* bread is a rather perishable product, the loaves are known to turn old and dry quickly as they are carried around in the sun, often unprotected from road dust. Some travellers try to ensure that they purchase bread that is fresh, or at least that *appears* so. Their efforts are often hampered by the short time they have to examine the quality of the bread loaves hastily touted at their car windows.

The hawkers I met were not overly concerned about the perishability of *Christ* bread. Certainly, they prefer to sell their stocks fast – ideally on the day of purchase – yet they often sell bread from the previous day. What they see as a chance to sell the not-so-fresh bread is the faster traffic with its short timeframe for transactions and a proper softness check. Some hawkers make sure to tout the fresher bread when traffic is very slow, whilst others take a break from touting during go-slows, when left with only older bread. An additional tactic for getting rid of older bread is, of course, to make it *look* fresh. I witnessed how hawkers regularly put them into new, clean plastic bags when the original bags (and the enclosed *Christ* label) have turned moist and wrinkly. Finally, they also promote *verbally* the alleged attractiveness of their bread loaves, such as by shouting “*eye* fresh oo!” (‘it’s really fresh’). To dismiss the doubts of customers, who are often naïve enough to ask, they say “*hwe, eye enne dee*” (‘look, it’s from today’). “Of course we tell them it’s fresh, even if it’s not”, the younger sellers admitted – after all, there is often no time for travellers to find out whether it really is.

The need for speed in touting perishable products on Ofankor’s roadside hints at parallel timeframes, a frequent phenomenon in the context of roads, transport and

mobility.²⁶ Here, one timeframe consists in the perishable nature of bread itself and, consequently, the urgency involved in selling it as well as the regular need for tricking customers once the bread is no longer fresh. This explains in parts why travellers prefer, yet are often denied, slower speed or a standstill, which would grant them sufficient time for examining the bread for sale. In reality, however, a different timeframe prevails, namely the *fleetingness* inherent in most roadside encounters: it requires hawkers to engage in swift, rushed manoeuvres, whilst facilitating their rushing – and thus tricking – of travellers.

The ephemeral and fleeting nature of encounters and interactions, which is intrinsic to road transport and travelling (Edensor 2011: 190; Sheller and Urry 2006: 209), appears to be a crucial element of the hawkers' everyday engagement with timeframes, speeds and rhythms. From my experience in Ofankor, swiftness and brevity strikingly mark the ways in which the quality of goods is (or can not be) checked, how prices and orders are communicated, and how notions of trust or trickery are assessed and negotiated between both parties – usually with only a very few and brisk manoeuvres, gestures, words or looks. This form of business interaction within a limited timeframe may tentatively be labelled as 'instant trade'. It signifies a form of trade where the complex principles and practices of market exchange are quickly converged, condensed or even lost in one brief instant.²⁷

Yet even if 'instant trade' and fleeting encounters may prevail on the road, some of the interactions between the sellers and travellers are nonetheless based on stable and long-lasting relationships. This suggests another timeframe, one that concerns not only traffic hawkers, but other types of roadside entrepreneurs as well. For instance, some of the fruit and vegetable traders I met have regular customers who stop at their roadside stalls to purposely buy from them. The traders actively invest in the relationships with such regulars, offer them (what they claim are) bargain prices, reserve goods of supposedly select quality for them and try to engage them in chatty conversations. This promotes a climate of trust, reliability and familiarity also found in other (not road-related) market places. Such bonds may even be established in the rather hectic context of traffic hawking, such as between *Christ* bread sellers

²⁶ Another example for parallel time frames is Carrier's (2005) account on *khat* production and transport in Kenya, which involves the slow growth of *khat* trees, the perishability of *khat* as a drug, and the resulting 'need for speed' of *khat* transporters.

²⁷ 'Instant trade' is my adaptation of 'instant sacrifice', a notion apparently used in Nigeria to describe the act of (accidentally or not) running over and instantly killing an animal on the road, an act that is seen to fulfil the same sacrificial purpose as the killing of an animal in a more elaborate ritual (such as for *Ogun*, the Yoruba god of iron). I am grateful to Richard Kuba for hinting at this parallel.

and drivers who frequently pass through Ofankor. Over the years, the more senior sellers have become acquainted with drivers with whom they not only exchange bread and cash, but also greetings, jokes and all sorts of information. I learned that the younger hawkers equally maintain acquaintances with drivers they recognize from far away by their vehicles and often call them by their (nick)names. The sellers are keen to approach and run along with these drivers as they are more inclined to slow down once they encounter a familiar face. It is particularly lucrative for any bread seller to befriend commercial bus drivers given that they ply the AKR more regularly and bring more customers than private car drivers. Their relationship is based on mutual interest as many of the drivers are keen to know hawkers whom they believe are reliable and will sell them bread loaves without tricking them.

Movements into emotions

While the Ofankor hawkers' moving market affords an array of practices, skills, tactics and even tricks, it also manifests itself with a number of constraints that tangibly mark the hawkers' everyday work. One of their regular complaints concerns the weather. Rain, for instance, may not only spoil their bread, but makes them feel cold and fall sick, as some of the young female sellers claim. When construction works resumed along the Ofankor road, rainfall turned the dug-up road surface into slippery mud, while drought produced irritating dust that left red laterite stains on the hawkers' clothes. In the dry season, the hawkers generally suffer from standing and running under a scorching sun for many hours. Steven told me that this made his eyes turn unhealthily yellow: "They look like the eyes of a smoker, but it's all because of the wind, the dust, the car smoke."

Accidents are another concern, though not all say they fear them. In Ofankor, known as a notorious black spot on the accident-ridden AKR, the bread sellers I spoke to vividly recall several fatal car crashes that had occurred there prior to my fieldwork. A trace of one remained – a disturbingly mangled mass of metal that could hardly be recognised as the remains of a passenger car. It had been wrecked by a tipper truck whose brakes had failed while descending from the new flyover towards the Ofankor junction, instantly killing all the car passengers. According to local residents, some pedestrians and a bus station porter had also become victims of accidents in recent times. Similar to the debates I followed among other road users and commentators (see Chapter 2, p. 63), hawkers blamed technical failure, overloading and overspeeding on the AKR. Some mentioned 'spiritual' beings as alternative, or additional, sources. The bread sellers were confronted, though only indirectly, with

such invisible forces when the cleansing ritual was performed right on their workplace by the chief of Ofankor and his ritual experts. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the hawkers were also paid a visit by the members of a nearby church, who held their prayer session by the roadside in order to assist those they thought suffered most from the malicious movements of the alleged powers.

Accidents, risky manoeuvres and collective emotions

The hawkers I met after these events supported both the road ritual and the protective prayers. “We all want the accidents to stop”, they told me. They were not only concerned about the hazards of accidents in the vicinity, but also about the vehicular manoeuvres of drivers that put the hawkers directly at risk. Standing with bread sellers by the roadside, we regularly needed to take evasive action when a vehicle suddenly swerved or drove directly onto the pavement. Its driver, in most cases a commercial minibus driver, had either decided to stop for passengers to board or alight, or to overtake by using the edge of the road occupied by the hawkers. “*Kwasia!* You fool!” they would shout at drivers in their shock and anger.

Similar emotive reactions to impending dangers are also part of the daily routine of those who sell at stalls on the open road. Sister Joyce and her colleagues from Asuboi, whom I mentioned earlier, recounted how passing vehicles regularly frighten them when they ‘overspeed’, overtake carelessly or try to dodge (not always successfully) big potholes. Roadside traders often cry out angrily, such as when startled by the noisy impact of a heavy truck zooming past their stalls, only a few feet away from where they sit; they also admit to the sudden rapid heartbeat that such situations provoke. They have become vigilant over time and are ever ready to jump back into the bush in case of a ‘blast tyre’ (meaning burst tyre) or other approaching dangers. These reactions are not only triggered by their immediate experience of dangers, but also by their embodied memories of accidents, which some have witnessed on their road section.

The hawkers I met in Ofankor claimed that commercial drivers, often labelled as ‘careless’ (or something less polite), engage in risky overtaking because they become impatient when they face slow-moving traffic and start worrying about losing time and money. Steven explained that these drivers follow the *kɔ ntem*, *bra ntem* principle, meaning that they have to (literally) ‘go fast, come fast’ in order to increase their daily earnings (see Chapter 5, p. 136). “They are in a hurry, they want to beat time”, he said. The drivers’ need for speed and their impatient rushing does not only lead to overtaking and swerving, but also to unduly rapid acceleration: “They will not

wait until you have finished selling to the passengers. But as soon as they get the chance, they accelerate.” Then the hawkers have to start chasing, which bears the risk of being hit by following vehicles or of colliding with other hawkers.

Apart from being physically menaced by passing vehicles, the hawkers claim they are often treated in derogatory and abusive ways. For instance, drivers shout at hawkers when irritated by their interfering with the traffic flow or when they clutch the window frames of the vehicles. “But what else should you do?” one bread seller retorted. “You *have* to hold the car to sell!” Passengers regularly insult them when they perform inefficiently and fail to exchange money, bread and plastic bags in time before the driver speeds off. Some travellers call hawkers to their windows and make them run along without buying from them – “but all this so that they can laugh at you”. What hawkers detest as well are drivers of heavy trucks who they suspect blow their horn loudly simply to scare hawkers and chase them off the road. Hawkers are thus caught in a sort of love-hate relationship with commercial drivers who bring potential customers, yet also dangers and fright.

I have been witness to many instances when drivers’ careless and impatient manoeuvres caused commotion. The bread sellers’ angry gestures, shouts of indignation and insults are expressions of their moral condemnation of the drivers’ acts, but also of their emotions triggered by tangibly (and often very suddenly) sensing dangers. Dangerous movements evoke ‘frustration-aggression’ (Katz 1999: 22) that manifests itself in commotion by the roadside and in hawkers’ outcries. What is more, these moments lead to concerted emotions, to ritualised expression of ‘collective emotions’ (Durkheim 2001; von Scheve and Ismer 2013) that produce a particular sense of community. The emotions foster a (mostly temporary) feeling of belonging to a community whose members are collectively exposed to the perilous manoeuvres of drivers, a phenomenon that I also observed among public transport passengers (see Chapter 9, p. 215). This sense of being put at risk and of their shared vulnerability (cf. Douglas 1992: 28) is reinforced through emotions and the moral condemnation of rushing drivers for their dangerous and therefore immoral impatience. It is also reinforced during instances such as the road ritual or public prayers described above, both of which addressed and underlined the hawkers’ common need for protection in an environment imbued with dangers, both visible and invisible.

Critical corporeality, commotion and conviviality

The fleeting forms of sociality that I encountered among Ofankor's bread sellers do not only emerge alongside dangerous vehicular movements, but also during their very own corporeal-kinetic performances. Part of them is the hour-long standing and tiring running: "It is not easy. You have to suffer before you gain." Hawkers frequently lament that it affects their feet, legs and the waist, especially at the beginning, and makes them 'hard' when they stay in the hawking business for a while. Some say they take painkillers for their aching bodies. One of the older female bread sellers told me laughingly that running is particularly bad for women: "It makes us open up 'below', if you know what I mean, so that our husbands become unhappy in bed. Some even accuse us and say that we have boyfriends!"

Besides body aches, so much rushing and chasing increases the likelihood of falls and collisions. Some hawkers are eager to jostle others, to push and pull whilst running, which is why hawkers regularly end up insulting each other. Among the younger and more dynamic ones in particular, tempers can be raised by competition. I have seen hawkers get into proper fights when one of them lost a sale to a swifter, more aggressive colleague. In such instances, their movements are suffused with aroused emotions, anger and frustration.

The hawkers nonetheless take pleasure in their work. "We run after the cars with joy!" one bread seller told me, explaining that their joy is triggered by the monetary rewards that result from their corporeal effort. Joy and joviality may emerge as reactions to the movements themselves. For instance, hawkers regularly joke about how strenuous their work is, or laugh (at times nervously) about the awkward task of chasing cars whilst simultaneously gesticulating with bread, shouting and bargaining. Laughter is often an effect of the ambiguity of their lived experience, of being subject to and participating in the production of a risky and dangerous environment (cf. Roitman and Mbembe 1995: 351). Sometimes, hawkers do embark on risky manoeuvres merely for the fun and thrill of it. They find sensual pleasure from engaging in what Lyng (2005, 2008) calls 'edgework', that is, voluntary risk-taking that is perceived as a source of positive emotions and embodied pleasures. Aesthetic arousal may also be experienced by the *observer* of movements. This is why Doris described her keen running as a 'show' in the sense of a peculiar practice that made her corporeal efforts and enthusiasm visible to others. These efforts are regularly admired, applauded, laughed at, joked about and mimicked by hawker colleagues and lead to what can be called 'convivial commotion'. Steven also recounted how his friends often tease him and suggest that he must have gone for *juju* when they see

that he has been fast and successful. At the same time, hawkers also mock their comical movements, or their mishaps of losing bread, money or a sandal while running. “If you don't take care and you fall down, they will laugh at you and say 'you don't know how to run!'” one of the guys explained. Some even display a sense of *Schadenfreude* and laugh spitefully when they see how others are unsuccessful, fail or fall while chasing cars.

Hawkers’ often strenuous movements appear to trigger an affective space for laughter, self-irony, parody, mockery and spitefulness. Their expressions of joviality provide a glimpse into the sensory and emotive experience of running (Ingold and Vergunst 2008; Lee and Ingold 2006; Sheets-Johnstone 1999). It is for this reason that Ofankor’s hawkers apprehend the road and the socio-economic environment in which they operate as a genuinely ‘moving’ workplace. It is moving not only with respect to the flows and speeds of vehicles and to the hawkers’ *corporeal and kinetic* engagements with these movements, but also with respect to their *emotive* engagement with the movements of drivers, colleagues and their own. Yet hawkers’ joviality, anger and frustration regularly unfold in commotion and in conviviality, both imbued with a sense of shared vulnerability, solidarity and collegiality. Commotion and conviviality thus have consolidating potential. They confirm the plight of hawkers as a concerned community. They also cement their apprehension of traffic hawking as a collective engagement with a workplace, in which vehicular movements, kinetic tactics, corporeality and emotionality become entangled.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I looked at the ways in which small-scale entrepreneurs operating on the AKR engage with traffic, travellers and ‘multitemporality’ (Rosa 2009). With their intricate movements, speeds, rhythms and timeframes, the road users turn the road and roadside into a heterotopic space (see also Chapter 3, p. 72). This space accommodates and juxtaposes a host of practices and temporal engagements that emerge from the diverse road users’ interactions. What is accommodated in Ofankor’s moving market, for instance, is the differential speeds: the rapidness and skilful running of hawkers at particular moments, also referred to as ‘rushing’, but also the speeding of vehicles or, again, their ambivalent slowness and temporary standstill. All these are manifestations of the ‘multiplicity of rhythms’ (or *polyrhythmia*; Lefebvre 2004: 16) on and alongside the road. The roadside market’s ‘variegated rhythms’ (Edensor 2010: 5) reveal what kind of workplace the hawkers are involved in, namely one with dynamic and processual qualities, ceaselessly

(re)constituted and continually (re)produced through the flows which, quite literally, run through it (cf. Edensor 2011: 190). Ofankor's human and vehicular movements and speeds, producing rhythms through repetition, afford the hawkers' commercial, temporal and corporeal-kinetic practices. They also afford their emotive experiences and, as a result, particular socialities emerging by the roadside, such as the 'convivial commotion' noted above. Such collective emotions will also be dealt with in the case of bus passengers and their reactions to movements and dangers en route (Chapter 9, p. 215).

My description of the hawkers' multiple engagements with the moving market implies a certain (over)emphasis on activeness in Ofankor, on the omnipresent hustle and bustle that is generally depicted as intrinsic to road environments in urban Africa. This depiction neglects the regular instants of inactivity and idleness by the roadside, which I have hinted at only briefly in this chapter. From the bread sellers' perspective, *waiting times* and *times for relaxing* are indispensable and sometimes mandatory parts of their work.²⁸ Waiting occurs at different times of the day, mainly outside of the regular rush hours – a term which implies a double meaning for hawkers, as it is the time when engaging with vehicles means rushing and running. Relaxing allows hawkers and their bodies to take a needed break from their dromocentric practices, but it is also a means to fill waiting time. This involves the equally neglected component of hawkers' *timing*: their continuous negotiations of when to engage in which kind of activity and when not, and for how long. Waiting and relaxing, combined with timing, thus form part of the hawkers' everyday engagement with the speeds and rhythms of the moving workplace. As I will explore over the course of the next chapters, such engagements and negotiations also distinguish the daily work of those who ply the AKR with their buses and passengers in order to make a living as transport workers. I will demonstrate that rushing *and* relaxing are important for those commercial drivers who are eager to do 'fast business' – an endeavour which is therefore not only limited to fast driving.

²⁸ The implications of waiting in (and for) vehicles have been explored among drivers and passengers (Harvey 2005; Jain 2009; Löfgren 2008; Lyons and Urry 2005) and will also be touched upon in Chapter 6 (p. 148, 161) and 8 (p. 189).

Part II

COMMERCIAL DRIVING

Chapter 5

Precarious business: navigating the uncertainties of commercial driving

Suhum's main junction was busy as usual when I reached the place one late Tuesday morning, with a combination of town vehicles and long-distance traffic cruising on the Accra-Kumasi road at varying speeds. On the lookout for some of my driver friends, I passed through the taxi rank, crossed the main road and walked over to the Accra bus station. A good dozen vehicles, most of them Mercedes Benz buses, were parked all over the station's yard. They were waiting to be filled with passengers and – once full – depart for the capital. The vehicle that was loading when I arrived was a white bus with a large red inscription: "*LION OF JUDAH*". It was the vehicle driven by Amoyaw, 26 years old, who told me that he had been waiting for more than three hours for his turn to finally start the loading procedure. By now the vehicle's 23 narrow seats were almost all occupied by passengers who had purchased their tickets from one of the station workers. "Accra! Accra! Last one!" the 'mate' shouted hectically and directed the boarding passengers to the last empty seats. Standing at the back of the *LION OF JUDAH*, Amoyaw was quarrelling with a passenger, a market woman. She wanted to take along two bags of maize yet was unwilling to pay the price that Amoyaw charged for this transport service. "Bring 20,000 *cedis*", he said, "your bags are big and heavy".¹ "Oh *adeen*, oh why?" she replied. "10,000 should be enough. Why are you drivers always forcing?" the woman hissed angrily. Amoyaw retorted that she should stop complaining. Due to her voluminous load, which prevented the rear doors from closing properly, the policemen at the checkpoint on the way to Accra would certainly accuse him of overloading and collect extra money before allowing him to drive on. Turning to me, Amoyaw said: "You see? Passengers will always complain that we are forcing for money. But if we don't force, we drivers will end up with nothing in our own pockets."

Amoyaw and many other drivers I met during fieldwork – mostly young men in their twenties and early thirties who regularly ply the Accra-Kumasi road (AKR) with their

¹ ₵20,000 were the equivalent of approximately £1.20 in January 2007.

buses and passengers – often stressed that commercial driving is about ‘forcing’. They used this term to denote their entrepreneurial efforts and undertakings and to allude to particular driving practices and tactics for getting customers. Yet ‘forcing’ was not merely geared towards making good business and ‘more money’ on the road, it also stood for drivers’ attempts to survive in the road transport business in the first place – despite the precarious circumstances such as the financial pressures that Amoyaw and his driver colleagues regularly bemoaned.

The assessment of Ghana’s road transport as precarious business is by no means new. In his article on small-scale entrepreneurs in the late 1960s, Hart (1970: 109) notes that a commercial vehicle represents “the quickest return” for Ghanaians. However, he cautions,

[m]any would-be operators [...] underestimate the *savoir-faire* required to run transport successfully, and financial casualties are frequent. The market squares and roadsides of Ghana, with their abundance of broken-down lorry hulks, provide silent testimony to the high risks inherent in this form of investment. Paper returns may look impressive to the unwary, but the risk of crippling accidents, high overheads in road taxes and insurance, the difficulty of replacing spare parts, and unreliable drivers and mechanics tend to make commercial transport an entrepreneur’s graveyard. (ibid.: 109; original emphasis)²

Roughly half a century on, the financial constraints described by Hart still affect commercial drivers. My ‘lorry park conversations’ (van der Geest 2009: 268) with them, carried out whilst waiting inside parked buses or in the kiosks of the transport unions that run the stations, were dominated by money issues: the very meagre revenues from their daily work and the risk of running at a loss. Low revenues and losses were blamed on a decrease in passengers and increase in commercial vehicles on the road (see Chapter 6, p. 147), but also on the high rent payments to the actual owners of the vehicles (‘masters’). These payments formed only one component in the drivers’ often conflictual relationship with the vehicle owners but were central to the overall financial pressures that they experienced.³ As many of my informants argued, such pressures engendered particular driving practices and ‘plans’, including

² Similar observations were made earlier by Field (1960: 134-45).

³ The relatively few scholarly contributions on commercial drivers in Ghana, all of which refer to the described constraints, comprise Date-Bah (1977, 1980), Fouracre (1994), Hart (2011), Jordan (1978), Meyer and Verrips (2001) and van der Geest (2009). On drivers in Nigeria, see Drummond-Thompson (1992), Lawuyi (1988) and Peace (1988); in Eastern Africa (Kenya, Tanzania), see Carrier (2005, 2009), Lamont (2012a), Marche (2000), Mutongi (2006), Nafukho (2001), Rizzo (2002) and wa Mungai and Samper (2006b); in South Africa, see Bank (1990), Hansen (2006) and Khosa (1992, 1994, 1997); in Angola, see Lopes (2009).

overspeeding, overtaking and other dromocentric practices to increase the daily earnings, which commercial drivers consider as one way of ‘forcing’.

In this chapter I explore one sector of Ghana’s road transport business as well as the ways in which commercial bus drivers *navigate* its inherent pressures and possibilities. ‘Navigating’ refers to the specific practices such as ‘forcing’ that I encountered in the daily work of drivers from the provincial town of Suhum. I borrow the concept of navigation from recent works that take an interest in understanding the everyday movements of young people in Africa in environments, or terrains (Vigh 2006a), of crisis, uncertainty and instability (ibid.; Archambault 2013; Langevang and Gough 2009). The concept of social navigation was first brought up by Vigh (2006a, 2006b, 2009). Inspired by de Certeau’s (1984) idea of tactical practices, by Dahrendorf’s (1979) notion of ‘life chances’ and by practice theory, Vigh uses social navigation to depict “a form of agency which entails the ability to act in relation to immediate constraints and possibilities, as well as to plot and actualise one’s movement from the present into the imagined future” (Langevang and Gough 2009: 742). According to Vigh (2006a: 11), navigating also implies assessing the movement of the social environment, one’s own possibilities for moving through it, and its effect on one’s (planned and actual) movement.

Applying a social navigation perspective within this chapter is useful for understanding how commercial drivers’ movements are associated with the fulfilment of their specific needs and aspirations, both for the present and for (hopefully better) times ahead.⁴ This perspective also reveals how drivers’ practices are shaped and often triggered by the socio-economic constraints of transport work. To illustrate this, I start by briefly introducing the commercial driving profession in Ghana and the group of Suhum bus drivers that I worked with during my fieldwork. In order to illustrate the – at times – precarious socio-economic conditions of working in the ‘informal’ transport business, I then provide detailed insights into the professional biographies of two of my main driver informants, Amoyaw and Saa Nono. I focus particularly on the pressures that the two have encountered whilst in employment and, in their own view, whilst being exploited by the respective vehicle owners. Subsequently, I explore the ways in which commercial drivers navigate the uncertainties of road transport, for instance through their practices of ‘forcing’, their search for opportunities, and their moves towards stability and upward mobility. I

⁴ This perspective helps to make sense of the experience of most drivers I worked with, namely drivers who do not own the vehicle that they drive and who work for a ‘master’, as I show later. Even though I will not explore the situation of drivers who have ‘made it’, such as owner-drivers and masters, I refer to them when describing my main informants’ aspirations.

show that some drivers attempt to do so with the help of occult (or religious) means that aim at personal success and what is known as ‘quick money’. Some draw heavily upon their Christian faith and confidence that promote distinct attitudes towards waiting and patience (*boasetɔ*). Thus navigating is also a matter of time and pace.

Bus drivers in Ghana and in Suhum

Driving, as professional occupation, emerged in the Gold Coast at the turn of the 20th century, with the construction of roads and the import of motorized vehicles, both of which were related to the boom in the cocoa industry at that time (Date-Bah 1977: 40). Transport historians describe this period as the beginning of the ‘lorry age’ (the ‘pre-lorry age’ lasted until 1918; see Hill 1963b) that witnessed an ever-increasing number of African owners and drivers of commercial motor vehicles – predominantly Bedford cargo trucks that used to be called ‘mammy wagons’ (Gould 1960).⁵ In the 1930s, these vehicles were joined by (mostly municipal) buses and taxis and later, in the 1950s, by *trotros*, the local term used for small passenger buses. The privately owned and operated *trotros* later became the dominant means of public transport within Accra as well as in other urban centres throughout the country (Clayborne 2012; Fouracre et al. 1994; Hart 2013). Nowadays, Ghanaians normally consider all minibuses as *trotros*, whether they carry passengers in urban centres or along inter-regional and rural roads. Yet transport professionals consider as *trotros* only those vehicles that make regular stops en route, allowing drivers to ‘drop’ (let off) passengers and ‘pick’ (pick up) new ones. *Trotro* drivers are thus differentiated from the so-called ‘long-journey’ drivers who ply inter-city or inter-regional routes with all types of vehicles – from minibuses to luxury coaches. More significantly, the latter do not normally ‘pick and drop’ en route, but travel with a passenger crew that remains more or less consistent from the home station to the terminal station.

Bus stations – or ‘*lɔre* (lorry) parks’ in local parlance – form the professional basis for most of Ghana’s drivers that work in passenger transport.⁶ Usually located near busy markets, major junctions or other central locations, the bus stations have often become important travel hubs as well as sites for trading and hawking (see Chapter 4,

⁵ Overviews of the historical development of motorized transport and lorry driving in the Gold Coast and, later, Ghana are provided by Date-Bah (1977), Dickson (1961) and Heap (1990). Hart (2011) provides a full socio-historical account of commercial driving in the 20th century.

⁶ Exceptions are for urban taxi drivers, who do not operate from any station or ply any fixed routes, but ‘pick’ customers in the streets all over the city and ‘drop’ them at their individual destinations, a mode called ‘dropping’.

p. 99).⁷ It is at these bus stations that the great majority of commercial drivers load their vehicles with passengers and goods and – once full up (that is, each available seat occupied) – set off on their designated routes towards their station of destination. This particular mode is often referred to as ‘fill and run’ (Stasik forthcoming). Bus drivers are usually accompanied by their ‘mates’, which is what the young conductors and driver apprentices are called. ‘Mates’ help drivers in maintaining and loading the vehicles, and when necessary, in ‘fighting’ for passengers at the station (see Chapter 6, p. 162). Once on the road, they are responsible for announcing the next stops, attending to alighting passengers and (when operating as *trotro*) calling out the name of their destination in order to attract new passengers. Most importantly perhaps, the ‘mates’ collect the so-called ‘lorry fare’ from passengers whilst en route (unless the bus tickets have already been purchased at the station prior to the journey).

At bus stations, ticket sale and other organisational tasks (regulating and monitoring the coming and going of drivers and vehicles; handling fees, fares and other transactions) are the responsibility of station workers such as ‘bookmen’ and other staff. They are usually employed by transport unions and associations, the most important being the Ghana Private Road Transport Union (GPRTU). Transport unions manage the bus stations and, within them, run branches dedicated to particular routes (often labelled again as stations, or sub-stations).⁸ They also organise and control more widely those private sector operators and entrepreneurs upon whom Ghana’s public transport system heavily depends (Beisel and Schneider 2012; Fouracre et al. 1994; Joshi and Ayee 2002; Kwakye 1995). The unions’ members generally consist of vehicle owners who rent out their vehicles (taxis or buses); of drivers who are employed by vehicle owners; and of drivers who own their vehicles (owner-drivers; Fouracre et al. 1994: 51). A further category of union members are the station workers, including office staff, ‘bookmen’, porters, etc., some of whom are also vehicle owners and former drivers.

Most of the bus drivers I worked with in Suhum were ‘driving for someone’, which means that they drove vehicles rented out to them by the vehicle owners (or *kaa*

⁷ Among the surprisingly few publications concerned with Ghana’s ‘lorry parks’ (bus stations) are Fouracre et al. (1994), Hill (1963a, 1984), Ntewusu (2011) and, most importantly, Stasik (2013) which includes a comprehensive literature review.

⁸ In large stations (or terminals), such as the *Neoplan Station* in Accra, different transport unions operate several branches/sub-stations. Branches are often named after the destinations that their drivers and vehicles serve (for instance, *Nkawkaw-Kibi-Anyinam Station, Accra Branch*); others are named after their founder or are playful nicknames or an (often meaningless) number.

wura, literally ‘car master/lord’).⁹ Among the sixteen drivers whose professional biographies I collected, only two were lucky to be owner-drivers. All the drivers were aged between 19 and 50 years, most of them considered themselves as Christians and only one third were married. During my fieldwork in Suhum, I spent a lot of time with transport workers (both station workers and drivers) in all of the town’s three bus stations, but mostly in the so-called *Roundabout Station* that spreads on both sides of the AKR. In this station’s *Accra Branch* (on the Accra-bound side) and *Kibi-Anyinam Branch* (on the Kumasi-bound side), I became acquainted with bus drivers who were particularly open to sharing their time and lives with me and to letting me join them on their trips up and down the AKR. In the following (as well as in Chapter 6 and 7), I make particular use of Amoyaw’s and Saa Nono’s own stories, practices and experiences as they effectively mirror the ways in which many of the drivers I met navigate the uncertainties of working in the transport business.

Routes, pressures and sales

I met Amoyaw and Saa Nono – both in their late twenties – during the course of my initial survey of several bus stations along the AKR, in late 2006. My first impression of the two men from Suhum was that they were doing more or less the same job. They were ordinary commercial drivers who took passengers to Accra and new ones back to Suhum. They drove vehicles that did not belong to them but to their ‘masters’, and they employed young ‘mates’ who assisted them in their daily tasks.

Upon closer examination, I realized that Saa Nono and Amoyaw conducted their business in quite different ways. Amoyaw was what is considered a ‘long-journey’ driver since he always drove back and forth between the two big bus stations (in Suhum and in Accra) in which he waited for his vehicle to be fully loaded with passengers. Saa Nono, by contrast, did not only shuttle between Suhum and Accra, but usually drove first to Anyinam (via Kyebi), located north of Suhum on the AKR, before heading all the way down to Accra. Due to this more elaborate route, Saa Nono chose to switch between operating as a ‘long-journey’ and a *trotro* driver, even within one day. He loaded passengers at bus stations (‘fill and run’) as well as from the roadside, whilst en route (‘pick and drop’). At times, Saa Nono even ‘picked’ passengers within the vicinity of bus stations, at town junctions and other spots where loading is prohibited – a mode known as ‘overlapping’, which I explore briefly below and in more detail in Chapter 6.

⁹ Ghanaians use the terms ‘vehicle/car owner’, *kaa wura* and ‘master’ interchangeably.

A further difference between the two drivers was their employment situation. Amoyaw's situation was clearly a more complicated and often unstable one. He changed vehicle owners four times during my research and was at times even 'sitting at home', that is, unemployed. Conversely, Saa Nono seemed in a quite favourable position. By the time I got to know him, he had already been working for one vehicle owner for some time and continued making business with his well-maintained minibus during my stay. Nevertheless, both drivers were under significant and continuous pressure by their vehicle owners and lived in a constant state of uncertainty. This was in part due to the "exploitative nature of employer/employee relations" (Rizzo 2002: 147) that is highly characteristic of the 'informal' transport sector in Ghana and in other African countries.¹⁰

A Ghanaian commercial driver who is 'driving for someone' becomes caught in a patron-clientelist labour relation with a transport entrepreneur. To begin with, the entrepreneur invests in a vehicle that he places in the hands of a driver who generates income by transporting passengers, their luggage and other goods. In return, the driver pays rent to his vehicle owner. This rent – known as 'sales' – is usually a fixed daily rate which varies according to the route that is to be worked, and according to the size and condition of the vehicle.¹¹ Yet what appears as a 'rental arrangement' (Peace 1988: 16) is rather an employment arrangement given that the vehicle owner pays the driver's salary at the end of the month. The salary is generally fixed at only twice the amount of the daily sales. To provide an example from my own research, a Suhum driver using a 12-seater minibus normally paid the vehicle owner C200,000 (roughly £12) in daily sales, and he would in turn expect to receive C400,000 (£24) as his monthly salary.¹² Such an arrangement turns out to be heavily imbalanced when considering that a driver often struggles to make the obligatory daily sales. Even when successful, after deducting all extra expenses, he is rarely left with much – if any – 'chop money' (personal profit) at the end of the day.¹³ Indeed, as the cases of Amoyaw and Saa Nono will show, the often exorbitant sales creates

¹⁰ Similarly exploitative labour relations are described by Peace (1988: 15-17) for Nigeria and by Lamont (2012: 184), Mutongi (2006: 554) and Rizzo (2002: 147, 154) and for Tanzania and Kenya (*daladala* and *matatu* drivers).

¹¹ In rare cases – when strong mutual trust or kinship relations exist between master and driver – the sales may be variable and fixed according to the driver's taking of the day.

¹² The daily sales for a 15-seater minibus was usually C250,000 (thus C500,000 monthly salary) and C300,000 (C600,000 salary) for a *Benz* bus.

¹³ 'Chop' (in Pidgin): to eat; food. 'Chop money' is cash that one receives, or keeps, to buy food and (if sufficient) to cover other daily expenses.

great hardship and pressure for those who work under vehicle owners – and who can easily be sacked if things don't go well for them.

Employed and exploited: two biographies

Amoyaw

Pressure and uncertainty has been part of Amoyaw's career as a professional driver. He began his career as a young helper at a bus station, assisting one of the drivers in maintaining his vehicle and learning how to drive.¹⁴ Several years later, he became a proper mate, joining the driver on his trips and learning how to deal with passengers, luggage, fares and the different stops en route. As a mate, Amoyaw did not receive salary from his 'master', but only some small chop money and, on bad days, nothing at all. He remembers how this used to frustrate him as he was doing hard work, and how he got "tired from all the shouting, rushing and carrying heavy luggage", and how he was often shouted at by the 'master' himself.

After several years as a driver apprentice, Amoyaw became a taxi driver. We were waiting in front of a mechanic workshop where his bus was being repaired when he told me the story about how his career as a taxi driver ended with an accident. He recalled the day, in June 1999 (he was 20 years old at the time), on which he had decided to stop work around 5 p.m. By that time he had driven enough to cover the sales and fuel and to be able to keep a bit of chop money. When he took the taxi back to its owner's house, the owner asked Amoyaw to take his wife to a church meeting in Akropong, a good one hour-drive away from Suhum. Amoyaw was not happy with the idea since he felt tired from the day's work and rather needed some rest. But the taxi owner insisted. Amoyaw accepted his order out of fear that his 'master' might become annoyed or even decide to sack him. Despite his tiredness, he drove to Akropong. On his return, driving alone and in the dark, he nodded off. He crashed into a bridge railing, severely damaging the taxi and sustaining head injuries of which the huge gap in his front teeth gives evidence today. Following the accident, the taxi owner not only refused to spend some of the reclaimed insurance money on medical treatment that Amoyaw needed, but also decided never to employ him again.

The hardship with vehicle owners continued for Amoyaw when he entered into the bus driving business. For instance, there was the Benz bus (a transporter converted

¹⁴ Like most of his colleagues, Amoyaw entered the transport business as a teenager, after finishing Junior Secondary School and unable to further his education due to lack of financial resources.

into a passenger vehicle) that he used when I first met him. It belonged to a well-off businesswoman who demanded C400,000 as the daily sales – instead of the usual C300,000 for this type of vehicle. “The pressure is too hard”, Amoyaw told me when he introduced me to the economics of commercial driving. “Sometimes you don’t even collect enough [from passengers] to pay your sales. Then you have to add some of the money which you kept from a better day.” Making up for such a loss becomes impossible when daily profits are low, or when the vehicle is not available (for instance, due to maintenance works or the vehicle owner using it otherwise). At the point when the Benz bus became totally unprofitable, Amoyaw stopped driving it.

After a two-month break, Amoyaw got hold of a ‘new’ vehicle: a white Nissan Urvan that an uncle of his in Accra had recently acquired. Quite ambiguously, it carried the inscription “*ADOM WO WIM*”, meaning ‘Grace in heaven’. The Urvan seemed to be quite promising, even on earth. According to Amoyaw’s calculation, if he were able to make two round trips to Accra with vehicle full of passengers (13 seats occupied) in one day, he could keep roughly C100,000 (£6) as chop money. “It’s okay, it’s not bad”, he said. This is how the figures of a somehow profitable workday would add up:

Each time Amoyaw loaded his vehicle at the bus station, he collected about C170,000 from passenger fares (13 x C13,000 for a Suhum-Accra ticket), of which C15,000 went to the transport union running the station (as ‘booking fee’) and C5,000 to station helpers (a fee called ‘down’). From two Suhum-Accra round trips in a day, he thus generated roughly C600,000 as well as maybe C50,000 from fees for passengers’ extra luggage. From the C650,000 gross profit, he had to subtract about C250,000 for fuel and another C250,000 for the daily sales to the vehicle owner. Further minor expenses were the C20,000 for the obligatory ‘little gifts’ to policemen by the roadside (a C5,000 note each). Left with a net profit of C130,000, Amoyaw would give C30,000 to his ‘mate’ and keep the remaining C100,000 for himself.

Account of a profitable workday:
two Suhum-Accra round trips with a 15-seater

C170,000	full bus	C650,000	gross profit
- C20,000	station fees	- C250,000	fuel
= C150,000	per single trip	- C250,000	sales (car owner)
x 4		- C20,000	‘gifts’ (policemen)
= C600,000	4 single trips	- C30,000	chop money (mate)
+ C50,000	luggage fees	= C100,000	net profit
= C650,000	gross profit		(£6)

The account shows that the deduced sales amount to almost 40% of the gross profit (as did the fuel costs) and that it is 2.5 times higher than the driver's chop money. It weighs even heavier as soon as the earnings diminish (such as less luggage or driving with empty seats) or expenses rise (higher bribes, small repair works). The driver's income is therefore highly fragile: each loss or any excess expenditure may shrink the scanty net profit in a dangerous way – or may even swallow it up entirely.

But things were going fairly well with the Urvan, Amoyaw reckoned. At least he managed to hand over the requested sales to his uncle, the vehicle owner, although sometimes with some small delays. In order to make up for this and not to fall out of favour with the vehicle owner, he agreed to a monthly salary of only C200,000 (where C500,000 would have been appropriate). Despite such efforts, Amoyaw was not able to keep the 'Grace in heaven' for very long. After using the vehicle for only a couple of months, he suddenly had to return it to his uncle who had allegedly decided to sell it.¹⁵ Frustrated by being dependent on vehicle owners who could let down their drivers at any time and for any reason, Amoyaw decided to apply for driver jobs with several companies and NGOs.

In desperate need for money, Amoyaw accepted to become the driver of the *LION OF JUDAH* – again a Benz bus, but this time owned by his church, the *Christ Apostolic*.¹⁶ At first, this appeared to be a good opportunity: the church elders allowed Amoyaw to use the slow, but big 23-seater for his own business, and they demanded only C250,000 in sales. Soon, however, pressures started rising again. Amoyaw realized that driving a church-owned vehicle meant having many 'masters' – not only the pastor, but other office-bearers as well: "All of them are trying to control my movements, anyone will give me orders", he complained. Moreover, they increasingly called on his service to drive church members to prayer conventions, funerals and other events but rarely remunerated him for it. "You know what they told me when I complained to them? 'You are doing the work of God'", he recalled laughingly. After the Easter holidays with their numerous church trips, which prevented him from doing his own work, and after not having been paid his regular salary for several months, Amoyaw was broke and he needed to make other plans.

¹⁵ Amoyaw's uncle, if asked, might have provided a different story altogether. Apart from a few exceptions, I did not interact with my driver-informants' masters in order not to jeopardize the trusting relationship that I had built with the drivers. It is commonly known that masters usually sack their drivers for reasons of distrust and the latter's alleged unreliability.

¹⁶ Many Ghanaian churches own buses that are used for transporting their members as well as for commercial driving during the week; they are mostly recognizable by painted wording on the vehicles (Gifford 1998: 91).



Figure 15: Amoyaw relaxing in the backseat



Figure 16: Saa Nono sitting in his Mitsubishi minibus

Saa Nono

Amoyaw's colleague, Saa Nono, who usually loaded 'his' cream-coloured Mitsubishi minibus from Suhum's *Roundabout Station* as well, seemed free from trouble with his vehicle owner. The minibus belonged to George, a transport entrepreneur in his mid-thirties, with whom the driver-vehicle owner relationship was allegedly 'cool' and harmonious. Both profited from each other: Saa Nono got a strong and nice-looking car that allowed him to do "somehow good business" on the road, as he put it, and George employed a driver who I later learned carried the reputation of being serious and hardworking, who always delivered the agreed daily sales, and who took good care of the car. Their successful cooperation was symbolically highlighted by two slogans written on the minibus with self-adhesive letters. On the rear windscreen, George had put "*STILL I THANK GOD*". According to Saa Nono, this expressed his employer's gratitude for 'getting something', that is, for being economically successful, which was the result of their joint entrepreneurial efforts and of heavenly grace. Saa Nono, in turn, had been allowed to put his own nickname on the upper part of the driver's side window: "*SAA NONO*". This translates into 'that's it' and did not appear to carry any deeper meaning. It was a catch phrase that people and colleagues shouted at him in a joking manner when they spotted him and 'his' car. Its mere appearance could be read as a sign for Saa Nono's strong identification with the minibus and for having taken symbolic ownership and responsibility over it.¹⁷

Upon closer examination, things were not all that smoothly between the two individuals. As Saa Nono opened up to me during the course of my research, I learned of money issues that were affecting his work. One problem was that George wanted more money. He would therefore urge his driver to work – and bring sales – on each and every day of the week. Obviously, this was problematic: "With this car, I don't even have one single day to rest, I will get so tired", Saa Nono explained. As Easter approached, he made some attempts for this to change. Saa Nono chose Easter Sunday as his first day off in a long time, hoping that he would be able to stay off the road more regularly in future "so that I can attend church on Sundays to thank God". But this plan failed due to continuous pressure from George. Another money issue was the costs for the regular maintenance works on the Mitsubishi bus, which frequently caused arguments. I was often present when George dropped by at

¹⁷ For different attempts at categorizing, interpreting and contextualizing the inscriptions found on commercial vehicles in Ghana, see Awedoba (1981), Field (1960), Hart (2011), Jordan (1978), Klaeger (2009), Kyei and Schreckenbach (1975), Lewis (1998), Obeng (2002), Quayson (2010a, 2010b) and van der Geest (2009). For Nigeria, see Lawuyi (1988) and Pritchett (1979); for Liberia, see Guseh (2008); for Tanzania, see Weiss (2009: 46-52).

the station or workshop to see his driver and “to do a lot of talking-talking”, as Saa Nono put it. He often got annoyed, was discontent about the repair works that needed to be done, about *how* they were being done, and about the costs involved. What annoyed Saa Nono, in turn, was that the vehicle owner avoided bearing these costs. At times, when they convened at the mechanics’, George would simply sneak off and leave his driver behind – and the latter had no choice but to pay. Saa Nono was prepared to pay for smaller repairs but expected the vehicle owner to cover the higher costs of ₵50,000 and upwards. Once Saa Nono had paid the fee, however, he barely had any negotiating power to claim the money back, to deduct it from the sales or to add it to his monthly salary. Saa Nono complained that, consequently, he argued, not much remained from his ₵200,000 salary, which was only half of what it was supposed to be anyway. When George started demanding higher sales, Saa Nono began considering breaking away from these constraining working conditions.

Ways of navigating

The pressures and frustrations experienced by Amoyaw and Saa Nono do not seem very different from those of their minibus driver colleagues across Ghana. In other parts of Africa too, vehicle owners have been described as “demanding and exploitative” (Lamont 2012a: 184), “ruthless” (Mutongi 2006: 554) and imposing “intense pressure” (Peace 1988: 17) on drivers. Various commentators agree that this leads to a series of attempts by commercial drivers “to make the best out of a difficult situation”, as Rizzo (2002: 154) puts it. Of utmost importance within this context is the drivers’ assessment that “the key to making money [is] speed” (Lamont 2013: 378). Drivers see a need for excessive speed (Rizzo 2002: 144; Carrier 2005) given that “high speed [...] is evidently essential in order to recoup the daily rental as quickly as possible” (Peace 1988: 16; see also Beisel and Schneider 2012: 651). This assessment applies to most of the drivers that I knew although some of them do not rely solely upon using excessive speed in their daily work but rather on a range of differential speeds instead (see Chapter 6, p. 161).

Practices of ‘forcing’

Suhum’s commercial drivers claim that financial pressures and low profit margins are the reasons why they need to ‘force’. The most obvious way of ‘forcing’ and of maximising profits is speeding, or ‘overspeeding’. The economic logic of speeding is subsumed in the ‘go fast, come fast’ motto: the faster a driver drives, the earlier he will return to his home base, which, in turn, allows him to make a greater number of

journeys in one day, carry more passengers and increase the daily return (cf. Lamont 2013: 370; Rizzo 2002: 147).¹⁸

Another method of increasing returns is through what is called ‘overlapping’. Here passengers are ‘picked’ (picked up) on the streets or from the roadside whilst en route, instead of at the bus station. Saa Nono and some of his colleagues engage in ‘overlapping’ so as to avoid the often long waits at the station (that occur for reasons I discuss in the next chapter, p. 147). They are thus able to go (and come) faster than those who only leave the station when full up (‘fill and run’), as Amoyaw does. Furthermore, ‘overlappers’ can overload more easily, a practice which is prohibited at the station. ‘Overlapping’ is not without risks. At times not enough passengers are found en route and competing with other ‘overlappers’ looking for passengers may involve dangerous manoeuvres, notably speeding and overtaking. As an elderly station officer explained, “It is the exorbitant sales that is forcing them to do the things that they are doing. They are always on the road, trying to beat time, trying to make the sales.”

To make the sales, some drivers are forced to work extensive hours. Some deviate from their standard route (agreed upon with the vehicle owner for the day’s regular trips) and embark on a longer, more profitable trip, often by heading to a more distant destination. Others seek opportunities to be hired by an individual or a group of travellers who are dropped off at a particular location (‘dropping’), usually against a fee that is higher than what would normally have been generated in the same time.¹⁹ For drivers, this mode of ‘forcing’ is only lucrative if the vehicle owners are not aware of the extraordinary trips and thus cannot claim their share of the generated extra income. Drivers know that such attempts are regularly grumbled about by vehicle owners who consider the moves as dishonest. They therefore threaten – or indeed proceed – to sack drivers who are found to be cheating.²⁰

Attitudes and new paths

Amoyaw’s story has shown that the possibility of being sacked is a constant threat to drivers. Losing the employer’s favour – and the entrusted vehicle that forms the

¹⁸ The intense pressure imposed on drivers and the economic logic of speed only partially explains the practices and attitudes of drivers, such as overspeeding and aggressive driving (cf. Peace 1988: 16-17).

¹⁹ The transport arrangement of hiring a vehicle (as opposed to sharing it with strangers) is much more prevalent with taxis, especially in urban centres where someone in a rush, and with the necessary cash, might decide to ‘take dropping’.

²⁰ Hiding extra income is particularly considered as cheating in cases when the daily sales has been agreed to be flexible and depending on the driver’s taking of the day.

cornerstone of the driving business – is not necessarily caused by a driver's dishonesty, deceit or poor performance. Some of my informants have had their vehicle 'taken away' because it was 'down' (out of order) or was going to be sold. They claimed this might have been true, or maybe simply a pretext from the employer for having given his vehicle to a new driver who seemed more efficient or who had agreed to pay more sales. The previous accounts have also shown that drivers are obliged to accept the various constraints imposed upon them, such as working each day of the week in order to make sure they can keep their jobs.

Some drivers argue that the critical employment conditions foster particular attitudinal behaviour, such as acting in a humble and servile way and avoiding challenging vehicle owners. "When you approach your master, you have to obey him", one driver explained. "Don't oppose him. Above all, don't annoy him with anything – like with your complaints about how things are hard for you, how you are suffering." Drivers claim that honesty and openness often do not pay. For instance, minor vehicle faults should better not be reported (and rather be paid from one's own pocket) as they could be held against the driver and possibly raise accusations of carelessness and irresponsibility. One way of avoiding such accusations and appearing as someone 'serious' is to deliver the daily sales on a timely basis. Ideally, it is delivered in shorter intervals than those requested by the vehicle owner who often accepts to receive the accumulated sales at the end of the week, or even once a month. This is supposed to demonstrate that the vehicle owner's money has not been used for anything else in the meantime.²¹

Frequently drivers reckon that the pressures and the unprofitable work conditions necessitate taking the more drastic and proactive move of returning the vehicle to its owner – effectively quitting their jobs. For instance, when things were brought to a head for Amoyaw at the end of my fieldwork, he decided to finally stop driving the *LION OF JUDAH* for his church. A few months later Saa Nono also quit with his employer. He gave up on the Mitsubishi minibus following new disagreements over the amounts of the daily sales and maintenance costs. Yet both drivers continued going to 'their' bus stations to meet with colleagues and station workers and, now and then, 'got a spare' (meaning they stood in for a driver). Moving within and remaining part of the network of transport workers, with its strong sense of solidarity, is essential for drivers who hope to get connected to 'someone helpful' and be re-

²¹ There is a common perception that drivers – just like anybody with access to money – are tempted to use the master's money for settling debts, covering loans, helping out someone in need, or for other personal projects – while the masters are kept waiting for their money.

employed. For instance, Saa Nono was actively seeking new driving opportunities, under more favourable conditions (and with a ‘nice’, strong vehicle), before quitting with his employer. He therefore enquired among his colleagues at Suhum’s different bus stations, asking them to recommend him to vehicle owners that they knew.

Amoyaw was also searching for alternative opportunities. He tried several paths in order to ‘move laterally’ into other spheres of employment (cf. Peace 1988: 19). Still driving the *LION OF JUDAH*, he regularly scanned the *Daily Graphic* and other major newspapers for job vacancies. He hoped to leave the ‘informal’ transport sector and gain employment for a company or NGO in order to receive a better salary and to be in a more stable situation. One of Amoyaw’s friends, a school secretary, helped him to formulate and type application letters. The letter he showed me for proofreading was sent to the WHO representation in Accra, though without success. Another path was to try to be hired as someone’s personal driver, such as for the Chief Justice who – according to a relative in Accra – was looking for an additional driver. The idea of driving a big man’s vehicle, probably a ‘nice’ Landcruiser, and receiving a good salary was extremely tempting. But despite all efforts, including numerous phone calls and visits to Accra, Amoyaw did not gain employment.²²

Simultaneously, Amoyaw invested a lot into winning the favour of his cousin living in the United States. Some time ago, the relative had promised to buy a minibus that he would then leave to Amoyaw for ‘work and pay’ (a scheme by which a driver is given a vehicle to work with and to be paid off in many small instalments before eventually becoming his own).²³ This brings us to the ultimate desire of every commercial driver, that of driving one’s own vehicle. Transport union officials expressed that it would be helpful if more drivers had the opportunity to join the ‘work and pay’ scheme and drivers regularly discussed the ‘upward mobility’ that vehicle ownership entails (cf. Peace 1988: 19; Carrier 2009: 182). Speaking of one of the few owner-drivers in Suhum, Amoyaw said, “He has no problem. He doesn’t have to worry about his sales.” Being the owner means being free from many constraints, and this was Amoyaw’s goal as well. Therefore, when his cousin from the US came to Ghana to attend a family funeral, Amoyaw spent a lot of time and energy helping with funeral

²² Amoyaw also kindly asked me to enquire from my host in Suhum, the bank manageress, whether she would employ him as her driver. Some of the young drivers (in particular desperate taxi drivers) even proposed to drive me in my Opel Astra, arguing that this would make my movements more pleasant.

²³ The well-off friend or relative promising the driver a vehicle (some claim it will be shipped to them from abroad) is a recurrent theme among commercial drivers. Many truly count on such promises, others use these stories to boost their reputation.

preparations. By appearing as someone serious and hard-working, he wanted to impress his cousin and push him towards the suggested car deal.

Prayers, powers and patience

In their varying pursuits of finding a new vehicle owner, getting employment with an institution or acquiring their own vehicle, commercial drivers actively explore, move within and expand networks of personal relations and invest heavily in potential connections. Within this context, drivers in Suhum often mention one very particular connection: their connection to God. Indeed, many see prayers and intercessions as highly instrumental. As a devout Christian, Amoyaw regularly asked God to support him – or better, his cousin – so that the planned car deal would finally work out. He also asked others for their supportive prayers. One day, he visited me at home and dictated a prayer request that I had to write for him on a clean sheet of paper: “I pray for assistance so that my cousin will fulfil his promise to give a car to me to drive.” Amoyaw then took the paper to an evangelist who was holding prayer conventions in town and who was praying over the special request and other worries brought forward by the attendees.

Praying is part of Amoyaw’s and many of his colleagues’ lived religiosity that strongly marks the ways in which they experience and approach the challenges and pressures of the driving business (cf. Meyer and Verrips 2001). The majority of drivers are attracted by (although not all attend) the preaching and practices of Ghana’s charismatic Pentecostal churches that put great emphasis on prosperity.²⁴ The churches provide welcome prospects for those who try to overcome financial losses and hardship and who hope to realize their plans and projects. Drivers who engage in these prospects are keen to distinguish themselves from those who they claim take non-Christian measures towards prosperity and protection. Though unable (or unwilling) to single out any particular colleague, my interlocutors regularly referred to drivers who make use of talismans, medicine (*aduro*) or *juju* – of course in a hidden manner – in order to boost their own (and maybe limit their colleagues’) business and to prevent it from failing. Drivers in Suhum are said to acquire these powers and ‘apotropaic medicines’ (Morris 2010: 596) from spiritual experts, such as Muslim *malams* found in the town’s *zongo* quarters or ‘fetish priests’ (*akomfo*) selling the powers of their deities (*abosom*) at shrines located in the area (see also

²⁴ On the emergence and workings of Ghanaian Pentecostalism and the ‘prosperity gospel’, see for instance Daswani (2013: 469-470), Dovlo (1998), Gifford (1994, 2004: 85-90) and Meyer (1998a, 2004).

Chapter 7, p. 178).²⁵ Amoyaw admitted he once went to such a spiritualist, an allegedly very powerful man called *Akooko Tiger* – not in his own ‘search for security’ (Field 1960), but to drive a customer to the renowned shrine in the village of Akooko. There he encountered several drivers from Suhum, mostly taxi drivers. They had obviously come to consult the self-professed ‘native doctor’ in their pursuit of a successful business and of what is labelled as ‘quick money’ (or ‘fast wealth’, cf. Smith 2001). Once, when visiting the village myself, I noticed a huge banner that revealed what *Akooko Tiger* promised to offer to his clients in distress. In bold letters it stated not only that “*LIFE IS WAR*”, but also “*VICTORY*”.

People often resort to, and freely combine, both occult powers and Christian practices and attitudes in their attempts to defeat the challenges in their lives. Usually only the latter are openly revealed. Such is the case with the mentioned prayers and prayer sessions, but also with Christian faith and confidence on whose power drivers heavily count. My informants recurrently expressed this through utterances such as the ubiquitous “*Onyame adom*” (meaning ‘[by] God’s grace’) or “*eye Awurade dea*” (‘it belongs to the Lord’), which have almost become standard vocabulary, especially in southern Ghana. Faith is also expressed in phrases like “God is in control”, “Your miracle is on the way” or “God’s time is the best”. Many of these phrases are found as slogans and mottoes written on vehicles or on stickers (Meyer 2004: 460; van der Geest 2009). They are coded as “succinct reminders of God’s activity on earth and what relationship owners or drivers of vehicles have with God” (Quayson 2010b: 89).

The profound confidence that these catchy phrases allude to can be quite explicitly elaborated in the drivers’ daily conversations and comments. With regards to their fragile work conditions and sufferings, many drivers are confident that things are in the hands of God, and are certainly well placed there. As one driver explained to me, “Once you know that God is in control of your work, it is easy for you to endure all the difficulties you go through.” They are also reassured that things will eventually be well with God’s help – “All shall pass”, it’s just a matter of time.²⁶ This mindset – including the hope for a miracle on the way – seems particularly appropriate in

²⁵ The long-standing phenomenon of Ghanaian transport workers visiting shrines for consultations (*abisa*), for seeking help, protection and prosperity is well described by Field (1960: 88, 108, 134) and Parish (1999: 124-125). See also Allman and Parker (2006) on the once famous shrine of the Nana Tongo deity located not far away from Suhum. On the use of *juju* in the transport business, see Meyer and Verrips (2001: 165-76).

²⁶ Hart (2011: 53) agrees that the slogan “All Shall Pass” is frequently used by drivers “to express the faith in good times ahead. If things are bad now [...], all shall pass, and it will get better soon”.

connection with the drivers' attempts to break out, improve their situation and to start something new in order to achieve progress and prosperity.²⁷ Most remarkable within this context is their confidence in and constant reference to prospective times, particularly to 'God's time'. For instance, Amoyaw expressed the sincere belief that his job applications and other efforts would bear fruits at some point – namely at a point in time chosen by God, chosen for a good (and obviously 'His' very own) reason. One of his colleagues who was eager to become a vehicle owner put it this way: "As long as I don't have a car, I will do foolish work. But I have to manage. When the time reaches, God will give me one." This is a call for perseverance and patience (*boaseto*), for waiting patiently for something – better – to happen in the future.

The drivers' patient waiting is clearly different to the ways in which roadside dwellers wait by the roadside (see Chapter 3, p. 78). The latter are often not doing much else except hanging out and letting time pass (though this can be entertaining in itself). The drivers perceive their waiting not as timepass, but as a necessary phase of passing from suffering to success, which involves struggling – doing 'foolish work', 'managing' – and often actively 'forcing'. Waiting and navigating thus go hand in hand and bears structural similarities with the period of 'waithood', a term used to describe the current, and often prolonged, experience of many African youths waiting to enter social adulthood (Honwana 2012).²⁸ Waithood is not to suggest a sense of passivity and idleness, of merely waiting for things to change. On the contrary, it is marked by the youths engaging in various, at times industrious activities in order to survive and to realize their dreams. As a 'tactical modus operandi' (Masquelier 2013: 487) of African youths and of many commercial drivers, waiting is about "situating oneself in such a way as to maximize one's encounter with opportunity" (ibid.) – opportunity that will open up at some point and that "God will provide", to cite another common Ghanaian phrase.

Attitudes towards waiting and patience among drivers come with specific warnings: a driver is not to engage in 'unnecessary forcing', by which he tries to "force [his] luck to come". Rather he should take his time in finding (or being provided with) new paths and opportunities. He must not, for instance, hastily quit with the vehicle owner or rush into a new employment situation, as such rush might throw a driver back into an uncertain situation again. People raise similar cautions when it comes to

²⁷ A similar functionalist argument was made by Radcliffe-Brown (1965: 176): "We can face life and its chances and difficulties with confidence when we know that there are powers, forces and events on which we can rely."

²⁸ The term 'waithood' was brought up by Singermann (2007).

taking occult measures in their rush for prosperity and stability. While they are certain that the use of medicines and powers can be very effective, they also warn that the effect – such as making ‘quick money’ – may only be short-lived, if not counterproductive and even harmful. This is precisely the reason why, according to Amoyaw, “You shouldn’t force money to come” and why waiting for ‘God’s time’ is simply the best.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I described some of the socio-economic dimensions of working in the road transport business, most particularly the constraints that the majority of commercial bus drivers in Suhum experience on a regular basis. The drivers who work for a vehicle owner become involved in a precarious business – in conflictual relationships, exploitative employment situations and fragile earnings. This often produces a great deal of pressure, uncertainty and frustration, but also a series of entrepreneurial practices and ambitions as well as optimistic, even spiritual stances that the young drivers direct towards their present and future situations. Such practices and stances can be described as ways of navigating the terrains and networks of road transport, which are marked by constraints and chances. To draw from Vigh (2009: 429), the drivers’ social navigation involves “simultaneously moving toward a distant future location or condition [...] *and* making one’s way across immediate and proximate oncoming changes and forces of the near future”.

At the centre of the rough roads to money and to more stable work conditions are the drivers’ attempts to ‘force’. These attempts include, among others, dromocentric driving practices aimed at ‘beating time’ and at increasing the daily returns, such as through overspeeding and ‘overlapping’. As will become clear in the following chapter, the driving and loading mode of ‘overlapping’ is suitable only for a particular type of bus drivers. A different way of ‘forcing’ is by investing in personal connections and professional networks, or even in occult and ritual domains. One example for the latter is the acquisition of occult powers employed in drivers’ rush for ‘quick money’. Drivers who rely on distinctly Christian practices and stances, however, heavily rely on their strong faith and confidence in divine guidance on their paths towards (again divine) intervention. This requires perseverance and patience during their wait for better times ahead or for *the* opportunity to materialize – an approach that is not necessarily backed by religious convictions only.

Within this context, there appears to be a certain tension between the drivers’ dromocentric ‘forcing’ on the one hand, and their plea for patience and waiting on

the other. As indicated above, the drivers I met therefore call for moderation with regard to some of the 'forcing' practices, not least because 'beating time' and rushing for money may actually backfire. Some also point to the need to find an appropriate balance between 'forcing' and patience in their daily work at stations and en route. Such balance is demonstrated by some of those drivers who engage in 'overlapping'. Although they usually spend a rather hectic time on the road, searching for passengers and competing with colleagues, they can also be seen taking their time, going slowly and at times even waiting. As I will explore in the next chapter, 'rushing' and 'relaxing' need to be carefully negotiated by drivers who ply the Accra-Kumasi road as 'wayfarers', trying to find their way through an intrinsically moving market.

Chapter 6

Rush and relax: the kinetic practices of competing for passengers

“Ekwan so nnye. The road is not good”, Saa Nono said whilst decelerating and making the typical gesture – a frustrated wave of the hand – that commercial drivers often make to colleagues when passing them. He was not bemoaning the poor condition of the Accra-Kumasi road that we were driving along, but the fact that business on the road was bad. “You see, the market is slow. Not many customers”, the driver’s mate, Kwame, explained. He showed me the lamentable bundle of *cedi* notes he had collected from the few passengers so far on that quiet Friday morning. Saa Nono was now driving at moderate speed in order not to miss potential passengers arriving at the roadside. Besides, there seemed no other commercial vehicles around with whom to compete for passengers, which meant there was no need to rush. In the afternoon, things were going to be different, Saa Nono said. Government workers, secondary school pupils and many others would be eager to travel to Accra for the weekend. At the same time though, more commercial vehicles would be on the road, all trying to ‘chase’ passengers. Yet Saa Nono remained optimistic: “The cars will be many”, he said, “but we will move fast”.

Complaints about business being bad on the road and about a ‘slow market’ are regularly brought forward by commercial bus drivers who engage in ‘overlapping’. I have briefly described ‘overlapping’ in the previous chapter as one way of ‘forcing’, of navigating the pressures and uncertainties of commercial driving. It is a practice by which drivers collect – in their own words, ‘pick’ (pick up) – passengers from the roadside while en route instead of loading them at bus stations. Drivers reckon that ‘overlapping’ allows them to ‘beat time’ since they can avoid long and tedious queuing at stations, which is the result of the surplus of vehicles and/or lack of passengers. Waiting at the station is often perceived as unproductive – “lost time converts to lost money” (Argounova-Low 2012b: 85) – whereas getting moving and loading en route is seen as an opportunity to fit in more trips and passengers. In other words, ‘overlapping’ eases drivers’ entrepreneurial impatience

and promises ‘fast business’. In practice, as the short episode above indicates, the driving and loading mode can be less profitable and slower than anticipated. It may be the result of a ‘slow market’, the presence of (at times many) other ‘overlappers’ on the road or, when both converge, of the competitive driving that turns into a necessity and major challenge for drivers ‘chasing’ the same passengers.

My aim in this chapter is to look at the mode of ‘overlapping’ in the context of competition – of drivers competing with their colleagues for potential passengers *en route*. As I will demonstrate, ‘overlapping’ takes place in an environment characterised by various rhythms and speeds and by contingent and often unpredictable movements of vehicles and travellers. Similar to roadside hawkers who engage with the flows and speeds of through traffic (see Chapter 4, p. 112), drivers face a truly moving market, which requires knowledge, skills and specific kinetic practices. Driving and doing business in a moving market, I argue, is similar to ‘wayfaring’ in the sense of Ingold’s usage of the term.¹ Ingold depicts ‘wayfaring’ as a mode of movement in the course of which people “‘feel their way’ through a world that is itself in motion” (2000: 155) by means of “continual tactical manoeuvring” (ibid. 2010: 127). ‘Overlappers’ are ‘wayfarers’ insofar as they attune their own vehicular movements in response to the movements of other actors on and alongside the road (cf. Ingold 2000: 242). Ingold’s notion of ‘wayfaring’ is thus closely related to social navigation (Vigh 2006a, 2009) which I employed in the previous chapter.² I choose to refer to ‘wayfaring’ in this chapter mainly because it can be regarded as clearly distinct from ‘transport’. Ingold (2010: 126) defines ‘transport’ as the mode of movement that is intended as “a lateral displacement rather than a lineal progression, and [that] connects a point of embarkation with a terminus” (ibid.: 126). For moving in the transport mode, it is of no consequence what happens along the way. Thus, commercial drivers who practice what is known as ‘fill and run’ are also ‘transporters’: they load their buses with passengers at the station; they set off once they are full; and they head straight to their terminus. Along their way they are not normally required to ‘chase’ passengers and to compete with other drivers – unlike their

¹ Ingold depicts the concept of ‘wayfaring’ and its counterpart, ‘transport’, in several of his works (2005, 2007, 2010). Yet in his earlier work (2000: 219–242) he uses the terms ‘wayfinding’ and ‘navigation’. Laurier and Lorimer (2012) make use of the concept of ‘wayfinding’ to analyse the daily practices of commuters in a European setting.

² Vigh (2009: 428) criticises Ingold amongst other things for perceiving environments (or landscapes) as too congealed and fixed, which renders Ingold’s concept “less adept at illuminating social environments and practice”. I do not fully share his criticism and find it appropriate to draw from both authors’ works in order to make my points in this chapter.

‘wayfaring’ colleagues whose movements and manoeuvres on the road are characterised by precisely these tasks.

In this chapter’s first section, I briefly explore the reasons for heightened competition among commercial bus drivers from the provincial town of Suhum. I also sketch the different and at times combined modes of loading passengers in Suhum and along the Accra-Kumasi road (AKR) as well as their respective potentials and constraints. Then I describe a journey with one of my driver friends, Saa Nono, with whom I frequently travelled in order to learn about (and on few occasions practice myself) competitive driving and ‘picking’ passengers en route. The journey reveals to some extent the knowledge and skills that are required for the task of ‘overlapping’. These are addressed in the following section in which I show how ‘wayfaring’ is connected with drivers’ attempts to map the moving market, but also perceptually engage with it and attune their own actions accordingly. Finally, I turn to kinetic practices and to the repertoire of differential speeds – ranging from ‘rushing’ to ‘relaxing’ – which ‘overlappers’ continuously negotiate whilst doing competitive business on the road.

Competition and loading modes

“The business is down, they are too many!” the bus drivers in Suhum often complained whilst waiting at the station. Transport workers claim they have observed an increase in the number of both commercial vehicles (taxis and buses) and drivers ‘in the system’ during the past years.³ In Suhum, this seems to be linked to the growing number of businessmen and businesswomen as well as retired government workers who have the means to acquire commercial vehicles that they rent out to drivers. The rising demand for drivers is easily met due to the continual attractiveness of the driving profession to young men, particularly among those with low (or no) education.

Bus drivers have observed a further worrying development, which is the gradual decline in people’s demand for transport services. This is not only related to the more frequent usage of privately owned vehicles, but also to the wide availability of mobile phones. “They have spoiled the business”, people say, claiming that Ghanaians now make fewer journeys since the phone allows easy communication and more efficient planning of journeys (see Chapter 8, p. 192). The result of these concurrent

³ This observation is partially confirmed through statistical figures that show a steady (though not dramatic) yearly increase in newly registered commercial vehicles between 2000 and 2008 (see Ministry of Roads and Highways & Ghana Statistical Service 2009: 65-68). This is paralleled by the steady growth of Ghana’s total vehicle population: from 511,000 in 2000 to 1.033,000 in 2008 (ibid.).

developments is a surplus of commercial drivers and a lack of customers, which has lead to a heightened level of competition among commercial drivers, worsened by the financial pressures that many experience.

Waiting and its alternatives

The saturated market serves as one explanation for what can be hours-long waiting times in Suhum's stations, which is where most drivers going to Accra load their passengers.⁴ The situation is aggravated when Accra passengers have different options, such as between boarding a bus going straight to the capital or a bus going to Nsawam (and then continuing in another vehicle to Accra).⁵ Station loaders also risk losing customers to 'overlappers' operating in and around town whose practice of poaching passengers who are on their way to the station (which they never reach) is called 'doing broken' – probably because they have broken the 'no picking around stations' rule. Detecting a driver who is 'doing broken' regularly infuriates those drivers and passengers who are patiently waiting inside the station.

Yet waiting at stations may also pay off as it usually guarantees driving without empty seats and is a lucrative opportunity to take on board more luggage and goods. In a slow loading process, the extra load can be stored in such a way that it will not be considered (and fined) as illicit overloading. This explains why my friend Amoyaw was doing quite well in the days when he was able to use the *LION OF JUDAH* Benz bus (see Chapter 5, p. 133). Amoyaw departed from one of Suhum's stations, headed straight to the *CMB Station* in central Accra and returned to Suhum in the evening. He reckoned that, despite the usually long waiting time, loading at *CMB* with his large 23-seater was more profitable than loading at any other of Accra's stations. Firstly, passengers boarding at *CMB* (located near the *Makola* and *Kantamanto* markets and near the railway station) were made to pay a slightly higher fare for the Suhum trip than those boarding at other stations. Secondly, many of the passengers were marked traders and brought bulky goods for which Amoyaw could charge good money (Figure 17).

⁴ Two Accra stations (or branches) exist in Suhum: one at the so-called *Roundabout Station* located beside the AKR, at the town's main traffic junction, another one at the *Main Station* located in the town centre. Both stations are run by the GPRTU.

⁵ Within Suhum's bus stations, there is no direct competition among bus drivers going to Accra given that they all wait in the same queue. The situation is very different in larger bus stations, such as the *Neoplan Station* in Accra where several branches (sub-stations) offering identical services are in "stiff competition" (Stasik 2013: 8) due to a complex entanglement of diverse rhythms, flows and movements (see also Stasik forthcoming).



Figure 17: Loading the *LION OF JUDAH* at the *CMB Station* in central Accra

Many of Amoyaw's colleagues plying the AKR with large Benz buses used station loading as a standard mode of doing business. This mode is neither spectacular nor demanding for drivers given that it consists of mere 'transport' in the Ingoldian sense, usually without competition and loading in-between departure and arrival. An exception may be the last section of each trip, when entering Accra's suburbs or approaching Suhum and when new short-distance passengers are occasionally taken on board to replace those who alight early. Whilst this *trotro* ('pick and drop') mode helps to maximise profits, it often annoys the already present passengers who feel that they are being delayed (see Chapter 9, p. 216).

Those drivers who do not want to wait at the station, who 'force' in order to fit in more trips and passengers in one day need to engage in one or more alternative loading modes. Only a few of the drivers I knew in Suhum were exclusively engaged in 'overlapping'. One of them was Opoku, a young driver in his early twenties who drove a Nissan minibus. A friend and at times also a rival to Saa Nono, Opoku never loaded at the stations but plied the road between Suhum and Accra as an Ingoldian 'wayfarer' – 'picking' and dropping passengers along the way, thus performing what some call 'overlapping non-stop'. Other drivers combined station loading with 'overlapping', either in a single trip or throughout the roundtrip. To provide one example, they may opt to load Nsawam passengers in the hope of leaving earlier from the station and after dropping their passengers in Nsawam, they continue as

‘overlappers’.⁶ Or they go to Accra as station-to-station drivers and return back as ‘overlappers’. This becomes an option when drivers estimate that queuing at the station in the capital will be a waste of time and that finding passengers on the road will be quicker and easier. Heading straight back and reaching Suhum relatively early usually allows them to go for at least two round trips in one day.

As I have briefly explained in the previous chapter (p. 129), Saa Nono was one of the bus drivers who did not only combine and switch between several driving and loading modes, but who also chose a more elaborate route. Saa Nono had what he called his ‘plan’. Instead of driving to Accra in the morning, he first went northwards on the AKR up to Anyinam and returned to Suhum, then went to Anyinam again before heading all the way down to Accra, and back to Suhum in the evening. He was convinced that his ‘plan’ was ‘helpful’, as he put it, particularly because of the potentially lucrative afternoon trips (Anyinam-Accra, Accra-Suhum). Like some of his colleagues, he believed that another key for making better business was to engage in ‘overlapping’.

Potentials and constraints of ‘overlapping’

One of the appealing aspects of ‘overlapping’ is the continuous ‘picking’ and dropping of passengers whilst en route. This allows drivers and their ‘mates’ to fill some of the seats not only by one, but by several passengers during the journey, as those who alight are (ideally) replaced by the next ones joining. ‘Mates’ are able to collect a higher total transport fare for these seats, given that the fares for travelling short distances are comparatively higher than long distance travel fares. Takings can further be maximised by overloading, that is, by taking more passengers on board than the number of seats in the vehicle. Whilst the ‘one seat one person’ regulation is strictly implemented at stations where officials and driver colleagues allow no breach, it is taken less seriously on the road.⁷ The most appealing aspect, however, about ‘overlapping’ is that it allows to ‘beat time’. And even if a financial advantage is by no means guaranteed, at least moving and being on the road *feels* more productive than waiting. This is based on the optimistic stance taken particularly by younger drivers who claim “Once you get a car, once you are driving, by all means you get money”.

⁶ One variation of this mode is called ‘loading mixed’, which involves loading passengers going to different destinations and then ‘picking’ new ones to replace those who have alighted on the way. Whilst ‘loading mixed’ is an unusual practice at the station (it is not normally tolerated by station officials), it is common practice among ‘overlappers’.

⁷ Overloading is also an offence when the vehicle boot does not close properly due to excess luggage. Station officials usually turn a blind eye on this (contrary to the traffic police) but they do prohibit overloading passengers.

One such impatient driver was Opoku, the young man mentioned above. He engaged in nothing else but ‘overlapping’ and rarely spent time at the station. His senior colleague Saa Nono was convinced that by doing ‘overlapping non-stop’, Opoku was exhausting himself as well as over-using and ‘weakening’ his vehicle and was more likely to have an accident. Furthermore, Saa Nono believed that Opoku’s ceaseless search for passengers was uneconomical: he must necessarily have been driving even when the market was slow, when few or no customers were found on his route.

The risk of driving with empty seats and running at a loss is one of the major constraints for ‘overlapping’. It is related to the general decline in passengers (as described above) but also to a periodically slow-moving market. The latter depends on several factors that can also affect drivers loading at stations. One factor is the daily, weekly, monthly and seasonal rhythms. For instance, passenger volumes are lower at particular times of the day (usually late morning and mid-afternoon) and when rain showers deter people from walking to bus stations or standing unprotected by the roadside. People generally do not travel much towards the end of the month when they have less money for travel expenses, shopping, trading or other activities. Conversely, passenger volumes are significantly higher on the more frequented market days and on weekends when people travel to attend funerals.⁸ Seasonal travel activities around Christmas, Easter and traditional festivals are generally also promising for drivers, as people move more between Accra and their hometowns. These times are often referred to as the ‘cocoa season’ for bus drivers.⁹

If ‘overlappers’ find it hard to fill their vehicles with passengers, it may also be because of the presence of other drivers. Some ply the same road section with the same intentions (hence, probably the term ‘overlapping’) and may ‘pick’ waiting passengers before the other is able to get to them. The threatening presence of competitors is not only associated with the general surplus of commercial drivers ‘in the system’, but also with particular days or times of the day. For instance, ‘overlappers’ from towns along the AKR expect to encounter many more rivals on Saturday mornings, when large numbers of buses arrive from Accra with passengers attending funerals in provincial towns. This, in turn, leads to a surplus of vehicles that need to be filled on the way back to Accra – and to a heightened battle for passengers along the road and at stations (see Stasik forthcoming).

⁸ Many funeral attendees already travel on Friday late afternoon, as they need to be present for the funeral rites early Saturday morning; they often return on Sunday afternoon after the thanksgiving service.

⁹ The ‘cocoa season’, the time for harvesting and selling cocoa, stands for a season of heightened business and trading activities – for more money in people’s pockets.

Another constraint facing drivers are the traffic jams. They occur daily on the AKR, such as in the capital's suburb of Ofankor and on the through road in Nsawam, but also away from urban centres, where construction works or accidents can obstruct traffic flow. Where traffic jams are a nuisance to all commercial drivers given that they prolong travel, 'overlappers' are particularly affected since they interfere with loading passengers on the move. Drivers imagine these hold ups allow competitors to 'pick' passengers whilst they themselves are stuck in traffic. Some of the travel interruptions, however, are triggered by passengers who need to be 'picked' and dropped. Such stops may allow competitors to overtake and take the lead. Some of the drivers therefore prefer to load as many long-distance travellers as possible, even if 'pick and drop' is potentially more lucrative.

The fewer stops drivers make, the less their chances are of encountering law enforcers. Law enforcers are a key obstacle to 'overlapping' as they are supposed to ensure that no 'picking' takes place within the vicinity of bus stations, at town junctions or other designated road sections. Regulations are set up by transport unions and local government (municipal or district assemblies) in attempts to bring more passengers to the bus stations and to control traffic flow. The drivers risk being fined by transport union officials, community task force members or traffic policemen when they are caught 'picking' in these prohibited areas. They may not only lose money (in fines or bribes) and valuable time, but risk also having their licences and vehicles confiscated.

The constraints and challenges of 'overlapping' thus deter quite a number of bus drivers from engaging in this mode of commercial driving. Some also reckon that they lack the experience, knowledge and practical skills explored later in this chapter to be successful 'overlappers'. Finally there are those who desist from 'overlapping' because they drive large buses and vehicles with weak engines. Large buses find it more difficult to occupy their many seats and slow vehicles are unable to perform quick manoeuvres and accelerate fast when such flexibility is required, as I show below. Saa Nono had a fast minibus as well as a great amount of driving experience, and his trips up and down the AKR were usually quite eventful and illuminating for me – in particular when his 'wayfaring' skills came out in the process of 'overlapping'.

‘Overlapping’: A trip with Saa Nono

We were at the bus station in Suhum, sitting in the back of Saa Nono’s Mitsubishi minibus and waiting for the two buses in front of us to fill with passengers and then leave before it would be our turn to load. Saa Nono told me of his plan: first he wanted to get a full load of passengers to Anyinam and then he would turn around and ‘pick’ passengers from the roadside to take to Accra. But things were moving ‘too slow’ at the bus station, as the drivers remarked. Few passengers seemed to want to travel late on Tuesday morning. By about one o’clock, Saa Nono had enough of waiting, concerned that any longer would make his planned trip to Accra unprofitable. He called to his mate, Kwame, and told his colleagues that he needed to do maintenance on his vehicle – which was a lie. He sparked the engine, briefly blew his horn and took off – without a single passenger.

To avoid being seen ‘doing broken’ by his colleagues and the station workers, Saa Nono drove a few hundred meters before starting the ‘picking’ process. Driving slowly through Suhum town, Saa Nono and Kwame were watching out and occasionally calling out for people who would want to travel with them. By the time we were leaving the Suhum limits on the AKR, we had ‘picked’ only three passengers, but driver and ‘mate’ were busy finding more. When entering the small communities after Suhum, we noticed a few people standing by the roadside and walking on byroads. Saa Nono honked repeatedly and gestured to indicate that we had empty seats. Kwame, too, tried to draw the attention of potential customers. He leant out of the window, called out the major destinations on our route – “Kyebi, Anyinam! Kyebi, Anyinam!” – and asked people via signs and shouts where they intended going. But nobody wanted to travel.

The first stop was at the Apedwa junction where the AKR divides into the ‘old road’ (through Kyebi) and the ‘new road’ (see Chapter 2, p. 45). One of our passengers wanted to alight here. Saa Nono and Kwame discussed the situation and decided to wait at the junction for a few minutes to give potential travellers on the upcoming section the opportunity to get to the roadside (instead of us passing them too early). Then we continued our trip. Upon reaching the hospital junction in Kyebi, Saa Nono noticed a group of women walking slowly towards the roadside. He honked and Kwame shouted “Asiakwa, Anyinam! *Mubekɔ anaa?* Will you go?” The women waved back at us in acknowledgement, and Saa Nono stopped for a good handful of them to join us. Continuing towards Anyinam, only few more passengers were found as other buses were now plying ‘our’ road as well (one had just passed whilst we were loading).

Some of our passengers alighted in the towns after Kyebi and the rest continued to Anyinam where Saa Nono dropped them at the roadside, close to the bus station. Saa Nono then made a rapid U-turn, and headed

back south. He explained that, on our way coming, he had spotted a group of about six Hausa men and women with suitcases at the town exit, most probably waiting for a lift to Accra. They would be rich ‘pickings’ – if only *we* were able to get them before our competitors, one of whom suddenly appeared on the scene. The white, half empty Mercedes Benz Sprinter overtook us in the town centre, but stopped to load only fifty metres ahead (Figure 18). “You see our enemy? He has also seen me, so we have to rush”, Saa Nono said. Rushing meant accelerating, overtaking the Sprinter (and checking in the wing mirror whether he was coming closer) and keeping going despite two people waiting by the roadside making attempts to flag us down. Saa Nono could see that the group of Hausa travellers were still waiting ahead – and he wanted to get them fast. “*Yepe ntem oo! We are in a hurry!*” Saa Nono shouted as we drove up to them. Kwame rushed the passengers into the car and had not even closed the door as Saa Nono took off again, still leading the Sprinter. “Fast business!” Saa Nono said laughingly as he blew his horn and sped up.



Figure 18: Spotting a Sprinter, one of Saa Nono’s ‘enemies’, loading passengers

The next batch of passengers on the way to Accra was ours as well, and after another stop the car was full. We took the quicker new road, which we wouldn’t have if still searching for passengers who are more easily found along the old road. We passed through Suhum and came to a halt again in Nsawam. Two passengers alighted and were replaced by new ones. It took us almost half an hour to traverse the congested town and Saa Nono could only speed up again upon reaching the new dual carriageway. Arriving at Ofankor, the gateway to Accra, the next delay awaited us – a slow-moving bottleneck. Saa Nono was desperate now to

‘dodge’ traffic, so he branched off into a backstreet which led through residential quarters but allowed us to arrive fairly soon in Achimota.

“Last stop!” Saa Nono called to the back as we reached the Achimota bus stop, next to the Achimota bus station. He had decided not to continue to *Circle*, which is usually the last stop in Accra, since it was already getting late. He instructed Kwame to quickly drop everybody and to transfer those passengers who wished to continue into a nearby Accra *trotro*.¹⁰ Things got hectic again as Saa Nono made a U-turn and forced his way through the chaotic traffic. He looked out for new customers and had a short argument with a traffic policeman who accused him of ‘picking’ at the station. “Suhum, Nsawam! Suhum, Nsawam!” driver and ‘mate’ shouted as we were leaving Achimota behind and headed back to Suhum for the last trip of the day.

Mapping the market, reading the road

The trip with Saa Nono conveys to some extent what commercial drivers claim is crucial for successful ‘overlapping’: “You have to know the market”, my driver friends often said when preparing me for my own driving episodes as a (temporary) ‘overlapper’. In other situations they advised me (and often their ‘mates’ too) to “watch the road very carefully”. Their words of advice referred to their knowledge of general activities on and alongside the road on the one hand, as well as to their perceptual engagement with the road’s immediate movements on the other.

Knowledge of and familiarity with the market

Commercial drivers and experienced ‘overlappers’ in particular possess a certain amount of knowledge of *when* and *where* relevant activities generally occur in the moving market. The mentioned occurrences and fluctuations of passengers, competitors and law enforcers – with their strong rhythmic and cyclical character – inform what can be seen as drivers’ schedule-like knowledge of the market. Yet the occurrences are not only anchored in time, but also in space and are thus reflected in drivers’ map-like knowledge of their workplace. For instance, ‘overlappers’ usually already have a clear idea of the availability of passengers at particular spots and sections on their route as customers are often found in the vicinity of bus stations, where they hope to find a ride more quickly than by waiting inside the station. They are equally found waiting at junctions and crossroads, in towns and outside, where pedestrians’ paths converge or where dropped passengers look for connections. Some

¹⁰ The transferred passengers did not have to pay an additional fare, since it was taken care of by Kwame who gave the money to the *trotro*’s mate.

spots have developed over time into popular bus stops with names such as *Hospital*, *Pentecost* or *Zongo*, referring to nearby institutions and residential quarters that are usually linked to the main road by footpaths or backstreets.¹¹ Some road sections are also known to be more lucrative than others, just as the 'Kyebi old road' is lined with more communities and therefore produces more passengers than the 'new road'.

With regards to competitors, drivers try to map the spots where they are most likely to be encountered – mainly at junctions and crossroads where passengers congregate and drivers' routes intersect. Yet it still remains difficult to predict the occurrence of competitors on particular road sections. Drivers find it crucial to familiarize themselves with other drivers, with their vehicles, routes and destinations so as to distinguish between harmless colleagues and competitors. Equally important is the familiarity with municipal law enforcers and patrols from different police stations, as they come to specific road spots to check drivers, vehicles and their papers and, as every knows, to collect money from drivers. Policemen operating only early in the morning can often be avoided by departing late for example. For those with whom encounters are expected and unavoidable, certain precautions can be taken. In these cases, drivers either ensure they are not overloaded or, if they are, arrange some *cedi* notes that will be quickly handed over to the policemen to avoid any closer inspection.

Grasping the temporal and spatial occurrences of passengers, competitors and law enforcers is thus crucial for 'overlapping'. The schedule and map-like knowledge of the market – a representation of time and space inscribed in the drivers' minds (cf. Gell 1985, Hutchins 1995)¹² – provides orientation for deciding where, when and whether at all drivers should engage in 'overlapping'. Yet this knowledge contributes to successful 'overlapping' only to a certain extent. What drivers try to schedule and map are merely the general movements and occurrences on and along the road. They are the broader trends, rhythms and flows of all road users, which may be referred to as the 'macro-movements' of the market. Drivers have gained their generic knowledge of 'macro-movements' through work experience and learning, including long-term observation of and exchange about road and roadside activities. This is why knowledgeable drivers and 'mates' are better placed to predict the 'macro-movements' in a more or less accurate manner, even from an off-road position.

¹¹ These names have entered into the vocabulary of drivers, 'mates' and travellers who employ them when announcing and requesting stops as well as when discussing routes and passenger availability.

¹² See Ingold (2000: 220-238) for a critical discussion of the concept of 'mental maps'.

Engaging with immediate movements

What ‘macro-movements’ do not capture, and what drivers are mostly unable to predict are the immediate and individual movements and manoeuvres that constitute the road’s everyday activities. These ‘micro-movements’ are what people are actually doing in the moving market – at their very own place, pace and moment, and thus in a highly contingent manner. For ‘overlappers’ and their ‘wayfaring’ mode, the most critical of ‘micro-movements’ are the ones performed by pedestrians and driver colleagues. They contribute to the incidental appearance and disappearance (even non-appearance) of customers and competitors on the road sections that ‘overlappers’ are plying at a particular moment. The movements – and the manoeuvres of competitors in particular – are less captured by drivers’ generic road knowledge than by their perceptual engagement with what is currently happening on the road. As one driver put it, “Even if you know the market, you don’t know how things are moving unless you read the road”.

A few examples should help clarify what ‘reading the road’ actually entails. First of all, it means to *look out and watch attentively*. For instance, looking out for the physical movements of people by the roadside was what Saa Nono and his ‘mate’ were doing when searching for customers. Potential passengers are those who can be seen standing, walking and arriving by the roadside, on footpaths and backstreets and at the well-known spots referenced above. Sometimes passengers are only seen when it is already too late, whilst boarding a competitor’s vehicle, and this is the result of unfortunate timing. Others are not seen at all, either because they have already boarded a competitor’s vehicle or because they will reach the roadside only after the vehicles have passed there.

‘Overlappers’ also have to actively look out for the movements and kinetic manoeuvres of competitors. “You see our enemy?” Saa Nono said during our trip, referring to the white Mercedes Benz Sprinter that had overtaken us, then stopped ahead of us but was not seen again in the rear-view mirror because it was moving slower. Similarly, competitors appearing on the route of ‘overlappers’ are seen driving at varying speeds, ‘picking’ and/or dropping passengers and often disappearing again from the drivers’ gaze – either temporarily or for good.¹³ Drivers’ visual attention is also required at the well-known haunts for law enforcers. “As soon as you reach that place”, one driver explained, “your eyes will go all around. You will

¹³ Unlike passengers who are found along the roadside, competitors can also be observed from a stationary perspective, such as when ‘overlappers’ are waiting at bus stops or junctions.

be watching whether maybe you can see that they are making an operation there.” This comes with particular (corporeal and vehicular) efforts similar to those effected by drivers who try to prevent accidents, as will be explored in Chapter 7 (p. 175).

What helps ‘overlapping’ drivers to visually capture immediate movements is their generic knowledge of when and where to look and what to look for. Being experienced with the market also enables them to ‘recognise at sight’ (Grasseni 2004: 42). Drivers who ‘read the road’ therefore not only look out, but also *assess*. On the basis of their “skilled capacity to look” (ibid.: 43), they may be able to *make a skilled judgement* of what they see. For instance, drivers continuously assess whether people appearing by the roadside intend to travel or are merely chatting, walking or watching the road. Saa Nono did so when he spotted the group of Hausa men and women who he assumed were waiting to travel to Accra. In many similar cases, drivers and ‘mates’ recognise passengers (including their travel destinations) by their typical travel dress and luggage, attentive posture, ways of watching the road and other unmistakable signs they often give.

The same applies to commercial vehicles that enter into the drivers’ gaze and need to be assessed – ideally quickly – as harmless, rivalling or potentially even helpful. On the one hand, assessment is based on drivers’ familiarity with competitors (and their vehicles) and with particular vehicle types. For instance, Saa Nono had recognised two minibuses that he knew were going to Anyinam via the new road and that might have had Kyebi passengers alighting at the Apedwa junction. Later, Saa Nono encountered the Sprinter, the ‘enemy’, a vehicle type that Suhum drivers fear for its speediness, high seat capacity and frequent ability to leave no customers to slow competitors (which Saa Nono wasn’t). On the other hand, drivers assess appearing vehicles according to their past as well as immediate movements and manoeuvres. Particularly telling is which of the passengers they ‘pick’ (or leave behind) and how many they have already picked. This often allows drivers to ‘read’ their competitors’ destinations, routes and intended movements and to picture the challenges they may pose. For instance, Saa Nono saw that the Sprinter arrived half-empty and was then ‘picking’ Accra passengers – two indicators that the driver would probably rush for more passengers and therefore compete directly with Saa Nono who in turn knew how to adjust to his competitor’s intentions.

The visual attempts of ‘overlappers’ to find out about other road users’ intentions would often fail if words, signs and signals were not also exchanged, for to ‘read the road’ is also about *communicating and interacting* (cf. Argounova-Low 2012: 78). Commercial drivers and their ‘mates’ often make use of their voices, hands, ‘high

lights' (high beam lights) and, most excessively, horns when driving (see also Chapter 7, p. 177). With these they try to attract people's attention and to advertise themselves, their destinations and the number of available seats (Figure 19). At the same time, the use of sounds and signs are also ways to elicit a response from pedestrians as to their intention to travel and travel destination. Drivers may enquire directly with abbreviated shouts ('You going?', 'Where to?') and hand gestures, as Saa Nono and Kwame did when approaching a group of women at the Kyebi hospital (see episode above). The verbal and non-verbal responses of travellers – and generally all the signs they make to flag down passing buses – are crucial for "mutual visual recognition" (Grasseni 2004: 42). This recognition is an important element in the contact between drivers and travellers. It determines in part whether drivers are going to decelerate and stop or move on.



Figure 19: The driver's 'mate' attempting to draw the attention of passengers

Brief hints about their own movements and intentions are occasionally also exchanged between driver colleagues. For instance, drivers give signs to oncoming colleagues about potential passengers they have spotted earlier, on the other side of the road.¹⁴ Although drivers like to indicate that the road is 'not good' (with the frustrated wave of the hand, as mentioned at the beginning), this exchange of 'market

¹⁴ Drivers also warn colleagues about the presence of law enforcers by pointing downwards with their index finger through the open car window.

information’ (cf. Beuving 2004) is of little practical value for others and would require proper discussions about observed or expected movements, which are certainly impossible whilst driving. Discussions may, however, take place among those travelling in the same vehicle. ‘Mates’ and at times talkative passengers regularly get to discuss, assess and speculate about the market with their drivers and thus support them in the task of ‘reading the road’ – and of responding to the perceived movements and manoeuvres.

Attuning and timing

To ‘read the road’ is the crucial task of ‘overlappers’, of ‘wayfarers’ who are concerned to seek a way through a market environment that is constantly moving and often rapidly changing (cf. Ingold 2000: 155; Vigh 2009: 431), not least because ‘overlappers’ themselves are constantly shifting their positions. The well-experienced ones, through their continual and perceptual monitoring of the road, are able to ‘know how things are moving’. This type of immediate and necessarily fluctuating knowledge – often in conjunction with generic road knowledge – provides orientation for attuning their own movements accordingly, as “motion within motion” (Vigh 2009: 431).

On the road with ‘overlappers’, I regularly observed how attunements became necessary (or were at least considered) with regards to the drivers’ general choice of route and loading mode. For instance, Saa Nono at times changed what he called his ‘plan’ when things were not moving well for him. There were days when competitors did not leave him sufficient passengers for a lucrative afternoon trip to Accra. His alternative options were to intensify his ‘overlapping’ trips on the Anyinam-Kyebi-Suhum section, to check whether loading at a station would make more sense, or to abandon his route altogether and take passengers to Koforidua, off the AKR. But Saa Nono could also get lucky and spot a large group of Accra-bound passengers during his shorter morning round. He would then turn his day’s schedule around, going for his big trip to Accra first and plying only the provincial towns in the afternoon.

Many of my driver friends regularly changed plans whilst queuing and waiting at the station and did ‘overlapping’ instead (which is why I was often unable to meet them at the agreed time and place). Like Saa Nono at the beginning of the trip illustrated above, drivers at stations are at first concerned with time – with waiting and departure times. One indicator for these clock-based times – and for the patience that may be required to overcome the waiting – is the current busyness of the station. Drivers scrutinize this busyness by checking the number and size of buses parked

inside the station (at peak times even outside), the order of the buses joining the queue (noted on a board at the station office; cf. Jennische 2012: 476) as well as their own position in this queue. In their attempt to manage time, the estimated time helps drivers to decide whether to continue waiting or switch to ‘overlapping’.

Once drivers are on the road as ‘overlappers’ and ‘wayfarers’, however, they are less concerned with time than with *timing*. The task of competing with others and ‘picking’ passengers requires making a move at the right time, namely at those moments when everything comes together in the conjunctures of the road (cf. Mazzullo and Ingold 2008: 34). To borrow from an Ingoldian perspective again, “at such moments, which may not be predictable, one has to be ready to move *at once* and quickly” (ibid., original emphasis). Without this readiness by way of ‘reading the road’ and without the right timing, the conjunction with customers who are ready to leave may pass and one may lose the opportunity. And without seizing the right moment for attuned action, the conjunction with other ‘overlappers’ may turn into competition that one may lose.

The challenge of ‘overlapping’ is not only to act at the right time, but also to do the ‘correct’ move. There are numerous reasons why an action – a move or manoeuvre – may be inappropriate, go wrong or even backfire. One may be the drivers’ (and their mates’) lack of knowledge, experience, attention or skilled judgement. Another is found on a practical level, namely that drivers cannot possibly apprehend all other ongoing movements on the road from their current position. Equally obstructive is the fact that, as a result of the moving and contingent market, the context of enactment is always potentially changing (cf. Vigh 2009: 431). In some contexts, drivers may have to choose (usually very swiftly) between several possible actions all of which may not be appropriate in a given situation. At the centre of drivers’ repertoire of alternative actions that need to be negotiated are differential speeds. It is to the dromocentric as well as to other kinetic practices vital to ‘overlapping’ that I turn now.

The need for speed?

“We have to rush”, Saa Nono had said when encountering the Sprinter in Anyinam, when it became clear that his rival needed to be ‘chased’, as drivers often put it. ‘Rushing’ (or ‘hurrying’, ‘forcing’) on the road includes the dromocentric practices of accelerating, overspeeding (or ‘going speed’, ‘going fast’, from *kɔ ntɛm*) as well as overtaking, tailgating and other similar manoeuvres. One driver explained how ‘rushing’ may evolve into a competitive situation:

When the other one is also doing ‘overlapping’ I have to chase him. Speed! When I see that he is stopping, and when none of my passengers want to alight here, then I will go fast. I will increase my speed for me to reach maybe the next town. And when I see passengers who are going I will pick them fast. And then I move again before the other one will come.

This example shows that ‘rushing’ in the context of ‘overlapping’ is not just about fast driving, but also about fast ‘picking’ and the active rushing of passengers. As mentioned above, drivers and ‘mates’ often approach passengers with hectic signs and signals and, when loading, tell them to hurry up and rush them into the vehicle. In order to lose even less time through loading (occasionally also to prevent being caught by law enforcers), drivers are keen to move off and accelerate even before the ‘mate’ has properly shut the door. Here, the drivers resemble the bread-selling hawkers described in Chapter 4 (p. 114) who try to gain customers by means of quick moves that suggest action, leaving customers little time to think of alternatives.¹⁵ Drivers’ rushing with its kinetic practices thus adds a skilful, embodied and also tactical dimension to the economic logic of (fast) speed.

Yet ‘overlapping’ is not solely about fast speed and quick moves. Drivers obviously need to slow down and stop in order to ‘pick’ and drop passengers. In some situations, drivers can decide to wait and even to reverse to collect passengers who come running, are busy shopping or are conversing by the roadside. They may also slow down in order to increase the distance between them and preceding ‘overlappers’ and to avoid rushing for the same passengers. Drivers may even wait inside bus stations, at bus stops or junctions in order to increase their chances of encountering passengers, but also to watch the road before making hopefully a good move. As Amoyaw explained, “At times, when I see that a car has just moved to do ‘overlapping’, I have to wait small, for some time, and I read the road before I will also move. We say ‘*Obi kɔ enti twen. Wokɔ aa wonnya* (Someone has gone, so you wait. If you go, you won’t get)’.”

¹⁵ Practices for rushing passengers are equally employed at bus stations where passengers can choose between different vehicles and alternative travel options, and where drivers and their crew therefore need to fight (at times physically) for their customers (see Stasik 2013 and forthcoming). A crafty attempt made by Suhum drivers to lure passengers and to speed up the loading process is the use of ‘shadow men’ (or ‘shadows’, see Stasik 2013: 9). These station workers take a seat in a waiting vehicle and pretend to be real passengers. Thus arriving passengers are led to assume that this particular vehicle will get moving fairly soon, which makes joining it more attractive. See Jordan (1978) and Lamont (2012a) on how drivers and ‘mates’ may “*give the appearance of rapid and efficient initiation of the journey*” (Jordan 1978: 38; original emphasis) at bus stations.

Decelerated driving and the tactical (non-)move of waiting are usually referred to as ‘relaxing’ – the reverse of ‘rushing’. By emphasising how important it is to also ‘relax’, drivers stress the need for patience (*boaseto*) and tactical slowness in a business that is predominantly associated with dromocentric practices and with the need for (fast) speed, as I have shown in the previous chapter (p. 136). In practice, ‘overlapping’ drivers negotiate a variety of speed modes (and moves) located on a continuum between excessive speed and very slow pace, including standstill. In some situations, drivers have to make difficult choices. This is the case when they get trapped in the ‘aporia of speed’ (cf. Derrida 1984) – in between the need (or desire) to speed up and overtake on the one hand, and the need to slow down, break, halt or even reverse on the other. “At times you have to choose”, Saa Nono explained. “Either you rush or you relax”. He, himself had got into what I term a *dilemma of speed* during the trip described above, when he was simultaneously facing the threatening Sprinter as well as deciding what to do with the two potential passengers who were trying to flag us down in Anyinam. Saa Nono had quickly decided *not* to stop for the passengers but to keep going at a fast pace so that he would reach the group of Hausa travellers before the Sprinter. Had he decelerated and stopped earlier, it might have given his competitor the chance to overtake us, gain the lead and ‘pick’ the more lucrative passengers waiting further ahead.

In other situations, again, being fast may actually backfire. For instance, the faster the ‘overlappers’ go, the more difficult it is for them and their ‘mates’ to spot and assess potential passengers, particularly those that are not close to the roadside. Also, ‘rushing’ in an attempt to catch up with rival vehicles may be disadvantageous given that following an ‘overlapper’ too closely means plying a road which has just been grazed for travellers. Instead, the time that elapses whilst ‘relaxing’ may allow for new travellers to arrive at the roadside. What is more, speeding and the race games into which drivers enter are often noted by travellers who are waiting for a ride. The latter may decide not to join hectically approaching vehicles (and are therefore ‘lost’ customers) out of concern about the hurried drivers’ uncomfortable and dangerous manoeuvres.¹⁶ This refers to the obvious perils of ‘rushing’, namely the accidents, injuries and even deaths that may result from dromocentric driving practices. “You hurry to make money fast”, a driver told me and exemplified how this may prevent drivers from applying the brake in time if a critical situation should occur on the road.

¹⁶ At the same time, as I show in Chapter 9 (p. 215), passengers may also become irritated with drivers who drive slowly and ‘relax’ since this often results in a prolonged journey and later arrival.

“All these things cause accidents”, he added. Saa Nono once put this fatal connection in a pithy equation: “If you rush, you crash.”

Conclusion

One of my arguments presented at the beginning of this chapter was that bus drivers who load passengers inside bus stations and who merely drive back and forth between their stations differ significantly from their colleagues who engage in ‘overlapping’. The former are ‘transporters’ who do ‘fill and run’ and tend not to compete with other drivers whilst en route. The latter are ‘wayfarers’ and have to deal with the movements of competitors and passengers whilst driving. For station loaders, competition may only arise when their potential customers have to choose between different travel options available within the same station. At this point, drivers (with their ‘mates’ and other collaborators) can often be observed acting like hunters who “chase passengers, always on the scout to woo them into their vehicles”, as Stasik (forthcoming) describes in great detail. Yet ‘overlappers’ are also hunters. They ply the road for their prey, for passengers waiting to be caught (and ‘picked’) by themselves, or by their competitors, who may also suddenly appear – which is when the hunt often becomes hectic. The knowledgeable and skilled hunter according to Ingold (2000: 190) is able to “tell things from subtle indications” that the unskilled hunter might not even notice. Similarly, the experienced ‘overlapper’ is not only able to map the road and the generic movements of the ‘market’, but also to ‘read the road’ by perceptually engaging with and exploring the immediate movements and signs of passengers and competitors.

I have also shown that drivers’ engagement with these movements comes with their attempts to attune and time their very own movements and manoeuvres accordingly. Drivers adapt, at times even abandon their plans, routes and loading modes, and, whilst in the processes of overlapping, resort to a repertoire of kinetic actions and *differential* speeds. This calls into question the common claim about the “seemingly continuous necessity of ‘reckless’ speed” (Lamont 2013: 370) among commercial drivers. Yet it is worth noting that drivers’ attempts occur in a road environment that is marked by uncertainty, by the contingent, often unpredictable, invisible and also misread movements of others. In turn, although ‘overlappers’ may be skilled and experienced, their timing, actions and speeds can occasionally go wrong. At times, drivers do not even notice the inappropriateness of, for instance, their random cruising speed or of their tactical ‘rushing’ and ‘relaxing’ since they do not get to see which passengers they have missed as a result of their moves. In other situations, the

missed opportunities become obvious and vanish right in front of their eyes, such as when competitors are seen ‘picking’ the passengers one could have collected as well. One indication of unreasonable and unsuccessful moves may be driving with empty seats for too long and, ultimately, not generating the fares as expected and required – although other factors and circumstances often play a part in this as well. Finding sufficient passengers whilst ‘overlapping’ is a central concern for commercial drivers. Taking them to their diverse destinations safely and without any accidents is another concern, as I will explore in the next chapter.

Chapter 7

Kill your speed, fight your fear: confronting perils on the road

“Who is a driver?” my interlocutors at Suhum’s bus stations often asked when contemplating their profession as commercial drivers. The answer that they provided was simple. As one of my friends explained: “A driver is a person who goes for his work and comes back safely. When his body and his car don’t get hurt. That person is called a driver.” For the drivers I knew – mostly young men who regularly plied the Accra-Kumasi road (AKR) with their buses and passengers – the ultimate quality of drivers was their ability to reach their (and their passengers’) destination safely, without any accident, injury or death.

Accidents and death by accident are recurrent themes among commercial drivers and figure prominently in conversations whilst waiting at bus stations or in traffic jams (especially those caused by accidents). When fresh accidents are reported, drivers are likely to discuss and vividly speculate about the circumstances, including the level of damage and the number of fatalities. These discussions and accounts often lead to resigned comments and sighing among those present. While on the road, drivers often insult as ‘killers’ those road users who are seen driving in a careless manner. Yet drivers are also well aware that their very own actions may lead to fatalities and that they therefore have great responsibility towards others. “If you do the least mistake, you can kill somebody”, a driver explained to me. As I have laid out in Chapter 2 (p. 63) already, there are a variety of causes for the high number of accidents on Ghana’s roads and particularly on the AKR, a highway frequently labelled a ‘death trap’. Among these causes are the dromocentric practices of drivers, including the manoeuvres intrinsic to ‘overlapping’ as described in the previous chapter. These practices contribute largely to the tangible perils and critical situations that drivers encounter (and cause) on a regular basis – perils that one needs to master in order to be called ‘a driver’.

In this chapter, I describe what bus drivers see as the major challenges of plying the AKR and I explore the different attempts of drivers to confront these challenges. To

do so, I provide a detailed account of one of my trips with Amoyaw – a ‘fill and run’ round trip to Accra with his *LION OF JUDAH* Benz. I continue by discussing what Suhum’s drivers perceive as the most central causes of crashes and critical situations on the AKR, many of which are related to matters of speed. Then I turn to the ways in which drivers confront the road’s perils. I show that one of the drivers’ attempts to accident-free driving involves practices of ‘wayfaring’ – the skilled and embodied practices of making one’s way through a challenging and constantly moving terrain (similar to the practices of ‘overlappers’ who engage with the movements of travellers and competitors; see Chapter 6, p. 157).¹ Other attempts are the protective (occult and religious) means employed by some of the drivers, but also faith-based convictions and emotional stances for promoting (divine) reassurance and fearlessness that are deemed necessary for safe driving.

On the road with Amoyaw

Travelling from Suhum to Nsawam, we were driving on a road section which everybody knows is terribly bad: it is rough, bumpy, and its margins are often sharp-edged. Most challenging on the 28 km long and unrepaired section are the numerous potholes. From the moment we left the bus station, Amoyaw had to watch out for potholes. He tried to avoid hitting them, especially the big and deep ones, by ‘dodging’ them, as Ghanaian drivers say, which means swerving left or right. Shortly before reaching the Asuboi township, there was no way around: the slope was so pitted with potholes that he was forced to rumble through. After the township, when descending again, we experienced the first critical moment on our trip. As we approached the narrow Asuboi bridge, a cargo truck came flying towards us. Amoyaw slammed his brakes and drifted towards the right kerbside to give way to the truck that occupied part of our lane. What he could not avoid, however, was the massive pothole that opened up in front of the bridge. Amoyaw drove right into it, provoking a loud bang and a few outcries from frightened passengers. “If you get a blast tyre, where will you go?” one of them challenged the driver.

Moving on, a small truck heavily loaded with tubers of yam barely managed to climb the slope in front of us – a hindrance for the speedier vehicles behind. Amoyaw was tempted to overtake, but the engine of his *LION OF JUDAH* was too weak for a swift manoeuvre. Besides, visibility was poor when approaching the hilltop. In order to avoid an encounter with an oncoming vehicle, Amoyaw waited until we reached the hilltop before he overtook the slow truck. A few moments later, we were the ones

¹ Fittingly, Ingold (2010: 130) states with regards to the ‘wayfarer’ that “[o]nly when he has reached a place can he truly be said to have found his way there”.

being overtaken: through his side mirror, Amoyaw noticed a passenger car approaching from behind at great speed. The driver set off to overtake *despite* several oncoming vehicles and cut in front of our vehicle, barely missing a collision with an approaching coach. “*W’abo dam?! Are you insane?!* ” Amoyaw shouted out and ‘threw his high lights’ at the driver (as drivers say for flashing their lights). My fellow passengers also made angry comments, especially when they saw that the impatient driver had to decelerate soon after: a few hundred meters further ahead, an overturned cargo truck was blocking our lane, creating a tailback on the open road as traffic intensified towards Nsawam.

On this late Thursday morning, the market town of Nsawam was not too congested, so we were able to reach the new and smoothly asphalted dual carriageway fairly soon. Travelling on it was much faster as neither cracks, potholes nor stationary vehicles presented any hindrance. Amoyaw reduced his speed only occasionally when approaching the bordering towns, where local vehicles joined the quickly moving traffic and pedestrians tried to cross the four lanes. “Walk like that, and if you die you will see [the result of your behaviour]!” he hissed at a woman who got to hear no more than the driver’s honking as she crossed without care. Then, at the end of the 19 km stretch, our vehicle came to its first proper halt: the road through Ofankor, at the outskirts of Accra, was, as always, congested. We were advancing only very slowly in the stop-and-go traffic which became worse as local vehicles – mostly taxis and *trotros* – were pushing into our lane ahead of us, often in a careless and aggressive manner. Trying to leave no big gaps between the vehicles in front of us, but also to avoid a rear-end collision Amoyaw switched constantly between accelerating and braking. “*W’aye adee! You have done well!*” one woman told Amoyaw when we finally reached *Circle* in Accra where all the passengers alighted.

At around five o’clock, and after waiting for several hours at the *CMB Station* in central Accra, the *LION OF JUDAH* was fully loaded again and we were ready to return to Suhum. After passing the city limits and halfway to Nsawam, we found ourselves in a sudden and heavy downpour. Amoyaw was forced to slow down because visibility was so poor on the road. Besides, the weak windshield wipers were unable to cope with the strong rains and the hurriedly closed windows were quickly steaming up. As we continued on the unrepaired road section, night had almost fallen. Amoyaw switched on his headlights. The darker it got, the more he was disturbed by the oncoming vehicles and their often blinding headlights. Some of their headlights were wrongly adjusted whilst ‘high lights’ were often not dimmed by merciless drivers, despite our approaching. Amoyaw remained vigilant, staring intensively into the blackness of the road. At one point, when climbing the hill at Kyekyewere, he slammed on the brakes: a broken-down truck suddenly emerged behind the hilltop. Amoyaw cursed the driver of the deserted vehicle which was unsecured

on our lane without any lighting or warning triangle. The passengers, many half asleep, were startled and shouted “Driver, watch the road!” and “Please take your time!” After all, as they said, they did not want to die only a few kilometres before reaching their destination (see also Chapter 9, p. 215).

The causes of crashes

During this trip up and down the AKR we were fortunate not to have had an accident (*akwanhyia*)² and to have been spared from witnessing one – despite the many critical situations that we encountered, as travellers often do on this road. Most bus drivers I worked with during my research are clearly aware of the multitude of causes that account for the road’s perils, including of their own, often perilous dromocentric practices. Nevertheless, in their daily assessments and discourses, drivers generally reduce these causes to two central, but partially connected ones, namely the condition of the road and the conducts and manoeuvres of road users.

The condition of the road

Drivers who regularly ply the AKR, one of Ghana’s major highways, perceive the road itself as a source of danger. As I have demonstrated in Chapter 2 (p. 62), the most critical features are the hills, slopes and bends that mark many of the AKR’s sections, such as the black spot at Potroase where poor visibility and excessive speed may prove particularly fatal; or the narrow spots, such as the Asuboi bridge where accidents are usually not exclusively blamed on evil spirits. A further and regularly lamented feature of the AKR’s unrepaired and ‘rough’ sections is the badly maintained surface, particularly the abundance of *potholes*. Those of alarming size and depth are often referred to as ‘killer potholes’. Among all the material and landscape features, potholes are claimed to be the greatest challenge for driving.

When approaching a pothole (or worse, negotiating a section with numerous potholes), drivers usually try to avoid ‘hitting’ (*bo*) it by ‘dodging’ it. In drivers’ experience, hitting and dodging each involve their own perils. *Hitting* a pothole affects not only the travellers’ bodies and wellbeing (see Chapter 9, p. 212), but also the vehicle. In the long run, the vehicle’s tyres, wheel bolts, shock absorbers and the ‘under’ (chassis) may become ‘weak’ or damaged by the frequent harsh impacts. The immediate effect of hitting a pothole may be a ‘blast tyre’ (the local expression for burst tyre), a neologism that nicely captures the harshness and threat of such an

² The term *akwanhyia* is composed of the noun ‘road’ (*kwan*) and the verb ‘to meet’ (*hyia*).

incident. Further effects may be a broken axle and, as a result, loss of control, with possibly fatal consequences. For heavy vehicles, particularly trucks with an unevenly distributed load, hitting potholes can easily lead to dangerous swinging, even overturning. *Dodging* a pothole bears similar consequences. A driver who tries to avoid hitting potholes often engages in abrupt and swift manoeuvres that can also lead to swinging and swerving. More critical is the fact that a driver who dodges is likely to threaten other road users, for instance when he suddenly leaves his assigned driving position whilst being overtaken or facing oncoming traffic (see Carrier 2009: 189; Figure 20). “Do you want to kill us?” I often heard drivers shout at others who pulled into our lane unexpectedly and came dangerously close.

Hitting potholes and the manoeuvres of abrupt dodging are at times unavoidable, such as when potholes are seen only at the last moment, perhaps due to an unfavourable road layout. It is particularly difficult and treacherous to spot potholes at nighttime or during heavy rainfall, when distinguishing the water-filled potholes from the rest of the flooded, at times reflective road surface becomes almost impossible. Drivers may also fail to notice potholes in time because of their fast driving or tailgating. Potholes thus form one of the many material and landscape features of the road that are potentially perilous, but that lead to critical situations particularly through the distinct manoeuvres of drivers.



Figure 20: Dodging a ‘killer pothole’



Figure 21: Broken-down and damaged ‘Burkina truck’ on a hill slope

The conducts and manoeuvres of (other) drivers

“Some accidents can be avoided by drivers, some cannot. Some are their own making”, one elderly transport worker told me during a discussion, thus underlining the responsibility of drivers for parts of the road accidents (see Chapter 2, p. 63). A common argument reiterated not only by my interlocutors, but also by road safety experts, the media and the general public is the alleged lack of education among drivers. It appears that commercial drivers in particular have often received only limited formal education and never attended any proper driving school.³ In order to illustrate this (and not least to mock their own profession), Suhum’s drivers repeatedly told me about the astonishingly poor knowledge of road signs among some Ghanaian drivers, revealed some time ago in a TV programme on road safety. In interviews these ‘ignorant’ drivers had given refreshing interpretations of particular road signs. Shaking with laughter, people told me that the stretched ‘S’ (meaning ‘double bend’) had been interpreted as a warning of snakes on the road, and that ‘H’ (for ‘hospital’) indicated two merged T-intersections. What they enjoyed

³ Although most drivers do actually possess a driving licence, many have obtained it illegally and without passing a formal driving test.

most was the warning sign showing a cow (for ‘cattle crossing’), which one driver had read as ‘chop bar ahead’.⁴

My driver friends were less concerned about their colleagues’ general ignorance than about their often obvious lack of driving experience and skills on the AKR. “They don’t know the road”, Saa Nono once said, thus blaming primarily other, non-local drivers for improper and dangerous conduct. According to him and many others, it was ‘strangers’ who used to be unable to negotiate safely the dangerous Potroase curve before the Kyebi bypass was built. It is also claimed that non-locals keep crashing at the narrow Asuboi bridge because they are ignorant of its dangers, even of its mere existence (which neither road signs nor road markings warn about). In contrast, most drivers who are at home on the AKR’s southern section know where dangerous spots are located.⁵ Their map-like knowledge of the road becomes particularly evident through the ways they deal with potholes and bumpy sections whilst driving. For instance, they often manage to change their position early enough to avoid the anticipated potholes; or they desist from overtaking a vehicle because they know that bad potholes are awaiting them on the opposite lane.

I was told that non-local and foreign drivers struggle most with the AKR’s hills and slopes, and particularly so the drivers of cargo trucks or ‘articulators’ (articulated trucks) from Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. “Where they come from, in the Sahel countries, the roads are very very flat, so when they get here they cannot cope”, someone explained. Many local drivers assume that the foreigners are afraid to climb (and descend) the unfamiliar hills and become virtually paralysed when facing these challenging road sections. Their fear and their missing practical experience apparently lead to their inability to apply the appropriate gears and speeds at the right time and location when climbing. To some extent, this explains why they are regularly seen drifting, creeping, broken-down or overturned on hill slopes (Figure 21).⁶ Many agree that these phenomena may occur not only with foreigners, but with any driver who plies the AKR’s tricky terrain with a heavy, overloaded truck or bus, even more so when burdened by a weak engine, broken gearbox or other technical deficiencies.

⁴ A ‘chop bar’ is a small, rather simple restaurant, often located by the roadside.

⁵ In the opinion of Suhum drivers, it is because of their extensive local knowledge that hardly any of them cause accidents on the AKR. While this may be idealistic, it is a fact that none of the Suhum-Accra minibuses had had an accident on ‘their’ road during my fieldwork (January to July 2007).

⁶ I was told that some truck drivers avoid shifting to a lower gear at a too early point, when climbing slopes, in order not to kill momentum (such as when double-clutching) and to keep fuel consumption as low as possible.

The great threat emerging from this segment of road users is their distinctive *speeds* – their relative slowness and at times even complete immobility. When abandoned in the middle of the road, these vehicles form obstacles that do not simply slow down traffic flow, but also regularly force approaching drivers to brake hard (such as when facing oncoming vehicles) or to overtake (despite oncoming vehicles) if a collision is to be avoided. This, in turn, may endanger other road users. These situations become even more complex and hazardous once additional speeds are involved. For instance, a driver approaching a slow (or stationary) vehicle might make an attempt to overtake, maybe accelerate, only to realize suddenly that he himself is being overtaken by an even speedier vehicle – which will force him to pull back swiftly into his lane and slam on the brakes.

This example hints at a different segment of hazardous road users on the AKR, namely those engaging in dromocentric practices, in relatively fast speed and in the notorious overspeeding. Most famous and feared among them are, again, drivers from beyond – the ‘Kumasi drivers’ who ply the AKR with their ‘American Ford’ (Ford Club Wagon vans), big Benz buses (Sprinters and other transporters) and other ‘strong’ vehicles. Their particularly speedy and reckless driving is supposed to be linked to their ‘forcing’ and attempt to beat time (travelling to Accra and back to Kumasi as fast as possible), a result of the general pressures that Suhum’s drivers know too well. What seems most threatening is not their mere speeding, but their overtaking. Overtaking is a necessity when fast vehicles encounter slow (or at least slower) ones on their lane. Yet overtaking is also regularly seen as an expression of the drivers’ impatience and their eagerness to get ahead of (instead of staying behind) competitors in their field.⁷ As the journey with Amoyaw shows, overtaking is particularly dangerous and ‘foolish’ when it occurs at places with poor visibility, regardless of oncoming vehicles, or without prior warning to those being overtaken.

Drivers on the AKR are thus confronted with the phenomenon of differential speeds – of wide speed variations resulting not only from the varying capacities and conditions of vehicles, but also from the specific conducts of drivers.⁸ Differential speeds are at the core of what Lamont (2013: 372) describes as “the dangerous competition between cars, buses, lorries and petrol tankers”. It is precisely this competition (which often includes dangerous overtaking) that regularly leads to fatal

⁷ Also, overtaking is often part of either (friendly) racing games or (aggressive) competition and provocations among driver colleagues (see Rizzo 2002: 144); for some drivers it is matter of self-esteem and pride as “they can’t stand to be behind someone, always they want to be in front”, as one driver explained.

⁸ For more details on speed variations and accidents on the AKR, see Chapter 2 (p. 64).

crashes on trunk roads in Ghana and beyond (see Carrier 2009: 188). For drivers, competing with differential speeds on the AKR means coping with many vehicles that are either much slower or much faster than they are themselves. This form of multitemporality (or ‘desynchronisation’; Rosa 2009) regularly requires the drivers to accelerate and overtake, to brake and even halt – and to be vigilant of those who do the exact same.



Figure 22: “Overspeeding KILLS”, message by National Road Safety Commission

Attempts to prevent accidents

Despite their awareness of the repercussions of extreme speeds, both fast and slow, drivers generally pay more attention to fast and accelerated driving. This may be linked to the discourses of road safety debates and campaigns in Ghana that are centred around excessive speed, as I have discussed in Chapter 2 (p. 64). Parts of the campaigns are the gigantic billboards erected on the country’s main highways by the National Road Safety Commission (NRSC). One of them is located on the AKR near Nsawam and issues a clear caution: “Overspeeding KILLS” (Figure 22). The warning is joined by the urgent appeal to passing drivers to “Reduce your SPEED... Control your SPEED... Kill your SPEED!!!” and by the large picture of a horribly wrecked passenger car. Further north, another NRSC billboard (portraying the same wrecked car) says “Wrongful overtaking can take your life – Overtake when necessary –

Ghana needs you fit & alive”. Constant speed reminders are the stickers issued by the traffic police, found on many dashboards, saying “Excessive speed increases stopping distance. Avoid same to prevent accidents.” Avoiding excessive speed is only one of various (at times contradictory) practices and attitudes that commercial drivers employ in their attempts to prevent accidents.

‘Wayfaring’ through perilous terrain

The drivers I knew have incorporated the cautions against fast speed in their own discourses. For example, one of them explained, “When you are in a hurry and go very fast, your tyre can burst. You can cause an accident, kill many people, including yourself.” Like many others, Asiedu made a strong plea for more patience, less rushing and more careful overtaking:

Sometimes you don’t have a clear [view], you can’t see down, or there is *curve-curve* [several bends]. There is no need to go. If you want to make overtaking – no rush. Where are you going?! If you are going to Accra, *nkakra nkakra* [gradually gradually] you will go. No rush. Even if somebody passes, you too will reach. Overtaking, speeding – no need.

Nevertheless, speedy driving, acceleration and overtaking are often perceived as advantageous, even necessary such as for drivers’ ‘forcing’ and ‘overlapping’, as I have demonstrated in the previous chapter. Sometimes drivers even speed up for their own safety. For instance, when overtaking an overloaded truck going downhill, they usually accelerate and (if necessary) overtake vehicles that are in front in order to ‘escape’ the descending truck. Drivers argue that the truck’s brakes can fail at any time; then the truck will gain momentum, become uncontrollable and finally hit the vehicles driving too close in front. This shows that when they deal with diverging attitudes towards (and thus with competing) speed, drivers are confronted with the ‘aporia of speed’, with “the need to move both slowly and quickly” (Derrida 1984: 21).

Attempts to prevent perilous encounters do not only comprise choosing the ‘right’ speed, but also altering the vehicle’s position, often abruptly and in response to other vehicles’ movements and positions. Shifting left or right or even crossing onto the opposite lane (which may actually create new perils) is a means to better apprehend critical spots and situations such as potholes and oncoming vehicles, particularly when visibility is impaired. As Dant (2004: 72) rightly puts it, “a key communication between driver, car and road depends on visual ability; lack of sight is a bodily deficit that cannot, yet, be compensated for”. Commercial drivers employ several means to achieve *better visibility* and to watch (even ‘read’) the road carefully, no matter whether they are ‘overlapping’ or driving like any regular road user. Besides altering

their position, they constantly adjust their posture by means of shifting, turning, stretching or ducking their head, neck or the entire upper part of the body. Sometimes they even lean out of the open side window. It is important to ‘watch fast’, as Saa Nono termed it, so as not to overlook anything whilst shifting between angles of vision (forward, backward, sideward, inward). A technical attempt to visually apprehend, even control other road users’ movements, speeds and positions and to measure them against one’s own is the use of mirrors.⁹ Some of the drivers have installed additional (or extra-large) mirrors (Figure 23) that they routinely (re)adjust, at times whilst driving. And to further improve the assemblage of the ‘driver-car’ (Dant 2004), drivers or their ‘mates’ regularly clean the mirrors and windscreen with a duster before setting off.¹⁰



Figure 23: Controlling the road via extra mirrors

In the process of ‘wayfaring’, drivers routinely gear their attention to the road and to the road users’ movements and speeds with the help of skilled sensory and vehicular practices (cf. Argounova-Low 2012, Dant 2004; Grasseni 2004; Ingold 2000). Yet drivers’ embodied orientation to a world of moving objects (from a sitting but

⁹ As Backhaus (2002: 118) points out, whilst driving, one usually conceives the road “in terms of one’s own projects, and the intentions of others’ as indicated by the ‘actions’ of their [...] automobiles are measured against one’s own project”.

¹⁰ The ‘mates’ usually also assist their drivers by watching the road from their position at the right side door and by providing information and instructions.

moving position) is not merely about vision. Suhum drivers make the experience that visual perception is complemented by the kinaesthesia of the body, by the sounds of the engine and the road, and by what Dant describes as “the resistance of steering wheel, accelerator and brakes – even the feel of the road through the wheels of the car” (Dant 2004: 72). As Amoyaw explained, “You need all your attention. You need to see, but you also need to hear so that you are able to react. Your whole body is involved when driving.” One of his colleagues, Kwasi, said, “My mind is always under the vehicle and on the road.” He particularly stressed the need to be *attentive to sounds* emanating from his own vehicle, to ‘unfamiliar noises’ that could be a sign of a damaged engine or axle, of a loose tyre or wheel hub. Yet other sounds emanate from fellow road users, most importantly from drivers who blow their horn to warn others of their intention to overtake. These sounds often compete with the drowning and distracting noises inside the vehicle, which drivers like to complain about.¹¹

‘Wayfaring’ on the AKR is not only about watching out and listening very carefully for movements and signals, but also about *making own signals*. Drivers direct signals towards other drivers by using their hands (for gestures such as waving), horns, headlights and indicators – most of them technical features through which the vehicle is virtually turned into an extension of the driver’s body (Dant 2004: 75; Ihde 1974). For instance, in a situation where a driver spots vehicles coming from behind and attempting to overtake despite oncoming traffic, the driver may either wave hectically with his palm downwards or set his left indicator. These are signs that tell the other drivers that they should desist from overtaking.¹² Signalling helps drawing other drivers’ attention and alerting them to potentially dangerous manoeuvres and situations; and it prompts (even instructs) drivers to react in an adequate manner.¹³ Signalling thus forms a means of communication among road users in their collaborative efforts to prevent accidents.

¹¹ Distractive noises may be the loud conversations and quarrels of passengers, the radio playing, or the rattling of loose windows and metal parts (often a result of plying a bumpy and therefore ‘noisy’ road with a battered vehicle at too high speed).

¹² Waving in this way means ‘Slow down – don’t overtake’; setting the *left* indicator either indicates ‘Vehicles approaching, don’t overtake’ or ‘I am about to change lanes (overtaking, dodging a pothole, etc.) – don’t overtake’. Accordingly, in some situations, setting the *right* indicator means ‘The road is clear – you can overtake’.

¹³ Signals, in particular blowing the horn, are equally employed to warn pedestrians, straying animals and lingering spirits of approaching vehicles.

Fetishes, faith and fearlessness

Apart from stressing their kinetic, sensory and communicative attempts to stay safe on the road, commercial drivers are also keen on revealing their religious and spiritual approaches to road perils. Many of the approaches and protective means resemble (or are even identical to) those employed to navigate the socio-economic uncertainties of the transport business (see Chapter 5, p. 140). For instance, medicines and occult powers for protection against accidents was a frequent subject of debate among the drivers I knew. Only one elderly and retired driver from Suhum openly admitted to actually employing such means. He gave me a detailed account of how he had visited several shrines in the past to seek help for diverse problems. When he finally met a “very powerful man” in Togo, in the early 1970s, he “put [his] head under the god”, which means that he devoted himself to the deity of the shrine. As a result of this, he was furnished with spirits whom he claimed were protecting him and his family. “Every time I sparked my car, the spirits were inside the vehicle, I could feel that they were with me”, the man said. He never had an accident.

The majority of drivers I worked with strongly draw on Christian practices and attitudes to protect themselves and their passengers from accidents, injury and death. Some of them hold a lengthy prayer before they set off or ask a passenger to pray for God’s guidance and for ‘travelling mercies’. The faith-based (often biblical) vehicle slogans and stickers (see Figure 24), however, are usually not understood to have a protective function, but to serve as a reminder and reassurance of a divine presence during the journey and in the driver’s life and environment more generally (see Chapter 5, p. 141). For instance, one driver called Uncle Ben had written “*YESU DI M’ANIM*” (‘Jesus leads me’) on the back of his big Benz bus. He said that the slogan was meant to publicly reveal that Jesus was on his side and that anyone’s bad intentions against him (such as wishing him failure or an accident) would therefore be in vain. According to Uncle Ben, the slogan also helped him to feel secure and to remain fearless whilst on the road.¹⁴ Following a Malinowskian perspective, the slogans as well as the prayers and occult rituals can be seen as an emotional response to perils and uncertainty and as having a psychological function in the way they ritualize a person’s optimism, raise courage and confidence, and reduce fears (Malinowski 1963: 336; 1965: 104).¹⁵

¹⁴ As Weiss (2009: 52) rightly puts it, many slogans are “icons of the intensely competitive and gruelling activities in which the minivans and their crews are constantly involved”.

¹⁵ Malinowski’s functionalist perspective on religious rituals is discussed in Jackson (2004: 82) and Morris (1987: 150).



Figure 24: Slogan on a taxi dashboard

Fearlessness is indeed perceived as a crucial component of accident-free driving, although feelings of fear are often inevitable. “You are a human being, it is natural”, a transport union worker told me. “Sometimes you get into a situation where you see death staring you in the face. And there seems no way of avoiding it. That’s when the fear comes in.” Some of the drivers also admit to their fear of seeing fresh accidents and to their reluctance to provide assistance. As Saa Nono explained, “Drivers don’t want to approach accidents. Because when they drive on, they remember what they have seen and they get confused. It disturbs them.” Apart from these exemplary situations, drivers claim that fear is generally absent among the courageous and professional drivers. “We don’t fear the driving”, I was told. “As soon as you have that fear, it means you can never drive – you can never be a driver.”

Being fearful of (and whilst) driving is commonly understood to be detrimental, even perilous, especially when drivers get into critical situations. As one driver explained, “Maybe you can save [the situation]. But once you fear, that you panic, you can even lose control so that you will get that accident.” The same warning is issued with regard to *contemplating* about accidents and deaths on the road: “If you keep the issue of accidents in mind, if you think of having an accident, your mind will be disturbed. You will not focus on your work properly”, Amoyaw said. He argued that

having negative thoughts generally affects driving and may lead to lack (if not loss) of concentration and to accidents: “If you overthink, you will kill somebody.”

Amoyaw, Saa Nono and many of their colleagues are convinced that it is for safety reasons that fearlessness should – and can – be promoted. This is why one driver put the word “*ENSURO*” (‘Fear not’) on his minibus. Others try actively to suppress fearful thinking and to adopt a positive mindset whilst at the steering wheel. “At the moment you spark your engine, you cannot think that you will have an accident”, Amoyaw explained. “You know that accidents happen, but you refuse all this. Don’t think that – think good.” For Uncle Ben, one option is to put on a smiling face when he gets inside his vehicle, and to wave and honk at his colleagues. He claims that his playfulness allows him to become settled and focused: “When I get to the main road, the next thing I think is my tyre and my engine, so that I and my passengers will reach our destination safely.” Another option is to hold on to (and talk oneself into) positive convictions. As Amoyaw said, “I *know* that I will die one day. But I am assuring myself that I will not die in a vehicle, in an accident. I have a trust for it.” His reassurance and positive thinking is backed by his faith in an almighty God. This is also reflected in another driver’s statement: “Everything is from God, so you shouldn’t be afraid of getting into an accident.” Stating that all things are “in the hands of God” conveys in fact two convictions shared by most Ghanaian drivers I knew. One is their trust in divine protection; another is that even if a (potentially fatal) accident should occur, they have to accept it trustfully as divine fate – as part of “God’s own plan”. Therefore it is pointless to fear death on the road.

Conclusion

I have shown in this chapter that for Suhum’s commercial drivers, the daily work of driving on the AKR is to a great extent about confronting excesses and extremes. This is often highlighted by the usage of the prefix ‘over’. For instance, there are the many unrepaired (and overused) sections of the highway with their great number of potholes (including ‘killer potholes’), but also the overly narrow, steep and bendy sections of the ‘death trap’ that drivers have to negotiate. The drivers also encounter (and engender) overspeeding and overtaking, whereby overtaking may be linked to one’s own speedy driving or, again, to the presence of slow-moving or stationary (possibly overturned) vehicles. Slow pace or immobility regularly occur when vehicles are overused or overloaded, or a combination of both. On a personal level, there is the issue of overthinking among some of the commercial drivers. This is not only about excessive thinking, but also about the wrong focus of thoughts, such as

when drivers reflect over accidents and death on the road and thus foster feelings of fear (instead of relying on faith).¹⁶

Drivers claim that these excesses and extremes contribute to critical situations, in the worst cases to crashes. They sometimes take a self-critical stance towards how to confront these tangible perils in their daily work. “None of us are perfect”, one elderly station worker, a former driver, once told me. “We all wake up in the morning praying to our God that he can save us. Anything can happen at any time. Sometimes you can control it because of your professional experience. But no one is perfect about accidents.” His statement reveals a common conviction among drivers, namely that the guidance of a higher being and their own skills may protect them from getting in an accident. But they are also aware that some accidents simply cannot be avoided since perils may arise unexpectedly and uncontrollably, and since drivers are human beings who occasionally fail.¹⁷

Indeed, although the skilled sensory, communicative and manoeuvring practices mentioned above are taken very seriously by the drivers, they may easily go wrong. For instance, the attempts made for adequate vision may be impeded by lack of attention, unfavourable weather conditions or a cracked windscreen. Warning signals made to other drivers may be misunderstood or are simply not noticed and thus impede collaboration. And evasive manoeuvres such as dodging stationary vehicles may be made too late or too abruptly and result in collisions. What is more, these practices of ‘wayfaring’ may not only fail, but may actually backfire, such as when swerving to the middle of the road (for a better view or for dodging) poses a danger to oncoming drivers, or when signalling for communicative purposes distracts drivers from other crucial tasks. It is in these and many other critical situations en route that a commercial driver is sometimes questioned by his passengers whether he is really eligible to be called ‘a driver’.

¹⁶ I also mentioned the danger of overlooking the movements and positions of other drivers. This is not an extreme, but rather the result of lack of attention (even of skills) in the context of drivers’ usually intense bodily and technical attempts to achieve better visibility on the road.

¹⁷ Luckily, neither my driver informants nor I had any serious accident during my fieldwork, and I have never had to witness a serious accident or get involved in a place of accident anywhere in Ghana.

Part III

TRAVELLING

Chapter 8

Important times: multiple means, socialities and occasions of travelling

During my stay in Elvis' house by the old Accra-Kumasi road in Kyebi, I witnessed many departure scenes that took place just on our doorstep. People from the *Obronikurom* quarter regularly came to this roadside spot to try to flag down a taxi or bus for their journeys to Accra or to other destinations on the Accra-Kumasi road. One early morning, at about six o'clock, Elvis' aunt appeared on our porch. Auntie Sissi was wearing nice-looking '*kaba and slit*¹ and carried a black handbag. The woman in her late sixties was about to travel to Accra, and she had arranged for Elvis to accompany her. While he was getting ready inside, she waited on the porch and one of Elvis' brothers brought her some bread and hot tea. After eating, Auntie Sissi put on some lipstick, something she normally does only on festive days. Then she asked for one of the boys' mobile phones and dialled a number she had written on a piece of paper. "*Afei na meko*. I'm about to leave", she announced to the person at the other end. "*Wowo fie?* Are you at home? ... *Na wonnko baabi ara?* And you won't go anywhere?" she asked insistently, making sure that the person – obviously someone she was going to meet – would be there upon her arrival.

When Elvis stepped out of the house he was wearing a new pair of blue jeans and a polo shirt. Smartly dressed and looking good, the two travellers and the boys positioned themselves by the roadside. Whilst Auntie Sissi and Elvis sat on the wooden bench, the boys watched the traffic for an Accra-bound vehicle that could take on two more passengers and had time to discuss the purpose of the impending journey. Elvis explained that he was going to accompany his aunt to Accra and take her to a relative's house that she would have difficulties finding on her own. According to Auntie Sissi, she wanted to discuss some 'family matters' (*abusua asem*) with the relative, and she therefore had to make the effort to go to Accra to have a proper face-to-face discussion.

¹ '*Kaba and slit*' is a popular outfit for women in southern Ghana, comprising a long wraparound skirt and a matching blouse usually made from a wax print cloth. It is worn for special occasions such as church services, birthday parties and receptions.

As we were waiting and no appropriate Accra vehicles had appeared on the road, we were all pondering whether it would be wiser – maybe quicker – to take a shared taxi to nearby Suhum. There, unlike in Kyebi, regular buses to Accra could be taken from the station. But just then, a big white Benz bus appeared at the horizon. The driver and his ‘mate’ gave us signs that empty seats were available, the boys waved back, and the bus stopped at our level. Auntie Sissi grabbed her handbag and rushed to the vehicle while Elvis enquired from the driver’s ‘mate’ whether the bus was really going all the way to Accra. When climbing into the bus, Auntie Sissi briefly waved at us and the boys replied with the usual farewell: “*Nante yie*. Safe journey” and “*Wo ne Nyame nko*. Go with God”. Elvis turned around and asserted: “*Menkye oo*. I will not keep long”, meaning that we should expect him back from Accra on the same day. Then the Benz bus drove off.



Figure 25: Auntie Sissi and Elvis waiting for a ride to Accra

This scene of an ordinary departure from the roadside reveals several issues that are central to the ways in which many people in southern Ghanaians travel. For instance, it demonstrates how travellers actively prepare for their journey, by putting on nice clothes, taking a meal, informing others about the impending journey and giving instructions to those who are left behind. The scene also reveals that time and speed play a role in travelling, such as when waiting for vehicles and discussing quicker transport options. Ultimately, the scene shows how various actors are drawn into the activity of travelling – an activity that involves interactions, communication and

sociability. I consider these communicative and sociable practices here as one of the socialities of travelling.

My aim in this chapter is to trace the socialities and temporalities that frame (or emerge from) the practices of travelling, as well as to explore the social relevance of particular travel contexts and occasions. First, I show how residents from the provincial towns of Kyebi and Suhum travel to the capital via the Accra-Kumasi road (AKR) and how their means of travel relates to their socio-economic background. I argue that the different means and respective speeds reflect, but also contribute to some degree to the stratification of Ghana's present-day society. I then examine the particular social (and sociable) practices at the margins of travel activities. They include interactions and exchanges of information with those who are left behind or who are met at the end of the journey. In the last section, I record two different types of social occasions that require and are made possible through travel. The first refers to events and meetings for which presence and proximity, and therefore travelling, are important and at times obligatory. The second addresses the occasional visits of Accra migrants to their hometown, during which the meaningfulness of both places, hometown and capital, come to the fore.

I draw from my experience of living and working Kyebi and Suhum to explore these travel means, practices and occasions. In both towns, I regularly became involved when my friends, hosts or other acquaintances set off and returned from their travels. I frequently travelled to Accra and between Kyebi and Suhum, either on my own or with friends and informants who relied predominantly on public transport. Finally, I also experienced what it means to use private cars for travelling on the AKR, not only because I had my own car during stages of my fieldwork, but also because some of my acquaintances had the resources to drive (or to be driven) in their own car.

Means and ways of travelling to Accra

The travel activities of residents in the towns that I lived in form complex social phenomena shaped by several factors on different levels. My ethnographic research has shown that at the centre of these phenomena are the diversities of people's travel *destinations*, their diverging travel *purposes* and the different *means* of travel available to them. Although I do not rely on thorough quantitative data, I can broadly trace what these diversities entail.

Departing on a journey (*akwantuo*)² from Kyebi and Suhum tends to mean departing for Accra. Other frequent travel destinations – which I do not consider any further in this chapter – include Kumasi (the country's second-largest city), Koforidua (the capital of the Eastern Region) and the nearby market towns, such as Suhum, Anyinam and Nsawam (all on the AKR). The reasons for travelling to Accra are varied, and any attempts to categorize them appear simplistic and unsatisfactory. "I travel for a purpose", an informant told me when I asked him what he thought was special about the activity of travelling. Many people I talked to reckoned that it is the particular purpose of their journey that guides it and often renders it attractive, such as buying and selling goods, working on a business deal, or spending time with family members, friends and lovers. Yet not every travel purpose is pleasant, as travellers might also encounter (and have to resolve) disputes, debts, deceit, death and other critical, often costly issues at the point of their destination. Equally varied are the frequencies and intensities of travelling and the practical and temporal modes of displacement. People may travel alone or with others; with or without luggage or goods; urgently, with a tight schedule or relaxed, without any time constraints.

Less diverse and easier to discern are the means of travel that are available to those who go to Accra. One can distinguish between public and private means of travel and transport. The former refers to services provided by the so-called 'informal' transport sector (d'Almeida-Topor et al. 1992; Godard 2002; Grieco et al. 1996), including taxis (hired or shared), *trotro* minibuses or 'long-journey' buses that have been described in the previous chapters (particularly Chapter 5, p. 127).³ These commercial vehicles are taken by residents who have no access to private vehicles, mainly due to their lack of resources. Private means of travelling to Accra involve vehicles (cars, trucks and buses) that are owned by individuals, companies or other institutions (religious, governmental, educational, etc.; see Chalfin 2008: 429-430). Travellers who make use of private vehicles range from bank employees who drive their own passenger car to groups of women in church-owned minibuses, to the king of Akyem Abuakwa who is driven to the capital in his black Mercedes Benz limousine.

² Here I do not consider short journeys to nearby places or neighbouring communities, which do not fall under the local category of 'travelling' (*tu kwan*).

³ Further means of public transport on the AKR are proper (often air-conditioned) coaches or the 'American Ford' vans that are only used by travellers going between Accra and Kumasi (or other major cities further north) since they do not load (or drop) passengers in between.

Public transport and private cars

Like my friend Elvis, the great majority of residents in Kyebi are used to relying on public transport. Elvis travels to Accra four or five times per month on average, mainly because he has ‘something to do’ there – as he likes telling those who are curious about the purpose of his movements. Mostly he goes to the capital to buy consumer goods like second-hand clothes, shoes, electronic equipment and materials for his carpentry work. Occasionally he is called to do a small job in a friend’s or family member’s house. Sometimes his Accra trips involve the transfer of money that he collects or delivers, and which he usually combines with visits to friends or to members of his extended family living and working in the capital.

Elvis very rarely stays in Accra overnight, as he prefers to set off early (at times as early as four o’clock) and gets as much done as possible by late afternoon, to then travel back home in the same day. Starting the day trip early in the morning is generally advantageous, as Accra-bound vehicles (mostly Benz buses doing ‘overlapping’) regularly pass through Kyebi and can be caught directly from the roadside. Furthermore, less traffic jams are to be expected in Nsawam and at the gateway to Accra. Morning travels therefore tend to be relatively fast (at times under two hours) and less tedious. Setting off for Accra later in the day is often more complicated, since waiting by the roadside for a ‘straight car’ may be to no avail. In such cases, the only alternative – and hopefully a quicker one – is to take a shared taxi or *trotro* minibus to Suhum from either the roadside or the bus station (direct transport to Accra is not offered). Then Elvis’ preferred mode of transport is to take a taxi, since unlike *trotros* with their ‘pick and drop’ mode (see Chapter 5, p. 127), the taxi will not make many stops (if any) on its way to Suhum, and is usually the quickest (yet also slightly more expensive) option.⁴ Upon reaching the *Roundabout Station* in Suhum after the first leg of his trip, Elvis checks the waiting and loading Accra vehicles. If movements at the station appear slow (for reasons that I have laid out in Chapter 6, p. 148), he seeks a quicker travel opportunity: vehicles doing ‘overlapping’, that is, vehicles that are loading passengers illicitly, but quickly from the roadside, at some distance from the bus station.

Elvis thus has to weigh several travel options when departing for the capital from Kyebi. This is especially the case when he decides (or is obliged) to make the journey in two legs, which involves searching for and changing vehicles and which potentially

⁴ Taking a shared taxi from the station however bears the risk of another wait, as it needs to be full before departing.

brings more waiting and delays.⁵ The same happens at the end of the journey. When Elvis reaches Accra he has to decide where best to get off and whether to continue on foot or by taking a *trotro* or a shared taxi. At times, a combination is required in order to reach a distant destination. Only in exceptional cases will Elvis hire a taxi in Accra, which would be the quickest but also the most costly option.

Whilst living in Kyebi helped me to learn about people's use of public transport for travelling, living in Suhum introduced me to what it means to own and use a private car. During the second stage of my fieldwork I lived in the household of the manageress of Suhum's most important bank. 'Madam', as everybody in town called the much-respected woman, was in her late forties, lived by herself and had her own car, a dark-blue Audi A4. Many observers, neighbours, employees, other bank managers and my friends from Kyebi regularly commended Madam for her 'nice' and classy mid-range car. It was bought second-hand, but was well maintained and was always parked in the garage in the back of the bank building when not being used.

Madam mainly travelled to three places in her car during my eight-month stay in Suhum. One destination was her hometown in the Brong Ahafo region, where she looked after her two houses every three or four months. Another destination was the nearby town of Koforidua where she attended meetings at her company's regional headquarters about once per month. And almost every Saturday, Madam travelled to Accra to visit her adoptive child who was being cared for by a family friend. Madam also went to the hairdressers and got her nails done in Accra. Once in a while she visited the dentist or went for medical check-ups, she also did most of her shopping in the capital, stopping by big provision stores, or foreign supermarkets to buy things. Some of the foodstuffs – fresh vegetables and fruit – for her cooking were bought from roadside traders along the AKR, some of whom knew her as their regular customer (see Chapter 4, p. 102, for roadside trading).⁶

Having the car was most convenient for Madam's travels to the capital and for the shopping rounds. Madam said that she enjoyed her rides to and within the city, except for the potholes on the AKR (which wear out her vehicle), the tedious traffic jams (which make her waste valuable time) and the dust at construction sites (which she claims she is allergic to). Of course she shared the same nuisances with those

⁵ Travellers departing from Suhum usually travel in one go as they can take direct ('long-journey') Accra buses that they board either at the station or by the roadside; see Chapter 6 (p. 148).

⁶ After my fieldwork, Madam was transferred to a different managerial post in the Ashanti Region where her pattern of travelling changed.

who travel on public transport, but she could mitigate some of them by rolling up the windows and turning on the car's air conditioning. Another privilege of Madam's was the driver whom she employed for her travels (which was also a necessity since she did not know how to drive). During my stay in her household, she usually asked her friend Ernest, a car mechanic from Suhum, to drive her; occasionally, I was the one who took the driver's seat.

From Ernest I learned about the tasks involved when acting as someone's driver. For instance, before setting off to Accra, I made sure (together with Madam's household helper) that the Audi was washed or freed from dust, and driven out of the courtyard and parked in front of the building to be ready for departure. If necessary, I also carried some of Madam's bags to the car and stowed them in the boot. Madam eventually took her seat giving final instructions to the helper or to her employees through the open window. She enjoyed the special treatment that she received by being chauffeured. Arriving at her destination, this involved driving her up to the entrance of buildings and places as closely as possible so as to avoid her having to walk too far. After she had alighted, I parked the car in the drive or car park in such a way that boarding and departing would be quick and easy.

Hierarchies of vehicles, travellers and speed

Living in Madam's household and travelling with her provided deep insights into how car ownership and travelling with one's own car is a matter of convenience and comfort combined with prestige and status. This nexus was a regular subject of debate among my friends and informants, most of whom were public transport users. They regularly stressed the comforts of travelling in a private car, which seems to be in stark contrast to the tiresome trips in often shaky, crammed and overheated commercial vehicles (see Chapter 9, p. 208). My friends also raved about how 'free' they would be if they had their own car, as this would allow them to go for their own 'rounds', and to travel – and stop – wherever and whenever they wanted. They would be independent and spared from negotiating departure times, routes and different types of commercial vehicles. In their experience, there is also a clear dromocentric advantage: although private car users can not normally escape time-consuming traffic jams faster than other travellers, they can save time through direct travel. Unlike public transport users, private car users do not have to walk to the roadside or to the station; they do not have to wait for a vehicle to arrive or for a loading vehicle to fill up; and they do not have to search for yet another connection (or worse, several), all of which add to the duration of the trip.

Walking is a necessary element in the travel activities of most public transport users. The slowest (and lowest) form of locomotion is regarded as the complete opposite to private car travel. “Once you have your car, you will never walk again”, somebody once argued. This conveys the commonly held perception that using a car (and not having to walk) is far more convenient and appealing, as well as more prestigious. The great significance attached to automobility is entangled with the high status attributed to those who travel in private cars (Chalfin 2008: 430). There is a general tendency among Ghanaians to view transport means as markers for the societal position and economic background of their respective users. Public transport mobility is broadly associated with ‘ordinary’ and less affluent citizens. Private car mobility is linked with wealthier and cosmopolitan Ghanaians and with the consumption and movement patterns of the country’s growing middle class and elite. Travelling with their own vehicles, the privileged Ghanaians present their economic power in the public domain of city streets and roads (cf. Truitt 2008: 16).

Observers judge a traveller’s status not only on the basis of the generic public-private divide, but also on the actual type of vehicle employed for travelling. For instance, public transport passengers who opt for *trotros* when shared taxis are available are not seen to be very well-off. Those travelling on the AKR in air-conditioned coaches instead of in cheaper vehicles like the Benz buses are categorised as wealthier and probably middle class. On the other side of the public-private divide, the characteristics of vehicles (such as general condition, make, model and size) are often seen to reflect the socio-economic background of the owners or occupants. For instance, the nice Audi A4 that Madame owned seemed to be an appropriate vehicle for her position as a bank manageress. She told me that she would have preferred a four-wheel drive vehicle like the Toyota Landcruiser, which is safer and more comfortable, but that it would have been too ‘big’ for her. Such a vehicle would not only be too expensive, but also more suited to her superiors in the company.

Whilst Ghanaians notice vehicles very carefully and “make much of the possibilities and distinctions they represent” (Chalfin 2008: 428; see Chapter 3, p. 82), they also take into consideration other factors for the distinction of class and status of private car users. One is the employment of a driver. In Madam’s case, this practice was a necessity as she did not have a driver’s license. Other professionals of her rank (both men and women) would normally drive their cars themselves. Another factor is the seating position. For instance, Madam explained that she prefers sitting in the front passenger seat since being in the back would signalise that she is a ‘big woman’, a

status ascription she was not very comfortable with. For important men and women such as CEOs, clerical dignitaries, politicians and chiefs, the back seat is mandatory.

The vehicle's particular road performance is equally understood to (and usually also intended to) embody the traveller's importance. Such is the case when the Okyenhene, king of Akyem Abuakwa, is driven to Accra in his black Mercedes or other top-of-the-range models from the royal fleet. His car is not only driven at a very fast speed once it is on the AKR, but is also usually escorted by several additional vehicles with at least one acting as the vanguard. Significantly larger, faster and thus more impressive are the convoys carrying the country's president and government ministers. The convoys announce the important travellers – usually hidden behind tinted windows – with several vanguard vehicles, loud sirens and glaring full beams (Figure 26). They also employ dispatch riders to urge other road users to slow down, move sideways or stop and in doing so manage to open up a way even through traffic jams. The conspicuous convoys of Ghana's elite are the culmination of prestigious travelling. Their performance displays not only the travellers' exceptional status, but also their dominance over all other road users who are forced to halt whilst the elite are passing. Clearly, being able to get somewhere quickly is associated with exclusivity (cf. Cresswell 2010: 23).



Figure 26: The presidential convoy on the Accra-Kumasi road

The means of travel and the types of vehicles that I have described thus correlate broadly with the status, class affiliation and economic position of their respective users. The hierarchy within the means of travel not only reflects, but also contributes to the stratification of road travellers and of Ghanaian society more generally. What matters for the distinction and stratification of vehicles and travellers are costs, comfort and convenience – with speed and people's dromocentric stance as further factors at the centre of the hierarchy of mobility. As I have demonstrated, the common *trotro* is known to be the most affordable, yet tedious and slowest means of transport associated with lower class travel, whereas the VIP convoy represents the speediest and most exclusive mode of travelling reserved for the elites. In between the two are the remaining means of road travel, each with their own possibilities, speed and form of access. The unequal distribution of access to road transport shows that "speed creates a hierarchy which privileges an elite who enjoy the power it confers at the expense of others who live in the 'slow lane'" (Northcott 2008: 216; cf. Virilio 1986).

Sociable practices at the margins

No matter by which means people travel or how fast they may be on the road, they usually encounter some sort of delay at their departure. Such delays are mostly caused by the social interactions and conversations that travellers get caught up in at the involved in at the start and end of their journey. For a variety of reasons travellers may try to avoid such encounters by setting off very early and in the dark so as not to be held up by anyone, or by taking an empty side street or hidden footpath when walking to the station. Yet travellers often cannot escape and simply have to communicate with household members, neighbours and others. Of course, communicative encounters may also be desired and enjoyed by travellers, not least as a means of exchanging important information before they set off.

Departing

Travelling involves communicating. The departure scene described at the start of this chapter provides an example of how travellers communicate with people both at home and at the destination before they set off. Auntie Sissi had made a phone call not only to announce her departure, but also to make sure that she would not simply 'meet the absence' – as Ghanaians like to say – of the person she had arranged to meet at her destination. In the days preceding her visit, she had also probably called them several times arranging her visit, maybe to consider whether it was really worth

the journey and the expenses involved.⁷ Upon their departure, Auntie Sissi and Elvis also engaged with those whom they were about to leave behind. Elvis gave instructions to his brothers about household chores to be carried out in his absence, and informed us about his travel plans, including the projected time of return.

In Kyebi, I noticed that people usually gave out information about their everyday movements quite willingly, especially to those they were living and working with. An example of this habit is the common phrase that I heard so often during the day, for instance, each time that someone left Elvis' house, even if it was just to go to a nearby store: "*Merekɔ aba*", literally 'I am going to come'. It means that the person intends to be back very soon and to which one replies "*Yoo, kɔ bra*", literally 'okay, go come'. Elvis and his brothers usually added exactly where they were going (when it was not just around the corner), and I was expected to do the same. In Kyebi's households and workplaces, people usually know where the others have gone. This knowledge can be useful (and passed on), entertaining (good for gossiping), but also a form of social control in Kyebi's closely knit community. Of course one can easily manipulate this control, such as by providing wrong, incomplete or no information at all about one's movements and whereabouts.

People in Kyebi normally announce their impending travels (destination, purpose and schedule) in the same manner to their household and to close ones who should be informed, or whose curiosity is to be satisfied. It is a combination of curiosity, control and even requests that travellers also encounter in public, when waiting by the roadside, walking to the bus station or loading the private car in front of the house.⁸ Friends and acquaintances who happen to be around often ask "*Wotu kwan anaa?* Are you travelling?" They even ask when the travellers' distinctive luggage, clothing, posture and movements already reveal the answer. In my experience, people are particularly interested in the travellers' schedules, in knowing whether they will stay away for long ("*Wɔbekye?* Will you keep long?") or what day they will come back. It is also not unusual for travellers to be asked what they will bring back when they return from their destination, and those travelling to Accra often receive straightforward requests for a 'little gift'. It took me some time to catch the nuances

⁷ Travellers in Ghana often make calls whilst on the road, too, to announce where they are and when they will arrive, or to fix a meeting place. In Chapter 6 (p. 147) I have hinted at the complaints made by commercial bus drivers regarding what they perceive as the negative effects of mobile phone use on their business.

⁸ The interactions I describe here may also take place when travellers are waiting in a ready-to-depart (or already leaving) vehicle, when information and greetings are exchanged through the open windows, at times only with hand signs.

of the sometimes insistent demands from friends (and even from not so close acquaintances) – demands that are less often characterized by serious expectations than by aims to provoke, tease and thus create some entertainment.⁹ These pre-departure interactions also form an opportunity for people who stay behind (and who may not be in a position to travel themselves) not only to express their interest in the travellers, but also to become somewhat part of the latter's travel activities.

Social interactions and conversations are particularly intense when departing travellers are escorted and seen off (*gya no kwan*) by their hosts, household members or friends, a practice that I have already shown in Chapter 3 (p. 77). First of all, accompanying someone to the roadside or to the station is a means to be of assistance. When Elvis departed from his house with Auntie Sissi, his brothers were present to help carry the bags and to stand at the edge of the road. It would have been inappropriate not to be of assistance and to let the elderly woman stand there and flag down approaching vehicles on her own when younger family members were also around. Secondly, escorting travellers is also an opportunity to chat, make final arrangements and discuss the impending journey (its route and means of transport), as well as to ask the travellers to pass on messages and greetings. When the travellers are finally seen off, their escorts typically ask them to give them a quick call once they have reached their destination – hopefully – safely.

Arriving

The forms of communication and interaction that take place in the context of departures show how at its margins, the act of travelling is embedded in social relations that may entail different forms of expectations, control and public scrutiny that travellers are subjected to. At the same time, the encounters involved in departure scenes often also obtain a sociable and entertaining quality. The same occurs at arrival scenes, many of which I observed either as a traveller or a host in the households that I stayed at and visited. For instance, whenever I returned to Kyebi after having been away (either to Accra or abroad) and greeted people whilst strolling through town, they often exclaimed “*Menhuu w’akye oo*. I haven’t seen you in a long time”. When they learned that I had travelled, they usually wanted to know where I had gone to, but more importantly, when I had arrived and when I was going to leave

⁹ It is precisely these material expectations brought up by non-travellers, along with their control and curiosity, that may push some travellers to conceal their travel plans, such as by not revealing details of their travels (if at all), or by trying to be ‘invisible’ travellers (sneaking to the bus station, wearing unsuspicious clothes). People may also lie about their travels, use them as pretexts, or even claim they will travel (or have travelled) even if untrue.

again.¹⁰ It was often followed by the more or less serious question about what I had brought for them. My excuses for not having brought anything were either accepted or led to (usually pretended) indignation, but also to joking and laughter.

When I returned from Accra, I followed the example of other travellers and did actually bring something for people who were important to me. Passing through Ofankor at the outskirts of Accra, I usually bought several loaves of *Christ in You* bread from the running hawkers (see Chapter 4, p. 108). The loaves were meant for my best friends' families and elderly persons whom I was going to visit, as well as for Elvis' household. As in many gift-giving situations in Ghana (and beyond; cf. Carrier 1995, Mauss 1954), bringing these gifts to a home serves as an indicator of friendship, estimation and respect. I further learned that gifts from Accra (and even more so from abroad) are received as travel souvenirs: they allow people 'at home' to enjoy things from 'elsewhere' and to have a symbolic share in the giver's journey to and from a place known for its esteemed consumer goods. "*W'aye adee*. You have done well", the presentees often say to the giver who is seen to have made efforts to remember people whilst being away. A more formal way for recipients to show their gratitude would be to ask a third person to stand as a witness and to thank the giver on the recipients' behalf.

Visitors are often greeted and welcomed according to what is considered as the local customs of 'typical Ghanaian hospitality' (see de Witte 2003: 547). Unless the visit is meant to be very brief, the first step is to offer visitors a seat and water to drink. After finishing drinking, the host starts the conversation by asking for the visitors' 'mission' (*amannee*). The latter explain the purpose of their journey and, if necessary, the particular reasons for their visit to the house. Thereafter, the host (and maybe other attendants as well) stands up to give the visitors the '*Akwaaba*', the formal welcome, and shakes hands with the visitors who remain seated. What follows are casual conversations, including exchange of greetings and news, or the discussion of a serious matter should this be the reason for the visit. In some cases, the guests will be served more drinks and eventually a meal. The meal is commonly taken in a separate space of the compound (or in a room) and not in the direct presence of the hosts to ensure that guests enjoy a moment of privacy.¹¹

¹⁰ People who do not want to mention that they have travelled (or have indeed not travelled) usually reply "*Me wo ho*. I'm around", meaning 'I haven't gone anywhere'.

¹¹ See Huppenbauer (1888) on how visitors/messengers were received and welcomed in pre-colonial Akan society in just the same way as visitors are treated in contemporary southern Ghana, especially in formal settings such as chiefs' palaces. On hospitality offered to travellers in specific roadside institutions in rural Sudan, see Beck (2013).

In everyday life, the extent and rigour to which the culturally prescribed practices of hospitality are performed with arriving travellers and visitors vary and depend on the context of the encounter, particularly on the social status of the involved parties. For instance, Elvis mostly had younger visitors who were welcomed with a cold soft drink that was quickly bought by one of the younger household members. When I visited friends and families that I had not seen in a long time, the entire welcome ceremony was usually followed in a rather loose and fragmentary way, but water was always offered. When I arrived with other friends (especially foreign visitors) or with a research assistant, mostly for a more formal visit or enquiry, then the hosts made more efforts to receive me in the 'proper' way.

The need to travel and the joys of returning

Living in Madam's household in Suhum, I regularly got a sense of the social significance of welcome ceremonies, especially in cases when visitors had travelled. Visitors at Madam's house were often pastors, church members and even customers (former and current) who turned up outside her office hours. Their visit was rarely random, or made only to greet her. When Madam sat down with the visitors to formally welcome them and to ask for their 'mission', they often stressed that they had travelled to see her in person. Some visitors explained in more detail that they had come with a concern (or request) that had to be brought forward in the physical presence of both parties. It is precisely this co-presence – and the efforts made by the visitors to make these encounters happen – that was highlighted during the formal welcome. In the following sections, I turn to the importance of presence, proximity and therefore the need to travel, before I look at the meaningfulness of particular places in the context of travelling to one's hometown.

The importance of presence

People's visits to Madam's house and the travel activities of my friends and acquaintances could in many cases have been substituted by a simple measure: using the phone. Yet this was often not an appropriate option (apart from maybe using the phone to announce or arrange the visit). In various life situations, Ghanaians are rather obliged to physically travel, despite the increasing availability of mobile phones, networks and call credit.¹² Their travelling engenders what Urry (2003: 156) refers to as 'meetingness' – occasioned meetings that are constituted by co-present

¹² On the question whether connectivity (through mobile phones or the internet) can replace mobility, see Burrell (2009), de Bruijn et al. (2009) and Larsen et al. (2006: 111-124).

encounters and physical proximity rendering people “uniquely accessible, available, and subject to one another” (Goffman 1963: 22).¹³ Travelling for the purpose of co-presence and face-to-face communication becomes socially appropriate, even obligatory, especially when a person wants to approach someone with a particular request or to discuss a serious matter. Indeed, when a person turns up unexpectedly at someone’s house or workplace (instead of calling), this is regularly understood as a sign that the person is in need of something.

During my fieldwork I regularly observed how people plan visits and then travel with the aim of gaining the support of someone, maybe of an influential person. Showing up is often not only meant to establish and consolidate one’s relationship with the solicited person, but also to express sincerity, courtesy and serious commitment to the matter brought forward. In turn, it is hoped that the solicited person may be willing to lend some money, sort out a case, arrange a business deal, provide a job, or ‘make a connection’ (link up) with someone helpful. For instance, I followed the way in which Amoyaw, my driver friend from Suhum, made efforts to travel and ‘face’ someone after he had become unemployed towards the end of my stay. A friend told him that he knew a businessman in Accra who had just bought several new Benz buses and was looking to employ drivers. Amoyaw was very eager to try his luck with this man. After making the necessary arrangements with his friend by phone, he travelled to Accra and met up with his friend. Together they visited the businessman at his office where they first chatted and then discussed the job opportunity. Amoyaw emphasized that not only was it important to meet the man in person, but to call on him in the company of his friend. The latter acted both as an intermediary for the first encounter and as a ‘spokesperson’ (*akyeam*) when he pleaded to the man on Amoyaw’s behalf. His presence and intercession were supposed to valorise the encounter between the two parties and to underpin the sincerity of the visit.¹⁴

The efforts made by those who travel and turn up do not usually remain uncommented. For instance, during festive and ceremonial occasions, particular guests are praised for their attendance that may be read as a sign of friendship, loyalty and support. At functions where the attendance of guests is carefully scrutinized, a common (at times publicly made) statement by hosts and guests alike

¹³ The observation that “travel stems from various compulsions to proximity, the desire and need to be corporeally co-present with significant others” (Larsen et al. 2006: 111) has been made by several sociologists and human geographers (ibid.: 93-110; Urry 2002, 2003, 2007).

¹⁴ On the social roles and functions of the *akyeam* (or ‘linguists’) as spokespersons, intermediaries and messengers in the courts and at functions of traditional leaders in southern Ghana, see Yankah (1995).

is: “The occasion was honoured by the presence of [person A and B]”. Also, when I visited friends or their families in other towns, they usually commended me by saying “You have tried”, meaning I had made real efforts. In their view I had done well to come all the way (although it might not have been far) and to spend money, energy and time to see them. The hospitality and welcoming gestures that hosts show to visitors in many such situations can be interpreted as reciprocal acts. They are ways of returning – at least to some degree – what visitors have invested in order to travel and to come and see them. This becomes most evident when visitors are given return presents such as farming products to be taken back home. Needless to say, the counterpart of showing presence – to be notably absent – is equally significant and subject to scrutiny. Failing to appear in person can lead to disapproval and incomprehension, to gossip and rumour. It may be regarded as disrespectful, even offensive especially when the absent person has been explicitly invited or worse, summoned to appear in front of family (or church) elders, chiefs or other respectable figures and their respective bodies. Remaining absent may in fact be intentional and meant as an explicit – often powerful and political – statement. Such is the case when chiefs or politicians decide not to attend the public meetings, rallies or festive palace events (*durbar*) that they have been invited to.

The fact that travelling to and attending an event is not only functional, but also symbolically loaded becomes most obvious when funerals are celebrated. Whilst some people attend a particular funeral mainly out of kinship obligations, others also attend it to express solidarity with the bereaved. Madam experienced this in a grand style when her 99-year-old father died, a few months before I got to know her. She recounted on several occasions how the funeral celebrations were staged as a huge event. What impressed Madam most was the great number of visitors that had come to her father’s funeral. Church groups, colleagues and various individuals (including neighbours) from Suhum and from her previous work stations had organised buses or taken their private cars to travel to her hometown in the Brong Ahafo region, a five-hour drive away from Suhum. The people whom Madam called ‘*her*’ visitors were not related to her nor had they ever known her father. Still, they had made huge efforts to be present at this occasion, to act as her sympathizers and supporters. As is the case elsewhere in Ghana too, the funeral was thus not only for the deceased, but also for the living (van der Geest 2000). Besides honouring the deceased, the visitors demonstrated respect for Madam and publicly acknowledged her social position and excellence through their attendance. Madam felt flattered. She was particularly proud of the fact that so many people had now been to her hometown. The

hometown is a place that Ghanaians generally attribute particular meaningfulness to and that often becomes closely entangled with travelling.

Hometown visits

Provincial towns in southern Ghana like Kyebi and Suhum that are often quiet places during the week usually become quite animated on weekends. This is mainly due to the many people who come in order to attend funeral celebrations, usually lasting from Friday afternoon until Sunday evening, with the burials taking place on Saturday morning. The towns also fill with more people during the holidays, mainly Christmas and Easter, and when traditional festivals are celebrated, like the biannual *Ohum* festival in the Akyem Abuakwa kingdom (Klaeger 2007a). These are some of the occasions for people to travel back to their hometowns, leaving behind for some time their places of residence – usually Accra, but also overseas – where they have moved for work, schooling and other migratory factors. In the Akan-dominated regions of southern Ghana, the hometown does not necessarily stand for a person's birthplace. It usually denotes the ancestral home and represents the seat of the person's matriline, often embodied through the so-called 'family (or lineage) house' (*abusua fie*) where the family elder resides and where major family events take place (Mohan 2008: 474). Most migrants maintain strong linkages with their hometown precisely because of these lineage affiliations, but also because they are socially tied to the place through birth, schooling, friendship and other biographic aspects. To them, the hometown is thus central for their sense of belonging (ibid.: 466).¹⁵

Elvis' father who lived in Accra was a regular weekend visitor to his hometown Kyebi and he normally came to attend a funeral (at times several). He usually travelled by public transport (unless he could join a relative or friend in their private car) and alighted directly at the little house by the roadside. He would take a rest, chat with Elvis and then take a bath before putting on his black funeral cloth (*ntoma*) and setting off to pay a visit to the bereaved families. One of his sons living with him in Accra, Kwaku (Elvis' younger brother, 22 years old), sometimes joined his father on these trips to Kyebi. Kwaku was more likely to be seen in the town centre around the 'spots' (drinking bars) where he mingled with his friends and other town youths than at the funerals. Although he did wear 'black', he did it in an unconventional, more fashionable way, usually combining a skin-tight black t-shirt with blue jeans and new sneakers. In this way Kwaku stood out as someone who had come from the city. The

¹⁵ On the connection between hometowns and funerals, see for instance Awedoba and Hahn (2014: 52-53), de Witte (2001: 82-83) and Mohan (2008: 473).

importance that Ghanaians commonly attribute to dress in the performance of status and subjectivity (Fumanti 2010: 210) was also expressed by Kwaku's friends. "You dress like an Accra boy!" I once heard them say laughingly when I met them standing and chatting in front of *Descent*, the most popular 'spot' in town.

One Saturday, the 'boy from Accra' decided to introduce me to his girlfriend, a 19-year-old woman living in Kyebi, whom he had been mentioning but whom I had never seen. We met up at a 'spot' close to the bus station where Kwaku decided to buy a round of drinks for us. Yet the noble gesture turned into a farce when he wanted to pay but was unable to find his money. He twisted and turned the pockets of his new baggy pants inside out, but not a single *cedi* coin, let alone a note was to be found. Kwaku was embarrassed. A few moments later, he remembered where he had put his money – and pulled the crumpled notes out of his sneakers. Later Kwaku explained to me what this was all about: His local friends were always assuming that as an 'Accra boy' he must have come with some 'cash' (which was not untrue). So normally when he arrived from the capital, his local friends teased him, asked him for money and at times even searched his pockets for cash. This is why Kwaku preferred hiding the *cedi* notes inside his shoes.

When Kwaku appeared in Kyebi for funerals and other festive occasions, he embodied some of the practices and characteristics that are intrinsic to hometown travelling. He was eager to meet with his mates, perpetuating the bonds with those who were important to him, but also paid courtesy visits to family members. Buying drinks for his friends was part of the consumption patterns that Kwaku could observe among older migrants coming from the capital (some even from overseas). The latter often spend money lavishly during weekends away in their hometown. The city dwellers' conspicuous lifestyle is also epitomized by their turning up with and publicly exhibiting objects and consumer goods (see Awedoba and Hahn 2014: 50–51).¹⁶ Just as Kwaku and other city youth arrive with distinctive clothes and appealing electronics, the successful city dwellers often parade through town with their private cars, parking them ostentatiously in front of the houses, 'spots' and close to the funeral grounds. Visitors thus become noticed, at times admired for their lifestyle, as I have shown in the case of roadside dwellers who observe – and admire – the cars coming from Accra (see Chapter 3, p. 79). Visitors are also challenged and even envied by those who are left behind and unable to attain such lifestyle.

¹⁶ Several authors have discussed conspicuous consumption in Ghana as marker of social status, success and wealth, particularly in the context of funerals and other occasions for hometown visits (Arhin 1995; Awedoba and Hahn 2014; Chalfin 2008; de Witte 2001, 2003; van der Geest 2000).

For Kwaku and other visitors, coming to the hometown means being in a place that is often ambivalently referred to as ‘village’ (*akurase*). Reference to the ‘village’ (and to the ‘villager’, *okurasini*) can be an insult. Many indeed perceive their ‘village’ as little (or less) developed and as backward and narrow on many levels, certainly devoid of long-term opportunities. Yet people also enjoy coming to their ‘village’. For them the place stands for a more authentic lifestyle and for the ‘traditional’ home, including customs, celebrations and seasonal festivals, but also the cherished ‘local’ food and drinks. Visiting migrants are attracted by the intimate environment of the extended family, the opportunity to meet and hang out with old friends, and the occasions for enjoyments and escapades. “I’ve travelled!” I heard a young woman tell someone on the phone whilst she was hanging out at a ‘spot’ in Kyebi. “I’ve travelled to my village to *chill*. I’m *happy* when I come back to my village!”



Figure 27: Enjoying the hometown visit

At the same time, in the case of Accra residents, their coming to the hometown means temporarily leaving behind a place of modern life whilst also taking along and exhibiting some of its features during their stay. City life allows many not only to participate in consumption styles conceived as more modern, but also to gain access to various networks, institutions and services, some of which promote individual success and upward mobility. Even where city dwellers are unable to fully participate and achieve ‘something better’, they are aware that the capital is the place where

opportunities for personal success and progress exist and can be found. Once in Kyebi, they are reminded and able to provide tangible evidence of what it entails (even if only potentially) to live in Accra. Thus the hometown visit – or more precisely, travelling back and forth between hometown and city – brings together the particular meaningfulness of both places. Here travelling contributes to and is constitutive of the dualism of ‘here’ and ‘there’.¹⁷ But both are also joined since the experience and symbolism of coming to the hometown (‘here’) is inextricably connected to the significance of coming from and having been to the city (‘there’).

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to bring out some of the socialities of and social occasions for travelling in southern Ghana and on the AKR in particular. I looked at multiple means of travel in relation to travellers’ socio-economic positions; the sociable practices that are at the margins of travel activities; and the meaningfulness of being present and of visiting one’s hometown. All of these phenomena reveal temporal and/or speed-related aspects that frame (or emerge from) the everyday practices and experiences of travelling and its surrounding activities.

One temporal aspect in coming to the hometown is the ‘time-out’ that the urban migrants get to spend during their short visits. As I have shown with the case of Kwaku, travelling to the hometown does not only mean leaving the city behind temporarily (although some of its features are taken along and visibly embodied), but also having a good time in the ‘village’. It means a period of downtime and relaxation, including socializing, drinking and dancing, which also correlates with the times and rhythms of holidays, festivals and funerals. For Elvis’ father as well as many other visitors, the funeral celebrations in their hometown represent social events that they are often required to attend and for which they need to take time to greet people, to sit with them and to chat. A further important temporal factor in these and other occasions is the considerable time (and money) that some of the visitors have spent in travelling in order to be physically present, to show their respect or to underpin the sincerity of their particular request. These efforts are usually acknowledged and at times verbally praised by the hosts (or the visited) who may reciprocate through welcoming and hospitable gestures. The latter may react with disappointment or

¹⁷ The symbolic significance of travelling and places (home and away) becomes even more powerful in the context of having been to and returning from overseas (*aburokyire*) as what is often called a *boga* (originally from ‘Hamburger’, meaning migrant to Hamburg; see Fumanti 2013: 134).

even consider it disrespectful when their visitors are in a rush and unwilling (or unable) to stay at their hosts for some time, and when they don't even wait until the announced meal has been prepared for them.

This points to the issue of time planning and schedules that occupies not only travellers, but also those who are eager to find out about the travellers' movements. I have detailed how people – household members, neighbours, friends, hosts – enquire routinely from travellers about their time or day of arrival, their planned duration of stay and, when departing, whether they will be away for a long time ('to keep long'). These enquiries almost always come up in the informal conversations that form part of what I called the sociable practices at the margins – at the start and end of travellers' journeys. Another schedule-related and perhaps the most pertinent time factor for travellers is, of course, the duration of their journey. The duration and the travel speed broadly correspond with the means of travel that are used. Most attractive, but not affordable for the majority of travellers is travelling by private car or even more exclusive and faster in a VIP convoy. Their great dromocentric advantage lies in the possibility of direct travel, of being spared the often time-consuming waiting and searching for (at times also changing of) public transport vehicles. It is these delays that public transport passengers – who are positioned at the lower end of the hierarchy of mobility and travel speed – are often faced with. As I will show in the following chapter, delays may also grow in cases where passengers make specific attempts to board vehicles and join the commercial drivers that they reckon can take them to their destination safely.

Chapter 9

Trapped travellers: personal safety and practices of ‘passengerering’

“Safety first!” my friend Julius told me one morning when we were strolling through the *Roundabout Station* in Suhum and looking at different buses parked in the station yard. He made the claim with a big grin on his face, since the ‘safety first’ motto is known by young Ghanaians to be part of HIV/AIDS education campaigns that promote the use of condoms. This morning, however, Julius’ concern for safety was not about his sexual health, but about his wellbeing on the road. His attempt to put safety first on his upcoming trip to Accra (and on several other trips that we did together) included inspecting the bus that was loading when we arrived at the station as well as looking at the other buses waiting for their own turn to load and depart. With his inspection, Julius claimed he made sure he would board a vehicle that was ‘nice’, that seemed in good condition and that he would feel safe in (maybe also comfortable) when travelling on the Accra-Kumasi road (AKR).

Perceptions about what makes road trips safe and unsafe and practices for managing the risks and perils of travelling do not only prevail among commercial drivers working on the AKR, as I have shown in Chapter 7 (p. 169), but also among public transport passengers such as Julius. The attempts of passengers to care for their personal (physical) safety en route can be seen as a central element of ‘passengerering’. The term ‘passengerering’ is employed by scholars in transport and mobility studies to describe and analyse the ways in which passengers ‘make’ their journeys (Jain 2009) with (and on board of) buses and other means of public transport.¹ Situated within heterogeneous technological arrangements, ‘passengerering’ involves a set of knowledge, skills and everyday practices that come together when travel is ‘performed’ (ibid.: 93). These include making various travel preparations and choosing appropriate travel time, route and means of transport (see Chapter 8, p.

¹ ‘Passengerering’ as a term and concept is used by several transport geographers and sociologists of mobility (see Ashmore 2013; Bissell et al. 2011; Jain 2009; Laurier et al. 2008; Thrift 2004; Vannini 2010).

185), as well as making attempts towards one's personal safety in a perilous road and transport environment.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the ways in which a particular segment of public transport travellers engage in 'passenger' when they embark on bus trips on the AKR and when they are transported by hitherto unknown drivers. I draw from the travel experiences, perceptions and practices of several young men – all friends of mine – whom I was able to follow closely on many of their trips from Kyebi and Suhum to Accra (and often back again).² The informants for my ethnographic 'ride-along' episodes (see Kusenbach 2003) formed a relatively consistent focus group. They were all men in their twenties or early thirties; they regularly travelled to Accra on public transport (from once per month to twice per week); they had substantial knowledge of and a personal interest in cars (models and technical features); and they were well acquainted with current road safety debates in Ghana (despite their differing levels of education). This explains in part why my friends were quite explicit about their worries regarding personal safety whilst en route, as well as about their ways of dealing with risks and perils.

In order to demonstrate how my friends worry about and try to engage in safe travels, I look first at their ways of *navigating* the potential perils of travelling in public transport buses. I make use of the concept of 'navigating', introduced in Chapter 5 (p. 126), since it denotes people's practices of assessing environments that are marked by uncertainty and perils, as well as their reaction to the immediate and anticipated constraints and perils (Vigh 2006a, 2009). In this sense, I understand navigating as a form of risk management – as the attempts of travellers to envision and to avoid being physically harmed in the face of potentially unsafe vehicles, seats and drivers. After addressing my friends' considerations and practices for their safety on *upcoming* bus trips, I turn to their regular practice of looking out for and averting dangerous situations *during* their trips. This involves their heightened sensory alertness towards the behaviour of (their own and other) drivers, and their immediate and often emotional reactions to critical situations and movements, as well as their occasional attempts to interfere in their driver's manoeuvres for the sake of their safety. Passengers can therefore be seen as 'co-wayfarers': they participate in

² My main focus group of public transport passengers consisted of about ten people, among them my host in Kyebi, Elvis, my two research assistants and several other friends from Kyebi and Suhum. Taking them as my main passenger informants seemed most adequate not only because they formed a consistent social group, but also because they were more interested in and familiar with my research and generally more available than other travellers I knew. In the following, I will simply refer to them as 'my friends'.

their driver's task of 'wayfaring' (Ingold 2010) and making his way through challenging and perilous terrain (see Chapter 7). In this context, I also show how bus passengers regularly get agitated with their driver when he engages in dangerous (especially dromocentric) manoeuvres. What follows are moments of indignation that may be directed at the driver, but are often in vain. Throughout this chapter, I highlight how my friends' and other travellers' attempts to put safety first may actually be impeded or ignored and thus remain rather limited. Focusing on their personal safety, but being limited in practice, the travellers become trapped.



Figure 28: Passing by a scene of accident

Navigating the perils of bus travel

"I need to take good care of my wellbeing", Julius explained when I asked him what the 'safety first' motto meant to him. "There is no reason for me to lose my life", he said and added that as a young man he was both liked and needed by his family and friends. As with the other young men with whom I regularly travelled, Julius was also concerned about safe travel practices because he knew of several people who had died in car accidents. Particularly shocking to him had been the accidents that he had witnessed himself on trips along the AKR. Julius recalled how he had once passed by a particularly horrible scene where a Benz bus had crashed into the backside of a long truck loaded with iron rods. Seeing fresh blood and dead passengers (some of whom

had been virtually pierced by fallen iron rods) had made him feel so nauseous that he was unable to drink water during and in the hours after his trip.³

Perils and safety: perceptions and considerations

My friends have quite clear ideas of what perils to expect on their road travels and how to deal with them. One risk factor is the driver. When arriving at the bus station, the young men usually examine the driver in charge of the currently loading vehicle. Ideally, they join a driver they know from previous trips and whom they remember to have ‘done well’ with regards to his driving, his ability to dodge traffic jams (and thus to keep trips short), his cooperative attitude towards passengers, and other criteria. They are particularly wary of drivers who look like ‘young boys’ (men in their early twenties or younger) since they have the reputation of being careless, whereas older drivers may be more trustworthy. The latter are commonly believed to be more experienced, to have encountered more critical situations and accidents, and to be more aware of the advantage of ‘relaxing’ (and the perils of overspeeding in particular). Elderly drivers are also assumed to drive more responsibly, given that they have wives and children whom they are committed to emotionally and financially. My friends also judge drivers according to their appearances. They suspect drivers to be ‘bad’ when they appear scruffy, wear dirty clothes and use flip-flops for driving instead of proper shoes.⁴ What counts, too, is their behaviour at the bus station. Understandably, my friends (and several other travellers I met) trust calm drivers more than those who act in an undisciplined manner, who are disrespectful to customers, and who shout at colleagues and quarrel. Drivers are scrutinized with regards to what they drink and eat while resting, as it is commonly known that drinking alcohol and eating heavy meals leads to driver fatigue.

Another risk factor is the driver’s vehicle. One way of assessing commercial vehicles is to look at the number plate as its last letter indicates which year the vehicle was registered with the licensing authority. At the time of my fieldwork (2007), my friends reckoned that the best choice for travelling was to take a vehicle with an ‘X’ (registered in 2007). They assumed that the ‘X’ (and its preceding letters in the alphabet) meant the vehicle was fairly new and more roadworthy, or at least that it had experienced less wear and tear on Ghana’s roads than vehicles with ‘lower’

³ For a vivid, and distressing, description of a road accident scene in Kenya, see Lamont (2012a: 174).

⁴ The issue of wearing proper clothes and shoes is regularly addressed by transport union officials who are not only concerned about the (often negative) public image of commercial drivers, but also about their safe driving, which is endangered by inappropriate footwear.

letters. Their assumption is influenced by the fact that all brand-new vehicles necessarily bear very recent registration letters. The young men are also aware, however, that even a newly licensed vehicle can in fact be old and in a poor technical condition. Some of them therefore explained that they try not to be misled by the registration letter and look out for other signs telling them whether the car is ‘strong’ and trustworthy or not. They pay attention to the condition of tyres and car body and watch out for cracked windshields. They also try to listen for critical noises coming from the engine, exhaust pipe, muffler and other vehicle parts (although noises linked to faults often emerge only en route).

If time permits, my friends – like most travellers – have a critical look at the vehicle’s interior condition. They focus on the seats and the panelling, which usually tend not to be original but have been modified or built in after importing the vehicle from overseas. The seat rows may be too narrow, or they may have broken back rests and protruding, badly welded iron tubes, and the panelling may be battered and unable to protect the sharp, often rusty metal edges around the fitted windows (hence the popular term ‘tetanus car’ for run-down vehicles). My friends despise such conditions in part because of the danger of being squashed, bruised or cut, but also because of the lack of comfort that awaits them in this type of vehicle. When there is no time to look for all these details, my friends at least assess the vehicle’s overall appearance, including paintwork and cleanliness. It is read as a general indicator of the invested maintenance, of the vehicle’s roadworthiness, and of the speed and comfort that are to be expected (or not) during the trip. The ‘nice’ car that the young men hope to board is strong, fast and safe, as well as neat-looking and possibly equipped with a car radio.

Another consideration for travel safety is the vehicle size. Here preferences among my friends vary. Some dislike taking the big Mercedes Benz (so-called ‘207’) buses that dominate public transport on the AKR. Originally built for cargo transport in Europe and then turned into passenger vehicles in Ghana, the Benz buses are widely perceived to be dangerous for passenger transport due to the technical modifications they have undergone.⁵ Other friends say they feel more secure in big Benz buses, precisely because of their big size and usually stronger engines, and they dislike small minibuses, which can feel slower, smaller and more cramped. A related aspect is the number of passengers in a vehicle. Travellers generally prefer not to take overloaded

⁵ It is widely argued that the allegedly shifted balance point makes the converted Benz buses swing more easily, especially on potholed roads, which may lead to the vehicle’s overturning. On the technological transformation and adaptation of imported vehicles, see Beck (2004, 2009), Beisel and Schneider (2012) and Meyer and Verrips (2001).

vehicles for reasons of safety and comfort. Yet at the same time they are also wary of boarding vehicles that ‘pick’ passengers from the roadside and have only *few* passengers on board: their drivers may engage in dangerous manoeuvres while rushing for customers and competing with other ‘overlappers’ (see Chapter 6, p. 161).

A frequent topic of discussion with my passenger informants was their seat preferences, though perceptions about which seats were (un)safe were not consistent. Some claim that sitting (actually, hiding) directly behind the driver is safest: in a critical moment, the driver would certainly do his best to steer in such a way that he escapes unhurt. Accordingly, the same respondents argue that the two front seats (next to the driver) are more exposed in a crash and are therefore to be avoided. Others claim they prefer sitting as close to the door as possible in order to get out more easily after an accident.⁶ Still, some of my friends clearly prefer a front seat (or one in the first row) since they are eager to observe the road and the driver’s movements and to interfere in critical situations, as I will explore below.

Travellers also consider the daytime of their travels. The majority prefer travelling in daylight since they assume that potholes, badly adjusted headlights, broken-down vehicles and other features cause more accidents at night. Conversely, some feel more secure when travelling after sunset. They assume that there is less traffic on the road when it is late, or that commercial drivers engage less in overspeeding and overtaking since they are on their last trip of the day and therefore not in such a rush.

Safety attempts and their limitations

Joining my friends on their bus trips on the AKR, I could observe their attempts to put safety considerations and risk perceptions into practice. The example I presented at the beginning of this chapter was Julius who always has a close look at the bus loading at the station before he boards it. “If I don’t like what I see, I will not take it”, he told me. If time permits, Julius does not board the disliked car, but waits for the next one or even goes away for some time if no ‘nice’ cars are next in the queue. In the same way, when he takes a bus from the roadside, he checks out the passing vehicles and does not just take the first one arriving. With my other friends, I also spent quite some time ‘hiding’ in a corner of the bus station, observing the movements of vehicles and waiting for a suitable option. Kofi, one of my research assistants, is particularly eager to chat with the drivers of vehicles loading at the station just to find out about their character and attitude, and whether they are ‘cool’.

⁶ Interestingly, nobody I spoke to seemed to prefer back row seats although they might be considered a safer option, particularly in the case of a head-on collision.

When Kofi has already bought a ticket, but realizes he is not happy with what he has seen and heard, Kofi will simply return the ticket.

Despite all considerations and intentions, the travellers' attempts to navigate the travel uncertainties by implementing safety measures remain limited in everyday practice. A central limitation is the lack of choice. For instance, the availability of alternative vehicles strongly depends on the time of day and on the location for boarding a bus. Waiting for an Accra-bound bus by the roadside in Kyebi, Elvis often feels he is obliged to take whatever comes. Not many 'overlappers' pass on the 'old road' during certain parts of the day, especially in the late morning. Even when he decides to split the journey in two (see Chapter 8, p. 187) and to change vehicles at Suhum's *Roundabout Station*, he can only be picky at times of relatively heavy passenger flow and high departure frequency. During quieter hours, refusing to board a departing 'bad' vehicle may result in a long wait for another – and not necessarily better – vehicle. Elvis explained: "If there is no other vehicle that can take you, you have to change your own [plan]. You have to comply to the circumstances".⁷

Another limitation to the travellers' safety measures is their desire – at times necessity – for avoiding waiting times and for a fast journey. "I want to get going very quickly", one of my friends once said, "because if I don't get to my destination on time, I will miss something". When travellers are impatient or in a rush and face a 'bad' vehicle, they often comply and simply board the vehicle. They may even fully sacrifice their safety intentions and focus on their post-travel activities. As Kofi explained, "Sometimes, my eyes can not be so much on the state of the vehicle. I just want to go. I'm interested in getting to my destination and then do what I have to do, then come back." Commercial drivers may take advantage of the travellers' impatience and loose safety intentions. For instance, a driver loading his unappealing vehicle can try to convince hesitant travellers to join nevertheless by assuring them (or pretending) that he is just about to depart (see Chapter 6, p. 162, for tactics of 'rushing' passengers). I have also heard drivers who lured hesitant passengers with a common phrase: "Don't mind the body". This phrase suggests that although the vehicle might seem to be in a bad state, it will still serve its purpose and take the passengers to their destination.

Apart from the lack of choice and the primacy of speed, conflicting safety preferences might complicate the travellers' safety measures. For instance, travellers who would

⁷ The same applies for insisting on one's preferred seat that is often simply no longer available. To wait for the next vehicle and for a better seat may involve a long wait, an option that is usually discarded.

normally refuse to take a rundown (or overloaded) vehicle may decide to take it after all if nightfall is approaching – simply to avoid any dangerous nighttime travelling. Some of my friends also try to sit in the front in order to caution the driver in case of dangerous driving, even though they also feel more vulnerable sitting in the front. In many cases, however, the travellers do not get the chance to set their own priorities and have to go along with the limited options available to them. In view of these limitations and of the insecurities of travelling more generally, they also resort to their faith in a higher being and routinely pray for protection, thus engaging in the same religious practices as those prevalent among commercial drivers (see Chapter 7, p. 178). For all the travellers I know it is important not only to “commit the journey into the hands of God”, as they often say, but also to pray for the driver to be ‘guided’ in every move he makes. Yet some of the travellers – and my friends in particular – also feel it is appropriate that they contribute to safe driving by watching and possibly controlling what their drivers do en route.

Passengers as ‘co-wayfarers’

“I can never sleep on a bus”, Julius once told me, “I always want to see what’s happening on the road”. For the young men whom I regularly joined on their bus trips on the AKR, being visually alert is a key component of their ‘passenger’ practices. I learned that this involves far more than just staring into the direction of travel, as most passengers commonly do, or letting the gaze wander from the road itself to its surroundings (including the roadside activities and communities), maybe out of boredom and to pass travel time. The young men’s visual alertness is rather directed at manoeuvres and incidents on the road that may turn into dangerous situations, in the worst case into accidents. This is part of their attempts to act as ‘co-wayfarers’ by playing an active role in the course of the bus trips alongside their driver as the actual ‘wayfarer’ (see Chapter 6 and 7).

Watching and being alert

I found it striking to observe how my travel companions were gazing as much as possible through the windscreen of the moving vehicle and how eager they were to gain a view of the road ahead.⁸ When their visibility was impaired, they shifted and moved their head and upper part of the body consistently in order to see. “Sometimes I even feel pain in my neck after the journey because of all the twisting and turning”,

⁸ I have described the (more elaborate) attempts of drivers for better visibility on the road in Chapter 7 (p. 175).

one of my friends told me. I learned that watching the road is an embodied and routinized practice by which the passengers – and attentive drivers (see Chapter 7, p. 175) – critically monitor the potentially perilous manoeuvres of other road users, in particular of oncoming vehicles. But my friends are even more critical of the manoeuvres and behaviours of their very own driver. For instance, they focus on how the latter copes with the often bad road surface and tries to dodge potholes, and how he makes attempts to pull out, overtake and cut in on other cars, particularly in bends and before reaching hilltops. Therefore, the passengers also pay attention to the speed that is applied, especially when the driver engages in ‘overlapping’, is in a rush to ‘pick’ more passengers and/or is tempted to ‘overspeed’.

My friends all agreed that their high level of (mainly visual) alertness en route serves several purposes. One purpose of being alert is to prevent oneself from ‘panicking’, that is, from being startled and reacting with fear. Unalert and inattentive passengers⁹ are startled by sudden braking or swerving, by the shock from hitting a large pothole, or by the noises – bangs, loud shaking – that normally accompany the harsh vehicular movements. They also get startled by the sudden and hectic sounds of the horn blown by their own or by other drivers. These impacts, noises and signals are regularly perceived as tangible signs of ongoing critical incidents or as announcements of impending dangers. Equally alarming are the reactions of fellow passengers, their facial expressions, hectic gestures and exclamations when they perceive some danger. “There are moments when I feel some fear”, Elvis told me. “I feel this kind of ‘hey!’ – like when I’m sleeping and all the sudden passengers are shouting. Then my head will be straight up, my heart will be beating heavily.” In my friends’ view, being startled in such a way creates unnecessary fear.

Another purpose of being alert is that it allows passengers to be “warned and prepared in case of anything”, as Kofi described it, and to adjust themselves and their bodies to what they see coming. For instance, when approaching a series of potholes, passengers can anticipate the foreseen shocks and shaking and can try to hold on to something to lessen the bodily impact and to avoid falling onto other passengers. Their alertness also means being prepared and ready to react, possibly to interfere in one way or the other for the sake of their safety.

⁹ Bus passengers, including my informants, become unalert when they have fallen asleep, are distracted whilst conversing, or are unable to see anything due to their seat position.

Reacting, interfering and keeping quiet

Being confronted with critical incidents on the road, my friends (and other passengers too) are not usually shy in expressing their emotions – anger, indignation and frustration – about the incidents, the drivers and their dangerous (and often uncomfortable) manoeuvres. They shake their heads, raise their hands, kiss their teeth, grumble or sigh, or a combination of several of these, and they regularly react with short, often terrified outcries (“ey!”, or “oh *adeen?*”, meaning ‘oh why?’). When truly annoyed they insult drivers as ‘fools’ (*kwasia*), ‘mad’ (*bɔ dam*), ‘animals’ (*aboa*) or ‘sheep’ (*ɔdwan*), resulting from the same type of ‘frustration-aggression’ (Katz 1999: 22) as found among roadside hawkers (see Chapter 4, p. 119).¹⁰ I witnessed several incidents during which Julius (the most outspoken among all my friends) complained vociferously to our driver about his wrongdoing. In one case, when our driver entered into a frightening race game with another ‘overlapper’, he threatened to report him to the police.

What seems appropriate to my friends, at least in some situations, is to interfere in the driver’s driving. For instance, they may warn the driver about an impending danger that the latter might not have seized early enough, such as when he sets off to overtake despite an approaching car, or when an unlit stationary vehicle is suddenly encountered in the middle of the road. They may also try to instruct the driver to stay further behind a dangerously loaded truck or to desist from overtaking in a blind corner. Most often, my friends feel it is necessary to interfere in the driving speed. “Driver, *bɔkɔɔ*, take it ‘cool!’” they usually tell a driver whom they reckon is overspeeding, or they shout “Master, I beg, kindly reduce the speed. I’m too young to die *oo!*” There is also the phrase “*Tɔ wo boe, na ye wo ha!* Take your time, we are here!”, which also serves to remind the driver that he is responsible for the safety of his passengers.

Interfering together with being alert can be seen as the passengers’ attempts to participate in the manoeuvres of the driver and to share in his (kinetic and sensory) tasks of ‘wayfaring’ through a perilous environment. Thus ‘passenger’ as practiced by my friends and some of their fellow passengers is about ‘co-wayfaring’ and refusing to be merely ‘transported’ in the Ingoldian sense of the term (see Chapter 6, p. 146). The active role that passengers can potentially take in the ‘making’ of (safe)

¹⁰ For reasons that I lay out below, such insults are more freely directed at other drivers (who often do not get to hear much of it) than to one’s own driver.

journeys is regularly brought up by road safety experts.¹¹ They argue that road safety in Ghana is not only in the hands of drivers (see Chapter 2, p. 63), but also in the hands of public transport users. In their campaigns and public appeals, the experts urge passengers to take responsibility, producing slogans like “Stay alert and keep watching and listening” and “Be bold and advise your driver when necessary to slow down and to stop unnecessary overtaking”.¹²

The experts’ appeals often remain without consequence. On countless bus trips that I made, passengers did not interfere with the driver even when they had ample grounds to do so, as I could tell from their startled and angry reactions. Even my usually attentive and outspoken friends were hesitant at times about interfering. They gave several reasons why passengers may desist from controlling and directing their driver. Firstly, passengers may simply trust their driver and his ability to perform well in any critical situation, no matter whether the situation is provoked by him or by other drivers. The passengers’ trust is not necessarily based on any previous experience with (or knowledge about) the driver. My impression was that it is often motivated by their desire to *feel* safe (instead of their worrying about *being* safe), which may deter them from interfering (cf. Harries 2008). Secondly, passengers may have learned from experience that interfering (requesting for less overspeeding in particular) is to no avail since drivers often give the appearance of not having heard their requests, or since they systematically disregard these requests.¹³ Thirdly, passengers may fear that their directions and criticism are received as an act of disrespect towards the driver, who will then react with anger. “Are you the one driving?” drivers commonly respond to interfering passengers, which is at times followed by insults and loud quarrels. What worries passengers most about such emotional reactions is that they can distract the driver from his actual task of driving, or that they result in even more dangerous and aggressive driving. In short, interfering may backfire.

¹¹ Lamont (2012b) also draws on the Ingoldian notion of ‘wayfaring’ in his description of how passengers in rural Kenya participate in the journeying (rather than being transported in a passive manner) by assisting manually, such as when their vehicle gets stuck in a broken culvert. Their communal engaging with infrastructural failures contributes to what Lamont calls the ‘infrastructural sociality’ of roads.

¹² These slogans were taken from the Facebook site of the National Road Safety Commission (<https://www.facebook.com/NationalRoadSafetyCommission>). Road safety experts regularly also encourage passengers to refuse boarding vehicles that are not roadworthy, and to report drunk and ‘recalcitrant’ drivers to station officials and to the police.

¹³ See Jordan (1978) for a (quantitative) analysis of commercial drivers’ behaviour towards passengers whilst en route, including their tendency to “sacrifice [passengers’] requests for the sake of speed” (ibid.: 36).

The main reason put forward by passengers for not interfering in their driver's *dromocentric* manoeuvres (overspeeding and overtaking) is the ambivalent stance they may take on speed. My friends explained that they are occasionally torn between being annoyed with and even afraid of their driver's fast driving, on the one hand, and feeling attracted to it, on the other. The advantages they often see in speed are the (hopefully) earlier arrival at the destination, and less time spent in an often cramped and uncomfortable vehicle (yet with more cooling airstream when going fast). "At times we like the overspeeding more", Julius explained to me. "We hate it because of all the noise and shaking and we fear for our lives, but we also want it because we are impatient. So at times we will not complain."

The degree of (im)patience and the needs for speed may also vary significantly among the passengers travelling in the same vehicle. On several occasions I witnessed how some anxious passengers complained to the driver about his overspeeding, but were soon told off by other passengers and reminded that fast speed was in everybody's interest (cf. Lamont 2013: 370). "Don't we all want to get home early?" I have heard people say in this situation. In some cases the drivers are downright encouraged by some passengers to go faster and to overtake, even at dangerous spots.¹⁴ The disagreements – at times regular disputes – emerging among passengers over matters of speed usually discourage those who would normally plead for more patience, as they find themselves in a weaker position.

Concerted complaining and blaming

Passengers are much more likely to complain and put joint pressure on their driver if they take a more or less unanimous stance towards the critical manoeuvres they are foreseeing. Such unanimity is often felt among the passengers when their emotional reactions (described above) are not merely isolated expressions of fear and outrage, but emerge from all corners of the vehicle, and when the startled passengers raise their voices against the driver at the same time. The collective emotions and the concerted complaints may lead to intensive (yet usually brief) communicative interactions among the passengers, during which they express their anger and indignation about their driver.¹⁵

¹⁴ Similarly, Lamont (2013: 370) describes situations in Kenya in which hurried passengers ask drivers to speed up, praise them for "a long road-trip made shorter by excessive 'skillful' speeding", and may harshly rebuke those who ask the driver to slow down.

¹⁵ Similar complaints about and reactions to minibus drivers have been described by wa Mungai and Samper (2006) and Mutongi (2006) who write about the narratives and perceptions of *matatu* minibus passengers in Nairobi.

Agitation and indignation typically arise when a driver makes an unexpected stop on the road in order to take new passengers on board, even though he set out earlier to drive directly to the final destination and not to ‘pick and drop’ passengers en route. This change in the loading mode often infuriates the passengers on board. “Driver, this is not a *trotro* oo!” they usually shout, and they complain that ‘picking’ (and dropping) new passengers will prolong travel time and possibly result in overloading, with its constraints for the travellers’ comfort and safety.¹⁶ What often ensue are the travellers’ indignant comments about the driver who is ‘forcing’ (increasing his income by ‘picking’ additional passengers) at the expense of his customers. “*Eyε asem oo*, it’s really something”, one female passenger once said, “this driver is doing everything to get more money in his pocket, and we [the passengers] are all suffering.” Several of her fellow passengers agreed: “*Eyε ampa oo*, this is so true”, they said, someone adding “and we are also paying for it. It’s really something.”

The passengers’ indignation (provided that it is shared by a large enough number) grows even louder when the driver engages in dangerous overspeeding and overtaking. In addition to asking their driver to slow down, to take his time and to exercise patience (*boaseto*), the startled passengers often make angry comments about the speeding. In their discussions en route, they relate the driver’s kinetic practices predominantly to his ‘forcing’ for money, to his attempt to fit in more trips and customers in one day, as the popular motto ‘go fast, come fast’ conveys.¹⁷ The passengers also interpret these practices as a sign of the driver’s impatience. His impatience may be the result of not having had a very successful day so far; of having been delayed at the station or in traffic jams; or of driving behind other vehicles, which may feel like losing time and above all, money (whereas the impatience of passengers described above is predominantly concerned with time alone).

“Aah, this driver! *Adeen*, why?! Why is he doing this to us?” the passenger sitting behind me exclaimed on one trip when our driver was tailgating and suddenly accelerating to overtake on a dangerous hilly road section. “His girlfriend is waiting at the station, so he wants to fly”, my friend Kofi (whom I was travelling with and who helped me recall the incident afterwards) said jokingly. On a more serious note,

¹⁶ On several such occasions, drivers who had been pushed by passengers to move on, but were asked later to slow down, got quite angry, usually retorting with words like “Did you not ask me to go fast, and now you want me to slow down?”

¹⁷ Passengers assume that drivers’ desire to ‘beat time’ also dictates their behaviour at police checkpoints on the road. When drivers are made to stop there, they are ever ready to give money to the police officers in order not to be delayed any more by further checks or discussions (see Beek 2011: 205). Some of my friends found it ironic that drivers pay money in order not to lose time and money.

one man asserted: “This driver, really, *ɔpɛ sika dodo*, he likes money too much, *afei nso ɔpɛ ntɛm saa*, and this is why he is in such a hurry.” What followed was a brief discussion during which the driver’s greed and impatience was blamed for the perils (and the potential harm) that the passengers were now experiencing as a result of his fast driving.¹⁸

In situations like the ones described above, especially after near-accidents, the immediate agitation and concerted indignation among passengers show what kind of community is created behind the drivers’ seat during the bus trips.¹⁹ My friends emphasized that people’s reactions in these critical situations serve as a reminder that “we are all one”, that the passengers are *collectively* exposed to the intentions, manoeuvres and moods of drivers. As suggested in the comments above (‘the driver makes profit, but we are the ones who are all suffering’; ‘why is he doing this to us’), the passengers are bound by collective ‘suffering’ and in their role as the victims of drivers. Like the roadside hawkers in Ofankor who are also exposed to the perilous actions of drivers (see Chapter 4, p. 119), the passengers not only engage in collective emotions, but also feel that they are being ‘sinned against’ (Douglas 1992: 28). Being put at risk and *feeling* the dangers, passengers form a vulnerable group of people. What seems to strengthen the sense of loyalty among the passenger community is the collective blaming of drivers, their greed and their impatience for putting their passengers in danger, as well as the moral judgements that the blaming implies (cf. Douglas 1985: 59).²⁰ This judgement is often central to the agitated discussions in which drivers are condemned for turning passengers into victims of what is perceived as *immoral impatience*.

If passengers feel like they are the victims of drivers and their impatience, then this is also related to the experience that their indignation is often in vain and has no (or

¹⁸ In other (often heated) discussions, passengers do not merely blame their drivers for the threats, pains and discomfort they are experiencing, but also other actors and institutions. They reference car owners, road planners and constructors, law enforcers, politicians and the government whose greed, incompetence and failure are seen to be embodied in (and virtually felt through) the dangerous and uncomfortable movements on (and materialities of) the road. However, when facing immediate threats emanating from fast speed, overtaking, harsh breaking and swerving, the passengers’ focus is clearly on their driver.

¹⁹ On the particular forms of sociality and collectivity that emerge among public transport passengers (in non-African contexts), see Bissell (2009) and Butcher (2011).

²⁰ The passengers are sometimes addressed as a (vulnerable) community at the beginning of the trip through loud prayers said by individuals or by itinerant preachers for protection and safe arrival (‘travelling mercies’; see Chapter 7, p. 178). The sense of community may also be strengthened during the trip when a preacher addresses the travellers, and when his preaching and the joint praying and singing turns travellers into a proper, albeit temporary (mobile) congregation.

only little) impact on drivers. Some of the complaints are not even meant to be heard by the drivers. Those that *are* directed at them may be disputed, or drivers may pretend not to have heard anything. Most often, the result is that drivers ignore the complaints. “Usually the driver will not mind us”, Julius told me in a post-travel discussion. “He is in control of everything, so there is nothing that we the passengers can do about it. When we are moving, we are all at his mercy.” In many situations, indignation among passengers is indeed followed by a sense of disillusion. And initial agitation is often quickly replaced by resignation when passengers realize that, after all, their possibilities of ‘passenger-ing’ and ‘co-wayfaring’ remain limited.

Conclusion

[I]n so many contexts throughout Africa, [...] the unreliable schedules and maintenance of vehicles, the ever present possibility of breakdowns or accidents, as well as the markedly poor condition of the roads combine to give most travelers [...] a sense of transport as unregulated and irregular movement. Thus, although, automotive travel is markedly fast, it is also circumscribed and fraught with tension, unreliability, and danger. (Weiss 1996: 184)

For the bus passengers that I joined on their trips on the Accra-Kumasi road, ‘passenger-ing’ takes place right within the tensions and dangers of travelling referred to by Weiss. Yet the task of ‘passenger-ing’ is characterised by its very own tensions. Driven by their concerns for a hopefully smooth and accident-free trip, the passengers try to actively navigate the potential perils of their trips and to act as ‘co-wayfarers’, but they regularly become trapped, given that their room for manoeuvres is limited. As I have shown, passengers may be exposed to (and stuck with) drivers whose manoeuvres and kinetic practices are threatening, but who are also reluctant to listen to and to comply with their passengers’ appeals for moderation and more patience. The passengers become victims of drivers, their moods and (partially profit-oriented, impatient) manoeuvres, as well as their own conflicting safety preferences. In some situations, the multiple preferences mean that not one safety measure (such as the choice of seat or time of travel) can be taken that feels really safe, as it is constrained by another potential danger. In other situations, travellers are trapped between their safety considerations, on the one hand, and practical circumstances, such as the lack of choice, on the other. As a consequence, passengers often feel obliged to comply with the circumstances and to discard their intentions of finding appropriate vehicles, vehicle types, seats, drivers or times of travel.

A final issue contributing to conflicts and compliance is the *dilemmas of speed* that have emerged in this chapter.²¹ One dilemma is routed in the ambivalent stance that some passengers take on fast travelling and driving. Passengers may be aware of the obvious drawbacks of speed, the tangible dangers of fast journeys and the fear of drivers' acts of overspeeding and overtaking, and they consider the bodily impacts of passing over the AKR's bad section at high speed. Yet there are also the passengers' desires for early arrival and therefore for a quick departure and for fast, ideally uninterrupted travelling. This may be coupled with the pleasures taken from acceleration and speediness, such as the relief of cooling airstream. Where impatience reigns, the passengers are quick to sacrifice their categorical considerations for safety. They may even push for more speed, despite knowing that the primacy of speed may come with a price – in the worst case human lives (cf. Lamont 2013: 370). Another dilemma arises where the desires for speed and the judgements of a given speed (and its possible threats) vary widely among the bus travellers. As I have shown above, disagreements in these speed matters regularly prevent passengers from interfering with and complaining directly to drivers – even if emotions and indignation over the latter's dangerous manoeuvres and immoral impatience arise. Indeed, what limits bus passengers time and again in their attempts towards safer travelling is the fact that they have become trapped in the dilemmas of speed.

²¹ I have already mentioned a 'dilemma of speed' in the context of 'rushing and relaxing' among 'overlappers' in Chapter 6 (p. 163).

Chapter 10

Conclusion: dilemmas of speed and immoral impatience

This thesis and the fieldwork on which it is based has been an opportunity to ethnographically explore an African highway and the perils and potentialities that its various users encounter on it. With this work I aim to contribute to the small but growing body of anthropological work on roads and, within this, to a more phenomenological appraisal of the practices and experiences of road users. I introduced the social life of the Accra-Kumasi road world via a discussion of the discourses among local residents about the historical, political, economic and infrastructural contexts. I then turned to the practical ways that people navigate the frequently complex tasks of roadside dwelling and trading, commercial bus driving, and travelling. I found it important to adopt a grounded perspective in order to draw out what characterizes people's tangible engagements with the road in their daily lives – with its material, kinetic, temporal and interpersonal dimensions. In such a context, my findings have shown that the road users' various activities and actions imply spatial, economic, entrepreneurial, religious (at times ritual) practices that can be of a tactical nature in a de Certeauian sense. These practices therefore partially lend themselves to be assessed from a 'social navigation' perspective which has hitherto been applied predominantly in studies on African youth and uncertainty (Vigh 2006a; see Chapter 5, p. 126).

My material revealed that people's activities and actions alongside the road also imply distinct bodily, sensory and skilful practices that emerge from the road's everyday 'taskscape' (Ingold 2000: 195). Such perceptual practices were shown to play a crucial role in the ways in which people engage with the physical perils that emanate from the road, its materiality and most importantly, vehicular movements and speeds. My analysis of people's perceptual engagements thus contributes to sociological and anthropological perspectives on risk and uncertainty that do not regularly consider sensory-bodily and at times, emotive experiences. The road seems a particularly suitable environment for such an assessment. This is related to the fact

that its space, activities and perils are strongly determined by kinetic and often dromocentric phenomena that are physical by nature and therefore immediately graspable through different senses.

Doing fieldwork on the road opened my eyes to matters of speed and related temporalities that were more intricate and more relevant to road users than I had first expected. I therefore let my work and analysis be guided by this phenomenon. Speed has not figured prominently in the works and on the research agendas of anthropologists, but I argue that much can be gained from an ethnographic assessment of speed and of the paces of movements in people's everyday lives. In order to point to some directions for possible research, I sketch three perspectives on speed matters that are inspired by my findings and experiences on the AKR. The following is therefore also an attempt to synthesize in a more integrated fashion what I have presented in my chapters, and (where possible) to bring into respective relations the three categories of road users dealt with in the three parts of the thesis.

Speed perspectives and directions

A first perspective concerns the *practices of speed*, with speeds in action. This perspective considers people's everyday uses of and needs for speeds, as well as their engagement with different dilemmas of speed. Such dilemmas may result from the contradictory values and the plurality of speeds in a given context. For instance, I have demonstrated how different paces of movement become a crucial component in the daily work of mobile roadside vendors. Their own corporeal-kinetic actions are intricately entangled with the speeds of passing vehicles. The vendors run alongside moving traffic to keep up with the vehicles' speed and to exchange goods against cash before the customers have disappeared again. 'Chasing' cars, as they term it, is also a means to advertise their goods skilfully to passing travellers who do not have much time to make their choice (just as stationary roadside traders present their goods in a highly visible manner so that they are seen by travellers despite their travel speed). The vendors say that business on the road (the 'market') is 'slow' when vehicles are very fast and therefore not approachable for selling – a period during their workday when they can slow down their steps, 'relax' and socialize with their colleagues. Business is also 'slow' when passing vehicles themselves are slow or are not moving due to traffic jams that prevent new customers from reaching the spot where the vendors are. Some vendors also claim that traffic jams make travellers 'unhappy' and unwilling to buy anything, whilst it also gives them time to critically assess the goods on offer – and possibly to refuse buying them. This is why vendors often make

particularly rushed and hectic efforts to tout their goods, produce a sense of urgency and thus entice customers. At the same time, the vendors (occasionally passengers too) may ask accelerating drivers to slow down or to wait so that the necessary transactions can be performed in time – a request that is often disregarded when drivers and passengers do not want to be delayed.

The above demonstrates how the different (at times conflicting) paces and rhythms in a moving environment give rise to certain dilemmas and contradictions, as well as kinetic actions and reactions from those who navigate this environment. The vendors' movements, paces and timings in a market characterized by speeds, fleeting encounters and swift transactions therefore bring to the fore particular trading practices and skills. These differ (in some parts significantly) from the usual principles and practices of trading and transactions in conventional (more stationary) market settings. I argue that focusing on the interplay between trade, pace, time and rhythm in mobile spaces of trading (such as roads, streets, sidewalks, junctions, bus stations), as well as inside 'regular' market settings offers an original perspective for further research (see Malefakis 2014; Stasik 2013, forthcoming).

Working in the transport business and commercial driving appears at first sight to be all about speed – fast speed. As I have shown, the commercial imperative of speed is a pervasive phenomenon at bus stations and on the road. It is a central component of the drivers' 'forcing', as they say, in their attempts to navigate the pressures and uncertainties of the transport business. In daily practice however, the economic logic of speed that is implied in the 'go fast, come fast' motto and in some (not all) contexts of overspeeding and overtaking does not always take effect. One reason for this is the multiple slow paces and delays that regularly inhibit the drivers' attempts to make money fast. For instance, the slow flow of passengers and the surplus of commercial vehicles at bus stations can lead to delays or to lost time that drivers are often unable to regain on the road. Once on the road, delays might occur due to traffic jams, stops made for alighting and boarding passengers, a flat tyre, and many other reasons. Once drivers arrive at their destination, long queues might await them again. In view of these delays, making increased efforts to catch up and 'beat' time may simply not be worthwhile, especially when the goal to fit in an additional trip (to make the day more lucrative) turns out to be unachievable.

Increased speed does not necessarily entail increased profits. This is partially the result of the flows, movements and (dis)appearances of commercial drivers' competitors and of potential customers. The often-cited 'need for speed' and the economic logic of speed – prominent in the literature on transport workers – can

therefore not be taken for granted and, in my view, requires a more critical assessment. The fact that speeding might be disadvantageous or may even backfire has been demonstrated in Chapter 6. I explored how the idiosyncratic speeds and manoeuvres of ‘overlapping’ (the kinetic practices involved when loading passengers en route, instead of at the station) are the immediate results of the drivers’ engagement with the (non-)movements of competitors and customers on the same route. It emerged that crucial for competing driving is both ‘rushing’ as well as ‘relaxing’ – dromocentric manoeuvres on the one hand, and decelerated or slow movements on the other. In some situations, ‘overlappers’ estimate that not moving at all for some time – halting and waiting – is most advisable, for instance to avoid driving on the same road section too closely behind competitors. What drivers need to negotiate in this context is which speed and manoeuvre to apply, at what point, and for how long. Weighing up the available alternatives becomes particularly delicate in situations where two oppositional speeds may be appropriate (or even necessary) at the same time – an ‘aporia of speed’ (Derrida 1984) that places drivers in a practical dilemma.

Differing speeds are intrinsic to all mobile practices, particularly to driving practices, not least because “there is no speeding up without slowing down” (Beckmann 2004: 82). Nevertheless, the occurrence and possible dilemmas of differing speeds in people’s mobile and entrepreneurial practices seems to be a neglected phenomenon in ethnographic and anthropological works (a notable exception is Lamont 2013). As I point out in Chapter 1, there exist various sociological contributions on the phenomenon of acceleration and deceleration (for instance, Bergmann 2008, Rosa 2009, Tomlinson 2007), however they are rather limited to theoretical discussions of Western societies. On the ground, differential speeds (‘desynchronization’) may form a great hazard and can end up fatally, such as when drivers encounter both overspeeding and very slow (or stationary) vehicles on the road. This is not limited to a Ghanaian experience (many accidents occur on the German *Autobahn* for precisely this reason), but it is a particularly worrying one on the AKR given the extreme speed variations that can be observed by travellers, roadside residents and researchers (see Derry et al. 2007). Road safety experts and policy makers might need to consider this problem more seriously and define it less as an issue of driver responsibility (cf. Lamont 2010) and more as an (infra)structural and technological constraint.

One reason why commercial drivers are not constantly speeding, as is commonly assumed, is the fact that their dromocentric efforts are at times slowed by their passengers’ call for dromocentric restraint and patience (*boaseto*). The latter may

intervene in what they consider inappropriate and dangerously fast speeding out of concern for their safety. Their need for slow (or slower) speed is however not always shared by the reprimanded driver and other fellow passengers. The dilemma of speed that results from contradictory needs for speed emerging among different actors easily leads to discussions, at times heated exchange of words inside moving vehicles. Some passengers are also trapped in a *personal* dilemma of speed in situations when they feel uncomfortable with (even afraid of) the encountered fast speed, yet simultaneously need a quick and short journey. For this and other reasons, travellers often abstain from criticizing their speeding drivers. The speed-related collisions of interests within groups or context and amongst individuals themselves arise not only when people engage with speed and temporality in road and transport contexts, but also in other contexts of everyday life, as I will show below, and provide ample grounds for further ethnographic enquiry.

In addition to looking at speeds in action, I suggest it is useful to approach speeds from a phenomenological perspective, taking into account the road users' tangible (bodily, sensory and emotional) *engagements and experiences with speed*, movements and travel. The ways in which people perceive speed and movements via their senses (in particular vision) has been described at great length in several parts of this thesis. Looking at the specific vocabulary employed by road users provides additional insights into the different 'senses' that arise in and that shape speed-related and experiential contexts. For instance, drivers and passengers express their sense of urgency – their immediate desire for speed or acceleration – by saying that they are 'in a hurry' (*pε ntem*, literally 'to want fast/early'). Passengers occasionally ask drivers to 'hurry up' (*ye ntem*, 'to do fast') and express their frustration when they feel they are being delayed. In the commercial contexts of the road, roadside vendors and drivers speak of 'rushing' and 'chasing', whereas the latter are also 'forcing', 'beating' time, 'fighting' for passengers and encountering 'enemies'. The drivers' physical vocabulary for describing their work practices conveys a sense of violence (also implied when referring to 'throwing' lights and having a 'blast' tyre). Physical excesses seem to characterize the road quite generally, as is reflected in notions (and practices) such as overspeeding, overtaking and overloading.

In view of these excesses or as a general attitude, some road users promote a sense of restraint and moderation. For instance, fearful passengers and pedestrians ask drivers to be 'patient' (*tə bo ase*) and to take things 'cool' (*bəkəw*), which also alludes to the need for tranquility. Roadside vendors may be more direct with their request and ask drivers to 'wait' (*twen*) or to 'stop here' (*gyina ha*). Drivers who engage in

‘overlapping’ label waiting and going slowly as ‘relaxing’. Their relaxing partially differs from the way in which roadside vendors relax by the roadside. Although the latter also slacken their pace or stop moving entirely, relaxing refers to a period of repose – which the vendors grant themselves, or which they are granted due to missing traffic. Repose and tranquility quickly vanish as soon as physical shocks, harsh moves and dangerous overspeeding are perceived visually and/or through the body. Any road user may end up in such perilous or frightening situations in the course of their movements or dwelling on the road, which can trigger emotions and aggressive and frustrated reactions (cf. Katz 1999). People’s sense of anger and agitation often translates into violent language, including harsh insults against the condemned drivers, as well as exclamations referring to death and murder (‘I’m not prepared to die!’, ‘do you want to kill us?’). Similar vocabulary is used in road safety campaigns and discourses, when roads (and vehicles) are labelled as ‘death traps’, and when overspeeding is advertised as ‘killer’ (which drivers are asked to ‘kill’ in turn, as in ‘kill your speed’). Certainly, fast speed is not only despised, but also admired, such as when observers by the roadside get thrilled about ‘big’ cars passing by at impressive speed, or when roadside vendors feel joy over the ‘show’ of running alongside fast vehicles. The pleasures taken in speed and kinetic action and the nexus of kinetic and affective (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 1999a) seem to open a field for further ethnographic enquiry on the road and in other technological-material contexts.

Referring to dangerously speeding drivers as ‘killers’ implies a certain judgmental undertone that alludes to another perspective on speed, one that is concerned with the *moral dimension of speed*. This dimension may be voiced in the comments of those who observe or who are directly affected by the (over)speeding manoeuvres of commercial drivers. I have shown how roadside vendors, bus passengers and in fact all kinds of commentators in Ghana are at times indignant over such behaviour since it is seen to reflect the drivers’ direct attempts to ‘force’, ‘beat’ time and thus make more (and quicker) money. Here, speed is equated with *impatience*, arising from greed and the desire for quick personal enrichment (a perspective that fully neglects the socio-economic constraints that may produce such impatience). What adds to the moral condemnation of the drivers’ impatience is the fact that it can inflict harm, even death to others if the speedy manoeuvres go wrong. For instance, bus passengers often emphasize their vulnerability and their role as victims in the face of the drivers’ behaviour. They feel that they are collectively put at risk and therefore virtually ‘sinned against’ (cf. Douglas 1992). The (im)moral dimension of speed therefore reinforces the dilemmas of speed.

Preaching patience in Ghana

Assessing the moral dimension of speed and of speed-related practices is a valuable line of enquiry – not least because of the moral discourses that arise in the context of roads, but also when other concerns of life in contemporary Ghana become affected by matters of speed. In recent years, the nexus of speed and immoral impatience became particularly prominent as Ghanaians were discussing – and condemning – the ways in which ‘quick money’ is generated. For instance, immoral impatience has been attributed to the so-called ‘get-rich quick’ activities of armed robbers¹ and cocaine dealers. Their ‘work’ acquires money not only quickly (definitely quicker than the income-generating practices of average Ghanaians), but also through illicit means. In the case of armed robbers, it is the looting of victims and the use of violence and killings that makes their actions particularly dangerous and morally condemnable. Both types of criminals are associated with fast speed on the road. Armed robbers are always reported to escape quickly by road after attacking, whereas cocaine dealers are assumed to use big, expensive and fast cars on Ghana’s roads (which in their case is merely a symbol of and not a tool for their success).

Another prominent ‘get-rich quick’ avenue that has strongly contributed to the “moralizing discourse on legitimate and illegitimate avenues for wealth” (Burrell 2012: 189) in Ghana is Internet scamming. Also known as cyber fraud or *419* (Smith 2001), online scamming has been a popular and highly lucrative activity among a section of urban youths for several years (see Burrell 2012; Oduro-Frimpong 2014).² When I visited Ghana in 2009, the hitherto mostly unnoticed scamming activities were suddenly all over the mainstream media and part of daily conversations, and had a new name: *sakawa*. The embodiment of *sakawa* were young men – ‘*sakawa* boys’ – gathering in and around internet cafés, showing off their nice, expensive clothes and their new cars that some of them had been able to acquire through successful *sakawa* activities. What led to public outcries about *sakawa* was the fact that young men suddenly ended up with at times huge amounts of money due to their illicit and dishonest practices. Politicians and religious leaders – known for their central role in shaping the public sphere with their discourses of morality (Fumanti 2013: 131) – condemned the youths for their socially unacceptable behaviour which was perceived to raise levels of immorality in the country in general.

¹ On armed robbery in Ghana, see Fumanti (2013: 133) and McCaskie (2008).

² Scamming practices include deceiving (white, Western) online acquaintances with the help of fake identities created on dating websites (‘romance scams’), credit card fraud, and several other practices.

A further public concern surrounding *sakawa* and grounds for a moral panic were the shocking rumours about the involvement of occult practices: the use of ‘blood money’ (*sika duro*) and other forms of *juju*, such as rituals that necessitate the body parts or the killing of girlfriends or relatives. As one friend explained to me, “*Sakawa* is internet fraud with some spiritual attachment”. This ‘attachment’ is meant to ensure the quick and rich flow of money – obviously at the cost of those affected by the rituals, like bus passengers and vendors who become the victims of overspeeding drivers. The rituals also seemed to present a high risk for the scammers themselves, just as overspeeding can be fatal to the commercial drivers themselves. There were numerous reports about the short-lived, possibly even catastrophic effects of such ‘quick money’-generating rituals on practitioners. In people’s narratives, newspaper stories and highly popular Ghanaian movies, ‘*sakawa* boys’ were often portrayed as ending up turning into a snake, going insane or dying a tragic death after a period of successful scamming (Oduro-Frimpong 2014).

The *sakawa* practices served as tangible evidence to Ghanaians that ‘fast’ does not pay, and as a reminder of the downsides (if not disasters) to be expected from aspiring and acquiring quick riches. This warning is expressed in the popular saying “*Ape ntem, anya ntem, ene owuo na enam*”, which translates as ‘seeking it quick, getting it quick, [both] leads to death’ (Oduro-Frimpong 2014: 135). The warning comes with various appeals for (morally more acceptable) patience that one should exercise in one’s efforts towards personal achievements, and in life more generally. Several sayings emphasize the value of taking things slow, such as by proceeding step by step. For instance, “*Nkakra nkakra akoko benom nsuo*” (‘little by little the chicken will drink water’) expresses the observation that the chicken can satisfy its thirst only by drinking with small sips. It serves as a reminder that it takes time and endurance to achieve something – and to achieve it well. As my friend Heinz expressed in a post on Facebook, “One step at a time. Have patience always. its a key to success. [sic]” (2 June 2011).

Among the predominantly Christian Ghanaians that I have encountered over the years, appeals for patience often take a religious turn. People particularly stress the importance of ‘God’s time’, on which one should rely, and for which it is worth waiting, since “God’s time is the best”. In Christian discourses, waiting applies not only to searching for success and wealth, but also to ‘rushing’ into relationships (or marriage) or engaging in premarital sex (Bochow 2010: 263). The virtue of waiting is regularly preached in churches as well as in other (more or less public) spaces, such as the Internet. Nana Yaa, a close friend of mine, used the following sentence when

updating her status on Facebook: “The greatest assignment on this earth is to wait” (23 September 2010). When I asked her what exactly she meant by this, she replied: “Wait means havin patience in al tins. U shdnt rush n God will help u to achieve all aim. Wait patiently for Lord Gab in al tins. Hpe u are gud n al é family [sic]”.

The call for slowness and patience is not always well received in Ghana, especially when it seems misapplied. For instance, in early 2010 President John Atta Mills defended the not yet visible successes of his NDC-led government in a public address by referring to – and even praising – the government’s “Slow but sure” agenda. Of course the public received the President’s words with great criticism and cynicism. One commentator wrote in an article on *Ghanaweb* (2010a):

[T]he president has adopted a new slogan: “Slow but sure”, trying to indicate that the slowness of his government is a virtue and he will surely fulfill his campaign promises. It appears that the president, despite the crises that is facing the majority of our people in relation to education, healthcare, housing, water, etc., [believes that] there is no urgency.

Another commentator spoke of a “‘slow but sure’ road to destruction” and referred to the words of advice that his taxi driver had for the head of state: “President Atta Mills, [the driver] said, could buy a taxi cab and advertise his doctrine on it. ‘Slow But Sure’, he said, would be a better inscription on a cab than state policy” (*Ghanaweb* 2010b). Slowness and waiting are clearly not always appealing, for example speed and rapid success can also be attractive. This may even be the case with speedy phenomena that are associated with perils and immoral impatience. For instance, the ‘get-rich quick’ schemes of the young Internet scammers may be despicable and condemnable, but the material gains that are achieved (often in abundance) remain highly ambivalent for many observers. The scammers’ conspicuous consumption – nice clothes, new cars, big houses, lavish spending of money – displayed in public spaces and in movies is a widely accepted feature in Ghanaian society and also broadly supported by Christian (especially Pentecostal) morality (Meyer 2003). Many Ghanaians dream of taking part in such consumption patterns or at least, of living in improved material and socio-economic conditions – instead of having to live in the slow lane and to wait for better times to come.

Recent developments on the AKR

Better times have indeed come for many of the young men living in Kyebi, the provincial town whose commercial activities had been described as ‘slow’ due to the new bypass when I conducted research there in 2006-07. When I visited Kyebi in

2009, it was not *sakawa* activities that were starting to transform life in town (the slow Internet access available would have frustrated scammers), but illegal gold mining activities. Known as *galamsey* in Ghana (Tsuma 2010), such illegal (small-scale) mining activities had been around in Kyebi, the capital of Akyem Abuakwa, and in other parts of the kingdom for many years. They were now gaining momentum and attracting many young men because, according to my friends, there were no other job opportunities and because *galamsey* was known as a laborious, but lucrative way of making money in a fairly short time. Among those joining the wave were Wayo and Shiboni, Elvis' cousins whom I had been living with (see Chapter 3). Instead of sitting by the roadside, watching passers-by and commenting on passing vehicles, which they had previously been doing much of, the two men now left the house by the roadside early in the morning to work on the farmlands on the outskirts of Kyebi. There they dug holes, removed the soil, washed it and extracted gold from the remains with the help of mercury. When I met Wayo and Shiboni again in Kyebi in 2013 they were driving around town with their own cars. Other young men I knew who have also joined the *galamsey* had even been able to build their own houses. For my friend and host, Elvis, new buildings meant more carpentry jobs.

The recent *galamsey* activities have transformed Kyebi and the lives of some of its residents. They have also had a serious and visible impact on the natural environment. The town's surrounding farmlands, some of them illegally occupied by the gold miners, have been dug up and destroyed by countless open pits, many of them abandoned and now filled with soiled water. Two children were reported to have died after falling into a deep pit. The digging up and the use of chemicals have severely polluted the streams in the area. The river Birim, formerly the source of drinking water for many residents and the abode of an important local deity, has turned into a muddy brew that flows into all directions. The extent of environmental degradation around Kyebi has even received nationwide attention through repeated media coverage. In April 2014, President John Mahama delivered a speech after visiting the area and claimed that "Kyebi is the headquarters of 'galamsey' in Ghana" (*Daily Guide* 2014). This damning verdict outraged local politicians and chiefs – not least because it alleged to their share of responsibility in the illegal and destructive activities. The king of Akyem Abuakwa, the Okyenhene, hit back at the President and said that the President should rather tag the Eastern Region (of which Kyebi is part) "as the headquarters of bad roads" (*ibid.*). The king claimed that the poor nature of roads in the region had contributed to the 'collapse' of some businesses and had inflicted 'hardship' on travellers (*ibid.*). He added that, if the government fixed the

roads, the unemployed youth could engage in other businesses rather than engaging in *galamsey*.

The ‘old road’ leading through Kyebi (formerly part of the main AKR) that the king alluded to had indeed been neglected and unrepaired in recent years; whether this alone has pushed young men into illegal gold mining remains doubtful. What certainly inflicts hardship on travellers are the two sections of the AKR that were dug up in 2008 (in order to be extended into dual carriageways) but that have remained partially unfinished – and in a truly terrible state – up until very recently.³ Other sections of the AKR that were under construction during my fieldwork have been completed in the meantime, among them, the Achimota-Ofankor road (the southernmost section of the AKR). One of the achievements – a six-lane flyover at Ofankor – was good for travellers, but disastrous for Ofankor’s *Christ* bread sellers (see Chapter 4). The predominantly young men and women whom I had first met in the aftermath of the road-cleansing ritual and then observed running alongside traffic had all disappeared when I revisited the place in 2012. The new flyover – with traffic and travellers now passing over people’s heads at fast speed – had made chasing vehicles an impossible task.⁴

For the bus drivers from Suhum, the end of the roadworks at the gateway to Accra was a great relief. During the height of the roadworks, Saa Nono, one of my main driver informants (Chapter 5), had not even been taking passengers into Accra any longer – the urban traffic jams were simply wasting too much of his time. Instead he intensified his ‘overlapping’ activities between Anyinam and Nsawam before he could finally return to his old driving plan. His colleague Amoyaw could no longer be bothered with the state of the AKR when I left Ghana in 2007. After he stopped using the *LION OF JUDAH* belonging to his church, he was without work and not driving on the AKR for over one year. His patient waiting combined with his intense efforts in finding alternative work opportunities were rewarded about a year later. Proudly he announced to me on the phone that he had found permanent employment as a driver with a big cocoa-exporting company based in Takoradi. He moved there and has been working with the company ever since.

³ The sections are Nsawam-Suhum and Suhum-Apedwa. Parts of the former and the entire latter section were still unsurfaced when I travelled to Kyebi in August 2013 because roadworks had stopped there during several periods.

⁴ A similar fate was met by roadside vendors and bread sellers in the town of Nsawam. The opening of the Nsawam bypass in early 2013 resulted in most of the former through traffic being diverted from the township where selling to travellers had become unprofitable. Most of Nsawam’s bread sellers have now shifted their activities to sites along the new bypass but grapple with the high speed of vehicles and a disadvantageous material environment.

Whereas Amoyaw had managed to turn his back on the transport business, Elvis was eager to try his luck in it. Shortly before I left Ghana in 2007, I sold my wine-coloured Opel Astra to him at a 'mate's rate'. Elvis had become a proper car owner. He painted the wings yellow, registered the vehicle as a taxi and started driving it back and forth between Kyebi and Suhum whenever he had no carpentry jobs in town. However the taxi business did not turn out to be profitable. Elvis said there were too many taxi drivers around, and the terrible state of the road wore out his car that was in constant need of repair. In early 2009, he had an accident when a small truck entered his lane and smashed the Opel's left front side. Elvis escaped with only a cut at his left forearm and he borrowed money to repair his car, confident that the insurance of the truck driver (who had clearly been at fault) would pay for the damage. Due to an incomplete accident report Elvis never received any compensation. Highly indebted and with insufficient income (despite being regularly hired by *galamsey* miners), he decided to sell the relatively new-looking and now blue Opel. Nowadays Elvis is no longer a car owner. Like before, he does most of his errands in town by foot. For his regular trips to Accra, Elvis walks to the roadside and waits for a vehicle that he hopes will take him on the AKR without too much discomfort and delay and above all, without accident. He and the many other road users will continue to remain both attracted by as well as cautious about the Ghanaian highway, and they will inevitably embrace the various speeds that characterize its everyday movements.

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Appendix I: Archival sources

Akyem Abuakwa State Archives (AASA), *Ofori Panyin Fie* Kyebi (Eastern Region)

AASA.10.7: Road Work Agreement (1916 [not dated])

AASA.10.8: Müller (Basel Mission Factory) to Omanhene (19 January 1916)

AASA.10.8: Swanzy Ltd to Omanhene (16 September 1916)

AASA.10.8: Danquah to contractor (10 November 1916)

AASA.10.20: Omanhene to Dalberto (10 March 1917)

AASA.10.20: Omanhene to DC (16 April 1917)

AASA.10.45: Omanhene to DC (1921 [not dated])

AASA.10.45: Ass.DC to DC (3 November 1921)

Appendix II: Glossary and abbreviations

blast tyre	burst tyre
chop bar	small, simple restaurant, usually by the roadside
chop money	personal profit of drivers; daily pay for drivers' 'mates'
dropping passengers	letting off passengers
long-journey driver	long-distance driver
long-journey bus	bus that does not usually load passengers en route
mate	the driver's assistant/helper, conductor
Okyenhene	the king of the Akyem Abuakwa kingdom
overlapping (doing overlapping)	loading passengers waiting by the roadside and competing with other drivers en route
overspeeding	driving at excessive speed; in Twi <i>kɔ ntem</i> ('to go fast'), <i>kɔ ntemntem</i> ('to go fast fast') or <i>kɔ ntemntem dodo</i> ('to go fast fast too much')
picking passengers	picking up passengers from the roadside
trotro	small passenger buses that load passengers en route

AASA	Akyem Abuakwa State Archives (Kyebe, Eastern Region)
AMA	Accra Metropolitan Assembly
AKR	Accra-Kumasi road
GHA	Ghana Highway Authority
GPRTU	Ghana Private Road Transport Union
MRT	Ministry of Roads and Transport
NDC	National Democratic Congress
NPP	New Patriotic Party
NRSC	National Road Safety Commission
RSDP	Road Sector Development Programme