

2 From the Lorry Age to the Age of Hustle

On a late evening in October 2011, exceptionally heavy rains poured down over Accra. Worst affected were the areas adjacent to the infamous Odaw River, the 'dead river' as local newspapers dubbed it after the flood. Engorged with debris, plastic, and human excreta, the river began spilling over just moments after the rain had commenced, with flash floods causing damage far beyond its banks. At the Neoplan Station, which is located right at the riverside, the floodwater wreaked havoc. Its basin-like shape was fatal in that respect. First, the floodwater accumulated at its outer wall. It then deluged the station, swamping shops and stores, destroying goods and property, and creating panic. Much property fell prey to the water. Bank notes worth millions hoarded in the nooks of the station offices were allegedly putrefied. Dozens of vehicles were demolished; many more vehicle engines were damaged. Six people were believed to have been killed by the sudden flood. Many of those who survived sustained severe injuries; many others were left traumatised.

For the first time in years, the station traffic was brought to a halt, but only for that one night. At dawn, the station workers recommenced their operations. While some toiled to make the yard accessible again, collecting scrap and rubbish, others arranged new loading bays on the main road in front of the station and behind the yard. Mechanics and craftsmen gathered in great numbers and started repairs at a brisk pace. New buses (and drivers) had been called in from other stations. Some even managed to bring in vehicles from outside Accra. Where buses were in short supply, private cars and taxis were deployed to replace them on the required routes. Outside operators from other stations, who usually compete with Neoplan for passengers, left their yards and joined in by allying themselves with groups of Neoplan workers or by loading in parallel (and in competition) on their own terms. Despite all calamities, both human and material, business was ramped up again in a matter of hours. As summarised baldly by one station worker with hindsight: 'There was no time for sorrow. People demand movement.'

The mechanisms put in place for coping with the emergency were neither planned nor prepared for. There was no emergency action plan whatsoever. Rather, they were crafted via a combination of self-regulating arrangements, ad hoc combinations, and opportunistic collaborations between various groups of station workers. Their actions and heterogeneous strategies were nevertheless all geared towards one main goal: to make ends meet by immediately adapting their capacities to the changed circumstances. These were not mere acts of making do, however. By acting on volatility in such ways as to retain operational capability, they turned flexibility into a resource for economic survival and, ultimately, returns. Manifest in the station workers' drawing together of different resources – human, material, mechanical, financial, and spatial – was a vigorous form of mobility of practice that looms large in their understanding of hustle as prowess in mastering shifting situations.

Once the yard was cleared, these arrangements were dissolved. By and large, the collaboration that had emerged in the immediate aftermath of the flood remained limited to the necessities of re-establishing operations, which revealed another basic idea behind hustle as an orientation and livelihood logic: namely, that ultimately everyone depends on their own resources. The unfortunate ones who were put out of business (above all, storekeepers and 'owner-drivers' whose vehicles suffered total loss) received no help or assistance. They had to start from scratch or relocate to other places. Deserted shops were taken over by new vendors. Dilapidated vehicles were replaced by those of other owners. Some people called on God, praying for dispensation. Others sought reimbursement from their insurance agency, which mostly turned out to be as futile as divine invocations. Notably, no one made claims against the city authorities or the government. Not only was the state absent in all of these rearrangements, the station workers did not even perceive this as a lack.

The self-reliant and instrumental practices by which Neoplan's workers responded to the havoc caused by the flood are indicative of a deeply sedimented mode of social organisation structured by tenets of entrepreneurial utility wedded to both cooperation *and* competition. With the need to restore operations taking precedence, little attention was paid to internal tragedies or external agencies. Similar to what Kristin Peterson (2014: 112–14) describes as the entrepreneurship-centred 'Igbo market theory', the station workers' dispersed and self-regulated actions were made cohesive by collectively performed realignments to extremely sudden changes in their capacities to meet (people's) demands.

These entrepreneurial modes are a far cry from communalistic views of African local economic practices, which are characterised by an emphasis on moral economies, and related, often invoked (but also challenged; see

Green 2014, for instance), notions of risk-mitigating, retributive mechanisms ascribed to ‘economies of affection’ (Hydén 1980). Unlike the peasant in James Scott’s (1976: 1) famous metaphor, who is likely to be drowned by just a ripple of water, at the Neoplan Station the (literal) floodwaters could not restrain the majority of workers from continuing their ventures, even though some of their co-workers actually drowned. While this is not exactly an ‘economy of disaffection’ (Lemarchand 1989), as forms of mutuality and patronage are also involved, I suggest that risk, competition, and shrewd resourcefulness are the principal modes that structure the workers’ group economic endeavour.

However, this is not to reproduce postulates of some kind of ‘disembodiedness’ of the economic practices of the station workers. Nor is it to relate their calculative attitudes and risk-embracing actions primarily or even exclusively to external structural forces and the pressures of global capitalism – or, more specifically, of neoliberalism – which would effectively explain away their salient agency. This is not to deny that certain changes in the national and global political economy, especially those promoting the deregulation and privatisation of road transport provisions, have had a significant impact on the practices, outlooks, and position of private transport operators, as has been suggested with regard to Ghana and other African contexts (Godard and Turnier 1992; Mwase 2003; Obeng-Odoom 2009; Rizzo 2017).

As I argue in this chapter, the economic practices of Neoplan’s station workers, along with the norms and orientations that inform these practices – captured in the notion of hustle – reach further back into the history of Ghanaian road transport entrepreneurship and policies. The hustle that characterises Neoplan’s workings, and which, in the aftermath of the flood, revealed a salient adeptness in dealing with contingency, displays strong continuity with a long-established set of self-enterprising, yet collective and competitive, economic endeavours of local transport operators. As I will show, these endeavours were largely of an indigenous kind, and they were decisively formed by a frictional, often clashing, relationship with the state authorities and, in particular, with their variously crafted attempts at regulatory intervention.

My primary aim for this chapter is to establish the historical context from which today’s station hustles – as a distinct economic logic and mode of production – emerged. I relate the modes and conditions of operation that characterise the private road transport sector in contemporary Ghana to the entangled history of local economic practices and of larger-scale political and economic changes that have shaped it since the first days of motorisation in the early twentieth century. Touching down at key moments in the history of private public transport ventures in the

Gold Coast and Ghana, I pay close attention to the role that bus stations played in these developments. In doing so, I introduce some of the key groups and the organisational structures they have created. Delineating the back story of the political economy of today's station hustle, this chapter sets the stage for understanding the dynamics of the operational and occupational organisation of Accra's Neoplan Station, which I examine in Chapter 3.

The Lorry Age: Indigenous Road Transport Ventures and Colonial Regulations

With the onset of what Polly Hill (1963b: 234) called 'the lorry age' – alluding to the great transformations brought about by the motorisation of Ghanaian society from the second decade of the twentieth century – public transport in Ghana (and the Gold Coast) largely became a private enterprise. The first to realise the potentials, and profits, looming in the motorised road transport business were local cocoa farmers, famously described by Hill (1963b) as 'rural capitalists'. Using money derived from long-term ventures in land cultivation, the farmers reinvested in lorries and engaged in the construction of road networks, much of which happened without government support, direction, or even notice.¹ 'Soon after 1918,' adds Hill (*ibid.*: 234), 'it became the fashion, for those who could afford it, to travel by lorry for most of the way – the lorry age had dawned.'

These early ventures led on to what Elizabeth Wrangham (2004) describes as an 'African road revolution'. Complementing, and also competing with, colonial efforts directed at the development of railways, the lorry business became rapidly established as the main mode of motorised transportation both for passengers and, from the mid-1920s onwards, for cargo, cocoa in particular (Heap 1990: 25). Lebanese traders ran an elaborate 'hire-purchase system' (Hill 1963a) that facilitated immediate access to vehicles, and hence to the market. Largely based on this brokerage, the prolific growth of the Gold Coast's private transport industry gave rise to a 'new kind of African entrepreneur' (Hawkins 1958: 4, cited in Hill 1963b: 215): the commercial lorry driver,

¹ The colonial authorities began finding out about these newly emergent road infrastructures (for the construction of which some farmers contracted with Swiss construction companies) when their revenues from import duties started to rise inexplicably (Hill 1963b). As argued by Wrangham (2004), these remarkable local initiatives did not follow the Gold Coast's cocoa boom; rather, the actions of farmers, chiefs, and traders were a prerequisite for the boom insofar as they provided the transport infrastructure needed to carry the cocoa to the ports.

who was able to invest in fixed capital (a motor vehicle), who worked on his own terms (thus outside the structures of wage labour), and who was able to collect profits daily (in fact, after every single trip).

Key to success was the drivers' flexibility compared with the rudimentary public transport provisions of the colonial state.² Characterised by high levels of adaptability to passengers' needs and enabling connections to areas previously accessible to human carriers only, the motorcar not only conquered new markets but created them. Innovations in automobile technologies dovetailed with emergent entrepreneurial activities and were promptly translated into business opportunities. Of great importance in this respect was the relatively easy handling of these early types of vehicles, mostly American Ford lorries with high road clearance.³ Both the affordability and the relative mechanical simplicity of the vehicles gave each owner-driver a high degree of operational independence. This independence, in turn, paved the way for a markedly decentralised organisation of the emergent privately run road transport sector. Ghana's lorry age was characterised by venturesome indigenous economic initiative from the outset.

The Establishment of Lorry Parks

As the volume of motorised traffic increased, the roads in the commercial centres of coastal towns, especially in Accra, underwent a thorough change. In his *The Red Book of West Africa* of 1920, Alastair Macmillan gives a vivid description of the scene in central Accra:

Innumerable motor lorries, with trailers attached, laden to the utmost with bags of the precious beans, roar, rattle, and rush, interrupted with equally numerous motor cars in the feverish haste of the cocoa season, and provide a spectacle of activity such as cannot be seen elsewhere in West Africa. (Macmillan 1920: 173)

It is against this background of a perpetually growing 'spectacle' of (motorised) activities that the colonial administration felt compelled to intervene. In this context, the establishment of lorry parks in the centres of urban conurbations – combined with the legal obligation on commercial lorry drivers to use the parks – appeared to be a promising device for

² State-run transport comprised a railway service, limited to the haulage routes of minerals and cocoa in the country's southern parts, and a municipal bus service, initially confined to Accra only. In 1928, similar bus services were established in Kumasi, Sekondi-Takoradi, and Cape Coast (RoG 1967: 8–11).

³ As noted by Governor Clifford in 1921 (cited in Heap 1990: 25): 'The introduction of the light Ford chassis has completely revolutionised the position. The standardisation of their parts and the simplicity of their construction rendered it easy and cheap to maintain in a good state of repair.'

regulatory intervention. Similar to other technologies for controlling motorised traffic, such as roundabouts, one-way traffic, and a comprehensive traffic code, the establishment of lorry parks resulted from the transfer of a British-bred socio-technological model to its colony.⁴ The first main lorry parks were opened in 1929 in Accra, Sekondi, and Koforidua, followed by Kumasi in 1930 and Cape Coast in 1931.⁵

The requirements for the establishment of a lorry park were quite simple and involved low costs. A centrally located, vacant plot of land was leased (usually for a period of 99 years) and declared an ‘official parking place for motor vehicles’. For the supervision of the park, a lorry park clerk, a policeman, and a night watchman were employed.⁶ Most of the early lorry parks were of a simple design. As James Jordan writes:

what is variously referred to as a Central Lorry Park, Central Truck Park, Lorry Station, Transport Station, or other of a variety of names ... usually denotes a large empty field (often an acre or more in sizeable towns) near the center of the town. In smaller villages it may simply be an open place near the gas pumping station. Typically, there is no shelter from sun or rain, but women and children will be found selling food to passengers. This service, plus its central location, are the sole functions of the park. It is almost never organized in the sense of having specific stalls for lorries or trucks with certain destinations. Rather they are found parked in random directions and at various stages of loading or unloading. (Jordan 1978: 34)

Along with the opening of each town’s lorry park came the introduction of a set of by-laws that local drivers were obliged to abide by. The most crucial regulation, as listed in the Accra Lorry Park by-laws of 1929 (see Appendix A for the full wording), was that all journeys should begin and end in the park, which effectively compelled drivers to abandon their loading practices in the streets of downtown Accra and other cities, and forced potential travellers to converge in the station.⁷ Resonant of what Heinrich Popitz (1992: 30–4) termed the ‘power to set data’ (*‘datensetzende Macht’*), the newly installed lorry parks bore the potential to control

⁴ The introduction of one-way traffic, for example, followed from a recommendation by the Chief Transport Officer (an Englishman). In a letter to the Colonial Secretary’s Office (dated 9 October 1937), he justifies the need with reference to positive experiences in England: ‘One way traffic has been found very successful in relieving congestion in narrow streets, and has been adopted in London and hundreds of other towns in England and the Dominions’ (PRAAD, Accra: CSO 15/7/108).

⁵ PRAAD, Accra: CSO 20/1/20, ‘Accra Town Council Annual Reports 1929–30’; CSO 20/1/16, ‘Municipal Annual Reports 1930–31’.

⁶ PRAAD, Accra: CSO 14/1/270, ‘Lorry Parks, Accra’ (1938–9); CSO 14/1/107, ‘Lorry Parks Eastern Province’ (1928–36); CSO 20/1/199, ‘Engagement of Night Watchmen for Accra Lorry Parks’.

⁷ PRAAD, Accra: CSO 14/1/270, ‘Town Council (Accra Lorry Park) Bye-Laws, 1929’.



Figure 2.1 Lorry park, c.1932.

Source: Archiv Basler Mission, ref. nr. D-30.63.033; photograph by Eugen Hägele.

and determine road users' practices, compensating for a lack of 'horizontal' state control over a largely diffuse system of transport operations involving indigenous economic actors.

The Drivers' Associations

At the same time as lorry parks became established in towns across the Gold Coast, the many individual operators began organising themselves in local drivers' associations.⁸ Most of these associations appear to have originated in earlier coalitions of drivers. Although archival sources are inconclusive in this regard, the salient concurrence of the enforced establishment of lorry parks and the emergence of the associations suggests a causal rather than a coincidental relationship. That is to say, the government's efforts to increase its regulatory leverage over commercial motor transport by way of a concentrated, 'vertical' spatial intervention

⁸ The biggest associations included the Gold Coast Motor Union (established 1929 in Accra), the Drivers' Association of the Western Province (1929, Sekondi), and the Ashanti Motor Union (1930, Kumasi). PRAAD, Accra: ADM 6/82, 'Gazette 1929'; ADM 6/84, 'Gazette 1930'; ADM 6/86, 'Gazette 1931'.

triggered the formation of a concentrated organisation of those who were subjected to the regulations: commercial transport operators.⁹ Their prime bases of operations became the lorry parks, with the result that a formal technology of regulatory control by the state (i.e. the parks) was transformed into a stronghold of opposition to this control.

Many of these associations labelled themselves ‘unions’. Yet they had little in common with trade unions for employees but rather resembled guilds (see also Hart 2014). The main function of each of these associations was to protect the economic interests of their members against competitive forays by other drivers’ associations, and to regulate the internal relations of a heterogeneous group of individual entrepreneurs – comprising principally lorry owners, drivers, mechanics, and the local lorry park personnel, who simultaneously acted as their main representatives.

Just as the structures of the associations were decentralised, there was no overall route licensing system. The distribution of routes came to be structured by market demand and by the capacities of each association’s drivers to meet these demands and withstand competitive pressures. And as most routes (that is, journeys) began and ended in the lorry parks, control over access to the parks came to constitute the only effective entry control to the public transport market. This control was effected through the registration of vehicles by the associations that based their operations in the respective park. Because drivers had to move their vehicles between different parks, a complex system evolved in which the associations created branches in parks controlled by other associations.¹⁰ Here, cooperation evolved as a means to facilitate competition.

⁹ While Jennifer Hart (2016) points out the critical role of the drivers’ associations in relation to the lorry parks, she does not acknowledge that the official formation of the associations was preceded by the establishment of the main lorry parks in the Gold Coast. Her argument that the associations’ claim to cater for the ‘internal regulation’ of drivers and for ‘organizing in the lorry park’ made it unnecessary for government to intervene (*ibid.*: 88–90) is the wrong way round. Rather, it was the government’s intervention that made them organise themselves in more formal ways.

¹⁰ The elaborate pattern of this competitive system is described in a letter from the Executive Committee of the Gold Coast Motor Union to the Governor of the Gold Coast, dated 11 March 1935 (PRAAD, Accra: CSO 17/1/24, ‘Petitions against Motor Traffic Ordinance and Regulations 1934 [1935–37]’). Premised on the ‘importance of the motor transport industry for the prosperity of the country’, it explains that the drivers’ associations have their headquarters in bigger towns and have ‘branches all over the country’. The letter includes an estimate of the total number of people involved directly in the motor transport industry – listed as ‘lorry owners, drivers, mates, fitters, clerks and the dependants of all the associations’ – said to be ‘over 52,000’ people. Although this figure appears extraordinarily high – for comparison, in 1936 the population of the Gold Coast was estimated at 3,613,876 (ACR 1938: 9), considering the total number of 5,421 commercial motor lorries registered in 1935 (PRAAD Accra: CSO 14/2/24), it might in fact have been quite accurate.

By way of these interleaving arrangements, the privately run motor transport industry established a highly fragmented and decentralised system of operations, which became as powerful in generating returns as it was divided over the distribution of gains. Ultimately, the institutionalised fragmentation that underlay the sector became a mechanism to immunise it against attempts to curb, regulate, or monopolise its operations.

The efficacy of this immunity has been demonstrated repeatedly in the successful defiance of various attempts by successive administrations – under both colonial and postcolonial regimes – to restrict the sector's latitude of self-rule. One example of this defiance during colonial times followed the introduction of the Motor Traffic Ordinance in 1934. As the first comprehensive traffic code, the Ordinance established various restrictive clauses concerning commercial driving.¹¹ At first, many drivers appeared to simply ignore the new statutes, calculating the risk of punishment (and of getting caught in the first place) against the gains derived from operations in grey areas of legality.¹²

As conflicts over the enforcement of discipline increased and as more and more drivers saw their commercial activities restricted, tensions culminated in a nationwide strike in November 1937.¹³ The scope of the strike was limited in that many drivers abstained from it, with many others being exempted in order to convey foodstuffs (and to prevent 'a great famine', as worded by one drivers' association).¹⁴ Yet the sheer threat of a full-blown stoppage of commercial road transport appeared to serve the purpose sufficiently. The authorities responded to the drivers' demands and passed a series of amendments (Hart 2014: 203–5).

Although this episode of the transport entrepreneurs' collectively staged action was rather short, it clearly demonstrated the extensive

¹¹ The main regulations laid out in the Ordinance, which was largely based on the British traffic code, included speed limits, carrying capacities, and a clause on driving licences that required commercial drivers to pass a literacy test and renew their licence every two years (PRAAD, Accra: CSO 17/1/18, 'Motor Traffic Ordinance, 1934').

¹² In some instances, drivers virtually thrust the police out of their way. In order to avoid being fined for overloading, for instance, one report states that it became 'the custom of drivers' not to stop at weighing checkpoints set up along the roadside by special police. The drivers were said 'to drive straight at them [the special police] and they had to jump for their lives to avoid being killed' (report by the Commissioner Gold Coast Police, 2 March 1936; PRAAD, Accra: CSO 17/1/39, 'Ashanti Motor Transport Union' [1935–38]).

¹³ Hart (2016: 74–93) provides a minute reconstruction of drivers' increasing hardships (and complaints) by quoting numerous petitions that drivers and their associations presented to government officials.

¹⁴ Letter from Sub-Inspector to Commissioner of the Gold Coast Police, 1 December 1937, in 'Report on Strike of Drivers' (PRAAD, Accra: ADM 11/1/1656, 'Lorry Driver Strike, 1937').

bargaining power they held in relation to the state. The mechanisms at work behind this power, however, did not relate to their ability to organise collective action so much as to their collectively shared aversion to central regulation. Their agenda was geared towards forcing the state to retreat from their affairs. It was driven, above all, by economic motives.¹⁵

With the advent of the Second World War, the authorities abated their regulatory counteractions significantly. Because they had to cope with Britain's war-adjusted colonial policies, the de facto relinquishment of regulatory authority over commercial transport to 'natives' turned from a threatening loss of (however frugal) jurisdiction to a veritable option for administrative relief. Emblematic of this turn in policy was the government's surrender to demands for the 'native administration of lorry parks'. While the municipalities retained legal entitlement over the acquired land on which lorry parks had been installed, in terms of organisation, conduct, and also the collection of revenues, the parks were fully taken over by local drivers' associations.¹⁶

The Collectors

As lorry parks came to serve as primary switchboards for their decentralised economic operations, the lorry park personnel became powerful brokers between passengers, drivers, and vehicle owners. Generally referred to as 'porters', following the designation of railway station personnel, in turn derived from the model of 'the Victorian railway' (Lacy 1967), central figures among them were the 'collectors' (later on referred to as 'bookmen'). Working on a commission basis for the associations' branches operating from the parks, collectors supervised the loading of vehicles and issued tickets to the passengers.

In 1947, the collectors became the target of a renewed attempt at regulatory intervention. Because the colonial administration sought to capitalise on their strategic function in the organisation of the parks, and of the transport sector at large, the collectors were to be put under the control of municipal authorities or replaced by official clerks. As this

¹⁵ Tellingly, the transport associations did not participate in the politically motivated strikes and demonstrations directed against colonial rule in the 1940s (Pawar 1979).

¹⁶ In parallel with the anatomy of political rule in the colony, these processes first took shape across the Northern Territories and Asante, thus where direct British authority had evolved the least and where native administration (in the context of indirect rule) was the strongest. The delegation of rule over lorry parks was advocated mainly by the Ashanti Motor Union, which had established branches in all major towns in Asante and the north (PRAAD, Accra: CSO 17/4/6, 'Native Administration of Lorry Parks, 1940–41').

directive unleashed great unrest among the drivers' associations, which bluntly warned the administration 'not to interfere in union affairs',¹⁷ the case was presented to the government's Commissioner of Labour. Preceding the decision of the Commissioner, a petition had been presented by representatives of the Ashanti Motor Union in which the function of collectors was explained:

Collectors are the people who carry passengers' goods into lorries and pack them in good order just the same way and manner the Porters of the Railways do their work ... no Lorry Park in the Gold Coast can function or move on alright or properly without the assistance of Collectors ... Because of the good work done for us by our Collectors, we pay them a commission of 2/- [two shillings] in the pound according to the number of passengers and goods collected which however does not in any way affect the passengers.¹⁸

The Commissioner of Labour, 'after considerable investigation', vouched for maintaining the local system. The summary of his report reads:

[The collector's] objects and actions are not always disinterested or necessarily desirable, but the Commissioner of Labour, after considerable investigation, has gained the impression that generally speaking they serve a good purpose, and bring some measure of cooperation and organization into what is very often a disorderly industry. The unions do much to protect the interests of drivers, and also to a lesser extent the African passengers, and the Commissioner of Labour believes that their object of appointing recognized collectors, who are members of the unions, to work in various lorry parks has had a beneficial effect.¹⁹

During the remaining years of colonial rule, the sector was largely left to its own devices. Reflected in this tacit official recognition was the state's acknowledgement that the continuously growing demand for transportation could only be met by private enterprise.²⁰ This demand

¹⁷ This formulation of the warning was reproduced in a letter from the Chief Commissioner, dated 18 June 1947 (PRAAD, Accra: CSO 21/6/174, 'Native Administration Lorry Parks, 1947').

¹⁸ Petition from Ashanti Motor Union to Colonial Secretary, 16 April 1947 (PRAAD, Accra: CSO 21/6/174, 'Native Administration Lorry Parks, 1947'). The petition was largely drawn from an earlier letter written by the Chief Driver of the Ashanti Motor Union, in which he pleaded for maintaining the 'system of Collectors': 'I wish the collectors do their work as ... they are of a greater use to the public for they help seeing that no driver escapes with somebody's child or wife as before when there were no collectors' (PRAAD, Accra: CSO 21/6/174, 'Native Administration Lorry Parks, 1947').

¹⁹ Chief Commissioner to District Commissioner, 14 June 1947 (PRAAD, Accra: CSO 21/6/174, 'Native Administration Lorry Parks, 1947'). The original report is missing in the archives.

²⁰ This was indirectly confirmed at the highest governmental level in late 1948, when the possibility of introducing state-run 'long distance passenger road transport services' was discussed at the Conference of Town Councils. While the idea was 'very much

was fuelled significantly by the extremely rapid urbanisation that set in after the war. In Accra, for example, where the highest (net) growth rate was registered, the population doubled between 1948 and 1960 to 388,000 (GCO 1962). A salient result of urban growth was the emergence and prompt institutionalisation of private motor transport services within municipal boundaries: urban Ghana's now famous (and thoroughly studied²¹) *tro-tro* industry.²²

The Post-Independence Era: Predicament and Possibility in the Road Transport Business

With Ghanaian socialism taking hold after independence under Nkrumah's administration (1957–66), the scope of state intervention in the conduct of private transport entrepreneurs remained remarkably limited.²³ The revamping of municipal transport services in the late 1950s (under the National Omnibus Service Authority) and the setting up of inter-city transport services in the early 1960s (under the City Express Service) did put some additional pressures on private operators. Yet their competitive position remained largely unchallenged, due to their much more differentiated network of routes and their far greater and continuously growing numbers.²⁴

What had a considerable effect, however, was the accumulation of recessionary pressures that troubled the country from the early 1960s onwards, in turn fed by political mismanagement and corruption (Frimpong-Ansah 1992). Subsequently, this led to shortages of vehicles, spare parts, tyres, and petrol. These economic strictures drove many operators out of the market. Overall, however, these processes bolstered

appreciated', it was also agreed that the chances for realising such a scheme 'would appear to be slender' (Minutes of the Conference of Town Councils; PRAAD, Accra: CSO 17/1/188, 'Inter-Municipal Transport Services, 1948').

²¹ See, for example, Clayborne (2012), Fouracre et al. (1994), Hart (2016), Obeng-Odoom (2009), and Turner (1996).

²² Lorry drivers had provided services on inner-city routes from the late 1920s (Hart 2016: 111). These services, however, were sporadic and secondary (and often incidental) to their chief trade of plying long-distance routes.

²³ The most visible regulatory measures taken by Nkrumah's administration were rather nominal attempts to standardise the appearance of commercial drivers (via uniforms) and vehicles (via coloured tags) (Hart 2016: 113–14).

²⁴ The registered number of privately owned commercial passenger lorries, for example, rose from 3,799 in 1945, to about 6,700 in 1961 (Hill 1963a: 6), and, including minibuses imported from the early 1960s onwards, to 9,821 in 1965 (Kjessler and Mannerstrale 1967: chapter 3). The first figure stems from the 1945 Vehicle Census (PRAAD: CSO 17/4/9). This census also indicated that a single commercial passenger lorry frequently had two dozen (or more) different drivers associated with it, hinting at the still far greater number of people involved in the lorry business.

the position of Ghana's private road entrepreneurs in relation to the state. As government provisions for public transport remained largely unable to serve the demand – with state-run enterprises persistently operating in the red (RoG 1967) – the lorry business offered a lucrative, if risky, venture for those who managed to access vehicles and were able to keep them running, foreshadowing contemporary understandings of hustling as founded on the combination of adverse circumstances and shrewd resourcefulness. Using various adaptive solutions, this 'managing' involved the creative skills of vulcanisers and mechanics, as well as more clandestine practices, such as the purchase of smuggled petrol. Towards the end of Nkrumah's reign, state-run road transport services on both inner-city and inter-city routes reached such a level of operational disintegration that private operators virtually became the exclusive providers of public transport.²⁵

The post-Nkrumah regimes, faced with a continued downward spiral of economic performance, took on differing stances towards the power that private road operators came to hold over the constituents of public life. With respect to public transport policies, the rule of the National Liberation Council (NLC, 1966–9) has been described as representing 'purely a period of consolidation and maintenance of existing structures' (Addo 2006: 10). The 'structural changes' introduced during the years of the NLC, which mainly followed a programme of divestiture and liberalisation (guided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF); Hutchful 1973), indeed appeared to have no significant bearing on the private transport sector. Far beyond mere 'consolidation', however, was the large-scale insurance scheme that the NLC administration introduced in mid-1967, which imposed particularly high premiums on commercial vehicles. The proposed scheme was challenged vehemently by the drivers' associations and, upon implementation, resulted in a nationwide strike – at the time, the second general strike action by commercial drivers (after the strike of 1937). Following several weeks of strike and a series of negotiations, the government eventually backed down and revised the scheme.

This strike stood at the beginning of a large wave of politically motivated strikes by wage labourers between 1968 and 1971 (Kraus 1979). In a

²⁵ A report presented by the Committee on the Reorganisation of (state-run) Bus Services in August 1967 (RoG 1967), six months after the ousting of Nkrumah's regime, attributed the disastrous performance of state-run bus services to 'lackadaisical attitudes', 'a complete lack of efficient management', 'gross waste of funds', and 'corruptibility'. It furthermore remarked that, as of 1967, the '[i]nefficiency in the supply system has resulted in serious hold-ups in the workshops where a great number of vehicles lay endlessly awaiting repairs; nearly 60 per cent of the buses at the main depots were constantly off the road'.

move indicative of the entrepreneurship-centred economic endeavour of Ghana's private road transport operators, the drivers' associations abstained from these actions. In the light of these later strikes, a governmental report on the drivers' strike concluded that there had been 'no evidence to suggest that the strike was premeditated or had any political overtones' (RoG 1968: 26). As in the strike 30 years earlier, their agenda appeared to be driven principally by economic motives.

The Busia government (1969–72), with its agenda for promoting indigenous business and economic 'self-reliance' (Esseks 1971), sought to straighten out its relations with the transport entrepreneurs along the lines of liberal corporatism, conferring on them the rank of self-deployed public sector workers. This move stood in parallel to Jomo Kenyatta's famous, and much discussed (Heinze 2018; Rasmussen 2012), 1973 decree to exempt Kenya's *matatus* from public licensing, which has been interpreted as a pivotal event that heralded the era of deregulation (Mutongi 2017: 95–7). In the Ghanaian context, the newly formed national umbrella organisation, the Ghana Private Road Transport Union (GPRTU), which followed from a merger of many earlier local drivers' associations, was allowed considerable latitude in the pursuit of 'national interests', particularly as it was commissioned to enforce price controls for transport fares. Despite its unified appearance, however, the GPRTU represented a loose grouping of mere nominal standing. Most regulatory capacities remained at the level of local branches, whose relations were structured by drivers' competition and of which there were several hundred in the 1970s (according to statements by national executives of the GPRTU in 2012).

The Police I No Fear

The military regime led by Acheampong (1972–8) was characterised by strong inclinations towards hegemonic political control and a corresponding distaste for factionalism and individual 'profiteering' (Owusu 1975). It pursued a much more restrictive course of regulatory action. This materialised in particular in a series of laws that conferred the structuring of routes and fares on a newly created licensing authority.²⁶ Not surprisingly, these measures brought many transport operators into conflict with state authorities.

²⁶ The laws followed National Redemption Council Decrees 71 of 1972 and 181 of 1973. However, the licensing authority that was supposed to enforce the new regulation never became (fully) operational.

Yet on the road and inside the lorry parks, where the statutes were to be implemented by (underpaid) law enforcement agents, the balance of power between state agents and non-state (economic) actors was largely in favour of the latter. Because demand for transportation continued to exceed its supply by far, many drivers and lorry park workers – the collectors in particular – took advantage of the situation and fixed the fares at will. And although some drivers were prosecuted (and occasionally imprisoned), conflicts were generally mediated through routines of everyday corruption. The following statement by a commercial driver, quoted in an interview in an Accra-based student magazine (headlined ‘I know I no fit for heaven’), gives a telling example of this widespread preponderance of ‘practical norms’ (Olivier de Sardan 2015) over legal ones:

For the police I no fear. I give them money for cigarettes and kenkey²⁷ they forget all these rules. The whole of last year me I no renew my driving licence because no policeman dey take me for court when I give am something. Sometimes, too, I dodge them. (Oppong-Agyare 1971: 33)

These attitudes of bribing and ‘dodging’, and generally of ‘not fearing’ police and prosecution, were confirmed to me in numerous talks I had with retired drivers and station workers who were active in the 1970s. Referring to the years of Acheampong’s rule, former ‘owner-driver’ Atsu summarised the economic position and practices of private transport entrepreneurs as follows:

Many people were going hungry. The country suffered. So they introduced Operation Feed Yourself²⁸ to help local farming. But we the drivers usually never felt the hunger. Even if I drove only two days a week, I could make enough money to live well for the whole week. Even if one day the business was not too well, the next day I doubled the fare. And that was that. We were fully committed to feeding ourselves, successfully so, not like the farmers.

All cynicism notwithstanding, this kind of savvy and self-interested entrepreneurialism, with its proximity to today’s understanding of the station workers’ hustle, made working in the transport business very appealing. Sjaak van der Geest (2009: 266) summarises this appeal in the ‘image of the driver for whom everything seems within reach: money, travel, women – in short, the good life’.

More often than not, however, life as a driver came at a considerable price. Commonly regarded with a ‘mixture of admiration and envy’ (van der Geest 2009: 265), drivers had to cope not only with anxieties related to witchcraft and other malevolent forces, but also with grave commercial

²⁷ Kenkey is a corn-based staple food.

²⁸ This was a national programme directed at increased production of food crops.

uncertainties due to market volatilities, indebtedness, and reliance on often unreliable vehicles (see Field 1960; Peace 1988; Verrips and Meyer 2000). As Keith Hart (1970: 109) notes in his study of Ghanaian small-scale entrepreneurs, while the lorry business yielded ‘the quickest return’, for many ‘would-be operators’ the intricacies of the business made ‘commercial transport an entrepreneur’s graveyard’. Furthermore, with a general ‘need for speed’ being the most essential commercial imperative (Klaeger 2014), for many drivers the pursuit of profit led not to ‘the good life’ but to accident, injury, or even death.

The drivers’ associations had little to offer to mitigate the potentially adverse effects of the risky ventures embarked on by their members. Mutual assistance has been (and still is) mostly limited to ‘funeral money’ raised for the bereaved of a deceased member. While this form of help should not be undervalued, especially as Ghanaian funerals can be extremely costly, the sense of safety it provides for the active member is negligible. Apart from funeral money, the associations lack any form of financial security scheme, such as healthcare, pension, or unemployment funds. The constitution of the GPRTU (§30) provides for legal assistance in cases of litigation or dealings with the police. This form of assistance, however, is merely a proforma offer and even appears to be unknown to drivers. In cases of accident, confiscation of their licence or vehicle, or the issuing of fines (and collection of bribes) at the ubiquitous police checkpoints, drivers generally act on their own behalf and on their own account (see also Klaeger 2014: 124–44).

The Dawn of the Hustle Age: Road Transport During and After Structural Adjustment

Some of the most far-reaching regulatory interventions were realised by the administrations headed by Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings, Ghana’s last successful coup-maker.²⁹ From the first days of the revolution, Rawlings and members of the Revolutionary Council repeatedly claimed that they would provide private transport operators with support, in turn counting on winning their backing. A first manifestation of this promised support materialised in the creation of the Neoplan Station. Only three days after seizing power, coup leader Rawlings ordered that a centrally

²⁹ Rawlings first seized power through a coup on 4 June 1979, and, following a two-year episode of civilian government, took back control through a second coup on 31 December 1981. He was a member of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council in 1979 and of the Provisional National Defence Council/National Democratic Congress from 1981 to 2001.

located yard in Accra owned by a local industrialist should be confiscated and transformed into a new lorry park. The newly established park was to be used by vehicles plying the Accra–Kumasi route, the single most important route in the country. Up to this point, these vehicles had departed from two congested roadside locations. Among veteran workers of the Neoplan Station, Rawlings’ ‘concrete action politics’ (as an older station worker put it) are especially remembered in relation to what became Neoplan’s ‘opening ceremony’: a major from Rawlings’ revolutionary guard opened the yard gate by firing a shot from his machine gun and handed over the confiscated land to the bus operators.³⁰ The Neoplan Tropicliner, a coach well adapted to the adverse road conditions of the West African tropics, became its flagship vehicle and gave the yard its name.

Two weeks after the initial 1979 coup, Rawlings’ junta attempted to intervene in the organisation of lorry parks by targeting bookmen, the former ‘collectors’ who had been the target of a (failed) regulatory intervention in 1947. The bookmen were blamed for the inflation of fares, their function was declared ‘unproductive and a nuisance to public interest’, and ‘all bookmen’ were banned from operations with immediate effect (*Daily Graphic* 1979a). This directive was in line with the junta’s larger and rigorously enforced policy to ‘eliminate all middlemen’, which in turn was related to the militarily backed ‘house-cleaning exercise’ (Pieterse 1982: 253). It unleashed great unrest among lorry park workers and commercial drivers, who decried the forceful upsetting of a longstanding organisational order. When they threatened to go on strike, the law was revoked just four days after its implementation (*Daily Graphic* 1979b).

Rawlings’ second regime revised its strategy in relation to the country’s transport operators, especially by giving extensive patronage to the GPRTU. It consolidated the union’s stature as a more coherent organisation while strengthening its position in relation to rival associations that emerged during the 1970s, most significantly the Progressive Transport Owners’ Association (PROTOA).³¹ This system of clientelism

³⁰ I have discussed elsewhere Rawlings’ political bias in favour of the commercial role of men and against women (Thiel and Stasik 2016). The use of military force to strengthen the economic pursuits and presence of (exclusively male) private transport entrepreneurs that the creation of the Neoplan Station speaks of stands in stark contrast to the military-backed forces Rawlings’ junta mobilised for the destruction of major markets and the violent eviction of traders, most of whom were women. On 18 August 1979, for example, soldiers burned Accra’s main market Makola Number 1 to the ground (Robertson 1983).

³¹ For example, state funds were used to supply GPRTU members with wear parts and to subsidise the acquisition of vehicles for the association, while senior members were included on national transport committees (Ninsin 1991).

proved largely successful. The GPRTU became a ‘prosperous “organ of the PNDC [Provisional National Defence Council] revolution”’ (Gyimah-Boadi 1994: 132), with many of its members featuring prominently in political mobilisation activities (Jeffries 1992: 217).

Concurrently, a series of measures was initiated for enforcing discipline at the country’s main lorry parks. Crucial to this was the introduction of so-called union guards into the system of lorry park management (Cissokho 2019). Appointed by the GPRTU, the union guards were to supervise the activities of other station workers, including those of other associations. As these newly created paramilitary-like proxies of the GPRTU (instructed by the military and equipped with khaki uniforms) were authorised to collect daily dues from all vehicles entering the stations, the status of the union was upgraded to that of a self-policing organisation (Joshi and Ayee 2002). By means of this incisive system evocative of indirect rule, control over Ghana’s main lorry parks was effectively handed over to the GPRTU.

These measures were reinforced by the economic recovery programme, which commenced in 1983 (Agyeman-Duah 1987), instantiating the structural adjustment policies launched across the global South. Established to arrest the country’s economic decline and revive the productive sectors, these measures brought drastic cuts to government expenditure, which in turn had grave effects on the lives and living conditions of people across Ghana. In line with the World Bank-promoted idea of increased reliance on market mechanisms, coupled with deregulation and privatisation, the PNDC introduced a range of reforms that favoured the private transport sector in general and the position of the GPRTU in particular. A divestment of state-run bus operations to the private sector was coupled with a favourably adjusted import policy for second-hand passenger vehicles,³² an increased availability of spare parts, an almost complete suspension of controls on transport fares, and a massive rehabilitation of road infrastructures (Fouracre et al. 1994; Gyimah-Boadi 1994: 132–3). These reforms and investments were encouraged significantly (and co-financed) by the World Bank, which, ever since the Berg Report (World Bank 1981), had called for more attention to the causal relationship between development and overcoming distance.

³² The new import policy fostered what older transport workers today refer to as the ‘Urvan factor’ – that is, the tremendous increase in the number of imported second-hand vehicles during the 1980s. Most popular among these vehicles was the Japanese-produced Urvan model, which could easily be converted into a passenger bus.

Enclaves of Growth

Framed by this global agenda for road infrastructure investment and the encouragement of private sector performance, the new-found affinity between the government and (GPRTU-aligned) transport entrepreneurs led to a veritable bonanza in Ghana's private transport sector. According to Jon Kraus (1991: 30), it grew 'by roughly 10.7 percent per year during 1983–87'.³³ The concomitant cutbacks in formal employment structures further fed into this upturn, as did a number of interrelated structural factors. For example, cuts in agricultural subsidies, the drought years of 1982–4, and looming ethnic conflicts in the northern regions catalysed processes of rural flight, while the sustained economic inequality between Ghana's north and south accounted for the durability of these processes (Brown 1986). In 1983, the expulsion of Ghanaians from Nigeria (the 'Agege returnees', whose number was estimated at roughly one million people; Afolayan 1988), added further pressures on the growing imbalances of the urban labour market.

During these years, Ghana's 'street economies' (Hansen et al. 2014) began to take on the function of a sponge, absorbing many people driven out into the relatively easy to access, yet loose and increasingly competitive, grounds of transport enterprises and adjacent trades. With growing rates of migration to the cities and increasing internal remittances (goods and money sent by city dwellers to their upcountry kin), there was a continuously rising demand for transport services. The effects of these diverging developments – of generally aggregating economic hardships and prospering transport businesses – became most pronounced in Ghana's lorry parks.

The stations progressively turned into enclave-like locales of condensed economic activities that attracted increasing numbers of small-scale entrepreneurs and labourers. These included lorry owners, drivers, and station personnel, as well as more peripheral engagements within the sector's bordering micro-economies, such as hawking, trading, and head portering. About half a century after 'the lorry age' had dawned, as phrased by Hill (1963b: 234), hustling found traction as the principal mode of economic sustenance for a fast surging number of people working the lorry business, whether on the road or at the roadsides.

³³ The percentage figure implies that transport businesses reached a high level of prosperity, but this should be treated with caution, as Kraus does not explain how he arrived at his 'rough' estimate.

Consolidating the Hustle

With the change of administration in 2001, newly elected President John Kufuor initiated a policy shift regarding the public transport sector. This was in line with the departure from policies of deregulation and liberalisation that had dominated the transport economics of African states during the previous two decades (Mwase 2003). Influenced by the World Bank and IMF-promoted poverty reduction strategies introduced in 1999, which translated into a series of country-specific poverty reduction strategy papers (IMF 2012), the new agenda aimed at increasing state capacities for the regulation of the transport infrastructure in general and of the private road transport sector in particular. The subsequent policies were based on two main approaches. First, the government embarked on a massive overhaul of the existing road network, including the redevelopment of major trunk roads into dual carriageways, newly constructed bypasses meant to ease congestion on urban through roads (Stasik and Klaeger 2018), a redesigned roadside architecture that accommodates traffic, and above all the construction of centrally regulated ‘transport terminals’ designed to supplant the old-established lorry parks. (I consider the designated function and uses of Accra’s new transport terminal in Chapter 8.)

Second, and complementing these infrastructural reconfigurations, Kufuor’s administration aimed at increasing its regulatory leverage on the private transport sector. The perceived need for these measures was formulated in an analysis of Ghana’s public transport sector carried out by an international transport consultancy (IBIS 2005). Prepared in order to ‘assist with the construction of a “toolkit” on bus transport reform to be financed by PPIAF³⁴ under the direction of the World Bank’, the government-commissioned analysis concluded that, because former governments basically ‘abdicated any direct responsibility for either planning or providing public transport services’, ‘a regulatory vacuum exists for the sector’ (ibid.: 12, 27).

The proposed ‘toolkit’ reforms aimed to develop a ‘centrally planned and integrated network of state-run services’ (IBIS 2005: 47), which would be tantamount to a complete restructuring of the transport sector. This proved to be of a rather impracticable scope – not least, as mentioned in the analysis, because of ‘the potential opposition of the existing

³⁴ The Public–Private Infrastructure Advisory Facility (PPIAF) represents the principal executive authority within the framework of the World Bank-promoted Sub-Saharan Africa Transport Policy Program.

private operators and their controlling unions' (ibid.: 48), which would most likely be provoked by such reforms. Faced with this discrepancy between the desire for regulatory intervention and the reality of regulatory capacities, the government settled for rather modest measures, principally designed to unfetter the public transport market from the grip of the GPRTU. With an estimated 85 to 90 per cent of Ghana's transport operators registered with the GPRTU (ibid.: 27), however, it could not (openly) break with the association. It thus re-animated the role of other transport associations, especially by removing the barriers for re-entering the stations, relaxed the conditions for granting concessions to private transport companies, and initiated a major public-private transport undertaking, Metro Mass Transit Ltd, which set out to 'move the nation' (as its slogan has it).

Kufuor's policy change effectuated a significant redistribution of market shares, with dozens of new transport companies and many more individual operators entering the market. When seen from the ground-level perspective, particularly from within Ghana's main lorry parks, it precipitated the dynamics of fragmentation, decentralised operations, and competitive pressures that have characterised and shaped the sector since its earliest days. For the first time, the public transport market showed signs of saturation and, on various major routes, of oversupply. Rather than leading to a drop in supply, however, this saturation resulted in a general intensification of competitive practices and a resulting increased vulnerability of transport operators, creating conditions that were ripe for hustle.

Conclusion

The relations that structured the balance of power between the state and local road transport entrepreneurs in Ghana (and the Gold Coast) can be described along two main lines. On the one hand, the state's inability to provide adequate public utility services was both capitalised on and partly compensated for by the economic ventures of local actors. On the other hand, throughout the one hundred years of the sector's existence, its bottom-line-oriented public transport providers have been subjected to repeatedly staged regulatory interventions on the part of state authorities. Depending on the larger economic and political constellations at the time, these interventions materialised as restraints imposed via legal sanctions, taxation, certification, price controls, import policies, and competition by subsidised parastatals.

Yet in spite of, and in defiance (and partly also mere ignorance) of, these variously configured mechanisms of regulation and

coercion – most of which were aimed at restricting the sector's latitude of self-rule and fill its supposed 'regulatory vacuum' – Ghana's private transport entrepreneurs retained a decisive degree of operational independence. This is not to deny that larger-scale economic restructurings have had a formative influence on the conduct of the operators, as have developments in automobile technologies, especially regarding the introduction of new vehicle models and their appropriation in both technological and commercial terms. Notwithstanding episodic entanglements with political patron–client networks (particularly during Rawlings' rule), operators adhered to an organisational mode structured according to the tenets of utility and a reciprocal relationship between cooperation and competition, manifest in particular in long-established competitive systems that structured the distribution of routes, as coordinated in the lorry parks since the 1930s.

The highly fragmented and decentralised operations that, from the beginning, characterised the economic practices of transport operators have never been captured by the state, but they also formed the very base from which to repel the state's regulatory forays. One salient example of the state's relative absence in the volatile developments of the station is provided by the union guards and their successors. Introduced by Rawlings' second regime to enforce revenue collection, the union guards were degraded to ordinary branch overseers in 2001; most of their executive powers, however, had already been forfeited with the end of military rule in 1992. Today, there is a small unit of quasi-tax collectors who literally glean marginal gains in the form of tolls which they collect from each vehicle that enters the station. These four municipal clerks, who work in shifts and only during office hours, regularly lose out to the drivers' reluctance to deliver the required payment. Tellingly, after the October flooding of 2011, the toll collectors did not show up at the station for weeks.

The evasion of state regulation by private transport operators is far from representing a kind of Ghanaian variation on 'the art of not being governed' (Scott 2009). From the perspective of the individual operators, the constraints following from state interventions were taken mainly as just another element of market volatility, one tantamount to external pressures induced by natural disasters. And more often than not, they were dealt with accordingly, by confronting them, 'dodging' them, or simply riding out their repercussions. Some of these individual attempts to confront and withstand volatile situations have been successful, many others less so.

In this sense, the commercial 'perils and possibilities' of roads (Klaeger 2013b) that frame today's station hustle are nothing new to Ghana's road

transport providers; and neither are matters of risk, uncertainty, and individual striving to maximise commercial opportunities and chances for income and ‘the quickest return’ in the face of weak service provision by the state. In Chapter 3, I look at some of the main effects that follow from the simultaneous embracing and contesting of economic adversity by zeroing in on the changing organisational modes in Accra’s Neoplan Station as they have evolved since the establishment of the station at the beginning of Rawlings’ rule.