CHAPTER 2

Roadside Involution,
Or How Many People Do You Need to Run a Lorry Park?

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In Ghana, public road transport is not a public undertaking but is largely in the hands of small-scale entrepreneurs, and it has been so since the advent of motorised transportation in the early twentieth century. The related technologies (above all, roads and vehicles) and the very model of motorised mass transportation were imported from the North Atlantic regions, mainly from Britain. During the first decades of what Polly Hill has famously coined as the ‘lorry age’ (1963b: 234) – which alludes to the great transformations brought about by the motorisation of Ghanaian society since the 1910s –, the ‘original’ model of public transport got adopted to the cultural syntax of West African practices of travel. In the course of this process, Ghanaian modes of road transport began to ‘deviate’ significantly from the forms of public transport in the British ‘motherland’ and the North Atlantic regions at large. In the North Atlantic regions, public transport follows bureaucratically administered models with high levels of regulation, standardisation and formalisation. The European railway systems, for example, epitomise the cogwheel rigidity of Western states’ public transport planning and organisation through their centrally-controlled routes, schedules, fares, as well as meticulously differentiated set of scripts devised for both its operators and its users.

Ghana’s privately run public road transport, by contrast, is characterised by conspicuously low degrees of central planning and regulation. Being an artisanal ‘trade’ with decentralised, diverse and bottom-up deployed structures of operations, it is often considered to be emblematic of what is commonly described as the ‘informal’ economy (e.g. Barrett 2003; Hansen and Vaa 2004; Hart 1970, 1973). The practices of road operators and users do not follow any top-down prescribed set of scripts, rather, its modes of organisation have evolved from distinct repertoires of skilled, often tacit practices and quotidian interactions that take place on the road and roadside. The distribution of routes is not centrally allocated, but according to the dynamics of supply and demand. These routes are served by a broad range of vehicle types; vehicles do not run according to time schedules, but only depart once the last seat has been taken; although fares are fixed according to officially set rates, in practice they are routinely adjusted at will.
As in most countries across Africa, such forms of informal collective road transport account for the main means of motorised transportation in Ghana (MRH and SSGH 2009; Trans-Africa Consortium 2010). Most inner-city, interregional and international travels, in turn, are organised in urban bus stations, called 'lorry parks' in Ghanaian English. This is where travel communities are formed and 'channelled' into their journeys by various roadside communities of the station. Lorry parks are hubs in the full sense of the word: they are pivots of travel and trade, gateways between urban and rural areas and interregional and international intersections. They are kept running through diverse networks of loosely-structured group economic activities, the constituents of which are far from clear to all of its participants. As most road-bound travels begin in urban bus stations, the practices of the station communities – who 'dispatch' passengers and goods, thus bringing traffic onto the roads – figure as central elements in the overall 'making' of road transportation.

With regards to the decisive role of bus stations within the complex operations of public transport in Ghana, and similarly in other African contexts, it is surprising that they have not received much attention from scholars dealing with related phenomena (roads, travel and transportation). This apparent lack of interest is particularly striking in relation to the work of anthropologists. Since the advent of automobility in Africa, many if not most anthropologists working in Africa must have spent considerable amounts of time at bus stations. Sjaak van der Geest, for example, reflecting upon the three and a half decades of his returning visits to the continent states that in 'those years I spent countless hours in lorry parks waiting for my bus or taxi to leave', during which he 'killed time by talking to drivers, “bookmen”, mates and fellow passengers' (2009: 269). Van der Geest's long-lasting, albeit not deliberate, bond with African bus stations is certainly not an exception among fellow Africanist fieldworkers both within and outside the scopes of anthropological research. And still, as Paul Nugent has recently noted with reference to the comparably vital locales of African markets, while 'markets have received their fair share of academic treatment, lorry parks have not received nearly enough attention as interactive spaces' (2010: 96).

Most noteworthy among the few studies dealing with Africa's bus stations are Polly Hill's portrayals of Ghanaian trade and transport systems in the 1960s.

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1 Van der Geest hints at a possible explanation for that 'lorry park-desideratum' by pointing to the 'dismal farsightedness' of (Western) anthropologists: 'What originates in their own culture is too familiar to be visible in another setting: schools, factories, hospitals, pharmaceuticals and cars – all these exports have – until recently – been overlooked by Western anthropologists doing fieldwork in other cultures' (2009: 259).