

"Fear Not": Public Danger, Public Safety, and the Culture of Driving in Late-Colonial Ghana

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This paper explores the development of a culture of driving through discourses of danger and safety. The establishment of motor transportation as a dominant occupational category by the 1930s and the expansion of the population of drivers and vehicle owners in the Gold Coast was paralleled by a rising number of motor vehicle accidents. The perceived “dangers of the road” prompted expected calls for regulation and reform among colonial officials for whom motor transportation reflected not only a risk to the health and well-being of individual members of the public but also a threat to colonial logics of governance and control. The 1934 Motor Traffic Ordinance, in particular, marked a shift in colonial regulatory attention away from vehicles and toward drivers themselves. Colonial regulation increasingly attempted to define “the type of man who should be a driver”. However, this paper argues that colonial regulations failed to appreciate an emerging culture of transportation that reflected not only driver responses to colonial regulations but also more particularly to the “dangers of the road”. Drivers’ prestige, welfare, and economic prosperity were the product of a difficult balance of the risks of driving and the rewards of risk. In crafting their occupational identity as professionals, this paper argues, drivers established a distinct culture of transportation premised on a complex risk and reward calculation. In so doing, this paper suggests alternative ways to think about regulation and danger in the colonial (and postcolonial) period. In contrast to literature on colonial regulation, which often assumes that discourses on public safety were a reflection of the impact of the colonial state and its organs of dissemination and inculturation, this paper argues that African cultural practices surrounding driving in the colonial period reflect systems of self-regulation. It also suggests that, in contrast to colonial regulatory systems that focused on risk, African self-regulation made possible a more complicated and dynamic system of risk and reward on the part of both drivers and passengers—a “productive life of risk”—which reflected both the possibilities and limitations of motor transportation for Africans in the Gold Coast.

