

“Fear Not”: Danger, Regulation, and the Rewards of Risky Behavior on Gold Coast Roads, ca. 1920s-1940s

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The road is a dangerous place. Everyday conversation and national news in Ghana today is dominated by concerns about motor vehicle accidents. The risk and danger of accidents on Ghanaian roads is experienced by passengers and drivers alike. However, roads—and the vehicles and people who ply them—have also figured prominently in the Ghanaian social and cultural imaginary (most noticeably, perhaps, through material culture: popular music, children’s games and toys, art, cloth, etc) and in everyday economic practice as a zone of potential and prestige. Just as much as the Nigerien drivers and passengers of Adeline Masquelier’s study, Ghanaian experiences of roads, vehicles, and motor transportation are marked by a profound ambivalence, which highlights both the dangers and potentialities of roads and road practice.¹ Roads are simultaneously objects of “fascination and terror”, “spaces of fear and desire”.² This paper explores this ambivalence through the life experience of drivers and passengers who traveled along Ghanaian roads and established a distinctive and robust culture of transportation in the late-colonial era. In both fearing and embracing the potentials of the road, Ghanaian drivers engaged in what Caitlin Zaloom has called “the productive life of risk.”³ This paper seeks to take up Zaloom’s challenge to explore the ways in which individual and social engagement with risk represents “constitutive elements of contemporary power and economic

¹ Adeline Masquelier, “Road Mythographies”, *American Ethnologist*, pg. 831

² Masquelier, pg. 831.

³ Caitlin Zaloom, “The Productive Life of Risk”, *Cultural Anthropology*

practice.”⁴ In other words, how did Ghanaian drivers and passengers reconcile the ambivalence of the road in economically, socially, or culturally productive ways?

These questions take on particular significance in the late-colonial context, when drivers, passengers, and government officials attempted to define the parameters of an emerging occupational and professional class. Risk—and the possibility of reward for risky behavior—was at the center of a complex debate over the shape of motor transportation in the Gold Coast. As motor transportation emerged as an established category of economic practice, drivers, passengers, and government officials all sought to define its practice through the lens of interest. The willingness to engage with risk—or the acceptability of risk—was viewed differently by each group. This engagement with risk, however, resulted in the emergence of new cultures and practices of motor transportation (both among drivers and within state policy) and spawned new and/or transformed forms of economic engagement.

Emerging Practices of Motor Transport

While motor transportation is widespread throughout sub-Saharan Africa, Ghanaians seem to have appropriated the economic potentials of motor vehicles and roads quite early. Motor vehicles were introduced by European commercial firms in the early 20th century, and their popularity expanded rapidly—not only among British colonial officials and European commercial agents, but also among a growing number of Gold Coast Africans. If vehicles numbered only 16 in 1908, by 1932, there were 4,141 commercial motor vehicles and 1,618 private cars and taxis registered in the Gold Coast. By the end of the 1930s, there were over 5,501 commercial vehicles and 2,076 private cars and taxis.⁵ The number of drivers in the

⁴ Zaloom, pg. 365.

⁵ PRAAD-NAG (Accra) CSO 15/1/65 1932-40 Registration Statistics of Motor Vehicles Abroad—forms for

colony also grew and, in fact, even outpaced the number of registered vehicles. By 1945 a single vehicle could have well over 25 different licensed drivers associated with it, as well as a likely much larger number of mates (or apprentices) who helped the driver take care of the vehicle and its cargo (goods and/or passengers).⁶ Gold Coast Africans dominated motor transportation so completely that British commercial agents in the 1930s noted that “no European drives in the Gold Coast”.⁷

This expansion of motor transportation in the Gold Coast was intimately connected to the growth of cocoa farming in the 1920s and 1930s. The newfound wealth of cocoa farmers was most frequently invested in motor lorries.⁸ Farmers used their lorries not only to carry cocoa and other products to railway termini, but also to by-pass the railways altogether. Farmers, traders, and drivers used a network of feeder roads to transport goods directly to coastal ports for export. As a result, motor transportation allowed farmers and traders to control the movement of produce outside of colonial networks of communications, transportation, and control. The profitability and appeal of motor transportation was clearly evident as African traders, farmers, and chiefs used their own money to build motorable roads when the colonial government proved resistant to funding road construction in an effort to protect railway profits—in one case spending nearly

⁶ PRAAD-NAG (Accra) CSO 17/4/9 1945 Vehicle Census

⁷ In fact, African drivers so dominated the system that in preparing for tests of a Leyland road train in the Gold Coast in 1933, the Secretary of Oversea Mechanical Transport Directing Committee reported that, “we have provided for an African driver and two mates in view of the fact that motor vehicles are not driven by Europeans in the Gold Coast” (PRAAD: NAG (Accra) CSO 17/1/32 1932-1938 *15 Ton unit of Oversea Mechanical Transport Directing Committee—Testing of, in the Gold Coast*). As late as 1932, however, colonial officials were still clearly underestimating the importance of these African owner-operators on the transport system as a whole: “At the end of the discussion it transpired that several present held the view that the small native owned lorry is not fully comparable with the larger motor vehicles owned by the transport companies such as Swanzy’s. The latter are concerned solely with transport and are run on commercial lines, the former are used as farm transport and for general utility purposes as well as longer distance running, e.g. to and from the sea ports. Moreover the vehicle is often family owned and the driver is not a salaried man.” (PRAAD: NAG (Accra) CSO 14/2/123 1932-33 *Scheduling of Roads*); PRAAD: NAG (Accra) CSO 14/2/25 1933 *Road, Rail and other System of Internal Communication, Competition Between*.

⁸ Polly Hill

50,000 pounds to construct an engineered road that connected Akuapem villages to major trunk roads. The increased profits that resulted from the expansion of the motor transportation network was undoubtedly appealing to African economic agents in the Gold Coast; however, motor vehicle practice also reflected passenger preferences. If railways separated passengers from their goods during transit, motor transportation allowed traders and farmers to escort their goods.

Ghanaian preferences and skills on the road forced changes in both European commercial and political practice. As Ghanaian enthusiasm for motor transportation continued to grow in spite of government attempts to dissuade or sabotage its expansion, government officials increasingly embraced the need for new regulation that accepted motor transportation as a legitimate and established professional and commercial category. The 1934 Motor Traffic Ordinance marked the first comprehensive government attempts to regulate drivers. Government regulations had long mandated the size, weight, and speed of vehicles. However, by requiring drivers to be literate (i.e. be able to read and understand the Motor Traffic Ordinance and to read road signs), undergo physical examinations, and submit a Certificate of Competency, the colonial state increasingly attempted to dictate who could and could not be a driver. The 1934 Motor Traffic Ordinance marked a new age and a transformation in the relationship between the state and drivers. Debates over the Ordinance highlighted both the difficulties of the state to define and control driver practices and the ways in which some state policies did effectively transform those practices (though often not in the ways that the state intended). Most obviously, the disjuncture between colonial definitions of “the type of man qualified to be a driver” and African understandings of the skill necessary to be a driver led African drivers to ignore laws, skirt around regulatory systems and petition the colonial government in protest as they pondered

(or experienced first-hand) the consequences of new regulation on their occupational practice and profit. In regulating driver practices (in the name of what they called the “public interest”), the colonial state challenged a well-developed institution and culture of driving. In this system, the training and skills required of drivers were defined by the demands of their passengers and the nature of their work.

Colonial officials as well as the broader African public viewed some of these practices as inherently risky and dangerous. The expansion in the number of vehicles and drivers in the colony established driving as a dominant occupational and economic category. However, this expansion also led to an increase in the number of accidents. By the 1930s and 1940s, driving was clearly identified as a dangerous profession by many in the Gold Coast, and parents often attempted to dissuade their young sons from pursuing driving as an occupation due to the high level of risk. While to some degree the danger and risk of their work established drivers as daring and brave, the prevalence of accidents—and fatal accidents in particular—also often put the lives and well-being of passengers and pedestrians at serious risk. In 1940 alone, there were 651 accidents in the Gold Coast, 74 of which resulted in fatalities.⁹

Risk and Reward Among Gold Coast Drivers

Among officials in the British colonial government, the risk of motor transportation was found not in the technology itself but in the conditions of motor transport work and practice among African drivers. The motor transportation industry in the Gold Coast was dominated by individual African “owner-drivers or small syndicates,” which raised concerns in the minds of

⁹ PRAAD: NAG (Accra) CSO 17/1/92 1940-42 Motor Accidents

British officers as late as the 1950s.¹⁰ As colonial officials noted in response to MR Bonavia's 1951 report on the road transport system in the Gold Coast:

It is only beginning to be realized by people outside Transport circles that the use of uneconomic road vehicles, for example the 3-ton petrol lorry, driven to death in order to obtain quicker financial returns, usually in order to pay off instalments upon the vehicle, are a considerable loss of economy and wealth to the territory concerned.¹¹

Bonavia himself found the impact of the hire-purchase system on the practices of the “typical African driver” to be directly related to the financial insecurity of drivers and, as a result, the prevalence of accidents in the Gold Coast:

The typical African lorry-owner will buy a new vehicle on a hire-purchase or deferred payment system through (frequently) a Syrian or Lebanese firm. The latter, in view of the risks they carry, give only short credit and charge high interest. The owner-driver thereupon sets out to earn as much as possible in the first months of the vehicle's life, overloading it and covering a heavy mileage, with fast running over bad roads, in the process. If he is successful, he pays off the instalments and thereafter earns a good profit; but if he has a major breakdown or accident he may be unable to afford the cost of the necessary repairs and may even abandon the vehicle in a ditch.¹²

¹⁰ CSO 14/2/25 1933 *Road, Rail and other System of Internal Communication, Competition Between*. In fact, African drivers so dominated the system that in preparing for tests of a Leyland road train in the Gold Coast in 1933, the Secretary of Oversea Mechanical Transport Directing Committee reported that, “we have provided for an African driver and two mates in view of the fact that motor vehicles are not driven by Europeans in the Gold Coast” (CSO 17/1/32 1932-1938 *15 Ton unit of Oversea Mechanical Transport Directing Committee—Testing of, in the Gold Coast*). As late as 1932, however, colonial officials were still clearly underestimating the importance of these African owner-operators on the transport system as a whole: “At the end of the discussion it transpired that several present held the view that the small native owned lorry is not fully comparable with the larger motor vehicles owned by the transport companies such as Swanzy's. The latter are concerned solely with transport and are run on commercial lines, the former are used as farm transport and for general utility purposes as well as longer distance running, e.g. to and from the sea ports. Moreover the vehicle is often family owned and the driver is not a salaried man.” (CSO 14/2/123 1932-33 *Scheduling of Roads*)

¹¹ CO 554/324 1951-1953 *S&C: Enquiry into the Economics of the Gold Coast Transport Industry by MR Bonavia and CR Hayes of the British Transport Commission*.

¹² CO 554/324 1951-1953 *S&C: Enquiry into the Economics of the Gold Coast Transport Industry by MR Bonavia and CR Hayes of the British Transport Commission*. As we saw in Chapter 1, this image of the “typical African driver” had been circulating in colonial circles for quite some time. In a letter to the Colonial Secretary on March 10, 1931, the Commissioner of the Western Province argued: “A good deal of the transport services today are undertaken by individual owner-drivers or small syndicates and there are few big companies. These individuals do not necessarily confine themselves to particular localities. I consider that any attempt at interference with their

The competition that resulted from the increase in the number of registered vehicles in the Gold Coast in the 1920s and 1930s led transport owner-drivers to cut their prices to uneconomic levels and placed them at significant financial risk. While the low prices generated through competition were appreciated by the mobile public, the financial pressures that competition placed on owner-drivers also forced them to drive vehicles far longer, faster, and with heavier loads than was safe.¹³ Nicknamed “boneshakers” by their passengers, the wooden lorries (or tsolorley, in Ga) became legendary for their rough ride and cramped, uncomfortable conditions. However, beyond issues of basic discomfort, the safety of these “old” vehicles and their wooden bodies clearly increased the risk of accidents—and fatal accidents in particular.

The most careful and well-trained drivers approached their work with a high degree of respect and concern for the safety of themselves, their passengers, pedestrians, and other drivers and represented careful driving and an accident-free record as a badge of honor.¹⁴ Skillful and careful drivers attracted loyal paying clientele. The respect that their skill and care engendered among passengers and other drivers also attracted apprentices, who paid for the pleasure of learning to drive and who provided cheap labor for the driver and/or vehicle owner both on the road and in the home. However, drivers were also pragmatic entrepreneurs whose desire for profit often led them to engage in otherwise risky behavior. “Driving without light”¹⁵,

freedom to pursue their livelihood on the roads of the Colony wherever it suited them best would be unfair.” (CSO 14/2/25 1933 *Road, Rail and other System of Internal Communication, Competition between*)

¹³ CSO 14/2/23 1931 *Roads, Rail and other systems of internal communication, competition between*, “Letter from the Director of Public Works to the Colonial Secretary, 19th March 1930: “An enormous volume of road transport has been imported into this Colony and may be said to have captured the business. Transport owners cannot therefore afford to scrap their lorries and will presumably cut their prices to bone in an endeavour to hold on to some of this business.”

¹⁴ CSO 15/7/37 1937 *A.T. Agbenyegah, Motor Driver petition praying for restoration of his driving licence*; CSO 15/7/43 1937 *Mr. David Dafoe Corbla Avenor—petition praying for restoration of his driving licence*

¹⁵ “Driving without light” was particularly relevant through the early 20th century when vehicles did not come with electric lights already affixed. Drivers were required to fix lanterns on both sides of the front of the vehicle. Later, such the phrase referred to driving without the electric light switched on. CSO 15/7/11 1931 *Kofi Attah, Motor Driver—petition from for restoration of his driving licence*: “If the Colonial Secretary will demand for the Licence

overloading¹⁶ and overspeeding¹⁷ constituted “common practices” among African drivers who weighed the danger of these practices with the potential for financial reward. While some drivers engaged in these calculations merely to enhance their own profits, most were motivated by the need to pay credit installments to the commercial firms that sold vehicles on a “work and pay” (or hire-purchase) system with high rates of interest and high monthly or quarterly payments. These credit systems—with their low overhead or capital input requirements—made motor vehicles available to a wider range of consumers; however, they also placed difficult long-term financial pressures on drivers, who had to pay off their vehicles as well as provide for what was often a large family including both their own children as well as their siblings and one or both parents. Risky behaviors such as overloading and overspeeding not only had implications for road surfaces and for passenger safety but also for the livelihood of drivers. By pushing their vehicles to the limit in order to squeeze the greatest amount of profit out of the vehicle when it was newest and, thus, most efficient, drivers also exposed the vehicles—and, thus, their investment and financial security—to the risk of breakdown and accident.

Those who were unfortunate enough to be the victims of accidents experienced first-hand the consequences of risky behavior gone wrong. The open, wooden sides of mammy trucks made passengers more vulnerable in the context of collision, being thrown out of the vehicle or risking impalement and other traumatic injuries when the wooden sides splintered in an accident.

in question, you would see my driving career is 12 years and have only one endorsement i.e. ‘driving without light’ which in my opinion is the common crime that drivers used to commit.”

¹⁶ Overloading refers to the practice in which drivers loaded a vehicle with more weight than a vehicle of its construction was designed to carry. In relation to goods transport this was evaluated in terms of gross weight. In the realm of passenger transport, the number of passengers that a given vehicle was certified to safely carry was determined by Certifying officers, testing officers, and police in relation to the size and type of the vehicle (3-ton, 5-ton, 10-ton, private car, etc.). In practice, as will be discussed below, it proved more difficult to enforce these distinctions between goods and passenger transport than colonial officials and regulations predicted.

¹⁷ Overspeeding is the British and/or Gold Coast/Ghanaian term for what is referred to as “speeding” in an American context.

Streets and roads were also dangerous places because of their mixed use. Many people walked alongside roads and children played in streets. While these activities proved relatively safe in most contexts, those pedestrians who did find themselves facing an oncoming vehicle were particularly vulnerable.

Legislating Risk, Negotiating Regulation

The 1934 Motor Traffic Ordinance reflected an attempt by the colonial government to regulate the inherent risk and danger of these practices. The majority of offences prosecuted under the Motor Traffic Ordinance of 1934 exemplified the “minor” or “common” offences (i.e. driving without light, overloading, and overspeeding) committed by drivers. If drivers considered these offences minor or common, colonial officials viewed them as contributing factors to the general and increasing danger of the road.¹⁸ In particular circumstances, it was argued, the accumulation of “minor” offences resulted in serious and fatal accidents. The experience of Yaw Kuma exemplified this increasing colonial concern over the relationship between minor offences and the increasing incidence of accidents¹⁹:

On the 26th March, 1929, a number of boys and girls were collected together in the street at Effiduase taking part in a certain native dance called Buntuku. Chevrolet lorry No. AC88775 driven by the accused Yaw Kuma, and passing through the same street in the direction of Asokore, dashed in to the children knocking down fourteen, injuring some of them and killing the deceased girl Abena Yawa immediately. The more seriously injured were taken to Koforidua Hospital for treatment and one of them, a boy named Yaw Mensah, succumbed to his injuries the next morning. It was dark at the time the accident happened and the driver had no lights on his lorry nor did he blow his

¹⁸ CSO 15/7/43 1937 *Mr. David Dafoe Corbla Avenor—petition praying for restoration of his driving licence*, Letter from Commissioner of Police to Colonial Secretary, 23rd July 1937: “The offence of carrying passengers in insecure positions is a particularly dangerous one and is one which is in part responsible for the big loss of life in road accidents in the Gold Coast.”

¹⁹ See, for example, CSO 15/7/25 1935 *Mr. J.B. Cobblah, Motor Driver—petition praying for refund of part of fine imposed on*; CSO 15/7/43 1937 *Mr. David Dafoe Corbla Avenor—petition praying for restoration of his driving licence*, Letter from Commissioner of Police to Colonial Secretary, 23rd July 1937

horn when approaching the children. After the accident, the accused ran away to Asokore where he was subsequently arrested.²⁰

Mr. Kuma was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to eighteen months in prison and had his licence suspended for 5 years; however, at his sentencing his actions did not seem to warrant the disqualification by the court of his holding a licence in the future. In 1936 and 1938, when Yaw Kuma petitioned the government for the return of his licence, the consequences of his otherwise minor offences constituted the actions of “a most dangerous driver” whose possession of a licence “would undoubtedly cause grave risk to other road users.”²¹

Police reports, African petitions, and drivers’ oral histories also testify to the prevalence of the more “serious” and “grave” offences that constituted careless and dangerous driving. “Driving to the common danger” encompassed a wide range of driver practices, all of which often resulted in accidents.²² Erratic behavior, generally, defied explanation and often resulted in both serious accidents and serious punishments:

Briefly the facts are these:--

- (a) The accused was driving a motor lorry No. AT 2267 belonging to one Kofi Dum of Mampong-Ashanti.
- (b) On the 16th of June, 1929, he was driving from Kumasi to Sunyani. There were five Passengers in the lorry plus the driver and mate, making seven persons in all.
- (c) Between Koforidua (Ashanti) and Koukrom, the accused took his hands off the Steering Wheel and began to clap his hands, and the lorry became out of hand, and swerved from one side of the road to the other.
- (d) The accused who at this time was unable to control the lorry, jumped off, leaving his passengers to their fate. The lorry went some distance, and ran off the road, crashing into an ant hill. The back of the lorry swung round and fell over facing the opposite direction to which it had been traveling.

²⁰ CSO 15/7/16 1934 *Yaw Kumah, motor driver, petition praying for restoration of his driving licence*, Report from H.M. Mitchell, Commissioner of Police Eastern Province to the Commissioner of Police, Criminal Investigation Department, 30th April, 1929

²¹ CSO 15/7/16 1934 *Yaw Kumah, motor driver, petition praying for restoration of his driving licence*, Minute 13 from Acting Inspector General of Police to the Colonial Secretary, 19/3/36

²² CSO 15/7/15 1935 *Erasmus Otutey Cournooh, motor driver—petition from, for restoration of his driving licence*, Minute to the Acting Colonial Secretary, 6/9/34

(e) There is no evidence that the driver was drunk, but witnesses, Kofi Ntem, Kwasi Badu, Akosua Donorona and Salifu Moshie each in turn, remonstrated with the driver and begged him to stop clapping, as the lorry was travelling too fast, and they were frightened. From the evidence, it is stated, that the driver jumped off the lorry 30 yards before it crashed. The lorry was badly damaged. Ekwa Koko was killed and the following were injured:--

- (1) Aksoua Nsua of Odumasi
- (2) Kofi Ntem of Nsuatre
- (3) Salifu Moshie of Sunyani
- (4) Kwasi Badu of Nsuatre²³

Davis Kofi was convicted of manslaughter and negligently causing harm, sentenced to five years' imprisonment with hard labor, and was barred from holding a driving licence in the future.²⁴ Colonial officials, and drivers themselves, understood these drivers to be poorly trained and “not serious”, and, as a result, severe punishments were considered warranted in an effort to keep them off the road. While colonial action was motivated by a general public concern about accidents, drivers themselves saw such careless individuals as a stain on the profession, negatively impacting their own ability to make a living and endangering the lives of all.

Drunk driving proved to be a particular problem, even among well-trained and experienced drivers. By the late 19th century, drinking had emerged as an important social activity in coastal towns, where “drinking circles replaced the family and kin networks abandoned in rural areas, and provided a platform for demonstrating their newly acquired wealth” among young, male migrants.²⁵ As active participants in the cosmopolitan culture of Gold Coast urban areas, the status of drivers was closely associated with alcohol. As responsible

²³ CSO 15/7/14 1933 *Davis Kofi, Motor Driver—petition for restoration of his driving licence*, Letter from the Senior Commissioner of Police, Kumasi to the Acting Inspector General of Police, 8th August 1933

²⁴ CSO 15/7/14 1933 *Davis Kofi, Motor Driver—petition for restoration of his driving licence*, Letter from the Colonial Secretary to the Attorney General, 16th August, 1933.

²⁵ Emmanuel Akeampong, *Drink, Power, and Cultural Change: A Social History of Alcohol, c. 1800 to Recent Times* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann), 1996: p. 53.

professionals, drivers received bottles of schnapps as part of apprenticeship agreements.²⁶ While the presentation of schnapps—with its parallels to the long-established traditions of chieftaincy and religious practice in the Gold Coast—clearly associated drivers as respected and knowledgeable elders, their consumption of alcohol contributed to their image as “cool” and worldly men. In their leisure time, many drivers joined their friends in drinking spots, bars, and clubs where they told stories about their adventures on the road and participated in popular music and dance. For some, however, the social practices of drinking spilled over into the work day, which had profound consequences for not only the driver’s safety but also the safety of his passengers, fellow drivers, and pedestrians.

On 16th March 1935 John Kwadjo was drunk when driving motor lorry No. AA3118 in the streets of Accra. He knocked down and injured a pedestrian in Rowe Road, and passed on without stopping his vehicle or taking any steps to assist the injured person. A few minutes later he crashed AA3118 into a ditch in Maxwell Road, and himself received some slight injuries. He was taken to Hospital and was found to be under the influence of drink. He was sentenced to a fine of 5 pounds, or in default to 2 months Imprisonment with Hard Labour, on 21st March 1935; and his licence was suspended for a period of twelve months.²⁷

The behavior of drunk drivers such as Kwadjo were considered most outrageous not for their injury of pedestrians and passengers, per se, but rather for their blatant disregard for human life. Such behavior reflected an abdication of the responsibility inherent in driving work.²⁸

Risky behavior presented not only a physical or material danger, but also a legal one.

The 1934 Motor Traffic Ordinance not only set rules for drivers but also established strong

²⁶ Schnapps was only one part of a rather large compensation package, which often also included cigarettes, money, and sometimes also beer.

²⁷ CSO 15/7/27 1935 *John Kwadjo, Motor Driver—Petition praying for restoration of his driving licence*, Letter from Inspector General of Police to Colonial Secretary, 8th July 1935

²⁸ Instances of theft were similarly concerning, and reflected a disregard for the interests of passengers, on whom a drivers’ business relies (CSO 15/7/13 1939 *Moses Acquaye, Motor Driver—request for restoration of his driving licence*, Letter from the Acting Inspector General of Police to the Colonial Secretary, 21/3/33; CSO 15/7/78 1939 *Mr. Amewuda Kwao, motor driver—petition praying for restoration of his driving licence*

punishments with significant consequences for those drivers who broke the new “rules of the road”. Despite the urgency expressed by colonial officials, African chiefs, the press, and others, the need for regulations to control transport had to be balanced with the ability of the colonial state to enforce regulations.²⁹ The financial constraints in the early 20th century, which limited the ability of the state to construct and maintain roads and keep pace with the technological change of motor transport development, also placed limitations on the resources available to the police, the judicial system, and other agents of regulation. Debates over the creation of regulations such as speed limits and the ability of police to enforce those limits reflected tensions between colonial desires for efficient and effective governance and the realities of limited funding, infrastructure, and personnel in the context of indirect rule. In colonial discourses, speed was one of the most important contributing factors to accidents.³⁰ Officials posted notices and used white paint to encourage drivers to slow down on particularly dangerous sections of road; however, drivers were widely understood to ignore such signs.³¹ As the focus of colonial regulation shifted to the practice of driving rather than its infrastructure, early colonial attempts to use cost-effective vehicle governors, as discussed above, were undermined by the manipulation and tampering of African drivers and mechanics. The abandonment of governors as a means of speed regulation placed greater focus on the issue of speed limits and speed enforcement. The increased power of new motor vehicles and their capacity to travel safely at higher rates of speed was weighed against the conditions of roads and the safety of the general public, particularly in urban areas.³² Furthermore, the tensions between the need and desire to

²⁹ CSO 15/7/108 1935-38 *Motor Traffic on roads in Accra—control of*; CSO 15/7/108 1935-38 *Motor Traffic on roads in Accra—control of*

³⁰ CSO 15/7/111 1938 *Speed limits, Motor Vehicles*; CSO 17/4/1 1940-1943 *Speed Limits, Motor Vehicles*

³¹ CSO 14/2/150 1929-47 *Road Policy*, Letter from the Governor to the Colonial Secretary, 1st May 1937; CSO 14/2/262 1932 *Traffic Control*; CO 554/324 1951-1953 *S&C: Enquiry into the Economics of the Gold Coast Transport Industry by MR Bonavia and CR Hayes of the British Transport Commission*

³² CSO 15/7/107 1935 *Motor Traffic in Sekondi—speed limit for*

protect public safety and the financial resources available to ensure that protection motivated the development of creative and sometimes contradictory policies. By failing to change speed limits to reflect the modern capacity of vehicles, for instance, colonial officials reasoned that the overspeeding that was already being practiced by drivers likely reflected the maximum safe speed for colonial roads. Increasing the speed limit to an enforceable and reasonable number would place greater pressure on the police to monitor speeds and would likely result in an even greater increase in the speed of drivers than was already being experienced.³³ In other words, colonial officials intentionally maintained out-dated policies in order to maximize resources while still achieving the desired effect—though out-dated policies also made the colonial government the focus of driver complaints and created an image of a state that was simultaneously crippled and crippling, stultified and stultifying.³⁴

While the most serious offences had resulted in the revocation of licences by magistrates and the refusal of principal licensing officers to renew licences, prosecutions took on additional significance after the passage of a 1937 Amendment, which allowed colonial officials (Police Commissioners, Certifying Officers, Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, District Commissioners, Regional Commissioners, etc) to confiscate the drivers' licences of those drivers were considered particularly dangerous due to their record of driving offences. These new powers meant that drivers, who had long been calculating the risk of punishment with financial reward and had accumulated a number of convictions for minor offences, could now find their motor licence confiscated without warning if they committed a very minor offence or in some

³³ CSO 15/7/94 1936-38 *Motor Traffic Regulation No. 2 of 1934, Ashanti—Amendment to*. It was suggested in 1936 and 1937 that a separate group of traffic police be established, though it seems that nothing came of that suggestion (CO 96/725/4 1936 *Police Dept Staff—Establishment of Traffic Police*; CSO 14/2/176 *Motor Traffic Amendment Ordinance, 1937*)

³⁴ In fact, questions about speed limits seemed to be at the core of the grievances expressed by lorry drivers in their 1937 strike. (CSO 15/7/94 1936-38 *Motor Traffic Regulation No. 2 of 1934, Ashanti—Amendment to*); CSO 17/1/39 1935-1938 *Ashanti Motor Transport Union*

way incurred the wrath of a colonial official. The power that this diverse range of colonial administrators and officials had in revoking licences existed outside of the judicial system and could be appealed only directly to the Governor.

Productivity, Risk, and Reward

Undoubtedly, drivers did not seek out accidents. In fact, many drivers proudly noted that they had never been in an accident. However, a desire to avoid accidents did not necessarily mean that drivers never engaged in risky behavior. In fact, state efforts to make risky practices illegal did not deter drivers—it merely pushed them underground and encouraged drivers to hide their practices. Rather, their ability to balance risk and reward was an inherent part of profitable motor transport work, and success or failure in mastering this balance defined their status as a driver and a professional. For many young men, driving not only facilitated a literal “eye-opening” through travel, but also served as an alternative path to modernity and masculinity. The possibilities for wealth and accumulation in driving work enabled young men to establish themselves as family men (husbands, fathers, sons, brothers) and community members of status and prestige.

Drivers were not the only ones willing to engage in risky behavior for economic reward. While the expansion of motor transportation heralded new economic opportunities for young men as drivers, the mobility made possible through motor transportation also influenced economic practice in other sectors, as new populations of Africans in the Gold Coast seized on the potential and possibilities of the road to create new opportunities for accumulation. Much like the cocoa farmers who were among the earliest African transport entrepreneurs in the Colony, Gold Coast Africans used roads and motor transportation to by-pass colonial networks

of control and to facilitate trade through new connections and increased speed and convenience. Yam farms expanded rapidly in the Northern Territories beginning in the 1920s, when roads were built to connect otherwise marginalized and isolated populations to major commercial centers.³⁵ Women also took advantage of the new means of transportation to expand their participation in market trading. As cocoa attracted men away from trading, women moved into the market in ever-increasing numbers, at least in part made possible by the increasing use of roads and motor vehicles. By allowing them to travel long distances in a relatively short period of time, many women were able to engage in relatively large-scale trade while continuing to fulfill household responsibilities and expectations.³⁶

Conclusion

The culture and practice of motor transportation, which had largely solidified by the 1940s was the result of large-scale contestation and debate over the nature of risk and the extent of danger on Gold Coast roads. If drivers and passengers saw risk as an inherent part of motor transportation—risks willingly taken in exchange for the rewards of success—the colonial state viewed risk as something to be controlled and minimized. They argued that risk and danger were not in the “public interest”. While state regulations did not eliminate the danger of the road, they did contribute to the consolidation of motor transportation as a central economic category in the Gold Coast. Government regulations simultaneously provided a framework that attempted to curtail driver risk-taking and increased the dangerous consequences of risky driver behavior.

³⁵ Benjamin Talton

³⁶ Gracia Clark; Polly Hill