

Mastering the Crossroads – Commercial Motorbike Riders in Sierra Leone Struggling for Steering their Destiny

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Crossroads are nodal points in commercial motorbike riders' everyday in Sierra Leone. They are literally junctions, merging riders' trajectories and opening into unknown destinations. At crossroads roads and the highly ambiguous forces and power haunting them converge and diverge, thereby being intensified. Exposure to the forces is most dangerous in these intersections of different worlds and places of liminality. But for those disposing of the knowledge and power to control and channel them productively, crossroads might offer departure to prosperity.

The aim of my contribution is to shed light on how so-called *okada-men* cope with the powerfully ambiguous encounters at road junctions and how their everyday life in a highly volatile social landscape is thoroughly intertwined with their positioning at and domestication of the junctions. Present activities around crossroads and the latter's perception as concurrent places of uncertainty and potentiality are informed by local historical experiences with (un)controlled movement and concomitant violence up to the most recent war.

Okada-men gather around different strategical junctions waiting for passengers, fitting their motorbikes, and finding some food and shelter. *Opin Ay* was the name of the particular junction in Makeni where I did my fieldwork in 2007. From there riders claim to see all the movements within town and to have control over everything entering and leaving Makeni - passengers, news about business opportunities, merchandise, fashion, police officers and other threats. At junctions riders control the direction of their own destiny. Highly visible if they want, they can quickly disappear into a back-alley or onto the highway, breaking further away from this main artery and going into the bush at one of the almost invisible minor crossroads. Never coming back again, or reappearing some time later with merchandise from Conakry, game, marijuana or other precious items from remote areas.

Okada-men's hypermobile activities around crossroads are yet conspicuously assessed by other community members: Positive about their contribution to the local economy, people fear again the loss of control over influx and outflow of people and dangerous and powerful forces. Riders rush again about the country's roads, as many of them already did as fighters during the war, constantly threatening the community. Thus, people try to control and *de-mobilize* the riders. This paper is thus also about the ongoing competition for the control over (cross)roads, (the direction of) movements, and the way powers can be channeled most productively.