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Introduction to Special Issue: Bus Stations in Africa

Michael Stasik and Sidy Cissokho

Bus stations are among the most prominent sites of everyday social and economic activity in Africa. The lorry park, motor park, *garage*, *gare routière*, *parkazy*, or *terminal rodoviário*—to cite but a few of the names used in Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone contexts, respectively—is an essential hub in the organization of mobility. The role that bus stations play in everyday life stems from the primacy of collective road transport in providing motorized mobility. Other means of motorized transport are largely restricted, either in capacity and functionality, as with railway travel, or in access and affordability, as with air travel and private motorcars. For most people in Africa, motorized transport is a matter of getting a ride on shared—and often crowded—minibuses, taxis, microvans, lorries, trucks, and motorbikes. In turn, most inner-city, interregional, and international travel is organized in bus stations, where travel communities are formed and channeled into their journeys by the various roadside communities of the station.

In their role as spaces that organize mobility and exchange over distance, bus stations are integral to the workings of transport infrastructures at large. If we follow Brian Larkin's (2013, 329) trenchant definition and conceive infrastructure as “matter that enables the movement of other matter,” then bus stations are among the most tangible reifications of movement-enabling matter in Africa. Movement is imperative at bus stations, and conceptual metaphors like “mobility,” “flow,” and “circulation” are made flesh and put into practice there (Lombard and Steck 2004a; Stasik 2017a). Stations serve as feeders of movement, as they facilitate the traffic of people and goods; in turn, they are fed by movement, because the activities and relationships of travel and roadside communities keep them running.

By choreographing the transport of people and freight, Africa's bus stations take on a quintessential economic role: they support and sustain trade, commerce, and exchange, and thus the wider economies they are embedded in, and they provide many people with a livelihood. The economic importance of bus stations is perhaps matched only by African marketplaces, to which they are often intimately related, not least in terms of geographical proximity, and with which they share many complementary services and functions (Grieco, Apt, and Turner 1996; Ntewusu 2012). Besides their often close ties through wholesaling, the complementarity of markets and stations reproduces larger structures of gendered occupational divides, with markets being associated with female, and stations with male, economic pursuits and roles (Thiel and Stasik 2016).

Similar to what Paul Bohannon and George Dalton (1968) emphasize in the introduction to *Markets in Africa*, bus stations in Africa have many purposes beyond the economic. They are gateways between urban and rural areas; they are sites of political contestation and popular mobilization; they serve as nodal points for the circulation of value, knowledge, meaning, and ideology; and they provide large numbers of people with a place to hear news, meet friends, and find shelter. In short, like marketplaces, they are loaded with social, economic, political, and cultural significance.

In view of the manifold functions and significances of bus stations in Africa, it is striking to note that they have only rarely been studied as subjects of research in their own right. In fact, nearly all the studies that relate to African bus stations appear to have emerged as subsidiary products of research on other subjects, often on marketplaces. The pioneering work of Polly Hill is a case in point. After setting out to research the distribution of specific market commodities in Ghana, she became absorbed by the intricacies of transport systems and, in passing, produced what constitutes some of the most detailed and most engaging descriptions of the social organization of bus stations to date (Hill 1984). Other classic examples include the in-depth account of Nigerian motorparks by Adrian Peace (1988), whose elaboration of socioeconomic relations within the parks was merely a point of departure for his analysis of the political economy of patronage systems in urban Nigeria, and Paul Stoller's (1989, 69–83) deep reading of social interactions in a bush taxi station in Niger, the final purpose of which was to illustrate the so-called hardness of Songhay culture.

While bus stations in Africa readily serve as an illustrative or anecdotal backdrop to studies on different aspects of society, culture, economy, politics, urbanism, and mobility, they have not received nearly enough attention as places of significance in and of themselves.¹¹ The main objective of this special issue of *Africa Today* is to make their place and significance the focus of attention, rather than looking at them parenthetically. This collection brings together case studies from Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, and Senegal, and also features an essay by Ato Quayson, who invites us to consider African

¹ There is, of course, a long-standing tradition of scholarship addressing various dimensions of road transport in Africa, and social science research on African automobility and “car cultures” has burgeoned in recent years (Gewald, Luning, and van Walraven 2009; Green-Simms 2017; Klaeger 2013; Mutongi 2017). Despite the obvious role that bus stations play in organizing road transport and the social life of the car (Kopytoff 1986), they have seldom received more than a passing nod. (Important exceptions include parts of the collections edited by Xavier Godard [2002b] and Jérôme Lombard and Benjamin Steck [2004b].) As Ato Quayson remarks in his afterword to this special issue, this apparent neglect of stations extends to African artistic works, and with a few notable exceptions, such as Wole Soyinka's *The Road* and King Ampaw's *Kukurantumi*, no elaborate representations of African bus stations appear in literature or film.

bus stations as chronotopes of spatial, temporal, and social relations. Taking their institutional diversity as a point of departure, these articles link the empirical study of stations as sites of everyday social and economic activity with broader questions of mobility, infrastructure, informality, governance, associational life, and urbanism. In so doing, they offer new ways of thinking about the significance, multifunctionality, and diversity of what Polly Hill (1984, 215) termed “peoples’ airport[s]”: that is, bus stations in Africa.

Unlike Bohannan’s and Dalton’s seminal book on African marketplaces, from which this special issue takes inspiration, we cannot claim that the collection of studies assembled here provides a comprehensive account of bus stations in Africa. Our goal is a more modest one, and readers should be aware that this collection has several blind spots in terms of regional and thematic coverage. For example, it includes no northern or southern African cases, and no article deals with the aesthetic dimensions of station life. These limitations notwithstanding, this special issue offers a first systematized attempt at understanding the common features of, and the differences among, Africa’s bus stations across national contexts and specific historical trajectories.

Bus Station Types

It should be clear from the outset that what we are dealing with—bus stations in Africa—encompasses a diverse spectrum of manifestations, or types, of stations. This diversity can be exemplified by looking at types of bus stations in Ghana. What is perhaps the most common (and stereotypical) idea of Ghanaian bus stations is the large, crowded, noisy, and seemingly chaotic central urban station as shown in figure 1, which can be taken as an emblem of urban Africa’s economic informality. Reminiscent of an inner-city bazaar, this type of station commonly accommodates a great number of transport workers, chop-bar operators, and hawkers, as well as a broad range of types of usually battered vehicles. This, however, is only one of many kinds of bus station.

We shall also find the small and relatively tranquil roadside station that serves only short-distance routes as in figure 2; the caravanserai-like locale of a station that serves long-distance routes, where passengers have to await preparations for the departure of a single bus for as long as a week, as in figure 3; the chronically congested urban market station that specializes in the transport needs of traders, as in figure 4, which blurs the lines among haulage, storage, and sales (a common variation of which is the rural market station, which becomes busy only during periodic market days); and the small-town station located in the dusty backyard of a filling station, as in figure 5, where drivers spend most of their days dozing while they wait for customers to fill their seats.



Figures 1–8 (clockwise from top left): Examples of the different types of bus station in Ghana (all M. Stasik).

In addition to the informal types of stations, there are other types of station: the so-called VIP station, run by wealthy private investors who operate a fleet of luxury coaches, with online booking systems and business-class seating, as shown in figure 6; the government-run station that serves a more plebeian clientele, with a fleet of buses sponsored by overseas development aid, as shown in figure 7; and the grand new state-of-the-art transport terminals like the one shown in figure 8, the form of which can be traced back to the modernist road transport architecture of colonial administrations, and which are established by public-private partnerships that speak of an effort to match international standards of road transportation.

This list of different types of station is not exhaustive, but the variety it hints at should clarify the fact that any generic reference to *the* Ghanaian—let alone *the* African—bus station is problematic. At the same time, this list challenges the widespread tendency to represent African bus stations as a primarily urban phenomenon. Many attributes of African urbanism are indeed writ large in bus stations, such as the characteristic variety of uses to which their designated function is extended through diverse practices of itinerant vending as well as begging, childcare, gambling, religious services, sex work, squatting, and the broadcasting of sports events.

Moreover, because bus stations are central hubs within broader networks of transport connections, the stations transcend rural-urban divides. Many of their central actors, especially the drivers, come from rural backgrounds, and the meanings they invest in their work culture can be traced back to their village homes, as the contribution by Basil Ibrahim and Amiel Bize on Nairobi's *boda boda* stages demonstrates. The link between urban and rural sites and stations is further strengthened by the ways many drivers participate in the lives of their villages, for example, through remittances and visits and their role in facilitating the circulation of commodities from the city to the countryside and vice versa. Their professional identity as go-betweens then reflects back on the meaning and significance ascribed to stations. Among Dakar's urbanites, for example, commercial drivers are called *kaw-kaws*, from a Wolof term associated with the supposed backwardness of rural groups. The *kaw-kaws*' main workplace, Dakar's *gares routières*, are commonly perceived as enclaves of rurality rather than as a symbol of urbanization.

The articles in this special issue underline the diversity of station types and their multiple uses and perceptions by different groups and across different national contexts, despite the fact that all the contributions focus on stations that clearly lean toward the more informal types. To give better traction for relating the various cases and approaches to broader debates, in the remainder of this introduction we discuss four dimensions that concern bus stations in Africa at a more general, integrative level. First, we consider the

descriptive and analytical valency of the informality label in relation to Africa's bus stations. Second, we look at the stations' generally poor reputation as places of danger, depravity, and chaos. Third, we attend to their intricate links with politics, assessing their role in both the contestation and support of power. Fourth, we turn to their perhaps more hidden quality as sites of cultural production, conviviality, and encounter, and thus as both source and product of social relations.

Informality

The dimension of informality is inescapable when discussing bus stations in Africa. The emergence of the concept of an informal economy has been closely related to popular transport enterprises in West Africa. Keith Hart, who first inserted the notion of informality into academic debate, has drawn largely from observations of what he termed the "irregular" economic activities of public transport operators in urban Ghana (Hart 1973). The economic activities in most of Africa's bus stations indeed appear to match the traits that are commonly used to define the informal economy.

The provision of public road transport is usually not a public undertaking; it is mostly in the hands of a large number of small-scale investors and laborers, most of whom operate in the context of a relative lack of state purview, taxation, protection, subsidies, and support. Their operations are characterized by low levels of central planning and regulation, low capital endowments and cash flow, and low conditions of entry, and correspondingly characterized by high levels of competition and creation of economic niches. As a result of this, precarity and uncertainty are common markers of labor relations in the transport sector and its adjacent trades, and especially manifest themselves in a general lack of security and benefits and the need for hand-to-mouth economizing. The work and wage relations of Africa's transport operators are a long way from the criteria the International Labour Organization (2002) articulated for "decent work," and they are a central manifestation of the structural disadvantages reproduced within the income-generating activities of the "sub-proletariat" (Hart 1973, 61; see also Lopes 2009; Peace 1988; Rizzo 2017).

At the same time, bus stations and the more extensive public transport operations they facilitate provide an opportunity to challenge generic models of the informal sector. This is especially true with regard to the simplified binary classifications these models project in relation to the formal sector or economy and to a range of negative qualifiers, such as *marginal*, *residual*, and *shadowy* (see Godard 2002a; Meagher 2007; Stasik 2018). In terms of the overall provision of public transport in Africa, the services of small-scale road operators are far from being marginal; indeed, they are the dominant economy. Most

of the economic activities that take place in bus stations are positioned outside the scope of formal state regulation, but their economic interrelations are structured by a plurality of nonformal or “alternative” (Meagher 2010, 16) forms of regulation, despite the fact that their organization integrates many conflicting purposes (Stasik 2016, 2017b; Steck 2004). As findings from earlier research show, the informal organization of Africa’s bus stations reveals highly formalized hierarchies, modes of coordination, and codes of professional practice (Barrett 2003; Hart 2016; Jalloh 1998; Okpara 1988). Bus stations are central stages for highlighting the often high levels of institutional inventiveness and bricolage of administrative practices and for showcasing the striking linkages that nonstate economic actors draw on across different degrees of institutional formalization. In addition, while most jobs in the transport sector do indeed reveal grave “*decent work deficits*” (International Labour Organization 2002, 4, emphasis in original), many transport operators articulate their work activities in terms of autonomy and a distinctively entrepreneurial spirit.

The analytical limitations of the formal–informal divide with regard to Africa’s public transport sector in general, and to Africa’s bus stations in particular, are emphasized in several articles in this special issue. Robert Heinze’s contribution demonstrates how the establishment of Nairobi’s *matatu* stations has always been linked to official—that is, state-directed—action, albeit within a usually friction-laden relationship. The *matatu* stations, he argues, developed as an imitation of, and with gradual encroachment onto, official public transport routes. Marie Richard Zouhoula Bi, in his contribution, shows how Abidjan’s informally established *gares routières* became an arena for reconsolidating the city authorities’ administrative powers following the political crisis in the Côte d’Ivoire. Taking issue with the common argument of an institutional vacuum filled by informal service providers (Kumar and Barrett 2008), Zouhoula Bi describes how registering and taxing the *gares* increased the legitimacy of local governments while conferring a quasi-official status on their operators.

Close ties like these between state and nonstate actors in the transport sector have been described in many African contexts, especially with regard to informal transport operators’ capacity to act as auxiliaries of state administrative practices (Bako-Arifari 2007; Cissokho 2017, 2018; Fourchard 2018; Tichagwa 2016). Describing the bureaucratic practices deployed in a taxi station in Dakar, Peter Lambertz adds a further dimension to these links in his contribution. Focusing on the crucial technology of the *carnet*, a roster for organizing the drivers’ running order, he reveals the intricate workings of a sociotechnological assemblage of highly formalized standards.

In all these cases, the relationship between informal and formal spheres is characterized not by division or discontinuity, but by a striking degree of continuity. We are reminded that rather than taking the informality of African transport provisions as read, or simply inserting the notion into scholarly writing as if it is a self-explanatory qualifier of economic practice and organization (as frequently happens when it is used as an adjective), it needs to be empirically interrogated, and attention needs to be paid to the dynamic constitution of its activities on the ground.

Marginality

The attribution of informality to African bus stations is intimately wedded to their perception as marginalized places, notwithstanding the import of their economic role. Several studies have focused on the poor reputation of Africa's bus stations and its operators, with particular reference to theft, smuggling, violence, and organized crime, as well as deviancy and depravity in general (see, for example, Ademowo 2010; Daniel 2012; Khosa 1992). What these studies bring to the fore is that the informality of the stations is often read locally as being synonymous with criminality. Indeed, in the popular imaginary, many bus stations bear the stigma of being home to the “poor and violent” (Ademowo 2010). They are said to be a magnet for thieves, crooks, drug dealers, prostitutes, and even witches. The frequently invoked image of stations as chaotic places, and of station workers as routine chaosmongers, adds to their reputation as notoriously dangerous and intimidating locations.

This popular perception is endorsed by local media, and even more by social media, where some of the most sensational representations of stations are fabricated, often by attributing the supposed ills to particular groups. Drivers are represented as loud, illiterate, insubordinate drunkards, driven only by a greedy desire for quick profits. Touts, loading boys, and *coxeurs*—as the (mostly young) men who act as intermediaries between drivers and passengers are known in Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal, respectively—are perhaps the most frequently scorned whipping boys. In the caricature depicted in figure 9 taken from one of Senegal's main newspapers, we see them as they are widely perceived and represented: as a symbol of city scum who are rude, potentially violent, and potent impostors. While the practices of the drivers and the touts / loading boys / *coxeurs* offer ample grounds for exploring occupational differentiations in contexts of economic informality, the way in which they are widely perceived resonates with questions posed in earlier sociological studies on class, status, and the “dirty work” carried out by marginalized professions (see, for example, Hughes 1971).

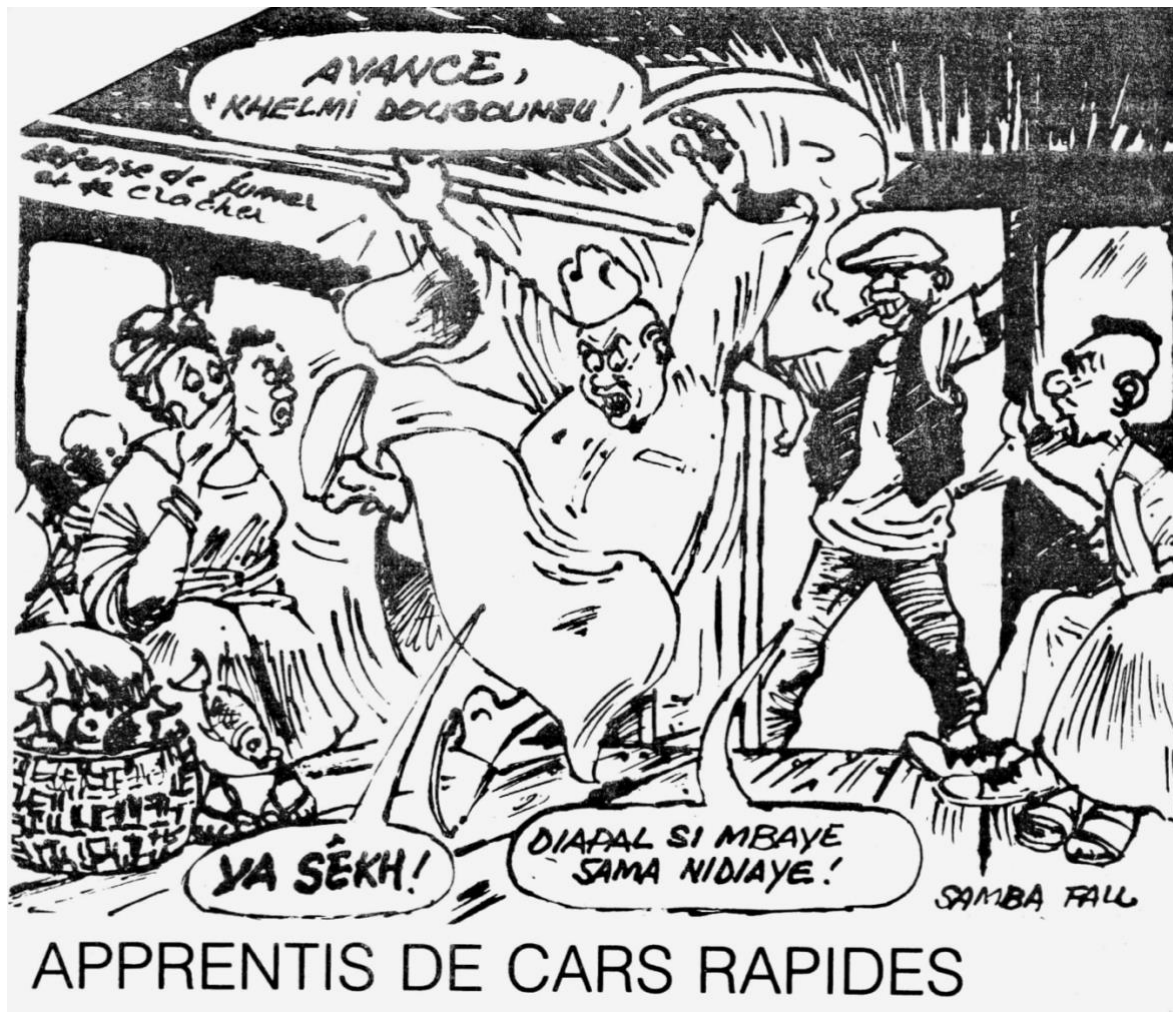


Figure 9: Senegal's *coxeurs*, as depicted in *Le Soleil* (13 August 1991, Samba Fall, Archives nationale du Sénégal).

The tendency to associate transport hubs with danger, depravity, and, for that matter, “dirty work,” is by no means limited to Africa. One just needs to think of European railway stations, such as the Gare du Nord in Paris (Kleinman 2012), which are also considered to be “places of danger, associated with lawlessness and suspect activity” (Bissell 2010, 633; see also Richards and MacKenzie 1986). As with European railway stations, however, popular perceptions of Africa’s bus stations and their occupational groups change over time.

In Ghana, for example, the cultural image of commercial lorry drivers was one of heroic harbingers of modernity and economic autonomy, and they carried it with them until around the 1980s (Hart 2016; van der Geest 2009). “Forty years ago,” writes Sjaak van der Geest, “a driver, who visited the capital five times a week, personified the mobility and freedom which most people in the rural areas longed for. His lifestyle was flashy and

impressed the younger generation” (2009, 260). In a similar vein, Kenya’s *matatu* owners and operators were viewed as exemplary indigenous entrepreneurs who contributed to the development, growth, and pride of the nation (Mutongi 2006). Accompanied by increasing competitive pressures and hardships in the transport industry, the image changed to that of reckless road hazarders bent on a profit-driven “need for speed” (Carrier 2005) and responsible for Africa’s “epidemic on wheels” (Lamont 2010). The loss of prestige and social status then informed the changing perception of the transport operators’ main workplace, the bus station, which became a place populated by so-called thugs.

As Gerard Horta and Daniel Malet Calvo remind us in their analysis of class relations in Cape Verde’s minibuses stations in this issue, the change of status ascribed to the stations and their workforces is both a result and a reflection of broader-scale political and economic changes. In the case of Cape Verde’s minibuses stations and their operators (and indeed of Africa’s public transport sector generally), social marginalization is directly tied to processes of economic restructuring and in particular to market liberalization and the reorganization of productive relations resulting from structural-adjustment measures implemented in the 1980s and 1990s (Godard and Turnier 1992; Mwase 2003; Rizzo 2017; Stasik 2015, 2016). As cutbacks in formal employment structures led the informal economy to commanding heights, more and more people tried to eke out a living by finding or creating new ways of economic engagement within so-called street economies (Hansen, Little, and Milgram 2014). Generally low entry barriers to work and (self-)employment in the stations facilitated the integration of increasing amounts of redundant labor, whether as drivers, touts, or *coxeurs*, or within the adjacent economic niches of hawking, trading, and portering (Cissokho 2014; Klaeger 2012; Ntewusu 2012; Okpara 1988; Seck 2006; Stasik 2017b; Stasik and Klaeger 2018). The concurrent removal of import restrictions, which led to a thriving secondhand car market across many African states (Beuving 2004; Chalfin 2008), provided further impetus for these processes, mainly through subsidiary investments in commercial vehicles by former public sector workers. This run on the stations resulted in a significant diversification and condensation of their economic activities while entrenching their image as places of menial work associated with chaotic, hazardous, and predatory performance.

Politics

This view of Africa’s bus stations not only persists among everyday station users (and indeed among city dwellers of all ranks), but also informs the reform agendas of international transport-planning agencies and the national governments they advise. After the period of state pullback and reductions in government deficit spending, the African economic renaissance of the new millennium heralded a policy shift aimed at bringing the

state back in (Beck, Klaeger, and Stasik 2017; Goodfellow 2015; Rizzo 2017). Many states, forging liaisons with private investors and international donors (the World Bank in particular), have undertaken large-scale infrastructure-renewal projects, including the massive rehabilitation of road transport infrastructures. International transport experts have produced numerous policy papers that strongly advocate ending what they view as an inefficient, obsolete, and untenable way of organizing transport. The idea of bus stations as places of unregulated, ungovernable conduct became a legitimate motive for replacing them with new government-mandated terminals. Reforms based on these experts' recommendations traveled from Accra to Cape Town and Dakar and through to Dar es Salaam and Marrakech (Cissokho 2012; Lomme 2004; Ndiaye and Tremblay 2009; Rizzo 2015). Backed by huge investments and the creation of new government agencies for reasserting state presence in the transport sector, such as AGETU in the Côte d'Ivoire and CETUD in Senegal (Bredeloup, Bertoncello, and Lombard 2008), the shift in policy triggered considerable resistance on the part of local transport operators, who saw their commercial existence come under threat.

Tension between private transport operators and state authorities is not a new phenomenon. As several articles in this special issue show, and as works from across Africa have demonstrated, the politics of transporting have been an arena of political struggle ever since the early days of motorization in colonial times (see, for example, Alber 2002; Gewald 2009; Hart 2016; Ntewusu 2012). Bus stations have played a decisive role in these struggles throughout. What first sparked collective opposition in the British colony of the Gold Coast, for example, was the establishment of central bus stations at the end of the 1920s. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the stations did not emerge “organically,” but were introduced by the colonial administration as a means of controlling motorized traffic (Stasik 2015). The enforced establishment of central stations led to the creation of local drivers' associations, which joined forces to increase their bargaining power with the state. The stations became their prime bases of operations and were transformed into strongholds of resistance against subsequent regulatory interventions.

In many African countries, associations of local transport workers grew into nationwide transport unions (in French, *syndicats de transporteurs*) and became a political force to be reckoned with (Albert 2007; Cissokho 2016a, 2016b; Fouracre et al. 1994; Hart 2014; Rizzo 2017). One well-tried method the unions deployed to pressure governments to repeal restrictive transport policies was drivers' strikes, which still have the potential to paralyze cities, and even whole countries. During strikes, the stations turn into prominent stages for expressing the transport workers' grievances, as well as asserting union leaders' claims to political power. In postindependence Senegal, for example, union leaders have

regularly encouraged strikes to demonstrate their influence vis-à-vis powerful national politicians. During the 2012 elections, senior members of the country's largest transport union even ran for parliamentary seats by trading on their privileged position to mobilize supporters, mainly through campaigning by union members and by securing their votes (Cissokho 2016a).

The transport unions' capacity for political mobilization is not only drawn on to oppose (state) power: their frequently close entanglements with patron–client networks at different levels can be converted into political, electoral, and economic support for those in power, as has been shown in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria (Albert 2007; Gyimah-Boadi 1994; Lewis 1970; Peace 1988). Patronage relationships between vehicle owners and their drivers, often forged along the lines of ethnic and political allegiance, are common, but they extend to the highest political levels, with union representatives exchanging their support for resources provided by the state. As Isaac Albert (2007) demonstrates in the case of Nigeria, struggles over union support and influence are fought out by way of conflicts over access to and management of the stations, where union power is both formed and performed. In Nigeria's motor parks, as in South Africa's taxi ranks (Bähre 2014) and Kenya's *matatu* stations (Heinze, this issue), these conflicts regularly turn violent, with drivers' unions being progressively transformed into, or taken over by, mafialike organizations.

Sociality

Many of Africa's bus stations are far from operating optimally, for both their often exploited informal workers and the majority of their passenger-users. Issues of economic precarity, organizational inefficiency, and organized crime do pose important problems, although the mostly technical solutions put forward by development specialists may not be the panacea they are presented to be. As the contributions to this special issue underline, however, the stations represent a quintessential site of everyday social and cultural life for workers and passengers alike, the significance of which reaches far beyond the often congested, noisy, dangerous, and chaotic transport yards.

We see a glimpse of the social and cultural importance of stations in the ubiquitous slogans on Africa's commercial passenger vehicles, the collection and interpretation of which has kept researchers busy for more than half a century (Field 1960; Guseh 2008; Lawuyi 1988; Pritchett 1979; van der Geest 2009). These “minivan poetics” (Weiss 2009, 49) provide a wealth of insight into the social imaginary across Africa, as related to politics, religion, morality, and the desired yet unfulfilled promises of modernity, for instance. They might indeed also be read as “a collective transcript of responses to social transformation”

(Quayson 2014, 135). The collectivity in which their rich meanings—and often idiosyncratic spellings—are usually initially conceived and discussed is firmly rooted in the transport operators’ shared work culture, which takes shape mainly in their shared work spaces—on the roads and in bus stations. The broad relevance these car inscriptions have for Africans (and Africanist scholars) thus stresses the embeddedness of the communities of bus station workers in broader cultural milieus and society at large.

Africa’s bus stations do not merely reflect issues that are relevant to society at a discursive and symbolic level: they help form different gradations of sociality, particularly of transport workers (Cissokho 2015; Hart 2016; Jordan 1978; wa Mungai 2013). In Madagascar, for example, the term *parkazy*, from the obsolete French word for parking (*parcage*), designates both the geographically bounded sites of stations and the professional group of virtually exclusively male transport operators (Papinot 1997; for a similar argument relating to the *vélo-taxi* garages in Kaolack, Senegal, see Morice 1981). Entering the transport profession is synonymous with entering the spatial, as well as the social and cultural setting, of the station. The close ties between spatial and social formations is brought home powerfully in Ibrahim’s and Bize’s contribution (this issue) on the social life of Nairobi’s *shimos*, the motorcycle taxi (*boda boda*) stands. By examining the *boda boda* riders’ activity of waiting for passengers, they show how collectivity—or what they evocatively term “togetherness”—is a result not of institutionalization, but of the time spent together in the “hole” (*shimo* in kiSwahili).

This does not imply, however, that we should view the station and its collectivity as a self-contained, static entity. As the ethnography of Ghanaian drivers’ and hawkers’ navigational tactics by Michael Stasik and Gabriel Klaeger in this issue highlights, spatial and temporal mobility constitute key properties of social relationships and commercial activities in Africa’s transport-related trades. While the connections that enable and sustain these activities congregate within the station locale, they are not confined to it: they are spread across different spaces. In this relational approach, the Ghanaian lorry park, the Kenyan *shimo*, and the Senegalese garage are all part of a wider fabric of infrastructural linkages, both material and social.

The spaces of sociality that Africa’s stations accommodate and produce are integral to processes of group creation and sustenance on a broader scale. Linked to their role in facilitating mobility and exchange over distance, stations enable the circulation of news and information, which are central to the integration of society at large. This stems from the stations’ function of physically transporting and distributing documents. For instance, many stations provide courier services, which prove to be more reliable than government-run postal systems. But it pertains even more to the fact that stations also provide more

informal circuits through which information spreads among persons and places. Drivers and their assistants are a reliable source of the latest news and gossip. The time passengers spend waiting to depart (and later on to arrive) offers ample opportunities for creating and exchanging opinions, ideas, and knowledge. The (usually seated) group of bus passengers provides a receptive audience for sermons by itinerant preachers (Klaeger 2009), and for impromptu performances by miracle healers, quacks, and conmen of various kinds. Stations serve as public stages on which different styles of clothes, language, and demeanors are displayed, performed, popularized, and at times even invented. These many different bus station encounters and exchanges, ephemeral as they may be, generate proximities of people who are otherwise separated by geographical, social, and often also cultural distance. Their inherent diversity affords people the opportunity to hone their skills in the everyday politics of coexistence and, ultimately, to gain a sense of the city, region, and state they inhabit and the society of which they are part.

Conclusion

Bus stations as sites of everyday practice provide a window on many of the social, economic, political, and cultural facets that characterize African societies, and their entanglements with broader structures, processes, and relations offer valuable insights into domains that go beyond their evident relevance to transport and (informal) economic organization. In this introduction, we have taken a brief look at some of the different perspectives and theoretical vantage points from which the significance, multifunctionality, and interconnectedness of Africa's bus stations can be considered. The articles that follow deepen and widen the scope of these perspectives, both empirically and conceptually, and underscore the value of paying closer attention to the often relatively small, yet usually extraordinarily dense, spaces that are bus stations in Africa.

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