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The Popular Niche Economy of a Ghanaian Bus Station: Departure from Informality

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Abstract: This article combines the concept of a "popular economy" with that of a "niche economy" to analyse the workings of a central bus station in Accra, Ghana, and, by extension, of Ghana's public transport sector at large. In doing so it departs from generic models of the "informal sector" commonly used for describing road and roadside entrepreneurship in African contexts. At the same time, it challenges prevalent views of popular economies bent on emphasising mechanisms of reciprocity and solidarity over opportunity and profiteering. The focus on the station, it suggests, provides for a detailed reflection on the dialectics of collaboration and competition characteristic of Ghana's local transport economics, and it offers significant continuities with practices, places, and politics of economic "informality" in Africa.

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Introduction

The notion of economic informality looms large in contemporary descriptions and analyses of Africa's public road transport sector (Agbiboa 2016; Cervero 2000; Khayesi, Nafukho, and Kemua 2015; Mutongi 2017; Oteng-Ababio and Agyemang 2015; Rasmussen 2012). On the face of it, this close association between Africa's transport services and informality is neither far-fetched nor particularly surprising. Indeed, the emergence of the concept of the "informal economy" itself has been closely related to popular transport enterprises in West Africa. Keith Hart, who first inserted the concept into academic debate, has drawn largely on empirical observations of what he described as the irregular economic activities of small-scale entrepreneurs responsible for transport services in urban Ghana (Hart 1970, 1973). Taken by the influential ILO-coined (ILO 1972) definition of the "informal sector" (in turn informed by Hart's research), public transport services in most African countries can indeed be thought of as a paradigmatic example of African economic informality. The provision of public road transport is commonly not a "public" undertaking but is largely in the hands of (a great number of) small investors and day labourers; the majority of operators is positioned within a relative lack of state purview, taxation, protection, and support; and labour relations are characterised by low entry barriers in terms of capital and skill and, correspondingly, by high levels of competition and bare subsistence incomes.

This said, the common traits of Africa's road transport services also provide significant grounds for complicating generic models of the "informal sector" (see Godard 2002; Hart 2016: 18). This is especially so with regard to the simplified binary classification such models project onto a wide range of economic activities and relations and, even more so, to the range of negative qualifiers such as "marginal," "residual," "unregulated," or "shadowy," particularly as used by development specialists and political analysts (e.g. Collier 2007; Reno 2000). Ghana's public road transport sector is a good case in point. In terms of the country's overall public transport provisions, the transport services of small-scale road entrepreneurs in fact constitute the dominant economy. Rather than being determined by state-made economic structures, the sector's non-state economic actors actively negotiate the effects that economic changes – on both micro and macro scales – bring to bear on their ventures, often in quite opportunistic manners. And while those actors' activities are largely positioned outside the control of state (or formal) regulation, their economic interrelations are nevertheless structured by a plurality of non-formal forms of regulation, despite their organisation being integrative of many conflicting ends (Beck, Klaeger, and Stasik 2017; Stasik 2016). Conceived in these more refined terms, Ghana's transport sector begs the question of the applicability of the notion of informality. Ultimately, this ties in with wider debates about the validity and utility of the informality paradigm (see Gërxhani 2004; Hill 2010: ch. 2).

Indeed, the entrepreneurial ventures taking place on and along Ghana's roads provide a striking illustration of recent takes on African economic informality that aim to nuance (and resuscitate) the analytical valency of the concept, not least as formulated in the pages of earlier issues of this journal (Meagher 2007; Kössler 2007; see also Bekker and Fourchard 2013; Lindell 2010; Meagher 2010). The key term here is "nuance," as opposed to "refute." To be sure, positing crude dichotomies between informal and formal spheres of economy risks ignoring the often-multifarious networks that people draw on across different degrees of institutional formalisation and regulation. Furthermore, the dichotomy associated with the label "informality" readily lends itself to normative perspectives commonly taken up in development policy, in turn becoming a justification to either formalise or eliminate "informal" economic activities.

The fact that an analytical notion is reified in policy discourse and practice in overly simplified ways, however, should not lead us to abandon the notion of informality. I maintain that there is an important element of *descriptive* utility to be gained from differentiating modes of economic engagement, for which a notion such as informality is a useful tool. Yet, rather than taking the "informality" of African transport provisions as read, or simply inserting it into scholarly writing as if it is a self-explanatory qualifier of economic action (as is frequently done in the adjectival form), it needs to be empirically interrogated and complemented with more subtle analytics that account for the dynamic constitution of its activities on the ground (Kössler 2007: 566). Here I follow in particular in the argument of Steck et al. that the notion of "informality" is used to good effect mainly, or even solely, "when the changeable and complex nature of a specific activity […] is recognised" (Steck et al. 2013: 88).

In this article, I attempt to carve out a more nuanced frame of analysis by attending, from a ground-level perspective, to the workings of the Neoplan Station, a major hub of informal transport in Accra. The analysis of the public transport ventures at Accra's Neoplan Station that I develop here includes a cross-section of ethnographic materials gathered over 12 months of fieldwork (conducted 2011–2013). My main methods comprised systematic observations and sustained apprenticeship-like participation in the station dwellers' quotidian work and grind, by way of which I have established close rapport with some three dozen station workers of diverse trades and levels of seniority. Largely based on these connections, I have conducted approximately 100 recorded semi-structured interviews, including talks with active and retired transport workers, with executives of Ghana's private road transport associations, with senior administrative staff of regional and national transport and urban-planning divisions, and with station vendors, itinerants, and passengers in Accra and other towns.

For the theoretical frame I develop in this paper, I expand on two related conceptual prisms: that of the popular economy (drawing in particular on Hull and James 2012) and of the niche economy (Guyer 1997). The combined analytics of what may tentatively be called a popular niche economy, I suggest, offer fine-honed (or more finely honed) conceptual tools for understanding the micro-level dynamics of informal public transport provision in Ghana and, by extension, in many other parts of Africa. Further still, the economic practices of a niche-economy logic that underlie the workings of Accra's station, I contend, challenge prevalent views of popular economies bent on emphasising community-oriented mechanisms of reciprocity and solidarity over opportunity and profiteering. Ultimately, the focus on the "popular" urban locale of the station provides for a detailed reflection on the social constituents of local transport economics in Ghana, and it offers significant continuities with practices, places, and politics of urban economic informality in Africa.[1]

My argument is that while the group economic activities taking place in the station are of a local, collective, collaborative, popular, and informal character, the practices by which they are created and sustained are rife with rivalry and competition. Propelled by continuously high demand for public transport services, these processes of cooperation and competition facilitate an ongoing reworking of existing arrangements for accommodating the results of growth they precipitate. I will qualify this assertion by focusing on the commercial practices and entrepreneurial bearings of several groups of transport workers, some of which have been successful, others less so. I show that within the socially embedded economic activities of the station workers, which do encompass forms of collaboration, support, and solidarity, entrepreneurial opportunity nevertheless routinely takes precedence over mutuality.

1 Above all, these continuities pertain to the groups of people that engage in the many roadside trades adjacent to the transport business – most prominently, the groups of itinerant vendors popularly referred to as "hawkers."

I begin by discussing the two central notions – the "popular" and the "niche" economy, showcasing the wider analytical purchase that this article offers. Next, I give an outline of the organisational features of the Neoplan Station, focusing in particular on its occupational organisation and its role in Ghana's public road transport regime more generally. In the last part, I zero in on the economic practices and institutional arrangements by which Neoplan's transport workers adjust to, and capitalise on, larger-scale political and economic changes. In doing so I attend to the dialectic dynamics of collaboration and competition, detailing the workings of Neoplan's popular niche economy by tracing the evolution of its net of itineraries and the concomitant "involution" (Geertz 1963; Stasik 2017) of its collective organisation of work.

A Popular Niche Economy

The concept of the "popular economy" was first introduced by scholars working in Latin America in the 1980s, especially with regard to small- to medium-scale collaborative economic initiatives, such as community associations and labour-managed cooperatives.[2] Set out as a substantivist approach for grasping the socio-economic relations and "inner logic" (Hillenkamp, Lapeyre, and Lemaître 2013a: 2) underlying productive engagements and market exchange in contexts of vulnerability and high informality, its application in Latin American contexts stands in close proximity (and is frequently read as tantamount) to practices and ideas of interdependence, communality, and solidarity, and of protective mechanisms more generally – hence also the commonly juxtaposed (and often interchangeably used) terms *economía popular* and *economía solidaria* (e.g. Nelms 2015; Nyssens and Van der Linden 2000). Following in this vein, Isabelle Hillenkamp defines the popular economy as

> the diversity of economic activities and social practices developed by popular groups in order to ensure the satisfaction of their basic material and immaterial needs through the use of their own working force and available resources. (Hillenkamp 2013: 53, citing and translating Sarria Icaza and Tiriba 2006)

While acknowledging the empirical relevance of this "need-satisfaction" focus for describing grassroots strategies for securing livelihoods while mitigating the effects of economic plight and scarce resources, I draw

2 See Hillenkamp, Lapeyre, and Lemaître (2013b) for a more detailed account of the intellectual history of the concept and its uses in Latin American contexts.

here on the somewhat different conceptualisation of the "popular economy" developed by Elizabeth Hull and Deborah James (2012). They offer one of the first (and still few and far between) adoptions of the concept to contexts of economic informality in Africa, in their case South Africa (see also Guyer, Denzer, and Agbaje 2002). Juxtaposing the "popular" in popular economy with earlier studies of popular culture in Africa (referencing, in particular, Barber 1987), Hull and James conceive of it as a particular domain of everyday group economic activities that straddles state and capitalist economic spheres, that is shaped by proliferous encounters of heterogeneous groups of people, and that is intimately wedded to the locale of the city, in which such diversity is most prone to occur.[3] What makes this domain "popular," they continue, is

> its hybrid character, its inventiveness and creativity, and the way it [relies] on particularly inventive "brokers" – even crooks and tricksters – for its operation. The term thus stresses the embeddedness of economic practices and institutions in broader cultural milieux. (Hull and James 2012: 9)

What makes their approach especially productive is that it helps to conceptualise "popular" economic endeavours as constituted by diverse groups of non-state (or "popular") actors without succumbing to – and thereby potentially idealising – communalistic views of "economies of solidarity" structured primarily by retributive mechanisms and mutual support for the people involved (for a related critique, see Green 2014). In other words, the fact that "ordinary" people work together by engaging in commercial associations of a popular kind by no means implies that mutuality and cooperation override opportunity and profiteering. But, to be sure, neither is this to suggest that associative strategies are but a kind of Trojan Horse of more instrumental, profit-seeking rationalities. The "capacity to combine productive activities" that Hillenkamp, Lapeyre, and Lemaître (2013b: 3) ascribe to popular-economy actors might well include a combination of different, often divergent, and even seemingly incongruous economic rationalities, not least because of a

3 One might be tempted to use Barber's approach to African "popular" culture yet more directly as a heuristic for theorising African "popular" economies. In her definition of popular arts (Barber 1987: 9–12), Barber posits the "popular" as a relational concept with fluid and shifting boundaries whose meanings (and related practices) traverse across, combine, and coalesce what earlier Africanists described as "traditional" and "elite" arts and cultural practices. Translated into the economic domain, the "popular" might then be thought of as a similarly relational concept that refers to economic activities that combine, recombine, and straddle what other Africanists describe as "informal" and "formal" economies.

heightened need to diversify economic engagements – a structural trait that Keith Hart ascribed to the "economics of uncertainty" (Hart 1970: 108).

Jane Guyer's (1997) concept of a "niche economy," which she develops in a study of local food-provisioning systems and economic change in Nigeria, similarly emphasises the social embeddedness of economic practice, particularly those practices that grow out of local and collective initiatives and that emerge within a relative lack of formal regulation and state presence, on the one hand, and under conditions of instability, uncertainty, and/or vulnerability, on the other. Her main conceptual drift is that the groups of people who engage in the creation of economic niches shift and sort themselves across a spectrum of possibilities for productive activity and economic specialisation. The key words here are shift and sort, which denote active, creative agency that not only adjusts to change but also helps to shape it – whether this pertains to opportunities or strictures caused by shifting competitive conditions at the local level or to market volatilities caused by large-scale economic restructuring. As Kathryn Barrett-Gaines puts it, it is precisely because of their "understanding of the complexities of their environments" that non-state economic actors "develop ways of living within constantly changing conditions, engaging in an ongoing process of creating, adapting, and discarding economic niches" (Barrett-Gaines 2004: 4, drawing on Guyer).

The analytics of a dynamic, fluid, and flexible niche economy, I suggest, can give us better traction on how to account for social and economic change – and for the multiplicity of ways in which social change brings about economic transition, and vice versa – as well as for understanding the ways in which people position themselves within different degrees of collaboration, competition, and conflict. Ultimately, juxtaposing the "hybrid," heterogeneous, and brokerage-driven character of the popular economy with the fluid, adaptive, and creative character of the niche economy offers a useful – and nuanced – conceptual lens for understanding the informal group economic practices that structure public transport systems in Ghana.

Accra's Neoplan Station

The Neoplan Station is one of three main long-distance bus stations in Accra. These stations, called "lorry parks" in Ghanaian English, have "partitioned" all major routes that link the capital with the rest of the country. This partition follows three so-called "corridors": the "western corridor" served by the Kaneshie Station in Accra's west; the "eastern corridor" served by the Tudu Station located in downtown Accra; and the "central corridor," which is served by vehicles from Neoplan and includes the most important route in the country, connecting Accra with Ghana's second-biggest city, Kumasi. In addition, 33 other destinations are directly served from Neoplan (as of 2013). These destinations are mainly scattered across the country's central and western regions and link Accra to the port cities of Tema and Takoradi as well as with Lagos in Nigeria, among other locations.

Neoplan thus acts as Accra's central gateway to all the major commercial centres in Ghana and, through the feeder routes branching off from its destinations, to the West African subregion at large. Accordingly, the station is frequented by many travellers from diverse backgrounds. There are people from all the regions in Ghana and neighbouring countries as well as from much further afar, such as Senegalese salespeople traversing overland to and from Central Africa, southern African migrants on their way to Europe's southern shores, or European and American backpackers trekking across the continent.

The communities of station workers are also diverse. They are composed almost exclusively of people who came from outside Accra and often also from outside Ghana. In most cases, they originate from one of the many towns and regions that are served from the station. Asante people form the largest group – mainly because of Neoplan's role in serving "Asante destinations" – but they are far from dominating the place. There are significant numbers of Kwahu, Ahafo, and Fante people, as well as Ewes, Hausas, and Dagombas. And there are many foreign nationals, some of whom are well-nigh naturalised Ghanaians, others of illegal migrant status, with the largest groups including Nigerians, Burkinabes, and Togolese. But national and ethnic identities are a weak social currency anyway, not least because people frequently emulate different identities as they see fit. Here, diversity constitutes a taken-for-granted reality, and it is dealt with accordingly: as daily business. As both source and product of the station's specific urban milieu, cultural diversity provides the principal backdrop against which economic activities take shape in the station and in which its institutions are embedded.

The 34 destinations served from Neoplan are run by 13 substations, which are locally referred to as "branches."[4] These 13 branches form

4 The number of branches that operate from Ghanaian bus stations varies greatly, ranging from a single branch in a station in a more rural setting to some 30-plus branches that operate from Ghana's biggest bus station, the Kejetia Station in Kumasi. Reliable figures on the overall number of branches in Ghana

part of larger bodies of nationwide-operating transport associations. Neoplan is split between two of the largest associations: 10 of its 13 branches belong to the Ghana Private Road Transport Union (GPRTU), whilst the other three branches are affiliated with the Progressive Transport Owners' Association. These associations evolved from indigenous drivers' organisations in the aftermath of Ghana's (then Gold Coast) "road revolution" in the late 1920s (Wrangham 2004) especially for the purpose of increasing their collective bargaining power in relation to the government (see Stasik 2015; Hart 2014). Today, the centralised leadership structure of the associations lends their regional and national representatives considerable leverage to negotiate with government agencies the regulative frame in which public transport operations take place, while also imposing broader rules of professional conduct on the branches. This includes authorising tenancies for the land on which stations operate, as well as setting fares and associational fees.

Regarding the practices "on the ground," however, each branch is a largely independent enterprise and the key organisational unit in Ghanaian public transport systems. The branches are principally responsible for the system of departure (which comes in many variations), and they constitute the only effective entry controls to the public transport market – both for vehicles and drivers and for the station personnel. This control is mainly carried out by way of the registration of vehicles, which follows from the payments of a range of fees levied by the branch, parts of which are passed on to regional and national representatives of their respective associations. Because there is no centralised route-licencing system, the distribution of routes is mainly structured by market demand and by the capacities of each branch to serve these demands and withstand competitive pressures.

Some branch members own vehicles themselves, either as "owner-drivers" or as senior branch members who commission junior members as drivers. Yet, the majority of cars belong to private proprietors who are unrelated to the branches and who hire their cars out to drivers on a commission basis, with usually only one vehicle per owner. This pattern of small-scale operators was already described by Hill (1963) and Hart (1970) for the 1960s. And similar to their findings, the owners of vehicles registered in the Neoplan Station comprise a broad spectrum of individuals. They include civil servants, military personnel, clerks, traders, farmers, teachers, college students, and a South Korean businessman.

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are difficult to obtain. According to my estimates, their number ranges well above 4,000.

Very few vehicles appear to be formally registered in the names of women, a gendered ownership structure that attests to the general masculinity of the industry. This, however, is not to exclude the possibility that

> the symbiotic economic relationship between a husband and a wife or a woman and a male kinsman may not be such as to mean that the woman is the effective financier in a partnership (Hill 1963: 7),

as Hill pointedly remarked.

For many owners of commercial vehicles, the incentive for investment in fixed capital appears to be driven principally by anxiety around having to "stash" away money at home, rather than by a pursuit of actual profit. Especially in the highly saturated "route market" of the Neoplan Station, thresholds for diminishing marginal returns are generally very low. For new investors, they are regularly undercut from the outset. At work here is a logic of minimalist rent-seeking, rather than one of capital accumulation. The greatly compartmentalised and diverse ownership structure of Neoplan's vehicle fleet is a corollary of the much-fragmented and inclusive system of operations, and it corresponds directly with the markedly low entry restrictions for joining a branch.

Reminiscent of urban West Africa's voluntary associations described by Kenneth Little (1965) half a century ago, admission to the branches is contingent not on ascribed or involuntarily assigned statuses (e.g. kin or ethnic affiliation) but on common (commercial) interests, and further on demand for labour (in terms of the station personnel) and for transport (in terms of registered vehicles). And because demand for both labour and transport tends to exceed supply, the occupational organisation of the branches is both highly inclusive and highly diverse. Furthermore, as most of the labour performed in the station is unskilled and manual, there are virtually no formal qualifications (e.g. school diploma) required for station work, save the work of drivers, who must have a valid driving licence. Corresponding to these low conditions of employment are the high turnover rates, especially of low-ranking station workers, which thus adds an element of flux to the general diversity characteristic of the composition of station personnel.

Posited as a non-kinship and low- to no-qualification form of commercial association that is inextricably linked with the locale of the city, the branches represent veritably "popular" kinds of associations. Their linkage to the city should not be overstated. A dense network of branches interlinks both urban and rural areas in Ghana. Yet it is in the city that the branches' qualities as popular associations – of hybrid, inventive, brokerage-driven, and inherently diverse group economic endeavours – become most pronounced. What is more, they can be thought of as proper reifications of economic niches, with each branch providing for an institutionalised form of shifting commercial engagements. Drawing on Guyer's specification, each branch has

> its own terms of operation, each developing through a characteristic series of cultural and social manoeuvres towards the most institutionalised form of the association, with its ceremonial life and public recognition. (Guyer 1997: 223)

With regard to Ghana's bus station branches, this is reflected in the characteristic (and often idiosyncratic) names of the branches, their greatly varying number of members and, ultimately, their locally tailored statutes, terms of operation, principles for the distribution of shares, and divisions of tasks and labour.

The most basic organisational pattern of each branch comprises the so-called "office staff" and "yard staff." The office staff is grouped around a board of five "officers" (chairman, vice-chairman, secretary, two trustees), who represent the branch's administrative body and who are elected every four years or so from among the members of the branch. The yard staff includes all those who operate the transport on the ground and who are further divided into smaller sub-units, locally called "gangs" (which can be thought of as kinds of "sub-niches"). The gang members are generally referred to as "porters" (following the designation of the Gold Coast railway station personnel, in turn derived from the model of "the Victorian railway"; see Lacy 1967).[5] Each gang is responsible for the loading of vehicles to one particular destination, and is grouped around a "station master" who oversees the work of the gang, one or several "bookmen" who are responsible for dispensing tickets, and the "loading boys" who assist in ticket sales. The number of gangs that operate within one branch depends on the number of destinations served by the branch as well as on the number of vehicles preparing for departure at the same time.

This long-standing hierarchy (or hierarchic duality) of the branch workers correlates with what other authors have identified as the ascriptive status dichotomy between "big men" and "small boys" (Nugent 1995), which essentially subsumes the relationship between rulers and ruled. As Paul Nugent puts it, "'big men' issue commands, normally from a seated position, while subordinates do the running" (Nugent 1995: 3). The officers generally occupy high-status positions within the

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5 Similarly, the term "gang" appears to go back to the designation of a "railroad gang," hence a group of labourers and not of delinquents.

social hierarchies of the branch, and they do command the yard staff from a seated position most of the time. Yet, this level of social seniority is not necessarily reflected in their economic status, particularly as their position at the top of the branch hierarchy puts them at the centre of a structurally volatile system of redistribution.

The branch members, and the gang workers in particular, are essentially brokers who facilitate the relations between passengers, drivers, vehicle owners, and the infrastructure of public transport provisions at large. In this respect, it is telling that all branch members work on a commission basis, with their income being derived from a share in ticket sales. They thus work both for the people and for the market, to paraphrase James (2011). And, as brokers, they represent a crucial element in a fragmented system of operations, which is as powerful in generating returns as it is divided over the distribution of gains. These divisions stem primarily from competition over the most lucrative routes. The effects of these collective, collaborative yet simultaneously highly competitive relations are pointedly reflected in Neoplan's changing occupational organisation, in addition to being apparent in the evolution of its net of itineraries. Both the changing organisation and the evolution of itineraries took shape, and largely gained momentum, in a context of rapid economic and political changes.

Negotiating Economic Change

At the time of its establishment in 1979, the Neoplan Station comprised four branches that together served seven destinations, which at that time already included the key connection to Kumasi. Each of these four branches comprised about three gangs and had some 15 vehicles registered with it. From the early 1980s onwards, major political and socio-economic upheavals rocked Ghana. Political ruptures were related mainly to the country's double coup-maker Flt. Lt. Jerry John Rawlings and his Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (1979) and Provisional National Defence Council (1981–1991) regimes. Economic change derived from the World Bank's "structural adjustment" measures (Kraus 1991b).

Framed by a broader agenda for road infrastructure investment and the encouragement of private sector performance (hence the "adjustment" policies that mainstreamed African transport economics in the last two decades of the twentieth century; see Mwase 2003), Rawlings' administrations introduced a range of reforms that favoured the private transport sector. A divestment of state-run bus operations was coupled with a favourably adjusted import policy for second-hand passenger vehicles, an increased availability of spare parts, an almost complete suspension of controls on transport fares and a massive rehabilitation of road infrastructures (Fouracre et al. 1994; Gyimah-Boadi 1994: 132–133).[6] These reforms and investments were encouraged significantly (and co-financed) by the World Bank, which, at the latest since the "Berg Report" (World Bank 1981), had called for attending to the causal relationship between development and overcoming distance.

The new import policy in particular fostered what older transport workers today refer to as the "Urvan factor" – that is, the tremendous increase in the number of imported second-hand minivans during the 1980s. Most popular among these vehicles was the Japanese-produced Urvan model, which could easily be converted into a passenger bus. Here, large-scale and rather abrupt changes in road transport technologies – both "global" (i.e. the minivan) and local (i.e. its appropriation-cum-"tropicalisation" into a converted passenger bus) – stimulated and shaped economic activity. Ultimately, the import of smaller (and cheaper) passenger vehicles reduced the transport operators' reliance on state funds, which, throughout the 1970s, were used to subsidise the acquisition of larger coach buses for the associations.

At the same time, massive cutbacks in formal employment structures and growing imbalances of the urban labour market led the "informal" economy to commanding heights. As a result, Accra's Neoplan Station began "absorbing" increasing amounts of redundant labour and newly released (and/or newly diverted) capital, the latter manifest mainly in former public sector workers' subsidiary investments in second-hand commercial vehicles. These processes were expedited considerably by growing rates of migration to the cities and multiplying systems of internal remittances (of city dwellers providing their upcountry kin with goods and money). Growing rates of migration in turn translated into increasing rates of travel, thus creating a continuously rising demand for transport services.

The effects of these diverging developments – of generally aggregating economic hardships and prospering transport businesses – led to a veritable bonanza period of Ghana's private transport sector, which, according to Jon Kraus' estimate, grew "by roughly 10.7 percent per year during 1983–87" (Kraus 1991a: 136).[7] These growth rates became per-

6 I have described in more detail elsewhere the effects of these politico-economic developments on Ghana's public transport regime (see Stasik 2015, 2016).

7 The percentage figure implies prosperity of transport businesses, but should be considered with caution, as Kraus does not explain how he arrived at his "rough" estimate.

haps most pronounced in Ghana's lorry parks. The stations progressively turned into enclave-like locales of condensed economic activities that attracted increasing numbers of small-scale entrepreneurs and labourers. These included lorry owners, drivers, and station personnel, as well as more peripheral engagements within the sector's adjacent micro-economies of, above all, hawking and head porterage (see Overå 2007; Thiel and Stasik 2016). The generally low entry barriers with regard to employment at, and access to, the stations, facilitated this "run" on the parks and the subsequent integration of "a wide range of small economic activities created by the people themselves […] outside formal economic channels" (Nyssens and Van der Linden 2000: 175–176).

It was against this backdrop that Neoplan's gangs began introducing ever-more refined differentiations between the passenger vehicles they loaded. They began categorising them by size, speed, and comfort, among other factors. At the same time, a proliferating number of additional positions has been appended to the branch organisation – a process I have described in more detail elsewhere with reference to Clifford Geertz's (1963) notion of "involution" (Stasik 2016, 2017). The creation of such appended positions often resulted from a favour rendered by a senior branch member to a relative or friend, or from an intricate system in which a gang member subcontracted an additional worker, usually as a middleman, assistant, dispatcher, or henchman. The newly created labels of work echo the implied levels of creativeness, comprising a broad spectrum of derivations of existing designations, such as "shift master," "gang leader," "second porter," "third porter," and so forth.

A telling example of this inward-bound, inclusive yet competitive expansion is the "invention" of so-called "shadow passengers," which also occurred around the 1980s. The main (and only) task of "shadows" is to sit in the loading vehicle and pretend to be "real" passengers to give the impression of a bus almost ready for departure, the purpose of which being to gain a competitive advantage over other gangs. The point about Neoplan's shadow passengers is that the "service" they perform is dispensable, if not redundant. Their work does not actually add value to the transport operation. Quite the contrary, it literally obscures the system of departure.

What the incorporation of the shadows' service-cum-labour demonstrates is a niche-economy logic flourishing within a popular urban milieu. Rather than maximising the utilisation of existing capacities, this "rationale" leans towards their integration and, ultimately, their multiplication. Constitutive of these processes is the capacity to incorporate and utilise labour that otherwise would be deemed redundant. Ultimately, this gives rise to a particular kind of "surplus labour" – not in the Marxist sense of work performed in excess per capita, but in the literal sense of a surplus of labourers, which effectively reduces productivity per capita. This is not exactly following from an ethos of economic solidarity, which Hillenkamp, Lapeyre, and Lemaître define as "a set of practices aiming both at securing livelihoods and at democratizing the economy" (2013b: 6). The effects, however, are of a compatible kind: the station's popular economy enables more and more people to make a living from it, irrespective of their ascribed statuses and affiliations. Ghanaian English trenchantly subsumes this related ethos in the proverbial wisdom that "everybody needs to chop" (everybody needs to eat).

Continuing in that register of nutritional subsistence, rather than sharing the same bowl (to echo Claire Robertson's (1984) interpretation of female Ga entrepreneurs' reactions to economic hardship), the station workers resorted to dividing the portions into ever-more and ever-smaller bowls. Here, cooperation and competition go hand in hand, with the one virtually "feeding" into the other. For, as the continuous incorporation of more and more positions into the branch gangs effectively decreased each worker's share in returns, the number of gangs and, ultimately, of new branches, multiplied. The multiplication of branches, I suggest, gives a striking illustration of the sorting and shifting practices of a niche-economy logic within the domain of popular associational enterprises, which I will flesh out by way of the following vignette about the interrelated creation of three of Neoplan's branches.

The Odzinga Splinter

Throughout the 1980s, the majority of Neoplan's Kumasi-bound cars were registered with the so-called "Nr 4" branch. This branch had emerged from an earlier split-up of one big branch ("GPRTU Branch Nr 1") into four smaller ones ("Nr 2," "Nr 3," "Nr 4," and the oddly termed "Nr 1111") that occurred at another central lorry park in Accra in the 1970s. Within Neoplan's Nr 4, the highest turnover of cars and passengers was achieved by a gang that loaded minivans and was led by the then-bookman Odzinga. Odzinga's men, his successor explained to me, were "the fastest loaders of the fastest cars" – an assertive demeanour they ascribed to their particularly cunning way of persuading passengers to buy tickets from them rather than from their colleagues and co-workers who loaded bigger (and slower) buses. Following growing dissatisfaction with their role as "subsidies-men" for the "weaknesses" of other gangs (I here cite phrases Odzinga's successor used in his re-narration of the branch history), Odzinga talked a group of (Ford) minivan drivers into seceding from Nr 4.[8] The newly formed “Odzinga Ford Highway Express” branch became extremely successful and even outcompeted Nr 4 with regard to the number of vehicles dispatched on the Kumasi route.

The success of Odzinga’s branch has in large part been made possible by its ability to register some of the most recent minivan models imported (second-hand) to Ghana, which proved highly popular with passengers. Odzinga’s remarkably able “Secretary” (this being his nickname and position) was largely responsible for the required brokerage between individual car owners, import agents, and customs and licencing authorities. After some three years of cooperation, and supposedly triggered by allegations of embezzlement, Secretary decided that he would be better off fending for himself and splintered from Odzinga’s branch by forming his own. Trying to copy Odzinga’s model of serving fast cars on the Kumasi route only, his demerger proved a failure. As commented by one of his former drivers, he was “too office-minded,” implying an ineptitude for the practicalities of yard work. While this does not exactly explain the reasons for the failure, it resonates with a widely held belief among Ghana’s transport workers that blind profiteering jeopardises business and that a certain degree of mutuality and cooperation is needed to balance against profit-seeking motives, even though economic success is also held in high esteem.

Secretary vanished, leaving behind many outstanding accounts and disgruntled members of his splinter branch. Unwilling to return to Odzinga, they discontinued the (overly competitive) connection to Kumasi and instead established whole new services on other long-distance routes. Preceded by a kind of bottom-up analysis of market potentials, the branch members began “recruiting” passengers in towns located north of Kumasi who had previously had to change vehicles on their way to Accra. Crucially, this market analysis relied on the drivers’ intimate knowledge of the transport needs of the people in their respective native regions and hometowns. The central asset to their collective business venture was the ethnic (as well as socio-cultural and linguistic) diversity

8 Within the GPRTU, the formal requirement for the establishment of a new branch is the enrolment of 100 members. In practice, however, this requirement is regularly circumvented through the manipulation of membership figures (e.g. by registering members multiple times or by including retired or even deceased members), as was the case with Odzinga’s secession from Neoplan’s branch Nr 4.

of the branch members and, not least, a great deal of cooperation, inventiveness, and creativity.

By way of these collective yet competitive economic strategies, the Neoplan Station continued expanding and eventually splintered into 13 branches that operate from it to date. More recent secessions led to the establishment of independent bus stations located in close proximity to Neoplan, creating a belt of satellite stations – all of which have been founded by former members of Neoplan's branches. Many of these spin-off stations run rather humble services, operating as few as three buses and some two daily departures only. Others represent more large-scale enterprises, most prominently the "VIP Station," which was established as a cooperative venture between former senior members of Neoplan and its main sister station in Kumasi. Located opposite Neoplan's yard, the VIP Station operates a fleet of luxury coach buses that mainly ply the route between Accra and Kumasi, competing with Neoplan for travellers belonging to Ghana's aspiring middle class, and thus serving a relatively recent niche in the transport market.

Concomitantly, Neoplan's itineraries increased to serving 34 destinations, half of which are contested by at least two different branches. To exemplify the results of these involuting creations of economic niches: today, there are up to 22 separate gangs from four different branches that compete only for passengers travelling to Neoplan's main destination (Kumasi). This includes many dozens of loading boys, a fluctuating number of supervisors and sub-supervisors, and often far more than 100 shadow passengers. The other 33 destinations are run by similarly vast numbers of station workers. This astonishing process of growth is reflected in the number of vehicles that operate from Neoplan: whereas 60 or so registered vehicles serviced the station shortly after its establishment in 1979, by 2013 more than 2,500 cars operated on particularly busy days.

Conclusion

I started this article with the contention that the concept of "informality," as widely deployed in analyses of transport services across the African continent, lacks in nuance for grasping the group economic activities at the heart of Ghana's privately run public road transport provisions. In doing so, however, I did not mean to dispense with the notion of "informality." For, broadly conceived, there is no gainsaying the fact that when comparing Ghanaian public transport provisions to, say, those in Poland, the former clearly slant more towards the informal than the formal. But this kind of broad (if not sweeping) categorisation, I argued, needs to be complemented with more nuanced analytics, informed by the ambiguities observed on the ground.

Hence, in order to better understand the diverse economic practices of the groups of people engaged in Ghana's informal transport provisions, which I explored through the lens of Accra's Neoplan Station, I suggested combining the conceptual prism of the "popular economy" with that of the "niche economy," expanding on Hull and James (2012) and Guyer (1997), respectively. I furthermore argued that the focus on the station's popular niche economic practices compels a corrective to conceptualisations of popular economies that (over)emphasise the solidarity mechanism.

The popular transport ventures I described are principally advanced by a niche-economy logic of creating, refining, and discarding "niches to participate in the circulation of money, goods, and services" (Barrett-Gaines 2004: 3), quite literally so. The practices by which these ventures are created and sustained are as much driven by collaboration and social inventiveness as by conflict, competition, commercial opportunism, and failure. Indeed, failure looms large in the economic bearings of the transport workers. The story of Odzinga's Secretary is but one particularly prominent and frequently instanced example of an associational transport business that foundered. Tellingly, its re-narration among Neoplan's workers is usually received with a mixture of glee and awe. Half a century ago, Keith Hart (1970) identified commercial failure as a key characteristic of transport operations in Ghana. Relating to the risky ventures of commercial drivers and "would-be operator[s]," often lured into the transport business by the prospect of "quickest return," Hart asserted that many "underestimate the *savoir-faire* required to run transport successfully," making "commercial transport an entrepreneurs' graveyard" (Hart 1970: 109–110).

With the larger structural changes that commenced in Ghana in the early 1980s (more than a decade after Hart's findings), when the largely advantageous reforms of Ghana's transport economics coincided with generally aggregating economic problems, the degree of practical knowledge (or *savoir-faire*) required to run transport increased significantly. This pertained both to the ventures of commercial drivers and, even more substantially, to the associational enterprises of the station branches, for which the ever-increasing amount of integrated-cum-"absorbed" redundant labour translated into an intensified need for balancing collaboration with competition.

The point is that with ever-more people attempting to eke out a living by finding or creating new ways of economic engagement with the station, and thus of niches of margin, all people involved are subjected to significant competitive pressures – thus frustrating strivings for "quickest return" (Hart 1970: 109). Besides leading to a significant expansion of Neoplan's route network, these mechanisms also squeeze out of the market (at times even out of a livelihood) people whose enterprises become submarginal. Put differently, the station's inclusive yet competitive occupational organisation entails marginal gains for many. At one and the same time, it also produces a large margin for individual failure. Here, popular cooperation within the context of economic informality principally evolves as a means for facilitating competition, not for mitigating its potentially hazardous effects.

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Die populäre Nischenökonomie eines ghanaischen Busbahnhofs: Abreise aus der Informalität

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel kombiniert das Konzept einer „populären Ökonomie“ mit dem einer „Nischenökonomie“, um die Funktionsweise eines zentralen Busbahnhofs in Accra, Ghana, und darüber hinaus auch Ghanas gesamten öffentlichen Transportsektor zu analysieren. Dabei wird von gängigen Modellen des „informellen Sektors“ abgewichen, die üblicherweise für die Beschreibung wirtschaftlicher Aktivitäten auf und entlang afrikanischer Straßen verwendet werden. Gleichzeitig stellt es vorherrschende Konzeptualisierungen von populären Ökonomien infrage, die darauf abzielen, Mechanismen der Reziprozität und Solidarität, Opportunität und Nutzen gegenüberzustellen. Der Fokus auf die Station bietet einen detaillierten Einblick über die Dialektik von Kollaboration und Konkurrenz, die charakteristisch für Ghanas lokale Transportwirtschaft ist, und eröffnet signifikante Kontinuitäten mit Praktiken, Orten und Politik wirtschaftlicher „Informalität“ in Afrika.

Schlagwörter: Ghana, Accra, Busstation, öffentlicher Verkehr, informeller Sektor, populäre Ökonomie, Nischenökonomie