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► To cite this version:

Pascal Pochet, Lourdes Diaz Olvera, Didier Plat, Amakoé Adolehoume. Private and public use of motorcycles in cities of Sub-Saharan African cities. Transport trends 2017, UITP, pp.103-105, 2017. halshs-01482898

HAL Id: halshs-01482898

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01482898>

Submitted on 2 Jul 2017

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Authors' manuscript, reference:

Pochet P., Diaz Olvera L., Plat D., Adolehoume A., (2017), Private and public use of motorcycles in cities of Sub-Saharan Africa, in UITP (Ed.), *Public Transport Trends 2017*, Bruxelles, Ed. UITP, pp. 103-105.

Private & public use of motorcycles in cities of Sub-Saharan Africa

Pascal Pochet¹

Lourdes Diaz Olvera¹

Didier Plat¹

Amakoé Adoléhoumé²

¹ Researcher, LAET, University of Lyon (ENTPE, CNRS, University Lumière Lyon 2)

² General Delegate, SITRASS (Solidarité Internationale pour la Recherche en Transports en Afrique Subsaharienne).

pascal.pochet@entpe.fr; lourdes.diaz-olvera@entpe.fr; didier.plat@entpe.fr; adelohou@sitarrass.fr

Acknowledgments: Many thanks to Lesley Brown for the translation of the text from French to English, and to David Délato Agbokpè, for the photographs of Lomé's motorbike taxis.

As urban growth contributes towards a surge in mobility needs, motorcycles are becoming increasingly present in cities in Sub-Saharan Africa. They are proving to be the transport mode best adapted to the poor road conditions and heavy congestion, as well as a solution to the structural difficulties encountered by public transport to ensure daily mobility for inhabitants.

Since the years 2000, a vast majority of motorcycles circulating in the streets are imported from China in parts and assembled locally. Their purchase cost is half the price of the Japanese models. The irruption of these more affordable motorcycles has also contributed towards the widespread use of this particular transport mode, which is far higher than for cars. Indeed, the spread of motorcycles within households is extremely high in three West African cities in particular, namely Ouagadougou, Bamako, and Cotonou. At the same time, it is reaching high levels in West and Central African cities – Lomé, N'Djamena, Douala, and Yaoundé – yet, with some exceptions, remains more restrained in East and Southern Africa (Fig. 1).

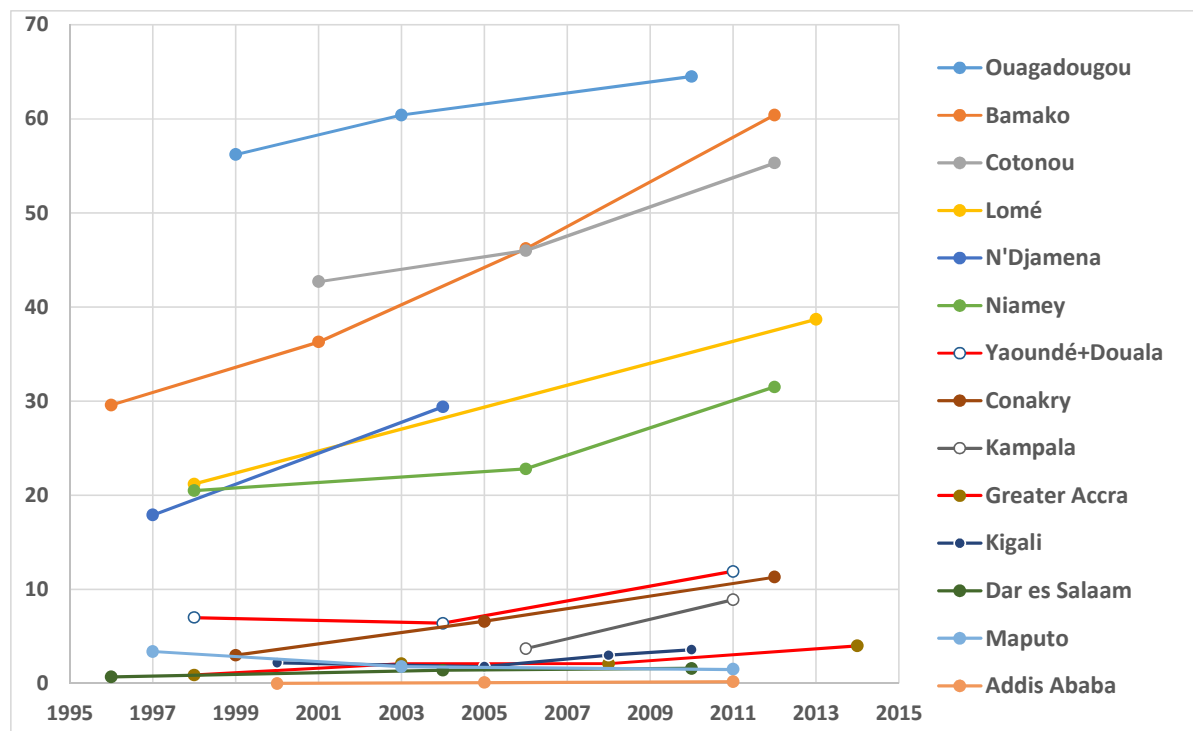


Fig. 1: Evolution of the percentage of households owning motorcycle(s) or scooter(s) in various large cities in Sub-Saharan Africa (1995-2014)

Source: The DHS Program Indicator Data API, The Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) Program. ICF International. Funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Available from api.dhsprogram.com [Accessed 06-07-2016]. Graph by authors

AN INCREASE IN PRIVATE OR PUBLIC USE OF MOTORCYCLES?

The advance of motorcycles takes different forms, depending on the cities in question.

Growth driven by personal use. In Ouagadougou, due to the poor public transport provision, the personal motorcycle has long been the most popular mode of motorised transport. Meanwhile in Bamako and Niamey, the rise in personal motorcycles continues despite the presence of public transport.

In all three cities riders typically enjoy high levels of mobility (Diaz Olvera et al., 2012). Yet the number of users remains relatively small. Motorcycles represent a substitute for the car, yet are still socially selective, out of the economic reach of most inhabitants. Used mainly by men, it is the vehicle of choice for the middle classes, employees in the formal sector, public administration or private companies, for students with sufficient financial means.

The rise in moto-taxis over the past three decades. Moto-taxis have a confirmed presence in over half of all cities in Sub-Saharan Africa of more than 100,000 inhabitants. Their reach has extended rapidly since the end of the 1980s in the cities of Nigeria, Benin, Togo and Ghana; in Central Africa – Cameroon, the Central African Republic, and Chad; and also in East Africa – Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda; and Southern Africa – Angola. When compared to the profile of personal motorcycle users, moto-taxi customers are less masculine, younger, and more socially diverse. This mode is widely used by employees in the informal sector and the unemployed.

There are a number of reasons for the prevalence of moto-taxis. Apart from congestion issues and the poor state of the roads typical of many cities, failings in the public transport supply, formal or artisanal, and the difficulties public authorities face in regulating the sector have paved the way for this mode. Further factors driving their success are easy availability and the cheap nature of factors of production (workforce seeking employment, vehicles and fuel, sometimes smuggled from neighbouring countries) coupled with perspectives for a rapid return on investment for holders of capital seeking lucrative business activities, as in Lomé.

MOTO-TAXIS IN LOMÉ – A SOURCE OF REVENUE, BUT AT WHAT PRICE?

The case of Lomé, the capital of Togo, is a good example of both the momentum and limitations of the moto-taxi sector (Diaz Olvera et al., 2016). Estimated at 90,000 vehicles in 2011, *zemidjans* (or *oleyias*), which provide a tailor-made mobility service, are by far the most popular mode of public transport in the capital of Togo (1.5 million inhabitants).



Fig. 2: Moto-taxis in Lomé (June 2016)

Photo credit: David Délato Agbokpè, Lomé

In an economy where unemployment is rife and professional training limited, the moto-taxi activity offers a means of subsistence for many households. Yet the tough competition and poor working conditions frequently push drivers on a knife-edge: long working hours, recurrent health problems (backache, respiratory troubles, headaches, etc.), night shifts, carrying several passengers in one trip, transporting bulky goods. The authorities fail to enforce all the regulatory obligations, including those covering safety. Nonetheless, since 2015 the wearing of helmets by drivers has become more commonplace; alas not so for passengers (see photo below).



Fig. 3: Lomé, June 2016 – only moto-taxi drivers are obliged to wear helmets

Photo credit: David Délato Agbokpè, Lomé

Recurring safety issues are further exacerbated by the manner in which the sector is organised, pushing drivers to run up too many rides without a break and run risks in order to make a profit. While the majority of moto-taxi drivers are the owners of the bikes they use, many of them hire one from an ‘investor’, most often under a leasing agreement called “work and pay”. They must pay the investor a high weekly sum, usually over an 18-month period. At the end of which the moto-taxi, often in a poor state, then belongs to them. Yet in reality many drivers are unable to buy their vehicle by this means.

An inability to enforce public regulations, the significant de facto positioning of this transport mode, and the lack of alternatives all mean that organising and regulating the moto-taxi sector remains problematic.

URBAN ISSUES AND STAKES

Just as the reasons for the popularity of this mode of transport are diverse, so too are the impacts on ways cities function. In terms of meeting mobility needs, moto-taxis offer personalised

service that is nearly door-to-door, and in areas often difficult to reach. The fares rise rapidly the longer the distance of the trip, which influences the types of usage and which may limit access to cities for low income inhabitants in the suburbs. This mode nevertheless opens up motorised mobility to many people and users consequently appreciate it, despite criticism of the associated risks (road accidents or even aggression).

However the proliferation of moto-taxis is posing many problems for the environment and public health: high levels of atmospheric pollution, stressful work conditions that generate many negative side effects among drivers, road safety compromised and an increase in serious injury accidents. With regards to transport organisation, when in some cases moto-taxis succeed in completely dominating the sector to the point of forcing other transport modes out of the field, this undermines the overall transport supply. Such a situation clearly demonstrates the difficulties public authorities are facing in almost all the above-mentioned cities in order to incorporate this type of informal transport into an integrated and coherent transport supply.

As the incessant growth of cities continues apace, at a time when bus rapid transit (BRT) and tramway systems designed to structure public transport networks are flourishing in many sub-Saharan cities (Deng and Nelson, 2011), it is a paradox that the unit capacity of more traditional vehicles is shrinking to this point. Public authorities are facing the challenge of organising the moto-taxi business without disrupting their strong social dynamics, in order to provide transport in interstitial areas in ways that complement higher capacity modes.

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