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van der Geest, S.

Publication date

2009

Document Version

Author accepted manuscript

Published in

The speed of change: motor vehicles and people in Africa.

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van der Geest, S. (2009). 'Anyway!': lorry inscriptions in Ghana. In J. B. Gewald, S. Luning, & K. van Walraven (Eds.), *The speed of change: motor vehicles and people in Africa*. (pp. 253-293). (Afrika-Studiecentrum series; No. 13). Brill.

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‘Anyway!’ Lorry inscriptions in Ghana.

Sjaak van der Geest¹

Cars and Highlife² in Ghana are connected in several ways. Highlife music is played in cars and cars run through Highlife songs. Highlife is mobile music; its artists travel the country and take the city to rural audiences. John Collins³ (1994) wrote an extensive study about Highlife concert parties and devoted a full chapter to his numerous journeys with the band he chose to study.

Back in 1985, Nana Ampadu, one of Ghana’s most popular performers of Highlife, launched a number (in Twi) called *Driverfo* that became an instant hit.⁴ An ode to lorry (public transport) drivers, it recounted the attractions and frustrations of their work. Ampadu sang about passengers’ behaviour, the role of the police and solidarity among drivers. He ended it with a long list of inscriptions found on lorries that express both the bravura of the

¹ This article has been published in a collection of essays on motor vehicles and people in Africa, published by Brill, Leiden (2009). That published version, however, contains many errors which is the reason that I prefer to place this corrected version on my website. Among the many people who helped me with the collection, transcription and translation of Akan Highlife songs, I am particularly grateful to Kwasi Asante-Darko, Kwasi Anim and Gifty Anim. They and Fred Gales, Kodjo Senah, John Collins, Don Bloch, Frances Owusu-Daaku, Jonathan Dapaah, Ben Kwansa, Anthony Obeng Boama, Daniel Arhinful and the editors of this volume also gave useful comments on earlier versions of this article. After the publication of this article I met a driver who told me that the first car that he drove many years ago was a Datsun pick-up with the name “Anyway.” I had never been able to meet someone who had been driving a vehicle with that name; I had only seen several “Anyways” passing by. I asked him why his pick-up had carried that name. It was his uncle, the owner, who had chosen the name because “Whatever way you go, it will be all right.” The uncle, who is now very old and lives in Kwahu-Mpraeso, is commonly called “*Wɔfa* Anyway.”

² In 1985 there were over a hundred professional Highlife bands in Ghana. Studies of Highlife include: K. Adum-Attah, *Nana Ampadu: Master of Highlife Music* (M.Phil Thesis, University of Cape Coast, 1997); O. Brempong, *Akan Highlife in Ghana: Songs of Cultural Transition* (PhD Thesis, Indiana University, 1986); J. Collins, ‘Ghanaian Highlife’, *African Arts*, 10, 1 (1976), 62-6, 100; J. Collins, *Music Makers of West Africa* (Washington, 1985); J. Collins, *The Ghanaian Concert Party: African Popular Entertainment at the Cross Roads* (PhD Thesis, State University of New York, 1994); J. Collins and P. Richards, ‘Popular Music in West Africa: Suggestions for an Interpretative Framework’, in D. Horn and Ph. Tagg (eds), *Popular Music Perspectives* (Göteborg, 1982), 111-41; D. Coplan, ‘Go to My Town, Cape Coast! The Social History of Ghanaian Highlife’, in B. Nettl (ed.), *Eight Urban Musical Cultures* (Chicago, 1978), 96-114; F. Gales, *Highlife* (MA Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1983); C.K. Sackey, *Highlife. Entwicklung und Stilformen ghanaischer Gegenwartsmusik* (Münster, 1995); R. Sprigge, ‘The Ghanaian Highlife: Notation and Sources’, *Music in Ghana*, 2, May (1961), 70-94; G.A. Vondee, *The Highlife Musician as an Oral Poet: A Case Study of King Bruce’s Lyrics* (MA Thesis, University of Ghana, 2000); K. Yankah, ‘The Future of Highlife’, *Glendora Review African Quarterly of the Arts*, 3 (1994), 108-10.

³ Collins, *Ghanaian Concert Party*.

⁴ See Adum-Attah, *Nana Ampadu* on Ampadu’s contribution to the development of Highlife in Ghana and Yankah ‘Future of Highlife’ on Ampadu as a singer of political innuendo. Ampadu’s popularity at the time can be illustrated by the inventory in Gales’s *Highlife* of the records at an arbitrarily selected music kiosk in Accra. Ampadu (the African Brothers Band) proved to be by far the most popular Highlife artist: fifteen of his records were available. In second place was C.K. Mann with five records.

drivers as well as their anxieties. I have tried to compress these contradictory feelings into one single term ‘Anyway’, a word that drivers paint on their vehicles. What follows is an excerpt from Ampadu’s song, translated into English.⁵

You wake up in the morning
and take your seat behind the steering wheel.
Everybody will see you and call something out to you.
You wave at them.
You feel proud because you are popular.
You are somebody!
One of the advantages of the work of drivers is
that when your lorry is off the road,
you go to the lorry station
and they will make you a ‘bookman’.⁶
Your fellow driver will give you ‘a spare’,⁷
so everyday you have something to eat.
Another advantage: you are on the road
and you meet one of your fellow drivers.
He greets you with a signal of his lights
and you do the same.
When the police are on the road,
he warns you by pointing his finger down.
Maybe you have given a lift to a policeman
and let him sit in front.
Then you are lucky;
no police will trouble you anymore on the way.
What I like about the work of drivers is
that every driver chooses a name
which he writes on his car.
Some drivers are called by the name
they have written on their car.
Some inscriptions on cars are very interesting.
Some are religious, some romantic.
Some are about family problems.
Some are insulting.
There are two types of inscriptions,
one for new, one for old cars.
When a new car approaches you, you can read on the front:
I love my car.

⁵ The transcription and English translation of Ampadu’s song were made by Kwasi Asante-Darko, Gifty Anim and the author. The meanings of some of the more obscure lorry inscriptions in the song are explained in the notes. Most inscriptions are in Twi (Akan) or English; some are in Hausa, Ewe or Ga.

⁶ Bookmen are the people at lorry stations who issue tickets and supervise the boarding of passengers and luggage. Usually they are fellow drivers who do not have a vehicle to drive or whose vehicles are not on the road because of repairs or because the owner has taken the vehicle back or sold it. They get tips from their colleagues in the business.

⁷ ‘To get a spare’ means to stand in for another driver.

The following are inscriptions on new cars:
Cool and Collected, Lover Boy,
Envy No Man, *Pe Wo De* (Look for yours),
Aho Ya (Skin pain), *Eye Wo Ya* (It hurts you),⁸
Otan Nni Aduru (Hatred has no medicine),
Yaa Baby, Still⁹ Good Boy,
Ɔɔ Ye Owu (Love is death)¹⁰
Sweet Jesus, Jar Bless,¹¹
Raster Man,¹² Asoscar,¹³ Honest Labour,
Anyway, I Shall Return, Roadmaster,
Girl Bi Nti (Because of a girl)
Sea Never Dry,¹⁴ *Abele* (Corn),¹⁵
Akwei Allah (God is there),
Elemawusi (It is with God),
Lɔɔnyo (Love is good), *Kamfo Yehowa* (Praise God),
Two Friends, *Fa Yɔnko Papa* (Choose a good friend)
Agya Pa Ye (It is good to have a good father),
Ase Pa Ye (It is good to have good in-laws),
God is King, Halleluyah.

When you meet an old car,
you will see the following text on the front:
W'Ano Pe Asem (You like to gossip)
and when it has passed, look back.
What has been written on the back?

Efa Wo Ho Ben? (Is it any of your concern?)
The following inscriptions can be found on old cars:
Slow but Sure, Poor No Friend,
Mokomoko Le Djen (Nobody knows the world),
Djen Gbe Me (Mankind),
Ebaahi (It will be all right),
Ebaa Tshake (There will be a change),

⁸ 'Skin pain', a literal translation of the Twi expression *Aho ya* (envy). *Eye wo ya* (It hurts you) also refers to other people's jealousy. Both sayings point to witchcraft.

⁹ The term 'Still' in lorry inscriptions means that the owner's previous car carried the same text.

¹⁰ Meaning that, according to Asante-Darko, if you love someone deeply, you are prepared to die for that person.

¹¹ 'Jar bless' is a popular Rastafarian version of 'God bless'.

¹² The Rastafarian image, its music, and philosophy have become a cultural ideal for young urbanized Ghanaians. Asante-Darko described them as 'always happy.'

¹³ 'Asoscar': happy man (origin unknown).

¹⁴ 'Sea never dry': The sea will never dry up, in the same way my car will never stop going. The saying also has sexual connotations, meaning never impotent.

¹⁵ *Abele* is a Ga word for 'corn' but it is also used to express appreciation. People may just call out *Abele* when they see something they like very much.

Me Nyame Kae Me (My God, remember me),
Onyame Bekyerε (God will provide),
Oboafɔ Ye Na (A helper is difficult to find),
Fayε Me Nkoaa (Do it to me alone),
Wayε Afεre (You have ended in disgrace),
Oserefo Nnim Awie (You laugh at people's downfall
but you don't know your own end),
Ohia Ye Ya (Poverty is painful),
Emma Mpε Ohia (Women hate poverty),
Sika Nti (Because of money),
Ofie Mmosia (House pebbles),¹⁶
Sε Asa (It is over),
Sε Mopε Me A Ni (This is how you want me to be),
Aka M'Ani O (I am in trouble),
Ankonam Boafɔ (Helper of a lonely person),
εbetɔ Da (A day will come),
Obideε Aba (Somebody's turn has come),
Dwen Wo Ho (Think of yourself),
Onyame Nnae (God is not asleep),
Abusua Ye Dɔm (Relatives become enemies),¹⁷

¹⁶ 'House pebbles' refers to close relatives who live in the same house and because of this are extremely dangerous. It is believed that those who are closest to you can hurt you the most with their witchcraft. Other inscriptions that speak of one's house or relatives express the same idea. Several Twi proverbs refer to the danger of witchcraft committed by those who are near: *Aboa a ohye wo ntoma mu, na ʒa wo* (The insect in your cloth is the one that bites you), *ɔgya hye nea εda ano* (The fire burns what lies near it), *Abe mpopa nnim manni* (The prickly branches of the palm tree do not spare their neighbours), *Suro wo yɛnko* (Fear your friend), and *Suro nea oben wo* (Fear the one close to you). The last two proverbs are also common lorry inscriptions; c.f. W. Bleek, *Marriage, Inheritance and Witchcraft. A Case Study of a Rural Ghanaian Family* (Leiden, 1975), 361-64.

¹⁷ The literal translation reads: The *abusua* (matrilineage) is an army/consists of many people. This proverb appears in many songs, inscriptions and academic discussions as it touches a fundamental friction in Akan (and any) society, namely the conflict between individual and community interests. In *Akan Highlife*, Brempong cites a Highlife song by the Akwaboa's Band with the title '*Abusua te sε kwae*', in which the following lines appear: 'The extended family is like a forest.

If you view it from far away, it is together,
but when you get closer to it,
you can see that each tree has a specific location.'

J.G. Christaller, *Twi mmebusen mpensa-ahansia mmoaano. A Collection of Three Thousand Six Hundred Tshi Proverbs in Use by the Negroes of the Gold Coast Speaking the Asante and Fante Language* (Basel, 1879) quotes a longer version of the proverb (no. 685): *Abusua ye dɔm, na wo na ʒa ne wo nua*, which Lange translates as follows: 'The extended family is like an army, but your mother's child is your real brother and sister'. See K.R. Lange, *Three Thousand Six Hundred Ghanaian Proverbs* (from the Asante and Fante language), compiled by J.G. Christaller, translated by Kofi Ron Lange (Lewiston, 2000), 57. The implication is that there are people in the family seeking your downfall. A similar interpretation is suggested in a Highlife song by Konadu, '*Mogya bi ye dɔm*' ('Some Blood is an Army'):
'When I prosper, it is for the benefit of the family.
When I get money, it belongs to the family.
But the family seeks my downfall and disgrace.
The family is an army; the family is a big army.'

Abusua Te Sɛ Kwae (The family is like a forest),¹⁸
Efie Mpo Nie (Even in my own house),
Nkum Me Fie (Don't kill me at home),
Abuburo Nkosua (Pigeon eggs),¹⁹
Enye Sei Ara Na Meyɛ (I will not remain like this forever),
Adom Wɔ Wim (Blessing from above),
Medee Bɛba (My turn will come),
Mese Hmm (I keep quiet),
Ehuru Huru A eɛɛbwo (However hot it boils, it will cool down),
 Psalm 91, Psalm 23,
 The Lord is My Shepherd I Shall Never Want.

The Popularity of Cars

Malinowski was so struck by the Trobrianders' love of canoes that he dubbed them 'Argonauts'. For the Trobriander, he wrote that the canoe:

... is surrounded by an atmosphere of romance, built up of tradition and of personal experience. ... (It) is a marvellous, almost miraculous achievement, and a thing of beauty. ... He has spun a tradition around it, and he adorns it with his best carvings, he colours and decorates it. It is to him a powerful contrivance for the mastery of Nature, which allows him to cross perilous seas to distant places. It is associated with journeys by sail, full of threatening dangers, of living hopes and desires to which he gives expression in song and story.²⁰

In a similar vein, one could say that in Ghana - as in many places around the world²¹ - people love cars. The popularity of the automobile is all the more striking if we take into account the fact that, before the arrival of colonialism, there was almost no form of wheeled transport in

The witch is never satisfied.

He has taken all my children away and brought them to the cemetery.'

¹⁸ See previous note.

¹⁹ The *abuburo* is a kind of dove that is believed to be lucky because its eggs do not spoil. Brempong, *Akan Highlife*, 206 explains: 'The bird is a poor nest-maker and its nest is always open, thus exposing the eggs to the hazards of rain and several predators. In spite of all these natural threats, the bird *aburuburo* is often able to hatch its eggs and to multiply because "God's hand is in it"'. The author refers to songs by Ampadu and other bands in which God's protection over man is compared with his special care for this bird. A proverb (Proverb no. 681 from Christaller's *Tshi Proverbs* says '*Aburuburu na obuɔ bɛ sɛ: Ade a eɛɛye yiye nsee*', 'The dove uses a proverb saying: "A good thing never spoils"')

²⁰ B. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London, 1922), 105-106.

²¹ D. Miller (ed.), *Car Cultures* (Oxford/New York, 2001) contains a collection of studies that describe the global popularity of cars. Miller speaks of the 'humanity of the car' (the car as an extension of the human body and person) and of 'intimacy with cars'. The popularity of cars in the US is beautifully expressed in popular culture such as 'Cole Porter songs, Fitzgerald novels and Hollywood movies' (D. Gartman, 'Culture as Class Symbolization or Mass Reification?', in: *Ibid.*: 133-52). This was also the case in Ghana: in 1999, Ghanaian television (GBC) broadcast a soap called 'Taxi driver' that related the colourful experiences of a taxi driver in Accra.

Africa.²² Now the automobile has become central to African cultures. It was indeed appropriate that Kopytoff²³ called for anthropological research into the meaning of the automobile in Africa.²⁴ Its neglect as an object of ethnography was typical of how Western anthropologists can be dismally farsighted. What originates in their own culture is too familiar to be visible in another setting: schools, factories, hospitals, pharmaceuticals and cars - all these exports have - until recently - been overlooked by Western anthropologists doing fieldwork in other cultures. Anthropological research would, however, reveal to what extent such phenomena assume 'exotic' features in new contexts. Indeed, they undergo profound cultural reinterpretation, emerging all but transformed.

The biography of a car in Africa would reveal a wealth of cultural data: the way it was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller to the buyer, the uses to which the car is regularly put, the identity of its most frequent passengers, and of those who borrow it, the frequency of borrowing, the garages to which it is taken and the owner's relations to the mechanics, the movement of the car from hand to hand over the years, and in the end, when the car collapses, the final disposition of its remains. All of these details would reveal an entirely different biography from that of a middle-class American, or Navajo, or French peasant car.²⁵

Kopytoff's call has been heeded over the past two decades. Historians and anthropologists have studied the role of the car in the colonization and missionization of Africa²⁶ and described it as a manifestation of popular and material culture.²⁷ Ghana too has seen a growing interest in the culture of trading, repairing and driving cars²⁸ and in mobility in

²² Law writes that the rare instances of wheeled transport in the pre-colonial era were mainly ceremonial or, to a lesser degree, were used in warfare. Wheeled vehicles as a regular means of transport were probably rejected because 'the enormous costs involved would outweigh any likely advantages' (R. Law, 'Wheeled Transport in Pre-colonial West Africa', *Africa*, 50, 3 (1980), 249-62).

²³ I. Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process', in A. Appadurai (ed.) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), 64-91.

²⁴ Peace's interesting article about social aspects of transport in Nigeria deals less with cars than their drivers and owners. See A. Peace, 'The Politics of Transporting', *Africa* 58, 1 (1988), 14-28).

²⁵ Kopytoff, 'Cultural Biography', 67.

²⁶ For example, K.B. Dickson, 'The Development of Road Transport in Southern Ghana and Ashanti since About 1850', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, 5, 1 (1961), 33-42; S. Heap, 'The Development of Motor Transport in the Gold Coast, 1900-1939', *Journal of Transport History*, 11, 2 (1990), 19-37; H. D'Almeida-Topor *et al.* (eds), *Les transports en Afrique XIX-XX siècle* (Paris, 1992); J-B. Gewald, 'We Thought We Would Be Free...' *Socio-cultural Aspects of Herero History in Namibia, 1915-1940* (Köln, 2000); E. Alber, 'Motorization and Colonial Rule', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 15, 1 (2002), 79-92; and G. Stotz, 'The Colonizing Vehicle', in: Miller, *Car Cultures*, 223-44.

²⁷ Miller, *Car Cultures*; T. O'Dell, 'Raggare and the Panic of Mobility: Modernity and Everyday Life in Sweden', in Miller, *Car Cultures*, 105-32; J.J. Beuving, 'Cotonou's Klondike: African Traders and Second-hand Car Markets in Bénin', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 42, 4 (2004), 511-37; J.J. Beuving, *Cotonou's Klondike: A Sociological Analysis of Entrepreneurship in the Euro-West African Second-hand Car Trade* (PhD Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2006). For an overview of the most relevant literature on motor vehicles in Africa, see J-B. Gewald, 'The Impact of Motor Vehicles in Africa in the Twentieth Century: A Comparative Socio-historical Case Study in Zambia and Ghana' (Forthcoming).

²⁸ For example, P. Kensok, *Fitter: Entwicklung aus der Werkzeugkiste. Informelle Ausbildung von Kraftfahrzeughandwerkern in Ghana* (Saarbrücken, 1987); J. Verrips and B. Meyer, 'Kwaku's Car: The Struggles and Stories of a Ghanaian Long-distance Taxi-driver', in Miller, *Car Cultures*, 153-84; T. Verstappen,

general.²⁹ Klaeger (2009) looks at cars and travelling as new loci of religious belief and practice, and talks of the ‘automobilization’ of religion.³⁰

For most Ghanaians, purchasing a car remains a remote dream.³¹ And unattainability exacerbates desire; people who drive cars are admired and envied. Young boys in the community where I stayed dreamt of becoming a driver. They played endlessly with toy cars and lorries, which they made themselves out of the lightwood of palm trees, old tin cans or wire.³² Right in the middle of the town where I did my research there was the shell of an old Ford that sat as a monument and round which children acted out their dreams.

Forty years ago, a driver, who visited the capital five times a week, personified the mobility and freedom which most people in the rural areas longed for.³³ His lifestyle was flashy and impressed the younger generation. Glamour was attached to him, Brokensha³⁴ wrote. Little helpers washed his car, showed passengers to their places, lashed luggage to the roof and collected the fares. The driver only appeared once the moment for departure had come. Smartly dressed, he took his seat behind the steering wheel, honked the horn and set off for the city.

The secret of a driver’s success lay in his shuttling back and forth. At home, he was surrounded by an aura of the seething atmosphere of the city.³⁵ His urbanity was evident in his manners and in the commodities he had at his disposal: clothes, electronic goods, alcoholic drinks and cigarettes. On the other hand, in the city he represented ‘the good country life’ about which city people continued to muse nostalgically but to which they never wanted to return. He brought goods to the city from the village:³⁶ food from the farm, (more or less) undiluted palm wine, presents from rural family members and, most importantly, the latest news from home. On the way back he carried reciprocal commodities and stories. His car both brought him fortune and embodied the fortune he had already found.

‘The Lord is My Shock Absorber’: Omgang met, opvattingen over en percepties van technologie met betrekking tot de trotro in het Kwahu South district, Ghana (unpublished paper).

²⁹ M. de Bruijn, H. van Dijk and R. van Dijk, ‘Cultures of Travel: Fulbe Pastoralists in Central Mali and Pentecostalism in Ghana’, in M. de Bruijn, R. van Dijk and D. Foeken (eds), *Mobile Africa. Changing Patterns of Movement in Africa and Beyond* (Leiden, 2001), 63-88.

³⁰ G. Klaeger, ‘Religion on the Road: The Spiritual Experience of Road Travel in Ghana’, In: J.-B. Gewald et al. (eds) *The Speed of Change: Motor Vehicles in Africa, 1890-2000*. (Leiden, 2009), pp. 212-31.

³¹ Unlike, for example, in Norway where ‘a car is the one of your dreams you’re likely to see come true’, see M. Sawyer, *Park and ride*. (London, 1999) mentioned in Miller 2001b: 240. According to Ferguson, buying a car used to be a possibility for Zambians with a good job: ‘A decade ago, young men in gainful employment were able to buy cars of all models. That era is gone, gone never to return again’. See J. Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1999), 1.

³² The Ghanaian artist Yaw Amankwaa has made bronze figures of cars and lorries. The anthropological museum in Leipzig hosted an exhibition of his work in 1995. See K-H. Krieg et al., *Hubschrauber, Autobus, Feuerstuhl und Kettensäge. Technische Träume eines westafrikanischen Künstlers* (Leipzig, 1995).

³³ The driver connecting the city with the rural world is also the main theme of the film “Road to Kukurantumi” (1983) by King Appiah. The ‘freedom’ of drivers may, however, give them a bad reputation of being morally loose. See D. Brokensha, *Social Change at Larteh* (Oxford, 1966), 227. The AIDS epidemic is partly blamed on drivers who become infected on the road and spread the infection at home.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 227.

³⁵ The emphasis in this essay is on rural-urban transport. Some of my interpretations (envy, for example) also apply to intra-city transport, others, however, do not.

³⁶ Here Ghanaians would use the term ‘town’, the usual translation of the Twi term *kuro*. ‘Village’ (*akuraa*) basically refers to a small farm settlement at some distance from the *kuro*. I use ‘village’ somewhat loosely in its European sense: a rural community of fewer than 20,000 inhabitants.

This sketch may sound too romantic today. The driver has lost much of his former lustre³⁷ and the growing fleet of taxis and lorries has lowered his status somewhat. Many drivers are shabbily dressed and now clearly have a hard life. In *Driverfo*, Ampadu describes the hardships and frustrations of life on the road. In another song, *Driver Banza*,³⁸ George Jahraa criticizes drivers for careless or drunk driving, for speeding and killing people.

In 1994, I asked 61 students (aged between 16 and 24) in Kwahu junior secondary schools to complete the sentence 'The life of a driver ...'. The students' sentences reveal a highly critical attitude towards drivers. Out of the 48 who produced an intelligible answer, 33 emphasized the dangers of the job. The most frequent phrase was that a driver (and his passengers!) '... may die anytime'. Clearly, the road is a dangerous place to spend one's life, as drivers do. Road accidents are common and gruesome photographs of wrecked cars often cover the pages of daily newspapers. Fatal accidents figure prominently in the stories that are exchanged at funeral sites and in some of the Highlife songs played to mourn the dead.³⁹ During my own journeys in Ghana's commercial transport vehicles, I had ample chance to share the fear of the road with my co-travellers. Some of them said a short prayer before setting off and I often silently joined in.

Ten of the students writing about drivers focused on smoking and drinking (only one referred to sexual morals), which were always linked to the previous point of risk. Four students mentioned the responsibility drivers have and seven offered them advice on how to drive safely. Nearly all the responses were in some way related to the topic of danger and only one student was unequivocally positive about the life of a driver. Although these reactions do not necessarily mean that driving is completely 'out' for the new generation (the school environment encouraged moralistic answers), they do show a drastic drop in the popularity of driving. Nevertheless, driving or owning a car is still enviable in Ghana today.

Inscriptions

You do not need to be a probing anthropologist to discover that Ghanaians have 'a thing' for cars; any passer-by can spot it at once. Drivers and car owners openly declare happiness and worries about their vehicles. Anyone who has travelled in Ghana, elsewhere in West Africa or, for that matter, in many other countries⁴⁰ is no stranger to painted texts on taxis, lorries and buses. Indeed 'sign-painting' has become a specialized art. It is impossible to imagine a

³⁷ Cf. E. Date-Bah, 'The Inscriptions on the Vehicles of Ghanaian Commercial Drivers: A Sociological Analysis', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 18, 3 (1980), 525-31.

³⁸ *Banza* is a Hausa term expressing disapproval: unworthiness or chaos. The best Twi equivalent would be *basabasa*.

³⁹ A famous example is *Ɔbra biara twa owuo* (All hard work ends up in death) that relates the deadly accident of a man, Yaw Osei, travelling from Kumasi to Accra:

'Yaw does not come and Esther becomes nervous and starts to pray. She sits waiting for her husband in the sitting room. It is past bedtime. Suddenly someone knocks on the door and tells her to start crying because her husband Yaw has not been able to arrive in Accra. He has had an accident on the road and is dead.' (S. van der Geest, 'The Image of Death in Akan Highlife Songs of Ghana', *Research in African Literatures*, 1, 2 (1980), 145-74).

⁴⁰ Painted texts and figures on lorries are found in many countries, for example in Haiti (R.F. Thompson, 'Tap-tap, Fula-fula, Kíá-kíá. The Haitian Bus in Atlantic Perspective', *African Arts*, 30, 36-45 (1996), 101-102; in Nigeria (J. Pritchett, 'Nigerian Truck Art', *African Arts*, 12, 2 (1979), 27-31), and in Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Philippines and Sierra Leone.

Ghanaian street-scene without it. Names and sayings on vehicles, elegantly framed by entwining flowers, little figures or other decorative motifs, are only one category. Sign-painting is also applied to canoes,⁴¹ beer and ‘chop bars, beauty saloons, barbershops, kiosks and other places of business.’⁴² This visualization of wisdom and proverbs is a continuation of an old tradition of decorating gold weights, spokesman⁴³ staffs, umbrella tops, Fante *Asafo* flags, and *adinkra* and *kente* cloths, all of which were adorned with similar expressions of wisdom. More recently, wax prints and T-shirts have become bearers of similar messages.⁴⁴

Texts on vehicles are directly visible but enigmatic. They speak out and remain silent at the same time. Tourists read them but do not understand them, not even when they are painted in English.⁴⁵ The texts are seldom original: they are derived from and refer to a world well known to Ghanaians. The text may be taken from an old proverb, a modern saying, a Christian prayer, the Bible, a newspaper report, sport or a political event. The visitor is struck by the picturesque decoration but is at the same time put in his place: he does not understand; he is an outsider. Yet even Ghanaians may well fail to understand the specific point of a given text, not knowing exactly to what or to whom the words apply. The inscriptions tell a personal history which is only known to the driver himself or to the car owner and a few insiders. The text may be conventional but its full meaning is unique and private.

Indirect and ambiguous speech is called *akutia* in Twi. In an essay about Ampadu, the maker of *Driverfo*, Yankah⁴⁶ describes *akutia* as ‘a strategic verbal assault in which speakers in face-to-face confrontation avoid eye-contact with their targets and insinuate without mentioning names’. Many inscriptions can indeed be seen as *akutia* assaults on

⁴¹ M.A. Coronel, ‘Fanti Canoe Decoration’, *African Arts*, 13, 1 (1979), 54-60; J. Verrips, ‘Ghanaian Canoe Decorations’, *MAST Maritime Studies*, 1, 1 (2002), 43-66.

⁴² cf. C. Kirsten, ‘Sign-painting in Ghana’, *African Arts*, 13, March (1980), 38-41; W. Bender (ed.), *Songs by Ebenezer Calender in Krio and English from Freetown - Sierra Leone. Song Texts of African Popular Music No. 2* (Bayreuth, 1984).

⁴³ *Ɔkyeame*.

⁴⁴ The ‘social life’ of textiles (cf. Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*; B. Spooner, ‘Weavers and Dealers: The Authenticity of an Oriental Carpet’, in Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, 195-235) in Ghana and elsewhere is another exciting field of research. The connection between Ghanaian wax prints and Highlife is particularly interesting. New cloth designs are sometimes given the names of Highlife songs, thus sharing in their popularity. A few examples are *Yaw Berko* (a name), *Aku Sika* (Golden Akua), *Ofie Nwansena* (Housefly), *Ofie Mmosea* (House Pebbles), *Okunu Pa* (Good Husband), *Abuburo Nkosua* (Pigeon Eggs), *Born Again*, *Onipa te se Kosua* (Man is like an Egg), and *Wɔbeka me ho aseɛ a, fa Akonya* (If you Want to Gossip about Me, Take a Seat). The history and cultural meaning of modern textiles in Ghana has begun to attract researchers. See for example, W. Boelman and F. Holthoorn, ‘African Dress in Ghana’, *Kroniek van Afrika*, 13, 3 (1973), 235-58; R. Nielsen, *The History and Development of Wax-printed Textiles Intended for West Africa and Zaire* (Berrien Springs, 1975); W. Kroese, *The Origin of the Wax Block Prints on the Coast of West Africa* (Hengelo, 1976); L.M.A.M. Bartels, *Bedrukte textiel, toonbeeld van goede smaak in West Afrika* (Printed Textile, Model of Good Taste in West Africa), (MA Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1990); M. Kraamer, *Hand-woven Textiles of the Ewe-speaking Regions of Ghana and Togo (1800-2000)* (PhD Thesis, SOAS, 2005).

⁴⁵ This also appears in the Ghanaian novel *Fragments* by A.K. Armah (London, 1974), 24. Juana is a stranger in Ghana: ‘On every journey Juana had passed and been passed by many lorries and little Mercedes buses bearing the sign OBRA Yɛ KO. One of the first things she had done, on beginning to learn Akan, was to ask what the signs meant. Oh, nothing, just life is war, she was told. There were other signs, cryptic to her until with time she asked and reached the realization that these were signs and words that had grown all too naturally from the place itself and the people here.’

⁴⁶ K. Yankah, ‘Nana Ampadu and the Sung Tale as Metaphor for Protest Discourse’, in K. Anyidoho and J. Gibbs (eds), *FonTomFrom. Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theatre and Film* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, 2000), 135-53.

unknown enemies as will be seen below.

Drivers and Inscriptions: Anthropological Interpretations

Anthropologists are drivers shuttling back and forth between two cultures. They interpret the texts of one culture for people belonging to another. Margaret Field was one of the first to try to decipher the meaning of lorry inscriptions in Ghana for western readers. Her 1960 *Search for Security* presents extensive case reports on 146 patients who visited priest healers in Asante in 1956. The complaints and requests put before the priests ranged from bad luck in business to infertility and marriage problems. In many cases witchcraft was identified as the underlying cause of the problem. Field was struck by the large number of drivers among these clients and began to take an interest in their way of life and studied their histories and the texts they wrote on their vehicles. She collected 144 inscriptions and interviewed the drivers about what the inscriptions meant.⁴⁷

Field also emphasized the appeal of driving to the young and noticed that there was hardly any ambition more widespread among them than to drive or own a lorry. But when that ambition had been fulfilled was when the worries started. A lorry is a risky investment. The new owner is likely to have to go deeply into debt, owing money to a rich relative in a business-like relationship. It is uncertain whether he will ever be able to pay off what he owes. Bad luck with the vehicle may ruin him. He is aware, moreover, that people regard him with a mixture of admiration and envy so runs the risk of being struck by witchcraft. The same applies, if to a lesser extent, to a driver who does not own a vehicle. His position, too, is viewed with some envy. He, too, is insecure: if he fails to do well financially, he will be sacked.

Drivers [and owners, SvdG] express their worries and anxieties in lorry inscriptions, according to Field. Their greatest problem is uncertainty about the future, which, they believe, is largely in the hands of others. Some inscriptions reflect financial concern or flatter rich relatives. Envy, provoking witchcraft or other destructive actions form a particularly feared danger. Witchcraft must either be prevented or defeated. Inscriptions reflect a preoccupation with how to escape witchcraft. Some texts are characterized by ‘paranoid anxiety and bluff’ (Field’s terms), others seek supernatural protection against enemies.

Field’s inscriptions can be placed on a continuum ranging from defensive to offensive ways of contending with the dangers of witchcraft and bad luck. Pious words which thank God or a well-to-do relative or which invoke their help are essentially defensive. The owner/driver draws attention away from his own excellence, thus making himself a less likely target for witchcraft. In addition, he secures that relative’s or God’s help in case misfortune strikes him after all. Examples of defensive texts include: ‘God is grace’,⁴⁸ ‘It is good to have a good uncle’,⁴⁹ ‘It is good to have a good father’,⁵⁰ ‘O God help me’,⁵¹ ‘Patience is good’,⁵²

⁴⁷ M.J. Field, *Search for Security. An Ethno-psychiatric Study of Rural Ghana* (London, 1960), 134-45.

⁴⁸ *Adom ne Nyame*.

⁴⁹ *Wɔfa pa ye*.

⁵⁰ *Agya pa ye*.

⁵¹ *Aboa a onni dua* (An animal without tail ...; ellipsis for: God chases the flies away for the animal without tail).

⁵² *Abotare ye*.

‘It comes through somebody’,⁵³ (i.e. I have got this car from someone), and ‘A good name is better than riches’.⁵⁴

It is striking, however, that aggressive texts are far more numerous, certainly in Field’s collection. These refer in blunt terms to the envy that the lorry may provoke and seem to say: ‘Come on if you dare, I am not afraid’. First a few examples derived from Field: ‘Some are crying and some are laughing’,⁵⁵ ‘Mind your own’,⁵⁶ (Someone does not like someone’s success), ‘Life is war’, ‘Kill me and fly’, ‘Good medicine’,⁵⁷ (i.e. I am well protected), ‘Fear people’,⁵⁸ and ‘Hatred has no medicine’.⁵⁹

Remarkably, some texts even go as far as accusing close – but unnamed – relatives of practicing witchcraft and undermining the driver’s success. Witchcraft in one’s own family is not a topic people like to talk about openly. Drivers may spell it out plainly, however, for everyone to see: ‘House affair’,⁶⁰ (i.e. the envy comes from my own family), ‘Fear the one who is close to you’,⁶¹ ‘The family loves corpses’,⁶² and ‘Hatred comes from the home’.⁶³ As will be seen below, the same proverbs frequently appear in Highlife songs about the treacherousness of the lineage.

The provocative tone of these inscriptions casts the driver as a cultural hero. The general impression they convey is not one of concern and anxiety about an insecure undertaking, leading to paranoia, as Field asserts, but rather the note struck is one of bravura and self-assurance, in spite of the many dangers. Invincible optimism confirms the romantic image of the driver for whom everything seems within reach: money, travel, women – in short, the good life. Many inscriptions refer to this idea: ‘Travel and see’, ‘Fine boy’, ‘Happiness’, ‘Sunny boy’, ‘Chicago boy’, ‘America boy on road’, ‘Sharp sharp’, ‘Playing is sweet’⁶⁴ (i.e. amorous play) and ‘Kumasi Night Sports’. Nor is it coincidental that most of these brash sayings are in English: the English language adds to the driver’s cosmopolitan image.

Field is not the only investigator who has taken special interest in Ghanaian lorry inscriptions. In 1971 Jordan,⁶⁵ an American anthropologist, became intrigued by the culture of drivers and travelled almost 2,500 km through West Africa. In Ghana his research included twelve days of trips between Accra and outlying towns and villages. He spoke with drivers and passengers on the road and noted down his observations, describing ‘the driver’ as a person living in two worlds. He uses Tönnies’s terms *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* to distinguish these worlds. During a journey drivers are ‘hard’ and businesslike, but when not behind the wheel their behaviour complies with the more person-oriented traditional code of

⁵³ *Enam obi so.*

⁵⁴ *Din pa ye sen ahonya.*

⁵⁵ *Ebi resu na ebi resere.*

⁵⁶ *Obi mpe obi yiye.*

⁵⁷ *Aduru ye.*

⁵⁸ *Suro nnipa.*

⁵⁹ *Ɔtan nni aduru.*

⁶⁰ *Ofie asem.*

⁶¹ *Suro nea oben wo.*

⁶² *Abusua dɔ funu.*

⁶³ *Ɔtan firi fie.*

⁶⁴ *Agoro ye de.*

⁶⁵ J.W. Jordan, ‘Role Segregation for Fun and Profit: The Daily Behavior of the West African Lorry Driver’, *Africa*, 48, 1 (1978), 30-46.

the *Gemeinschaft*. Jordan sees this ambivalence reflected in contrasting lorry inscriptions, for example, 'Time is money' versus 'God's time is the good'.

While Jordan's interpretation is interesting, his claim that drivers are involved in a role-conflict presents too schematic a picture of driver culture. I would instead emphasize that the driver's businesslike persona constitutes his charm and 'capital' within the home community. His cultural image is not so much a being torn between two worlds as someone who easily straddles both.⁶⁶

There are three other pieces of research on lorry inscriptions in Ghana. One was carried out by the sociologist Date-Bah⁶⁷ who collected information about 384 drivers, interviewing them about the inscriptions on their vehicles. She sorted their answers into nine - merely descriptive - categories (e.g. work, expressions of gratitude, religion, politics) but did not interpret their texts. Lewis⁶⁸ wrote a brief note in response to an article about slogans on Brazilian lorries.⁶⁹ Lewis reads a growing individualism in the inscriptions but at the same time notices that they reflect 'a trial-ridden society and the near fatalistic resignation to such trials that seems to be all too typical in Accra, Cape Coast and other urban centres'.⁷⁰ I cannot disagree less: the texts would seem to express bravura and aggression.

Van Eijk⁷¹ 'inherited' a collection of 2,369 lorry inscriptions from a Dutch missionary in Ghana, Sjeff Moonen, who died before he could interpret these 'testimonies, convictions, beliefs, pieces of wisdom and experiences'.⁷² He was planning to write a 'car theology' on the basis of the collected slogans. 'Theology' may be too ambitious a word here but the texts certainly express the drivers' concerns about fortune and insecurity. Van Eijk, who did not interview the drivers, suggests three categories of inscriptions, those with a religious tone, those that are inter-personal, and others. This classification does not, however, help us to fathom the meanings of the slogans. Prayers addressing God or saints may in fact be very similar in intention to inter-personal texts.

We owe an unusual publication on lorry inscriptions to two architects, one Ghanaian and one German.⁷³ Schreckenbach took pictures of buses and trucks bearing inscriptions, while Kyei discussed the texts' meanings with the drivers. He does not, however, provide a report of his conversations but, inspired by them, offers us poems that have an inscription as a theme. The result is poetic ethnography. One example is as follows:⁷⁴

Beware of friends
Beware of friends.
Some can head you

⁶⁶ Similar research was carried out in Nigeria by Lawuyi (1988) who interpreted inscriptions on taxis as expressions of drivers' concern about wealth, status and social mobility. Lawuyi, too, draws attention to drivers' attempts to ward off mystical attack.

⁶⁷ Date-Bah, 'Inscriptions on the Vehicles'.

⁶⁸ G.H. Lewis, 'The Philosophy of the Street in Ghana: Mammy Wagons and their Mottoes. A Research Agenda', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 32, 1 (1999), 165-69.

⁶⁹ P. Burke, 'The Philosophy of the Road in Brazil: Lorries and their Mottoes', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 30, 3 (1996), 209-22.

⁷⁰ Lewis, 'Philosophy of the Street', 166.

⁷¹ R. van Eijk, *Car Slogans in Ghana* (Cadier en Keer, 2003).

⁷² *Ibid.*: 1.

⁷³ K.G. Kyei & H. Schreckenbach, *No time to die* (Accra, 1975).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*: 59.

Into a marathon of *plaba*;⁷⁵
 Some can fool you;
 Some can really disappoint you;
 Some can corrupt you;
 Some can ruin you;
 Beware of friends.
 Some are snakes under grass;
 Some are lions in sheep's clothing;
 Some are jealous behind
 Their faces of praises;
 Some are bunkums;
 Some are just no good;
 Beware of friends.

Lorry inscriptions are so appealing that many have tried their analytical skills on them: scholars, journalists and even casual observers. Brempong⁷⁶ mentions in a footnote that he and Warren collected a number of inscriptions and 'are now working⁷⁷ on the analysis for later publication', (which as far as I know never materialized). Lawuyi⁷⁷ used inscriptions for his study of the world view of drivers in Yorubaland, Nigeria, and Burke⁷⁸ did the same in Brazil, as we have already seen.

Lorry Park Conversations

My own investigation into lorry inscriptions was carried out on frequent journeys – mainly in the south of Ghana – between 1969 and 2005. In those years I spent countless hours in lorry parks waiting for my bus or taxi to leave. I killed time by talking to drivers, 'bookmen', mates and fellow passengers.⁷⁹ Often the texts on the cars around us formed the beginning of lively discussions, with those who had written the texts and with those who read them and were travelling with them. Our conversation usually attracted a crowd of people and developed into a spontaneous focus group discussion – before the term had even come into existence. Whenever I asked those present if I could record the discussion, they agreed and continued even more fervently. The discussion often went on in the car after we had finally set off. Between 1990 and 2000, I recorded 569 inscriptions of lorries on the road and at lorry stations and asked drivers and passengers about their possible meanings.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ *Plaba*: palaver, i.e. trouble, difficulties.

⁷⁶ O. Brempong, *Akan Highlife*, 213.

⁷⁷ O.B. Lawuyi, 'The World of the Yoruba Taxi Driver: An Interpretive Approach to Vehicle Slogans', *Africa*, 58, 1 (1988), 1-13.

⁷⁸ Burke, 'Philosophy of the Road'.

⁷⁹ The lorry park is an excellent research location for anthropologists. Stoller recounts his first and subsequent experiences in a lorry station in Niger and his uncomfortable travels in 'bush taxis'. At first he found himself 'in an alien universe of signs' but gradually began to understand them. See P. Stoller, *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology* (Philadelphia, 1989), 69-83. Transactions and communication in and around the bush taxi proved an ideal introduction to the harshness of Songhay culture. My own experiences in Ghanaian lorry parks and lorries are similar, though far less dramatic: Ghanaian public transport is comfortable compared to conditions in Songhay regions.

⁸⁰ The English and Twi texts are listed in Appendix 1. About a third of them also occur in Moonen's list (van

A few observations need to be made to sketch the development in inscription writing since Field's time. The first and most striking change is the Christianization of inscriptions. More and more inscriptions are coming from Christian sources, such as Bible texts, hymns and prayers. If we exclude inscriptions referring to *Onyame* (a traditional and a Christian term for God), we find only four inscriptions in Field's collection that could be regarded as Christian. None mentions the name of Jesus. Unless this observation is owing to a bias in Field's work, we must infer that the situation has changed considerably. Christian themes and prayers are very prominent nowadays on lorries, as they are on houses and elsewhere in public. In my own collection about 10% could be classified as undeniably Christian. That proportion would triple if inscriptions about God, *Onyame*, The Lord and *Awurade* (Lord) were included. Some typical Christian inscriptions are: 'Blood of Jesus', 'Christ is the answer', 'Clap for Jesus', 'Deo Gratias', 'Guy Jesus', 'Holy Spirit', 'Lamb of God', 'Psalm 35: 1-7', 'Rock of Ages', 'Thy will be done', and 'Jesus is the first'.⁸¹

The general purpose of the inscriptions has, remarkably, hardly changed since Field's analysis. My informants still emphasized the danger that envy and witchcraft pose to drivers and explained seemingly very different texts as responses to this perceived threat. The following are fragments of a conversation at Nkawkaw lorry park when we were discussing the meaning of 'Someone's efforts',⁸² an elliptic version of 'Someone's efforts annoy another'.⁸³

A: I am the Chairman of the Local Union and somebody may be jealous of my chairmanship. It is my good service and the length of my stay here that have earned me this chairmanship. Somebody who has just spent one or two years in this station may want the post Or: someone may have four cars, so whatever he does or says will be interpreted wrongly and create jealousy. This can move him to write an inscription like *Obi mmɔdenɔ*.

Q: And what is the meaning of *Anibere enye*?⁸⁴

A: Someone is not content with what he has. He looks for means to get someone else's property to add to his own and by doing so he will even lose what he already has.

I asked a driver about the meaning of *Ɛsɛ wo ara*.⁸⁵ He answered:

If someone does not wish you well, he wants you to lose your job. Maybe he wants your car owner to sack you as a driver or he has been reporting you to your car owner and you, later on, get to know all that he has been doing. That person may come to you, as if he loves you or to wish you well. You then tell him *Ɛsɛ wo ara*. You are the one who has been undermining me all along; I have not lost my job. I am aware of all your plotting against me.

It struck me that the most divergent slogans were said to stem from fears of jealousy. Although this does not prove that drivers and owners are only preoccupied with this aspect of

Eijk, *Car Slogans*, 35-101).

⁸¹ *Yesu di kan*. My southern bias should be taken into account here; if I had travelled in northern Ghana, Islamic inscriptions would have been more prominent. Some examples that I did record were: *Akwei Allah* (Allah is there), *Allah Sarakyi* (Allah is King) and *Baa meyi shei Allah* (Nothing except Allah).

⁸² *Obi Mmɔdenɔ*.

⁸³ *Obi mmɔdenɔ ye obi ahyi*.

⁸⁴ 'Jealousy is not good'.

⁸⁵ 'It is up to you'.

the business, it does suggest that there is a popular notion that texts on lorries have an element of envy. A few examples of such ‘twistings’: ‘It is the Lord’,⁸⁶ explained one driver, meant that only the Lord could protect him from witches in his family. About ‘It may keep long time but it will come’,⁸⁷ the driver made the following comment: ‘In the night witches come and spoil the car. The car may be off the road for a long time, but eventually it will come back and everything will be OK.’ Another inscription read: ‘God wants us to be close to him’.⁸⁸ The driver, a Seventh Day Adventist, explained that a struggle was going on between God and the Devil; jealousy comes from the Devil so we should look for protection from God by staying close to Him. Another theme – work – proved to link up with envy as well: it is only by working hard that one succeeds. By implication, those who try to get rich without working are evil. But hard work is not enough; one must also seek protection to prevent those who are envious from destructive interference.

Several friends told me stories about cars and car owners that suggest that the inscriptions can also be messages that are not directly related to the car itself but to an important life event. One told me:

A prominent politician had a number of *trotros* in Accra. When Rawlings came to power in 1979, the man went into exile. Later, his vehicles, which had originally carried no inscriptions, were all inscribed with the saying: ‘I shall return’.⁸⁹ Another example. Some time ago, my uncle in the US came home and bought a taxi for one of my cousins who has been suffering from grinding poverty. Not long afterwards, my cousin inscribed on the vehicle ‘The Lord is my shepherd’, meaning that because the Lord guides him, he will not lose hope no matter what the difficulty because at the end of the day, a saviour (like my uncle) will come to his rescue.

Someone else told me a long story, which he again heard from a driver. The narrative may not be historically correct but it does illustrate the rich imaginations that are evoked by lorry inscriptions:

A certain man used to drive someone’s commercial vehicle. One day he decided that he did not want to continue that job because he was not making enough money. Ironically, the very night that he ended his employment, thieves broke into the vehicle and made away with the battery. Naturally he became a suspect and was arrested by the police and detained for two days. He felt humiliated and so peeved that he decided to seek spiritual intervention to settle scores for an offence he did not commit.

A few weeks after the incident, someone from the car owner’s family died in mysterious circumstances. Before the funeral retinue returned from the cemetery, another family member of the car owner died and a third followed. After these mysterious deaths, the family of the vehicle owner also decided to find out from the spiritual world what was going on. They were told that those deaths were happening to them because someone in the family had

⁸⁶ *Eye Awurade.*

⁸⁷ *Kye na ebekye.*

⁸⁸ *Onyame ninkuntwe.*

⁸⁹ This has a striking resemblance to certain political warnings aired through Highlife songs. A story I often heard was that Busia from his exile in London requested a song on the radio to let his opponent Nkrumah know that his political end was drawing near: ‘*Nsu betɔ a, mframa di kan*’ (‘Before it starts raining the wind will blow’) (S. van der Geest and N.K. Asante-Darko, ‘The Political Meaning of Highlife Songs in Ghana’, *African Studies Review*, 25, 1 (1982), 27-35.

wrongfully offended another person. Upon further enquiries, the offended person turned out to be the former driver. To overturn the curse, they were asked to compensate the man. When the driver was approached to indicate what he would want for compensation, he asked for a Nissan Urvan mini-bus. The former boss agreed to provide a vehicle as compensation. To celebrate his exoneration and redeemed image, the driver inscribed ‘The Truth’ on the front of the car and ‘Shall set you free’ on the back to tell the world his story.

A recent development in vehicular texts is the growing popularity of stickers. These are printed with sayings ranging from ‘No money no friends’, ‘*Kakra yebedi nti*’ (Because of the little we eat), and ‘King of Kings’ to the highly westernized ‘I ♥ my car’ and ‘I ♥ Ghana Airways’. Obviously, such stickers have lost most of their particular biographical depth. A related phenomenon that I observed was that texts are sometimes no longer painted in gracious letters but rather printed in simple block letters on the windscreen.

Some vehicles carry several sayings, at times a medley of painted inscriptions, stickers and printed texts. Occasionally the texts are related. What appears on the back may react to a question or remark on the front: ‘Who is free?’/‘Only Jesus’ and ‘Let us pray’/‘That day’. A text on the back may also carry a translation or synonym of the one at the front: ‘*Eye me nkrabea*’/‘It is my destiny’, ‘Fire’/‘Holy Spirit’ and ‘Thinking’/‘Scientific education’.

Some texts seem somewhat clumsy English translations of local idioms. ‘It’s not wonderful’ is probably derived from ‘It’s no wonder’⁹⁰ which, according to one informant, can mean that there’s no reason to be surprised that X owns the car because he has worked hard for it. The English text in this category that intrigued me the most was ‘Observers are worried’, which was a fairly common inscription. ‘Worried’ probably refers to the Twi expression *ani abre*, which literally means: the eyes are ‘ripe’ (or red). The idiom expresses a state of emotional tension that in most instances refers to envy. The original meaning of the inscription, therefore, is most likely to be that people who see the driver in his vehicle become jealous. There is, however, little point in speaking of an original or literal meaning. ‘Observers are worried’ can mean just about anything to anybody. It has become a Rhorsach blot that invites idiosyncratic interpretation.

I also suspect that certain orally transmitted texts have come to be misunderstood. In this way ‘Naked I came’ perhaps was transformed into ‘Naked game’. Each new version of a text assumes meanings independent of its origins.

The custom of inscribing texts on vehicles is not limited to automobiles; people on bicycles and pushing carts and beggars in wheelchairs also decorate their modes of transport.⁹¹ In Techiman, probably the country’s largest transshipment market, there were estimated to be a hundred wheelbarrows and four-wheel pushcarts, locally called *trɔk* (truck). Young boys hired a wheelbarrow for 600 Cedis per week (at that time, in 1996, about £2) and tried to make money by transporting goods back and forth between the (real) trucks and the market. The wheelbarrows carried inscriptions similar to those on lorries.⁹² Lorries – and also wheelbarrows – belonging to one owner tend to carry identical inscriptions. Such an inscription often functions as the name of the person closely associated with the vehicle,

⁹⁰ *Enye nwonwa*.

⁹¹ A bicycle in Accra carried the text: ‘The same people’, a saying which continues: ‘... who are your friends will kill you’. Kodjo Senah drew my attention to the following inscriptions on wheelchairs: ‘The handicapped too has wisdom’ and ‘I walk with Jesus’.

⁹² A small collection of these inscriptions can be found in Appendix 2.

either the owner or the driver. I observed how a driver is often called by the text written on his car, as if that were his name. Indeed, Nana Ampadu refers to this custom in *Driverfo*.⁹³

Ampadu's popular Highlife song *Driverfo* offers yet another interpretation of lorry inscriptions. The text sounds like an anthropological sketch of drivers' mixed pleasures. Ampadu even proposes a dual classification of inscriptions, distinguishing those on old from those on new cars. Words on new vehicles convey bravura and self-confidence while those on old ones express modesty (often put in religious terms), self-mockery and anxiety. This classification, however, takes us only so far. Unless lorries pass from one owner to another, they are likely to keep their initial inscription from glorious beginning to inglorious end.⁹⁴ As a vehicle ages, the meaning of this text may change, although the words themselves do not. 'God will provide',⁹⁵ a modest boast of acquisition on a brand new car, matures in time into an anxious prayer of 'Oh God, keep me on the road'. The self-assurance of 'Roadmaster', 'Travel and see' and 'It hurts you'⁹⁶ on a new bus acquires an element of irony as the vehicle grows old and has reduced dependability. The provocative 'Even in my own house'⁹⁷ (i.e. witches want my downfall) has an increasingly apprehensive ring to it as the years go by. Similar shifts in meaning occur with such inscriptions as 'Because of money',⁹⁸ 'I won't stay this way for ever'⁹⁹ and 'Good father'.

Cars and Highlife: Means of Transport

Commercial vehicles and Highlife move together. Highlife music is played on journeys in buses and taxis, while the adventures of drivers and their cars become the topic of Highlife songs.¹⁰⁰ Brempong¹⁰¹ quotes no fewer than 23 lorry inscriptions in the titles or texts of Highlife songs. Inscriptions and lyrics alike reflect everyday problems. The most salient correspondence between drivers and Highlife artists is that both facilitate communication. Highlife songs and cars are a means of transport that connects the village with the city, the past with the present, foreign culture with local life. Like the lorry that carries people, goods and news from village to city and back again, the Highlife song portrays the good and bad of village life to an urban audience and informs rural people of the pleasures and perils of life in the city. Interestingly, Highlife, although essentially an urban phenomenon (the medium is the message), draws much of its inspiration from rural life. Ampadu in particular favours rural

⁹³ See 'The Boy', a poem that refers to using an inscription as someone's name in Kyei and Schreckenbach, *No time to die*, 53.

⁹⁴ A new owner is likely to change the inscription on a car unless he regards the existing text as fitting for himself as well. Other reasons for keeping the old inscription may be that it constitutes good publicity or simply to avoid the costs of repainting.

⁹⁵ *Nyame bekyere*.

⁹⁶ *Eye wo ya*.

⁹⁷ *Efie mpo nie*.

⁹⁸ *Sika nti*.

⁹⁹ *Enye sei ara na meye*.

¹⁰⁰ The same applies to popular music elsewhere in Africa. The song 'Double Decker Bus' by the Sierra Leonean Krio singer, Ebenezer Calender is famous. He sang out his welcome to the first double decker arriving in Freetown, Sierra Leone in 1951. See W. Bender (ed.), *Songs by Ebenezer Calender in Krio and English from Freetown – Sierra Leone. Song Texts of African Popular Music No. 2* (Bayreuth, 1984), 14-17.

¹⁰¹ Brempong, *Akan Highlife*, 195-96.

settings for his narratives about human endeavours and failures, often ending his songs with a moral lesson.

One common Highlife motif is the ambivalence of the *abusua* (matrilineage), the traditional setting of family life. The *abusua* is the basis of existence and model of harmony, as well as a source of conflict, envy and misfortune. In the song, *Obiba Broke* ('Someone is broke'), Ampadu sings:

My family is a *nsansɔnɔ*¹⁰² family.
It has spread over my skin and itches me.
When I scratch, it hurts.
Ao Broke, who is my enemy?
My enemy is the one staying with me in the house.
Hatred comes from the home.

Highlife's ambivalence about rural life captures fairly accurately the feelings of the urbanized: on the one hand, lyrics express nostalgia for the tranquillity of the village, while on the other they voice relief at having achieved a safe distance from the demands and intrigues of the *abusua*. Highlife songs thus provide city listeners with a rationalization for living away from the village.

A converse mechanism features in Highlife songs that portray city life to villagers. When Highlife bands crisscross the country to perform concerts in villages, they usually start with a medley of songs and end with a kind of soap opera.¹⁰³ The songs performed show both the opportunities of the city and the suffering of those who have not made it. Again, it is the pessimistic picture that prevails. After all, the singers are primarily interested in human drama. Bame¹⁰⁴ cites the story of a concert party at which a cocoa farmer who had come to a town was tricked out of all his money. The story reinforces the stereotypes of the depraved city dweller and the naive villager. Songs commonly concern the often unsuccessful struggle of people in the city. In '*Wo'ankɔ bi nti wose yeanko*'¹⁰⁵ by Ampadu's African Brothers Band, a young man sums up all the financial problems he faces in town where nothing is free as it is in the village. He complains that the people at home do not understand his plight. The singer, at the end, comments:

This song we made to comfort our brothers
working away from home
and to plead to our elders
to consider our hardships away from home.

Similar worries about economic hardship in the city are central to '*Wɔsewɔse w'adwuma asei*'¹⁰⁶ by Yamoahs. Brempong¹⁰⁷ collected ten songs about money, wealth and poverty.

¹⁰² *Nsansɔnɔ* is a weed that causes itching.

¹⁰³ 'Concert parties' are discussed in K.A. Bame, *Come to Laugh. A Study of African Traditional Theatre in Ghana* (Accra, 1981); Collins, 'Ghanaian Highlife'; Collins, *Ghanaian Concert Party* and A. Ricard, 'The Concert Party as a Genre: The Happy Stars of Lome', *Research in African Literatures*, 5 (1974), 165-79.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*: 93-95.

¹⁰⁵ 'Because you did not go, you say that we have not fought'.

¹⁰⁶ 'They say you have lost your job'.

¹⁰⁷ Brempong, *Akan Highlife*, 556-600.

It is not only Highlife texts, however, that bring the city into the village. The bands themselves are live representations of the glamorous city. Since its inception, Highlife has stood for urban progress and the prestige of a different – at first Western – lifestyle. Highlife is commonly regarded as a part of the modern urban culture that, according to Ghanaian painter Ato Delaquis, included:

‘Star’ Beer, ‘Club Mini’, Ah Star posters, Football matches on Sundays, Garth and Kong strip cartoons, Dark goggles and beer bars, Coups d’états, Toyota taxis and Benz buses, The Microphone and Amplification equipments, ... Dances from 9 pm TDB (Till Day Break), the Soul and Popgroups, and the Big Bands. the Record Player and Foam Cushions, ... Beauty Parlours, James Bond films and Spaghetti Westerns, Funerals, Draughts at the roadside ... , Vulcanisers and roadside fitters, Sayings on Mammy trucks and Buses, etc.¹⁰⁸

Highlife performers share the double role of drivers. The connection – presented in terms of contrast – between city and village at the same time provides a bridge between the past and the present, as Brempong¹⁰⁹ concluded some time ago:

... the contents of these modern songs still uphold and promote the traditional value systems and social practices; their dominant themes revolve around such central cultural and social institutions as religion, family and political power. Thus, highlife songs juxtapose the urban present and its uncertainties with the wisdom of the rural past.

The same mixed feelings about village versus city recur in the confrontation between old and new values. Highlife songs often cite proverbs and fables and are in many ways new versions of traditional wisdom. But they also picture aspects of modernity. The songs can be quoted in defence of the old *and* the new. Commutation between city and village is a voyage through time. Funerals and festivals, which draw city people back to the village, constitute a powerful convergence of past and present. It is not surprising that Highlife has become the dominant music heard at funerals.¹¹⁰ More than traditional drumming and dancing, Highlife expresses the complexity of emotions felt by city people mourning their dead back home.

Finally, Highlife connects cultures. Coplan¹¹¹ has called Highlife a musical pidgin because it combines Western and indigenous musical elements into a new musical style. Sprigge,¹¹² though emphasizing the African part of the creation, says the same thing:

I regard highlife music as a purely African product – a brilliant African invention. The claim that this is so is in no way affected by, let alone invalidated by, any evidence showing that the African has not produced the highlife from exclusively African ingredients. He has enterprisingly taken from outside his indigenous culture at least some of the ingredients of that attractive mixture, and he is, I believe, still incorporating others.

Highlife is believed to be a blend of military band music, church hymns introduced by

¹⁰⁸ Cited in G. Brett, *Through Our Own Eyes: Popular Art and Modern History* (London, 1986), 102.

¹⁰⁹ Brempong, *Akan Highlife*, 260-61.

¹¹⁰ S. van der Geest, ‘Funerals for the Living: Conversations with Elderly People in Ghana’, *African Studies Review*, 43, 3 (2000), 103-29; M. de Witte, *Long Live the Dead: Changing Funeral Celebrations in Asante, Ghana* (Amsterdam, 2001).

¹¹¹ Coplan, *Go to My Town*.

¹¹² R. Sprigge, ‘The Ghanaian Highlife: Notation and Sources’, *Music in Ghana*, 2, May (1961), 70-94.

Christian missionaries and local musical tradition. As such it stands as an example of creative syncretic imagination. This ‘pidginization’ or ‘creolization’ is not limited to the music, however. Highlife texts too literally ‘pidginize’. In many of Ampadu’s songs, for example ‘*Driverfo, Somu gye wakrantee*’,¹¹³ and ‘*Obiba broke*’,¹¹⁴ as in everyday language, English and Twi intermingle. This conflation of English and Twi is also prominent in the songs of other Highlife bands, for example Senior Eddy Donkor, Jewell Ackah, A.B. Crentsil and Ahemfo Band. Many Nigerian Highlife artists, including Fela and Prince Nico, sing their texts in ‘proper’ pidgin. Thus Highlife becomes a vehicle that brings English and African languages closer together.

Anyway

Starting with a Highlife song about drivers and lorry inscriptions, I have tried to sketch the connecting worlds of Highlife artists and lorry drivers. Both produce texts in which they express – and attempt to allay – the anxieties of life, particularly those that result from envy. They borrow freely from Christian prayers, biblical verses, church songs and proverbs. To some extent these texts, inscriptions as well as Highlife songs, remain ambiguous because their meaning is to be found both within and outside the text, in the personal history of the owner/driver, the singer and the reader/listener.

A more intriguing connection between the world of drivers and singers, however, is that cars and Highlife are both means of transport that allow ideas to travel. They are means of communication, cultural – indeed linguistic – brokers between village and city, past and present, local Twi and cosmopolitan English.

One of the lorry inscriptions mentioned by Ampadu in *Driverfo* beautifully captures this notion of multi-dimensionality: ‘Anyway’. In the first place, ‘Anyway’ confirms the mobility of cars and Highlife in Ghana, although it is unlikely that whoever wrote the word had this in mind. Secondly, ‘Anyway’ puts the worries of daily life into perspective. Nothing is certain or fixed. ‘Anyway’ expresses the doubt about something that was taken for granted a while ago. It announces insecurity and danger but at the same time ‘relativizes’ that feeling. The uncertainty of the moment dissolves in self-confidence and in the belief in help from above. The driver has braced himself; he is ready for anything. ‘Anyway ...’ is finally the beginning of an uncompleted sentence. It is left to those who read the word to finish the text. Drivers and Highlife singers carry their signs across the country. And passengers and onlookers choose their own interpretations.

¹¹³ ‘Get Back your Grasscutter’.

¹¹⁴ ‘Someone is Broke’.

Appendix 1: Lorry Inscriptions in Ghana

Most of these inscriptions were collected in August/September 1990 and during two research periods in 1994. I travelled extensively in the Kwahu region and made a journey from Accra to Kumasi, Sunyani, Techiman, Wa, Tamale, Yendi, Bimbilla, Hohoe and back to Accra. About two-thirds of the inscriptions were recorded while travelling in a car. Sometimes I had the opportunity to discuss their meaning with people travelling with me. The other third were collected at lorry stations, mainly in Techiman, Nkawkaw, Mpraeso and Kwahu-Tafo. There I had ample opportunity to converse with drivers, passengers and others about the meaning of the inscriptions.

There are various drawbacks to writing down inscriptions while on the road. Apart from the handicap of not being able to contact the driver, there is also the simple problem of reading the text. Various inscriptions were missed because the car went too fast or I was still copying down the text on a previous car. It also proved difficult to catch both the front and back texts of the cars coming towards me. The inscriptions listed below are in alphabetic order; those in languages other than Twi or English have been omitted. Multiple inscriptions that were found on one vehicle have been split up. Various inscriptions were spotted several times but they have been listed only once.

1001 Berlin

A friend in need

Aboa a onni dua = The animal without a tail (i.e. God will chase its flies away)

Abotare = Patience

Abrantee = Young man

Abura nkosua = The eggs of the *abura* pigeon (see footnote 19)

Abusua ne wo bra = Family and your life (Don't depend on your family!)

Abusua ne wo bra = The family is your life (opposite meaning!)

Aden? = Why?

Adam Bros

Adea mani na so = Something I did not expect

Adom ara kwa = Only grace

Adom ara kwa = Only by (God's) grace

Adom wo wim = Blessing from above

Adow na ye = Farming is best

Africans

Ah Abusua bone = Ah bad family

Ahead

Aim high

Aka mani = It is left with my eyes (I am only watching)

Alaska Boy

Alhadji Ghana

All is good

All power belongs to Jesus

All shall pass

Aluta continua
 Always
 Amazing Grace
 Amen
 American boy
 American Boy
Ampara Onyame *yε* = Truly, God is good
 And his blessing
 And in everything give thanks
 And so what
Anka meye den (Title Highlife song) = What else should I have done?
 Are you sure?
 Arizona
 As if (It is not true what they say)
Asa pa yε = Good in-laws
Asomdwee mma = Children of peace
Atamfo nyε Nyame = Enemies are not God
Atea bisa = When you hear, ask (it may not be true)
Atemmududa nti = Because of the day of final judgement
Awie yε = The end
Awieε ne asem = The end is trouble
Awisia yε mmɔbɔ = An orphan is miserable
Awo Batan Pa = Good (nursing) Mother
Awoɔ yε = Childbirth is good
Awurade Adom = God's grace
Awurade kasa = Lord, speak

B.B. (Benjamin Boama, owner in Abetifi)
 Baby face
 Be bold
 Beginning of wisdom
 Behold
 Believe in God
 Big Boy
 Big Joe
 Big toss
Biribi hia = Something is missing
Biribiara nsɔ Nyame yε = Nothing is too difficult for God
Biribiara ni a bɔkɔɔ = Everything slowly
Biribiara wo ne mmerε = Everything has its time
Bisa Nyame = Ask God
Bisimilani (Hausa) = God is great
 Black Beauty
 Blessed Assurance
 Blood of Jesus
Boafo yε na = Helpers are rare
 Bob

Bone ben = What evil?
Brain behind (on the back of a car)
Brother sweet
Brotherhood
Buffalo and Sure

Captain of Israel's
Castro
Chase away the flies for the animal without a tail
Christ is the answer
City
Clap for Jesus
Clap for Jesus nicely
Come Jesus
Come to Jesus
Comedian
Comfort
Consider
Cool running
Counsellor
Cry for Jesus

Dabi asem nti = Because of what may happen one day
Dada
Dee Onyame beka = Whatever God will say
Deo Gratias (Latin) = Thanks be to God
Destiny
Determination
Dinseyee kwa = Spoiling one's name without reason
Divine peace
Divine victory
Do
Do good
Do unto others
Don't give up
Don't forget
Don't rush in life
Don't touch my grass = Don't touch my glass (?)
Done?
Driver Christ is with me
Dwene wawie = Think of your end

E! Sika = Oh Money!
Ebenezer
Ebi te yie (title of a Highlife song) = Some are well seated (well-off)
Ebi wo mu fie = Some people in your house

Eda w'anim = It lies in front of you
Ehɔ = Over there (i.e. Heaven)
Emma w'ani nha = Don't be lazy
 Emmanuel
Emmere dane = Time changes
Enam obi nsam = It is through someone's hand
Enam obi so = It is through somebody
 Endless love
Enkaa akyi = It is not too late
 Enemies are not God
Enni bɔne akyi = Don't follow evil (don't retaliate)
Enso maseda ni = This is my reward
 Envy no man
Enye Nyame den = It is not difficult for God
Enye Onyame den se = It is not difficult for God to ...
Enye hwee = It is nothing
Enye me nko = It is not only me
 Error
 Esprit
 Even Jesus
 Every misfortune is a blessing
 Everything by God
 Except the Lord
 Exodus 14: 14
 Expensive
Eye ntoboasee = It is good to be patient
Eye Awurade = It is the Lord
Eye me nkrabea = It is my destination
Eye obi ahi = It makes someone angry
Eye Awurade dea = It belongs to the Lord

Fa woho bɔ Jehowa = Be God's companion
Fa ma Nyame = Give to God
Fa wo ho bɔ Yesu = Give yourself to Jesus
 Fabulous
 Fabulous all the way
 Faith
 Father forgive them
 Fear God
 Fear woman

Fears
Feeling Brother
Fine boy
Fire
For Christ we live
Freedom
Fresh
Friends today
Future is unknown

Gausu the Warrior
Gentleman
Glory be to God
Glory be to God in the highest
God Almighty
God dey
God did it
God first
God has written
God is able
God is always right
God is great
God is love
God is not for one man
God is the source
God is wonderful
God knows all
God loves you
God my defender
God never sleeps
God's case no appeal
Gods plan
God's power
God's time
God's time is the best
God's will
Good boy
Good brothers
Good Father
Good friend
Good luck
Good name
Good never lost
Good partner
Grace
Gracious
Gradually gradually

Great is thy God
Great to be young
Guy Jesus
Gye se wobre = Unless you work very hard
Gye Nyame = Except God
Gye Onyame di = Have faith in God

Had I known
Hallowed be Thy name
Help me oh God
Holala (exclamation of surprise)
Holy Spirit
Hope in the Lord
Hope of Glory
Hwe deε Awurade aye = Look what the Lord has done
Hwannea? = Who?
Hwe Onyame asem = Look at God's words
Hypocrite

I am afraid of my friends even you (sticker)
I ♥ Ghana Airways (sticker)
I ♥ my car (sticker)
In fact ...
In God we trust
Innocent
Isaac
Isaiah 48: 18
It is my destination
It pains you. Why?
It's not wonderful
It's the Lord

Jah love
Jah Power (God's power)
Jehowa ne me Hwefo = God is my shepherd
Jericho boy
Jesus alone
Jesus is coming soon
Jesus is the bread of life
Jesus is the way
Joan of Arc
Jomo (someone's name)
Justice

Keka ko = Continue talking
Kae me bre = Remember how I toiled
Kae deε mayε = Remember what I have done (for you)

Kakra a yebedi nti (sticker) = Because of the little we eat
Kamfo Yehowa = Praise God
Kasa pa = Good talk
Keep on
Keep smiling
Keep what you get
King David
Kwasea kakra = Small foolishness
Kye na ebekye = It may keep long, but it will come*
Kyerε nea wobesom no = Show the one you will worship (from the Book of Samuel)

Labour on
Lamb of God
Let them say
Let us pray
Let's give thanks to God
Liberty
Life
Life history
Life is how you make it
Life is war
Life Man
Little Tokyo
London Boy
Lord
Love all
Love and respect
Lovely
Lovely Brothers
Lover
Lucky
Lucky brothers

Ma wonka = Let them say
Magye me boy = I have got my boy (lover)
Mambo (nickname)
Man will cry
Management
Master
Me Gyefo tease = My saviour lives (sticker)
Mesrε Onyame = I pray to God
Messiah
Mfa nni agoro = Don't take it as a joke
Mighty is Jehova
Mind your own
Mity God = Mighty God
Mmoa firi Onyame = Help comes from God

Moma me ho ntɔ me = Let me be free
Monka = You may talk
More time
Mother is sweet
Mpaebɔ = Prayer
My brother
My Lord
My happiness

Na menim saa = I know that
Naked I came
Naked game
Name A.A.A. (Akwasi Ampofo Agyei)
Nana Afari Minta (owner's name?)
Nana Kofi
Nana Kwasi nti = Because of Nana Kwasi
Never loose hope
Never rush in your life
Next time
Nhyira anka Agya = Blessed be the Father
Nhyira nka Nyame = Blessed be God
Nhyira nka boafɔ = Blessed be the helpers
Nice
Nipa dasani = Human being ('You are ungrateful')
Nkrabea = Destiny
Nnipa nyinaa nte saa = Not all people are like that
Nnipa behwɛ yie = People should be careful
Nnipa yɛ bad = People are bad
No cross no crown
No fears
No hurry in life
No Jesus no hope
No king as God
No money no friends (sticker)
No problem
No victory without struggle
No wonder
Not you
Nothing bad
Nothing is too late
Nsem pii = Many troubles
Nsisi wo yɔnko nni = Don't cheat your friend
Nsɔ Nyame yɛ = Not too big for God to do
Nte nsere = Don't hear, don't laugh
Nte nsere = Don't laugh (when you hear of my case)
Ntentan = Spider's web
Nto boase = Have patience

Number 1 in the world

Nyame mmerɛ ne mmerɛ pa = God's time is a good time

Nyame ne ho ye hu = God is wonderful

Nyame tumi so = God's power is great

Nyansa nfitiaseɛ ene Yehowa suro = The fear of God is the *O.B.*

ɔbaa Alice = woman Alice

Obey the will of God

Obi mmɔdenbɔ ye obi ahyi = One's perseverance annoys another

Obi nti = Thanks to someone

Obi mpɛ = Somebody does not like it

Obi mmɔdeng mmɔ ye obi ahi = Someone's struggle makes someone annoyed

Obiba T.K. = Someone T.K.

ɔbra ne nea wabɔ = Life is what you make it

ɔbra akwantu = Life is a journey

Observers are worried

Odimafo Agya = Father mediator (God)

ɔdɔ ye owu (title of a Highlife song) = Love is death

ɔdɔ ye de = Love is sweet

Ogyam = Nickname among friends

Oh Christ

Oh Ewiase = Oh World

Oh Man

Ohene ne Yesu = Jesus is King

Oheneba = Prince

ɔkyena nso bio = Tomorrow again

ɔkyena bi = Tomorrow too

ɔkyeso Onyame = God who provides for all

Once upon a time

One man no chop

Onipa wɔ baabikɔ = Man has a place to go to

Onipa nyɛ aboa = Man is not an animal

Onipa ye bad = Man is bad

Onipa ye mmɔbɔ = Man is miserable

Only Jesus

Onua dɔ = Brother love

Onua pa ye = Good brother

Onua tie Onyame asem = Brother, listen to God's word

Onyame akwan = Ways of God

Onyame adom = God's grace

Onyame bekyere = God will provide

Onyame na onim neɛ onibie asem = God knows someone's trouble

Onyame mpɛ bɔne = God does not want evil

Onyame kwan dɔɔsɔ = God's ways are many
Onyame ne ho ye hu = God is wonderful
Onyame nnae = God does not sleep
Onyame tumi so = By the power of God
Onyame ye kɛsɛ = God is great
Onyame ninkuntwe = God wants us to be close to Him
 Opportunity
 Original Peace
 Original Father
Osanfɔ = Those who cause trouble (Title of a Highlife song)
ɔsompa = Good service
Otumfo ne Nyame = God is powerful
 Our Father
 Our God is great
 Our God reigns
 Over to God
 Over to you (cf. *Esɛ wo ara*)
 Owner
Oyaa suro = A person is afraid

Papa ye brɛ = Father is tired
Papa ye = Father is good
 Patience
 Patience & Confidence
 Patience pass all
 Peace be with you
 Penny wise
 People
 People will talk of you
 Peoples Mandela
 Person
 Personality
 Popular
 Praise your maker
 Praise the Lord
 Pray for life
 Pray without ceasing
 Prayer is the answer
 Prince of Peace
 Promise never fail
 Psalm 23
 Psalm 35: 1-7
 Psalm 86
 Psalm 90: 17
 Psalm 115
 Rely on God alone

Remember
Renaissance
Repent
Respect
Road Master
Roaring Kungfu Fighter
Rock
Rock of ages
Royal class

Se wo nua fom wo a, gyaē ma no nka = If your brother offends

Se Yesu te ase yi = If Jesus was living now

Saa na esse se aba = What was expected has happened

Saa nti = Because of that

Safe journey

Safo Nyame = God the healer

Sakra Agya = Father change

Salama [Hausa] = good brother

Save me oh Lord

Saviour

Say Mohammed

School boy

Scientific education

Se wo ho = Say yours

Se wo bo adwo = You are appeased, aren't you?

Sea Boy (someone from the coast)

See beyond

Seek for the coming Kingdom

Seek Yee

Seniority (still)

Seven brothers

Shade

Sika ye bad = Money is bad

Silent driver

Simple man

Slow but sure

So is the world

So nice

Social

Social justice

Some friends

Some friends are

Sons of God

Speed the light

St Andrews

Step by step

Still Banda Boy

Still Joe
Still Know that I am your God
Still Officer
Still smart guy
Su nkwa = Cry for life
Suban = Character
Suffer to gain
Sunsum boafo = Spiritual helper
Super USA
Suro obaa = Fear woman
Suro onipa = Fear man (m/f)
Suro nnipa = Fear people
Susu biribi = Think something
Susu ka = Stop talking
Sweet not always
Sweet Mother
Sweet Victory
Sympathy

Take some ...
Teasefo bre kwa = People get tired for nothing
Tell me (still)
Tete wɔ bi ka = The past has something to tell
Tete wɔ bi kyere = The past has something to teach
Thank u Jesus
That day
The Angels
The boy in town
The boy Santo for peace
The Good...
The Light
The living Christ
The Lord is my shepherd
The same brothers
The same people
The same people (wish you evil)
The second coming of Jesus is near
The son of man
The Thing
The wages
The young will grow
There is hope
They act as lovers
Thinking
This rock
Thy will be done
Tie Agya asem = Listen to Father's word

Time changes
Time tells
Time will tell
To beat man
Travel and see
Trouble no good
Trust and obey
Trust in God
Trust not
Try and see
Two paddy [two friends]

U.K.
Uncle great
Understanding
United we stand
Unity

W'adwene no no = Is that your mind?
We are going the bible way
Wet rain
Whatever you do
Where there is life
Who is free?
Who knows tomorrow?
Why not Jesus
Wisdom
With whom? Jesus
Wo sikaε sua w'asem sua = If your money is small, your word is small
Wo nti = Because of you
Wo wɔ nkwa a = If you have life
Wobeyε nnipa den? = What will you do to people?
Wonderful God
Wonderful Jesus
Wonderful world
Wopε wo yie a = If you want to have a good life ...
Woyε papaapa = You do well
Woyɔnko da ne wo da = Your friend's day is your day

Yε obideε yie = Do good to someone
Yakode ne Onyame = God is my helper
Yes Sir Master
Yese yεsee = They talk and talk
Yesu dea = Jesus's property
Yesu Mogya = Jesus's blood
Yesu adi nkonim = Jesus has triumphed
Yesu tumi wura = Jesus master of power

Yesu nti = Because of Jesus

Yesu ye = Jesus is good

Yesu mo = Well done Jesus

Yesu anaa = Jesus? (i.e. You can't challenge him)

Yesu di kan = Jesus is the first

You lie

Young guy

Youngsters

Zimbabwe

Appendix 2: Inscriptions on Wheelbarrows

These inscriptions were collected at Techiman market on 29 and 30 August 1990. All wheelbarrows carried the letters TDA (Techiman District Area) and a number. Wheelbarrows belonging to the same owner had the same inscriptions, often followed by a number (see below).

Agyeiwaa No. 1 (Someone's name)

Awieε ne Asem = The end is trouble

Come back to Jesus No. 20

Envy no man No. 4

Express No. 7

Ɛye Awurade deε = It belongs to the Lord

God is king No. 1

Gye se wobere = Only when you get tired

Holala

Man no be God

Naty Pee (Krobo, name of owner; has 18 wheelbarrows)

Nkwa = For nothing

No condition is permanent

Simple No. 3

Susu ka = Stop talking

When