Motorization and colonial rule: two scandals in Dahomey, 1916

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ABSTRACT Transport systems are not just technical solutions to bring people from one point to another: they are embedded in social structures, reflecting and producing relations of power. The introduction of a new mode of transport means more than just a new way of moving around. Since cars were introduced to African colonies in accordance with the hierarchy of the colonial system, car ownership became an effective means of consolidating not only economic, but – more importantly – social and symbolic boundaries between rulers and subordinates.

The article describes how, in 1916, administrators in Dahomey twice used local chiefs and their resources in order to buy cars which were to remain in their own hands, diverting money which had originally been destined for the local population as compensation for the recruitment of soldiers during the First World War. In both cases the scandal was discovered, the cars had to be sold back and the costs were covered by the Government. Nevertheless it was the local population and its elite which was duped. While chiefs were first seduced by promises of car ownership and then excluded from it, the local population was reduced to an audience admiring the newly acquired cars of colonial officers.

Although they did not profit from the introduction of cars or the establishment of a whole new infrastructure, colonized peoples were forced to construct roads. Considering the low number of cars in use at the time, the enormous expansion of the infrastructure is best interpreted as an expression of the colonial administration’s need for control and planning.

In autumn 1916, on the occasion of the yearly recruitment campaign for soldiers for the French army, Governor Noufflard travelled to the cercle of Abomey.\(^1\) He went by motor car, the first official car ever used by a Governor of Dahomey. He was visibly proud of this and demonstrated the car to various chiefs, inviting them for test drives, enthusing about the new age of the motor car and mentioning that for the next recruitment campaign the cercle might temporarily have at its disposal a vehicle which would usually be stationed at Savé. Finally he said that the chiefs would be able to afford such a car for about a third of the amount they received in recruitment premiums.

According to statements by Noufflard and the commandant de cercle of Abomey in a subsequent report, the chiefs were so taken with this plan that, under the overall

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\(^1\) My description of the scandals in Abomey and Allada is based on documents and investigation reports which are kept in Aix-en-Provence, in the Archives Nationales d’Outre Mer (hereafter: ANA). I thank Sabina Matthay for helping me to bring the text, originally written in German (published in Paideuma 46, 2000: 279-99), into this English version.
leadership of Aouagbé Béhanzin, the *chef supérieur* of Abomey, they decided to put it into effect. At the beginning of March 1916, after the end of the recruitment campaign, they took five thousand of the almost eighteen thousand francs which they had been paid for the recruitment of 1200 young men as soldiers and gave them to the *commandant de cercle* for safekeeping. With his help, Béhanzin ordered from the firm of Ollivant in Porto-Novo a Ford, which was shipped to the *cercle* in October 1916.

According to the *commandant*, he and the chiefs had tried to settle questions relating to the maintenance of the car before its arrival – the expenses for gasoline and spare parts and for a driver who was to be chosen among the sons of the chiefs. Arguing that these expenses would be higher than the chiefs could afford, the *commandant* suggested to them that they should put the car at the disposal of his headquarters. If the *commandant* could use the car for his official trips, he would in turn pay for its maintenance. In order to put this plan into effect, the *commandant* prepared a deed of gift; after the signing of this document, the car was to be recorded in the inventory of the *cercle*. This, he said, was necessary for correct book-keeping.

Suddenly, Governor Noufflard stopped the plan which he himself had initiated, insisting that the car be used exclusively by its owners, the chiefs. He did so in reaction to the announcement of an inquiry into similar events in Allada by a colonial inspector, Kair, who was staying in Dahomey at this time and happened to hear of the two cases. The car stayed in Bohicon and was sold back to the car firm after the conclusion of the inquiry. As an admission of his political responsibility for the useless purchase which he had recommended to the chiefs, the Governor had to pay the difference between the original price and the resale price out of his own pocket.

In his statement to the inquiry the governor emphasized that he had always found the car purchase quite correct: he interpreted it as a proof of the chiefs’ loyalty to the colonial administration, who in this way had wanted to contribute to the improvement of the equipment of the headquarters. He also rejected the inspector’s objection that subordinates had gained the impression that the colonial administration wanted to make money at the expense of the recruitment premiums intended for the chiefs: since France had originally planned to pay compensation to the colonial administration for the loss of young men’s labour due to recruitment, an indirect appropriation of the recruitment premiums could be reconciled with the intentions of the motherland. Nor was Noufflard impressed by the argument that a colonial power suffered a loss of prestige if it gave the impression that it was unable to pay for its own purchases: every car in which the chiefs themselves were interested fostered their consent to road construction plans and therefore their co-operation in the organization of forced labour. And when the inspector argued that cars were not right for ‘natives’ who up to a short while before had not even known handcarts, he gave the names of local businessmen who had already ordered and received cars.

In a second scandal in the same year, the role of the chiefs was to an even greater extent reduced to that of admirers of the Governor’s car. Again he had travelled with his car during the recruitment campaign of 1915/16, this time in the *cercle* of Allada, and again he had invited the chiefs for test drives and had enthused about the desirability of a

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2 On the rivalry between the two leading car firms Citroen and Ford in car advertising in Guinea see Goerg (1992). Their competition was linked to national interests, which were also mentioned in connection with our scandals: the Governor-General of French West Africa stated on 10 February 1917 that the purchase of an American Ford from an English company in Porto-Novo damaged national interests, especially in view of the World War (*ANA, FM, 1Affpol, 3044*).
But only after the firm of Ollivant had shipped a Ford to the cercle and placed it in a garage built by prisoners of the cercle on the grounds of the headquarters did the chiefs in Allada find out that the purchase had been made with money which should have been paid to them or ‘the population’ in return for the recruitment of soldiers. When asked to sign a deed of gift for ‘their’ car at the cercle headquarters, they complained to the Governor. As a result, the commandant of Allada, Leon Combes, accused them of slander and defamation of character. The Governor decided in Combes’ favour, and the incident would probably have ended with disciplinary action for the chiefs, had not Inspector Kair started a detailed inquiry.

In the course of this inquiry it was revealed that Combes himself had purchased the car while pretending in the correspondence with the car retailer that he was acting on behalf of Djihento, the chef supérieur of Allada. The money came from a number of sources, including recruitment premiums intended for the chiefs. After the money had been paid to them and a corresponding entry made in the books of the colonial administration, Combes had put pressure on the chiefs, so that they had returned the money to him. Another part of the payment had come from money which immediately after the start of the First World War should have been paid to the population and especially to the families of soldiers as an additional payment for the special cost of the recruitment campaign of 1915/16.

The car in Allada was also sold back to the car firm, and since Noufflard was politically responsible he had to pay the price difference in this case as well. Leon Combes, the commandant of Allada, was transferred and reprimanded. Intending to drive the car himself in the cercle, he had taken driving lessons; and he alone had a key to the garage, which – as mentioned above – was located on the grounds of the cercle headquarters.

1. Interpreting the stories

Both incidents reflect the ‘colonial situation’ which shaped the interaction between white rulers and black subordinates in Dahomey. In interpreting these stories, I propose to show how this relationship of power manifested itself in the use of cars, which were highly coveted first of all by whites, but then by many Africans as well. Cars and the infrastructure necessary for motorization were instruments of colonial rule before they became elements of everyday life and mass consumption; and to this day they continue to mark social and economic boundaries.

A governor obsessed by cars gives himself airs by driving on the few roads which in 1916 were suitable for car traffic and by inviting his subordinates – African chiefs and local commandants – for test drives: at first sight such behaviour appears ridiculous; yet it shaped a new form of boundary which structured everyday life in the colonies – the boundary between car-drivers and those who stood admiringly at the roadside. In this

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3 These stories lend themselves as examples in other connections, too, notably with reference to the First World War and the use of recruitment money on a local level. Literature on the recruitment of soldiers often points out that soldiers and their families received none or only part of the money they were entitled to. In Senegal this led to bloody unrest, which was suppressed by force (Glinga 1990: 356ff). It remains unclear what really happened with recruitment money that was withheld – whether short-payment was ordered from above or whether the money went into the pockets of local colonial officers. In many cases there are no sources permitting a study of local manipulations like those described here. On the recruitment of soldiers in general see Crowder (1968: 227-274), Echenberg (1975: 171-92), Glinga (1990: 356ff).
way, the car was transformed into a desirable object which stood for progress and development, but a progress in which only ‘developed’ people could participate.

In their statements to the inquiries, colonial officers asked repeatedly whether Africans – including their élites – were sufficiently developed for the possession and maintenance of cars. Yet these Africans were expected to act as an audience and thus to supply the framework within which car-driving colonial officers acquired prestige. The chiefs were sometimes invited for test drives, but this depended on the goodwill of the white car-owners. In this way technical and economic differences were demonstrated and a need for participation in car ownership was created.

For local commandants too the car was in the first decade of the twentieth century a coveted possession, through which the user might acquired prestige vis-à-vis the comparatively backward users of sedan-chairs. But in the following decade the first local businessmen were already buying private cars in the towns in southern Dahomey, as well as in neighbouring Togo. The commandants did not want to remain behind these men. But usually they had to wait till the mid-1920s before the cercles were gradually supplied with official cars.

In the two stories summarized above, the commandants of Abomey and Allada took measures which the colonial administration had in mind: a fake alliance with the chiefs – in the case of Abomey with their knowledge, in the case of Allada without – made the acquisition of cars with recruitment money possible. In both cases, the aim was to keep a monopoly of the use of cars in European hands, thereby drawing a line of demarcation between white car drivers and blacks excluded from the use of cars. Although the chiefs were part of the colonial administration and as such belonged to the local élites with whom the commandants pretended to co-operate, they too were excluded from the use of the cars: the commandants made clear even to Béhanzin, who had proved a competent business partner in his dealings with the car firm, that he was expected to do without a car.

In the stories from Abomey and Allada the relationship of power between colonial rulers and subordinates is reproduced in the investigation reports as well: the perspective of the chiefs is mostly left out, although the injustice done to them lay at the centre of both cases. While the whites were interviewed repeatedly and their views documented extensively in written statements, only the chiefs from Allada were questioned by the investigating inspector.

But in both cases the chiefs had taken an active part in and influenced the course of events. The chiefs from Abomey had shown an interest in cars, and contrary to all notions of ‘primitive’ people, Aouagbé Béhanzin had travelled to Porto-Novo and ordered a car. We can therefore assume that he had an individual interest in cars which was independent of the interests of the colonial administration. It appears highly unlikely that he purchased the car in order to give it to the colonial administration. The investigation report does not state anything about the way in which the decision to sell the car back was taken, nor does it describe Béhanzin’s part in this decision.

The chiefs from Allada had also taken an active part in the events: when informed that a car had been bought behind their backs and with their money, they had complained to their commandant, an action which required courage and for which they were officially reprimanded, as so often in colonial West Africa. Although the colonial inspector broke with this practice of the rulers and acknowledged the legitimacy of the Allada chiefs’ request, both cases ended with the sale of the cars and hence the reinforcement of boundaries with regard to access to cars – boundaries which coincided with those between rulers and subordinates. In these stories the chiefs, who were located on the line
demarcating these boundaries and who, as *chefs de cantons*, were integrated into the colonial administrative system and had a certain share in power, turned out to be border-crossers in the negotiations between rulers and subordinates.\(^4\) By being invited for test drives, they were promised participation in the power of cars, from which they were then suddenly excluded when their superiors, the *commandants*, decided so. In the end, they had to join the rows of African spectators who lined the colonial roads during the second decade of the twentieth century as soon as cars came into sight.

Such spectatorship constituted the stage on which the power of rulers manifested itself in the view of car-driving whites. They attached considerable importance to these spectators, because without staged excitement car drives would have lacked the symbolic value of power. Here and in connection with other events, such as the first drive of the Governor-General of French West Africa (see below), colonial officers reported enthusiastically that Africans lined the street when a car was announced. They can always be seen on photographs of this period which show cars.\(^5\)

African spectators confirmed and constituted the social, economic and technological difference between rulers and subordinates; and since enthusiastic astonishment – unlike forced welcoming and bowing gestures – constitutes a voluntary or even spontaneous confirmation of power, colonial officers could light-heartedly bask in the glory of this experience.\(^6\) The astonishment and admiration on the part of the audience, which was immediately noted in the colonial records, therefore contributed to the representation of the car as a desirable possession. Test drives promoted this attitude and at the same time created the need of local élites to participate in car ownership and hence in the prestige of whites.

In our stories, the governor above all contributed to the formation of power by creating a need and subsequently preventing its fulfilment. By constantly mentioning the advantages of cars, by staging his drives and by issuing invitations for test drives he designated the item of which he had a monopoly as a desirable object whose possession was promising. When the message had gone down well with the chiefs from Abomey and they consequently tried to share in car ownership, they were denied participation by the same man who had made it palatable to them. This underlined his outstanding position, since he was at that time the only colonial officer in Dahomey who had an official car.\(^7\)

Apart from the chiefs, the population of Dahomey was present not only as spectators in both stories, but also – comparatively invisible – through forced labour in road construction, which was necessary to make cars usable in the colony at all. The statement of the governor in the investigation report proves that he recognized the central

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\(^4\) There is a lot of literature on the ambivalent position of chiefs between rulers and subordinates in colonial West Africa and their partial participation in power. See, for example, van Rouvery van Nieuwaal (1987: 25-26; 1994); Crowder and Ikime (1970).

\(^5\) On photographs as sources for the reconstruction of every-day stories see Deutsch and Jenkins in this volume; on photographs as sources for the history of transport in West Africa see Bozzo (1992); Duclos (1992); Almeida-Topor and Lakroum (1992).

\(^6\) My interlocutors in North Bénin described a number of gestures which confirmed the relationship of power and which were disliked because they were imposed by decree, among them removing one’s headgear for a welcoming bow, a gesture expected even from elderly men.

\(^7\) None of the Frenchmen – not even the investigating inspector – doubted that the ownership of a car and the responsibility for its maintenance would exceed the financial means at the disposal of a chief. This comes as a surprise since, although the number of soldiers recruited during the First World War was especially high, there were big recruitment campaigns and therefore payments to the chiefs every year. Had they voluntarily decided to buy a car, finance would not have been a major problem.
importance of forced labour as a precondition for motorization. He justified his consent to the chiefs’ car purchase with the argument that this would presumably increase their motivation to organize forced labour: every car which belonged to them or in which they had an interest promoted such willingness.

In both stories, as in the case of local tribunals in German East Africa (see Jan-Georg Deutsch’s paper in this volume), a colonial public representing the structures of colonial power was stage-managed. Along the colonial roads, which had been built with forced labour and were lined with excited spectators, rolled the cars of the colonial officers, whose characteristics were technical superiority, economic potential and speed. In the second decade of the twentieth century, colonial officers who were enthusiastic about the new possibilities granted selective participation to individual privileged subordinates and in return received voluntary confirmation of their own power. In doing so, they took care to keep power by retaining their car monopoly.

This was a period of radical change in the traffic situation in French West Africa. During the First World War the first cars appeared, albeit in small numbers, on new roads which were in constant need of repair, but cars were not yet the colonial officers’ usual means of locomotion. Only 15 years later, colonial rule was to be fundamentally based on car transport, and after the Second World War, cars were to become part of everyday life.\(^8\) Who would participate in car culture was decided in events like those described in the above stories.

2. **On the history of transport in Dahomey**

Even in pre-colonial times, the means of transport of African élites were characterized by the exercise of power and prestige based on speed. Some based their rule essentially on the monopolization of these means of transport: what Goody (1971) has shown for large parts of the West African savannah applies equally to Borgou, in the north of Dahomey: possession of horses was the decisive resource of the war lords’ power. They reproduced themselves and their retinue from cattle, slave and caravan raids. On horseback they were able to cover even long distances in a relatively short time. In areas controlled by them they collected taxes from farmers and pastoralists and in return offered them military protection against the raids of other warlords. Since the care of horses was expensive and their price was high – horses were not bred locally, but were brought by traders from the North – the number of those who had a horse at their disposal and therefore could exercise military power was limited. The (monopolized) possession of horses and the speed\(^9\) of attack and flight were therefore conducive to a form of decentralized rule.\(^10\)

In the south of what later became the colony, in the kingdom of Danhome, power was not based on speed and hence on military superiority, but on the control and monopolization of trade. The means of transport which the rulers of Abomey preferred and monopolized was the sedan-chair: although they did not move faster than other

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8 On the process of converting a means of transport – in this case the bicycle – into an element of everyday life, see Schenkel (1996: 211-28).
9 On speed as an essential characteristic of power see also Canetti (1980: 335ff). On speed and the inherent increase in speed as a central moment in communication, transport and war see Virilio (1986; 1992; 1993).
people, they arrived relaxed at their destination, even if the bearers had run to cover the distance. Transport by sedan-chair showed, or rather enacted, the special status of rulers who in their luxury clothes could be carried comfortably even through rough territory. It supplied prestige, without itself being a resource of the exercise of power.\footnote{On the sedan-chair as a means of transport and an object of prestige of the élites in the kingdom of Danhome see Iroko (1992).
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With the coming of colonial rule, no new means of transport which would have secured the power of the whites came into the country. In their expeditions of conquest the French used the forms of transport of the local élites, i.e. horses, sedan-chairs or their own bodies. A number of more or less voluntarily recruited carriers took care of the transport of luggage. Nevertheless, the French did introduce new media which secured them superior speed in the communication of information: soon after the conquest, colonial stations even in the north of the colony were already connected with each other, not only by mail but also by a working telegraph system.\footnote{Statistics compiled by the colonial administration in Parakou, the capital of the northern cercle of Borgou, underline the importance which the French attached to the communications network: in 1909 six whites were living in Parakou; three worked in the administration of the cercle; there was a doctor, a teacher and a telegraph operator. Of the 18 local employees of the administration, 12 men worked at the post and telegraph office. Furthermore, 48 men worked for the security forces – garde – and police: Archives Nationales du Bénin (hereafter: ANB), Revue mensuel trimestriel (hereafter: RMT) 26. Thus it was the combination of military force and communications that secured a monopoly of power for the colonial rulers.
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Only a few years after colonization, the French started to build a railway system. By 1911 a railway line led to the North of the colony, at that time to Savé. Unlike the telegraph system, which was of military importance, and car transport, which started later, the railway had almost no influence on structures of power, but mostly transformed trade: it replaced more and more the caravan trade and fostered a north-south orientation at the expense of the old east-west trade routes (Manning 1982: 148). The construction of the railway therefore promoted the internal trade of the colony and contributed to the integration of the North into the colony of Dahomey.

In contrast to this, close connections between power and motorization can be detected in road construction, which began in the first decade of the twentieth century in Dahomey and from the beginning was intensive. The road network of the colony was not built by a private company or a state authority, as was the case with the railway, but by the population through forced labour. Thus the cost of road construction was not imposed on road users but on the local population as a whole.\footnote{In this, the colonial administration followed a logic which remains valid in Europe and especially in Germany, where road taxes are taboo and car transport is promoted at the cost of the railway: while the railway network is maintained by the railway company (and therefore financed by the customers), roads are financed by taxes (and hence also by non-motorists).
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Road construction at the beginning of the twentieth century involved an absurd distribution of costs and an enormous waste of human labour in many places. Between October 1910 and February 1911, for example, almost all the male (and registered) population of the cercle of Savé in northern Dahomey was recruited in order to build a 150-kilometre road to Parakou. This road served the sole purpose of offering the Governor-General of French West Africa the opportunity to use a car for his journey to Niger from the coast of Dahomey to Parakou and to cross the colony in a sensational triumphal procession.\footnote{On this journey of the Governor-General see Manning (1982: 207). The monthly reports of the local commandants reveal that it gave them a lot to do. North of Savé, in the cercle of Borgou, construction work was likewise carried out in preparation for the arrival of the first car: in}
This intensive road-construction, which was driven forward by local administrative officers in the whole of the colony, has been called by Patrick Manning (1982: 181) ‘the most perplexing and yet revealing aspect of colonial investment policy’. Before the first cars were sighted on these roads, there was no rational justification for the enormous labour which was extracted from a deeply unwilling population. Apart from the collection of taxes, road construction was one of the main concerns of colonial officers in this period. In the south of the colony, in the towns of Porto-Novo and Cotonou, the first private cars were being driven by 1910. Apart from the journey of the Governor-General in 1910, it took many years before cars were one of the everyday sights in the north of the colony. But the roads were built and constantly renewed.

Maintenance of the roads was a constant problem: not only did they have to be repaired and the bridges renewed after each rainy season, but weeds grew all the more rapidly since the roads were rarely used. The use of the roads for economic purposes was low, since they were needed only by the minority of bicycle-riding colonial officers before the introduction of cars (and then only near stations in the south of the colony). For the local population and therefore for those who built the roads, footpaths which connected the villages were in any case sufficient. Nor was the road network necessary for transporting colonial officers in sedan-chairs.

So what was the reason for this huge expenditure on an infrastructure which was rarely used? According to Manning, it was socialization of the population: local administrative officers tried to educate the population to be willing to work for the colonial state, without asking whether this work made any sense. Hence the object of road construction was to discipline an unruly population which fought forced labour wherever it could.

But in my opinion additional factors were involved: by the beginning of the twentieth century, passable roads between villages were a matter of course in Europe, and Europe served as the model for a developed cultural landscape in spatial notions regarding the colonies. In addition, Napoleonic road-construction programmes, which had supplied the infrastructure for the subsequent victory of the car culture, had proved their military importance. The colonial government does not appear to have asked whether closed marching formations, which were common in European avenues, made sense in a war in Africa at all.

A link may be discerned between the colonial officers’ need to appropriate ‘wild’ space, to re-structure it in line with European concepts and take development measures which created order in accordance with European notions of space, and European environmental planning. Local officers wrote with enthusiasm about road construction, and not only in connection with the measures taken before the Governor-General’s trip in 1911. A neat, wide road without weeds gave a different picture of the government and its control of the population than crooked paths between unstable settlements. The road therefore symbolized the new order in which the rulers could reach their subjects (and vice versa) on straight tracks. Although at first hardly anyone needed wide roads, they did convey a different notion of security and a sense of control, planning and government to

January 1911 the local commandant proudly announced that the section between Parakou and the border with Niger was completed, so that Niger could now be reached within five hours from Parakou. (ANB, 1E4, February 1911).

For Borgou see, for example, ANB, RMT, series 22, 26, 1E2, 1E3, 1E4.

Manning (1982: 182). On bicycles in Africa, which ‘always have been ignored or banned’, see Grühl Kipke (1987/88: 151).
the colonial officers. Furthermore, roads were visible results of local colonial rule, which indicated the success of colonial officers who were aiming at promotion.

The tenacious attempts that were made to settle the population of Dahomey along the roads and to move settlements situated in the bush nearer to the roads in order to gain better control over them, prove this need for control and underline that control was increasingly exercised along the roads.\textsuperscript{17} Often the population fought such re-settlement and deserted into the bush. The complaints of colonial officers and the recollections of the population reveal that many people preferred to live away from the roads and to evade the direct form of government control which had been made possible by the car culture.\textsuperscript{18}

Documents on road construction also reveal that the perspective of the population was generally ignored. For example, local negotiation processes about the course of the roads, which were extremely important for local power structures, are hardly ever mentioned: in the 1930s, when administrative structures had been tightened by merging the cantons, only those settlements situated on busy roads remained as the central places of the cantons. The question whether villages had been opened up by road construction or whether roads ran through other places was extremely important for the long-term development of villages.

Conversations which I have held in the course of my research in northern Bénin indicate that some chiefs approved of road construction in their villages in the early colonial period and supported it by organizing forced labour. But what interested them most was planning relevant to the course of the major roads across the country. Other chiefs were not interested in such projects and sided with those who preferred life in the blind spots of colonial structures, i.e. away from roads, stations and towns.

This perspective has changed over the years. Today, people in villages which were not connected to important roads during the colonial period regret this development. They notice that places which in earlier times were of little importance have acquired importance through the roads, that important regional markets take place or that health centres and other institutions and facilities are situated there. Since it has become clear that roads have engendered not only the exercise of power but also infrastructure and trade, road-construction projects are normally welcomed by the population today.\textsuperscript{19}

The gradual equipment of the colonial administration with cars depended on its internal hierarchy: after the Governor-General of French West Africa had received a car in 1910, the first governors in the colonies were given cars. This seems to have been the case in Dahomey from 1915 onwards (\textit{ANA}, FM, IAffpol, 3044). As soon as the governors had received the new vehicles, the commandants pointed out in petitions that the use of cars would make sense on a local level (ibid.). And when they were gradually equipped with cars in the 1920s, some chiefs also asked to be supplied with an official car – a request which was always declined, even if they argued that a car would increase the

\textsuperscript{17} From the 1930s onwards, government re-settlement projects with the aim of moving the population of remote villages to the roads became common (\textit{ANB}, 1E4, \textit{RMT}). The last attempts in this direction took place in the 1960s, even after the country became independent.

\textsuperscript{18} In conversations which I have had with older people in northern Bénin, they repeatedly described the advantages of life away from the great roads during the colonial period. People felt there was more freedom from control by colonial officers, the chances to avoid tax collection and recruitment campaigns grew and if people really needed to get in touch with the colonial power they walked to the centres.

\textsuperscript{19} One example of a village which in the course of the twentieth century increasingly lost importance is Tebo. For perceptions of this process by the local population see Alber (2000).
efficiency of their official work: in 1926, for instance, the *chef supérieur* of Nikki asked for an official car (*ANB*, 1E3, *RMT*, 3. Trimestre 1926).

The process of equipping the colonial administration with cars did not take a uniform course in all colonies: while the first *commandants de cercle* in Dahomey received cars in 1920, in Guinée a decree established in 1922 that only the Governor should have a car with a driver at his disposal; all others should have a hand cart and a ‘pousseur’ (Goerg 1992: 48f). As in the stories from Abomey and Allada, local *commandants* did not openly reject the chiefs’ demand for cars, stimulated by their own behaviour: instead, the *commandant* of Parakou offered to the chief of Nikki to take him on a test drive through the territory controlled by the chief and let him and his dignitaries drive the car to a meeting in the capital of the *cercle*. After the trip, he enthused in a report to his superior about the reactions of the subjects and the enhancement of the chief’s prestige by the drive (*ANB*, 1E3, *RMT*, 3. Trimestre 1923).

It was precisely because cars were so attractive not only to men in the colonial administration but also to the élites among its subjects that colonial rulers did not let the chiefs take their favourite play-things away from them. In all events of this kind, a line was drawn between positions held by Frenchmen and those held by Africans. The French monopolized access; they occasionally granted Africans such access, but usually denied it. In this way, the car became a prestigious object reserved for whites in the administration and for some rich local businessmen who could afford to buy and maintain a car privately.

Like many boundaries drawn in the colonial period, this one applies to the post-colonial territorial administration even today. Those ranks in Bénin which correspond to the old ranks of the whites, i.e. the *préfet* and the *sous-préfet*, have official cars; the lower ranks in the territorial administration, which correspond to the former *chef de canton*, do not.

While road construction with its disciplinary character was from the beginning a form of rule over a population which fought forced labour by passive resistance, the roads themselves became instruments of rule only after the introduction of cars, even when they were no longer built or maintained by forced labour but by the *service des travaux publics*. They made possible the transport of motorized colonial officers at more than 50 km/h and hence the presence of colonial rule everywhere possible. The radius which a single administrative officer could control grew enormously through the use of cars. Thus it comes as no surprise that the colonial bureaucracy in Dahomey was equipped with cars at the same time as colonial administrative structures were consolidated and tightened.

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21 The *service des travaux publics* was established in 1907 as a reaction to the unwillingness of the population to do forced labour in road construction. From then on, road-construction works were to be financed by local taxes. But when colonial officials noticed that for months they had no money for road maintenance, they gradually went back to the old practice of forced labour. From 1909 onwards, the *travaux publics* were usually responsible for inner-city road construction, while country roads were built and maintained by forced labour (Manning 1982: 182). Since the 1930s a mixed practice has been established which still exists today: the major country roads are maintained by the *travaux publics*, while smaller roads are still repaired by the local population after the yearly tropical rains. Since independence, development aid and projects have provided a third source of finance.

22 The new means of transport – roads, railway tracks, waterways and harbours – brought ‘directly to the subjects’ not only colonial rule but also infectious diseases (Bourge 1992; Boutron 1992).
Especially after the First World War and various local uprisings against colonial rule, the French tried to secure their rule in the long term and to create more stable and more efficient structures. Among these measures were the merging of *cercles* and *cantons*, which gave control over larger territories and therefore more power to the remaining *commandants* at the head of the *cercles* and to the subordinate African *chefs de cantons*. To colonial officers, a good road network appeared to be a precondition for such a concentration of power. In a letter to the Governor-General of French West Africa in 1934 the Governor of Dahomey conceded that the breaking-up of the territory of the colony into many small *cercles* had possibly made sense twenty years earlier, before the introduction of cars and before the construction of the railway: but he pointed out that nowadays, when one could travel on the roads at 70 km/h, it no longer made sense for the three towns of Cotonou, Ouidah and Allada, situated only 40, 75 and 40 kilometres from one another, to be capitals of autonomous *cercles* (ANA, 14 MIOM, 13 August 1934). In the same year the *commandant de cercle* of Borgou proposed in a letter to the Governor of Dahomey that the administration in the north of the colony be tightened by merging *cantons*. With reference to the use of cars in the country he suggested merging the *cantons* of Niassy and Guinaguru and putting the new *canton* under the control of the *subdivision* Nikki: the road network already made it possible to travel fast from Parakou (capital of the *cercle*) or Nikki to any place in this territory; and this would be even more the case when the roads had been improved (ANA, 14 MIOM, 18 September 1934).

Linking more efficient administrative colonial rule to the use of cars and therefore to the existence of means of transport which could be used by cars had a number of consequences. Putting cars at the disposal of commandants was expensive, because it made it necessary to maintain the road network and equip the stations with cars. On the other hand, posts became redundant and personnel costs might be saved.

But the forms of rule exercised along the roads also changed. Settlements which were not connected to the road network were removed from the reach of the colonial officers, and in the view of the colonial administration this made more road-construction or the resettlement of remote villages necessary. Visits to villages not situated on a road became increasingly rare.

Another consequence was change in the structure of communication. The occasions on which the colonial officers stayed in a village overnight became rare, because cars made it possible to return to the station in the evening. The time spent with the population became shorter. One reflection of this change is the fact that from the 1920s the monthly reports of the local *commandants* in Dahomey contain less and less ethnographic observations. Moreover, the carriers of sedan-chairs lost their importance as intermediaries between population and colonial officers. On the other hand, a new group of trained specialists came into existence whose mediating role has been underestimated even in a developmental context: the drivers.

Before the introduction of cars nobody needed roads; by the 1920s they had become a necessary infrastructure for the small minority of car owners and users. These were mostly colonial officers, then local élites and businessmen.\(^{23}\) Up to today, the ownership of a car remains a privilege of the élites. The type of car and the outward appearance of a car are important criteria of social differentiation within these élites, much discussed in everyday conversations. Despite the massive increase in car traffic in Dahomey and

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\(^{23}\) Men who worked for the French were also part of the local élite. The boundary between them and the businessmen was fluid. One of the first men from northern Bénin to own a car was a well-known interpreter who was employed by the French. In the 1940s he bought a Citroen, and later he owned several cars, which he used commercially as cabs.
Bénin and despite the casualness with which almost all my friends travel by bush taxi, most cars in West Africa – the white four-wheel drive cars of the development projects as well as the privately-owned city cars which are cleaned every day and painted again and again – still have the character of a prestige object\textsuperscript{24} which underlines social boundaries, retaining the old aura of the horse and the sedan-chair.

3. Government, transport and everyday life: unresolved questions

Focussing on the everyday aspect of history with regard to colonial rule\textsuperscript{25} means examining the concrete forms of interaction between European rulers and African subordinates and picking out those phenomena which influence this communication in a decisive way. In this paper I have pointed to the often underestimated significance of transport for the form of this interaction. Whether we consider the carriers of Europeans’ luggage in the expeditions of conquest, who were treated in a brutal manner but might respond by threatening to strike,\textsuperscript{26} or in today’s Bénin the ‘development experts’ in their well-suspended and air-conditioned four-wheel-drive cars, protected from direct contact with the population and made to feel the contrast between the European island and the unfamiliar country when alighting in a hot, dusty village – every form of locomotion brings its individual forms of communication.

Furthermore, every means of transport needs its own infrastructure, which is also the result of specific social situations or relationships of power and which at the same time creates these situations and relationships. And finally, the access of individual persons to the respective means of transport depends on their social position, their economic means and negotiated boundaries; in this respect, the desire for participation in the use of a concrete means of transport does not develop in a neutral way or without the involvement of power, but is negotiated in situations shaped by power.

I have sought to show the close connection between motorization and colonial rule in the colony of Dahomey, and in doing so, I have hinted at specific forms of communication which were created by motorization. The connection between colonial rule and road construction as a measure necessary for building an infrastructure becomes clear if we look at forced labour and the cost–profit relations, especially in the early times of the colony: large sectors of the male population had to invest their working hours in an infrastructure project in which they had no interest at that time and which they did not use. Without the colonial state’s machinery of repression, these works certainly would not have been carried out.

In the two cases described at the beginning of this article I showed that in colonial Dahomey new boundaries were drawn between rulers and subordinates parallel to the

\textsuperscript{24} The significance of this prestige value can be observed where it is not present – in taxis, which are used commercially, purely as a means of locomotion. Normally the car owner is not the user and therefore not interested in the car’s prestige value. In Bénin, city cars and bush taxis alike are in a lamentable technical and aesthetic condition; they are used until they fall apart, and since the purchase has paid for itself after about six months, it appears rational to most owners to invest little in them and, if in doubt, to acquire a new ‘deduction object’.

\textsuperscript{25} For an approach to history from an everyday-life perspective see Lüdtke (1995b). Despite its programmatic claims, his contribution shows how difficult it is to delimit ‘the history of everyday life’ from other historical approaches. To my mind, the history of everyday life is not so much a clearly delimited perspective but rather a focus which can claim credit for having taken neglected aspects seriously and, to a greater extent than Lüdtke emphasizes, for an effort not to let individual cases and lived experience disappear in the description of supposedly ‘wider contexts’.

\textsuperscript{26} On the situation of carriers in Angola see Heintze (1999: 54ff).
boundary defining access to cars; these boundaries required the creation of a prestige value for cars which made owning them desirable.

Such connections between motorization and colonial rule have been largely ignored in recent research on transport in Africa. The otherwise excellent anthology *Les transports en Afrique* (Almeida-Topor 1992) does not contain any contribution which deals explicitly with the topic of colonial rule. Further research is needed on a number of issues. First, an examination of the infrastructure necessary for car traffic over and above the roads would be instructive: where were petrol stations, who controlled the distribution of petrol, and in what manner? How often were the cars really used? A more exact knowledge of the histories and perspectives of the early drivers would be valuable. Finally, the relationship between private car owners and colonial officers with their desire for official cars in early colonial times needs examination, especially in order to see colonial rule and transport in perspective, as suggested above. In this regard the question of competition for prestige, power and transport might be posed in a more complex way than I have been able to do here.

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