Discussant's Comments
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on
"Cry your own cry": On popular visual media of life experiences in Ghanaian mottonyms.

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Reviewing this article is something of a trip down memory lane: over forty years ago, I carried out fieldwork in northern Ghana on Nigerian migrants, most of whom left the country in dramatic circumstances at the end of 1969.i They had been among the leading entrepreneurs in what soon became known as the "informal sector",ii and transport, along with urban rental property, was one of the main areas of investment for those with spare capital to invest. However, transport, even though lucrative, was less stable than urban property as a source of income, subject to a combination of poor roads, high rates of accidents, corrupt officials, and a constant shortage of parts. The backbone of the system was the converted Bedford truck or "mammy lorry" (which makes a cameo appearance in this paper) and the newer Benz busses which were faster and more comfortable on the main roads, but less durable in the bush. These vehicles also presented dangers – I remember evacuating from one rapidly as it caught fire at night on the Kintampo Road from Kumasi to Tamale. The state of one of the vehicles described in the article suggests that it, too, was a potential disaster waiting to happen. To judge from the paper therefore, the uncertainties of the informal sector are as alive and well in present-day Ghana as they were then – as is the fine art of vehicle decoration and the construction of "mottonyms", even though painted art-work seems to have given way to plastic lettering on front and back windscreens which can be more easily removed as owners, fashions and ideologies change.

I mention all this simply because the implicit context of the paper is provided by the dynamics of Ghanaian small-scale enterprise and its informal sector transport industry which form the backbone of the nation's logistics. Transport is still risky in unexpected ways – several of which are illustrated in the rich case material which lies at the heart of this paper. To this reviewer, it is precisely this case material which is the most arresting and important feature of the paper. The media-related questions which are raised along the way are certainly important, and deserve more discussion than they receive here. But it is the structure and perils of small-scale transport entrepreneurship in developing countries which provide the matrix from which this material springs, and hopefully the author will be willing to explore these in more detail as the research progresses.

As it stands, the paper starts off with a brief discussion of "Big [i.e. verbose] English" and its use by officialdom and the media. I suspect that, even though this is an important topic, it would best be explored separately. The paper then moves on to its main topic, vehicle inscriptions as a class of media representations. I'm not sure that the argument about the status of these inscriptions as a popular medium matters very much. They are certainly a genre of textual communication, probably common to many developing countries, and as a genre they can be analyzed in a number of ways:

as folk art forms; as expressions of "traditional" culture; as verbal communication of innuendo or philosophical ideas (as here); or as products of a service industry providing employment for local artisans. It is also clear from this paper that they are an important form of branding and market differentiation in an industry dominated by a large number of small enterprises using a small range of otherwise similar vehicles. This is not dissimilar to North America, Europe or Japan, where similarly anonymous commercial vehicles identify themselves with company logos. Like the author, I noticed in my own research that the logos on their vehicles could become nicknames for their operators. As one example, a Nigerian-owned taxi in Tamale in a state of terminal disrepair had the ironic inscription "Why Worry?" and this became a nickname for the driver, more widely known than his real name.

This brings us to the main question discussed: how the drivers and operators select the mottonyms under which to ply their trade. Clearly these brief texts have caught the attention of a number of writers since Independence, from the classic work of Margaret Fieldiii onwards. I would agree with the quotation from Meyer and Houtman given here, that "approaches that take ideas, concepts, ideologies, or values as immaterial abstractions that are regarded as prime movers of history" are unsatisfactory.iv Ideas do not do things on their own, rather, people do things with ideas, and it is the ideas of the operators that are explored in much of this paper. However, I am not sure how such a critique helps to "de-Westernize" the discipline: there is a long tradition of humanistic and interpretative anthropology and sociology in the West as well.

As for the methodological issues of investigating these mottonyms, the author quite rightly points out the limitations of previous studies. Some of these criticisms are obviously legitimate, though I am less sure about the critique of Date-Bah.v The author states that she "surveyed 384 vehicle inscriptions and 'on the basis of the interpretation given by the drivers' … she categorized these inscriptions into nine classificatory groups. Date-Bah did not expound on interpreting the nine classifications types 'in the phraseology of the informants'" However, what the author of this paper does seems to be rather similar: he interviewed 20 drivers about their inscriptions and then classified them into two categories, innuendo and philosophical, based on his analysis, which , like that of date-Bah, is his own terminology, not the "phraseology of the informants". In quoting Polikinghorn, he states that "I used an inductive process that allowed me to "capture commonalities across individual experiences."'vi On the surface, this also sounds rather like what he describes Date-Bah as doing. Perhaps the differences between his work and hers could be made more explicit.

Given that categorization involves a search for commonalities, it is not clear how the author arrived at the classification in terms of innuendo and philosophical mottonyms presented here. Given that they do not seem to be mutually exclusive, perhaps the distinction could be phrased as follows.

1. Innuendo and philosophy are two different dimensions of statements involving speech or text.

2. Philosophy provides the underlying (logical) meaning of the statements, while innuendo provides an instrumental rationale for their use: the statements are aimed at particular people to be interpreted in particular ways.

3. The two are not necessarily separable in practice and some statements might have elements of both.

4. Those closer to the innuendo pole have meanings which are less easy to separate from the circumstances in which they were formed, while those closer to the philosophical pole are more likely to state ideological or religious commonplaces (e.g. "Don't overlook little things" or "Praise

be to God").

The most important part of the paper reports the results of the interviews with the drivers and their rationales for their selection of mottonyms. Here there are several issues to be addressed, and perhaps the author could take some of these up in more detail, either here or elsewhere.

1. The author mentions that he interviewed 20 drivers, though only six cases are discussed in detail, which raises questions of why these particular ones were selected, and the ways that they are treated. It could have been that some were clearly closer to the innuendo or philosophical poles than others, and were selected for this reason. But what about the others? Here, the point made above, that innuendo and philosophy are separate dimensions and not mutually exclusive, could be relevant.

2. His emphasis is on a phenomenological approach, an attempt to understand meanings from the actors perspectives. As a result, he takes the explanations given him as expressions of the reality to the actors, as "experiential narratives" situated within the actors' personal experiences and free from the researcher's own interpretative explanations.

3. But surely there is another dimension: these are also performances for the benefit of the interviewer, and in some cases they look suspiciously like actors' rationalizations or justifications of their own actions and careers. To give two examples:

1) In the first case, Kofi Abrefa's vehicle was clearly in a terrible state, a potential disaster waiting to happen (like the bus I travelled in on the Kintampo Road), so his colleagues' reported concern for his potential passengers had a basis in rationality, in addition to their own self-interest in competing for passengers. Kofi's attitude that they should mind their own business actually ignored this very real danger. The appearance of vehicles as an index of safety does matter to prospective passengers, where they have a choice.
2) In the case of Abukari's vehicle, the narrative of his relations with his brother looks somewhat abbreviated, presenting only Abukari's view of himself as victim and his revenge through his choice of inscription. In the real world things are rarely as simple as this, and it would be good to know in more detail what really happened. Generally, this comes most easily from triangulation in community-based fieldwork, rather than isolated interviews with a sample of actors.

4. It must also be said that the relationship between the innuendo mottos and the circumstances which gave rise to them is still not clear despite the explanation. It could be difficult for Abukari's brother to see the phrase "Even this" as a critique of his own behavior, even if he could read English, and the same could be said of Kwaku's "You just assumed" and its intended audience. Significant meaning seems to have been lost in translation, so further clarification would be useful. Could it, for instance, be that these phrases have a meaning grounded in local proverbs which needs to be further explained?

Conclusion

To summarize, this paper raises a number of theoretical and empirical issues: the theoretical issues may need to be developed further, and that could form the basis for the web discussion to follow. From this reviewer's perspective, the main issues would appear to be (a) how far the paper represents an advance on earlier work in extending our understanding of these kinds of texts; (b) how the innuendo and philosophical categories were arrived at from the data (including the data not

included in the paper); (c) the relationship between these categories, and how far they are useful dimensions in understanding this kind of phenomenon more generally; (d) the advantages of an interpretative approach, based solely on the informants' statements, as opposed to, for instance, a performative approach, which sees actors as playing roles and projecting images, to justify and give meaning to their own actions and careers and influence the perceptions of the interviewer.

Empirically, the material presented in the case studies about small scale enterprise in developing countries in general, and the transport industry in particular, is very rich and suggestive. The major issues include (a) the difficulty of raising capital to start the enterprise; (b) problems of collaboration and division of profits if capital comes from other actors; (c) the constant risk of fraud (as in Kofi's case); and (c) the insecurity of the transport business, given the dangers of the roads, the problems of vehicle maintenance, the relations between owners and drivers, and even (in the final case of Kwame Danso), the dangers of picking up dodgy passengers with criminal intent.

It is by consideration of this background that the role of mottonyms both in brand differentiation for the clientele and the construction of meaning for the actors themselves can be most easily seen. This also raises the interesting comparative question of whether the use of similar texts on vehicles in other developing countries, outside West Africa, plays similar roles and reflects similar preoccupations, given that the uncertainties and dangers of road transport may be very similar in other parts of the world as well.

i For accounts, see Margaret Peil, 'The expulsion of West African aliens,' Journal of Modern African Studies 9.2: 209-225 (1970); J.S. Eades, Strangers and Traders, Edinburgh University Press, 1994.

ii Keith Hart, e.g. 'Informal income opportunities and urban employment in Ghana', Journal of Modern African Studies 11.3: 61-89 (1973).

iii Margaret Field, Search for Security, Faber & Faber, 1960. Field's original research dated back to the pre-war period.

iv The author's citation is B. Meyer and D. Houtman, eds Things: Religion and the question of materiality. Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2012 p. 5.

v The author's citation is E. Date-Bah, 'The inscriptions on the vehicles of Ghanaian commercial drivers: A sociological analysis', Journal of Modern African Studies 18:3: 525-31 (1980).

vi The author's citation is D. Polkinghorne, 'Validity issues in narrative research', Qualitative Inquiry, 10 (10), 1-16 (2007).