"CRY YOUR OWN CRY":
ON POPULAR VISUAL MEDIA OF LIFE EXPERIENCES IN GHANAIAN MOTTONYMS

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Abstract
Mottonyms are both inscriptions, based on people's experiences, on Ghanaian commercial vehicles and 'names' by which drivers of such vehicles are called. Prior research on mottonyms implicitly affirms how these inscriptions are embedded in human interpersonal relationships and on careful reflection, in personal social experience. Guided by a phenomenological perspective, I explore, through interviews with vehicle owners, the specific life experiences that spurred them to coin these mottonyms. Overall, I analyze two major themes about drivers' incentives for their inscriptions: innuendo mottonyms and philosophical mottonyms. Through this research, I respond to recent calls for a phenomenological approach to investigate media uses in everyday life (Moores 2009). This approach provides a grounded understanding into "embodied sets of activities that humans perform with varying degrees of regularity, competence and flair" (Postill 2010: 1). Thus, it helps us understand how cultural forms are not just "mental, meaningful circulation of ideas" (Zito 2008: 71) but concrete mediated practices. Furthermore, the paper responds to scholars' advocacy for a broader understanding of 'media' that transcend narrowly defined traditional mass media formats (Downing 1996), and novel ways of examining such formats (Moores, 2009; Meyer, 2009).

Keywords: Mottonyms; popular media; vehicle inscriptions; phenomenology, Ghana.

Introduction

In the mid-1980s to the late1990s, *The Mirror*, a Ghanaian weekly newspaper, featured a satirical column under the banner 'Woes of a Kwatriot'. In a piece titled *No Big English*, Kwatriot lampooned Ghanaian politicians' communicative incompetence (and/or linguistic arrogance) in explaining economic policies and realities to non-English speaking Ghanaians[1]. In that essay, Kwatriot explained that he had borrowed the paper's title from an inscription on a commercial vehicle. In explaining what "might have inspired the inscription" (Yankah 1996:1), Kwatriot

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[1] Kwatroit gives an example of this official-speak: "Nananom [Chiefs], fellow countrymen . . . the gross per capita income of this our national metropolis has satisfactorily progressed unabated; but lest we are blinded by the rapacity of our conceitedness, let me on behalf of the government pontificate that our modest economic growth is bound to pale into nothingness if pomposity clouds our ocular apparatus and kyinkyinga [spicy kebabs] overwhelms our national appetite" (No Big English, 1996: 1).

speculated it might have resulted from a government official's *Big English* or 'verbose English' used to explain simple economic plans to people from the driver's hometown. Although *Kwatroit*'s inference of the possible motivation for the inscription may not be entirely correct, what is clear is that this interpretation cues us to how the inscription is situated within the driver's everyday personal experiences.

In this paper, I explore such meanings of this popular visual media practice of vehicle inscriptions which I refer to as *mottonyms* on commercial vehicles in Ghana (see Figures 1 and 2 for examples)[2].

Fig. 1: Be Hopeful

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2   Commercial vehicles are of three types: taxis, trotros for intra-city travels, and long-distance buses those operating between towns and cities such as from Accra to Kumasi; Cape Coast to Tema.

Fig. 2: What is Written . . .

My preference for 'mottonym' is based on how it captures two salient features of the inscriptions: they stem from people's experiences, and act as philosophical capsules that captures these experiences. In my research on this aspect of Ghanaian popular media practice in some lorry parks in Accra and Kumasi, I became aware of how mottonyms, in general, represent some form of experiential and/or religious "philosophical summaries" (Yankah 2011:15) for these drivers. I observed how drivers referred to one another either by the full or an abbreviated form of the inscriptions on their vehicles. As some of them intimated, in most cases, their fellow drivers do not know one another's actual names. All the drivers I interviewed were known by their vehicle inscriptions only and 'owned' such inscriptions because they evolved from their own personal experiences[3]. Unlike terms as 'lorry or vehicle inscriptions' or 'car signboard', mottonym is more robust as it captures drivers' experiential ownership of these writings and situates these experiences within their work environment.

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3   Within the Ghanaian commercial driving industry, most drivers are not necessarily the owners of the vehicles they drive. However, most of these drivers have very good working relationships with their 'masters' and some of these bosses do allow the drivers to write their preferred inscriptions on the vehicles. In my interviews, I declined to interview those drivers who did not originate the inscriptions on their vehicles.

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In the sections below, I detail the inspiration for this research. Second, I briefly examine some of the continuities and changes related to the practice of mottonyms in Ghana. I follow this discussion with that of prior research on mottonyms, and detail the theoretical and methodological orientation that underpins this paper. In the last two sections, I discuss the two major themes I gleaned from drivers' interviews on their motivations for their inscriptions. Finally, I conclude with the contributions that insights from this research make to recent theorizations in some fields in the social sciences.

Research Motivation

In this paper, I am inspired by recent discussions in the humanities and social sciences. The first of these discussions is call by some scholars in both the multidisciplinary fields of religion, media and culture, and media studies to 'unsettle' our traditional understanding of 'media' (Meyer, 2009; Moores, 2009). Here, the consensus is that due to major shifts in both disciplines, our current definition of 'media' grounded in the traditional confines of 'mass media' is limiting. As a result, we need to have a broader understanding of the concept "to include other media and forms of communication" (p. 302). Here, I position the mottonyms within a broader understanding of 'media', understood as a popular cultural practice that mediates certain activities of commercial drivers in Ghana (Zito, 2008). This positioning of the mottonyms as a 'practice of mediation' (Meyer 2009) is also inspired by the 'practice turn' in media studies (Couldry, 2004; Brauchler and Postill, 2011) and material and visual culture studies (Morgan 2008). One of the key reasons for this turn is arguably the "nagging dissatisfaction with [prior] approaches that take ideas, concepts, ideologies, or values as immaterial abstractions that are regarded as prime movers of history" (Meyer and Houtman 2012: 5). Here, the advantage of the practice paradigm (over the "'mentalistic approach'" Meyer 2012: 8) to understand people's lifeworld is that it positions us to view cultural phenomena not only as abstract and discursive (Morgan, 2008) and more importantly, to closely and concretely scrutinize the practices associated with "what people do with things" (Morgan 2008: 228). Lastly, this research on popular visual media, from a country in the Global South, is inspired by calls in global/international media studies to de-Westernize the discipline (Downing, 1999; Park and Curran 2000; Thussu 2009). Here, the goal is to complicate universalizing examples and

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theorizations in the field that have primarily emanated from Europe and the USA (Wasserman, 2010).

The Practice of Mottonyms: Continuity and Change

If someone from the mid-twentieth century, familiar with the Ghanaian commercial transportation system at that time, were to visit the country in the present moment, one thing would remain constant: the practice of mottonyms (inscribed on either the front or the back or both sides of vehicles) (Kyei and Schreckenbach 1975; Powell, 2012). This same person would have also noticed two important things. The first relates to the remarkable changes in how current *trotros* are no longer primarily "old Bedford trucks with locally wooden bodies of . . . distinctive design" (Powell 2012:1; see Figure 3) but include Nissan and Toyota vans.

Fig. 3: Miniature Bedford Truck

In spite of the continued practice of mottonyms, there is an area in this tradition that has significantly changed. Previously, roadside artists used oil-based paint to write these mottonyms. In recent times, artists 'carve' the majority of such mottonyms from sticky plastic (see Figures 4

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and 5). In interviews with both artists and drivers whose mottonyms are written in such a format, I learned that this style is not only cost-effective but also less time-consuming to remove[4].

Fig. 4: Artist 'carving' a Mottonym

Fig. 5: 'Carved-out' Mottonym

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4 In the commercial driving industry, vehicles are frequently bought and sold, thus necessitating new owners to remove and 'write' new mottonyms.

Previous Research on Mottonyms[5]

Within the limited literature on Ghanaian mottonyms, one encounters several issues. The first relates to methodological and theoretical frameworks that scholars have used to investigate this cultural practice. The ethnographic research of Margaret Field (1960) provides the earliest example. Field's work consisted of interviewing Ghanaians regarding the meanings of mottonyms she had observed and recorded elsewhere in the country, which the interviewees were not personally associated. Relying on these hypothetical attributions, Field concludes with a universal conjecture on the inscriptions: "in the choice of these inscriptions the driver unconsciously reveals his dominant attitude, and preoccupations, sentiments and character-traits" (Field 1960:134). This statement seems to suggest that the inscriptions provide the ultimate identity window into the overall character of their 'owners'. However, one should be suspicious of this claim as they are deduced from assumed meanings of these inscriptions and not from actual experiences that initiated the inscriptions. Approximately a decade and half later, Kyei and Schreckenbach (1976) also investigated the mottonyms. While Kyei and Schreckenbach (1975) interviewed drivers about the motivation behind their inscriptions, the authors' render their interpretations into poems which were inspired by the insights from the interviews on the mottonyms. Thus our understanding of the mottonyms discussed in their work is filtered through blending fiction and fact. Jordan's (1978) structural-functionalist four-month fieldwork in Ghana, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Togo, Dahomey, and Nigeria, focused on the role segregation behaviors of drivers (when driving and when not on the job) as reflected in their vehicle inscriptions. The critique of this work lies in its strict attribution of these drivers' behaviors to the inscriptions on their vehicles, as if to say, once you grasp 'the meaning' of these mottonyms, you have total knowledge of a driver's behavior. Date-Bah's (1980) work, not situated in any explicit theoretical framework, surveyed 384 vehicle inscriptions and "on the basis of the interpretation given by the drivers" (p. 527) 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" (p. 528). Lewis' (1999) short essay on mottonyms encourages "more focused study of these mottos as an important form of Third World urban folklore" (p. 165). His plea stems from a data set of 73 inscriptions in English on whose meanings he speculated. Lewis's

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5 The critiques against this past research are offered within the spirit of the Ghanaian (Akan) proverb about all pioneering work: nea oretwa sa no nnim se nakyi akyea 'those who chart a path cannot discern its' crookedness behind them'.

(1999) request for more research on mottonyms seems to be answered by van der Geest's (2009) work on the topic. Van der Geest's (2009) ethnographic discussion of 569 inscriptions based on fieldwork "between 1990 and 2000" (p. 13) questioned drivers and passengers about the possible meanings of such mottonyms. In one instance where van der Geest asked a driver about the meaning of the mottonym Ɛsɛ *wo ara* 'It is up to you', the driver answered with this scenario: "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" (p. 14). Here, it is clear that the inscriptions' meanings, as one encounters them in van der Geest's work, are based on hypothetical situations.

In this review, we become aware of certain limiting trends in prior research on Ghanaian mottonyms. The first is the speculative meanings of the investigated inscriptions that stem from scholars' own interpretations, interpretations elicited from those not connected with the inscriptions, or hypothetical scenarios associated with the meanings of these inscriptions. Another major limitation is the lack of explicit theoretical focus that ground the examined research on the inscriptions. Lastly, in the literature there is a penchant for large data sample, which do not provide deep insights on the 'meanings' of the mottonyms.

The above criticisms are not meant to give the impression that these prior researches have nothing to offer to our understanding of these mottonyms. On the contrary, the hypothetical meanings in these previous works, at least, provide concrete evidence that the mottonyms are deeply embedded in human interpersonal relationships. It is a facet of this evidence that I explore in this paper. In so doing, I used phenomenological analytics to guide my ethnographic research, where I conducted twenty focused interviews with drivers on their respective mottonyms to understand their meanings from their perspectives. What makes these interviews different from prior research is that they are explicitly guided by a theoretical approach that has clear goal of exploring the experiential narratives that underpin this cultural practice. This paper, therefore, is a modest attempt to demonstrate the view that the mottonyms' meanings I captured are situated within drivers' personal experiences. This method of understanding the mottonyms gives

compelling evidence to explain how people experience and process their lived quotidian experiences (Morgan 2008: 10).

In the sections that follow, I detail the theoretical and methodological approaches that guide this work. I then discuss my research findings within the context of interviews with drivers regarding their experiences that motivated their mottonyms. I conclude this paper with how the insights of the interview discussions on the mottonyms expand our insights on some recent theoretical debates in the social sciences.

Theoretical & Methodological Orientation

The basic theoretical framework that underpins this research is a social constructionist approach to human communication (Lee-Hurwitz 1995). This perspective takes the view that humans are active agents in constructing their social experience, and, thus, human communication is purposeful. To understand human communicative acts, one has to engage those very participants whose actions one seeks to understand. As part of this research, I took over two-hundred photographs of mottonyms and, more importantly, held casual and audio-recorded interviews on the topic with drivers at various lorry parks in Accra and Kumasi. In Accra, I spent time at taxi and trotro parks at Legon near the University of Ghana, 'Thirty-Seven' and Tema-station. At Kumasi, I spent time with taxi drivers, primarily at the taxi station in front of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, popularly referred to as 'Tech Junction'.

Another aspect of a constructionist approach used in this work is the choice of the phenomenological perspective to guide the research and data analysis. This analytical perspective, "at the very least , . . . [studies] an environment from a situated location in actual experience and oriented toward particular aspects of the spectrum of human activity" (Langsdorf 1994:1). It is this analytical approach that guides my exploration of the meaning of these mottonyms from the perspective of owners' motivations that influenced their respective chosen mottonyms. I chose the phenomenological method for the following reasons below. The first is to show the utility of this perspective to examine the rationale for drivers' choice for their mottonyms, which cannot be properly understood within "a model of production, representation and consumption that has been inherited from the study of traditional 'mass media'" formats

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(Moores 2009: 302). From this angle, I aim to contribute to recent emerging interest in the use of the phenomenological approach in the media studies (Moores, 2009)[6]. The second is to have a grounded understanding of these mottonyms and "to avoid the misleading one-sidedness of textual interpretation" (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010:1) that results from the researcher's own speculative interpretations of these mottonyms. The third is not only to contribute to phenomenological approaches in contemporary anthropological research (Desjarlais and Throop, 2011) but also to use insights from this research to contribute to current projects in visual culture that ask how "images as well as the rituals, epistemologies, tastes, sensibilities, and cognitive frameworks that inform visual experience help construct the worlds people live and care about" (Morgan 2005:25). The fourth reason is premised on how phenomenology is accepted as a qualitative social science research method, capable of investigating issues of consciousness in everyday human lived experiences (Betanzos, 1988; Kapferer, 1997; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinhorne 1983). Last, the approach aids the researcher to effectively explore every day experiences from a participant's perspective, with the goal of identifying and describing such experiences to ultimately yield a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of the phenomenon being investigated (Schwandt, 2000; Van Maanen, 1990). Such an understanding is not achieved through measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables or processes but through careful interviewing (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

The specific phenomenological viewpoint I used for my data analyses is Lanigan's (1988) three-step method of phenomenological analysis. These steps are description, which begins with the actual interviews, listening to these recorded interviews for a number of times and transcribing the interviews verbatim; reduction, which involves identifying important participants' statements related to their experiences; and interpretation, which involves organizing and thematizing participants' statements that signify their experiences. The choice for adopting Lanigan's methodology lies in its clarity and straightforward nature in analyzing and interpreting phenomenological data. I want to emphasize that inasmuch as Lanigan's three step method of analyses might seem sequential, in practice, it is very 'synergistic' (Lanigan 1988:10). Thus, in spite of "each step [following] upon the other in a dialectic progression . . . each step is part of the others in a systemic completeness of reflective intentionality" (Lanigan 1988:173).

6   Also see the forthcoming International Communication Association (2013) Pre-conference on "Conditions of Mediation: Phenomenological Approaches to Media, Technology and Communication" to be held in London on Monday, 17 June 2013.

Logic: Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity of my findings of my research, I focused on "the personally reflective descriptions in ordinary language" (Polkinghorne 2007: 5) of interviewees' revelatory phrases that recalled those experiences that formed the basis of coining the mottonyms. In ensuring thematic reliability of my findings, I used an inductive process that allowed me to "capture commonalities across individual experiences" (Polkinghorne 2007: 5; see also Lindlof and Taylor, 2002) in all the respondents' experiences about how they came by their mottonyms.

Description: Participants and Procedures

Participants consisted of drivers who owned vehicles depicting mottonyms and who also agreed to talk about the experiences that initiated the mottonym. All twenty interviewees were males[7] who represented information-rich cases relevant to my investigative focus (Patton, 2002). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and proofread for accuracy. I assumed the 'phenomenological attitude' (Holroyd 2001: 4) before reading the transcripts and the subsequent analysis. This attitude involves 'bracketing,' which refers to the suspension of one's taken-for granted approach to everyday life (Desjarlais and Throop, 2011)[8].

As stated above, data collection consisted of in-depth interviews with owners of commercial vehicles displaying mottonyms. I conducted the interviews, which were guided by short semi-structured, open-ended questions that facilitated effective exploration and gathering of experiential narratives about the mottonyms. I used a digital audiotape to record the interviews to help ensure accurate data gathering and analysis. At the beginning of each interview, I asked participants to choose their own pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. The interview began with warm up questions that asked participants how long they have been in the driving business and also what occasioned their choice to become commercial drivers. Due to the way

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7   It should be noted that the commercial driving in Ghana is a predominantly male-dominated profession.
8   Here, I have to acknowledge that such bracketing is not complete but a matter of degree. I argue that, for me, this bracketing involved my prior acknowledgement that the meanings of the mottonyms are not self-evident, and 'understanding' them involves taking time to talk to informants that 'owned' these mottonyms. The prior preparations allowed me to carefully focus on the specific revelatory phrases I discuss.

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"phenomenological research seeks to understand the *meaningfulness* of acts, events, and situations rather than theorize about meanings, ideas or arguments" (Langsdorf 1994:8, italics in original), the main question in the interview guide asked participants to share with me the particular experience or experiences that led them to coin the mottonym. I frequently utilized probing questions to encourage interviewees to elaborate on their narratives. In concluding each interview, I asked participants to share with me any related information that they felt was important but which I had failed to ask. The interviews lasted from about twenty minutes to about forty-five minutes. The time difference was based on several factors including how succinctly interviewees articulated their views or how they sometimes digressed from the topic.

Reduction: Data analysis

Since the primary concern of phenomenology is the description of experiences "as expressed and perceived by persons in a social world by others" (Lanigan 1992:182), my data analysis began with the expressed experiences of interviewees achieved through the conducted interviews, listening several times to the interview recording, and finally, transcribing their verbatim responses. Phenomenological reduction of my data entailed careful readings of the descriptions for "those parts that are essential for the existence of the conscious experience" (Lanigan 1988:10). Such 'essential' parts were identified through important statements and phrases relating to the experience under investigation. Lastly, phenomenological interpretation of my data involved organizing the meanings of the 'significant statements and phrases' into two key thematic meaning clusters: innuendo mottonyms and philosophical mottonyms. Cumulatively, these rigorous analytical processes helped me to uncover meaningful clusters that pertained to how the interviewees' experiences influenced their choice of mottonyms.

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Data Reduction: Thematic Analysis

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In this research, I asked participants to share with me their stories that motivated them to coin their respective mottonyms. This line of questioning differs from previous research on Ghanaian mottonyms where some researchers, for example, would ask "drivers and passengers about [inscriptions] possible meanings" (van der Geest 2009:13). Here, instead of hypothetical cases that such inquiry yields, my approach sought to elicit experiential narratives about the

mottonyms. In the discussion below, I explicate two major themes: (1) innuendo mottonyms and (2) mottonyms as religious and personal philosophy that I identified and extracted from the interviews.

Innuendo mottonyms

A prominent theme in my data analysis relates to how drivers crafted messages that simultaneously responded to certain experiences but couched in what they considered an innuendo to prevent "the easy assignment of malicious motives" (Yankah 1995:51). This type of communication is particularly used in Ghanaian public communication and conforms to local aesthetics of communicative competence.

Kofi Abrefa's mottonym is a good example of 'innuendo mottonym'. This 35 year-old driver in Kumasi in the Ashanti region has the mottonym *Efa Wo Ho Ben*? 'why does this bother you?' on the back of his old Datsun Sunny taxi. In explaining what prompted this phrase, Abrefa noted that at his base taxi station, most of the cars there are nearly new since his colleagues have been able to access car loans. His vehicle, in stark contrast, is very old. In fact, most of the equipment on the dashboard - speedometer, odometer, and gas fuel indicator - did not work. The windows lacked handles to move the glass up and down. The glove compartment lacked a door and the inside light had an empty socket. As a result of these features, his colleagues have named his car *alatsa*, a derogatory Ghanaian term reserved for such rickety cars. Furthermore, he noted that anytime that a passenger came to the station to hire the services of a taxi and he attempted to convince such clients to utilize his vehicle, his colleagues derisively asked the passengers why in the world they would be interested in such *alatsa* with the implication that it is not reliable. According to Kofi, the persistent behavior of his colleagues made him come up with this mottonym which he said is meant as an innuendo to signify to them that they should mind their own business.

Abubakari Seidu drives a Mazda Urvan mini-bus and has been a commercial driver for 32 years. His story regarding the mottonym "Even This. . ." at the very front end of this vehicle also comes under 'innuendo mottonyms'. Abubakari's wish as a young man was not to become a commercial driver but to become a Western educated person. However, when his father died, he

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could not continue schooling beyond high school. His eldest brother, who inherited his father's property, thus encouraged him to learn a trade, and he chose to enter into commercial driving. In regards to what made him to coin 'Even This . . .', he informed me that it all began with a rift that occurred between him and his senior brother. The story was that when Abubakari finished his driving apprenticeship, he could not find a car to drive and consulted his elder brother to buy him a car based on selling some of the property of their deceased father. The brother agreed and bought him a vehicle with the condition that he would repay the cost within a year, after which both of them would equally share the profits of subsequent earnings. Abubakari noted that he was pleased with the arrangements, and in his eagerness to show how diligent he was, he worked very hard to finish the payments six months ahead of the repayment schedule. Abubakari recounted that just after the payment, his elder brother started "behaving strangely" towards him, and the only reason that he could deduce for this behavior was that the brother was jealous of him. After about a year, things came to a head with the brother forcibly taking the vehicle from him. Abubakari said he disputed his brother's sole-ownership claim, but since they did not sign a paper contract, the brother was able to get the car from him. Abukari noted that his elder brother's repossession of the vehicle made him jobless, and over a protracted period made him experience severe financial difficulty. However, with time, one of his in-laws visited him and his family and became aware of their financial hardships. He proposed seeking a car loan to purchase a vehicle for Abubakari who readily agreed, and within a week, the in-law bought a vehicle for him. After repaying the loan and owning the car, Abubakari said he thought for a while as to what to write on the vehicle and decided on "Even This". In explaining his choice for this mottonym, he noted that had it not been for his brother's behavior, he may never have come to the realization that jealousy could arise from trivial matters such as "small wealth". The mottonym, therefore, was meant as a reminder to himself and also as an innuendo targeting his brother. Asked whether or not he was worried that his brother would read this mottonym and further escalate any animosity between them, Abubakari smiled and said that is the precise reason he has written it in English, which his brother cannot read.

Mo De Mo Ani Bu 'You (have) Just Assume(d)' is the inscription on Kwaku Addae's Nissan minivan. Kwaku noted that his original profession had been an auto-body mechanic, but because of bad business due to his shop's location, he branched out into commercial driving in 1992. When I asked Kwaku to tell me what experience motivated *Mo De Mo Ani Bu*, he noted that for

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personal reasons, he did not want to discuss specifics because they reminded him of painful memories he wished to forget. However, he did indicate, that in an earlier period in his life, he had made a lot of mistakes as he refused advice from his colleagues and relatives. These mistakes had cost him dearly, but he noted that he has begun making amends and trying to get his life back. He intimated that had he been careful with his previous actions, he would have been in a "far better place" than being "just a commercial driver". He made me aware that despite his reformed lifestyle and the visible evidence of such changes, he said persons that had known him still look back on his previous actions and tag him as *sansani*, 'a useless person', who is not capable of achieving anything worthwhile in life. He noted that he wrote the slogan as innuendo that reflects what his detractors think of him but also as a way of indirectly telling them that he is also a changed person. He added that the use of this slogan is also to remind him to strive to continue to be a better person.

Philosophical Mottonyms

The second major theme that became evident from my interviews is in reference to how some of the mottonyms, born out of life experiences, have become philosophical capsules that drivers professed guide their everyday conduct. A typical case is exemplified in the mottonym 'All Shall Pass' (Figure 6) that is written at the back of Kofi Owusu's Opel Astra taxi. When I asked Kofi to share with me what led him to appropriate this popular Ghanaian phrase, he recounted a very sad personal story.

Fig. 6: All Shall Pass

Kofi Owusu began life as a small-time business man who sold wares on tables at Katamanto in Accra. As a result of being very truthful, his suppliers eventually gave him a larger amount of goods on credit. With time, he became financially independent and was able to import goods such as intimate apparel, luggage, and shoe buckles from China and Saudi Arabia. Kofi claimed that in 2003, he was the sole importer of such goods in Accra, and thus, he was very popular. It was about this time that a gentleman from Nigeria approached him and proposed to do business with him, to which he agreed. Their business relationship lasted for about four years. According to him, the nature of the relationship was very favorable because the gentleman would supply him goods on credit, sometimes to the amount of about three-hundred thousand dollars, and would not collect any payment until he (Kofi Owusu) had finished selling the items. Kofi intimated that sometimes, he would not even hear from the gentleman for about four months (which allowed him to re-use profits as well as the principal amount for further business ventures). This arrangement made him to completely trust his newfound business partner. Thus, he did not suspect any foul play when the gentleman informed him that he needed about seven-hundred thousand dollars to prepay for items he wants to supply him. Although he did not have this full amount, Kofi pointed out that he raised the funds from his business partners whom he also sold goods to on credit. It was not until after the due date of the shipment of the goods had elapsed that he began to be worried. It later turned out that the documents the gentleman had

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given were fakes, and he had absconded with Kofi's money. All the attempts by the Ghana Police and Interpol did not yield any results. Kofi informed me that this situation rendered him bankrupt. Also, the consequences of having to deal with his business partners who needed their funds caused him mental problems, and he had to be admitted to the Accra Psychiatric Hospital for about six months. After his release, his wife of about twelve years divorced him because of his financial woes and the social stigma attached to mental illness. He noted that what made matters worse, after the divorce, his in-laws ejected him from the house that he and his wife had built, which unfortunately for him was on the in-laws' property. Thus, he became homeless in Accra and after being on the streets of Accra for a-while, he found work as a 'packer' at Kasapreko Company[9]. It was not long before his boss found out that Kofi knew how to drive, and so he was 'moved up' to become his boss's personal driver with good remuneration. Through hard work and diligent financial savings, he managed to buy two cars, which he has converted into taxis (one that he drives himself and the other given to a 'worker'). He informed me that the mottonym resulted from his 'trials', which at the time he never thought he would be able to transcend. Thus, in reflecting upon his life, he has come to realize that notwithstanding the troubles he goes through, he believes that such situations would not be permanent, since eventually '*All Shall Pass*'.

Another philosophical mottonym is evident in *Nothing Spoil* 'All Is Not Lost' that is inscribed on the front of Kofi Gyan's Daewoo Tico. Kofi noted that when he began his commercial driving career, he often experienced two things: the first was so much trouble with his vehicle to the point that sometimes it became financially impossible to support his family since the vehicle had to be sent to the mechanical workshop for constant repairs; the second was his encounters with passengers who were very disrespectful and verbally abused him over trivial issues. However, throughout these experiences, Kofi maintained that he kept the perspective that, in terms of his mechanical and non-mechanical problems, the situation will not last forever. Also, in terms of the verbal abuse he encountered with some passengers, he always reminded himself that their utterances were mere words and could not hurt him. It is within these experiences that Kofi asserted he coined 'Nothing Spoil' to remind and reassure himself that in all adversities, one should hope for the best.

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9   This is a very popular local alcohol manufacturing company in Ghana.

Fiifi Gyamera is a sixty-year old trotro driver at Tema station on whose vehicle is the mottonym 'Don't Overlook Little Things'. Fiifi noted that he coined the mottonym out of his observational experience that people usually tend to think that it is only the bigger issues which can have negative impact. Fiifi pointed out that, in his personal life, there are certain areas where the mottonym particularly applies: finance, vehicle maintenance and sanitation. In terms of finance, Fiifi noted that people he disagrees with most of his colleagues who seem to think that little savings cannot amount to much over a long period of time. He maintained that ever since he started driving, he has been setting aside a daily consistent amount and if he should tell me what this amount is, I will not believe because "it is really huge". With regard to car maintenance, he informed me that most of his colleagues do not have a regular maintenance check and only visit the mechanic shop when they have a major problem. According to Fiifi, the 'major mechanical problem' arises because his colleagues do not have routine check-ups. He noted that he always sends his vehicle for routine check-up, and as a result, problems are detected earlier and resolved quickly.

Lastly, philosophical mottonyms can also be religious as in the case of *Aseda Nka Nyame* 'Praise Be to God' that is inscribed on the back of Kwame Danso's Hyundai vehicle, popularly called *Atta Cambu*. Kwame entered into commercial driving because the profession has relative stability in terms of daily earnings. In explaining the experience that motivated the mottonym, he noted that in May 2009, a group of three young men hired his services to drive them to Bibiani in the Western Region. According to Danso, on their way, one of the passengers casually asked him how many Ghanaian languages he spoke. He told him that he spoke only Akan and only two of its dialects. As they neared Bibiani, Danso enquired which part of Bibiani they were specifically going to. In response, one of the passengers said he had intended to visit one of his uncles in a near village in Bibiani. When they neared the village, the passengers started speaking Ga, another Ghanaian language, which they thought Danso could not understand based on his prior response that he speaks only Akan. According to Danso, what they were discussing was how to lure him into the bush and murder him. I asked if he thought they were armed robbers, and Danso indicated that he believed they wanted to murder him for ritual purposes. He said upon hearing this, he tried to remain as calm as possible. A little bit down the road, Danso claimed that he pulled a trick on the passengers by manipulating the car in such a way that it started jerking and the engine died. He then kindly asked them to give the car a push for it to re-start. He said as

soon as they got out of the car to begin pushing, he started the car and sped off to Bibiani police station. He narrated the story to the police, and upon going through the luggage, they found several knives and a hand-made gun. According to Danso, he believes strongly that it was God, who saved his life by giving him the wisdom to lie to his potential murderers. Thus, the mottonym reminds him of God's constant protection over him as in the case of disallowing his untimely death.

Interpretation and Conclusion

In terms of the thematic discussion of the mottonyms, it is clear that certain experiences shaped the coinage of participants' mottoyms. At least, in this research, these experiences point to the ways in which popular cultural media practices are not just random acts but are enmeshed in "matters of deep interest and concern to the people who produce and consume them" (Barber 1997:2). From this perspective, it becomes clear that it is productive to investigate such popular practices, such as these mottonyms, not from a predetermined position that assumes their meanings are fixed and/or self-evident. As it has become clear in my field research, even some very common mottonyms – for example, *Cry Your Own Cry*[10] – are appropriated to make meaning of one's experiences, thus showing how the meanings of even the most prosaic mottonyms are situated in people's lives. This understanding of the mottonyms as intertwined with drivers' actual experiences importantly informs us of the value of Shaun Moores' (2009) recent call for media studies scholars not to exclusively explore media users' experiences solely as "predominantly cognitive process of meaning construction" (p. 301) but from a more expansive perspective of such users' "sensory experience of the world and [their] sensitive knowledge of it" (Meyer and Verrips 2008:21). Such an embodied approach to media and (material and) visual culture (as evident, for example, in this research on mottonyms) takes us beyond the "study of imaginations in terms of representations towards a more visceral and material approaches of cultural forms" (Meyer 2009:7; Morgan 2005; 2012). Just as in this research, such a material (practice) approach to (visual) media allows us to take account of the equal importance of the role of the body, things and media so as to better "grasp the particular modes through which imaginations materialize through media and become manifest in public

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10 This Pidgin English phrase means 'mind your own business'.

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space, generating sensorial sensibilities and aptitudes that vest these imaginations with a sense of truth" (Meyer 2009:6; Couldry, 2004; Zito, 2008).

In the discussion of the mottonyms, it became clear that seeing these 'writings' (even when written in [Standard] English) on the vehicles, do not lend themselves to automatic comprehension. One has to be a competent speaker in any of the languages in which they are written to be able to read and (even then) partially comprehend what that phrase-sentence means. Fuller comprehension of the mottonyms involved tapping into the experiential narratives that formed the basis of coining the inscriptions. This grounded approach to understanding these inscriptions makes a definite contribution to the field of visual culture that urges a concrete ethnographic approach to images. The practice approach to images is premised on the sociocultural feature of images and the way we see things (Morgan 2005:31). Thus, the meanings of the mottonyms as innuendos or philosophical capsules in the lives of the drivers are not "only abstract and discursive but embodied, felt, interactive and cumulative" (Morgan 2008:228). What becomes clear from the above is a holistic understanding of the visual culture of Ghanaian mottonyms through careful embodied ways of knowing rather than just "wispy evocation of words" (Morgan 2008:228) about these inscriptions.

In concluding, this paper has examined, through interviews with some Ghanaian drivers, the motivations behind their mottonyms. In so doing, the paper demonstrates two things. The first is how the practice of mottonyms signifies the experiential nature of naming practices among these commercial drivers. Second, and more importantly, the paper demonstrates the advantage of a field-based phenomenological approach to the mottonyms that makes gives us a holistic understanding into this popular cultural practice. This comprehensive insight about the mottonyms is that they are not just "mental meaningful circulation of ideas" (Zito 2008:71) but more importantly as mediated (embodied) practice. This vision of the mottonyms as a practice of mediation (Zito, 2008) shows that in as much as the mottynyms may seem trivial, they reflect work of thought and effort (Barber, 1997). Thus, as researchers we should take these popular media formats seriously as they delve into peoples' experiences and therefore contribute to our broader understanding of contemporary everyday social life.

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