
Notes

1. The newspaper article was quoting Espen Røysamb from the National Health Board (*Folkhelse*).
2. A little less than £1,000.
4. In 1988, 60 per cent of all houses belonged to this category (Sørensen and Søgaard 1994: 9).
6. I et ‘fuktig’ miljø blir det mange stordrikke. HVIS DU DRIKKER MINDRE, VIL ANDE OGSA DRIKKER MINDRE. I et ‘tørreb’ miljø blir det færre stordrikke.

In a 'wet' environment there are a lot of big drinkers. IF YOU DRINK LESS, THE OTHERS WILL ALSO DRINK LESS. In a 'drier' environment there are fewer big drinkers.

19.10.1996. Saturday. This morning we wanted to go to Accra, but on the road to the center I all of a sudden noticed that the temperature of the engine in our car (a Toyota Corolla Estate from 1985) was rising in such an alarming way, that we decided to immediately visit a workshop near our house in Teshie to let mechanics have a look at the problem. Well, they prepared us surprise after surprise. They spent hours trying to solve the mystery of the sudden rise in temperature – to no avail. Not only did the temperature remain disquietingly high, to our amazement and great annoyance our gasoline meter also started to indicate incredible things. The mechanics carelessly removed a particular part (the thermostat) and threw it away – for according to them we would not need it in Ghana anyway – replaced some old parts for new ones, and emptied and filled the radiator that many times that we seriously started worrying about their expertise and fearing for the 'life' of our car. When the friendly smiling gentlemen at last began to remove the radiator in order to clean it, because this surely would end all our technical problems, we told them to immediately stop their seemingly fruitless efforts, for we did not want to have our car completely ruined by them (see Figure 7.1). They are real *bricoleurs*, who try to behave professionally without having the proper tools, but who evidently have no technical knowledge of cars. Pretenders. One just starts with something in the hope that it will work. If you trust these so-called specialists, in no time you will end up with a totally damaged car which hangs together with ironwire and adhesive
tape! With each turn of their screwdriver not only its value decreases but also its usability on Ghana's roads, which are not 'car-worthy' anyway (diary fragment Jojada).

Figure 7.1 The mechanics who repaired our Toyota.

21.10.1996. Monday. Today we brought our Toyota to another workplace at Osu (Accra). When we came to collect our vehicle at five o'clock it was not yet ready, though we had been assured that this would be the case. I saw the car standing somewhere with the hood aloft. When I looked under it I got a shock. The radiator was replaced, the original fan removed and a kind of huge propeller attached to the engine block. When I angrily asked a mechanic what the hell had happened, he smiled and told me not to worry at all, because this strange propeller was a 'proper adjustment' to the climate in which our car now had to function. The original fans were too weak for the tropical circumstances, so everybody with a car like ours would sooner or later replace it by a strong one which would always be in operation, and do away with the thermostat, a useless and even dangerous part in these circumstances. We felt horrible and irritated, for once again the value of our car had gone down due to this so-called adjustment. The mechanic, however, tried to explain that we should be glad with it, for now our car was 'tropicalized' or 'baptized into the system', but we could not be glad at all. These people not only don't ask you anything, they also devaluate your property because they are bricoleurs and no real mechanics who respect an engine (diary fragment Jojada).

These two fragments from Jojada's diary show how shocked we were by the way in which Ghanaian car mechanics treated our more-than-ten-year-old second-hand car (for which we had just paid 7.6 Million Cedis and which was praised by our Ghanaian friends and neighbours for its newness and beauty) when it had some minor technical problems. These people really made us angry by their seemingly respectless and unprofessional approach towards the engine. However, as we eventually discovered, this approach was not an indication of their lack of technical knowledge, and our anger rather indicated our own ignorance and bias about cars, their upkeep and repair.

We visited Ghana, in the case of Birgit, to study Ghana's vibrant videofilm industry and, in the case of Jojada, to continue research on the artisanal fishery sector, and, like many anthropologists working in urban areas, had just bought a car in order to drive around. While initially we took the use of a seemingly familiar thing as a car for granted in the same way as we did at home, our experience with mechanics made us understand that cars were an incredibly interesting, yet unduly neglected research topic. For that reason, Jojada gradually shifted his attention away from canoes and started a small odyssey through the realm of cars in Ghana. Though not focusing on cars directly, Birgit also realized the importance of car matters, both in films and for their audiences, and collected information about this. The motive behind these endeavours was to deal with our first, strongly negative impressions of car mechanics and electricians, and to give room to a gnawing feeling that these impressions were totally off the mark and appeared to reveal more about a Western fetishization of cars than about actual Ghanaian expertise with regard to vehicles. In order to understand the importance and meaning of cars in contemporary Ghana, we sought to find out how one obtains them, uses them and keeps them rolling on the often defective roads, how they are 'adjusted' or 'tropicalized,' how one repairs them with a minimum of tools and an often discouraging lack of spare parts, and what kind of perceptions of and stories about cars were circulating.

Our point of departure became a car which had appeared in the open space next to our house in Teshie just a few days before our car troubles started. This Peugeot 504, which looked like a heap of scrap-iron beyond...
repair, was nevertheless day in day out patched up by a young man and a few assistants. At the time we developed an interest in this vehicle, it was nothing more than a beautifully blue-sprayed body with the slogan *God Never Fails* on its back and a worn-out engine inside. To mention just a few glaring defects, it had no electrical wiring, the coverings of the doors and the seats seemed to have disappeared, the tyres were in a terrible condition and the exhaust pipe almost fell on the ground (see Figure 7.2). The man who invested so much time,

**Figure 7.2** The interior of the ‘God Never Fails’ before it was repaired.

energy and money turned out to be long-distance taxi-driver Kwaku A.\(^2\) who together with his young wife and baby lived in two rented rooms nearby. Several months before, he had had a serious accident with his car and now he was trying to bring it back on the road again, for he desperately needed some income. Soon after we got in touch with Kwaku, we found out that the Peugeot 504 had been imported from the Netherlands in September 1991. To our surprise, we realized that it had crossed our path in Ghana before; we even had made a ride in it in the company of one of its former owners, a Dutch development worker whom we met during an earlier trip to Ghana. This Dutchman sold it somewhat later to a befriended South African doctor, who in his turn sold it to Kwaku for the amount of $3000 in April 1994, on the condition that during one year he was to pay $250 per month to a certain Ghanaian woman.

This rather remarkable coincidence prompted us to write at least part of the ‘biography’ of Kwaku’s car and to use it as an empirical entrance into the world of cars in Ghana. Soon after we met Kwaku, we therefore made an agreement with him: in exchange for all kinds of data, he would take Jojada on small trips and introduce him to relevant people and places to invest in the reconstruction of his beloved car, the *God Never Fails*,\(^3\) so that he could start as a long-distance taxi-driver again. Kwaku initiated Jojada in the scarcely explored, thoroughly male domain of the car world in Ghana.

Given that all over the globe cars play a tremendously important role as means of transport and sources of power and prestige, it is surprising that they are so much neglected by anthropologists. When we started looking for anthropological work on cars and car-related matters, we realized that the few existing publications focus on very partial aspects. There is, for instance, some anthropological literature on drivers (with regard to America see Agar 1986; with regard to Africa see Field 1960; Jordan 1978; Peace 1988). These authors, however, merely focus on social networks, contacts with passengers and other sociological topics, and pay virtually no attention to the car in its materiality. The same applies to anthropological studies of car slogans (e.g. Lawuyi 1988, Van der Geest 1989), which regard the mottos car owners chose to paint on their cars as a reflection to their world view.

In his chapter on a ride in a Songhay bush taxi, Stoller, too, confines himself to a Geertzian symbolic analysis of ‘the complex of Songhay bush taxi interaction’ (1989: 69–84). We do not, of course, wish to deny the merits of approaching cars as vehicles of meaning (see also White 1993). But our point is that research should not be limited to symbolic approaches but should also address the more mundane and material aspects of cars in their use in everyday life.

It seems that, up until now, Kopytoff has pleaded in vain for more anthropological research on cars, conducted along the following lines:

The biography of a car in Africa would reveal a wealth of cultural data: the way it was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller to the buyer, the uses to which the car is regularly put, the identity of its most frequent passengers and of those who borrow it, the frequency of borrowing, the garages to which it is taken and the owner’s relation to the mechanics, the movement of
the car from hand to hand over the years, and in the end, when the car collapses, the final disposition of its remains. All of these details would reveal an entirely different biography from that of a middle-class American, or Navajo, or French peasant car (1986: 67).

It would lead too far to discuss the reasons for anthropologists’ reluctance to write such ‘auto’-biographies. Certainly Ottes in his reflection about the fact that social scientists pay so little attention to cars as objects, hits an important point:

A general reason . . . is quite simply that much of sociological theory . . . has a tacit but nevertheless a strong anti-materialist bias in which an artifact becomes a ‘mere vehicle,’ a mundane means of little substance or interest (1994: 50).

Next to this general anti-materialist bias, which has been opened up in anthropology only in the course of the last decade (e.g. Miller 1987, 1995), one may also notice a bias against modern technology. Resonating with a mistrust of technology propounded by Western intellectual tradition (expressed most explicitly by thinkers such as Max Weber and Martin Heidegger), in Africanist anthropology there still is a tendency of favouring the study of local, cultural traditions. While it may no longer be stated overtly that African drivers show a lack of “feeling” for machines’, and that their allegedly defective attitude towards cars ‘may be the result of a youth passed in a non-mechanic world’ (Morgan and Pugh 1969: 608, quoted approvingly by Jordan 1978: 41), the view that Western technologies are foreign to and potentially disruptive of African culture is still lingering on.

Paradoxically, in the practice of everyday life in Western societies, this anti-technological bias is accompanied by an uncritical attitude which just takes technology in general, and the car in particular, for granted. As the Dutch sociologist Van de Braak (1991: 50ff) has argued, there is a rift between production and use of cars. Consumers simply expect that a car keeps on rolling; only at the very moment when something is wrong one realizes how little one knows about car technology and quickly seeks help from a specialist, who, in turn, is expected to replace the necessary parts without changing the technological structure as such. This unquestioning stance, masked by blind confidence, can best be characterized as alienation (ibid.: 51).

In this chapter we seek to overcome the anti-material and anti-technological bias of our discipline, as well as the typically Western, taken-for-granted attitude towards cars which we appeared to reproduce in our reaction to the Ghanaian mechanics, and investigate cars in their mundane as well as symbolical, material-technological as well as spiritual dimensions. The foremost goal of this chapter, then, is to understand, by way of a detailed study of Kwaku’s car, why and how cars in Ghana are culturally redefined or, as Ghanaians put it, ‘baptized into the system,’ ‘tropicalized’ or ‘adjusted,’ and to investigate how cars are kept in the system for periods Westerners usually deem technically impossible. On the basis of our – necessarily tentative – answers to these intriguing questions, we will briefly reflect on the car as a marker, and indeed, a vehicle of modernity. Before dealing with the vicissitudes of the Peugeot 504 it is necessary, however, to say something in general about Ghana’s infrastructure, car trade, the Ministry of Transport and Communications, the insurance business, types of car use and (police) control.

Roads, Customs and Licences

Ghana is almost fully dependent on lorries and cars for the transport of goods and people, for it does not have an elaborate railway system. Ghana’s road network is most dense in the southern regions and least in the northern ones. Due to the bad condition of these roads, the reachability of particular places and areas often forms a serious problem. Highways exist only in, around and between big cities such as Accra and Tema. The rest consists of asphalted interregional two-lane roads, untarred country roads and bush tracks. The problem with many of these roads is that they are full of potholes, and therefore rather dangerous, especially in the dark, for outside the big cities lighting is almost always absent. Nowadays the government invests a lot in the maintenance and improvement of Ghana’s road network, but it has not yet been able to bring the quality of the network to an acceptable level which matches its intensive use. For many Ghanaians, this is a constant point of criticisms with regard to the state, which is regarded as unable to cater for the needs of drivers and travellers. As Ghanaian popular videomovies indicate over and over again, good roads and beautiful cars are much cherished and figure as ultimate icons of modernity. There are endless scenes in which the camera takes the audiences on a mimetic ride through the beautiful highways and lanes of Accra – scenes which prompt audiences to loudly admire the beauty of the capital city, which eludes them in their everyday life, and which apparently can only be seen from the perspective of a smoothly-running limousine.
As Ghana does not have its own automobile industry, the country is fully dependent on the import of new and second-hand cars, trucks, lorries and buses from abroad. Until a few years ago, the import of used vehicles from European countries, for instance the Netherlands and Germany, was flourishing. Lots of old vehicles, sometimes declared unroadworthy in these countries, were shipped to Tema where they could be collected by their owners (private persons, car dealers, or companies) after they had paid a certain amount of customs duties, including a so-called over-age tax. The latter kind of tax is considerable when a car is older than a particular number of years. One of the tricky things with the import of old cars is that the government tends, on the one hand, towards decreasing the age beyond which this tax has to be paid and, on the other, to increase this tax each year. The background of this policy is to muzzle the import of too many cars above a certain age. For the Toyota Corolla we bought in 1996, the trader who imported it had to pay 50 per cent of the C.I.F. Value, that is C 3,767.327.00, as over-age tax plus 10 per cent (or C 753.466.00) customs duty. Although a price of 7.6 Million Cedis for a more than ten year old car that would cost no more than $500 in Europe may seem excessive, if we add to this the amount paid for it abroad, the costs of shipment and insurance, then it is understandable.

Against the background of such high prices for used vehicles, it is no wonder that people struggle to keep them on the road as long as possible. Many people get into serious debt with relatives and friends in order to get their certificate of payment of customs duties in Tema harbour, without which certificate registration by the Vehicle Examination and Licensing Division is simply impossible. These problems frequently occur in the case of cars shipped by ex-patriotes to relatives in Ghana, or cars bought on trips abroad by Ghanaians without sufficient knowledge of the latest tax rules and regulations.

After an imported car has been released, more obstacles have to be overcome before one can finally drive it. Officially, a vehicle has to be technically examined by state officials, for without such an examination one will not get a licence number. Getting such a number may be a difficult affair, if one does not know the right official and/or one has not enough money to ease one's way through the bureaucratic channels. Therefore car owners often let others go through the time- and money-consuming procedures at the licensing offices. In and around these offices are found many 'agents' – who make a living by offering their services in getting the proper registration documents within reasonable time. As in the Cameroonian situation described by Mbembe and Roitman (1996), here too the official bureaucracy is seconded by its 'fake parallel', and only through particular 'ways of doing' can one access the necessary documents. The amount of money agents demand for their knowledge of the proper procedures and how to circumvent them, for instance by offering officials they know (or work with) small 'gifts', can be rather high, but worth the cost, especially if one is in a hurry. A government decree in 1996, that every car owner had to re-register his or her vehicle before a particular date, resulted in a bonanza not only for these agents but also a host of others, such as the insurance people, the producers of licence plates, the sellers of all kinds of car accessories, the owners of small repair-shops and vulcanizers, whom one can regularly find in the direct vicinity of a licensing office. The final step in obtaining the formal right to drive the car after the certificate of roadworthiness and a licence number are obtained is to insure one's vehicle. Even without the documents mentioned, the police may be lenient in exchange for 'presents'. So the 'adjustment' of the car as a mechanical process is accompanied by similar adjustments in the cultural norms of Ghanaian bureaucracy and commerce.

**Public Transport**

When one wants to travel in Ghana, one travels by car. Though the state maintains particular bus lines between big cities with rather good material, this kind of public transport is of minor importance compared to the private sector. Ghanaians travel within and between cities with private taxis and trotros (derived from the three-pence charge one once had to pay for a ride). Formerly these trotros or Mammy lorries were Bedfords, which were imported in great numbers from Britain as complete vehicles between 1948 and 1959 and thereafter C.K.D, that is 'Completely Knocked Down', to be assembled in Tema until 1966, when this type of lorry was banned (cf. Kyei and Schreckenbach 1975: 8). These characteristic vehicles, almost all with evocative slogans in the front and at the back, which for more than three decades dominated the image of traffic flow on Ghana's roads, packed with passengers and all kinds of goods such as yams, fish, fowl and fruits have almost all disappeared now. Nowadays, the transport of persons and their goods is mainly by passenger cars and station wagons made into short- and long-distance taxis, as well as with all kinds of delivery vans, ingeniously transformed into small busses, and ordinary busses. The passenger cars are painted yellow at the front and back of each side and have a small black shield which indicates the name of the car owner, the maximum
amount of passengers, etc. The long-distance cabs (mostly Peugeot station wagons, but also small and big busses) normally also have such a shield, but they are not painted in a specific manner. Instead they almost always have painted slogans, such as *Sea never Dry, Don't Kiss the Horror or God Never Fails* (cf. Kyei and Schreckenbach 1975; Date-Bah 1980; Van der Geest 1989).11

In a big city like Accra the apparent chaos hides an order in which many drivers work in turns on particular trajectories between stations, use fixed charges and belong to unions with elaborate rules and regulations. The unions often run (rented or owned) stations12 and supervise the admission of new taxi-drivers on the basis of such criteria as experience, knowledge of a trajectory, state of the vehicle and the possession of the proper documents. After having been accepted as a new member, one has to pay income and welfare tax as well as booking and union fees. Not all taxi-, *trotro*­ and big bus-drivers own their vehicles. Many of them drive for relatives or other private persons, who often live abroad. It is exactly this practice which forms a frequent source of troubles. Common complaints by the owners, for instance, are that their drivers do not maintain the vehicles properly and, still worse, do not stick to the financial agreements made with them but instead keep too much money for themselves. Conversely, drivers complain about owners' greediness, their inclination to attribute any technical fault to the driver, and their general indifference towards the hardships involved in the job.13 These potential conflicts notwithstanding, driving a taxi or *trotro* is considered a respectable business, which not only conveys prestige, but often earns more money than one can get through other jobs. Therefore becoming a driver, and possibly a car owner, is aspired to by many young men.14 Our neighbour Kwaku was one of them, and he even managed to get his own car exceptionally fast. His case shows that the high hopes vested in vehicles do not always materialize and that driving an old Peugeot between Accra and Takoradi may be a heavy, almost unbearable burden.

**Struggling with 'God Never Fails'**

Kwaku was born in Teshie,15 where his father (a Ga) worked as carpenter. As he did not like to stay in the family house after his mother's (a Fanti) death, he ran away from home at the age of 13; first to Labadi (the neighbouring Ga village which has become absorbed by Accra) where he became a driver's mate, and later to Takoradi (Western Region) where he started living with his mother's sister's husband. After a few years he returned to Labadi where he became a mechanic's apprentice, for he loved cars and later wanted to have his own workshop, but the buying of tools turned out to be an unsurmountable obstacle.16 He got his driving licence and earned some money by driving around his elder brother, a rather successful businessman. Then he obtained a job as a driver for a hotel owner in Accra. While working for this man in the early 1990s, he became acquainted with the South African doctor Henry H. and his Dutch friend Klaas W., the development worker. Through the doctor he obtained his first taxi, a Datsun, which he bought for C 457,000, a rather low price at the time (September 1992). Since he only possessed C 107,000, Kwaku had to borrow the rest from his friend, whom he very quickly paid back in monthly installments of C 25,000.17 Very soon after he got it, Kwaku gave the car to a driver to exploit it for him in the morning; he himself used it during the night. Because of troubles in the hotel – the owner and his wife did not understand where Kwaku's money came from and accused him of theft – he left the place for the doctor's house and became his 'houseboy'. Though Kwaku invested much money in the maintenance of the old Datsun, he still earned a lot with its exploitation, at least enough 'for the house' and for his expensive marriage with Rose in March 1994.

He managed to organize a wedding many young people dream of (and which forms a recurring, characteristic feature of popular video movies): the bride was wearing a white gown, the ceremony took place in church, and there was a reception afterwards. Through this church wedding – in the Apostolic Church of Ghana to which Rose and her family belong – the marriage became officially registered. Many young women want to convince their boy friends to make such an arrangement, which is also much favoured by Ghana's booming pentecostal-charismatic churches (cf. Meyer 1998), because official registration makes it legally impossible for the husband to take a second wife. As Mr and Mrs, Kwaku and Rose commanded much respect from neighbours when they moved to their beautifully painted two-room apartment in Teshie: a modern, Christian couple with a comparatively fine income. While Kwaku was very proud of having been able to marry in such a way, he also felt that many people, especially in his own family, would envy them and seek to spiritually destroy their happiness.

And indeed, soon after the wedding, Kwaku got into trouble, when for unknown reasons the car burnt out. He managed, however, to sell the heavily damaged vehicle for a higher price than he bought it for. In April 1994 his employer and friend Henry sold the Peugeot 504 he had bought from the Dutch development worker to Kwaku. This time
the price was considerably higher, that is $3000, to be paid in monthly installments of $250 into the bank account of the doctor's Ghanaian girlfriend, who was to remain the official car owner until the payment had been settled.

Kwaku started to invest in the car immediately after he got it. He transformed it into a comfortable long-distance taxi with which he began to transport passengers and goods between Accra and Takoradi. His home base became a station in Kaneshie owned by a local co-operation (the Kaneshie Co-operative Association) where he joined an independent local group of Peugeot drivers (not yet resorting under the Ghana Private Road Transport Union [GPRU] of the Trade Union Congress [TUC]) working on this lucrative trajectory. In order to be able to maintain his car well, he first bought the body of an old Peugeot 504 for C 200,000, and somewhat later also the engine for C 500,000. He left both in Takoradi to cannibalize them just in case the need might arise. This is a common practice among long-distance drivers who mostly work with rather old and worn-out material.

For ten months Kwaku drove without many problems and therefore earned a decent living and had a good time with his then pregnant wife. But then an endless series of troubles with the car started, which eventually made Kwaku decide to become a good Christian again, for these problems almost ruined their life. It all started in February 1995 with three flat tires in a row, each at a place where there was water at both sides of the road – incidents which worried Kwaku a lot, for 'this could be no coincidence'. He visited a church elder, an old lady, who told him to fast for seven days. Yet he did not stick to her advice and on April 13, on his way back to Accra, he had the first serious accident with his Peugeot near Malam Junction not far from Takoradi. He needed almost three months to get the spoiled car back on the road again. Though the insurance company paid him C 500,000, he still needed to borrow money from relatives. Fortunately the doctor, who had left Ghana for some time, appeared on the scene again. In August he hired Kwaku and his car to travel, and this reduced Kwaku's debt to 1.2 million Cedis.

But from then on the car became a real nuisance, a money-devouring monster. Kwaku's diary in which he meticulously recorded any event related to his car – his auto-biography, so to speak – contains entry after entry on disturbingly knocking bearings, malfunctioning cylinders, an out-of-order crankshaft, a leaking radiator, etc. Time and again he had to make embarrassing trips to uncles in order to borrow money from them, which they sometimes refused. He even considered meeting the church elder again to pray for him, so that his predicament might end. In spite of all these technical problems, Kwaku managed to pay off part of his debt. On April 13, exactly one year after his first accident, he had a serious second one.

I thought that I and my passengers would die. I really felt there is something behind, so that I cannot pay the money, so that she will get the car. So let us pray over things and stop joking. (...) I was reporting to her that the car was not working properly and asked her to give me some money. She said I had to go and come. I did that three times, but she did not give me the money I asked for. Then I decided to borrow the money elsewhere. I have not been at her place anymore. (...) The thing has become a sort of pressure on me. I want to get rid of Mary and transfer the car on my own name.

From then on Kwaku did not pay Mrs Mary P. for a long time. At the time we met him in September 1996, he still owed her C 600,000; and had stopped paying her since that April after he had had his second serious accident with the car. He believed that she was behind it – that is, that she had used some destructive 'spiritual' means – because she wanted to get the vehicle back. Since his car was seriously damaged and moreover showed more technical shortages with every day, he decided to stop making trips to Takoradi and back and to invest all the money he could borrow in slowly repairing his vehicle. He even used the capital (C 200,000) his wife had accumulated in order to start a trade. This, of course, put tremendous pressure on their relationship, especially since Rose had become pregnant again. They had frequent quarrels, and not much was left of the image of the modern, better-off couple they had given before. Rose often stayed with her own parents, and expected Kwaku to become a better husband – a project he himself had agreed to and discussion but could not always live up to because of his allegedly quick temper.

Kwaku now became a regular visitor of repairshops in Teshie and all over Accra. He cleverly used his elaborate network to recruit a whole series of specialists, from sprayers to electricians, who could help him in bringing his car back to life again. Sometimes, however, these people caused more problems than they solved. Once a welder worked so carelessly that the electric wiring of the Peugeot caught fire and was partly destroyed. This is no small wonder, for welders, who usually work without protecting their eyes, are not used to removing inflammable material in their direct environment. When something happens
they simply use a small plastic bottle with water to extinguish a fire (see Figure 7.3). In this case to no avail, with the result of a damage of C 60.000 of which the unlucky welder could only pay C 20.000 immediately.

At the time we developed a serious interest in Kwaku’s car, he and a befriended electrician were busy installing new wiring (see Figure 7.4). But they could not properly test it, for the Peugeot’s battery urgently needed to be repaired or, still better, replaced. The problem was not to
find a battery repairshop, which abound in Accra, but the money needed to repair it. In these shops, one repairs, refills and recharges for a price dependent upon the number of plates in a battery. It is here that our financial involvement in the revival of Kwaku's car began, for we decided to help him buy a new battery in exchange for information. But this proved hopeless, for the vehicle was in bad shape. To list only a few of the technical problems, the shock-absorbers were weak and needed to be refilled with oil, the radiator and the fuel pump were leaking, the bearings were knocking, the cylinders, pistons and crankshaft were worn out, the starter often did not work, the fanbelt was damaged, the gearbox looked dangerous, no meter at the dashboard was working and almost all of the fuses were fixed instead of replaced by new ones. As Kwaku used to say: 'The body is nice now, but the inside is not good.'

In order to make the inside better, so that he could start his business again, he did what so many of his colleagues would do in similar circumstances. He fell back on using all kinds of locally invented 'adjustments' and, when these would no longer work, on buying second-hand or even new spare parts. Since original parts are often unavailable in Ghana or much too expensive, one frequently makes do with cheap imitations of an inferior quality produced in countries such as Nigeria and India. Since even these copies are rather expensive, the common practice, however, is to first pay a visit to one of Accra's many markets, for example at Kaneshie, where old engines are cannibalized and a wide variety of second-hand parts are offered. In these areas one can also find a host of small workshops where old parts, which are usually thrown away in Western countries, are most ingeniously 'revitalized' or utilized to repair engines. In the machine-shop Godfirst Engineering Works, for instance, the walls of old cylinders are turned into 'new' ones to be placed in engine blocks with worn-out linings (see Figure 7.5). Here one is confronted with a tremendously rich sort of technical knowledge and practice, which came into existence due to a shortage of money and hence of means and parts. This is backed by an impressive degree of inventiveness.

Kwaku is a master in using technical 'adjustments'. For example, he replaced the two-chamber carburettor of his old Peugeot by a one-chamber one in order to save petrol. The air inlet was not original any longer, but consisted of a piece of pierced tin. A lot of gaskets and rubber parts, such as bushings, were 'indigenous', that is, cut out of old tubes and tyres (see Figure 7.6). The art of recycling these materials is practised with a minimum of tools by a small army of highly skilled masters and their apprentices. All the fuses in the Peugeot were repaired with copper wire, because original ones could not be found or were too expensive. At several places nails were used as lock pins. Some rubber tubes were fixed with iron wire, whereas others which evidently were out of use were closed with old spark-plugs, butterfly nuts or even pieces of wood.

Figure 7.5 The production of new linings in the machineshop Godfirst Engineering Works.
A more careful inspection of *God Never Fails* would certainly have revealed more technical ‘adjustments’. Similar ones and others, such as the huge propeller-like fan put in our car, could be observed in other vehicles.

It is important to realize that this widespread ‘tropicalization’ of motor-cars in Ghana (as well as in many other African countries) not only rests on a thorough knowledge of how engines work, but also and especially on a rather unique type of knowledge of how one can keep old ones working in a situation of limited goods. People like Kwaku not only have to cope with a shortage or lack of spare parts, they often do not have the proper tools to repair their vehicles, and for that reason they often involve their bodies in ways that compensate for the lack of such tools. For Kwaku it was almost normal to suck petrol out of his tank in order to clean certain car parts or to use his tongue to feel if his battery was still charged. And since the gasoline, oil and temperature gadgets had stopped working long ago, on his trips between Accra and Takoradi he constantly tried to figure out by listening and smelling, whether his car was still going strong.

Only a few garages in Accra are equipped with sophisticated instruments to repair cars, for example those of big dealers, but they are too expensive for ordinary people like Kwaku. In contrast to the poorly equipped workshops of many mechanics,23 who like to advertise themselves, for instance, ‘gearbox doctors’—these garages look like sophisticated ‘hospitals’ for machines. It would be wrong, however, to presume that the workshop mechanics on the one hand, and the employees of these modern ‘hospitals’ on the other, represent respectively an inferior and a superior approach to the car. They share a thorough knowledge of how this pre-eminent specimen of modern technology works and best can be kept working under the given circumstances, but differ in the way they are able to treat it when it refuses to function properly. At this point mechanics and people like Kwaku show an incredible inventiveness based on a perception of the car, more especially the engine, as a thing or an object which technically can be dominated and domesticated. And they need this, for old cars constantly confront their users with new problems to be solved.

Kwaku, for instance, managed to get his car back on the road in the middle of November, but was faced with a serious breakdown of his engine less than a month later. On a trip from Accra to Takoradi his crankshaft became loose, as a consequence of which at least one connecting rod of a piston was totally spoiled and others seriously damaged. In the meantime he had earned a little bit of money, but

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**Figure 7.6** A steering rod with a rubber ‘adjustment’.

Next to these directly visible ‘adjustments’, there were a series of hidden ones. In order to prevent the knocking of some worn-out main bearings in the engine block, Kwaku had put pieces of greasy paper between them and the crank-shaft. Instead of using a special spring, his distribution chain was held in its proper place with a piece of copper pipe. He had raised the oil level in his shock-absorbers beyond normal so that he could drive more comfortably on roads full of potholes. He more than once asserted that in case of an emergency situation, he would not hesitate to temporarily use soap-suds instead of brake fluid.
not enough to easily overcome this new disaster. We left Ghana when he was struggling to find an additional sum of money to the one we ‘borrowed’ him. But he was successful, for in 1999 he was still on the road between Accra and Takoradi with God Never Fails, this time sprayed yellow, and had managed to pay off his debt to Mary and finally become the official owner (see Figure 7.7).

Figure 7.7 Kwaku and his yellow-sprayed ‘God Never fails’ in 1999.

Though it seems as if mechanics and people like Kwaku ‘will fix everything and bring it back to life again’, this does not mean that their perception of cars, especially engines, and how they (dys)function is merely technical. Here one enters the fascinating area of the beliefs, images and lore with regard to these material objects. Just like the canoes used in the artisanal fisheries, they very often are seen and treated as a kind of beings with a will of their own, who can get hurt and die and therefore have to be carefully protected against all kinds of evil influences. To make things more complex, most drivers, as is also the case in Western societies, tend towards a strong identification with their vehicles, that is, with already semi-anthropomorphized material objects (cf. Verrips 1994). At times they feel so much one with their car, that what happens to these ‘beings’ also happens to them. And though drivers know that many cars are old and therefore run more risks of collapsing than new ones, that accidents occur as a consequence of bad road conditions, overloading, speeding and the use of alcohol, they nevertheless want to have an answer to such pressing, classical questions as to why a car collapses or gets involved in an accident at a particular time and place, so that income is lost.

We will start by describing some of the practices or rituals to protect cars from collapsing and getting involved in accidents and then present some of Kwaku’s stories about why such things happen. Apart from painting slogans of the type God Never Fails on their cars, drivers often also use stickers saying, for instance, I am covered by the blood of Jesus or I will make it in Jesus name. Next to this kind of protective formulas on and in their cars, Christian drivers often ask their pastor and church elders to pray over their vehicles, so that they will be protected against the influence of evil forces or Satan. Muslim drivers also visit their malams to pray over their cars, so that they will be protected against evil. Some of them even go so far as to park the car in front of a malam’s house so that it will not be stolen.

Kwaku himself went through a protective Christian ritual just before he started making long distance trips between Accra and Takoradi again: ‘... we prayed that whatever ties there were on the car with evil, God should burn them. Seeking for the blood of Jesus Christ.’ When he was about to take his car back on the road in November 1996, he invited us to accompany him to the Apostolic Church one Sunday. In order to mark his good intentions and high hopes for the future, he attended church together with Rose after quite a long period of absence. After service the pastor and a number of church elders blessed the car through prayers (see Figure 7.8). When we told him in the course of our discussion about this ritual that we did not attend church at home, Kwaku said that he could appreciate that, as he himself had not been a church-goer in the past. ‘But’, he said, ‘you don’t have jujú [black magic]. But we here, we have it here, and we have to protect ourselves against it and the only way to do it is through the Holy Spirit.’ Clearly, Christianity is regarded as generating power and protecting people against evil forces.

Kwaku, however, did not assume that such rituals would protect him against all kinds of troubles, for he explained:

It is protected, but not that nothing will happen to it. Against evil forces and unwanted accidents, but not against technical failure. The car is old. Technical failures are caused by lack of maintenance. It is essential that
drawn. In any case, he started each journey with a silent prayer because he believed that regular praying and listening to what God said to him while under way were important ways to avoid all sorts of trouble. He was also convinced that living according to Christians rules might yield luck on the road and a decent income.

Kwaku told us many stories about the use of jujus to protect cars and drivers. According to him, there were many non-Christian – but also ‘nominally’ Christian – (taxi)drivers who had hidden special things, such as particular beads or pieces of (blood-stained) cloth, under the hood or the pedals, in the steering wheel or even the engine in order to drive safely and earn a lot of money with their trade. He especially feared (truck) drivers from Nzima in the Western region, for some of them were supposed to have very strong magical powers

… which make that, if the car is gonna crash you might not find them anymore, the drivers. They might be somewhere else. (...) It is just like an air bag. As soon as you get the impact, the airbag will explode to the one steering. That’s how it is, as soon as the accident comes, he vanishes.

But according to Kwaku ‘most of the drivers have got a kind of protection which they might not tell. Not for vanishing or disappearing, but sometimes it protects them from evil forces.’ In spite of all these protective measures, drivers every now and then are confronted with these forces and their destructive influence. They might manifest themselves, for example, in suddenly broken engines, mysterious flat tyres, and more or less serious accidents. In Kwaku’s view, and much in line with the stance of the pentecostal-charismatic churches, all these evil forces come from the realm of the Devil, who was sacked from heaven by God and dragged along all demons (cf. Meyer 1999b), and are called upon by envious or greedy persons to afflict cars and their owners. There are many stories circulating around spiritual pacts made between local priests and their clients, which involve killing others spiritually through car accidents, or even offering a whole car as a blood sacrifice in exchange for personal gain (cf. Meyer 1995). Other stories are about strange beings roaming about in the night, and seeking to distract drivers’ attention so that their car will perish. Kwaku told us that he had often seen such beings along the roadside, but that as a result of his faith in God he had always managed to get through.

Due to the presence of witches among the passengers, a car may become ‘strong’, ‘stiff’ or even stop all of a sudden at a certain place, so drivers believe. Kwaku experienced this several times; once, for

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**Figure 7.8** The blessing of Kwaku’s car in 1996.

you grease it. It is like our own bodies, you have to put grease in the joints. If the pastor prayed over it, there still should be oil, water, all what is necessary. Like a body you have to feed it.

This statement notwithstanding, he often talked about evil forces spoiling totally worn-out parts of his car. For him in everyday life technical and supernaturally caused failures were entangled, so much so that a clear-cut boundary between the two domains could not be
instance, when he had Hausa people from Ivory Coast in his car who carried cola and a strange bag with them:

I was coming from Takoradi and as soon as I got to the big bridge, the car couldn’t go anymore. I turned back, then I drove fine. I returned back again, it couldn’t go again. So I drove to the station and dropped them to the next car. (. . .) I didn’t understand it. In certain traditions cola means something. Maybe they are having something of a dead person, the hair or the nails. If your car is not that type of car, it can’t go.

There are also many stories about the ghosts of persons who either died in a car or were transported in it to be buried, which prevent automobiles from functioning properly. Kwaku told us, for instance, how the ghost of his deceased stepmother stopped the very small car in which he and some of his relatives were travelling to her burial.

We saw oil coming out, smoke, so we stopped. The driver was complaining ‘why?’, nothing was wrong with the car. The woman wanted us to be comfortable and knew the car that they brought was very big, a lot of space. So the body was put into that car, then we had more space. It was two hours to the village where we were going, in the Volta Region.

In order to prevent this kind of trouble, one often pours libation at mortarways when collecting a corpse and ritually purifies cars in which people died by accident. 28

But it is not only envious outsiders who may cause technical breakdowns and accidents. Kwaku, for instance, was afraid that jealous uncles might poison him and spoil his car because of his relative success as a long distance taxi-driver. He also suspected one of his father’s wives of seeking to spiritually spoil his business, because she was jealous that he – ‘just a small boy’ – could own a car. In dreams and visions, he every now and then ‘saw’ how envious ‘witches’ used his car spiritually, and the next day he felt that the car was tired and run-down. It was, however, very difficult to recognize them, for in his visions – about which his pastor and a prophet said that they were justified – they were using different people’s faces. Nevertheless he was pretty sure that they were close relatives who wanted to destroy him and his car. His experiences with witchcraft – here, too, the ‘dark side of kinship’ (Geschiere 1994) in the sense that he saw himself as a target of his relatives’ envy – formed one of the reasons why he would not like to live in the family house and felt in constant need of protection.

**Conclusion**

By now it may be clear that our initial anger and amazement about the treatment of our Toyota, which we found increasingly embarrassing as our research proceeded, reflects a particular Western way of dealing with cars. At least in our experience at home, car repair is a specialized yet centralized affair. Like many car owners, we take the technological dimension of cars for granted and simply trust that, regular maintenance at the garage provided, everything works. In case something might go wrong, we would never dare to touch the engine of our VW ourselves and rather leave it to the care of expensive specialists, who do not admit snoopers at the workplace. And, afraid to get stranded somewhere along the road, we are prepared to follow the mechanics’ advice to replace all sorts of parts even before they break down, or, alternatively to buy a newer car when maintenance of the old one becomes too expensive. All this pinpoints a rather ignorant and, in a sense, alienated attitude towards car technology.

How different are things in Ghana where there are great numbers of different specialists for various aspects of cars, where parts will only be replaced after they broke down, and where even lay people have an admirable working knowledge of motors and can easily engage in technical debates with the mechanics. The distance between the realms of repair and use, so characteristic of Western societies, is blurred. On the whole, it appears that the engine commands much less awe. People easily and pragmatically take it apart, and even rig up self-made spare parts from improper materials in order to make it work again. This self-assured pragmatism is diametrically opposed to Western images of the impact of technology in Africa and urges us to pay more attention to how machines – not only cars, but also phones, computers, cameras and so on – are used, maintained and repaired in everyday life. 29

If the car, as many authors suggest (e.g. Mbembe and Roitman 1996: 160), is one of the main markers of modernity, then Kwaku’s struggles with *God never fails* can certainly reveal important features of African ways of dealing with modernity. The key term, of course, is ‘adjustment’ – a process not laid upon from above as in the case of the IMF’s Structural Adjustment Programmes, but emerging in the practice of everyday life. ‘Adjustment’, as we experienced ourselves, becomes necessary as soon as a car enters Ghana and becomes ‘part of the system’. This involves ingenious technological changes as well as more or less elaborate spiritual measures. The background of these endeavours, of course, is poverty and scarcity, and it would be naive to merely
celebrate them as expressions of cultural creativity. At the same time, at least with regard to the situation described here, there is no reason to subscribe to a pessimistic notion of all-pervasive crisis which speaks through Mbeembe and Roitman’s account of the Cameroonian situation in general, and their representation of the (middle-class) car as a ‘broken down machine’ which has been reduced to ‘a figurative object’ (ibid.: 161) in particular. Kwaku’s story reveals a tremendously powerful will and capacity — at least on the part of ordinary people — to keep the engine working by all means, even at a time when the West tends to forget Africa as much as its old, cast-off cars.

We dedicate this chapter to our friend and colleague, the medical sociologist Dr Kodjo Senah, who taught us as much about cars as about Ghanaian society, and with whom we had so many wonderful rides in his Lion (an old Peugeot 505). The research on which this essay is based has been made possible partly through the generous financial support of the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO). We would like to thank Marleen de Witte for transcribing our interviews with Kwaku and Daniel Miller for valuable editorial comments and suggestions.

References


Notes

1. In September 1996, 1000 Cedis were the equivalent of Hfl 1.00, and about US $0.50. Due to inflation, the Cedi has been loosing value to such an extent that in September 1999, C 3400 were exchanged for $1.00. – When we expressed the wish to buy a car, our Ghanaian friends strongly advised us not to get a car which had been ‘in the system’ for some time already, but rather a second-hand one directly imported from Europe. Despite their sometimes considerable age, such cars are regarded as ‘new’.

2. We use pseudonyms for all persons featuring in this chapter.

3. According to Kwaku he painted the slogan God Never Fails on the Peugeot, because God had listened to his fervent prayers to influence the previous owner in such a way that he would give or sell his car, which he had stored away for some time, to him.

4. Though Van der Geest even quotes Kopytoff’s valuable call in a footnote, he does not take up the gauntlet, for he also deals with cars in a rather superficial way and does not show how they undergo what he tersely calls a ‘cultural redefinition’ (Van der Geest 1989: 35).


6. Cf. Van Binsbergen (1999), who develops this argument with regard to ICT, and pleads for more research on Africans’ use and perception of computers.

7. The only railway which can be said to play a role of some significance is the one between Accra and Kumasi. But in comparison with transport by lorry and car, railway traffic does not mean very much. Though Ghana disposes over navigable rivers and lakes, especially Lake Volta, waterways are not optimally used for the transport of goods and persons, on the contrary. As a citizen of a country in which transport over water is tremendously important, and as an anthropologist who once did fieldwork among Dutch bargees (Verrips 1990a and b), Jojda often wondered why inland navigation is so underdeveloped in Ghana.

8. The Ghanaian videofilm industry emerged in the mid-1980s. Instigated by the fact that the state-owned film industry had not been able to produce feature films for years, local, untrained producers took up ordinary videocameras and made their own films. These movies, which are closer to the soap genre than to artistic ‘African film’, visualize stories and experiences from everyday life. They became tremendously popular and are screened in all the major cinemas. Cf. Meyer 1999a.

9. Cars liked very much in Ghana as well as in other African countries are Peugeots. Nowadays they do not reach Ghana over land any longer. Due to the political situation in countries such as Algeria it is too dangerous to drive used cars through the Sahara with the goal to sell them in West African countries for a much higher price than the one paid in Europe.

10. This discouraging policy of the government seems to be successful, for the number of really worn-out and dangerous cars and lorries in Accra’s streets in the early 1990s was considerably higher than in the mid-1990s.

11. We also collected in and around Accra a great number of (English, Ga, Twi and Ewe) slogans on cars used for public transport. Hand-painted ones are increasingly being replaced by slogans made of adhesive letters and stickers. Many refer to a Christian background of the driver and/or owner. Islamic ones, such as Insha Allah and Allahu Wahid, are rather rare.

12. At the long-distance stations one often finds a ticket-seller, porters, and an overseer or stationmaster who regulates which car will get the next ride and makes sure that the drivers stick to the rules and fares. This system of turns is rather complex and may cause serious conflict between the drivers of ‘home’ and ‘away’ cars. Another source of conflict, this time with the passengers, are the extraordinarily high fares drivers sometimes ask on busy Friday evenings for a ride from Accra to other places. The newspapers every now and then publish complaints about this type of ‘Friday-evening travel roguery’.

13. In 1996, drivers using an ordinary cab had to pay the owner C 15.000 on each day of the month. In 2000, the amount is C 30.000 (the increase reflects both inflation and higher prices for gasoline). Each month, drivers receive back two-days’ pay, and are allowed to keep the extra money made. If the owner lives abroad, the money often has to be paid to a relative, who puts the money in a particular bank account. Car repairs made necessary through old age or accidents form a constant source of dispute between drivers, owners.
and their representatives. The popular soap-like TV series Taxi-driver (produced by Village Communications, and broadcast by GBC in 1999) depicts this type of conflict. In a comic vein, the series figures the daily experiences of TT, a Ga taxi-driver, with his – sometimes rather weird – customers, the arrogant Asante car owner, car mechanics, policemen, and Christian prophets.

14. In this respect little has changed since Field’s observation, made forty years ago, that ‘[a]mong young men, particularly illiterates, there is no more widespread ambition, nor one more often achieved, than to drive, and if possible own, one of the thousands of passenger car lorries that raven about the roads’ (1960: 134).

15. Tesheie was originally a Ga fishing village in the immediate neighbourhood of Accra. In the course of the twentieth century, Tesheie grew in size and accommodate an ever-increasing number of persons from other Ghanaian peoples (above all Asante, Ewe, and Muslims from the North) working in Accra. While the old village centre near the coast is still inhabited by Ga fishermen and their families, the newer parts are multi-ethnic. The area where we stayed, and where Kwaku also lives, consisted of a mixture of (run-down) middle-class homes, and compound houses, in which separate rooms were rented to different tenants.

16. With cars as in many professions, the apprentice system is still in operation in Ghana. When a boy wants to become car mechanic, electrician, welder, sprayer, vulcanizer or rubber spare part cutter, to name just a few specializations, he has to become an apprentice in a workshop of the master. In exchange for money and Akpeteshie (locally distilled gin) he will usually be trained for four years. Only after having been an apprentice, chief apprentice and assistant, can a young man become master himself. All this time he merely gets ‘chop money’ and has to serve his master. Officially it is strictly forbidden to offer one’s services for money to others without the master’s consent, but in practice this happens frequently.

17. This is no small wonder, for the contract contained a clause in which it was stipulated that the car would be the property of the doctor again, if Kwaku would only once forget an installment.

18. A trip with seven passengers from Accra to Takoradi or v.v. brought Kwaku plus minus C 15,000 netto. Together they paid him C 38,500 (C 5,550 each), but he had to deduct from this C 18,000 for petrol, C 1,500 booking fee, C 1,000 welfare fee and C 1,000 union tax. Because gas was cheaper than petrol, Kwaku preferred to use this type of fuel, but often he could not because of problems with the gas installation in his car.

19. The more plates the higher the price. In 1996 the prize of repairing, for example, a 12-volt battery with 19 plates was C 17,500 and refilling plus recharging C 11,500. As in almost all small workshops in Ghana, in battery repairshops environmental pollution is at the order of the day: acids are just poured on the ground.

20. In this connection it is interesting to take notice of the results of an official German test of vehicles in Kenya (cf. Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin 11.12.98), which showed they all suffered from at least fifty technical shortages. According to the official Kenyan documents, however, some of them were technically OK. We realize that, of course, an examination of cars according to Western standards may be problematic because it fails to acknowledge local technical ingenuity. Certainly there is a great number of ‘adjustments’ which have no negative impact on safety, although they may still be unacceptable for Western technicians. At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that the line between ‘adjustments’ and lack of maintenance as a result of poverty may be thin at times. In our view, there are no grounds for an exaggerated cultural relativism, because lives are at stake.

21. Strikingly the introduction of the car did not entail the development of an indigenous Ga, Twi, or Ewe terminology for its parts and their working. Almost all the terms used by drivers and mechanics are English ones.

22. Cf. Stoller who remarks in a chapter on a Songhay (Niger) bush taxi: ‘Each taxi, of course has a driver, someone who has obtained his driver’s permit and who knows very well how to repair automobile engines’ (1989: 73). It is striking, however, that although his anthropology emphasizes the relevance of the senses, he does not say anything about the ways in which such a vehicle is perceived and treated by drivers. Kwaku constantly referred to how he used his senses (especially his ears and nose) to find out how his car was functioning. Striking in this connection were his expressions: ‘I felt a smell’ or ‘I heard a scent’.

23. See Van Dijk (1980:228 ff) who made similar observations for repairshops in Ouagadougou.

24. We found that, in a sense, this field was much easier to grasp than the technological dimension. This does not only stem from the fact that here we touch on common grounds for anthropologists, but also from our own everyday experiences with the representation of and meaning attached to cars in Western societies. Certainly many car advertisements in our own society speak to potential buyers’ desire to identify, or better still, be identified with his or her car.

25. In general the number of accidents on Ghana’s roads tends to disquietingly increase just before and after Christmas, when many people travel in often overloaded vehicles. It is also in this period that one hears more about molesting and even lynching of drivers who caused serious accidents.

26. We did not hear of rituals performed by groups of drivers in order to protect them while being on the road. In Nigeria, however, cabdrivers are used
to collectively bring blood sacrifices to Ogun, the god of steel whom they consider to be their patron.

27. Passengers and other drivers were not the only possible agents of witchcraft: His wife also feared that beautiful Fanti women on one of his trips to Takoradi would bewitch him so that he would not return to her.

28. Kwaku told us that it was not unusual to purify polluted cars with seawater at the beach because it was supposed to be very powerful. He, however, would not go there, for the seaside was also associated with the Devil and Mami Water (cf. Meyer 1999c).

29. Who hasn’t heard the familiar stories about the tractors brought to Africa as a means to further development, which just break down and stop functioning because of a lack of spare parts and know-how? It would be worth to examine as to whether the dysfunctioning may be due to other than technological factors.

Soundscapes of the Car: A Critical Study of Automobile Habitation

Michael Bull

When I get in my car and I turn on my radio. I'm at home. I haven't got a journey to make before I get home. I'm already home. I shut my door, turn on my radio and I'm home. I wind the window down so I can hear what's going on and sometimes as the sun’s setting and I'm in town and I think. Wow. What a beautiful city that I'm living in, but it's always at the same time when that certain track comes on. It's a boost. (Automobile user).

Today the highway might well be the site of radio's most captive audience, its most attentive audience. The car is likely to be your most intensive radio listening experience, perhaps even your most intensive media experience altogether. Usually radio is a background medium, but in the car it becomes all-pervasive, all-consuming . . . the car radio envelops you in its own space, providing an infinite soundtrack for the external landscape that scrapes the windshield. The sound of the radio fills up the car, encapsulates you in walls made of words (Loktev 1993).

For twenty-five centuries Western knowledge has tried to look upon the world. It has failed to understand that the world is not for beholding. It is for hearing . . . Now we must learn to judge a society by its noise (Attali 1985).

'... to each his own bubble, that is the law today' (Baudrillard 1993).