

FROM PERIPATETIC ANTHROPOLOGY TO THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF ROADS AND MOTORISATION IN AFRICA

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This paper is based on 10 months of field work between 2009 and 2014 in Cape Verde, and provides an overview of the anthropological literature in which motor vehicles and African roads are studied as social phenomena. Until the end of the twentieth century, most ethnographies have failed to focus on the countless social processes linked to the development of mobility by road and the motorisation of transportation in Africa, or on the role played by cars and roads as symbols of a globalised modernity. The paper reviews the research by authors who, from the 1930s onwards, mention African roads and the use of motor vehicles as spaces in which social situations and processes take place. The several symbolic and instrumental dimensions of the motorisation of road transportation in Africa are discussed as well.

Keywords: anthropology of African roads, African mobility, motorisation in Africa

Da antropologia peripatética à etnografia das estradas e a motorização em África

Este texto é baseado em 10 meses de trabalho de campo entre 2009 e 2014 em Cabo Verde, e fornece uma visão geral da literatura antropológica em que os veículos a motor e as estradas africanas são estudados como fenómenos sociais. Até finais do século XX, a maioria das etnografias não se focaram nos inúmeros processos sociais ligados ao desenvolvimento da mobilidade rodoviária e à motorização do transporte em África, ou no papel desempenhado pelos carros e estradas como símbolos de uma modernidade globalizada. O artigo analisa a pesquisa realizada por autores que, a partir dos anos 1930, mencionam as estradas africanas e a utilização de veículos a motor como espaços em que têm lugar situações e processos sociais. São também abordadas as várias dimensões simbólicas e instrumentais da motorização do transporte rodoviário em África.

Palavras-chave: antropologia das estradas africanas, mobilidade africana, motorização em África

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From the late 1990s onwards, there are plenty of references made to the role played by roads and motor vehicles in African societies, but its invisibilisation during the previous period is obvious¹. If the journey is the ethnographer's object of observation, and also the object of his or her reflection as an anthropologist (Augé, 2007, p. 71), then what is the reason for this invisibilisation? The implicit multiplicity of approaches to the journey resides in the journey itself, since any journey is at the same time a movement in space, in time and – depending on the departure and arrival contexts – in social hierarchy (Lévi-Strauss, 1955/1969, p. 79).

Even though the twentieth century is the century of motorisation, the use of motorised land vehicles by anthropologists in Africa does not usually appear in their accounts, neither past nor present. Concepts such as “car”, “road”, “mobility”, “motorisation”, and even “transportation”, are missing from analytical indexes and accounts². References to the presence of cars and trucks in African roads have been late to appear in the anthropological literature. Kuklick (1991, p. 151) mentions cars only once when dealing with the 1929 expedition of archaeologist Caton-Thompson (when the Rhodesian Transportation Department lent her a car). There are no theoretical reflections on the social dimensions of roads and cars. Nevertheless, the history of Africa is closely tied to social processes stemming from the development of motorisation and roads. From May 1931 to February 1933, Marcel Griaule, Michel Leiris and other European ethnographers carried out the Dakar-Djibouti Mission from the Atlantic to the Red Sea. The mission unfolded as a gathering of objects for museum collections as well as a fruitful ethnographic exploration. They travelled by foot, boat, canoe, train, truck, mule, donkey, camel, cart... and by car, with the sponsorship of the Citroën company³. Michel Leiris became the first anthropologist to mention roads and cars in his field diary.

The journey and the road as social process

In his diary, Leiris (1934/2007, p. 795) wonders: “Why travel? This way of seizing things, will it prevent us from being unarmed on the occasions in which it is

¹ This article is the result of a research on the social universe of the Hiace vans in Cape Verde and how they relate to urban planning, mobility and the anthropology of traffic itself (Horta & Malet, 2014). Field work was undertaken during the autumns of 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2014.

² For an analysis of the wide set of social phenomena which transportation encompasses, see: Ward (1996, p. 52).

³ Previously, the 1923 “Citroën Mission” had crossed the Sahara (Touggourt-Timbuktu) in 21 days. The cars, the wheels of which were reinforced with chains, covered the 1,100 km stretch between In Salah and Tin Zeuaten. In 1924, three cars from the Renault company travelled from Bechar to Burem, by the river Niger, in six days (Costa Morata, 1978, pp. 94-95).

written that we should be unarmed?" (27-XII-1932). The ethnographer travels by car through bumpy roads, and for the first time he succinctly describes what happens in the course of the journey. What happens to the car, to the people inside, to the people who they run into and interact with, and to the road itself. If this first peripatetic anthropology is indebted to "travel literature" (Delgado, 2012), then the anthropology of mobility and the emerging anthropology of traffic should not be alien to it.

The anthropology of roads shares with the anthropology of traffic its focus on the culture of traffic, the culture of risk and accidents, the social construction of the regulation of the traffic of wheeled vehicles, and the development of the processes and systems of transportation of people and commodities. Aside from this closeness – always verging on the edge of incest –, roads embody a social process in which the collective life of any society emerges to the surface through movement. Every society flows onto its roads. Perhaps the roads express the paradoxical confirmation of the triumph of sedentism, since they work as a means of communication between points inhabited by people on a permanent basis (tellingly, the hunter-gatherers don't need roads to assert their never-ending mobility).

As pointed out by Estevan (1996, pp. 208-209), within the terminology of transportation the concept of "mobility" is a quantitative parameter that refers to the movements performed by people and commodities in a specific socio-economic domain. It is expressed in individual terms, such as the average number of journeys or km travelled per person, or in aggregate terms, such as the total number of journeys or km travelled by the inhabitants of a specific place. On the contrary, the concept of "accessibility" is a qualitative variable, since it indicates the ease (I would add the ability or possibility) with which people from a specific place can cover the distance to other places where they will find the means to satisfy their needs or desires. According to Estevan, the standard view of transportation understands the improvement of accessibility as the facilitation of movement (the efficiency of the transportation system). This entails an emphasis on the constant reinforcement of infrastructures, vehicles and the system of transportation as a whole. All of which facilitates the increase of motorised mobility and transportation. On the other hand, a different point of view links accessibility with proximity: spatially or geographically speaking, the less movement required to satisfy a need or desire, the more accessible they will be. Different models – with different social consequences – are developed depending on how each society constructs or asserts its interpretation of transportation and accessibility. This is why we must remember Hannerz' claim – cited by Juan, Largo-Poirier, Orain and Poltorak (1997, p. 25) – regarding the fact that physical accessibility does not guarantee social accessibility.

Penny Harvey (Khazaleh, 2013) claims that roads include different sorts of spatial dynamics due to the great variety of social relations which are developed within them. How are the urban strands – villages and cities – fused together other than through these traffic routes called roads? Augé (2007, p. 33) argues that urban projects are conceived with respect to the relationships between the urban “interior” and “exterior”. This implies that the design of roads, highways, airports, train stations, bus lanes, taxis – Hiace vans –, and motorised vehicles in general is shaped by the model of social relations intended to be established. Where can we find, then, in the universal megalopolis, the “empty” and “porous” zones (Augé follows Philippe Vasset’s terminology), the dark side of universalisation? How much intensity, how much life, is born, grows and dies in these “porous” zones so acutely impoverished under colonization?

In the context of the process of motorisation in Africa, Gewald, Luning, & Walraven (2009, pp. 1-18) highlight the wide range of transformations caused by the introduction of cars in the twentieth century: cultural, economic, political, military, urban, medical, educational, religious, ecological, communicative, and regarding interpersonal relationships⁴. However, the study of these transformations has been – up to a certain point – very limited, even if in vast African regions transportation depends entirely on motorised vehicles. Out of the more than 1,000 papers presented at the meetings of the African Studies Association (ASA) between 1990 and 1997, only one dealt with the impact of motorised road vehicles in Africa. The paper by Chilundo (1992) for the ASA meeting was based on research on motorised traffic in which the economical aspects had the utmost relevance.

Gewald et al. claim that the ground-breaking scholarship on this topic has more distant origins. According to them, it starts with the classic work by Hill (1963) on the use of vehicles by the cocoa farmers in Ghana, which was followed by the ethnographies by Lewis (1970) on the transporters’ association of the Ivory Coast, by Silverstein (1983) on the local strategies of transportation in Nigeria, and by Stoller (1989) on the importance of the regulation and structuring of road transportation. We must add the ground-breaking studies by Margaret Field (1960) on the rural drivers in Ghana from an ethnopsychiatric point of view; by Jordan (1978) on the daily behaviour of truck drivers in West Africa; and by Peace (1988) on mobility in South-West Nigeria.

The real boom of scholarship in this field took place in the beginning of the twentieth-first century. According to Gewald et al. (2009, p. 5), the construction

⁴ Their survey is almost systematically limited to the literature written in English. This practice applies to most publications in the Anglo-Saxon context. The Francophone literature shows the same endocentrism.

of African roads did not uniquely respond to the aim of transporting goods and people since, of course, the mining and agricultural products of colonial plundering had to be transported through somewhere. Historically, roads have played a pivotal role in the control, repression and imposition of colonial discipline over African societies by means of the transportation of military troops and arms. Moreover, roads represent a key factor of modernisation for African state bureaucracies, both before and after the formal processes of independence⁵.

As communication and transportation devices, roads and their vehicles have been useful to the revolutionary or anti-colonial causes as well, thus turning back against their own promoters. This is the case of the Kikuyu taxis during the Mau Mau revolution in Kenya, between 1952 and 1960, under British colonial rule. The organisational structure of the taxi drivers' associations and trade unions was essential for the articulation of the movement, and the vehicles of the Kikuyu were used both for carrying and hiding their leaders and for moving information around (FERENCE, 2011). Walraven (2009) offers a similar example concerning the uprisings in the French Niger between 1954 and 1966, in which drivers offered their vehicles – and their lives – to the revolutionary cause.

In turn, Graeber (2004/2011, p. 64) refers to the Tsimihety in the west coast of Madagascar and to their rejection of the Sakalava monarchy's authority when arguing that a collective project lies behind every social group. Under French colonial rule, the Tsimihety accepted to meet with the representatives sent by the Administration, whose goal was to obtain an adult workforce in order to build a road next to a Tsimihety village. But when the team in charge of the construction works returned to the village, they found it abandoned. Its inhabitants had fled to other places to live with their relatives, rejecting participation in the colonial program of forced labour that was to be imposed on them.

Writing on the Bakoya in Gabon, Soengas (2009, p. 189) points out that the opening of roads by the French army in the 1930s caused major changes in the social and spatial organisation of the communities, which from then on came in contact with "the white people". The construction of roads and the beginning of motorised traffic entailed a rise in inequality within rural populations, as happened in Ghana and Nigeria (Porter, 2012), in a process that began in the colonial period but extended beyond formal independence. In this context, a mysticism of speed and modernity linked to motorised vehicles was developed, and was immediately inscribed in representations of masculinity.

⁵ For an analysis of the motor vehicle in Africa as a generic symbol of colonisation, see: White (1997) and Alber (1998). There were no cars in the Sahara until 1916, but in 1920 there was already a remarkable number of cars in Tamanrasset, which played a vital role in the military subjugation of the population in the Hoggar (Costa Morata, 1978, p. 94).

The introduction of vehicles in Africa also entailed the visibilisation of several racial and class contradictions, inherent to the same colonial system that had imported roads and motorisation into African societies. The work by geographer Gordon Pirie informs us of the complaints that both whites and blacks addressed to the South African authorities in charge of the public bus system, a set of reasons in which the conditions of transportation, the segregation and racial abuse, as well as the class differences within the black population in the rural public buses between 1925 and 1955 are made explicit (Pirie, 1990). The same author offers us an overview of one of the favourite – and exclusive – activities of the white social classes in African colonies: motor racing clubs. Maps and guides of African roads that included lodgings and supply points for motor vehicles multiplied from the first decade of the twentieth century onwards. At the same time, literary fiction linked to the exotic journey was in all of its splendour, stimulating colonial representations (Pirie, 2013). In the 1920s and 1930s, the motorised expeditions across the whole continent – sponsored by the manufacturing companies themselves – brought to the rural parts of Africa a strange blend of scientists, travellers and colonists (Pirie, 2011). In the context of the colonial political rule of European societies over the African continent, a new sort of journey defined by a taste for adventure became established: dangerous trails, treacherous topographies and harsh weather appear as the main “attractions” of the rallies that from then on race through Africa⁶. Around the 1960s, in the new political contexts that led to the independence processes – and also due to the takeoff of the aeronautical industry –, the motor racing clubs gradually abandoned the cross-border routes and focused their activities within the sphere of the state and on the promotion of road maintenance (Pirie, 2013).

The wide variety of dynamic processes in African societies is reflected in the social universe of the development of transportation and motorisation. The anthropological and sociological approaches to the culture of road transportation, the motorised vehicle, and the several dimensions of its impact on social life have defined very specific research fields. This has enabled both an increase in comparative analysis (Miller, 2001) and the development of anthropological and sociological scholarship on urbanisation processes, land transportation routes, risk, safety, or traffic (the list is endless) beyond the explicit references to Africa.

Ritualities, processes of technologisation, “moral geographies”, “informal” economies, or motorisation as agency, are central issues in the boom of scholar-

⁶ The first major racing championship in Africa – the *Méditerranée-Le Cap* rally (16,000 km from north to south) – took place from 1950 up to 1961. From 1953 onwards, several rallies took place as legs of the world championship: Coronation Safari, Safari, Morocco and Ivory Coast.

ship regarding Africa from the late 1990s onwards. Alongside the overviews on urbanisation and interurban mobility in the continent as a whole, a schematic bibliographical territorialisation of the wide variety of topics dealt with by this scholarship (such as: commerce and transportation; construction of roads under colonial rule; interurban transportation of passengers; urbanisation processes; relationships between vehicles, drivers and “entrepreneurship”; relationships between drivers and power or status; relationships between vehicles and pedestrians on the roads; the symbolisation of vehicles; accident rates; etc.) encompasses a big portion of Africa⁷.

Regarding the ethnographic references on mobility in African roads and the role of motorised vehicles by anthropologists writing in the first two thirds of the twentieth century, we must recall some aspects and situations which in later decades will become explicit topics of study. However, we must take into account (Dalakoglou & Harvey, 2012, p. 462) the scarcity of references to interurban mobility, roads and motorised transportation in African urban anthropology – with exception of G. Wilson in Zambia, E. Hellmann and B. Sundkler in South Africa, and by the Manchester anthropologists affiliated to the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (Hannerz, 1980/1993, pp. 162-163 and 179-187). This is an area in which research needs to be undertaken, and it cannot be spared by referring to the long list of anthropological studies about nomadic and cattle-breeding societies in Africa, as Dalakoglou and Harvey (2012) do. On the whole, it results difficult to trace the consideration of roads and motorised transportation in the ethnographies written throughout the best part of the last century.

⁷ For a first approach to Angola: Lopes (2009, 2011); Algeria: Boesen & Marfaing (2007); Benin: Beauving (2004); Burkina Faso: Luning (2009); Cape Verde: Grassi (2003), Dias Furtado (2007), Malet (2011), Horta (2010, 2013) and Horta & Malet (2014); Ivory Coast: Luzón (1988) and Wrangham (2004); Ethiopia: Ramos (2010) and Alem (2013); Gabon: Soengas (2009); Ghana: Field (1960), Dickson (1961), Date-Bah (1980), Geest (1989, 2009), Grieco, App, & Turner (1996), Akurang-Parry (2001), Verrips & Meyer (2001), Lyon (2007), Asiedu & Agiey (2008), Chalfin (2008, 2010), Klaeger (2009, 2012a, 2012b, 2013), Hart (2011), Ntewusu (2011), Porter (2012) and Stasik (2013); Kenya: Wainaina (1981), Munguti (1997), Chitere (2004), Kimani, Kibua, & Massinde (2004), Carrier (2005), Mungai & Samper (2006), Mutongi (2006), Melnick (2010), Ference (2011), Chavis (2012) and Lamont (2012, 2013); Madagascar: Cole (1998) and Thomas (2002); Mali: Fiori (2010); Mauritania: Godard (2002), Retailié (2006), Chenal, Pedrazzini, & Vollmer (2009), Chenal, Kaufmann, Cissé, & Pedrazzini (2009a, 2009b), Choplin (2009) and Alonso & Nucci (2011); Mozambique: Chilundo (1992, 1995), Agadjanian (2002) and Nielsen (2012); Namibia: Gewald (2002); Niger: Masquelier (1992, 2002) and Chilson (1999); Nigeria: Hannerz (1979), Okpala (1980), Berry (1983, 1985), Afejuku (1988), Lawuyi (1988), Peace (1988), Masquelier (1992, 2002), Fourchard & Olawalle (2003) and Porter (2012); Senegal: Bredeloup, Bertonecello, & Lombard (2008), Lombard (2006), Chenal (2009) and Green-Simms (2009); South Africa: Lee (2011, 2012); Tanzania: Liebnow (1971), Banyikwa (1988) and Rizzo (2002); Zaire: Poutier (1990); Zambia: Hansen & Vaa (2004), Hansen (2010) and Kalikiti (2010); Central Africa in general: Fairhead (1993), Giles-Vernick (1996), Fourchard & Olawalle (2003), Hansen (2010), Simone (2004), Coquery-Vidrovitch (2005), Elouga, Nga Ndongo, & Mebenga Tamba (2006) and Freed (2006), Díaz Olvera, Plat, e Pochet (2008 and 2010) and Dibwe Dia Mwembu (2009).

The first references to roads

Beyond describing the day to day of his almost two-year-long research during the Dakar-Djibouti mission, Leiris includes in his narration the events which occurred on the road whilst traveling by car. In *L'Afrique Fantôme* [Ghostly Africa], he deals with fundamental contexts for the study of roads as social phenomena. The changing caravan of anthropologists, translators, chefs, assistants and an endless list of companions rarely travels by van or by car. We will focus our attention on the car. Leiris writes in his field diary the situations in which the car takes part. In his account, the car appears as a means of business for the indigenous (8-VI-1931); as a place of weariness due to the discomfort of the journey (30-VI-1931); as a victim of the deplorable conditions of roads and bridges, as well as of harsh weather (8-VII-1931); as a sign, by means of the horn, of an imminent announcement (14-VII-1931); as protagonist of crashes with animals which cross the road, as well as a moving device for hunting them (25-VIII-1931).

In other occasions he describes how the presence of the vehicle on the road provokes unexpected encounters (a sick man lying down on the way) (15-XII-1931). The car also appears as a factor of accidental deaths (30-XII-1931); as grounds for argument under the pressure of a social environment demanding that ethnographers assist them with the vehicle to transport them to other locations (15-I-1932) – see below the testimony of Rabinow in Morocco, 40 years later, as protagonist of the forced end of a journey due to a non-fatal accident in which the vehicle and its load are left destroyed (17-I-1932); as a container of long trips – a day-long journey of 100 km along precarious roads (22-I-1932); as a vehicle which has suddenly broken down and finds itself dependent on a greater vehicle (a truck, in this case) (17-IV-1932); as a method of transportation that sometimes relies on a drunken chauffeur (30-IV-1932); and finally, as a means of transportation for animals, who like humans are also prone to vomit (22-XII-1932). In a final note regarding the 8th and 9th of December, 1931 (p. 835), Leiris reflects on the social exceptionality of the profound happiness of an administrator who has found a faster way to construct roads and bridges, which would save the people he administered “a significant number of days of service” – that is, forced labour.

These situations form part of any ethnography of roads. To the extent that Leiris' field diary is significant for the analysis of the observed social relations and his role in them, the fact that he considered necessary to leave written testimony of what happened, and how it happened, when travelling by car, makes him the first ethnographer to acknowledge the usefulness of cars and roads as elements of anthropological reflection.

Soon after the return of the mission directed by Leiris, another mission left for Brazil: the “French University Mission”, in which Claude Lévi-Strauss participated. From his time in the University of São Paulo, Lévi-Strauss undertook, between 1935 and 1939, various trips to Mato Grosso and the Amazon, where he studied the Kadiwéu, Bororo, Nambikwara, Aikanã and Tupi-Kawahib societies. Of course, he comes across very few cars, but tells that the land which spans the road from Santos to São Paulo is one of the first exploited terrains in the country. He refers to the place as an “archeological site dedicated to a deceased agriculture”. In the valleys, the vegetation reclaims possession of the soil again: what is found now is no more “the noble architecture of the primitive jungle”. The European landscape is ostensibly subjected to mankind, hence the bewilderment experienced when he is confronted with something that does not fit within our traditional categories (Lévi-Strauss, 1955/1969, p. 89).

From field work carried out in Zululand at the end of the 1930s, Max Gluckman (1958) records the European domination and explains that groups of equal social status are not separated. Whereas the Zulu cannot venture into the reserves of the white group – except as domestic servants – Europeans can move freely amongst the Zulu, observe them and at times take photos of them.

Gluckman understands that the schism between the two groups of colour is in itself the pattern of their integration in a community. In a given moment, he tells of the inauguration of a bridge in order to describe the supposed formal reason for its construction (to facilitate the mobility of the magistrate) and its immediate social effects (the access to a hospital by Zulu women). He makes almost no ethnographical references to the experiences lived on the road, but three observations can nevertheless be noted: firstly, he describes how, during a trip to Nongoma in his automobile, he stops to pick up an elderly man; secondly, he narrates another journey by car together with the Zulu king, whose car is responded to by the Zulu with the royal salute; thirdly, he mentions the automobile as an object of social status only accessible to Europeans and few Zulu.

In his writings based on field work undertaken in Africa in the late 1940s, George Balandier (1955, 1957/1962, pp. 191-224) makes no mention of automobiles. Instead, he outlines the segregating character of the planning of urban spaces by the colonial power, as well as the anomic uprooting of rural immigrants in growing cities such as Brazzaville, Lagos or Dakar. Both are reflections of colonial capitalism’s opulence and speculation, greatness and precariousness of the material and social conditions of the majority of the population. Reflections of the immense explosions of urban colonial societies, the emergence of incipient labour unions which in fact collaborate with the colonial power, the new heroes

of Western cinematic mythology, the changing contexts of the commodification of sex and love, the submission to the tough and implacable law of “working without happiness”, the effervescence of Saturday nights and Sundays, the imposition of names on streets and squares, the construction of an illusion to “our” image and convenience, the gap between reality and hope.

All these processes have been historically parallel to the expansion of roads and traffic as a means of colonisation and transportation of goods and people. The reference to the fact that the construction of roads has brought to an end the supposed isolation of certain human groups, as Lévi-Strauss writes (1955/1969, p. 125), has become a general principle, although in his work we do not find the reflections of social life on the roads. Beals and Hoijer (1965, pp. 405-449) devote a section to the transportation of animals and vehicles throughout history, focusing their attention on the Baganda of Eastern Africa, who they describe as the builders of an elaborate system of roadways used for walking, human strength being the only means of transportation. And Knutsson (1969/1976, p. 124), when referring to the polyethnic village-market in Mecha (Ethiopia), links the high mobility, the creation of commercial villages and the growth of existing populations, and points to the fundamental role played by the construction of roads in order to understand this development. The expansion of motorisation in urban spaces throughout Africa has been recent (Hannerz, 1993/1996, p. 14), and even more so with regard to interurban transportation. Whereas generic comments regarding the poor quality of road infrastructures – in comparison with the Western standard – span decades of anthropological research, the attention given to the car and the road is very uncommon.

This potential anthropology of roads has been dismissed for decades to the waste bin of the social sciences. In anthropology textbooks, introductions to the discipline and dictionaries, the references to the processes of construction of roads and motorization in relation to colonial expansion are in general inexistent, or to a certain point disparaging of a concept – “road” – stripped of the social universe which it signifies and in which it is inscribed. Peacock, in his introductory anthropology textbook, defines the entrance into field work in these terms (1986/2001, p. 129): “But neither is it a simple adventure which ends in itself; one is not simply ‘on the road’, but ‘on the field’, and must mobilise himself to find his place in it and, afterwards, to understand it”.

In his field work in Sefrou (Morocco), Clifford Geertz states the centrality of the car in saving time while travelling (“I hired a car. No more buses. No more waiting”, as cited in Slyomovics, 2010). And the amalgam of images that Paul Rabinow offers us (1977/1992), also from his field work in Morocco, points to-

wards new dimensions. He describes tracks, trails, paths without asphalt, curving, empty or tortuous roads with potholes dangerously close to ravines, night-time journeys by car while arguing with an angry informant who gets out of the vehicle and condemns himself to walking the remaining 8 km. Rabinow (1992, p. 112) tells of the relief he feels when his car explodes, because it spares him from the unbearable pressure he suffers by way of a village demanding to be driven here or there, for this and that: "I stopped the car in front of the hospital. No, they told me, go a little further up the street, to the market. But didn't you tell me that you were dying? Yes, she replied, but I have to do some shopping" (p. 88).

In his first field work in the Dowayo land, Barley (1983/1989) describes how his car is used as a taxi and ambulance by the community. Half of the references regarding the vehicle concern its repairs and the tremendous cost that they imply. On another occasion he tells of the local interpretation of the arrival of a car (p. 65): "There were fields on both sides of the road. The people who worked them stopped their tasks to watch us as we advanced laboriously. Some fled. Later I realised that they believed we were sent by the *sous-prefet*". The uneasiness caused by the bad condition of the roads appears regularly (p. 103): "The old maps still indicate a roadway running through the valley, but nowadays it is found to be in a pretty sorry state". The first page of the book (Barley, 1986/1993) based on his second field work with the Dowayo, some years later, contains a map which distinguishes three types of roadways: official roads, passable roads for vehicles and mountain trails. Screeching breaks under threatening storms, illegal transportation of beer and the figure of the anthropologist as the community chauffeur accompany the references made to the vehicle.

Other examples of the generic attention paid by anthropology to roads and motor vehicles as social phenomena can be found in the work of Marjorie Shostak (1990, pp. 23 and 349). In her field work with Nisa, the !Kung woman from the Kalahari desert, she describes the situation in the !Kung village as follows: "Roadways with transport trucks, shops, schools and even a clinic exist today in the Dobe land...". She also narrates the night-time arrival to a !Kung village located beyond the road on which she has driven the Land Rover. In turn, Jean and John Comaroff (2002) mention roads in contextual terms in their account of the incendiary apocalypse witnessed in South Africa's Cape Peninsula. The roads are described as victims of this great fire (since they are closed to traffic), as the object of pyromaniac desire (it is the case of a rural roadway), as space for the establishment – in its margins – of camps of settlers from the rural interior areas (it is the case of the main roads), and as a place for the sale of small packages of *braai* wood to mostly suburban, white, and middle class travellers.

Centrality of the vehicle in African social life

Gewald et al. (2009, p. 10) address the obvious impact of motorised vehicles in almost all aspects of African daily life. This makes it all the more intriguing why anthropologists, during the twentieth century, have disregarded cars and roads as a research focus. Every social scientist in Africa has experienced being on the streets and roads, waiting for the bus, a collective taxi, or a Hiace van. In his pioneering work, Kopytoff (1986) suggests the need of considering the motorised vehicle as a central element of African social life.

As Geest claims, perhaps anthropologists, in their anxiety to discover “the exotic”, have overlooked those material elements – like the car – which come from the West and are too familiar to their eyes, considering them for this reason little worthy of anthropological attention. Or perhaps, we might add, motorisation evokes dimensions of the colonial process that are too terrifying⁸.

Whatever it might be, anthropologists have only recently treated the car in Africa as an object deserving of their attention. Peace (1988) mentions this absence in his ethnography about the organisation of transport, the owners of vehicles and the drivers of a Nigerian village in the north of Lagos. At the same time, he laments that the analysis of transportation and its economic, legal, and political dimensions, remain relegated to the domain of economists and geographers.

More recently, Klaeger (2009) has claimed that an anthropology of roads must go beyond the functional perspective (the social impact of the infrastructures, their causes and the political corollary of their construction) in order to address the representational aspects: “The study of the semantics of symbols, metaphors and narratives” (p. 216)⁹. It results paradoxical that, the car being a means of transportation as well as a force of power and prestige on a global scale, it has been neglected by anthropologists in their research. Some years ago, Verrips and Meyer (2001, p. 156) made a compilation of anthropological literature on cars and motorised driving when they began their study in this area. They found little material regarding Africa (the already cited Field, Jordan and Peace), mostly

⁸ Evoking the centrality of the canoe among the Trobrianders studied by Bronislaw Malinowski, Geest (2009, pp. 258-259) highlights that, following the same logic that signifies it (object of desire and beauty, aimed at the domination of nature, decorated, and an inspiration for stories and ballads), the car would be the means of transportation that would occupy centrality in Ghana (and maybe all over the world), claiming the “honour” (we would add) of rising as the central object of the representations of the global culture (Miller, 2001).

⁹ As examples of this kind of approach, he mentions the ethnography by Masquelier (2002) in the Niger’s Route 1 and several articles of a special issue of the journal *Theory, Culture and Society* (2004, 21 [4-5]).

focused in social networks and contact with passengers, thus confirming the lack of research on the material dimensions of the car as an object¹⁰.

Conclusion

Roads condense the global circulation of a society to the extent that they unite one point with another. At the same time, roads are found between us and between those two points, allowing for physical and social connections and disconnections. The presence of roads tends to transform the relations and life of a social group, and all class of economic, political and cultural processes converge on them. The role of cars and vehicles for the transportation of people and goods is, in this context, fundamental to the general history of Africa. In fact, the development of colonisation itself is inseparable from the development of motorisation and overland communication. Although Africanist anthropologists and sociologists have not deepened their research about cars and roads as social phenomena, some of them (beginning with Michel Leiris in the 1930s) deal with the different dimensions of this phenomena. What has been put forward, therefore, is a brief overview of those pioneering studies and their descriptions and representations of the relationships between road, automobile and society.

¹⁰ Verrips and Meyer study the interurban taxis in Ghana – which are called *tro-tro* and act as *minivan* or *minihiace* – by following the existential trajectory of a driver named Kwaku, in which we will recognise some parallel features with the social universe of the Hiace vans in Cape Verde: the little police monitoring of road transportation, the symbolisation of the vehicle by means, for example, of the slogans written on its front and rear parts, the social respectability of the business, the mechanical problems of the vehicle, the “lack of sophistication” widespread amongst the repair shops, or the aspiration of many young men to work as drivers because of the social status that this implies.

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