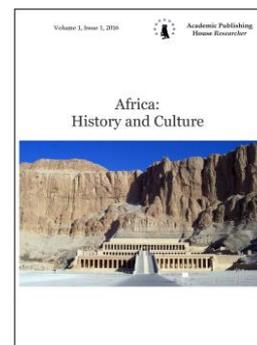


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Published in the Russian Federation  
Africa: History and Culture  
Has been issued since 2016.  
E-ISSN: 2500-3771  
Vol. 1, Is. 1, pp. 15-20, 2016

DOI: 10.13187/ahc.2016.1.15  
[www.ejournal48.com](http://www.ejournal48.com)



## **‘Bone-Shakers’ and Contemporary ‘Tro-Tro’ in Ghana: Implications for Traffic and Transport Psychology**

Jacob Owusu Sarfo <sup>a, b, c, \*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Cape Coast, Ghana

<sup>b</sup> KAD International, Ghana

<sup>c</sup> All Nations University College, Ghana

### Paper Review Summary:

Paper submission: 2016, April 20

Revised paper submission: 2016, June 27

Paper acceptance: 2016, June 28

Paper publication: 2016, July 01

### **Abstract**

‘Tro-Tro’ is a local term for any minibus in Ghana, that trip short to semi-long distances as ‘share taxis’. As share taxis, Ghanaian ‘Tro-Tro’ run in between specific destinations with passengers alighting at designated or assumed bus stops, while others get on board. This business is unique for its cheaper transport fares and possible interactions, at least with the conductor who is locally known as the ‘Mate’. This article explores some historic evolutions that the ‘Tro-Tro’ business had accomplished so far in Ghana. In addition, it examines the role of the ‘Tro-Tro’ business on the culture, socioeconomic and psychological factors in Ghana. This unique business nurtures a collective life force among the three human elements; the ‘Tro-Tro’ Driver, Mate and passengers. The ‘Tro-Tro’ transport industry and concept have come to stay and needs to be given the needed advocacy and consideration. This paper has implications for future studies, education, transport industry, policy, and traffic and transport psychology in Ghana.

**Keywords:** ‘Tro-Tro’, Transportation, Traffic and Transport Psychology, Vehicle, Driver, Conductor (Mate), Passengers, Interactions, Culture, Ghana.

### **Introduction**

The ‘Tro-Tro’ transport business has come a long way, even before Ghana’s independence from the British Colonial Masters in 1957. This share taxi business started with old Bedford trucks, with locally made wooden forms which were often used for intra-city travels (Powell, 2012).

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\* Corresponding author

E-mail address: [sarfojo@gmail.com](mailto:sarfojo@gmail.com) (J. O. Sarfo)



**Figure 1: Ghana's First 'Tro-Tro': The Bedford Truck**

Credit: <http://www.carmudi.com.gh/journal/interesting-inscriptions-cars-ghana/>

'Tro-Tro' vehicles are well noted for carrying inscriptions which serve as mottoes and slogans. These mottoes and slogans which are often written by the owners or the drivers on their vehicles serve as a form of identification and to express their heartfelt philosophies (Powell, 2012). An example of such old Bedford trucks is illustrated in Figure 1 with the inscription "Wisdom". These Bedford trucks were locally called "Bone-Shakers" due to their constant nature of throwing passengers up-and-down to literally "shake their bones" as they drove by. The famous name 'Tro-Tro', is noted to have originated from the 'Ga' Ghanaian dialect. History attributes the name 'Tro' from the value of the currency 'Penny', which was used in the Gold Coast colonial days to pay for the fares share-taxis charged. After Ghana's independence, the Cedi currency was introduced but the 'TRO' concept lived on (Anyima-Ackah, 2002). The aim of this paper is to provide a review on the existing Ghanaian 'Tro-Tro' transport industry and its impact on culture, socioeconomic and psychological dynamics.

### Method

The major sources for this article were online media articles and peer reviewed studies on the subject. I used a combination of observation and a systematic review method to analyse past and current developments in the Ghanaian 'Tro-Tro' industry.

### Results

#### ***The Present Day 'Tro-Tro' Vehicles and their Stations***

At present, the 'Tro-Tro' concept has been shifted from the old Bedford trucks to include comfortable mini buses from leading vehicle producing companies like Hyundai, KIA, Nissan, Ford, TATA and Mercedes Benz as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Present 'Tro-Tro' Station at Kumasi**

Credit: KAD International Photos

These vehicles have their stations where they are loaded on a “*First-Come, First-Serve Loading System*”. This system runs that, the vehicle that is first on the loading scale gets loaded first (Coomson, 2013). Most vehicles operating in this industry ranges between fourteen [14] and twenty-one [21] seaters and even beyond in big TATA buses. Not all buses in the existing ‘Tro-Tro’ transport business are in good shape. Some big buses known as the ‘Space Buses’ and other brands of Benz buses often called ‘207 buses’ may look quite old (Anyima-Ackah, 2002).

Ordinarily, most ‘Tro-Tro’ stations do not have a well arranged linear car parks for these buses. The ‘Tro-Tro’ Drivers keep moving in and out, trying to create spaces for each other. Figure 3 shows an example of existing Ghanaian ‘Tro-Tro’ station as demonstrated by Coomson (2013).



**Figure 3: Present ‘Tro-Tro’ Station at Kumasi**

Credit: Coomson (2013). <http://233times.com/2013/01/profile-of-trotro-in-ghana-2/>

Many a times, ‘Tro-Tro’ stations are very busy avenues. They are often surrounded by markets or commercial buildings. It is very easy to bump into petty traders who sell items ranging from food to hi-tech resources like mobile phones.

### ***The Categories of Human Elements within the ‘Tro-Tro’ Business***

There are three (3) key human elements in the ‘Tro-Tro’ business. These elements work-hand-in-hand to make the success of the industry boom. Unlike other transport businesses in Ghana, there are some expectations for each element within the ‘Tro-Tro’ industry.

The first human element in the ‘Tro-Tro’ industry is the ‘Tro-Tro’ Driver. These ‘Tro-Tro’ Drivers are often adult males who are qualified to drive buses. They begin their work as early as 4 am especially in the cities, and may close between 10 pm and 12 am. Majority of these ‘Tro-Tro’ Drivers have bosses they account their daily income called ‘sales’ to. These bosses usually called ‘car owners’ [notwithstanding the gender] prescribe fix daily amount of ‘sales’ for these ‘Tro-Tro’ Drivers to meet as targets. Due to this, there seems to be no time for break or rest except weekends or when their vehicles develop mechanical faults. In some cases, other ‘Tro-Tro’ Drivers who do not have vehicles of their own to drive [called ‘Spare Drivers’] take possession of the vehicles when the main ‘Tro-Tro’ Drivers [or ‘Master Drivers’] closes in the evening to work in the night. The driver needs to be an adept in navigation and should be able to change routes when traffic jams upsurges (Anyima-Ackah, 2002).

The second human element is the ‘Tro-Tro’ Mate. The ‘Tro-Tro’ Mates, usually males also, does the job of a bus conductor. Unlike other places in the world, most Ghanaian ‘Tro-Tro’ buses do not

have boarding tickets or automatic doors. Thus, it is the duty of the ‘Tro-Tro’ Mate to collect the fares and also manage the opening and closure of the buses’ doors (Coomson, 2013). Apart from these duties, the ‘Tro-Tro’ Mate has to be vigilant at noticing the particular place the passenger got on board to be able to charge the right amount. A wrong pricing, can lead into agitations from passengers. Another important role of the ‘Tro-Tro’ Mate is his duty to serve as a helping hand to both passengers and ‘Tro-Tro’ Driver.

‘Tro-Tro’ Mates are supposed to pack the belongings of passengers into their buses before boarding, and offload after arrival. They also buy things for both ‘Tro-Tro’ Drivers and passengers in traffic. They also assist little children, vulnerable adults like pregnant women, physically challenged, and the aged to board or alight. Figure 4 shows an example of a ‘Tro-Tro’ Mate helping a child to alight from a vehicle in Accra.



**Figure 4: ‘Tro-Tro’ Mate helping a child to alight in Accra**

Credit: KAD International Photos

Their duties to the passengers come at no extra cost and are fairly seen as ‘responsibilities’ rather than ‘privileges’. Another important role of these ‘Tro-Tro’ Mates is to call out the next destination to alert passengers of their nearness to their arrival bus stops. Once a passenger responds to his or her destination’s name, they alert the ‘Tro-Tro’ Driver to stop and assist the passengers to alight. ‘Tro-Tro’ Mates also simultaneously signal any potential passenger along the road by calling out the name of the possible routes or destinations, even as the buses move as shown in Figure 5 (Coomson, 2013). Thus, the successes of the daily ‘sales’ or fixed income targets depend on the effectiveness of the ‘Tro-Tro’ Mates.

The third important human element is the group of persons called passengers. Passengers are the main consumers of the ‘Tro-Tro’ services. Depending on their journeys and choices, some passengers may choose to go to the boarding stations or stand at a bus stop to pick a passing bus. The passengers in the ‘Tro-Tro’ are both Ghanaians and foreigners of all ages. Children are not charged fares once they are able to sit on the laps of adults they may be travelling with. At the stations during the peak periods or rush hours, passengers have to wait patiently in often long zigzagging queues (Anyima-Ackah, 2002).

Typically, some Ghanaian passengers serve as a check on the ‘Tro-Tro’ Drivers and Mates, especially when they impose wrong fares on innocent passengers or drive carelessly. They also chastise other passengers and even the ‘Tro-Tro’ Drivers and Mates for wasting their valuable time, if a passenger fails to hurry up to get on board (Coomson, 2013).



**Figure 5: ‘Tro-Tro’ Mate in black shirt calling out for potential passengers in Accra**  
Credit: KAD International Photos

Passengers are very valuable because they help in determining the prices of fares. Once you get on board in a ‘Tro-Tro’, a new passenger is expected to greet and feel at home. Each passenger is supposed to shift to make space for a boarding passenger or step down for another to alight. The passengers also assist in the collection of fares as the ‘Tro-Tro’ Mate is only seated close to the door of the mini bus.

Though not quite obligatory, passengers also assist in buying water and other items for other passengers who cannot get access to the traders who are hawking in the traffic. Passengers join in conversation with themselves and sometimes with the ‘Tro-Tro’ Mate or occasionally with the Driver.

### Discussion

From the analysis, the old Bedford trucks have evolved to include many recent comfortable mini buses from leading vehicle producing brands, who charge differently depending on the destination ([Anyima-Ackah, 2002](#)). In effect, the Ghanaian ‘Tro-Tro’ transport system is more of a cultural concept rather than a type of bus or an amount of currency that is charged as a fare.

The system of interactions between the ‘Tro-Tro’ Driver, the ‘Tro-Tro’ Mate and the passengers are very unique. Considering the nature of risky driving in Ghana ([Anakwah et al., 2015](#)), the role of passengers in maintaining sanity is very vital. Passengers are seen as visible checks and regulators on the conduct of both drivers and conductors within the ‘Tro-Tro’ system. Unlike other transport systems in the country, the passengers in the ‘Tro-Tro’ buses are quite open and have some extra conventional powers to instruct the drivers and conductors. This may have some role in influencing risky driving and related consequences if used positively.

Perhaps, another important issue to be debated is the system of ‘Tro-Tro’ passengers’ collectivism. Granting it as a novel discovery may yet, point to the underlying philosophy within the ‘Tro-Tro’ transport industry as serving a particular social class [*i.e. their cheaper means of transportation*] ([Anyima-Ackah, 2002](#)). The historical ‘Tro’ idea may warrant that latent concept among the passengers. The possible feeling of ‘invariably coming from one family.’ Noticeably, this may not be so, as people within the high and middle socioeconomic classes do patronise these buses for several reasons ([Coomson, 2013](#)). However, that unconditional feelings may be hypothesized to lead to some extent, the universal feelings of togetherness and oneness as they travel in the same bus.

### Conclusion

This study examined the evolutions that have occurred within the ‘Tro-Tro’ transport system in Ghana. It also examined the human elements within the industry and the existing dynamics.

It appears that the ‘Tro-Tro’ Drivers, Mates and passengers build a system of culture that is mutually dependent. This relationship goes beyond the service provider - consumer bonds.

It fosters a communal spirit among the 3 groups of human elements, though each has his or her own distinct roles. These findings suggest that, the ‘Tro-Tro’ transport industry has come to stay and will go a long way to enhance the national development agenda, once given the needed consideration.

### **Implications**

This paper advocates for the need to delve deeper into the ‘Tro-Tro’ transport industry. The hypothesised concept of ‘Tro-Tro’ passengers’ collectivism ought to be studied in a broader sense using more robust methods.

It is noteworthy that the discipline of traffic and transport psychology should be promoted by psychologists, researchers, educators, regulatory boards, and policy makers in Ghana and Africa as a whole. From the work of Conkle and West (2008), there is a need to consider the ‘psychology on the road’. Again, future studies may also look at interesting features such as the use of mottoes and slogans for communication as discussed by Powell (2012).

Once traffic and transport psychology is advanced within Africa, it will have a positive impact on all other branches of psychology in general. It will help explain the changing aspects of human behaviour on the roads of Africa and enhance development (Anakwah et al., 2015; Conkle, & West, 2008). On the whole, this will positively enhance planning, policy making, and growth.

### **Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank all the ‘Tro-Tro’ Drivers, Mates and passengers who consented to make this study possible. I am also grateful to all whose photographs and works are displayed and reviewed in this work. This work is part of a bigger research project funded by KAD International, Ghana.

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