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WAYFINDING

Present-day African cities are characterized by the constant movement of pedestrians, cyclists, cart pushers, street vendors, market customers, the incessant traffic, noise and exhaust fumes of all kinds of motorized vehicles, and the flow of communication either face-to-face or through mobile phones. This constant movement corresponds with manifold ways of social mobility such as labour migration, marriage mobility, upward mobility through education and profession, downward mobility through sickness, poverty or other adverse circumstances, and movement through different social worlds. These various forms of mobility are visible and audible in ways of talking, dressing, and behaving according to the respective situation. Mobility in the wider sense of individual and collective movement, flexibility, and versatility is a prerequisite for the functioning of African cities, and for individual success or at least survival in them.

In order to navigate African cityscapes, city dwellers need to acquire knowledge about different spatial and social domains and to command the respective appropriate language, diction, demeanour, dress code, and other skills. Although many anthropologists who worked in urban Africa have had to learn these things themselves, the process of learning has rarely been a research topic, because its significance as a way of knowing the city has been overlooked. How does this learning by doing work? How do city dwellers perceive the cityscape?

In this chapter, I will present the concept of “socio-spatial navigation” for exploring how city dwellers find their ways in the literal and the figurative sense. Wayfinding requires spatial orientation in order to move through the built environment. Social navigation involves knowledge about social worlds and skills for moving competently within and through them. The chapter uses examples from fieldwork in Bobo-Dioulasso (Burkina Faso).

Insight 1: Spatial orientation is not just maplike knowledge

Some authors used attributes such as “elusive”, “invisible”, or “unknowable” to characterize cities in Africa (for a discussion of these attributes see Guyer 2011). McFarlane (2011b: 362) stated: “cities (...) are constantly sought to be learnt and relearnt by different people and for often very different reasons, from coping mechanisms and personal advancement to questions of contestation and justice”. What McFarlane does not explicitly mention here is the necessity to learn and know the urban space as such. In order to access coping mechanisms and to attain personal advancement, people first need to know what and where the respective resources are and how to proceed from there. Knowing where these resources are and how they work requires knowledge about the city both in terms of material spaces and social worlds. But given the purported “unknowability” (Hansen and Verkaaik 2009: 8, Pieterse 2013) of cities in Africa, how do people actually know their city and what do they know of the city?

In spite of decades of anthropological research in urban Africa, one aspect of knowledge has been curiously under-researched: spatial orientation. How do people find their way in an urban environment that seems confusing to the unaccustomed visitor from abroad? How do people learn to move competently through cityscapes? In many African cities, official street names (if they exist at all) are often irrelevant for the actual orientation of city dwellers. Many people cannot read street names or have not learned how to read maps. In order to find their ways through often unpaved and unnamed streets of the city, they have to learn by doing. This involves learning invisible landmarks such as, for instance, formerly existing buildings or signboards that are no longer there but whose names are still being used. There are no-go areas that also have a temporal dimension, because what may be a popular venue during daytime (e.g. a market building) can become unsafe at night and is therefore avoided.

As an example for an orientation system that operates without reference to official maps and names, Mounin used wayfinding in Beirut:

Indicate the position of the point to be reached with respect to the nearest big gas station; there, ask the way to the nearest grocery store; there, ask the location of the point sought, and when in despair phone the person whose house one is trying to reach and tell him where one is calling from.

Mounin 1980: 494

This is, in fact, a method of wayfinding employed in many African cities where official orientation systems are either absent or restricted to central business districts. What emerges from Mounin’s description is the necessity to communicate with others at each point along the way. Until recently, the option of phoning was only possible for a minority of city dwellers in Africa. Today, even many poorer city dwellers own a mobile phone. Mobility providers such as taxi and Uber drivers use digital tools like Google Maps or customized apps.

Moving through the city requires getting information about directions, routes, and means of transport. In order to board a collective taxi or mini-bus to go from one part of the city to the other, people have to enquire about the right corners or sides of streets where these vehicles habitually stop. Since many urban transport systems operate informally, these stops may not be visibly marked by signboards, poles, or other objects. One also has to acquire certain bodily postures and verbal skills in order to know how to climb a mini-bus, where the most preferred seats are, how to negotiate fares, and what to call to the conductor or his assistant when one wants to get off (D'hondt 2009).

Mental maps

Conventionally, spatial orientation is thought to be based on the knowledge of maps: either two-dimensional representations of the physical space or cognitive maps that have been acquired through familiarity with the terrain (e.g. Gell 1985). Widlok (1997: 329) criticized concepts of cognitive maps in anthropology and psychology because they seemed to “fail to account for all skilled and habitual forms of orientation” that work without maps. Widlok pointed out that among the Hai||om in Namibia, spatial information is transferred verbally through “a continual flow of indexical and referential talk about places and where people and resources are located. This topographical gossip (...) uses a widely shared system of landscape terms” (Widlok 1997: 325). Spatial orientation in Widlok’s example did not only consist of establishing one’s position and direction in the physical surrounding, but also entailed a collation of observation and information that is impossible to achieve without communicated knowledge. In a similar vein, Ingold (2000: 219) stated that “wayfinding (...) more closely resembles storytelling than map-using”. However, Heft (in Mounin 1980: 496) pointed out that wayfinding skills are often tacit knowledge that is not verbalized.

Probably due to their background in hunter-gatherer studies, neither Ingold nor Widlok mentioned Kevin Lynch’s remarks about wayfinding in his seminal book “The Image of the City” (1960) or De Certeau’s “Walking in the City” (2000). For Lynch, the “legibility” of a city depended on “the ease with which its parts can be recognized and can be organized into a coherent pattern” (2–3). Wayfinding in the city is based on an “environmental image” that “is the product both of an immediate sensation and of the memory of past experience”, and is “used to interpret information and to guide action” (4). For De Certeau (2000: 105), the

act of walking is to the urban system what the act of speaking, the Speech Act, is to language or to spoken utterance. On the most elementary level it has in effect a threefold “uttering” function: it is a process of appropriation of the topographic system by the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and assumes language); it is a spatial realization of the site (just as the act of speaking is a sonic realization of language); lastly, it implies relationships among distinct positions, i.e. pragmatic “contracts” in the form of movements

(just as verbal utterance is “allocation”, “places the others” before the speaker, and sets up contracts between fellow speakers).

Lynch, De Certeau, Widlok and Ingold agreed that wayfinding is more than a purely cognitive operation. It is a socio-spatial practice that is predicated on the presence of and communication with others. Its result is not just maplike knowledge but a framework which enables individuals to act.

Lynch’s concept of the “environmental image” was transformed into the “mental map” (e.g. Downs and Stea 1977). However, the use of mental maps for the empirical study of orientation in urban space has rarely been applied to cities of Africa. One notable exception is Deborah Pellow’s long-term study of the Sabon Zongo quarter of Accra during which she collected mental maps in order to explore residents’ perceptions about boundaries and important features of the quarter (Pellow 2006). Pellow noted that many people felt uneasy about drawing maps and often asked the researcher to do it for them on the basis of what they communicated verbally. Most maps reproduced the grid structure of the quarter and contained places such as markets, mosques, and peoples’ own homes. They corresponded with Lynch’s environmental image in including paths, edges, and nodes, but there were also significant differences between individual maps. Pellow was surprised to find that one central element that regularly draws even people from other parts of the city to Sabon Zongo was conspicuously absent from the mental maps: typically “Northern” prepared-food specialties sold on markets and by street vendors. Neither the sellers and the food nor the accompanying characteristic smells, sounds, or haggling figured on the maps. Pellow assumed that this was because they were taken for granted. This finding throws a light on the limits of mental maps for the exploration of shared images of the city.

Insight 2: Social and spatial navigation are co-constitutive for doing the city

Some authors have employed the concept of “social navigation” for the constant necessity to “read” and respond to ever-changing urban environments. In his ethnography about young ex-combatants in urban Guinea-Bissau, Vigh (2006) explored their strategies of gaining a foothold in a post-conflict society. Social space, according to Vigh, is more akin to seascapes than to landscapes. He defined social navigation as “motion within motion” and as “movement through both the socially *immediate* and the socially *imagined*” (Vigh 2009: 420, 425; his emphasis). In emic terms, social navigation was called *dubriagem* (muddling through). *Dubriagem*, a notion similar to the French *se débrouiller*, *chemsha bongo* in Kiswahili (Stroeken 2005) and “hustling” in Kenya (Thieme et al. 2021),

encompasses such different acts as finding or procuring the odd bits and pieces of work, running errands in the hope of a later return, using your

body to get what you need (...), persuading someone to give you something, cheating on your wife or husband, or stealing.

Vigh 2006: 133

In a similar vein, Gough (2008) described how young people tried to make ends meet in Lusaka by doing trips from the outskirts to the city centre in order to look for jobs even if they could barely afford the bus fare. Looking for work involved asking the same persons about vacancies over and over again. These young people hoped that the persons they asked for work would eventually prefer to employ someone they had known before instead of a total stranger.

Like Vigh, Archambault (2013) found that her interlocutors in a periurban neighbourhood in Mozambique employed an emic concept for the “poise and cunning required for successful living” in the city, *visão*. It required the ability to read footprints in the sand in order to determine who had passed, but also knowing what not to see. Archambault studied the endeavours of young people to both hide and display certain things about themselves, which could mean only moving about at night. Young women tried to reconcile respectability and independence within an “intimate economy” by using mobile phones for pursuing several simultaneous relationships with men from whom they expected gifts and assistance. Mobile phones helped to navigate everyday uncertainties and to make oneself visible or invisible according to the situation. Archambault proposed to conceive of this type of social navigation as “cruising” which not merely denotes survival strategies but also the skilful exploitation of opportunities.

Bjarnesen (2013: 228–230) observed “social performances” by young people in Bobo-Dioulasso who had grown up in Côte d’Ivoire but “returned” to their parents’ country of origin Burkina Faso because of the civil war in Côte d’Ivoire. These young people had to demonstrate adherence to certain local social norms when they did not want to be identified as “Diaspo”. Bjarnesen recounts how one young man changed his behaviour completely “in a blink” in an interaction with a Big Man to whom he had to appear as humble and subdued.

Trovalla, Adetula and Trovalla (2014) studied everyday movements through the city of Jos in Nigeria. In the wake of interethnic and religious violent conflicts, Jos had become subdivided into socio-spatial realms whose borders changed according to day- and nighttime, particular events or political circumstances. Individuals had to constantly assess the conditions for moving through urban space and to adapt accordingly, which included paying attention to the speed and noise of traffic, speaking different languages, adopting particular dress codes, hiding one’s religious or ethnic affiliation, and bluffing.

The concept of social navigation reminds us of the fact that social relations in urban Africa are not given but constantly emerge from multiple and repeated interactions and exchanges, as Epstein (1961) had already pointed out in a seminal article. These interactions may result in what Simone (2004b) called “people as infrastructure” (see also Hansen and Verkaaik 2009 on “infrapower”). He referred to networks of immigrant Africans at the fringes of legality in Johannesburg, but the

notion of “people as infrastructure” can easily be extended to many forms of urban sociality that entail mutual obligations, reliability, predictability, and the potential provision of means for moving on.

Social navigation is a useful concept for exploring the ways in which city dwellers assess the possibilities for creating or becoming “infrastructure”. However, due to the term’s reference to a seascape, what tends to get lost is the materiality of the urban spaces within which social navigation takes place. As with other metaphors that refer to liquids or fluids (e.g. the ubiquitous global “flows”), there is a risk of naturalizing processes that are the result of intentional action. As Knowles (2011: 139) reminds us: “Journeys matter and make matter, urban matter, in flesh and stone, and they forge the social interactions, social relationships and, ultimately, the social morphologies or viscous, if not solid, forms to which these things accumulate”.

Socio-spatial navigation in Bobo-Dioulasso and Zanzibar

In a recent research project, we used the concept of “socio-spatial navigation” as a heuristic tool for exploring modes of “doing the city” in Bobo-Dioulasso (Burkina Faso) and Zanzibar (Tanzania) that relate to both the material and social conditions for perception and action (Beck and Werthmann 2016, 2020).¹ We departed from the assumption that conventional or “Northern” conceptions do not encompass “Southern” epistemologies of the urban (Connell 2007, Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, Jenkins 2013, Mabin 2014). We wanted to challenge claims that not only outside observers of cities in Africa but also city dwellers themselves are puzzled by their urban environments. Even if the urban in general, or any particular city, is principally unknowable from an individual perspective no matter where in the world, there is still a need to explore individual and collective responses to “unknowability”. Our project aimed at giving answers to this question: “if the urban is opaque and difficult to decode for everybody, how do people make themselves at home in it?” (Hansen and Verkaaik 2009: 16). We assumed that African city dwellers do indeed dispose of ways of decoding the city.

Our project looked at practices of spatial orientation and social navigation as simultaneous and co-constitutive ways of knowing and doing the city. How do people interact with the cityscape? How do people know where they are, where to go, and how to get there, in both the concrete and figurative sense? We were looking at particular professional groups that we considered as experts of socio-spatial navigation: mobility providers (drivers of public transport vehicles) and tourist guides. They can be seen as professional urbanites: it is their job to navigate the city and to move people and goods from one place to the other under the specific conditions of contemporary African cities, so they have to know the city both as inhabitants and as service providers. They need to learn the written and unwritten rules of the business; they have to mobilize social relations and networks to gain access to material and immaterial resources; they have to speak at least one *lingua franca*; and they have to assess the dangers connected with their particular

line of work. They have to assemble a mental map of the city that includes regular routes and stops, visible and invisible landmarks, shortcuts and no-go areas. They need to be able to provide information about their city's culture and history as well as practical information. Both taxi drivers and tourist guides have to anticipate the needs and interests of their customers. They have to learn about customers' and foreigners' knowledge, images, and expectations of their cities. The cityscape constantly emerges in the interactions between these professional navigators and their clients.

Through going and riding along with tour guides, taxi drivers, and their customers and observing their interactions, we explored the visible and invisible landmarks of shared topographies. In both cities, the majority of commonly known landmarks are markets, hospitals, mosques, shops, or municipal services that are relevant for city dwellers' everyday lives and practical needs, and sites of touristic interest. A number of names for landmarks refer to buildings or places that no longer exist, or to past events, or there is both an official and a popular name for a place. Getting to know these landmarks and their names often happens during everyday movements in public transport.

In both cities, every person is a potential infrastructure for others. Taxi drivers and tourist guides are experts not only in spatial navigation, but in assessing the possibilities and potentials of various situations and interactions. Many members of both professional groups aim at entering a more lucrative or reputable occupation in the long run. Their current occupation enables them to get information or form relationships with customers that may help to build up connections and access to other lines of work. While shortages and lacks obstruct certain avenues, they can create possibilities for others. In Zanzibar, for instance, a temporary fuel deficit led to rising taxi fares, which, in turn, created a shortage of public transport and delays, but also to a thriving informal retail trade with fuel in small amounts. Taxi drivers in Bobo-Dioulasso rely on networks of people who enable them to do their work, e.g. mechanics who also serve as intermediaries between car owners who want to hire out their vehicles as taxis and potential drivers.²

Insight 3: A taxi ride can be much more than just transport

The city of Bobo-Dioulasso

Since this kind of background has often been missing in urban ethnographies, I will give a brief overview of Bobo-Dioulasso's history and present-day features in order to sketch the cityscape through which mobility providers move. The city mirrors many of the features and dynamics that I discussed in the previous chapters such as some groups' claims to firstcomership, the redefinition of ethnic boundaries, and individuals' pursuits of various livelihoods. At the same time, it has some features that distinguish it from other cities in Burkina Faso.

The emergence of a trading centre known as Sia along the routes that connected Begho (in present-day Ghana) and Djenné (in present-day Mali) cannot be dated

exactly. Neither is it possible to establish since when self-designations such as “Bobo” and “Zara” – the two groups who today claim being the “founders” of Sia – existed. In present-day Bobo-Dioulasso, the names “Zara” and “Bobo” tend to be used as ethnonyms, whereas until the colonial era they designated socio-professional categories: the Zara were traders and warriors, the Bobo were farmers.³

The precolonial history of Bobo-Dioulasso is linked to the city of Kong in the North of present-day Côte d’Ivoire. Mande-speaking traders and warriors settled in Kong in the 15th century. At the beginning of the 18th century, Sekou Ouattara came to power and the trading city became an important political centre. In the first half of the 18th century, groups of warriors from Kong with the clan name Ouattara began to settle in the West of present-day Burkina Faso, where they founded garrisons or “war houses” from which they undertook raids (Şaul 1998). These warlords did not dominate entire territories but controlled some trade routes and rural settlements. In local narratives and the academic literature, the relations between Ouattara and Zara were ambivalent. The Ouattara appear sometimes as conquerors, sometimes as mercenaries who made the Zara pay for their services in gold, sometimes as allies who “ceded” control of the Bobo villages they had conquered to the Zara (Werthmann 2013: 850).

In the second half of the 18th century, two sons of the famous Koranic scholar Muhammad al-Mustafa Saganogo left Kong and settled in Bobo-Dioulasso. At that time, the Saganogo were the most prominent Muslim scholars in the Volta region. Usually, scholarly lineages “belonged” to warrior lineages and followed them to certain places. The two brothers settled in Farakan (a present-day quarter of Bobo-Dioulasso) where they built the first mosque in the city. Ouattara warriors from Kong who had preceded them founded the settlement of Kombougou. Under the influence of the Saganogo, some local families converted to Islam. Sakidi Sanou, who had been raised by a Saganogo as a foster son, became a well-known scholar himself. At the end of the 19th century, he built the mosque which has since become the emblem of Bobo-Dioulasso.

As in other cities of Africa, present-day competition about political power and leadership in Bobo-Dioulasso can be traced back to the precolonial and colonial periods (see Chapter 4 “Governing”). In the second half of the 19th century, the Ouattara and Zara in and around Bobo-Dioulasso alternated between periods of alliances and rivalries for control over trade routes and political power. In 1897, their alliances broke down definitively when the Zara decided not to fight alongside the Ouattara and the Tiefo against the warlord Samori Touré. On 25 September 1897, French troops invaded Sia. According to a Zara version of events, the Zara had wanted to surrender peacefully, but the trickery of an Ouattara led the French to open fire on the town. Sakidi Sanou and a renowned warlord lost their lives. To this day, the Bobo and Zara consider the Ouattara as “traitors”.

From 1898 to 1904, Sia was the capital of the Second Military Territory of Upper Senegal and Niger. In 1904, the French colonial forces renamed the town Bobo-Dioulasso. In 1906, a large military camp was set up. In 1919, the French created the colony of Upper Volta and made Ouagadougou its administrative headquarters.



FIGURE 7.1 Railway station of Bobo-Dioulasso in 1997. Photograph by the author

In the region of Bobo-Dioulasso, the French appointed Ouattara warlords as canton chiefs. A number of these chiefs abused their power and exploited the rural populations. The French therefore tried to replace them by more legitimate local leaders, with mixed success.

In 1934, the railway line from Abidjan reached Bobo-Dioulasso. In the 1940s, Bobo-Dioulasso was the second largest city in West Africa after Dakar and one of the largest garrisons in French West Africa. It had an industry, was a transshipment point for agricultural products from the hinterland, and served as a “turnstile” for military recruits. From 1932 to 1947, Upper Volta was dissolved and the Western part of the country, including Bobo-Dioulasso, belonged to the Haute-Côte d’Ivoire, which was a means of forcing the labour migration of the “Voltaics” into the plantations of the Ivory Coast. From World War II onwards, Bobo-Dioulasso became the scene of anti-colonial political activities under the influence of the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA).

In 1960, Upper Volta became independent. Ouagadougou became the capital because the reconstitution of Upper Volta in 1947 had been carried out partly under pressure from the Mossi elites in the central parts of the country. Since independence, the city has experienced strong demographic growth and spatial expansion. Today, Bobo-Dioulasso is the second largest city in Burkina Faso and said to be its “economic capital”. According to the 2019 census, Bobo-Dioulasso had 983,552 inhabitants (INSD 2020). However, the economic crises since the 1990s, especially the civil war in Côte d’Ivoire from 2002 to 2007, forced many factories to close and interrupted the rail link with Abidjan, which had an adverse effect on many economic activities in the city. As a result of decentralization, municipal councils and mayors have been democratically elected since 1995. As elsewhere, this reform has not necessarily led to an improvement in public administration. In 2010, the nation celebrated the 50th anniversary of Burkina Faso’s independence in Bobo-Dioulasso.

For this occasion, a new quarter “Bobo 2010” was built, the airport was renovated, and a modern fruit and vegetable market was constructed.

Since the colonial period, populations from other West African countries and further away have settled in Bobo-Dioulasso, including a small European community mainly consisting of businesspeople and employees of development organizations. During the civil war in Côte d’Ivoire, children of Burkinabè parents who had migrated there but who themselves had never lived in Burkina – the “Diaspo” – “returned” to the country. In Bobo-Dioulasso, those who were better-off established businesses like nightclubs and commercial enterprises, whereas others work in informal occupations (Bjarnesen 2013).

In terms of its spatial layout, the city has an ancient centre called Dioulassoba, which emerged from the precolonial quarters of Sia and Tounouma and used to be a touristic site until the ongoing security crisis severely damaged the tourism sector. Parts of the older quarters had been removed when the French colonialists created an administrative and business centre. While the city centre has not changed much ever since I first visited in 1997, there has been considerable growth of the quarters outside the centre. In the city centre, there are important services and places such as the central market, the railway station, stations for regional bus connections, the central police station, branches of state services and municipal administration, the public hospital, the old mosque and the catholic cathedral, banks, supermarkets, restaurants, hotels, and nightclubs. In the officially zoned and developed residential “sectors” outside of the city centre, one finds schools, hospitals, pharmacies, small supermarkets, gas stations, as well as numerous small neighbourhood kiosks and



FIGURE 7.2 Rainfall in the city centre of Bobo-Dioulasso. Photograph by the author

roadside stalls that offer products and services for everyday needs. These quarters have public water wells frequented by household members and water sellers, because indoor plumbing is still rare. Kiosks, stalls, roadside restaurants, and bars can also be found in the sprawling, non-zoned periurban quarters. Only the main traffic arteries like the big *boulevards* are paved. Many unpaved roads are difficult to pass during the rainy season which may cut off entire parts of the city.

In terms of the built environment, some public buildings such as the railway station were constructed in the “neo-Sudanic” style during the colonial period. For housing, all kinds of styles and materials are present as in other West African cities (see Chapter 6 “Dwelling”), such as the self-built one-room houses made of clay bricks and corrugated iron sheet roofs on non-zoned plots, large compounds in the older quarters that accommodate families and tenants, half-built second or third floors of modern business or residential buildings, and the huge mansions or “villas” in the upmarket quarter of “Bobo 2010”. For more than ten years, I rented a small house in a row of four identical two-room houses in the quarter of Yéguéré in a quiet, middle-class neighbourhood. In the local parlance, this was a *cour unique* (single courtyard), separated from the other houses by walls and with its own entrance gate.

Despite the profound changes of the urban layout and administration since the colonial period and independence, the inhabitants of some older quarters still perceive these as “villages”. It is in these villages that traditional rituals and celebrations take place, such as, for instance, sacrifices at shrines, mask dances following the death of a respected elder, or dances of girls and women during Muslim holidays. Since the colonial period, many inhabitants of these old neighbourhoods feel neglected by the municipal administration. Under the influence of catholic missionaries, the Bobo, who were once mostly farmers and non-Muslims, began to form a



FIGURE 7.3 Commercial building under construction in Bobo-Dioulasso. Photograph courtesy of Souleymane Komboudry

Western-educated elite since the 1920s. Today, their descendants reject claims to power by both the Zara and the Ouattara. This has resulted in the creation of offices such as the “supreme chief” of the “Bobo-Madarè”⁴, which is contested by other groups who also started nominating chiefs, the Jula being a case in point. During and after the colonial period, both the Ouattara warriors and their allied traders’ and scholars’ lineages lost livelihoods and prestige, and their complementary relationships had cooled. In order to become more visible in the political arena of the municipality and beyond, some prominent individuals tried to unite these status groups under the ethnic label Jula by creating associations and organizing assemblies in recent years (Werthmann 2011, 2012). The project succeeded, and the Jula community instated a supreme chief in 2015. The ambition to have chiefs is clearly modeled on the hierarchical system of the Mossi who formed precolonial states and continue to be demographically and politically influential in Burkina Faso. The agenda behind this redefinition of an ethnic identity and a more unified political organization is to have a Jula mayor in Bobo-Dioulasso in the medium run.

In socio-cultural terms, Bobo-Dioulasso is much closer to areas in the neighbouring countries with Mande-speaking populations such as Mali, Guinea-Conakry, and Northern Côte d’Ivoire, which is a heritage of precolonial social structures, trade connections, and religious networks, but also based on continued kin relations and mobility between those countries. In Bobo-Dioulasso, the *lingua franca* is Jula⁵ and the majority religion is Islam, in contrast with Ouagadougou where Mooré is the dominant language and Christians are more numerous. Joking relationships between certain categories of relatives, kin groups, and ethnic groups

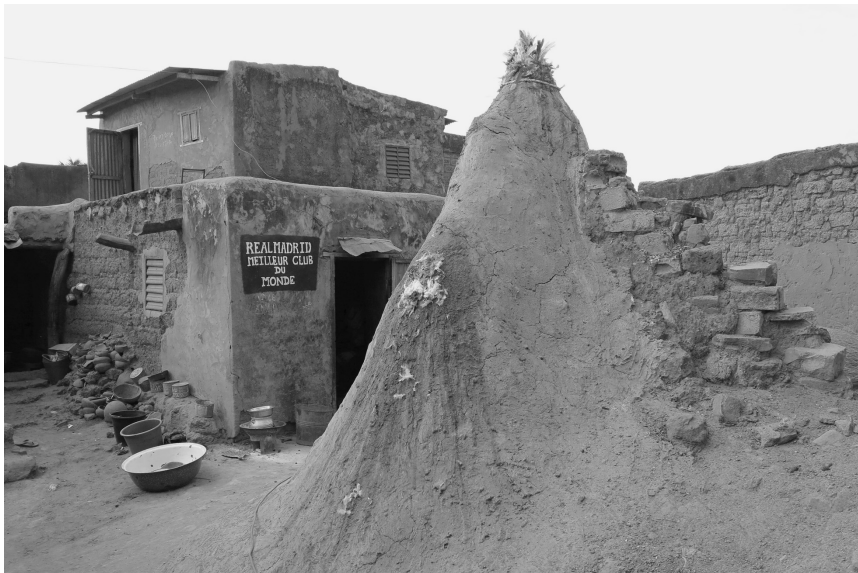


FIGURE 7.4 Shrine in Dioulassoba, the old part of Bobo-Dioulasso. Photograph by the author

as well as friendly banter among neighbours, work mates, or market traders and their customers characterize many everyday interactions (Hagberg 2006). The traditional social categories of free-borns (*horonu*), artisans (*nyamakalaw* or “castes”), and former slaves (*jonu*) still have an impact on marriage relations. While social norms for the relations between men and women based on Islam are less strict than, for instance, in the Northern Nigerian city of Kano, where married women are secluded, women in Bobo-Dioulasso are supposed to conform to certain ideals of dressing and behaving. Parents and elder persons should be treated with respect, which is expressed in certain terms of address and forms of greeting, and in giving small cash gifts to them. Even though not every individual respects these norms, the inhabitants of Bobo-Dioulasso see them as something that distinguishes them from inhabitants of other cities.



FIGURE 7.5 Neighbourhood mosque in Bobo-Dioulasso. Photograph by the author

Even though there is competition and rivalry between different groups of inhabitants, ethnicity and other socio-cultural differences are not relevant in all everyday interactions, unless they are being joked about. The collective self-designation as “Bobolais” contributes to a common identification with the city, both in the media and in the daily conversations among city dwellers. The Bobolais distinguish themselves from the Ouagalais by way of mutual stereotyping. For the Ouagalais, it is the laziness of the Bobolais that is the root cause of the lack of economic dynamism and the dilapidated state of the urban infrastructure. The tea rounds of young men (*grin*), typical for Bobo-Dioulasso, are emblematic of this perceived laziness (Debevec 2013, Roth 2018: 153–165). Conversely, the inhabitants of Bobo-Dioulasso criticize the Ouagalais as being business-minded and impolite. They blame the national government and the municipal administration for the neglect of Bobo-Dioulasso. Even though the people of Bobo-Dioulasso have a reputation of being less belligerent than those of Ouagadougou or of the “rebel city” Koudougou (see Chapter 4 “Governing”), there were a number of protests during the political crises in recent years which entailed, among others, the burning of the town hall in 2014 during the popular insurrection against former President Compaoré.

Public transport

In many cities of Africa, “public” transport is, in fact, private and often informal (e.g. Godard 2002, Gewald et al. 2009, Díaz Olvera et al. 2010). There is a huge variety of vehicles used for transporting passengers and of the respective modes of business organization. As early as 1936, Hunter mentioned that some men in East London were employed as wagon and lorry drivers, and a few worked independently as taxi drivers:

One location is two miles from the centre of town, and there is no means of conveyance by train, tram, or bus, so a considerable business is done by taxis in taking those who can afford to pay for conveyance to and from their work. Many of these taxis are owned by the drivers who buy second-hand cars on the instalment system. (...) These taxis also do a business at the week-ends in taking parties to visit friends in the country, or in some other town, and in taking teams to other centres for matches.

Hunter 1936: 439, 442

Before motorized transport expanded after World War II, most labour migrants from the West African Savanna regions made the journey to the coastal areas on foot. After 1945, “mammy lorries” became an essential feature of these movements. Transporters specialized on particular routes, e.g. from Bamako, Segou, Mopti, and Bobo-Dioulasso to Ouessa near the border to Northern Ghana, and from there on southwards. Rouch (1956: 75) pointed out the importance of “lorry parks” in Accra and Kumasi as hubs where “bookers” directed arriving migrants from

the North to jobs in various regions. Some migrants ventured into this activity as well, and those who managed to save enough money bought a lorry and started their own transport business. Inner-city transport and portage was an occupation of many unskilled labour migrants. “Kaya-kaya” (carriers) transported loads on their heads. They were usually located in one particular city quarter or market area, but some also went around looking for customers. “Toroko-boys” (truck boys) had motorized carts (Rouch 1956: 108–109). Until today, bicycles and mopeds are important means of transport in cities.

In Kaolack (Senegal), better-off town dwellers like traders, civil servants, and army officers bought mopeds and rented them out to drivers who could, in turn, sublet them to “apprentices” (Morice 1981–1983). The drivers met in certain strategic places such as markets, bus stops, or cinemas. These meeting points called “garages” were both geographical and social units where a group of drivers sat on benches while waiting for passengers. Each garage had one person who was in charge (*responsable*). These leaders owned several mopeds but did not drive themselves. The leaders’ tasks were protection of the drivers against authorities, arbitration in conflicts, and the collection of money for emergencies or social events (baptism, funeral). Within one garage, there was solidarity among its members. Membership requirements were formalized. A member had to be at least 18 years old, own a moped, and pay fees for a governmental union, but there was tacit acceptance of breaches. The apprentices were often younger than 18. They would drive during the driver’s breaks and turn over all the money they made to them. In return, they received a gift from the driver. The apprentice system allowed for an in-group selection of drivers. The fee for one ride was 100 CFA. This fee was comparatively high. As reasons, the owners cited expensive reparations and the lack of spare parts. The drivers had to give 1,300–1,500 CFA to the owners per day which meant that they had to make c. 15 rides until they earned money for themselves. The commercial transport of passengers with mopeds was illegal, but the municipal authorities wavered between *laissez-faire* and repression. Some months after the end of Morice’s research, mopeds were finally prohibited in favour of taxi cars. Mopeds continued to work clandestinely, but the “apprentice” system was abolished.

A number of later studies focused on similar forms of the social organization of motorized intra- and inter-urban mobility as well as on the social, economic, and discursive significance of bus stations, truck stops, and roadside markets. Since the 2000s, an “anthropology of roads” has emerged (Klaeger 2013, Dalakoglou and Harvey 2015, Horta 2019). Anthropologists work about urban transport by drivers of buses, taxis, and moto-taxis such as the *boda-boda*, *dala-dala*, and *matatu* in East Africa, the *bendskin* in Cameroon, and the *okada* in Nigeria. Like other anthropologists who studied urban informal livelihoods, researchers working about the road and public transport in cities of Africa found unwritten and written rules for the social organization of work and the flow of traffic, various forms of learning, careers and hierarchies, specialized terminologies, nonverbal communication, mastery of certain body techniques, strategies for avoiding police, pride in skills, and hurt about bad reputations.⁶

Mobility providers in Bobo-Dioulasso

In Burkina Faso, several attempts at creating municipal transport systems since the 1980s in Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso were unsuccessful. The most recent initiative started in 2018 when the municipality of Bobo-Dioulasso introduced a public bus system. However, these buses are mainly used by pupils in the mornings and the afternoons. For other potential customers they are inconvenient because they only serve some main routes, the stops are not located close to popular destinations such as markets, they are not protected against weather conditions, and buses often run only once in an hour without any indication at what time they arrive at the stops. City dwellers speak of such misguided planning as “calculation of white people”, thereby indicating the distance between “Westernized” planners and the local population.

This situation leaves the market of urban public transport largely to private operators. Most customers in Bobo-Dioulasso prefer collective car taxis and three-wheeled moto-taxis (*tricycles*, made from mopeds with a trailer for transporting goods) because they offer much more flexibility: they are constantly circulating, go into remote parts of the city and can stop anywhere. Moto-taxis are only authorized to transport goods and not passengers. However, the municipal authorities are unable to enforce this regulation. This is partly due to the fact that some of their owners are themselves officials, and that driving moto-taxis has become an important livelihood for many young men who would otherwise be unemployed. Faced with threats by policemen to impound their vehicles, moto-taxi drivers point out that most car taxi drivers also operate illegally because they use butane gas as fuel, a practice that is officially prohibited but has continued to exist since the food price crisis in 2008. For poorer city dwellers, especially women, moto-taxi fares are more affordable.

In Bobo-Dioulasso, there are full-time and part-time car taxi drivers. Some own their vehicles and others enter into an agreement with an owner. In many cases, people took up taxi driving in order to compensate for the loss of an occupation or to complement another line of business by investing in a taxi. Agreements between owners and drivers are verbal and vary between a daily or a monthly sum which the driver has to hand over to the owner. In order to become a taxi driver, a newcomer undergoes an apprenticeship by accompanying an experienced driver for some time who will explain the unwritten rules of the business to him and show him the major landmarks and routes. Experienced taxi drivers as well as long-term city dwellers pass on spatial knowledge to apprentice taxi drivers and other passengers, thereby consolidating a shared mental map of the city. As a rule, taxis do not enter into the *six-mètres* (blocks of houses off the main streets) unless specifically negotiated beforehand. If they agree to do so, they have to navigate through the unpaved and unlit parts of the city, which is often further complicated by their customers' unfamiliarity with the terrain. However, by doing so taxi drivers increase their knowledge of destinations “off the grid” which may give them an economic advantage over other drivers. Some taxi drivers have regular clients whom they pick

up in the morning to bring them to their work places and collect them there in the afternoon to bring them home again.

Public transport in Bobo-Dioulasso is gendered. Most car and moto-taxi drivers are male and the majority of customers are female, because women tend not to have their own means of transport. Passengers in collective car taxis in Bobo-Dioulasso have to ride along until other customers have been delivered to their destinations, thereby passing places they would not otherwise know. Certain destinations become topics of conversation. When, for instance, one passenger asked to be taken to a healer, another one commented on this healer's reputation and qualities. Their exchange made a third passenger aware of the existence of this health provider. In this way, knowledge about particular resources and their location in the city is passed on in myriad everyday interactions between taxi drivers and their customers.

The competences of a taxi driver go beyond spatial knowledge. Houd Kanazoé (2021: 117–122) found that taxi drivers dispose of both *savoir-faire* (know-how) and *savoir-être* (know how to be). Know-how involves recognizing potential customers by keeping one eye on the roadside and “reading” people's body language. It also includes mastering the conventions and tricks for negotiating destinations and fares. There is a standard fare of 300 CFA per “drop” fixed by the taxi drivers' unions, but if customers want to go beyond a standard distance or into unpaved quarters, the price is negotiated. Both drivers and customers employ verbal and nonverbal strategies in order to raise or reduce the price. Know-how is also mobilized in negotiating with policemen during controls. “Know how to be” includes looking the other way when an acquaintance enters the taxi with a woman who is not his wife. It also requires not to become angry when customers cheat or abuse the drivers.

Taxi drivers and passengers dispose of certain skills for making the most of a ride. The drivers can be vague about the fare if the customer does not explicitly ask. Clients of an inexperienced taxi driver who does not know the city well can dupe him into going much further into certain parts than would be economically profitable. The significance of such skills appeared most forcefully in the cases of older and poorer women who used particular verbal strategies for coaxing taxi drivers into giving them a free ride. They addressed the taxi drivers as “sons” and appealed to their pity, thereby obliging them to pay deference and to provide help. The drivers complied because the blessings and the curses of “mothers” are considered as powerful. Such a strategy is probably peculiar for the city of Bobo-Dioulasso where certain forms of etiquette and social hierarchies are generally accepted even among strangers on the basis of shared socio-cultural norms for gender and intergenerational relations.

Taxi drivers compete with each other, but they also practice solidarity with each other or act as mutual “infrastructure” in certain situations. For instance, taxi drivers aim at avoiding police controls and give hand signals to other drivers upon detecting a spot where controls take place, or they call other drivers they know personally on their mobile phones in order to warn them. In negotiating the fare,

male drivers and female customers refer jokingly to their respective social roles as husbands and wives in order to reach an agreement, both acknowledging the necessity to earn enough money to feed a family.

Some interactions between taxi drivers and clients in Bobo-Dioulasso go far beyond negotiations about destination and fare. The taxi can provide an anonymous yet intimate space in which women can talk about matrimonial or other personal problems. The taxi drivers in such an interaction can merely listen and thereby provide an outlet for their clients' grievances, admonish women for having committed adultery or planning a divorce, or offer advice and even help. For some women, the taxi becomes a changing room in which they modify their appearance from a pious veiled Muslim woman to a woman who is "sexily" dressed (i.e. showing her neckline and her legs).

Ordinary nights in Bobo-Dioulasso

Socio-spatial navigation is also part of nocturnal practices in Bobo-Dioulasso. Truck drivers from other West African countries have to wait for the clearance of their goods by customs agents at the dry port without knowing how long this will take. Nabos (2019) argues that these periods of waiting do not amount to immobility but constitute the urban night as an in-between time-space that allows drivers to enjoy leisure and to pursue side businesses which connect them with local traders and businesspersons. In order to build up trust for conducting transactions, truck drivers have to learn about opportunities and to pass long hours with potential partners and clients. Such connections can involve sexual relations and even lead to marriages between drivers and female traders. Truck drivers also make deals with street children who guard lorries at night or help discharge loads.

Édith Nabos (2021) departed from the local concept of *se chercher* (looking for possibilities) when studying Bobo-Dioulasso at night. She explored nocturnal activities in three urban spaces: a street in the city centre known for its "recreative economy", a roundabout next to a gas station, and the moving taxi. The taxi drivers who work at night are not the same as those who work during the day. Many belong to the "Diaspo" or have worked abroad for some time. It requires particular skills and tools to work at night as well as a preference for the nocturnal rhythms. Most nighttime drivers own their cars and do not pay fees to taxi drivers' unions. At night, the roads are less congested, it is cooler, drivers are more able to move at their own pace, there is less competition, and taxi fares are higher, so they can make more money than during the day.

The nighttime taxi drivers' topography differs from the usual daytime destinations. Night taxi drivers usually begin working around nine p.m. and pick up passengers from their places in outlying quarters. Their passengers are mostly women from other West African countries who work in bars, restaurants and night clubs in the city centre and who do not possess their own scooters or motorbikes, as do many men who go out at night. Taxi drivers and female passengers often have

regular arrangements whereby the women call the drivers when they need to get picked up. The drivers use special robust mobile phones with long-lasting batteries in order to be reachable all night long. Drivers bring clients to their destinations until there is a lull around one a.m. when they may take a break. Around three a.m., business accelerates rapidly when many women call to be brought home or to a different place. At the same time, hundreds of older and poorer women employed by the municipality are up and sweep the streets, an activity that is invisible to most city dwellers who start their working day later. The nighttime taxi drivers' work continues until the sun is up, overlapping with the daytime rhythm of other city dwellers.

As during the daytime, the nighttime taxi can become a transitional space and a shelter for the female passengers. The women may leave their veils in the taxi and retrieve them when going back home. Drivers and passengers who have known each other for some time exchange stories about what happened during the night and share cigarettes and joints. As foreigners, many women do not speak Jula or Mooré but they can speak French with the drivers. Drivers and women bond against police during traffic checks and against male passengers. If a driver transports a female and a male client who do not know each other, he does not drop the woman directly at her place in order to conceal where she lives. To be sure, not all taxis are safe and some women refuse to enter taxis with male clients in it for fear of being abducted.

Conclusion

The example of mobility in a West African city shows that wayfinding in the literal and figurative sense is a crucial activity of city dweller's everyday lives. It requires the appropriation of knowledge about the cityscape and about the social worlds it contains. The concept of socio-spatial navigation has proved useful for exploring these processes. Through riding along and looking at the city from the perspective of taxi drivers and their passengers, one can grasp the co-constitution of the shared knowledge of the urban space and the everyday practices of socio-spatial mobility which relate to that space in specific ways.

Taxi drivers in Bobo-Dioulasso know the visible and invisible topography of the city. They link the city centre with the outlying quarters; they enable economic activities and social connections; they provide confidential spaces for female passengers; and they navigate the porous borders between day and night. The taxi is therefore an essential infrastructure for "doing the city". In Bobo-Dioulasso, there is a moral economy of mobility that becomes manifest in interactions between taxi drivers, their clients, forces of order, and other mobility providers. City dwellers seem to share a tacit consensus that everybody is entitled to reach his or her destination in the literal and the figurative sense. This consensus sets limits for the extent to which transactions are being regulated or negotiated. Although everybody tries to make the most of a ride, the other city dwellers' rights to navigating the city is acknowledged.

Means of public transport like taxis are not only a mobile infrastructure but a microcosm of the wider society. Urban transport and the interactions between mobility providers and clients mirror the tensions and contradictions in an African city, but also the ingenuity of city dwellers who create and maintain patterns and infrastructures for socio-spatial navigation and thereby “do” the city.

Notes

- 1 The project “Doing the City: Socio-Spatial Navigation in Urban Africa” (2017–2020) was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) and co-directed by Rose Marie Beck and myself. Irene Brunotti co-supervised the doctoral students Houd Kanazoé and Édith Nabos who worked in Bobo-Dioulasso and Patrick Mlinga who worked on Zanzibar. Dmitri van den Bersselaar was involved as member of a graduate school thesis advisory committee at Leipzig University. I thank Alimatou Sanou (née Konaté) who explored some social worlds of Bobo-Dioulasso together with me and generously shared her own insights on everyday life in the city, thereby contributing to the idea for the project.
- 2 Due to the security crisis since 2016, tourism in Bobo-Dioulasso had diminished to such an extent that we had to drop this part of the planned fieldwork.
- 3 For more detailed accounts of Bobo-Dioulasso’s history, Islamization and the relations between warriors and scholars, see Werthmann (2008b, 2011, 2012, 2013).
- 4 The name Bobo-Ma(n)darè seems to have been introduced after independence or even more recently (Werthmann 2013: 20). According to socio-linguist Alain Sanou (personal communication), it does not correspond to any historically known group or political unit.
- 5 Jula is a variation of Manding in the Mande language family and closely related with Bamankan (Bambara) of Mali. In Bobo-Dioulasso, the *lingua franca* Jula differs from the variation spoken by “ethnic” Jula which is called Kpɔnkan, “the tongue of Kong”.
- 6 Masquelier (2002), Konings (2006), Klaeger (2012), Melly (2013), Beck et al. (2017), Macamo (2017), Rizzo (2017), Ibrahim and Bize (2018), Stasik (2018b), Stasik and Klaeger (2018), Lambertz (2018b).