

# Evolution, Safety and Security Challenges of the Public Road Transportation Sector in the North West Region of Cameroon, 1961-1989

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper investigates the evolution and the safety and security challenges that plagued the public road transport sector in the North West Province of Cameroon from 1961 to 1989. Though there has been growing interest and increased activities in the sector since independence, security and safety concerns has become some of the major setbacks to the endeavours of actors in that domain. Using mostly primary and secondary sources, and the thematic and qualitative method of analyses, the study argues chaos and disorder characterized the road transport sector and exposed not only passengers, but also other road users due to inadequate safety and security measures from drivers and conductors of vehicles involved in the sector. Besides, different government agencies in charge of transport management made things worse by abandoning their responsibilities in favour bribes and other financial benefits from drivers, thus giving a blind eye to the safety and security needs of commuters. Reckless driving, over aging, poor state of vehicles and the absence of the maintenance tradition, poor state of road infrastructure and the absence of safety road sings all made the road transport sector a nightmare in the North West Region of Cameroon. it is a result of this factors that crimes and squashing punctuated the security of public road transport users.*

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**Key words:** North West Region, Cameroon, Public Road Transportation, Road Safety and Security

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## Introduction

Public transportation remains one of the most important means of ferrying goods and services from one location to the other especially in developing countries in general and Africa in particular. Though this medium of transportation plays a vital role in economic development of the continent, it has been bisected by safety and security concerns. This situation is not particular to Africa but also affects the entire world as it has results to the loss of lives, property and physical harm to many in the continent. For instance about 1.2million lives and nearly 50 million

injuries have with the associated economic and social costs to governments.<sup>1</sup> More so, the dilemma is more resounding in developing countries as there are approximately one million road accident fatalities and ten million casualties annually worldwide with almost 70% occurring in continent developing world. The situation is precarious in Cameroon with about three thousand people dying in road crashes annually.

This reason for such incidents has been attributed to inadequate safety and security measures which stems from -poor state of roads, inadequate policies and implementation as well as laxity on the part of administrative and security officer. Furthermore, poor state of vehicles and improper maintenance, increase in the number of cars with dilapidating road infrastructure, untrained and inexperienced road transport personnel and squashing also account for these developments in the country. Poor state of vehicles used in transportation couple with increased economic activity in the country since independence has not made things any better.<sup>2</sup> According to the Cameroon Ministry of Transport, these factors have led given rise to road traffic crashes, harassment and vandalism, banditry and antisocial behaviour on public transport users and their consequences contributed serious threat to road transport in Cameroon generally where most of the nation's economic activities depended on just like in most developing countries.<sup>3</sup>

It is because of this that the study goes memory lane to analyse developments witnessed in Cameroon since 1961 in order to enable the government and actors concerned with road public transport to learn from the mistakes of the past and road friendly policies and manners which will overcome or minimize the mayhem that has rocked the sector over time. It is worth noting that the area under focus was formerly part of German Kamerun that was colonised in 1884. With the departure of the Germans in 1916 during World War I, after being ousted by the combined forces of Britain and France, the country was divided by into two by the victorious powers (British and French Cameroons).<sup>4</sup>

The British further divided their part into Northern and Southern Cameroons and the present day North West Region of Cameroon fell under the Southern Cameroons Administration and styled the Bamenda Division. It was later upgraded into a Province in 1949 and upon independence, it was renamed the North West Province of Cameroon.<sup>5</sup> Suffice to note that, after the independence of the two Cameroons (French Cameroon in 1960 and Southern Cameroons in 1961) the two colonial territories reunited to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon and British Southern Cameroons took the appellation West Cameroon and the French Cameroon, East Cameroon.

It is within this administration set ups that the transport sectors of the countries evolved until 1972 when the united to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon. However, the foundation of

<sup>1</sup> Charles G. Manyara "Combating Road Traffic accidents in Kenya: A challenge for an Emerging Economy" in *African Histories and modernities* 2(3), 2016

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Transport. Annual Report and statistics of the Road Safety Unit, Yaounde.2016

<sup>3</sup> Oborunfemi A; Olojede and Blesing Olufemi." Metropolitan Transport safet and security: An African Experience" in *journal of transportation safety and security*, 10, 1080, 2016; Dickson D. Ajayi and AP Ajoyi. "Trend analysis of crimes incidences and crime vulnerability differentials on Urban transport facilities in Ibadan", *journal of intelligent transport and Urban planning* 2(2), 45-57, 2014

<sup>4</sup> The area which is under focus was formerly an administrative division of the German colony and fell under the authority of the British.

<sup>5</sup> Following the 1996 Constitution of Cameroon, all Provinces were upgraded into Regions and the area of study became the North West Region.

the transportation sector was built on the colonial infrastructures bequeathed to them by colonialism. However, safety and security concerns which stemmed from the colonial period continued unperturbed in the post 1961 era.

### **Evolution of Road Transportation in the North West Province of Cameroon**

Upon independence, just like in the colonial period, the linking of Urban and rural areas in the North West Region Cameroon in general and the North West Region in particular through road transport remained the only means through which goods and individuals could be transported from one area to the other. This was done with the use of vehicles and Public transportation services in Province were provided mainly by the private sector. Operators used varieties of vehicles in the transportation of persons and goods. It good to highlight the fact that before independence and reunification of the British French Cameroons in 1961, some companies owned by expatriates dominated public transportation not only in the Province with its hub in Bamenda<sup>6</sup> but also across the former British Southern Cameroons. Their vehicles plied the Bamenda, mamfe, Kumba, Buea, Nkambe and Victoria which were the major towns in British Southern Cameroons.<sup>7</sup>

After independences and reunification of the Cameroons in 1961, few operators went into the transport business in Bamenda. The vehicles and carriers used for public transport were not standards, nor were they of highest specifications when compared to those that operated in larger cities in Cameroon like Douala and Yaounde. However, they provided local services to commuters with the “mammy wagon”<sup>8</sup> which were in use in the colonial period.

In the mid1960s and 1970sthe “mammy wagons” were relegated to the background and a new era in public transportation ushered in. Some “luxuries” buses and cars called Lorries (trucks) stole the show. These Lorries were fashioned for the purposes of transporting passengers and goods. Their inner compartment consisted of wooden benches at both end of the lorry. One was placed in the middle of the truck and all these served as seats passengers. Passengers’ goods and luggage were placed in the upper compartment. These Lorries left Bamenda to different destinations across the Province especially on weekly market days.<sup>9</sup> Despite the scarcity of luxurious buses and vehicles, operators of Lorries and trucks charged cheaper fares when compared to existing smaller vehicles and buses. This was because the Lorries transported more passengers at a time.<sup>10</sup>

The 1980s witnessed another epoch. There was an increase in the number of buses and mini buses that were used for public transportation.in this direction, the Toyota Hiace, Mini buses popularly called Litiace, Corolla Dx, Toyota Corolla, Nisan Urvan, Mitsubishi L300 among others were visible. With this the wooden bench trucks and Lorries gradually effaced out though some of the later were reserved for goods’ transportation only. These vehicles become the main means of transport in Province and virtually plied all rural and urban roads in the Province. They

<sup>6</sup> Bamenda was the administrative and commercial city of the Province.

<sup>7</sup> N.A.B. file N<sup>o</sup> 243/ab/61 motor transport pool, The Southern Cameroons.

<sup>8</sup> Many Wagons was a small open sided bus or light truck used to transport passengers or goods especially traders and farmers especially women traders.

<sup>9</sup> Mbah Mathias 78. Retried transporter/Proprietor transportati on vehicles 18/01/17

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

were well suited for more rough terrain and responded quickly to request of commuters especially in areas where the later would not go.

They were equally cheaper and carried more goods than the mini buses and as such satisfied most of the needs of travel who could not afford the mini buses. Though not really comfortable, citizens preferred them than to trekking and using bicycles which were more cumbersome to use. Although these buses and mini buses from the onset appeared to be disorderly, nevertheless it was a system that involved and employed a large number of persons though characterized by lack of schedules

### **Commuters and Squashing**

Commuters had different motives for using the public road transportation system. This was mostly for economic and social reasons former dominated was paramount. With regard to economic reasons, mostly traders and business persons moving from rural to urban areas and vice versa dominated. They bought and sold agricultural produce from the rural to the urban areas and in turn supplied the rural areas with semi industrial goods or needs that could be gotten locally.<sup>11</sup> In fact given the intensive economic activities, traders and business persons constantly dominated in the public transportation system; especially market women locally referred to as “buyam sellam”.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, economic activities greatly contributed to vehicular movement between the urban centers of Bamenda, Nkambe, Wum and many rural and semi-Urban centres within the Province. Social activities equally pushed persons to move to places for social aggrandizement. Popular family reunions and meetings, death celebrations and burial festivities, among others social activities greatly enhanced the sector. Here, people of all categories were involve; men, women, children, students, young and old. Hence a majority of the population took delight in using public transport facilities especially where it was difficult in procuring individual means of transport. In the course of this, squashing in vehicles became the norm.

Operators and drivers did not respect the capacities designed for their vehicles. They overfill the buses and vehicles. For instance, in an ordinary mini bus that was designed for 9 to 10 persons carried about 13 to 15 individuals. In smaller vehicles, and cars meant for 5 persons would carry as much as 8 persons on board. The situation was so precarious when parents making the journey with their children had to carry them on their laps. Besides, the driver’s seat that was designed for him alone took as much as three; one on either seat seating with him (See Table 1 for Various Capacities of Vehicles and Excesses transported).<sup>13</sup>

The reasons for such actions were to maximize profits. Again another justification was to make up for the money lost as bribes usually offered to transport and forces of law and order usually on high ways for the enforcement of transport policies and provide security.<sup>14</sup> However, they instead turned into corrupt agents as they gave a blind eye to squashing and were only interested

<sup>11</sup> Peter Atid 4a, President Bali Motor Park 10/05/21

<sup>12</sup> “Buyam sellam” is a local term used to describe market women involve in the buying of goods in rural areas and supplying them in towns of profit making.

<sup>13</sup> Oban Euphrasia S4, trader (buyam sellam) between villages in the Ndop plain and Bamenda 11/05/21

<sup>14</sup> Nyamah Constantine 39, mini bus driver, Bamenda – Ndop Towns 11/05/21.

in collecting money from road users or better still drivers irrespective of the abrogation of the law especially with regard to Squashing during journeys.

**Table 1: Capacities of Vehicles and Excesses Transported**

| Conventional Type | Local name                     | Bus capacity          |                   | Excess capacity |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
|                   |                                | Manufactured capacity | Approved capacity |                 |
| Mini bus          | Litiace                        | 8                     | 9-10              | 13-15           |
| Bus               | Hiace                          | 15                    | 19                | 21              |
| Toyota corolla    | Toyota corolla                 | 5                     | 6-7               | 8               |
| Toyota dyna       | Dyna 100<br>Double cabin/cargo | 6                     | 6                 | 7               |

As illustrated on table 1, a Mini Bus which was designed for a capacity of eight by the manufacturer and 9-10 by the regulation in force in Cameroon transported 13 commuters instead. This was equally true for the Bus and Toyota Corolla which were suppose the 15 and 5 respectively 8 in that order and by policy; 19 and 6-7 respectively ended up taking 21 and 8 commuters. Again the Toyota Dyna instead of taking 6 it ended up with 7 passengers. Such squashing came with repercussions on the safety and security of commuters though other factors were concerned.

### **Safety and Security Challenges and Implications**

Security and safety concerns became some of the major challenges affecting the public transportation system in the North West Region of Cameroon between 1861 and 1989. Squashing, a human factor, facilitated the occurring of accidents along the high way. In extreme cases there were injuries, and mortality rates were. For instance in 1989, there was a fatal accident at the Waiynamah Hill, along the Ndop Kumbo stretch of the road as 15 individuals lost their lives. Poor road network and reckless driving also acted as catalysed for incessant accidents on in the Providence.<sup>15</sup> Not only passengers on-board were at risk during such accidents but most often pedestrians and cyclists were equally affected. Added to this, there were acts of personal or collective violence or harassment on passengers on-board transport vehicles.

This happened most often on the Bamenda-Fundong roads as well as the Bamenda-Wum road especially within the vicinity of the Bafut forest especially in the 1980s.<sup>16</sup> Attacks on passengers' vehicles happened most often during peak periods especially during end of year festivities. Thieves and armed robbers attacked vehicles plying that road in order to extort money and valuable properties from commuters. Crime wave too was high. Researchers have identified different types of crimes which took place in buses and included; ant-social behaviour, violence on drivers and conductors as well commuters. Vandalism, Was also well rife and putting to test passengers' security during journeys.<sup>17</sup> However, in Bamenda and the rest of the North West region, the practical crimes in bus or vehicular transport that constantly occurred were harassment against users as well as road vandalism and attacks.

<sup>15</sup> Regional delegation of transport, north west. Annual report - 2014

<sup>16</sup> Mbom roger 5a, retired bus driver; park collector, mile 4 park b'da 11/05/21

<sup>17</sup> Transport research board, "public transportation passenger security inspectors: a guide of rpolicy deasion makers. TCRP 86", "rublic transportation security volume 13.2007.

Furthermore, the poor state of the roads both in rural and urban roads in the Province since independence has been identified as one of the major causes of insecurity in the Province. These infrastructures were in such a state of despair that the maintenance cost of vehicles operating on these roads was extremely high. Besides bumpy roads and deadly pot holes was a nightmare to travellers in the Province. This made journeys very tedious and a road that was meant to cover not more than two like the Wum Bamenda saw people spending more than a day to get to their destinations.

This was fatal during the rainy season as roads were muddy and muddy making impossible for drivers to accelerate faster. Besides, the nature of road surfaces greatly influenced road accidents.<sup>18</sup> Generally the road network in Cameroon which was the main mode of transport suffered amongst other problems from a lack of high way signals, cracks and deadly potholes and poor drainage.<sup>19</sup> The poor state of vehicles was another nightmare for users of public transport users. Many of them were old second handed cars/vehicles that were imported from Europe and Japan. Based on the design of these vehicles, they could last for up to at least 20 years old or extreme conditions 30 years old.

Most of these vehicles were too old for meaningful maintenance and the maintenance culture was poor. This of course led to regular breakdown of most public transport vehicles. Although, the condition of vehicles conditions the inexperience of drivers as well as human error (reckless driving), were negligent on their part as little or nothing was done in putting the vehicles in good shape. Hence, the culture of maintenance was poor.

Proprietors and drivers were profit driven and forgot about these key aspects of public transportation. This lack of maintenance was reflected not only in the mobility carriers but equally in infrastructure, for most motor parks and terminals across the region were in a sorry state; dirty, stinking , absence of toilet facilities, resting and waiting seats for passengers.<sup>20</sup> As mentioned before now, road traffic crimes and crashes were most often caused by human errors as a result of recklessness, excessive speeding and lack of experience and knowledge on the high way code..<sup>21</sup> This constituted a major problem to passengers and the public transport operators in the region. Driving behaviour such as over speeding and the drivers personal characteristics were major reasons associated with incidents in road traffic accidents.

## Conclusion

The paper focused on the evolution of the public road transport sector in the North West Region of Cameroon since independence. It traced the evolution of vehicles used in the transportation of goods and services and argues that, the sector moved from the “mami wagon”, unsophisticated cars which were gradually replaced by the mini Buses in the 1980s. The process was gradual and not drastic. With this evolution, squashing became one of the major problems faced by commuters. Poor nature of roads and the absence of safety road signs, the none respect of regulations by government agents involved in the sector as well as the poor nature of vehicles

<sup>18</sup> Mbom Roger.

<sup>19</sup> Dedectation of transport, Bamenda annual report 2013

<sup>20</sup> Mbah mathias 78. Retired proprietor/driver, bus transportation // vehicle vender, Bamenda 18/01/2017.

<sup>21</sup> Tiwari, G & Jain, D. “Accessibility and safety indicators for all road users. Case study Delhi BRT”, *Journal of Transport Geography*, 22, 87 – 95. 2012.

which often over aged and the absence of maintenance and recklessness on the part of drivers plying these roads all made the road transportation sector unsafe to commuters. These factors therefore resulted to accidents, harassments and vandalism on commuters, antisocial behaviours and corruption became part and parcel of the sector. It is hoped that if the major problem which faced the sector during the period under study are addressed by the actors today, the security and safety concerns of commuters will be taken care of and the sector will become a veritable contributor to the development of the North West Province of Cameroon.

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