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## *Moving Despite Constraints: Socio-Spatial Navigation in a West African City<sup>1</sup>*

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The concept of socio-spatial navigation allows us to understand how city dwellers come to know the city and what skills they need to move both to reach their destinations and to reduce constraints. In this article, we show that male taxi drivers and their female passengers in Bobo-Dioulasso in Burkina Faso possess place-specific knowledge and skills. These are manifested in practices such as learning visible and invisible landmarks, negotiating the fare, making oneself invisible to authorities, concealing one's true destination, or invoking moral norms about gender and intergenerational relations to make the most of a ride. At the same time, drivers and passengers engage in forms of cooperation and solidarity to maintain an urban transport system that is vital to them, even if it involves illegal practices.

**Keywords:** Urban anthropology, socio-spatial navigation, urban mobility, African cities, public transport, gender.

### **Introduction**

Visitors to the city of Bobo-Dioulasso in Burkina Faso can buy printed maps with street names from bookstores or street vendors. But apart from the names of a few major *boulevards* and *avenues*, street names rarely feature in everyday conversations about routes, directions and locations among city dwellers. “Who knows the names of the streets in Bobo? We don't use them, we know the city!” claimed Amadou, a taxi driver. Given the alleged “unknowability” (Hansen and Verkaaik 2009: 8; Pieterse 2013; Guyer 2011) of cities in Africa, what did he mean when he said he knew the city? What do taxi drivers use to navigate the urban space?

In this article we explore responses to “unknowability” and thereby contribute to “Southern” epistemologies of the urban (Connell 2007, Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, Jenkins 2013, Mabin 2014, Macamo 2018). For many city dwellers in Africa, knowing the city involves spatial orientation as well as the ability to navigate different social situations in a context of pervasive insecurity (Trovalla et al. 2014). Vigh (2009: 419) coined the concept of “social navigation” for grasping how people “move under the influence of multiple forces or seek to escape confining structures”. In Bobo-Dioulasso, these confining structures or constraints include inconsistent governance, inadequate infrastructure, economic hardship and social pressures.

Social navigation is a useful concept for capturing practices of moving despite constraints. However, the metaphorical reference to a seascape neglects the materiality of the urban spaces in which social navigation takes place. We understand spatial orientation and social navigation as simultaneous and co-constitutive practices of knowing the city. By combining them in the concept of socio-spatial navigation, we can show that shared taxis are

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more than a means of transport but spaces in which taxi drivers and their passengers mobilize spatial and social knowledge to make the most of a ride.<sup>2</sup>

Spatial orientation has been understudied in ethnographies of urban Africa (Werthmann 2022, 2023). In many studies, the cities merely served as backdrops for social phenomena. We use the concept of socio-spatial navigation for everyday practices of mobility (Beck and Werthmann 2016; Kanazoé 2022a; Werthmann 2022: 153-72). It allows us to understand how city dwellers get to know the city and what skills they need when they move, both to reach their destinations and to reduce constraints.

### “What will my Co-wife do?”

In order to illuminate the concept of socio-spatial navigation, we begin with a dialogue between a male taxi driver looking for passengers and a potential female customer on the side of a road in Bobo-Dioulasso.



Fig. 1 Taxi driver and potential client negotiating the fare. Photo by Houd Kanazoé.

“Woman: Taxi, I’m going to the TSR station [bus station for long-distance destinations].

Taxi driver: Okay.

Woman: How much will you charge me, *taximan*?

Taxi driver: You will pay 1,000 FCFA [Franc of the Communauté Financière Africaine].

Woman: No, that’s too much, I have a lot of expenses! When I get to Houndé [her final destination, c. 100 km from Bobo-Dioulasso], I still have to pay for the transport to bring my luggage home. Leave it at 500 FCFA.

Taxi driver: Ah madam, if I have to work like this, you won’t find me here next time.

Woman: Why not?

Taxi driver: Because I will run away from home, since I will not be able to support my family.

<sup>2</sup> Taxis in Bobo-Dioulasso usually transport several passengers with different destinations.

Woman: I'm sorry, if you run away, what will my co-wife do?

Taxi driver: Ah, if you want your co-wife to eat, you have to increase the amount.

Woman: Fine, I will give you 800 FCFA.

Taxi driver: All right, that's fine" (Kanazoé 2022a: 160).<sup>3</sup>

At first glance, this interaction appears as a routine act of negotiating a taxi fare in the context of an informal urban transport system such as can be found in many African cities. But why would the two people engaged in this dialogue refer to seemingly unrelated issues such as the customer's future expenses or the taxi driver's marital status?

We suggest that this interaction comprises in a nutshell what we call socio-spatial navigation. In the dialogue above, both sides know that the standard fare for a taxi ride in the city is 300 FCFA.<sup>4</sup> Both also know that most taxi drivers operate illegally because they use butane gas as fuel, which allows them to save costs but is prohibited. Taxi drivers who use butane gas cannot renew the papers for their cars and are under the constant threat of having their vehicles impounded or having to pay bribes to the police. The cost of maintaining the vehicles also rises because of the inability of the municipality to improve the poor state of the streets. Both drivers and passengers experience economic hardship, forcing the majority of city dwellers to work in informal and insecure occupations. Men who are expected to provide for their families are under considerable pressure, especially if they have more than one wife, which is often the case in this predominantly Muslim city. Indeed, many women shoulder the burden of caring for their children, even when these are grown up (Roth 2018). Needless to say, this creates tensions between spouses and between parents and children, and can lead to the breakup of marriages and downward social mobility.

The man and the woman in the short dialogue above skilfully allude to these larger economic, socio-cultural and governance issues. The woman states that she wants to go to a bus station for long-distance destinations. The taxi driver quotes a price that is too high, even taking into account the distance between the spot where they negotiate and the bus station, and the fact that the woman is carrying luggage, which usually drives up the price. Instead of offering a lower price or refusing and waiting for another taxi, which are also standard routines in such interactions, the woman appeals to the taxi driver by referring to the expenses she will have to cover upon arrival at her destination, thereby implying that she has only limited funds for this trip. When she offers half of what the taxi driver has asked for, the driver could refuse and insist on the original price, quote a slightly lower price or simply move on. Instead, he verbally creates a scenario in which he will have to give up his job because he will not be able to feed his family. One may speculate that — based on his professional experience — he correctly assumes that the woman is a trader who is able to pay more than the standard fare. By referring to his wife as her "co-wife" (*sinamuso*), the potential passenger accepts the "offer" to enter into an imaginary marriage and thus considers the taxi driver's social obligations as a breadwinner. Neither of them seems to have hard feelings about not reaching their respective original goals

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<sup>3</sup> All citations of dialogues and interviews in this article have been translated from Jula or French.

<sup>4</sup> The standard price is fixed by the taxi unions, but drivers ask more when customers have luggage, if the destination exceeds a standard distance or for other reasons.

of getting a higher or paying a lower fare. The playful tone of the dialogue is characteristic of many interactions in Bobo-Dioulasso, where institutionalised joking relationships between relatives, kinship groups and ethnic groups provide a ground pattern for everyday interactions and where people joke with each other even when they are total strangers (Sissao 2002). Being able to navigate through the urban space thus requires an ability to navigate through socio-cultural norms in order to overcome economic constraints. This is what we call socio-spatial navigation.

This particular dialogue was no exception. A similar framing of drivers and passengers as “husbands” and “wives” occurred in other interactions, such as when a taxi driver had to stop during a journey to replace an empty gas bottle. Instead of reclaiming the fare to take another taxi to continue her journey, a female passenger waited patiently for the driver to resume the journey. She explained to the researcher: “They are our husbands, they are doing this [work] to help their families, what else can we do?” (Kanazoé 2022a, 144).



Fig. 2 Taxi with butane gas bottle in the trunk. Photo by Houd Kanazoé.

### **Approaches to Movements and Mobilities**

When we agree that the central concern of urban anthropology is understanding “how social life is structured by and experienced within urban contexts” (Jaffe and De Koning 2016: 3), we have to include everyday movements and mobilities as a crucial feature of city life in order to generate “fresh ideas and forward-looking analyses on the problems and complexity of our urban environment” (Prato and Pardo 2013: 99).

Some recent strands in anthropology, geography and sociology are particularly apt for capturing socio-spatial practices. Empirical studies in the framework of an “anthropology of the road” have highlighted the economic, social, political and imaginary dimensions of roads and public transport in Africa (Beck et al. 2017, Dalakoglou and Harvey 2015, Horta 2019, Ibrahim and Bize 2018, Klaeger 2013, Masquelier 2002, Stasik and Cissokho 2018, Stasik and Klaeger 2018). These works look at the road as an urban space that needs to be studied in its

own right and not just as a backdrop for movements. They resonate with our approach in that they also focus on everyday practices and on the multifunctionality and forms of sociality of mobility infrastructures.

The “new mobilities studies” in geography and sociology focus on practices such as walking or driving (Brown and Shortell 2016, Cresswell and Merriman 2011, Sheller 2014a, Sheller and Urry 2006). Sociologist John Urry (2004) introduced new perspectives on (auto)mobilities and the related socialities. He pointed out the need to explore how people “physically and socially make the world through the ways they move and mobilize people, objects, information and ideas” (Büscher and Urry 2009: 112). He aimed at “transcending the dichotomy between transport research and social research” by “putting the social into travel” (Urry 2003: 157) and stressed that a means of public transport such as the railway carriage is a “socially organized environment” (Urry 2006: 363).

While the new mobilities studies ask how “bodies and objects shape cities, and in turn are shaped, through their rhythms of movement, their pace, and synchrony” (Sheller 2014b: 797; Cresswell and Merriman 2011: 4), few have applied such a perspective to cities of Africa (for an exception, see Porter et al. 2017).

Anthropologist Henrik Vigh (2006, 2009) coined the concept of “social navigation” for countering precarity in the post-conflict society of urban Guinea-Bissau. In his field site, social navigation became manifest in *dubriagem* (“muddling through”), which is similar to *se débrouiller* and *se chercher* in Burkina Faso: “making one’s way through immediate difficulties as well as directing one’s life positively into the future” (Vigh 2009: 423; Nabos 2021: 66). Archambault (2013: 80) proposed that it could also be applied to less volatile environments such as the “intimate economy” of urban Mozambique.

The concept of social navigation emphasises that social relations in urban Africa are not given but constantly emerge from interactions, as Epstein (1961) already pointed out in his seminal account of one man’s day in the city of Ndola (Zambia). Such interactions are part of what Simone (2004, 2021) called “people as infrastructure”: the separate but interconnected activities of city dwellers based on their capacity to “read” constantly changing situations, which then contribute to the collective making of urban spaces such as the transport depot in Abidjan or the inner city of Johannesburg.

In the spirit of the anthropology of the road and the new mobility studies, we propose “socio-spatial navigation” as a concept at the intersection of social navigation (Vigh 2009) and spatial orientation or wayfinding (Darken and Peterson, 2002). It is a heuristic tool for understanding how urban dwellers make sense of their environment and how they use their knowledge to overcome constraints in order to move successfully in urban space. Indeed, in the realm of urban public transport that we studied in Bobo-Dioulasso, spatial and social mobility are intertwined. Taxi drivers are not only professional providers of mobility and knowledge of the city, but also experts in assessing the possibilities and potentials of spaces and situations. In their interactions, taxi drivers and their passengers mobilize moral norms derived from a common socio-cultural background; they frame their relationships as one between “husband” and “wife”, or between “mother” and “son”; and they invoke the history of urban spaces and

past trajectories as they name the visible and invisible landmarks of the cityscape through which they move.

In the following pages, we briefly introduce public transport in Bobo-Dioulasso. We then describe the everyday “practices of movement” (Stasik and Klaeger 2018: 106), as well as the knowledge and skills that underpin these practices and enable city dwellers to move competently through different areas of urban life despite constraints.

### **Public Transport in Bobo-Dioulasso**

Bobo-Dioulasso is Burkina Faso’s second largest city, located in the western part of the country. Its population of around one million is predominantly Muslim and the *lingua franca* is Jula.

As in many other African cities, the main urban management challenges are demographic growth, high unemployment and inadequate infrastructure. Historically, the city grew out of pre-colonial settlements at the crossroads of trade routes. The French conquered the city in 1897 and made it an important centre for trade, industry and military recruitment. In the 1940s, Bobo-Dioulasso was the second largest city in colonial French West Africa (AOF) after Dakar in Senegal. However, after independence in 1960, Ouagadougou became the capital and Bobo-Dioulasso’s economic importance declined as many businesses moved to Ouagadougou (Werthmann 2013).<sup>5</sup>

In terms of transport infrastructure, a few paved main roads crisscross the city, but most of the smaller roads are unpaved, and parts of the city become impassable for cars during the rainy season (Kanazoé 2022a: 40-70). As elsewhere, “public” transport in Burkina Faso is in fact private and informal. Since the 1980s, several attempts to establish urban transport systems in Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso have been unsuccessful. The most recent initiative dates from 2018, when the state-owned bus company *Société de Transport en Commun* (SOTRACO), which had existed in Ouagadougou since 2003, started operating in Bobo-Dioulasso. There are nine bus lines, and the service runs from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m. The fare is 150 FCFA. The buses are mainly used by schoolchildren in the mornings and afternoons. For other potential users, they are inconvenient because they only serve paved roads, the stops are not always near popular destinations, such as markets, and the buses often run only once an hour, with no indication of when they will arrive at the stops. City dwellers refer to such inappropriate mobility planning as “white people’s calculations”, thereby indicating the distance between “westernised” planners and the local population (Kanazoé 2022a: 86).

Inhabitants of Bobo-Dioulasso prefer two types of public transport: cars painted light green that operate as shared taxis, and three-wheeled moto-taxis (*tricycles*) consisting of a moped with a trailer for transporting goods.<sup>6</sup> In Bobo-Dioulasso, there are full-time and part-time taxi drivers; there are drivers who own their vehicles and others who have an agreement with a car owner. As in other informal occupations, solid business plans are the exception, and many owners are overwhelmed by the costs for fuel, maintenance and spare parts once they start using their cars as taxis. Agreements between owners and drivers are verbal and set a daily

<sup>5</sup> The capital Ouagadougou lies in the centre and has 2,5 million inhabitants (INSD 2020).

<sup>6</sup> In this article, we focus on shared taxis. For a discussion of the *tricycles*, see Kanazoé 2022b.

amount that the driver must give to the owner. At the time of research, the amount varied between 5,000 and 6,000 FCFA, depending on the condition of the taxi, and determined the driver's monthly income, which was around 30,000 FCFA.<sup>7</sup> The driver was responsible for buying fuel, which cost FCFA 5,000 for petrol and FCFA 7,500 for diesel per day. This put a lot of pressure on the drivers who risked unemployment if they did not earn the target amount. Drivers also had to pay a membership fee to one of the four taxi unions in order to obtain an official number and receive support in case of conflicts with authorities and passengers, or in the event of a road accident.<sup>8</sup>

Taxi drivers need to know the spatial, temporal, social and cultural dimensions of the city, both as residents and as service providers. They have to learn strategies to maximise their profits, including following the rhythms of the city. Peak times for taxi drivers are the mornings when people go to work and the afternoons when they return, or the departure and arrival times of the train that links Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire) with Bobo-Dioulasso. Taxi drivers must be able to "read the road" (Stasik and Klaeger 2018, 101). They have both *savoir-faire* (know-how) and *savoir-être* (know-how-to-be). Know-how involves recognizing potential passengers by keeping one eye on the roadside and reading people's body language. People who walk close to the roadside and turn around to look at the street from time to time are most likely looking for a taxi, and the driver will honk his horn to attract their attention. Know-how is also mobilized in negotiating with police officers during controls. "Know-how-to-be" includes looking the other way when a male acquaintance boards the taxi with a woman who is not his wife. It also requires not becoming angry when passengers cheat or abuse the drivers.

### **Practices of Socio-spatial Navigation**

In African cities, people who cannot afford their own vehicles have to walk or use public transport, which often means shared taxis, vans, buses, three-wheeled vehicles, motorcycles or mopeds (Godard and Teurnier 1992). Using public transport requires knowledge of places, times, directions, routes, landmarks, means of transport and situationally appropriate language, as well as verbal and non-verbal strategies for negotiating a ride and interacting within the vehicles. City dwellers build up this knowledge incrementally through learning by doing.

Our fieldwork involved riding in shared taxis, observing interactions between mobility providers and passengers and recording routes with a GPS tracker.<sup>9</sup> This allowed us to see how drivers and passengers gradually constructed a shared mental map of Bobo-Dioulasso,

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<sup>7</sup> The minimum income in Burkina Faso at the time of research was FCFA 30,684 (US\$ 45.31).

<sup>8</sup> All taxi drivers are expected to join a union, but not all do so because they consider them useless or do not want to pay the membership fees.

<sup>9</sup> Houd Kanazoé rode along with and interviewed 125 taxi drivers and 50 drivers of moto-taxis in 2018 and 2019. The selection of these taxis was random, and the drivers were all informed of the purpose of the research. In addition, Kanazoé conducted qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with 50 drivers of moto-taxis, three bus drivers, city and state officials, and with customers and other transport-related providers of goods and services at their places of work or during social meetings.

including landmarks, routes and distances, and how they used their knowledge of times, rhythms and socio-cultural norms to reach particular destinations and goals.

A key finding of our research is the gendered nature of public transport in Bobo-Dioulasso. Drivers tend to be male, while the majority of passengers are female. Male taxi drivers and their female passengers have verbal and non-verbal skills for navigating the city and negotiating destinations and fares. These skills are manifested in the following actions.

### *Learning landmarks*

To become a taxi driver in Bobo-Dioulasso, a newcomer undergoes a kind of apprenticeship by accompanying an experienced driver for some time who will show him the major landmarks and routes. Knowledge of landmarks and their names is also passed on in the countless daily interactions between taxi drivers and their customers. Passengers in shared taxis have to ride along until other passengers have been delivered to their destinations. They therefore pass locations they would not otherwise have known.

Many names of landmarks refer to buildings or places that no longer exist, to past events, or there is both an official and a popular name for a place. Some examples in Bobo-Dioulasso are the roundabout called “Blaise-Khadhafi”, where there used to be a monument to the former president Blaise Compaoré and former Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi. It was rarely called by its official name “la place arabo-burkinabè”.<sup>10</sup> The name for one vacant space is *kaba kuru misiri* (“mosque of stone blocks”) because originally a Muslim prayer congregation placed stones on the ground to mark a space for prayers. The congregation has since built a mosque further away, but the space is still called by its former function. A street known for its nightlife is called “Black” after the famous club “Black and White” (Nabos 2021: 129). Personal names sometimes remain attached to a place even after it has changed its function, as in the case of a building called *Docteur Soma kliniki* (Doctor Soma’s clinic), which has served as a secondary school since the doctor’s death years ago. These naming practices are not unique to the city of Bobo-Dioulasso but have also been observed in other African cities (Eichhorn 2022; Werthmann 2022: 175-76).

Learning landmarks is vital for taxi drivers. They use them for assessing the distance between locations, which is important for determining the fare. Some drivers learn the landmarks the hard way, because customers of an inexperienced taxi driver who does not know the city well yet can trick him into going much further into certain areas than would be economically profitable for him.

### *Bargaining*

There is a standard fare of 300 FCFA per “drop” set by the taxi drivers’ unions, but if passengers want to go beyond a standard distance or into the unpaved and unlit parts of the city, drivers and passengers use verbal and non-verbal strategies to increase or decrease the price. Some passengers ask after the fare as soon as they have stated their destination and try to negotiate with the driver if he asks for a higher price than the standard fare (because of distance, bad

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<sup>10</sup> During the 2014 uprising which ended president Blaise Compaoré’s regime, the monument was demolished.



roads, luggage, night time, risk of not finding passengers on the way back). Normally, the fare should be 300 FCFA if the driver says nothing when accepting a passenger. If the driver mentions a higher price only upon arrival at the destination, passengers may refuse to pay more than 300 FCFA or put up a fight.

Some drivers say nothing and just open their hand at the end of the trip. When the passenger gives him a 500 FCFA note, the driver asks, “How much do you want me to take?”, hoping that the passenger will not ask for change. Such a strategy gives the passenger the impression that they are the masters of the game and that the drivers are dependent on their goodwill. By using such strategies, drivers can make more money than they would have if they had discussed the fare at the beginning of the journey.

Some passengers hide their intention of paying less when they get into a taxi. Consider the following dialogue between a taxi driver and a middle-aged woman.

“Woman: I am going to Belleville [a quarter of Bobo-Dioulasso].

Driver: Okay, you will pay 500 FCFA.

Woman: Ah driver, sorry, I have 300 FCFA. I am going to visit my sister who is ill.

Driver: Mother, are you sure you have only 300 FCFA?

Woman: Yes.

Driver: Okay, get in.

After a few minutes’ drive, we are in Belleville.

Woman: My son, there is a problem of change, I have 500 FCFA.

Driver: But you said you had only 300 FCFA.

She no longer looks at the driver and holds out her hand with the 500 FCFA note.

Driver: You see [addressing the researcher], that’s how it is, the customers don’t care about us, and then they say that taxi drivers don’t respect people. If not, is it right what she did? It’s because she’s old; otherwise, I would have kept the 500 FCFA” (Kanazoé 2022a: 164).

In this interaction, the woman tried to appeal to the driver’s sympathy by calling him “my son” (*n den*) and mentioning that she was visiting a sick relative. Probably because of previous bad experiences, the driver was still suspicious and explicitly asked the woman, whom he addressed as “my mother” (*n ba*), to confirm that she only had 300 FCFA, thus asking her to be truthful, as is expected of a mother. On arrival, the woman’s intention to pay less — possibly because she needed the change for her return journey — became clear. She only got away with it because the driver respected her as a social senior. As a small consolation for the driver, she had to listen to what he said to the researcher (Kanazoé) who was present. In another case observed by Werthmann, a taxi driver threw out a woman who admitted that she had no money after she had already got into the taxi.

#### *Hiding from and Negotiating with the Police*

In order to evade police checks, taxi drivers without valid papers or those who use petrol as fuel give hand signals to other drivers when they pass a checkpoint or call other drivers on their mobile phones to warn them. They also have set up WhatsApp groups for this very purpose. The phone thus becomes a tool that allows them to make themselves “invisible” in certain

places (Archambault 2013). But when the driver is caught, he negotiates with the police officers to avoid having his vehicle confiscated. The police officers, in turn, play along and many will eventually accept a bribe, as one taxi driver explained: “The first time the police caught me was in the central market. I was driving against the one-way street. I called an old [taxi] driver there. He told me to negotiate with them and give them 2,000 FCFA. That’s how I knew we could negotiate and how much we could give them. Even if you don’t have the money, you have to negotiate. They will delay you, but in the end, they will give you your car. But if you want to play hardball, it won’t work. They know our problems, so we work it out (*on s’arrange*)”.

This is an example of learning the unwritten rules on the job. The driver already knew that experienced taxi drivers who are leading members of the taxi drivers’ unions always hang out at the central market to supervise other drivers and intervene in cases of conflict. He now knew about the appropriate amount for a bribe.



Fig. 3 Police officers around a tricycle during a traffic control, a taxi passes in the background. Photo by Houd Kanazoé.

### *Overcharging and Going in Different Directions*

Taxi drivers prefer to carry as many passengers as possible at once. They often overcharge their vehicles, especially during rush hours. A driver may ask a passenger to disembark, and refund him or her the fare, if he can have several passengers at the same time for another destination. Passengers can refuse to get out, which can lead to arguments and even violence, or they can refuse to board a taxi that is already full.

If a taxi driver accepts passengers with destinations in different directions, he should let them off in the order in which they got on. In some cases, however, passengers dispute the order. One driver accepted four passengers who wanted to go to three different sectors from the central market.

“Passenger 2: Driver, where are you going to go first, because I went out without my baby?

Driver: I’ll drop you off at [Sector] 21 first and then we’ll go to 22.

Passenger 3 [going to Sector 11 with another woman]: No, driver, drop us off first, because I am sick and my foot hurts. I can't stand the pain with all this touring.

Driver: Madam, I'm sorry, it won't take long.

Passenger 3: Honestly, I can't stand it. If that's it, we'll get off and take another taxi.

Passenger 2: Okay, driver, as there are two of them, you mustn't lose because of me. I'll get out and take another taxi.

Driver: Oh, thank you very much, madam" (Kanazoé 2022a: 143).

After all the passengers had disembarked, the driver said to the researcher: "You see, the woman who got off at the market was nice; otherwise, she could say she was not getting off because she got on before the other two, and I would lose out" (Kanazoé 2022a: 143). Although the woman was probably doing this primarily to get back to her baby as quickly as possible, her attitude also suggests a form of solidarity with the taxi driver, because by getting off voluntarily she saved the driver from losing two passengers instead of just one.

### *Invoking Moral Norms*

The importance of socio-cultural norms for gender and intergenerational relations when travelling in taxis was very evident in the interactions between taxi drivers and older and poorer women. Some older women address the taxi drivers as "sons" and appeal to their pity, thereby obliging them to show respect and to help, as in the following example:

"Driver: Where are you going, madam?

Woman: I'm going to Salibatogo *cinq heures* [a neighbourhood market that starts in the afternoons].

The driver hesitates, perhaps because this market is very small, hidden and not very far away.

Woman: Ah, my husband, you have to help the old woman!

The driver reflects for a few seconds.

Driver: Okay, get inside.

Less than 10 minutes later, we arrive.

Woman: You see the tarpaulin there? That's where I'm getting off. We are invited to come and eat. [Family celebrations often take place outside dwellings in public spaces that are temporarily transformed into rooms by setting up marquees with open sides and equipped with chairs.]

Driver: Ah, is it a naming ceremony or a wedding?

Woman: It's a wedding.

Driver: Oh, right. Congratulations to the bride and groom.

The old lady hands over a 500 FCFA note.

Driver: No mother, it's okay.

Woman: Ah, my son! Thank you very much. Not all taxi drivers are like that with old people. May Allah bless you; may he give you lots of luck."

Driver: Amen" (Kanazoé 2022a: 165-6).

Although the driver was reluctant at first, probably because he was unlikely to find another passenger on this route on the return journey, he agreed to take the elderly woman to her destination when she called him “husband” and asked him for help. When he found out that she was going to a wedding, he even waived the fare. This is because the blessings of older women during rites of passage, such as weddings and naming ceremonies, are essential for triggering *sababu*, the stroke of luck based on divine intervention that produces social success (Debevec 2013). Instead of the fare, the driver accepted a blessing himself. Interestingly, the woman who first called the driver “my husband” (*n ce*) later called him “my son” (*n den*), after he had addressed her as “my mother” (*n ba*). Both were thereby emphasising that they belonged to different generations, which requires the younger person to show respect and humility. Many taxi drivers comply with such strategies of older women because the blessings and curses of “mothers” are believed to be powerful.

### *Making Confessions*

For female passengers, the taxi can provide an anonymous space in which to discuss marital and other personal problems. According to their “knowing how to be” skills, some taxi drivers simply listen and provide an outlet for their clients’ grievances, while others offer advice and even help.

“Once a lady stopped me on the road and asked me to collect her luggage [from her house]. While I was taking her luggage, she started telling me about her problems. In fact, she was going home [to her parents’ house] because her husband had beaten her. He had changed. He used to come home late at night and often stayed out until four in the morning. But she never said anything. On the contrary, she didn’t sleep. She waited for him. When he came home, she heated the water for his bath and gave him something to eat. But she couldn’t stand being beaten anymore. So I said to her, ‘You know, madam, men are like that. Your husband has false friends and it is they who take him to the bars. When he gets drunk, he starts looking for women. If you go home for a few days, he will see your importance and he will come to ask for forgiveness. But please, you have to accept to go back to your [married] home, don’t say that you’re getting a divorce, that it’s over. You’ll see he’ll change’. She told me she understood. One day I was there and the phone rang. It was the lady. She started to thank me because it had really happened as I said it would” (Kanazoé 2022a: 173).

Not all taxi drivers are sympathetic to the confessions made by women in their vehicles. One taxi driver recalled how he had put pressure on a woman to ensure that she would not repeat actions that he considered inappropriate. He had picked up a married woman from a brothel who confessed that she had just slept with a former lover whom she had run into at the market while buying groceries. When the driver dropped her at her place, he said “see you next time”. She asked where they were going to meet again and he claimed to have driven her at least twice before, which was a lie. The driver commented: “I did this to sow doubt in her mind. She’ll think maybe I know her and I can tell her husband. That will make her stop” (Kanazoé 2022a: 175). The driver thus contradicted the woman’s expectation that she could speak freely in the anonymous space of the taxi.

### *Working at Night*

Taxi drivers who work at night are not the same as those who work during the day. Most night taxi drivers are *Diaspo* (children of Burkinabè parents who had emigrated to Côte d'Ivoire and returned to Burkina Faso during the Ivorian civil war from 2002 to 2007). Their customers are often women who work in nightclubs and who are not from Bobo-Dioulasso but from other West African countries.<sup>11</sup>

Night taxi drivers have regular customers who they pick up at the beginning of the night. These women can leave their veils in the taxis before going to work in “sexy” clothes (i.e. showing their necklines and legs) and retrieve them when the same drivers pick them up again (Nabos 2021: 195-213). Drivers and women form bonds against police officers and against male passengers. If a driver transports a female acquaintance and a man who do not know each other, he will not drop the woman directly at her home in order to conceal where she lives.

Nabos (2021: 211) observed that people waiting for taxis on the streets in the early hours of the morning on their way to work would look away and refuse to embark if they encountered a “night taxi” with its particular type of passengers. Although day and night rhythms overlap, this avoidance marks a boundary between day and night activities. At the same time, it reveals shared knowledge about what happens in the city during the night.

For some women, therefore, the taxi is a vehicle that links different social worlds — the domestic space, which is governed by specific norms of female dress and behaviour, and the nightlife spaces where these norms are subverted or suspended. The taxi becomes a space where women can move from one social category to another while moving to their destinations.

### **Conclusion**

“Urban travel is not just about getting from point A to point B. It is about producing and reproducing the city and the self in a complex relationship involving mobility cultures and different types of mobility knowledge” (Jensen 2009: 152). The concept of socio-spatial navigation, which combines spatial orientation and social navigation, allows us to understand what happens when city dwellers move through urban spaces, what skills they use when moving, and how these constitute a “mobility culture” in a non-northern, “ordinary” city (Robinson 2006). By riding along with taxi drivers and their passengers, we observed how they gradually constructed a mental map of the city, and how they used spatial knowledge, as well as knowledge of social norms for gender and intergenerational relations, to negotiate destinations and fares. This actor-oriented approach to everyday urban mobility is highly relevant for understanding urban spaces as both the environment for and the product of social practices.

The people of Bobo-Dioulasso who provide and use public transport face many constraints. Drivers and passengers live in conditions of economic precarity. Roads are poorly maintained and the official public transport system is inadequate. While many men own at least a scooter or a bicycle, many women and poorer men are forced to use public transport.<sup>12</sup> With

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<sup>11</sup> While not all waitresses are sex workers, ordinary citizens tend to view them as deviant (Nabos 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Insufficient infrastructures, inconsistent regulations, precarity and inequalities such as class-based access to particular kinds of urban transport are also features of cities in the Global North (DeSena 2019, Hoffmann and Lugo 2014, Pardo and Prato 2021).

prices rising, taxi drivers are resorting to illegal practices to cut costs, such as using butane gas as fuel. This creates constant insecurity as the practice is prohibited and the car could be confiscated at any time. Should the drivers lose their livelihoods, they would be unable to meet their social obligations to their families, thus putting them under considerable pressure. However, the authorities and the police do not enforce the rules consistently, partly because they themselves have invested in informal transport, take bribes, do not want to risk losing voters or are afraid of stirring up social unrest.

In their interactions in taxis, drivers and passengers make references to these larger economic, political and social issues. Drivers and passengers have certain verbal and non-verbal negotiation skills, such as the ability to conduct a conversation according to established cultural patterns of joking, or to skilfully invoke moral norms for interactions between men and women, spouses, and social juniors and seniors. This is based on their shared knowledge of the socio-cultural context, which in the city of Bobo-Dioulasso means references to common social norms and hierarchies in the Mande-speaking regions of West Africa, such as the power of “mothers” to bestow blessings. Individuals can manipulate these norms, for example when older women manage to get free rides by emphasising their status as “mothers”. Socio-cultural norms are subverted in some situations, for example when women use the taxi space to talk about private problems or remove their veils during the ride. Through such acts, the different social worlds that constitute the city become manifest.

A taxi ride is therefore not simply a movement between two places. The taxi is a microcosm of society at large. It reflects the pressures, tensions and contradictions of life in an African city, as well as the capabilities of its inhabitants. The “mobility culture” of public transport in Bobo-Dioulasso is characterised by a tacit consensus that everyone is entitled to reach their destination, both literally and figuratively. This consensus sets limits to the extent to which transactions can be regulated, negotiated or manipulated.

Of course, this does not apply in every situation. Disputes and fights can occur during taxi rides. Nevertheless, we observed many instances of solidarity and cooperation between male taxi drivers and their female passengers, in which both sides abandoned their goal of getting the most out of a ride and agreed to frame their interactions as relationships between “husband” and “wife” or “mother” and “son”. In doing so, they made the urban space through which they moved a knowable social space.

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