3 Niche Economy Involution

The rapid ways in which Neoplan's workers responded to the havoc caused by the flood, as described in Chapter 2, revealed the highly adaptive capacity of their organisational structure. Driven by a combination of limited cooperation and competition that has long since shaped transport enterprises in Ghana, it brought to the fore a salient form of mobility of practice. It was this high level of adaptability that enabled the workers to quickly reorganise and restore operations, despite – and regardless of – the great material damages and human casualties. Their reactions to the flood would readily lend themselves to an interpretation of either the 'creativity' and 'miraculous' workings of urban 'informal' economies, or their symptomatic under-regulation and lack of protection, which tend to reproduce 'predation' and 'chaos', as the enthusiastic and alarmist views of African urbanism would have it (as discussed in Chapter 1). When assessed from either of these perspectives, the processes that are at work inside the station, and the practices that keep these processes working, might indeed seem to resemble both miracle and predation in a disordered system.

At ground level, however, more mundane dynamics are at play. One the one hand, there are identifiable structures of larger scales within which the organisation of the station and the station workers' practices are constellated; these are the main trajectories and historical turning points that I described in Chapter 2. These structures constitute the broader economic and political context from which today's station hustle has emerged. Similarly, there are discernible sets of regulatory norms that are shared by the various groups active inside the station and that lend their actions a certain degree of predictability. The point, however, is that there are many overlapping and often competing organisational structures that regulate internal work relations at the station. While each of these structures conforms to its own, often quite rigid, norms and codes of conduct, their close interrelation and proximity inside the station's space mean that they regularly erupt into frictional encounters. The station's heterogeneous organisational structure provides a fecund

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ground both for its highly adaptive capacity, as seen in the station workers' reactions to the flood, and for its organisational tension and change. In turn, it is the heterogeneity of both regulatory structures and ordering mechanisms that constitutes and reproduces the situation of hustle, which here describes a complex (and only seemingly disordered) setting.

In this chapter, I narrow the focus from the context that frames the station hustle to some of the main constituents of hustle as a situation. I thus zero in on the multiplicity of ordering dynamics integral to the station workings, as well as the complex constellations that emerge from this multiplicity. To do so, I mainly focus my description on the role of, the internal organisation of, and the (mostly competitive) relations between the branches at the Neoplan Station. As described in Chapter 2, the emergence of the system of station branches was directly related to the establishment of lorry parks and the concurrent creation of local drivers' associations in the early 1930s. As drivers registered their vehicles with whichever association controlled a particular lorry park, referred to as the 'mother station', but moved their vehicles between different parks, the associations created branches in parks controlled by other associations, the 'sister stations'. This system still forms the main organisational arrangement of Ghana's public transport operations today, and it has evolved into an enormous complex, with many thousands of branches of different sizes and numbers of route connections branching out in a rhizome-like structure between hundreds of bus stations in Ghana and beyond.

A key feature of the branch system, as I will show, is the ongoing process of internal growth. This growth is spurred mainly through the incorporation of new vehicles, new drivers, and new branch personnel who serve more vehicles on the same routes and/or on newly created routes; this eventually leads to a splintering and multiplication of one branch into several new ones. I suggest that the multiplication of branches is a striking illustration of both the causes and effects of unfettered competition within a largely self-regulated, undersupplied, and relatively easy to access market – and thus of the historically established context that creates the conditions for both the situation and the activity of hustle.

For the analysis I develop in this chapter, I introduce two conceptual prisms – the niche economy (Guyer 1997) and involution (Geertz 1963) – which, in combination, help to capture the organisational components of the situation of hustle that frames and directs the orientation of people's hustle activities. Guyer's concept of a 'niche economy', which she developed in a study of local food-provisioning systems and economic change in Nigeria, emphasises the social embeddedness of economic practices, particularly those practices that grow out of local and

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collective initiatives and that emerge within a relative lack of state regulation and presence, on the one hand, and under conditions of instability, uncertainty, and/or vulnerability, on the other. Her main conceptual implication is that the groups of people who engage in the creation of economic niches shift and sort themselves across a spectrum of possibilities for productive activity and economic specialisation. The key words here are 'shift' and 'sort', which denote active, creative agency that not only adjusts to change but also helps to shape it – whether this pertains to opportunities or strictures caused by changing competitive conditions at the local level or to market volatilities caused by large-scale economic restructuring. The concept of a dynamic, fluid, and flexible niche economy provides an apt analytic for understanding the branch system that structures work relations in Ghana's bus stations, and for explaining the various ways in which people collaborate and compete, while also shaping and co-creating the situation of hustle.

The second notion is Geertz's (1963) concept of 'involution', an inward-bound process of organisational change (best contrasted with the unfolding changes of 'evolution') that is characterised by increasing institutional complexity, 'elaboration and ornateness', and 'unending virtuosity' (ibid.: 82). In turn, this kind of 'static expansion' (ibid.: 79, borrowing from Boeke 1953) provides a useful concept for making sense of what happens when the creation of economic niches, here the station branches, approaches saturation and when expansive strategies begin turning inwards, consolidating the conditions of hustle as both situation and activity.

I start by describing the multiplication of branches, a process that accounts for the increasingly complex organisational structure of the Neoplan Station, and I use the interrelated creation of three of its branches to exemplify this process. Next, I turn to the basic organisational features of the branches, detailing the ownership structure and registration of vehicles and the occupational division and main roles of the branch workers. In the following section, I describe the processes of the inward-bound densification of labour – hence, the involuting changes in the branches' occupational organisation – and illustrate some of the main effects these processes have on the labour and orientations of the station workers.

Branch Multiplication

At the time of the Neoplan Station's establishment in the days following Rawlings' coup of 1979, four branches served seven destinations. In addition to the lucrative Kumasi route, served mainly by the then

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famous Peugeot 504 station wagon, the four-cylinder model popularly referred to as 'one-pound' (named for the fare), the branches provided transport to towns in the Ashanti and Eastern regions. Corresponding to the long-established division of labour (which I describe in detail later in this chapter), each branch was divided up into a varying number of 'gangs' that were responsible for the loading of vehicles to a particular destination. According to the estimates of some of Neoplan's longest-serving workers, in those days each branch had no more than three gangs and about 15 vehicles registered with it.

With the rapidly increasing influx of additional workers and capital in the early 1980s (the latter manifest mainly in the registration of additional vehicles), Neoplan's branches began expanding their itineraries, both by doubling services on particularly lucrative routes and by serving new destinations. At the same time, the branch members began introducing ever more refined differentiations between the vehicles they loaded. They began categorising them by size, speed, and comfort, among other factors. The continuous growth in the number of branch members, driven by the increase in route connections and the fragmentation of services, effectively decreased each individual worker's share in the returns from ticket sales, thus frustrating strivings for 'quickest return[s]' (Hart 1970: 109). The increasing competition accompanying these processes resulted in the multiplication of gangs and, ultimately, in the creation of new branches. As I will show by describing the interrelated creation of three of Neoplan's branches, the ventures of the entrepreneurs involved are driven by commercial opportunism, ingenious contrivance, and risk-taking propensities just as much as by frustrated ambitions, pretence, persuasion, and failure – an ambivalent set of qualities that is central to the station workers' understanding of hustle.

The Odzinga Splinter

Throughout the 1980s, the majority of Neoplan's Kumasi-bound vehicles were registered with the so-called GPRTU Branch No. 4. This branch had emerged from an earlier split of one big branch (GPRTU Branch No. 1) into four smaller ones that occurred at another central lorry park in Accra in the 1970s. The four new branches were called No. 2, No. 3, No. 4, and the oddly named No. 111. Within Neoplan's No. 4, the highest turnover of vehicles and passengers was achieved by a gang that loaded minivans and was led by the Odzinga, a bookman at the time. His successor told me that Odzinga's men were 'the fastest loaders of the fastest cars' – an achievement that they ascribed to their particularly cunning way of persuading passengers to buy tickets from them

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rather than from their co-workers, who loaded bigger (and slower) buses. Following growing dissatisfaction with their role as 'subsidies men' for the 'weaknesses' of other gangs (I here cite phrases Odzinga's successor used in his narration of the branch history), Odzinga talked a group of Ford minivan drivers into seceding from No. 4.[1] The newly formed Odzinga Ford Highway Express branch became extremely successful and outcompeted No. 4 with regard to the number of vehicles dispatched on the Kumasi route.

The success of Odzinga's branch was in large part made possible by its ability to register some of the most recent minivan models that had been imported (second-hand) to Ghana and which proved highly popular with passengers. Odzinga's remarkably able Secretary (this being both his nickname and his position) was largely responsible for the required brokerage between individual vehicle owners, import agents, and customs and licensing authorities. After some three years of cooperation, and supposedly triggered by allegations of embezzlement, Secretary decided that he would be better off fending for himself and splintered off from Odzinga's branch by forming his own. His attempt to copy Odzinga's model of serving fast vehicles on the Kumasi route proved a failure. As one of his former drivers put it, he was 'too office-minded', implying an inaptitude for the practicalities of transport work. While this does not explain exactly the reasons for his failure, it resonates with a widely held belief among Ghana's transport workers that blind profiteering jeopardises business, and that a certain degree of mutuality and cooperation is needed to counterbalance profit-seeking motives, even though economic success is held in high esteem.

Secretary vanished, leaving behind many outstanding accounts and disgruntled members of his splinter branch. Unwilling to return to Odzinga, they discontinued the (overly competitive) Kumasi route and instead established new services on selected long-distance routes. Preceded by a kind of bottom-up analysis of market potential, the branch members began 'recruiting' passengers in towns located north of Kumasi who previously had to change vehicles on their way to Accra. Crucially, this market analysis relied on the drivers' intimate knowledge of the transport needs of the people in their respective native regions and home towns. Based on this strategy to produce demand by creating supply,

[1] Within the GPRTU, the formal requirement for the establishment of a new branch is the enlistment of one hundred members. In practice, however, this requirement is regularly circumvented through the manipulation of membership figures (e.g. by registering members multiple times or by including retired or even deceased members), as was the case with Odzinga's secession from Neoplan's Branch No. 4.

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they ground out their niche within Neoplan's competitive passenger market and grew into one of Neoplan's biggest branches.

By way of these collective yet competitive economic strategies, the Neoplan Station continued expanding and eventually splintered into 13 branches that operate from it today. At the same time, Neoplan's itineraries increased to serve 34 destinations, half of which are fought over by at least two different branches.[2] More recent secessions led to the establishment of independent bus stations located in close proximity to Neoplan, creating a belt of satellite stations – all of which were founded by former members of Neoplan's branches. Many of these spin-off stations run rather humble services, operating as few as three buses and some two departures daily. Others represent more large-scale enterprises, most prominently the VIP Station, which was established as a cooperative venture between former senior members of Neoplan and its main sister station in Kumasi (described in Chapter 1).

Branch Organisation

The 13 branches that have formed the Neoplan Station since the mid-2010s belong to the nationwide transport associations and former drivers' unions described in Chapter 2. Neoplan is split between two of the largest associations: 10 of its 13 branches belong to the Ghana Private Road Transport Union (GPRTU), while the other three branches are affiliated to the Progressive Transport Owners' Association (PROTOA). The centralised leadership structure of the associations gives their regional and national representatives considerable leverage to negotiate with government agencies the regulatory framework in which public transport operations take place, while also imposing broader rules of professional conduct on the branches. This includes authorising tenancies for the land on which stations operate, as well as setting fares and association fees.

Regarding the practices 'on the ground', however, each branch is a largely independent enterprise. The branches are principally responsible for the departure system (which comes in many variations), and, as described before, they constitute the main entry controls to the public transport market – both for vehicles and drivers and for station personnel. This control is mainly carried out by way of the registration of vehicles, which follows the payment of a range of fees levied by the branch, a proportion of which is passed on to regional and national

[2] See Map 2 for a visual representation of the distribution of Neoplan's branches inside the yard in relation to the destinations served by them.

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representatives of their respective associations. In principle, there are no prescribed conditions as to what kinds of vehicles qualify for registration with a branch. In practice, however, it is the routes that are plied by a given branch and the quality of the roads on these routes that determine selection. On Neoplan's highly frequented shorter routes, such as the well-developed 35 kilometre connection to the neighbouring town of Ashaiman, preference is given to vehicles with a large carrying capacity, with little consideration for the vehicle's condition. Small and resilient vehicles are preferred on longer, less frequented routes, such as the 500 kilometre connection to Lagos.

Some branch members own vehicles themselves, either as 'owner-drivers' or as senior branch members who commission junior members as drivers. However, the majority of vehicles belong to private proprietors who are unrelated to the branches and who hire their vehicles out to drivers on a commission basis, with usually only one vehicle per owner. This pattern of small-scale operators was described by Hill (1963a) and Hart (1970) for the 1960s. And, similar to their findings, the owners of vehicles registered in the Neoplan Station comprise a broad spectrum of individuals. They include civil servants, military personnel, clerks, traders, farmers, teachers, college students, and a South Korean businessman. Very few vehicles appear to be formally registered in the names of women, a gendered ownership structure that attests to the general masculinity of the industry. This, however, is not to exclude the possibility that 'the symbiotic economic relationship between a husband and a wife or a woman and a male kinsman may not be such as to mean that the woman is the effective financier in a partnership', as Hill (1963a: 7) remarked.[3]

For many owners of commercial vehicles, the incentive for investment in fixed capital is a fear of having to stash money away at home, rather than the pursuit of profit. Especially in the highly saturated 'route market' of the Neoplan Station, thresholds for diminishing marginal returns are generally very low. For new investors, returns are regularly undercut from the outset. At work here is a logic of minimalist rent seeking, rather than one of capital accumulation. The greatly compartmentalised and diverse ownership structure of Neoplan's vehicle fleet is a corollary of the much fragmented system of operations, and it corresponds directly to the markedly low entry restrictions for joining a branch.

[3] In one case reported to me by the driver of a relatively new Korean-produced minivan, for example, the registered owner was an 18-year-old male pupil from Accra. The actual proprietor, however, was the pupil's senior sister, who financed the vehicle by savings made from a bursary she had received for postgraduate studies in England.

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Similar to the urban West African voluntary associations described by Kenneth Little (1965) half a century ago, admission to the branches is contingent not on ascribed or involuntarily assigned statuses (e.g. kin or ethnic affiliation), but on common (commercial) interests and on demand for transport (in terms of registered vehicles), which entails demand for labour (in terms of the station personnel). And because demand for transport tends to exceed supply, the occupational organisation of the branches is both highly inclusive and highly diverse. Furthermore, as most of the labour performed in the station is unskilled and manual, there are virtually no formal qualifications required for station work, save in the case of drivers, who must have a valid driving licence.

Posited as a non-kinship and a low- to no-qualification form of commercial association that assembles a diverse set of hybrid, inventive, and brokerage-driven economic endeavours, the station branches can be thought of as proper reifications of economic niches, with each branch providing for an institutionalised form of shifting commercial engagements. To borrow Guyer's formulation, each branch has 'its own terms of operation, each developing through a characteristic series of cultural and social manoeuvres towards the most institutionalised form of the association, with its ceremonial life and public recognition' (Guyer 1997: 223). In Ghana's bus station branches, this is reflected in their characteristic and often idiosyncratic names (think, for example, of the above-mentioned branch No. 111), their greatly varying number of members, and, ultimately, their locally tailored statutes, terms of operation, principles for the distribution of shares, and divisions of tasks and labour.

These differences stem primarily from the route competition in which the branches are engaged. The effects of competition-driven processes of route distribution, and in particular of the parallel serving of routes, are pointedly reflected in Neoplan's net of itineraries. Out of its 34 destinations, 19 are served by only one branch (these are the least lucrative routes). The passengers for the remaining 15 destinations are competed for by at least two different branches. The Kumasi-bound vehicles are in the toughest scramble, as this most travelled route is served by four branches simultaneously. The complexities resulting from these competitive modes of route organisation are both the source and the product of the increasingly complex – and, as I will show, involuting – occupational organisation of the branches.

Office and Yard Staff

The most basic organisational pattern of each branch comprises the so-called office staff and yard staff. The office staff is grouped around a

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board of five 'officers': chairman, vice-chairman, secretary, and two trustees. The officers represent the branch's administrative body and are elected every four years or so from among the members of the branch. The chairman is the main representative of the branch. Addressed as '*panyin*' (Twi for 'boss'), he is the ultimate authority for imposing penalties and for disciplining or dismissing branch members, and he acts as the main connection to the regional and national levels of the association. While some chairmen capitalise on their positions for obtaining (moderate) wealth and even political influence, most serve as mere ombudsmen whose re-election is but a matter of routine. The vice-chairman is mainly in charge of issuing the directives of the chair to the branch members. The main task of the two trustees is the administration of finances. Correspondence, bookkeeping, and the formal registration of members and vehicles are the duties of the secretary. Unlike all other office staff, who are usually long-serving station workers who have toiled their way up the branch hierarchy, the secretary is often a lateral entrant and the only one with a background in a white-collar occupation. His recruitment is the result of the low levels of literacy of the other branch members. While his remuneration is usually above the average of the other officers, he is kept strictly away from the funds. As one Neoplan chairman explained to me: 'The secretary has not the trustiness, but he has the pen' – meaning that he is the only one who is able to read and write properly.

Like the chairmen, the other branch officers generally occupy high-status positions within the social hierarchies of the branch. Yet this level of social seniority is not always reflected in their economic status, particularly as their position at the top of the branch hierarchy puts them at the centre of a structurally volatile system of redistribution. Seth, a branch secretary re-elected for a fourth term, explained to me the intricate role of the branch leaders in this system as follows:

> Some officers play their tricks. But you don't see them standing for long. The workers monitor your pockets. They appreciate sober leaders who deal with them on fair grounds money-wise. Money lubricates the workforce engines. For that, you don't see much at the end of the day, because the money passes through too many hands. And when it reaches you, you have to divide it again and pay out the rest.

Just like many of the longstanding branch officers, Seth derives his main income not from his assigned share in the daily turnover of the branch but from the two vehicles he owns, which operate under his own branch. This practice works relatively well for a number of branch officers, some of whom manage to acquire up to three vehicles. Yet for many, the costs of maintenance leave a vanishingly low profit margin, which tends to decrease in proportion to the age of the vehicle.

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The yard staff comprises all those who carry out the transport activities on the ground. Positioned at the top of the yard hierarchy is the station master (also referred to as the overseer), who acts as the principal coordinator and supervisor of the branch's yard staff. Below the station master are the transport officer (or TO) and the chief driver. The TO is responsible for overseeing the roadworthiness and maintenance of the branch vehicles. In earlier times, the chief driver used to serve as spokesman-elect of all the drivers of a given branch. Today, however, this role has become almost obsolete. As few drivers are now registered members of a branch, with many switching (or doubling) their association whenever it seems advantageous, the chief driver now monitors operations rather than serving as their advocate.

The remaining positions among the yard staff are grouped into smaller sub-units, the 'gangs' (which can be thought of as sub-niches). They carry out the loading of vehicles, which basically means hustling for passengers. The number of gangs depends on the number of destinations served by the branch, as well as on the number of vehicles that are preparing for departure at the same time. The basic composition of a yard staff gang includes the bookman (the former collector, as described in Chapter 2), who is in charge of dispensing tickets for the vehicle, and his group of loading boys, who assist him by loading passengers and luggage. The collection of fares falls mainly within the remit of the bookmen, so most of the income generated by a branch passes through their hands. They are routinely treated with disdain both by passengers and by other station workers, as well as by state authorities (which, in 1947, attempted to formalise their position, and, in 1979, to remove them altogether), because their middlemen-like status brings with it a potential for 'pocketing' – that is, fraud. The station master, TO, chief driver, and bookman of a given branch are considered to be its porters, a category that designates registered members among the yard staff and distinguishes them from unregistered workers, mostly the loading boys.[4]

The two modes of payment for the branch workers are 'office money' and 'chop money'. Office money is an assigned share of the money earned by the branch during the course of the day and is divided between the office and yard staff at the end of every full shift (usually 24 hours). The yard staff, particularly the junior gang members, usually come off rather badly. Chop money is money derived from the sale of bus tickets for a single bus and is shared immediately after the bus's departure

[4] As mentioned in Chapter 2, the term 'porter' was adopted from the organisational pattern of the Gold Coast railway station personnel; likewise, the term 'gang' goes back to the 'railway gang', which was a group of labourers (and not a group of delinquents).

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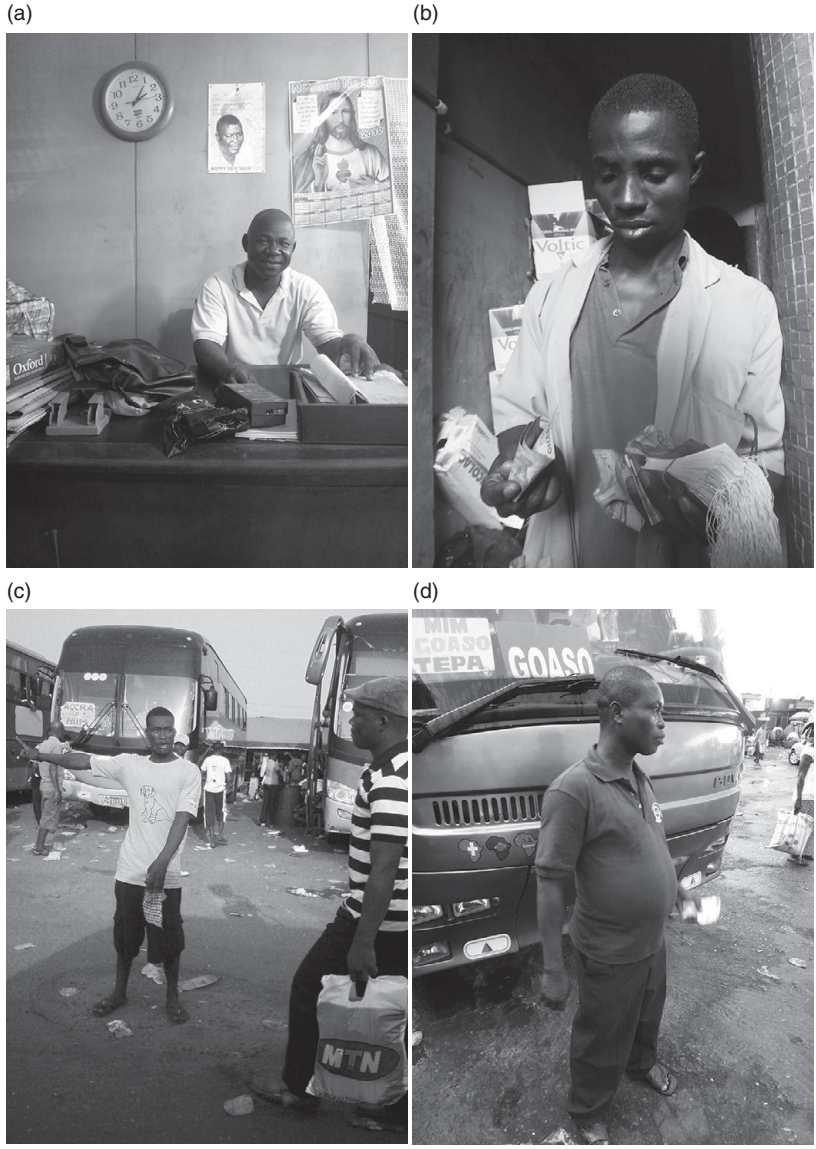


Figure 3.1 (a) At the secretary's office; (b) bookman checking the tickets; (c) overseer supervising the yard; (d) loading boy at work.

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among those who participated in loading it. An example of the shares distributed after loading a 22-passenger bus to Kumasi, with a 10 Ghana cedi (GhȻ) fare per seat (thus 220 GhȻ in total) is as follows: the overall 'booking fee' for the branch will be about 50 GhȻ, of which 35 GhȻ is for the office money and 15 GhȻ for the chop money. The remaining 170 GhȻ is the driver's share, which covers all other expenses, such as costs for petrol, road tolls, and commission for the vehicle owner, as well as a daily station toll of 1.50 GhȻ for the association ('welfare money') and the municipal authorities. Generally, however, the fees and allotted shares vary significantly between different branches. In fact, even within a single gang they might change several times during a day's shift.

Branch Involution

This longstanding hierarchy (or hierarchic duality) of the branch workers correlates with what other authors have identified as the ascriptive status dichotomy between 'big men' and 'small boys' (Nugent 1995; Price 1974), which essentially subsumes the relationship between rulers and ruled. As Paul Nugent puts it, '"big men" issue commands, normally from a seated position, while subordinates do the running' (Nugent 1995: 3). Nominally, this dichotomy exists in the relationship between officers and the yard staff. In practice, however, it has become progressively blurred since the station began absorbing redundant labour from the early 1980s onwards. Spurred by the competitive relations both between and within Neoplan's branches and their gangs, a growing number of additional, mostly unregistered, positions have been added in the branch organisation. Dozens of newly emergent 'middlemen' complicate the relation between 'big men' in the office and 'small boys' on the ground – hence the 'too many hands' referred to by the branch secretary Seth.

The creation of such additional positions often results from a favour rendered by a senior branch member to a relative or friend, or from an intricate system in which a gang member subcontracts an additional worker, usually as a dispatcher or henchman. The newly created labels echo the implied levels of creativeness, comprising a broad spectrum of derivations of existing designations, such as 'shift master', 'gang leader', '2IC-TO' (that is, second-in-command transport officer), 'second porter', 'third porter', and so forth. In other instances, new positions emerge in order to counterbalance the structural weaknesses of the transport sector at large. Attached to the office staff of some of Neoplan's bigger branches, for example, are varying numbers of so-called 'associates', who usually consist of branch members considered

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too 'senior' (that is, too old) for yard work. Exempt from any duty (as well as from authority and income), their continued presence as branch members serves as a substitute for the lack of a pension scheme for retired transport workers; they depend on the officers' goodwill to grant them something from the daily write-offs of the branch. Effectively, their status is tantamount to beggars.

The dynamics underlying these inward-bound densifications of labour are reminiscent of what Geertz (1963) describes as processes of 'involution'. In Geertz's example of Javanese farmers, it is the combination of abundant labour and scarce (yet remarkably fertile) land that makes for 'introversive tendencies', 'absorbing increased numbers of cultivators on a unit of cultivated land' (ibid.: 32). This 'static expansion', fuelled by continuous labour intensification, was matched by increasing levels of complexity with regard to tenancy relations, cooperative labour arrangements, technological modes of production, and social modes of redistribution – a process to which Geertz ascribes the qualities of 'overornamentation' (ibid.: 82).[5]

A similar process of labour intensification and increasing technical detail holds true for Ghana's main lorry parks in general, and for Neoplan in particular. As a longstanding centre of attraction for day labourers, unskilled workers, and roadside venturers with diverse professions, the park 'absorbs' ever increasing numbers of 'cultivators' who work its ever more densely populated land. Although Neoplan's additional workforce does not 'plough' the land, tenancy relations within the yard have grown strikingly intricate. The workers come to ply routes, striving to increase the turnover of vehicles and passengers by way of organisational fragmentation and the elaboration of established practices, and thus of economic niches – raising the levels of institutional complexity and technical virtuosity with every newly incorporated position, which in turn feeds into, and progressively increases, the situation of hustle that prevails at the station.

Increasing in-migration, as described by Geertz for the processes of agricultural involution, translates into increasing soil productivity (kilograms per hectare) *and* into decreasing labour productivity (kilograms per hour). A similar correlation is at work in Neoplan's involuting occupational organisation, with increasing incorporation of new workers

[5] Geertz elaborates on the notion of over-ornamentation by quoting Goldenweiser's take on late Gothic art: 'The basic forms of art have reached finality, the structural features are fixed beyond variation, inventive originality is exhausted … Expansive creativeness having dried up at the source, a special kind of virtuosity take its place, a sort of technical hairsplitting' (Goldenweiser 1936, quoted in Geertz 1963: 81).

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translating into increased turnovers of vehicles and passengers (in turn related to the possibility of opening up, or creating, new 'passenger markets', as exemplified by the passenger recruitment strategy adopted by the members who splintered from Odzinga's branch) *and* into decreasing shares for the workers involved. Hence, too, the tendency for each coin to become smaller with every hand through which it passes – and the more hands, the more small coins are in circulation. Many small-scale entrepreneurs striving to invest in fixed capital (i.e. commercial vehicles), despite low and frequently long-postponed returns on equity, if any, intensify the system of involuting densification significantly – this being the proprietary flipside of involution.

Everybody Needs to Chop

The linked concept of 'shared poverty' that Geertz (1963: 97–103) introduces to describe the egalitarian ethics of Javanese village society, which he posits as the cultural basis for the involution of the *sawah* economy, is not transferable as such to the involution-driven labour organisation in Ghana's bus stations. By this, I do not mean to discard the idea that cultural values may serve to explain certain aspects of economic practice, as some of Geertz's critics have argued (see, in particular, Alexander and Alexander 1982).[6] Values endorsing cooperation, mutuality, and reciprocal help do have a bearing on the actions of the transport workers, but their effects are mostly limited to the group of workers of one branch, and often to the members of one gang. Acts of solidarity between members of different branches are generally rare, and they appear to arise only in reaction to external threats, such as in response to the regulatory interventions by governmental agencies (described in Chapter 2) or in the aftermath of the flood.

On a more general level, there is a collective understanding of shared economic hardship, which entails acknowledging everyone's need to secure a livelihood, irrespective of their ascribed status and affiliation. This idea is expressed in the notion of the station as a place that is 'free for everybody', as framed by Al Hassan, the station worker whose explanation of hustle I quoted in Chapter 1. This understanding is not exactly

[6] Geertz's argument has given rise to a host of criticisms (for an overview, see White 1983), most of which are directed at the lack of evidence for his otherwise 'brilliant hypothesis' (ibid.: 11). I draw here on the analytical potency of the concept, leaving aside the question of whether or not it is adequate for explaining agrarian relations in Java.

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based on a generalised idea of economic solidarity, let alone altruism. But it implies a form of toleration that lends others an equal right to enter the market, and to compete for work, resources, and income. Ghanaian English trenchantly subsumes the related ethos in the proverbial wisdom that 'everybody needs to chop' (everybody needs to eat), which resonates strongly with hustle as a livelihood logic of competing, yet also collectively shared, struggles and strivings for making a living.

Continuing in that register of nutritional subsistence, rather than sharing the same bowl (to echo Claire Robertson's (1984) interpretation of female Ga entrepreneurs' reactions to economic hardship), the station workers resort to dividing the portions into ever more and ever smaller bowls. Rather than evoking 'a society in which tradition has acquired hegemony over economics' (Alexander and Alexander 1982: 614), the static expansion of Neoplan's occupational relations bespeaks of a different way of dealing with and accommodating social and economic change. Here, cooperation and competition go hand in hand, with the one virtually 'feeding' into the other, which parallels and extends the organisational structures of Ghana's privately run transport business at large.

The main force driving the processes of involuting growth in the Neoplan Station is the continuously heightened level of competition. As more and more people attempt to eke out a living by finding or creating new engagements within the station's niche economy, their influx leads to the reworking of existing arrangements to adapt to the effects of involution. Similar to the users and producers of Zimbabwe's '*kukiya-kiya* economy' that Jeremy Jones (2010) writes about, Neoplan's workers are constantly driven to become 'more multiple, mobile and polyvalent than the adversary' (ibid.: 293) – that is, than their competitors. The drive to outwit rivals on the ground and counter their innovations leads to the creation of new and cleverer practices and the introduction of new positions.

The distribution of chop money, which for most of the low-ranking and unregistered yard workers constitutes their only share and implies a hand-to-mouth existence, adds a further element of fragmentation to the station's involuting competition. While the influx of additional workers (or 'cultivators') leads to a decrease in each individual worker's share of the returns, it also results in an expansion of routes and a multiplication of services. Ultimately, these internal splinter tendencies come to form the basis for the formation of more and more gangs, and – as I have shown by the example of the successive splits of Neoplan's No. 4 Branch – of new branches and new stations. Propelled by the ongoing creation, re-creation, and refinement of competitive practices, Neoplan's

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branch involution both parallels and advances the particular logic of a niche economy. As Kathryn Barrett-Gaines (2004: 3, drawing on Guyer 1997) pointedly remarks, by 'creating niches to participate in the circulation of money, goods, and services, people may go beyond what appears to be efficiency, logic, and functionality'.

An example of this inward-bound, inclusive, yet competitive expansion within a niche economy is the existence of 'shadow passengers' (whose practices I describe in more detail in Chapter 7). Shadows owe their 'invention' to Neoplan's departure system, in which buses leave only when they are 'full', meaning when all seats are taken. The main (and only) task of shadows is to sit in the vehicle and pretend to be a 'real' passenger in order to give the impression of a bus almost ready for departure, with the goal of gaining a competitive advantage over other gangs. As actual passengers begin to buy tickets and take their seats, the shadows disembark one after another.

Driven by the competition for passengers between Neoplan's branches, the system of shadow passengers has evolved to such a degree that a 22-seater bus may contain up to 12 shadows before the first ticket is sold. The point about Neoplan's shadow passengers is that the 'service' they perform is dispensable, if not redundant. Their work does not add value to the transport operation; on the contrary, it literally obscures the departure system. The incorporation of the shadows' service-cum-labour demonstrates a niche economy logic flourishing within an involuting economic milieu.

The figure of the shadow symbolises a larger process at work at the station that constitutes the situation of hustle: increased degrees of complexity yield new ways of engaging with that complexity and, supposedly, of mediating and taming its confusion, which in effect generates further degrees of complexity. To give one example of the exceedingly complex divisions of labour that follow from Neoplan's involuting niche economy: on busy days, there are up to 22 separate gangs, along with a fluctuating number of coordinating supervisors, sub-supervisors, middlemen, and henchmen, and more than one hundred shadows, who all, at the same time, compete for passengers travelling to Neoplan's main destination (Kumasi). Here, we may perceive the roots of what can be described as the socio-economic organisation of complexity that manifests itself in the situation of hustle at the station. This process, and the confusing and often bewildering situations it begets, is produced by the open-ended variability of active, inventive, and conflicting modes of ordering, recombining, and exploiting complex constellations – the result of which is easily *mis*apprehended as a kind of bustling 'disorderliness' with hazardous or 'miraculous' workings.

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Figure 3.2 On shadowing duty.

Conclusion

Despite all the apparent perils and seemingly 'predatory' activities, Accra's Neoplan Station works. Whether in its function as a nodal point of transport or as a centre of trade, there is little reason to deny its efficacy. Since its establishment following Rawlings' first coup, myriad passengers have been dispatched from its yard, and myriad workers, hawkers, and vendors have made a living from it. Neoplan has persisted through economic and political crises alike. It has weathered floods, currency devaluations, and petrol shortages. Competitors have surfaced in the form of state-backed transport enterprises and private bus companies, all trying in vain to challenge Neoplan's position. Its hustle continues unperturbed.

The hustle at Accra's Neoplan Station illustrates how a heterogeneous and highly segmented form of urban economic organisation can have complex hierarchies and regulations while being subject to high levels of rupture and indeterminacy – and how it can integrate these into its workings. From this observation one might be tempted to infer, like other authors who have studied comparable spaces of urban hustle in Africa, that '[t]here is order in the disorder' (Trefon 2004: 2; see also

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Bakare-Yusuf and Weate 2005; Czeglédy 2004). But in the case of Neoplan's 'hustle park', this inference appears to be the wrong way round. For it is through the multiplicity of competing ordering attempts, accelerated by the multiplication of branches and by structural changes at larger scales, that certain degrees of confusing complexity are fermented that create the situation of hustle.

These larger structural changes, as I have shown in Chapter 2, can be traced to processes that commenced in the early 1980s and that continue to this day. Catalysed by generally aggregating economic strictures and the consequent reorganisation of productive relations, the Neoplan Station – serving as a pivot of transport work and roadside trade – began absorbing increasing amounts of redundant labour. Facilitated by the longstanding market-aligned orientation of Ghana's private transport workers (reaching back to what Hill termed 'the lorry age' (1963b: 234)), these densifications of labour progressively re-constellated the station's regulatory arrangements, particularly with regard to the unfettering of patriarchal rule and of long-established hierarchic patterns that underlie the organisation of the station branches.

Notwithstanding these many organisational vicissitudes, the station has retained a remarkable level of 'workings'. In fact, it has thrived. Similar to the 'power of location' (Clark 1994: 35) that determines the commercial identity (and success) of traders in the Kumasi central market, the Neoplan Station – like other major stations – constitutes a 'location of power'. Its economic potency grows with the sheer number of actors who engage with it, regardless of whether or not they succeed in utilising the possibilities it offers in the long run. As framed succinctly by one station worker: 'Politics and money can trick the people, but they can never trick the station. The people are many, but the station is more.' In other words, being greater than the sum of its many dissociated parts, its increasing fragmentation becomes a mechanism to immunise it against attempts to curb its operations.

In this, the station represents key aspects that characterise Ghana's privately run transport system more widely. For, like the transport sector in general, it facilitates the integration of more and more differentiated ways in which people come to approach it as a resource and exploit it for some form of gain. Its resulting economic appeal simultaneously enhances its operational resilience and organisational versatility, as demonstrated by the expedient and instrumental practices following the flooding of the station. Principally driven by entrepreneurial utility and mutually enforced competition, these mechanisms allow a large margin for individual failure and, ultimately, make the private road transport sector immune to external pressures, whether these materialise as regulatory interventions by government or as natural disasters.

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