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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# THE COLLECTIVE TRANSPORT IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE: WHEN THE TRADE UNION RACKET BECOMES A PROFESSION

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse social logics that condition the reconversion of the activity of syndical auxiliaries in fund extortion. To do this, a survey was carried out with syndical auxiliaries in the district of Abidjan especially in Abobo. Qualitative approach through open interviews, allowed us to collect necessary data to achieve the following results: liberalization of urban collective transport carried away proliferation of syndical structures formed of actors with divergent objectives in sight of obtaining incomes of this sector. Profit-seeking led some syndicates to redeploy themselves in fund extortion actors to the detriment of defending interests of drivers.

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## INTRODUCTION

Public road transport is at the centre of all economic activities in Côte d'Ivoire (agriculture, industry, tourism, etc.). Its contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is between 5% and 12% per year (Ministry of Transport, 2014). The important role played by transport has considerably increased in recent decades with the liberalization of urban transport in Abidjan. This has allowed the arrival of private operators and significantly private public transport including "gbaka" minibuses (World Bank, 2000). Following this entry, public transit operators are confronted with road harassment on communication channels. To cope with this, fight actions are taken by the carriers. As proof, the fight against this phenomenon is one of the demands and reasons for the creation of a growing number of transport unions and drivers in the field of collective road transport (Zouhoula Bi, 2010). In the carrier union the role of professional regulation has fallen due to the assignment of lines to the different vehicles. Faced with the abuses of the transport unions, the drivers' unions have appeared and are taking on driver protection tasks (Idem, 2010). Alongside these trade union structures that are present in the field, in the different municipalities of Abidjan, such as: Adjamé, Abobo, Bingerville, Cocody, and Yopougon, where the minibuses (gbaka) intervene, we find in the vicinity of

roads union auxiliaries commonly called (gnambro). These assistants have a mission to find customers on behalf of drivers. Installed haphazardly in almost all the informal bus stations and on the lines of the economic capital, they operate as true masters. They impose themselves on drivers by levying taxes. The municipality of Abobo remains one of their main base. The phenomenon of "gnambro" is one of the concerns of the public transit sector in this municipality. Wherever they work as union auxiliaries, drivers are ransomed on a daily basis on the main streets without the intervention of the political authorities and the formal unions in the transport sector. What are the social logics that explain the presence of union auxiliaries in the transport sector despite the existence of formal structures? What is the organization and operation of unionism in the field of public transport? What is the nature of the relations that the union auxiliaries have with the drivers? The objective of this study is to analyze the social logics that condition the conversion of the activities of the union auxiliaries into an extortion of funds in the field of minibuses (gbaka) in Abobo.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

A survey was conducted in the Abidjan Autonomous District, particularly in Abobo municipality. The choice of this municipality is explained by the presence of union auxiliaries at the various points of loading and unloading minibuses (gbaka). The study focused on qualitative data. This was only

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possible through the development of an interview guide. Also, the use of direct observation has been useful to us. The individuals involved in this study are union auxiliaries (gnambro) and minibus drivers (gbaka). The first group is interviewed because they are the ones who extort funds from the drivers. Then the drivers, because they are supposed to give us information to the extent that they are the ones who undergo the acts of the union auxiliaries. The sampling technique (reasoned sampling) consisted in identifying the minibus drivers (gbaka) who are part of this study, that is to say the gbaka drivers operating in the municipality of Abobo. Concerning union auxiliaries (gnambro), we used network sampling. Indeed we have made the sample from the knowledge that introduced us to the gnambro. They served as initial informants and put us in touch with people who could be part of the sample. In total after questioning fifteen (15) union auxiliaries (gnambro) and twenty (20) drivers, we were able to reach saturation. We also took into account the opinion of certain personalities in the transport sector and union officials. They were the leaders of Union of carriers of the municipality of Abobo (UCMA) and the National Coordination of Road Stations of Côte d'Ivoire (NCRSCI). These union officials are interviewed to the extent that the first represents all the union structures of Abobo, the second represents one of the few union structures in Côte d'Ivoire that fights against the phenomenon of gnambro. The information gathered from the interviews was processed on the basis of the principle of content analysis. In short, the combination of all these elements of survey mobilized made it possible to identify all the practices of the different actors in the daily experience of their work.

## RESULTS

### Organization of trade unionism in the municipality of Abobo

#### Formal Unionism

After the liberalization of political space in 1990, the transport community registered many unions. These unions are created at the end of the frustrations of some and motivated by the desire to capture the rent of this economic sector. This justifies the creation of a growing number of unions in the transport sector. In Abobo, the unions are grouped into federations and collectives to better conduct their activity in the field. This is justified by the remarks of Mr. K R, Union Manager:

*"We are organized in a union called Union of carriers' of the municipality of Abobo (UCMA). We are made up of driver unions and transport unions. The carriers are our bosses and the drivers of the employees. The UTMA is composed of thirteen (13) carriers' unions and seven (7) driver union federations. Within each federation, there are several basic unions "*

The words of this manager reveal the number of unions present in the municipality of Abobo. He makes a distinction between the drivers' unions and the carriers' unions. These unions set up a system of levying "dues" collected by these organizations even when they do not have union members. Any new union wishing to exercise on the municipal territory must have the prior approval of the UTMA. This administrative approach allows the various entities to set the conditions for the exercise of the activity of the unions. It is at these different stages that

negotiations and locking strategies and / or positioning strategies for the exploitation of manna resulting from transport are played out.

#### Formally authorized union taxes

Trade union structures are set up in parallel regulatory bodies and impose union taxes on vehicles. In order to take control of the management of informal transport, unions introduce two types of taxes: the line right or the right to put on line and the exploitation fees.

The first tax, payable before entry into the activity is the subject of a consensus between the unions with an amount varying according to the municipality and the profitability of the line. This sum amounts to 50,000 FCFA for the minibuses (gbaka) which exercise in the municipality of Abobo. According to union officials, payment of this fee is one-time. This is revealed by Mr. C, Union Manager:

*"The right to upload or line right is 50 000 FCFA for minibuses (gbaka). This sum belongs to the legally constituted trade unions and is paid once and for all. It constitutes the legal authorization granted by the unions to vehicles "*

These words of this interviewee reveal that union taxes are unavoidable in the municipality. This tax is subject to regular control by the trade union structures. Except for metered taxis, all other public transport vehicles in Abobo municipality must pay the union's line fee. The exploitation fees are collected daily. They constitute one of the main reasons for the multiplication of unions in public transport in Abobo. From an amount between 300 and 1500 FCFA, the union ticket is a fixed tax which the driver of the minibus must pay once for the day. The funds generated by the taxes on the activity are divided between the unions involved in the management of the informal stations. However, it is difficult to know what these funds actually serve.

#### Origin of union auxiliaries

The activities carried out in the bus stations by the union auxiliaries show how much urban public transport is invested by several categories of actors. Initially, in the urban bus stations, the union auxiliaries or "gnambro" were either sick drivers or drivers without vehicles, or jobless people who managed to direct customers to vehicles for a few coins (50 or 100Fcf). As well as the working populations, they were used to organize the transport, by making the access to the vehicles more fluid. In return, the driver gives a few coins as he wishes. Mr. S, a union official says:

*"Originally, the people you see on the road today called gnambro, were loaders by auction. At the end of the day, the driver gave coins to the loaders according to his wishes, it was aids. The old drivers who are aged are still doing this in the stations. "*

This working of old drivers still persists in stations arranged by individuals where there are driver organizations. With the liberalization of Ivorian urban transport space, jobless people, often outside the transport world, occupied streets, bus stops and terminals. Sometimes, they have been recovered by new union structures to work for them. For Mr. L, delegate-driver *"Now, there is no more" gnambroya "*. All the gnambro became trade unionists. They are there, they say it's their land.

*Once someone parks on their land, they cash them. They set a sum that they like, it is what trade unionists say they do. But before then, the gnambro worked for the drivers”.*

These words illustrate that "gnambro" unofficially belong to professional groups, either drivers or carriers. While these professional groups say they do not recognize union auxiliaries in their ranks. On the other hand, we realize that on the field some union officials are in close collaboration with the union auxiliaries who collect funds for them. There are sites where do not belong to any organization. As this auxiliary union says: *"We, we belong to the transport union, we have our boss to whom we pay the recipe, there are other gnambro who do not have unions, they work for themselves, but they are not many"*. The gnambro are present on all main roads in the municipality of Abobo where the gbaka pass. Unlike drivers or carriers who travel and do not depend on one location, the "gnambro" group together. They are present on main streets and share the transport space daily.

### **Method of installation of union auxiliaries**

To have enough passengers, the union auxiliaries (gnambro) choose the strategic and perceptible points of the urban space to implant themselves. In this logic, crossroads appear as best places. These crossroads are the preferred spaces for the activities of union auxiliaries. Indeed, the main form of appropriation spaces is the location of the influx of passengers in the crossroads of the main streets. Each intersection of streets becomes a potential installation site. The size and importance of the crossroads in the traffic network determine their presence. The words of F B gnambro at the pump, illustrate this statement:

*"We created this place ourselves, as we saw that many passengers stop here to wait for a car, we created and then we confided in our boss. We can not work on the tar like that without a boss. We saw someone who is a union leader to be our boss. In our environment there are many things, so we can not work alone "*.

This installation of union officers at crossroads is not trivial. This way of settling allows them to have many customers for the benefit of the drivers and to have more sums to be collected. The method of occupation of these stations is almost the same but they are created in different contexts.

Thus, junctions located on urban roads are the most valuable. The union auxiliaries by perceiving the crowds at rush hours in bus stops, make themselves useful by finding cars for them. It is in this way that the spontaneous points of intervention of "gnambro" are generally created on the urban territory. These points become places of enormous pecuniary stakes because they are transformed into spaces of taxation.

### **Factors favoring the presence of union auxiliaries**

#### **The taxation system and the daily income of union auxiliaries**

Union auxiliaries collect fees at loading points. The sites where they are most present are located in areas where the clientele is large and constant. Indeed, they collect funds from 100 to 300 FCFA per passenger vehicles'. This is justified by the words of Mr. S who says: *"Here, we do not worry about apprentices.*

*When the apprentice takes 3 people, he pays 100 FCFA, when he takes between 4 and 6 people, he pays 200 FCFA and full load 300 FCFA. These fees vary depending on municipalities and loading points. Some drivers pay up to 1200 FCFA for the first load of the day. Thus in one day, the "gnambro" can accumulate a large amount of funds. These collected sums allow us to understand the difficulty to stop this phenomenon. By observing the number of existing points and the number of vehicles in this municipality, it is easy to understand the "opulence" in which the managers of these union auxiliaries live. To do this, the control of the intervention sites of the union auxiliaries is the origin of many conflicts. In this vast "swindle" network, all public transports are not spared except metered taxis that escape the payment of these fees.*

### **The union auxiliaries sector as a lucrative activity**

The public transport sector generates significant financial resources that the different actors share. Indeed, this sector is regularly subject to violence between rival union auxiliaries. Their links with the official unions, allow them to enjoy the status of agents of taxation on behalf of the latter and to establish on the station space a form of racket that is practiced with violence. The currencies that are generated in the informal stations make them a coveted space. It remains difficult to estimate the totality of the sums of money accumulated by the different actors. But, we can get an idea of the sums collected in some places. These amounts range from 10,000 CFA to 100,000 CFA a day. They vary according to the density of traffic at the point of embarkation and disembarkation and the number of vehicles likely to load at this point. This collection provides substantial income for union auxiliaries as well as managers and chiefs.

*"Here at home, we make as a recipe 15000 F CFA a day. It depends, there are places where it exceeds 15,000 CFA, Adjamé bracodi is 100,000 CFA a day and at gendarmerie roundabout is 80,000 CFA a day"* testified M. D gnambro at the station.

The monetary resources collected by these union auxiliaries are strongly contested for its control. During our surveys, we found that a large number of individuals gravitate around informal bus stations. In the municipality of Abobo, clashes between union auxiliaries working in the field are recurrent. In this environment, each actor seems to find his account.

### **The activity of union auxiliaries as a means of subsistence and integration in the transportation environment**

The perception of union activity varies according to the opportunities that the union auxiliary get from his work. The union auxiliary sector is a way to keep many jobless people to support themselves and their families. To face the social charges of the family and the economic difficulties, the trade union environment becomes attractive for the union auxiliaries (gnambro), because the profits are more rapid, as testifies this gnambro.

*"We come to the station because I know that every night I'll find something and go home. There are somedays where I can earn 2000 F CFA, 3000 F CFA even sometimes 5000 F CFA. Sometimes, I work the whole day"*.

Trade union activity allows the union auxiliary to be financially independent. The station appears not only as a place of work where one comes for his pittance, but also allows these people to reconstruct themselves socially.

Trade union activity also appears as a means of support for many people who left school without financial means. It is a social and economic means of integration where union auxiliaries hope to take advantage of the profit that generates transportation to be able to continue their studies. *"I was a student, but I stopped classes since one year, but I'm in evening-school, I pass the G.C.E.A-level this year, I work here as union auxiliary in the meantime I have the Bac "* said D A, responsible gnambro. In addition to the opportunity that the sector offers, even precarious, the sector also provides shelter for union auxiliaries. This idea is shared by stations I and transport unions who think they participate for their part in a mission of public utility by allowing them to exercise in their stations. For the latter, the actions of the "gnambro" in the transport sector help their socio-economic integration. As explained Mr. C union leader in Abobo:

*"The gnambro are unknown people in the field of transport, they have no status in transport. They are young volunteers who came to manage themselves at the station. They are not in our ranks even though we recognize that sometimes some of our union leaders are behind their activities. As you see in Abobo, the only industry is transportation.*

As for the modalities of access to the union space, they are done by networking. Indeed, it is according to the network of chief and the personal aptitudes of the pretender that it is admitted in the system. Ultimately, the recruitment of a gnambro apprentice is left to the discretion of the manager who can decide or not to integrate a candidate into his team. This is corroborated by B chief gnambro who says:

*"I, if a little boy wants to work with me, he must come to watch me working, if he is good, the day I'm not here, I let him work. If I had another place, I can put him there to manage, so he learns a little bit. "*

The entries into the union world, are based on profiles and personal networks. Thus, some include this sector at the bottom of the scale as apprentices or "loaders" or "gnambro". Other actors find themselves in this environment in order to become familiar with the transport sector. Whether they hold or not driving license, they aspire to immerse themselves in the realities of the driving profession what they want to exercise in the future. With a daily wage, the income from the union activity allows those who are not holders of the driving license to acquire the financial means to pass that license.

### **The union auxiliaries sector as a job provider sector**

The sector offers an opportunity for economic integration for many people. Even if they admit, working as a union auxiliary is not a legal profession, it does not prevent them from offering a significant income. Beyond the appearance and disorder that prevails, this sector remains spaces that offer real job opportunities. The number of jobs held by "gnambro" is very important as transport and trade are the main economic activities in this municipality. These auxiliaries consider this practice as a profession. *"It's gnambroya our current job. Above all, it provides a lot of services to the youth of Abobo.*

*Currently, I pay my house in it, I feed my family, I feed my wife, I make money transfer to send to the village, the same for the others who are with me here, that's what they live ",* said K F chief gnambro.

Apart from the different aspects that we mentioned above, this area of activity is job provider. However, the development of the informal sector in this sector does not facilitate the knowledge of the jobs generated. It is not easy to pinpoint the number of people used in stations to fulfill these tasks. However, by touring the various sites where they operate, we can estimate the maximum number of gnambro per boarding point to 20 people and minimum to 5 people.

### **The nature of the relationship between union auxiliaries and drivers**

#### **The use of violence as a method of work**

Transactions of union auxiliaries are not based on the will of the actors, but rather on choices imposed on them. Drivers must accept this organization if they want to continue operating. These choices are imposed by threats and the maintenance of fear in order to deter discordant voices. For S A, driver: *"Today, the gnambro impose their dictates, they became professional loaders, and they do everything by violence".* The use of violence marks a transformation in the nature of the relationship between drivers and union auxiliaries. We are in a system where actions are regulated by the one who knows how to be more threatening, by his capacity of nuisance to the other actors and to the whole organization. The system is fragile, but maintained at every moment in permanent conflicts. Trade unions of the transport sector are supposed to organize and defend the interests of their members. As far as possible, they must provide assistance and intervene in the resolution of disputes between drivers and other actors. If this is the case for some, others derogate from these objectives. The latter are considered as their "executioners", as testifies Mr. T, driver of gbaka:

*The unions and the gnambro tire us too much. If the government can remove them or forbid them, that will please us a lot. They make much money and without us they are nothing but they do not respect us. If today we rise to fight against them, we will pay the price for nothing. Normally the unions are there to defend the rights of the drivers, but they are there, they do not do anything for us, they are there to eat for themselves and to get rich ".*

Drivers who refuse to pay the parallel taxes imposed on them by the union auxiliaries, expose themselves to violence when their vehicles are not ransacked. These auxiliaries can stop a vehicle on the road for minutes to drivers who oppose the payment of these taxes. As proof, in January 2017, a driver was abused in Abobo station by union auxiliaries. That driver had refused to pay an amount of two hundred (200) FCFA to a gnambro. In the same month, a young apprentice was caught in the eye, for refusing also, to pay the loading fees to the gnambro.

### **The repercussion of the activities of the union auxiliaries on the transportation cost**

The fees imposed on drivers are an integral part of the cost factors to be taken into account when defining passenger fares.

The effect of such practice on prices is assessed at two levels: directly and indirectly. The indirect impact is linked to the additional costs borne by the drivers, which are reflected in the users (passengers) of collective passenger transport vehicles. For K S, apprentice of gbaka:

*"All what tires us, it is the incidental expenses of the gnambro. You know why the price of transport is not fixed in Abobo? It is because of the gnambro. We can not pay 500 FCFA per load and decrease the transport fare, if you want to talk it's palaver you'll do, to make up for our loss, we have to increase the price of transport during rush hour".*

This impact, not directly perceptible by passengers, has an impact on the cost of passenger transport. According to ENSEA, these costs contribute to increase 16.67% the price of urban transport in Abidjan. This result has an effect on the purchasing power of the population as there is a link between transport prices and the standard of living of the population.

### The passivity of public authorities

The levying of the expenses of the union auxiliaries in the public transport has become institutionalized. Indeed, these fees are very frequent to such a point that some actors in the transport sector have become accustomed to this practice. The drivers, exhausted by all these expenses, do not find it useful to denounce it. Those who dare to do so are not always welcome to the brigade services of the gendarmerie or police stations. According to Mr. L minibus driver (gbaka):

*"One day, I had a problem with the gnambro who are at the station. I went to complain to the gendarmerie, in front of me, the commander phoned one of the leaders of the gnambro, after exchanging with him on the phone, the commander told me to go settle between us. In front of the commander, I burst into tears and I returned home without solution".*

This collaboration gives another facet to the problem of union auxiliaries. It defines the relations between the leaders of union auxiliaries and hierarchical authorities. This practice is almost an integral part of the operation of the activity and has become habits. It is a strong pressure that the union auxiliaries exert on the drivers daily. The latter are forced to pay taxes to auxiliaries posted at various strategic places. Under these conditions, it is impossible for a driver to escape.

## DISCUSSION

Trade union structures, whatever their status, formal or informal, are inescapable in Ivorian transport. They have a supremacy on the collective transport of Abidjan so that secondary charges imposed by the union auxiliaries have become a normal phenomenon. This imposition of fees is outside the law and is illustrated by force. This is seen in the studies of (Kassi, 2007). For the author, the dominance of the unions over transportation is such, that the authorization granted by the administration is not sufficient itself to carry on the transport activity. Their activities tend to substitute for authority. They manage the entire insertion process for the profession and have the right of access and withdrawal on the service lines. For this, they create parallel instances of control to dictate their dominance. The regularity of the levies makes it an institution. In this same perspective, Zouhoula Bi (2010) emphasizes the supremacy of trade union corporations in the

process of collecting secondary costs. He analyzes the activities of the trade unions in relation to the development of the informal in the bus stations of the Autonomous District of Abidjan. For him, the collection of fees or union taxes explains the proliferation of trade union corporations in transport sector. He added that the unions put forward the control of taxation to the detriment of defending the right of union members. As we can see, the union auxiliaries put in place mechanisms that justify and legitimize their action by belonging to a corporation by using of all the means available to them to impose their power.

On that subject, Meité (2014), in his study, explains the presence of union structures by the phenomenon misuse of authority between non-institutional actors of urban transport. The different transactional relationships between stakeholders are based on a set of informal procedures. To do this, artisanal operators set up parallel organizations in bus stations in order to impose a kind of "absolute" and "dictatorial" power in place of official regulation. This approach of the territory by the trade union actors implies a kind of distrust toward the authority of the State and the physical violence in the transactions. According to the author, this contributes to the consolidation of the relations between actors within the organization even if these transactions are done outside any cooperative framework.

These imposed choices maintain the transactions by force with permanent conflicts. The analysis that Lombard (2006) makes in its tax levy comparison between the district of Abidjan and the agglomeration of Dakar is different. The fact that the unions are the tax masters in the bus stations of the Abidjan district strengthens the relationship between actors of the informal transport. Kouamé et al (2015) do not analyze the presence of unions that way, but rather as an opportunity to reintegrate transport sector. For them, beyond appearances and the disorder that seems to be present in the transport, the stations constitute "organized" spaces producing the social link. Fundraising initiated by the trade unions allows actors to control the sector and consolidate their position.

They continue that the various informal stations constitute a space of resocialization for the various young people intervening in the sector of the transport. The station appears as a place of social and economic integration. It is a livelihood-providing area and an opportunity for socio-economic reintegration that guarantees relative social mobility. From the preceded idea, we can consider that beyond any negative connotation, the presence of trade union organizations reflects new practices between actors. These systems of practice serve as a basic reference in the informal fringe of urban public transport. From then on, it can be assimilated as an indicator in the organization and operation of public transport.

### Conclusion

The liberalization of the public transport sector in Abidjan benefits various economic operators. However, the effects of this liberalization are not the same for all actors of transport. The discrepancy between the official or unofficial representatives of the trade unions and working conditions of the drivers' poses the problem of the survival of transport actors. In fact, the levying system of union auxiliaries contributes to exacerbating the working and living conditions of drivers. The future of transport is at stake, as the prospects

for a balanced and sustainable development of the sector appear unconvincing. In fact, unanimity on the issue should lead to the organization of the public transport sector that evolves in the informal by promoting the eradication of this phenomenon and at the same time improve the living conditions of drivers. Union auxiliaries develop ways to take advantage of this disorganization. For them, unionism is perceived as a profession. It brings in actors just like income-generating activities. On the other hand, on the side of drivers, the presence of union auxiliaries is an unfounded activity. They perceive their presence as a way of expropriating their sources of income that leads to conflicting relationships.

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