

Commercial Motorbike Transportation in Bangem since the 1990s: Setting a New Paradigm

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Abstract: This study has as objective to situate the historical context in which the new paradigm of commercial motorbike transportation; an informal economic activity, emerged in the late 1990s through the early 2000s in Bangem town. It treats the genesis/implantation, challenges and implications of the sector in Bangem. The paper contends that, the very difficult impacts of the economic crisis of the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s that hit Cameroon at large and Bangem in particular amongst other factors brought untold hardship on the locals exhibited by poverty and mass unemployment of youths. It was the economic crisis and the ensued hardship that was the basis and catalyst for the pursuit of informal economic activities as niches for economic survival, growth and livelihood. Commercial motorbike transportation thus provided a new avenue for economic livelihood. Based on primary, secondary data and the authors' observations, the study reveals that commercial motorbike transportation greatly ameliorated the lives and living standards of many youths who found a way of making ends meet in the sector. More to that, Motorbike transportation became the main means of transportation within the Bangem township and greatly helped to palliate the movement of persons from Bangem municipality to the neighbouring villages due to the flexibility and adaptive nature of the bikes. Motorbike transportation also aided in the transportation of agricultural products from the suburbs and environs of Bangem Township that had been a major handicap for the rural farmers due to the poor state of the roads within the entire Kupe-Muanengube division. Commercial motorbike transportation was therefore a new paradigm of informal economic activity that had come to stay and to contribute to the socio-economic fabric of Bangem town.

Keywords: Economic Crisis, Informal Economy, Livelihood, Commercial Motorbike Transport, Unemployment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Transportation remains and is without doubt one of the pivotal factors needed for the development and growth of any society as it facilitates the movement of persons, goods, services and resources from one place to another.¹ The movement from one area to another has always been a fundamental aspect of human existence. This for a plethora of reasons stemming from the search for better settlement areas, the search for business avenues, provision of services and the exchange of goods that have provoke human mobility.² The success of the aforementioned activities relied heavily on the development of transport modes. There has been numerous modes and means of transportation in use since the existence of humanity. They range from water, air, rail and road transport. Talking of water transport for instance, this means of transport was revolutionised

¹ M. A. Tunde et al, "Impact of Road Transport in Agricultural Development: A Nigerian Example". *Ethiopian Journal of Environmental Sciences and Management*, Vol.5, No.3, 2012:232.

² De Blii H. J and Peter O. Muller. *Concepts and Regions in Geography, 1st Edition* (New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc, 2003), 34.

with the manufacture of the first complex ship launched in the late 18th century in Western Europe. The outbreak of the Industrial Revolution in Britain and Europe in the 19th century in general had far-reaching implications on the transport sector that included the construction of automobile engines, trains and railway lines.³ In most parts of Cameroon and Africa in general in the post-colonial epoch, transportation of persons and goods had been the preserve of private vehicles, minibuses or smaller cars that commuted the urban centres and rural peripheries. The use of motorbikes had long existed in Cameroon like in other parts in Africa but its use was mostly by individuals who owned them for private functions.⁴ However, in the recent past in most countries of Sub-Saharan Africa beginning from the 1980s through the 1990s, commercial motorbike transportation experienced a rapid expansion and eventually became a phenomenon.⁵ In fact, in most Sub-Saharan African countries, commercial motorbike transportation outgrew commercial taxis and transportation in most urban centres and in the rural areas became the preserve of commercial motorbikes.⁶ This was the case in Cameroon and in Bangem in particular.

Transportation to and within Bangem before the introduction of motorbikes in the late 1990s and early 2000s like in most other towns and villages in Cameroon was very difficult. This was because most of the towns were inaccessible or at best barely accessible and for the most parts only during certain periods of the year. The inaccessibility of the town therefore made it almost impossible for commercial taxis to exist nor thrive. It would therefore not be an exaggeration to say that commercial taxis for intra town transportation were none existent in Bangem like in other secondary towns and cities in Cameroon. Commercial motorbike transportation therefore came in to fill an existing vacuum. There exist an avalanche of factors that necessitated the introduction and expansion of commercial motorbikes in Bangem. The factors range from the difficult impacts of the economic crisis of the 1980s that had as spill over effects, the retrenchment of the work force of the civil service, unemployment, poverty. There was also underdevelopment demonstrated by the very horrible road conditions into and within Bangem. By the year 2005, the motorbike sector had gained full recognition in the area and had imposed itself as the sole township transport means in Bangem town. In the light of the foregone, this paper seeks to discuss the historical context or basis for the introduction and spread of commercial motorbikes in Bangem, the genesis and implantation of the sector in Bangem and challenges and implications.

The study area in brief

Bangem town or better still Bangem sub division is one of the sub divisions that make up the Kupe Muanenguba Division of the South West Region of Cameroon. It is home to the Bakossi, a Bantu ethnic group of the Sawa cultural stock.⁷ Their language spoken is *Akose*. It is the administrative head quarter of Kupe Muanenguba Division, created by Decree N^o. 92/186 of 01/09/1992.⁸ Civil servants, Bororos, Bamileke businesspersons and Nigerian commercial agents also make up the population found in Bangem town. It lies between latitude 4^o 45' and 4^o 63' North of the Equator and Longitude 9^o 46' and 9^o 50' East of the Greenwich Meridian. It shares boundaries with Nguti sub division in the North, Tombel Sub Division in the south, Melong, Nkongsamba and Manjo Sub divisions to the east and south east, and Konye sub division in the west. It

³ Jarocka, M., & Glińska, E. *The State and Prospects for Development of Railway Transport Infrastructure in Eastern Poland – Secondary Data Analysis*. 7th International Conference on Engineering, Project, and Production Management. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Published by Elsevier Ltd, 2016.

⁴ Oladipo, O. Olubomehin, "The Development and Impact of Motorcycles as means of Commercial Transportation in Nigeria", *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol.2, No.6, 2012, 232

⁵ Gina Porter, "Transport Services and Their Impact on Poverty and Growth in Rural Sub-Saharan Africa", AFCAP/ Durham University, 2013, 7.

⁶ AFRIC editorial. "Commercial motor cycle, the necessary evil in Africa", *Association of Free Research and International Cooperation*, 2018. See also Frederick Mwangi Karema, "The Role of Motorcycle in the Rural Economy: A Case Study of Laikipia East Sub-Country, Kenya (MA Dissertation in Transport Geography, University of Nairobi, 2015), 53.

⁷ Nobert Okah 50 years old geographer, educationist, and owner of motorcycles used for transportation in Bangem town interviewed at Bambili, 20/05/2015.

⁸ Decree N^o. 92/186 of 01/09/1992.

has a total land surface of about 1030km².⁹ Bangem lies within the coastal and maritime ecological zone and it experiences a lot of torrential rainfall for the most part of the year. The town of Bangem is rich in major touristic sites that attract a lot of tourists into the town. The town lies at the foot of Mount Muanenguba with its rich fertile soils that encourage a lot of crop cultivation in the area.¹⁰ In addition, the Muanenguba massif is the highest point with a height of about 2396m. Mount Muanenguba with its Ebwoge crater harbours the famous twin lakes known as *Ngom-Edib* (male lake) and *M'mwade-Edib* (female lake). The lake area has a lay stretch of lowland covered with green grass view, which from a distance looks like a spread of green carpet. The introduction of commercial motorbikes in Bangem was not only as a nexus to transport difficulties but was factored by the prevailing economic context of the era.

Contextual framework/Basis for the emergence of Commercial Motorbikes in Bangem Town

The emergence of commercial motorbike transportation sector in Bangem was provoked by an avalanche and a melange of factors. One of the factors or basis that was a catalyst for the introduction of commercial motorbikes in Bangem was the economic crisis that hit Cameroon between 1986 and 1994 and the ensued consequences it had. The economic crisis marked by a severe fall in the prices of commodity materials and exports such as coffee, cocoa, rubber, cotton, timber, petroleum and banana in the international market.¹¹ The economic crisis together with an overvalued currency (the CFA Franc) led to a decade long of recession.¹² This pushed the government to implement structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) in the early 1990s with the objective of stimulating economic recovery.¹³ The government in a bid to cope with the economic crisis through the SAPs took draconian measures. These measures included reorganisation of public and semi-public institutions that led to staff layoff and mass unemployment. The government also cut down public expenditures on education, road infrastructure, extension services and rural water supply, electrification, and health services; halted recruitment and salary augmentations of public service staff. In fact, the government instead slashed by about 60% the salaries of civil servants in 1993.¹⁴ It went further to liquidate non-profit making public enterprises, to privatize others that were of marginal profit making and in January 1994, the CFA Franc was devalued.¹⁵ The structural and institutional changes that the government embarked on influenced rural poverty results making it more precarious than it was.¹⁶ Thus in the quest to seek survival means and livelihood, the unemployed youths and those who had been laid off from the public service and other public parastatals found commercial bike transportation as a new niche from where they could make ends meet.

The implantation and spread of commercial motorbikes in Cameroon in general and Bangem in particular was favoured by the collapse of government managed public transport companies like SOTUC (dissolved in the mid-1990s) and later SOCATUR. This was because of managerial difficulties and government's incapability to continue subsidizing the public transport sector due to the economic crisis. This created a vacuum and gave room for the development of a new paradigm of informal commercial motorbike transportation sector in Cameroon and Bangem in particular as the government

⁹ Loveline E. Njenge, "Road infrastructure and Development in Agriculture: case of Bangem Sub-Division" (DIPES II Dissertation in Geography, The University of Bamenda, 2012/2013), 9.

¹⁰ M.B Gwanfogbe and Melingni, *Geography of Cameroon* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 29-30.

¹¹ Joseph Lon Nfi, "Je suis Bamenda, Je suis Docketa: Accounting for the Popularity of Bamenda Grassfields Traditional Medicine Men in Cameroon since Precolonial Times", *Afo-A-Kom: Journal of Culture, Performing and Visual Arts*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2021, 38.

¹² Mbu Daniel Tambi, "Economic Growth, Crisis, and Recovery in Cameroon: A Literature Review", *International Journal of Industrial Distribution & Business* Vol 6, No 1 2015, 5. 5-15

¹³ Ibid, 6.

¹⁴ Francis Menjo Baye et al, "Dynamique de la Pauvreté et de la Répartition des Revenues au Cameroun Durant les Années 80 et 90", Final Report, Nairobi, Kenya: AERC 2004. See also Franz Heidhues and Gideon Obare, "Lessons from Structural Adjustment Programmes and their Effects in Africa", *Quarterly Journal of International Agriculture*, Vol 50, No 1, 2011, 58.

¹⁵ Baye, "Globalisation, Institutional Arrangements, and Poverty in Rural Cameroon", 128-129.

¹⁶ Francis Menjo Baye, "Globalisation, Institutional Arrangements, and Poverty in Rural Cameroon", *African Development*, Vol XXVIII, Nos 3&4, 2003, 120.

encouraged private sector investment in public transport.¹⁷ The government went further in 1994 by issuing Prime Ministerial Decree no 94/033/PM of 2nd February recognising the activities of commercial motor bikes and established the mode of exploitation. Again, in 1995, the government outlined the conditions and modes of exploitation of commercial motorbike on profit bases by signing Prime ministerial Decree No 95/650/PM of 16th November.¹⁸ This therefore gave the leeway for many unemployed Cameroonian youths in general and in Bangem in particular to venture into commercial motorbike transportation sector especially in the absence of motor taxis in the town.

In addition, the relatively cheap prices of motorbikes compared to those of vehicles also acted as a vector for the introduction and spread of commercial motorbikes in Bangem. In fact, motorbikes were far cheaper to acquire than the land rover vehicles, mini busses, four wheeled Toyota pickups and small Toyota KE70 vehicles that commuted Bangem and other surrounding towns and villages. More so, the transportation of persons and goods on motorbikes from Bangem to other villages like Tombel, Nyasoso, Melong, Loum, Nguti was cheaper than with land rovers.¹⁹ Furthermore, by the early 2000s, Cameroon businessmen started importing Chinese made motorbikes (Nangfang, Lifang, Galaxy, Senke, Sanili, Sanyo) at cheaper prices (their prices ranged between 800 US dollars to 1000US dollars) replacing the Japanese motorbikes (Kymco, Sanyang, Yamaha) that were more expensive and cost up to 2000US dollars. Therefore, many people could readily acquire the cheaper Chinese motorbikes leading to a proliferation of commercial motorbikes in Cameroon and in Bangem by extension.²⁰

The deplorable nature of the roads leading to and within Bangem Township made for the introduction of commercial motorbikes indispensable. Movement within the town was characterised by trekking because the bad roads did not allow motor taxis to exist, even though some of the distances were walking distances. Coupled to the bad roads not making it favourable to have motor taxis, it also handicapped the full exploitation of the agricultural and touristic potentials of the town. A town rich in commercial and other crops that were in constant high demand in bigger cities like Douala, Nkongsamba, Kumba and Loum. In fact, movement to most of the surrounding villages with vehicles was almost none existent as they were inaccessible. Head portage was a very common practice for the transportation of commercial crops like cocoa, coffee, plantain, cocoayams coming from the suburbs like Mueba, Ebamot, Nkikok, Eyandong, Ekanjoh and Dek areas (Babibock area). Hence, the use of motorbikes in the area came against this backdrop of rough and inaccessible terrain for cars. The roads during the rainy seasons (which last up to 7months) were constantly in very pitiful conditions. This was aggravated by the nature of the terrain characterised by volcanic rocks that was a constant menace to the wheels of cars. This seriously impeded movement and transportation with vehicles as only four wheeled vehicles and land rovers could ply the roads in such conditions thereby drastically restricting traffic. It also rendered it daunting as vehicles took longer time to travel from Bangem to other towns or from other towns into Bangem.²¹ For example, travelling from Bangem to Tombel a 60km stretch in the dry season with vehicles could take between 3 to 4 hours, but the same journey could last up to over 5hours in the wet season. The muddy and slippery nature of the roads to some towns and villages during the rainy season as shown on plate I below depicts a picture of the road conditions that necessitated the introduction of commercial motorbike transport in the area due to their flexibility and ability to adapt.²² Hence, the same voyage with a motorbike took a shorter time (up to 4hours) in the wet season. This was so because bike easily navigated through the rough patches of the road and made of footpaths that vehicles could not.²³

¹⁷ Jude Ndzifon Kimengsi and Kingsley Ndashi Agyingi, "Commercial Motor Bike Transport and Poverty Reduction in the Bamenda Urban Space Cameroon", *Cogent Social Sciences*, 2022, Vol 8, 8.

¹⁸ Ibid, 8.

¹⁹ Lawrence Nkede Njie, The socio-cultural impact of the introduction of motorbike taxis in the rural community of Tombel, South West region, *Cameroon, Academia Paper*, 2012, 7-8.

²⁰ Ibid, 67.

²¹ Ibid, 67.

²² Willington Tanyi Tanyi, 62 years old retired civil servant and one time Divisional Delegate for Public Works and Transport in Kupe Muanenguba Division, interviewed in Limbe, 20/06/2022.

²³ Lawrence Nkede Njie, The socio-cultural impact of the introduction of motorbike taxis in the rural community of Tombel, 67.

Plate 1: Some of the bad and muddy areas during the rainy seasons along the Bangem-Tombel and Bangem-Melong stretch of roads.



Source: Photographs taken by author along the Bangem Melong and Bangem Tombel roads August 2003

Plate 1 shows the state of the roads on both sides either going out from Bangem or going to Bangem town from Tombel or Melong. The first image is at a spot in Muanengue, the second and third at Mueba towards Tombel town. The fourth and fifth images are at Douala-up and Muanyet all along the Bangem-Melong Stretch of road. In 2003, the roads deteriorated and movement was difficult and the bikes seen on some of the photographs transported people even though the passengers had to step of the bikes for the rider to manoeuvre through the poor roads. The fare went up depending on the luggage weight the passenger had. The high transport fare was due to the bad roads. The transportation of agricultural products to markets out of the Division was a hideous as seen in the pictures above. In addition, eco-touristic potentials of the environment also helped to promote the development of this economic venture in Bangem. The presence of touristic sites in the area such as the crater lakes (twin lakes) of Mount Muanenguba situated some about 10 km uphill from Bangem, Bakossi National Park and the Bayang-Mbo Wildlife Sanctuary (natural attractions and diverse wildlife) provided an excellent opportunity for commercial motorbikes to go operational in the area. There was lack of transport means to transport the numerous tourist that regularly visited these sites though some tourists arranged for their transportation and brought their personal cars. Individuals who visited on regular bases found it difficult to move up the Muanenguba hills where the lakes are located except by trekking, which was tedious for many due to the absence of transportation means.²⁴ With the advent of motorbikes in the study locale, tourism and hospitality services in these touristic sites witnessed a boost in their activities, as it became the main transportation means for the tourists to these sites.

Commercial motorbike business got to Cameroon and Bangem particular as a spill over effect from Nigeria. Benjamin Ako a marine officer of the Cameroon navy, who worked in the maritime waters across Nigeria, saw the activity lucrative in Nigeria a country he visited often and was urged to support the brother Napoleon Ako who on a trial bases had started using his private motorbike for business purposes in Bangem. He disclosed that:

I visited Napoleon in Bangem and where I was dropped, I had to trek for another kilometre to reach his residence. When I arrived his home, asked him if there were no motorcycles for transportation and he responded that none existed in the town except his that was hired out when need be. I then thought it wise to start something with my brother who was in Bangem. It was cheaper and easier for me to transport the motorbikes through Ekondo Titi that I did a few weeks later.²⁵

Genesis/Implantation of Commercial motorbikes in Bangem

The practise of commercial bike transportation in Bangem began with a teacher, Napoleon Akwo who used his personal bike for transporting himself to his place of service to carry a person who was stranded because he had been waiting for a vehicle and none was showing up. He was carrying the person out of help, but when they got to the person destination, the person gave him money to help refill his fuel. From then, he understood that this could bring him some extra cash should he be fully invested in it as a business. He later started having many people soliciting his services. He had so much pressure on him and realising that it could be a very profitable venture. He decided to ask his brother who was based in Nigeria to

²⁴Bobby Epie, 70 years old, retired educationist interviewed in Bangem, 12/11/2010.

²⁵ Benjamin Ako 50 years old at the time of interview, marine officer of the Cameroon Navy interviewed in Kumba, 11/01/2009.

send him another motor bike that he gave to someone else to ride on an agreed sum of 4000 FCFA per day. He explained that; as a teacher in the area, my class schedule at times coincided with pressure from clients who urgently needed my bike services and I could not leave my professional commitment to do business except on my off days or after work. I had to buy another motor bike so that I should not be disturbed.²⁶ From the statement, he was merely going into a business where he had no experience and wanted to ward off pressure. He also saw the earnings he had (20000 FCFA weekly) and with his desire to control profits, he took risk without thinking of the financial uncertainty or challenges that might be involved in the business. Other people eventually got interested in the business and wanted to exploit it. Coupled with the high level of unemployment, it was a very suitable avenue for the unemployed to pick up jobs and economically empower themselves. Okah presents the situation and admits in his words that ‘‘I wanted to give employment to at least four youths in Bangem town given the fact that I was also unemployed for so long before I got employment and I know where the shoe pinches as a young man who was once unemployed, financially dependent and poor.’’²⁷ This also gained prominence as an upshot of what occurred in Tombel Sub Division. Tombel due to its nexus to the Littoral region through Loum had commercial motor bikes called in French *chat noire* (black cat translation ours) a type of small motorbike used in the area especially Douala town at the time as commercial motorbikes and called ‘‘Bendskin’’.²⁸ According to Okah, Moto bike riders of Tombel had a motorbike union and during the National Day and Labour Day celebrations in Bangem town, this motorbike union came and displayed with bikes, and they entertained the crowd.²⁹ To some respondents, they were attracted by the profit incentive motive to engage in the commercial motorbike business. These commercial motorbikes were able to penetrate and reach areas that hitherto were inaccessible by cars due to seasonal roads and poor road conditions. This inaccessibility has been clearly shown on table I below.

Table 1: Roads linking Bangem Town and suburbs, their accessibility and distances in km² covered by the Motorbikes.

Category of Road	Road Axis	Accessibility	Distance in km
Primary Roads	Bangem-Melong	Seasonally accessible	31
	Bangem-Tombel	Seasonally accessible	56
	Bangem- Nguti	Inaccessible	53
Secondary Road	Bangem -Muanenguba	Partially accessible	18
	Bangem - Eyandong	Accessible	10
	Bangem -Ebamut	Inaccessible	4
	Bangem -Nkikoh	Accessible	8
	Bangem -Muamenam	Accessible	18

Source: Loveline Ebote Njenge, ‘‘Road Infrastructure and Development in Agriculture case of Bangem Sub-Division’’ (Dissertation, DIPES II in Geography, the University of Bamenda, 2012/2013), 48.

From table 1, it is evident that some roads were inaccessible while others were accessible only during particular seasons thus movements on the roads were not frequent. During the rainy season, both the accessible and inaccessible roads were too poor that the roads were inaccessible for weeks without a single vehicle going through them. Only motorcycles could manage to go through after serious assistance from the passenger(s) to push through the muddy areas. The poor state of the roads also limited the number of riders who used the roads and many preferred to ride only within the town and to nearby

²⁶Napoleone Ako Nkongho 49 years old instructor, the first individual to start the motorcycle transportation business in Bangem interviewed in Kumba, 10/12/2015.

²⁷ Nobert Okah, 50 years old educationist and owner of motorcycles used for transportation interviewed in Bambili, 20/05/2015.

²⁸ Njong, et al, ‘‘An Investigation of Risk Management...’’, 39.

²⁹ Nobert Okah, 50 years old educationist and owner of motorcycles used for transportation interviewed in Bambili, 20/05/2015.

accessible villages. With such difficulties, the riders charged varied fares per passenger depending on the state and distance. Table 2 illustrates the transportation fares charged by bike riders within the study area.

Table 2: Areas of service by the motorbikes and their fares from Bangem Center

Location from Bangem	Fare charged per head(per person)
Bangem –Mueba	1000
Bangem –Eyandong	1000
Bangem –Ebunimin	1000
Bangem –Mbat	1000
Bangem –Nkack	1000
Bangem – Mboassum	1500
Bangem –Nkikog	1500
Bangem –Muabi	1500
Bangem –Lakes	1500
Bangem –Polla	2500
Bangem –Ebamut	3000
Bangem –Nteho	700
Bangem –Muaku	500
Bangem –Nyan	500
Bangem –Ndibisi	500
Bangem –Njom	-300
Bangem –Ekanjo Elung	2500
Bangem –Melong	3000 (dry season) 7000-10000 (rainy season)
Bangem-Tombel	2500 (dry season) 6000 (rainy season)
Bangem around town	300 depending on the distance and the street

Source: Field survey by author in Bangem 2003

Table 2 paints a picture of the fares paid and indicates that though the sector was not properly organised, they had strength; that of communication as the fares were uniform and made known to the riders by those who managed these motorcycles. These fares were for an individual but in a situation where there were two passengers there was a discount. The fare from Bangem to Melong during the rainy season remained constant due to its distance and the bad state of the roads. The fare was 7000 francs for an individual and the size and weight of the passenger was at times considered since they usually carried two persons especially for long journeys. Most riders were youths from all the suburbs and those in Bangem town. The riders at the beginning operated in a haphazard manner without any leadership or union. However, a few years later (in 2003) they organized themselves and chose Epie E (AKA Bubinga) to be their leader to put in order in the functioning of the sector.³⁰ These commercial motorbikes organised themselves at a park at Bangem “Squares.” The riders carefully chose the area because it was at a junction linking other neighbouring villages. Client could easily move up to the park to request the services of the one of the riders. While other client could request bike riders over via phone calls.

Most of the proprietors of commercial motor bikes were civil servants who worked in the outskirts of Bangem town and used their motor bikes for business. The sole supplier to those owners was Napoleon Ako as earlier mentioned. In later years, other businesspersons in the area such as Halle T, Emmanuel Ekabe joined in the line of owners but came in with other bike brands of Chinese origin like; Nanfang, Senke and Sanili (bought from Kumba, Douala, Melong and Nkongsamba). Businesspersons bought bikes and gave them to young youths based on some specific conditions. One of the working condition was that a youth had to work and recover the money that the owner bought the time with and with some

³⁰ Bubinga was a nickname name given to Epie due to his physical build up and the strength he had. The name is derived from the timber bubinga a rare specie of hard wood found in Bangem area.

profits on it and then could own the bike after paying the money in full. This system came to be known as “balance and take”. Other riders were paid monthly salaries that range between 25,000 frs CFA and 30,000 frs CFA).³¹ Another system was that other riders worked for owners and the owners gave those two or three days to work and pay themselves and the other four days were reserved for the owner.³² As the business evolved, some families bought bikes for their children as part of their settlements. This sector eventually developed to become part of the socio-economic fabric of Bangem with far-reaching implications.

Implications of Commercial Motorbike Transportation in Bangem

This activity had significant effects on the socio-economic life of Bangem town. It created many jobs as a good number of Bangem youths picked up jobs as bike riders and had the opportunity to alleviate the poverty levels. More to that, even civil servants and those employed in other sectors joined engaged in the sector in order to shore up their finances. This by extension helped to retain the youths in Bangem town thereby reducing rural exodus, which by this time was becoming a serious phenomenon in Cameroon and Bangem in particular. The introduction of commercial motorbikes was therefore a source of wealth not only to the riders but also to the businesspersons who owned several bikes that were handed to riders to work for them. Charles Ndape paints a picture by his situation in the following words;

My first job as a young man was as a rider to one prominent business man in Bangem town after many years of searching and doing farm work which was strenuous to me. I had two days of my own to work and five days for my employer. This riding job gave me enough money to take care of my personal needs and to give a helping hand to my family.³³

As a main access into self-employment to others and a stepping stone to the labour market and a means in alleviating poverty with at least a wage to many riders, living standards were improved upon in families. It played a great and irreplaceable role in an effort to combat social exclusion and in alleviating poverty. Through this, many raised enough money to own property (real estate), to refurbish old family houses (karabots)³⁴ especially for those who worked as family employees and self-employed. According to Awasume Ivo,

My stepbrother whom we bought a motorbike as part of his settlement within a short while of work in this sector was able to buy land for himself, contribute for family upkeep, renovated the family house and attached a small section (house) to the main house for rents.³⁵

In another narrative from another business man in Bangem who together with his other brothers bought a motorbike to assist the family confirmed that this new business was of great help. Enongene explained that:

My jobless parents depended entirely on the proceeds from their family bike for survival. This helped to also give them space to work and concentrate on his own immediate family instead of thinking and taking care of my parents. It helped my family and parents who were already having trouble especially when those of us working could not regularly support them financially.³⁶

Many families through commercial motorbike business sponsored their children in schools up to the tertiary levels. Families were able to see their kids in professional schools like Higher Technical Teachers Training College (HTTTC) and Higher Teachers Training College (HTTC) in Bambili, Yaounde, and Douala. Others were self-sponsored through profits realised from this commercial activity especially those who dropped out of school due to the inability of their parents to sponsor them at a higher level. Nobert Okah sponsored himself in Higher Teachers Training College ENS in later years from the

³¹ E.Epie 42 years old first President of the association of motorbike riders in Bangem, interviewed in Bangem town, 11/02/2010.

³² Ibid

³³ Charles Ndape 36years old businessperson and farmer Bangem town interviewed in Kumba, 17/03/2010.

³⁴ karabot is a type of house built using planks sawed in various sizes depending on the individual and family. The entire house is constructed using plank but roofed with corrugated iron sheets.

³⁵ Ivo Awasume, 42 years old teacher interviewed in Kumba, 14/04/2016.

³⁶ Fostin Enongene, 49 years old businessperson in Bangem town interviewed in Bangem, 11/02/2010.

proceeds he had as a “bike” owner back in early 2000s. Many also developed other petty business from the proceeds of motorcycle business such as hairdressing, tailoring, provision stores and restaurants.³⁷

The implantation and spread of commercial motorbikes in Bangem helped in facilitating the movement of goods and persons thanks to the flexibility and adaptability of motorbikes. Persons could easily move from one area or quarter of the town to another, providing door-to-door services and being able to ply even bad roads that vehicles could not³⁸. It also greatly aided in making the suburbs within Bangem municipality and the entire Kupe-Muanenguba Division accessible. Motorbikes easily reached areas that hitherto were inaccessible by cars. In connection to this, it facilitated the transportation of agricultural products from the farms to the urban centres. It is worth noting that before the introduction of commercial motorbikes, transportation of agricultural products especially from the farm areas was mostly through head carrying and in smaller quantities. Nevertheless, this changed with motorbikes being able to carry larger quantities and in shorter periods.

The government and the Bangem rural council over the years generated huge sums of money from the commercial motorbike sector through the numerous taxes the motorbike riders paid to the ministry of taxation and the rural council. The sector also directly helped to boost the economy of Bangem through the avalanche of motorbike spare parts vendors that opened shops and motorbike mechanics who erected mechanic shops. In fact a chain of economic gain developed as the spare part vendors generated finances from the parts they sell while the mechanic also make ends meet from the money they earned in repairing the breakdown bikes. Those employment was generated both from the fact that youths picked up jobs as commercial bike rider as well as other youths got jobs as mechanics of such bikes.

Regardless of the plethora of meaningful impact that the commercial motorbike sector had, it was without negativities. Obnoxious social ills such as stealing, promiscuity and run away from homes were associated with this mode of transportation. Crimes such as stealing were done by thieves with motorbikes especially during cocoa and coffee seasons in the area. Other aspects of societal ills such as prostitution were facilitated by this means of transportation. The peak was during the dry season when many cocoa and coffee buyers came into town and the motorbikes helped to transport these girls to these buyers (businesspersons) who were in town during in period.³⁹ It also affected the educational system in the area as many youths readily dropped out of school since as they could easily pick up jobs as bike riders. Youths who found education difficult for them saw bike riding as a back door out of school.

Challenges faced by the Sector

The commercial motorbike sector faced a plethora of challenges. The lack of a knowledge of road usage was a great challenge, though there were no road signs and symbols on the streets of the town. A consequence, the motorbike riders were constantly having misunderstandings with vehicle drivers who accused them of making use of motorbikes without any knowledge.

The bikers constantly ran into trouble with the police and gendarmerie administration, officials from the ministry of transport and taxation officers because they were adamant of paying the necessary taxes levied on commercial motorbike operators. These commercial motorbikes riders and other motorbike business operators had the responsibility of paying taxes and other fares like insurance, drivers licence, park fee and business licence which they more often than not were not willing to pay them. Reason why they had to be policed in other that they have all their required papers in order.

Furthermore, many were involved in accidents because of the poor state of roads; slippery nature of the terrain during rainy seasons, gutters cutting across road, narrow bush path and above all the hilly nature of some of the areas like; Mbat, Polla and Nkikoh. It hampered the smooth functioning of the business and there were serious damages incurred either by the riders with exhaust pipe burns being very common, broken legs and bruises not left out due to lack of helmets and protective jackets.⁴⁰ Some bike riders due to speed especially, and lack formal training knocked down pedestrians. There were no seminars to educate riders on road use and road signs and no legal instruments were put in place by the Divisional Delegate for Transport to control the sector during the period of the study.

³⁷ Andre Ewanoge 72 years old retired civil servant interviewed in Bangem, 11/02/2010.

³⁸ Kimengsi and Agyingi, “Commercial Motor Bike Transport and Poverty Reduction in the Bamenda, 9.

³⁹Elias Enoh, 79 years old settler in Bangem town and retired farmer interviewed in Bangem, 11/02/2010.

⁴⁰ Njong, et al, “An investigation of Risk Management...”, 38.

Fuel scarcity was a major problem to the riders. The precious liquid was scarce given the fact that there was no single filling station in the locality. Businesspersons in fuel were also scarce and with bad roads, they could not travel at all times to Melong a nearby town for fuel or go in for the supply of fuel from Nigeria through Nguti. The scarcity of fuel often contributes to price hikes. This always caused most motorbike riders to park due to fuel scarcity.

At a certain moment, the business became associated with village or clan leanings or even tribe or language. Blackmail was common to have clients and some passengers only waited to go on a bike owned by their village or clan man. The “strangers” (non aborigines) were also discriminated upon with a different fare charge if not careful.⁴¹ This discriminatory aspect of the business was also due to the lack of a riders union.⁴² Lack of standardised fares at the start created problems to many with strong bargaining power or those with weak minds. There were also problems of lack of a central control unit, poor maintenance since it was still new in the area and no real technicians to repair the damaged motorbikes. Weather protection materials like raincoats or thick riders’ clothes were absent, most rode in the rain, and caught cold given the fact that the area had heavy rains and the weather was always cold.

2. CONCLUSION

The transport sector in Cameroon in general and Bangem witnessed a new paradigm of commercial motorbikes in the late 1990s through the early 2000s that hitherto was almost none existent. The very difficult impacts of the economic crisis of the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s that hit Cameroon at large and Bangem in particular amongst other factors brought untold hardship on the locals exhibited by mass unemployment of youths. It was the economic crisis and the ensued hardship that was the basis and catalyst for the pursuit of informal economic activities as niches for economic survival, growth and livelihood. Commercial motorbike transportation thus provided a new avenue for economic livelihood. The absence of township taxis and other forms of transportation modes in Bangem that were thriving in other major towns and cities in Cameroon at the time favoured the implantation and spread of commercial motorbikes in Bangem as a transport means that became an economic booster and a source of livelihood to the actors at the time. This was also favoured by the relatively very cheap prices of motorbikes as compared to the land rover and Toyota four wheeled vehicles that plied the roads to and from Bangem. The topography of the area was also a vector to the institutionalisation of the business. The socio-economic gains of the sector cannot be over emphasised. However, this new sector had challenges such as accidents; break down of motorcycles, disorder and self-competition. Despite the numerous challenges, the sector none the less enhanced the mobility of persons and agricultural products in high demand in most urban centres in the South West and Littoral regions. Thus implying that commercial motorbike transportation was a new paradigm of informal economic activity that had come to stay and to contribute to the socio-economic fabric of Bangem town.

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