

THE CLANDOS OF CAMEROON

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An original means of transportation made its appearance some ten years ago on the difficult roads in the rural areas of Cameroon. Converted Toyota, Mazda and Peugeot pickup trucks, originally designed for use as light utility vehicles, began to carry passengers. Commonly called "clandos" or "opeps," these pickups, often overloaded with as many as 20 passengers and their merchandise, now shuttle back and forth all day long between Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, and the villages within a radius of about 80 kilometres.

Until the early 1970s, public transit in Cameroon was provided exclusively by coaches that were privately owned but government regulated. The increased cost of fuel and vehicles in recent years led conventional carriers to abandon money-losing routes — such as those so close to town that fares were too low, or those that were so rough that wear and tear on vehicles was excessive.

The transportation vacuum was filled by increasing numbers of pickup trucks, called "clandos." Because a truck sells for only a little more than half the price of a coach or minibus, the owners can charge lower fares over the same distance. Today these trucks are a common sight in Cameroon, especially in Yaoundé.

Despite the high risk of accidents and the rapid wear and tear on the vehicles, clandos can still turn a profit. Few drivers actually own their vehicles — they rent them from entrepreneurs for a high price. Drivers work long hours, overload vehicles, and drive at top speed to make as many trips as possible in one day to make the clando pay off.

The attitude of the public authorities toward this unconventional form of transportation has changed over the years. Their original appearance was greeted with immediate opposition by the authorities. The pickups were outlawed because they were not equipped to carry passengers. But this did not stop the traffic, which continued in "clandestine" fashion — hence the name clandos.



Spontaneous transport in Africa: the need for low-cost transportation has produced many innovations, and not a few problems.

Their high speeds, even on the worst roads, drew the ire of local officials, and resulted in clandos also being referred to by another name, "opep," which can mean wind, speed, or the noise made by a vehicle running at full speed. According to estimates by the police and insurance companies, the clandos, often driven by unlicensed youths, have contributed to the sharp increase in traffic accidents in recent years.

Despite the dangers, clandos remain an important form of transport. Village workers and farmers from medium-sized towns within 80 kilometres of Yaoundé, a city of 500 000 people, usually must travel to the capital once a week to sell their produce, purchase goods, or run some errand. The rural people maintain that opeps are the only means of transporting their produce for sale. And the city-dwellers say the vehicles are their only way of visiting relatives in the rural areas on weekends.

The clandos have played an important role in the success of the "green belt" operation begun by the government to supply Yaoundé with foodstuffs. Crops that would otherwise rot in the villages are now brought into the city by these trucks.

The government has had to take these factors into account and its attitude towards the clandos is changing. The official goal now seems to be to incorporate the illicit vehicles into the Cameroonian transportation system, rather than banning them. In particular, the government is trying to get operators to obey safety regulations. Opeps now operate openly during the day and even pick up passengers at bus stations in areas neglected by regular carriers.

OPEPS AND SILORS

The phenomenon of the opeps is similar to that of the low-cost transport available in Asia, the focus of a recent study supported by IDRC. The opep is most similar to the *silor*, a pickup truck adapted to carry passengers in Thailand. The only difference is that the opeps travel in rural areas, whereas the *silors* operate in the city.

The IDRC-supported study concluded that the *silor*, like the Philippine jeepney, Turkish dolmus-minibus and other low-cost transport systems, had evolved to meet an important social and economic need. The researchers in Asia recommended to municipal authorities that these systems be improved, rather than repressed. If such a suggestion were made now to Cameroonian officials, it no doubt would come with the unanimous support of thousands of riders who appreciate the daily service provided by the opeps in the rural areas of the country.

Although citizen groups have participated in the establishment of a public transit system in Cameroon, it has not developed as well as it might; it has not adapted to needs of many commuters. Nor is it possible any longer to tolerate the opeps in their present dangerous form. Their contribution to public transit should perhaps be studied and, if needed, regulated so that they may provide an organized, efficient and safe service to the many passengers who depend on them. □

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