

# "NIFA NIFA"

## Technopolitics, Mobile Workers, and the Ambivalence of Decline in Acheampong's Ghana

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the events surrounding Ghana's successful transition to the right side of the road in order to shed light on one of the longest periods of military dictatorship in Ghanaian history. In particular, this paper traces the ways in which drivers, as mobile workers, coordinated with and supported state officials to achieve major technological and infrastructural transformation. These large-scale projects challenge an image of postcolonial dictatorships as ineffective, authoritarian, and isolationist regimes. Instead, the success of what the government called "Operation Keep Right" highlighted the close relationship between the Acheampong state and Ghana's large class of mobile workers in achieving visions of technopolitical progress, national development, and regional integration. Even in the context of increasing economic crisis in the 1960s and 1970s, projects like "Operation Keep Right" complicate a narrative of seemingly inevitable postcolonial decline and push scholars to revisit the politics of postcolonial dictatorship through the experiences of citizens.

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In July 1972, a mere seven months after taking over leadership of the country in a military coup, the National Redemption Council and its leader, Col. Ignatius Kutu Acheampong, announced that Ghana was going

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to drive on the right-hand side of the road. By continuing to drive on the left, Acheampong and the NRC argued, Ghana not only reinforced its history as a British colony, but it also isolated itself from its neighbors and limited its potential for economic growth and development. A massive campaign, “Operation Keep Right,” was scheduled to culminate on August 4, 1974, when road signs and drivers would switch to the other side of the road in a massive feat of social and infrastructural engineering. Drivers and pedestrians alike were called on to learn the new rules of the road, embodied in the phrase “Nifa, Nifa” (Twi: “Right, Right”) or “Nyimfa, nyimfa, na nyen” (Twi: “Right is right”). Ghana would, quite literally, be on a new path.

Acheampong’s military coup was only the most recent in a series of relatively short-lived government takeovers—both democratic and dictatorial. For Acheampong’s allies and much of the Ghanaian public, economic decline was a symbol of persistent state failure to address the deleterious effects of what Bayart terms “extraversion”—the externally-oriented political and economic orientation of many postcolonial African states, “mobilizing resources from their (possibly unequal relationship) with the external environment” in a manner that both builds on and pre-dates colonial governance.<sup>1</sup> In centralizing state power and harnessing that power to encourage domestic production, the Acheampong regime drew on Nkrumahist theories of scientific socialism and critiques of neocolonialism while crafting their own unique technopolitical program.<sup>2</sup> The NRC’s critiques rang hollow when they also ultimately proved unable to turn around the country’s economy, despite nearly a decade of reform.

These theories of extraversion, and concomitant political critiques of corruption and state failure, are widely cited as explanations of what Chazan and Pellow describe as an “era of decline in Ghana.”<sup>3</sup> This narrative of postcolonial decline frames the Acheampong government as a failed, authoritarian state, limited by its own grandiose visions, inefficiency, and flawed policy; the legacy of colonial underdevelopment; and global shifts in the politics of economic exchange. However, in framing economic success by using the language of state power, these critiques fail to acknowledge the power of workers in producing these changes. Workers were crucial in shaping postcolonial economies; by constructing and regulating infrastructural technologies, and defining the values and practices of economic productivity, workers played a central role in Ghana’s postcolonial economic history.

In this article, I analyze the political debates, labor mobilization, and economic policy surrounding “Operation Keep Right” to present an alternative narrative of postcolonial politics and labor culture. In particular, I argue that “Operation Keep Right” highlights the importance of

entrepreneurial African drivers in shaping a system and practice of governance rooted in the “informal economy” of mobile workers.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to wage laborers, who relied on the state to ensure the stability and security of their work, commercial drivers in Ghana sought to preserve and enhance their economic autonomy, even in the context of widespread economic decline. Capitalizing on the flexibility of their work, derived in large part from the inherently mobile nature of their labor, drivers “managed” the realities of economic crisis, which restricted the accessibility of vehicles, spare parts, and petrol as well as increased the cost of doing business.<sup>5</sup> The most talented drivers built on decades of skill and professionalism, establishing businesses that profited even as the rest of the country faltered.<sup>6</sup>

At the height of economic crisis, I argue, postcolonial governments like Col. Acheampong’s National Redemption Council achieved impressive feats of infrastructural, social, and economic engineering by utilizing the skill of these mobile workers. The relative success of these projects, which relied on decentralized power and popular support, challenges an image of the Acheampong regime as an incompetent authoritarian dictatorship. However, the centrality of entrepreneurial mobile workers in these projects also forces us to reconsider the centrality of formal sector wage labor in analyses of economic mobility, labor mobilization, and governmentality. As Barchesi has argued, stable wage labor has never been a widespread historical norm in Africa.<sup>7</sup> We see that most clearly in the context of economic decline when wage labor markets and the “formal sector” are weakest. As the relative success of Acheampong’s public projects suggest, a full understanding of both the power and stability of the postcolonial state and the prosperity of its laboring citizens requires that we take seriously the role of mobile workers who operated at the center of what might otherwise be considered an informal economy, dominated by commercial drivers, indigenous entrepreneurs, casual laborers, farmers, and petty traders.<sup>8</sup> These mobile workers created an economy of survival and accumulation on multiple scales—from local markets that connected rural producers with urban trading centers, to regional trading networks and global institutions of export and exchange—which proved highly flexible and adaptable to changing economic realities.

“Operation Keep Right”—the most successful of these projects—was defined not by the confident proclamations and coherent projects of the state but rather by drivers’ strategies of “coping with uncertainty.”<sup>9</sup> Viewed through the lens of state failure, one might expect that such an ambitious program of infrastructural, technological, regulatory, and cultural reform would end in disaster. And yet, drivers who remembered the shift noted the absence of catastrophe and coercion. The shift, they argued, was

marked by careful consideration of economic policy and practice, favored not only by government officials but also by drivers themselves, who embraced the change as an improvement in their long-haul routes, which frequently traveled across national boundaries and into different regulatory and mobility regimes. Drivers' ability to successfully realize this shift was a symbol of their professionalism and skill as well as their connection to the mobility systems of the broader West African region. Within the structures and practices of entrepreneurial, mobile labor, which had long defined circulation and exchange in the region, drivers reported that such large-scale change was "no problem."<sup>10</sup>

The fear and warnings to "keep death off the roads" and "save your life," which emanated from government agencies, news media, and citizens alike in the months and years preceding the switch, indicated that such success was far from guaranteed. But the practical benefits of the changeover were significant, literally paving the way for the early stages of a Trans-African Highway Project<sup>11</sup> and laying the infrastructural groundwork for new forms of regional economic cooperation, formalized in the Economic Community of West African States (or ECOWAS) in 1975. These successes seem to defy a scholarly image of Acheampong's government as isolationist, rooted in the NRC's discourse of self-reliance, which was perhaps best embodied in "Operation Feed Yourself." Rather, as "Operation Keep Right" suggests, these campaigns of self-reliance were part of a much broader strategy of technopolitics, which implicated mobile workers (drivers and passengers alike) in national economic development, as well as regional and Pan-African projects. More importantly, however, projects like "Operation Keep Right" represented "the range of everyday technologies by which the state is spatialized, by which verticality and encompassment became features of social life."<sup>12</sup> In redirecting the country's movement, "Operation Keep Right" engaged citizens directly in state policy, projecting state power and authority into the structures and practices of everyday life and constructing new definitions of mobile citizenship rooted in the actions of workers. The ability to move—and to move right—underscores a persistent economic populism in Ghana, which informed both popular economic practice and state policy that empowered mobile workers even in the context of military dictatorship and authoritarianism.

### **"Economic War": Self-Reliance and State Power under the NRC**

The National Redemption Council came to power in a military coup on January 13, 1972. Led by Colonel Ignatius Kutu Acheampong and other

officers of the Ghanaian military, the NRC overthrew the government of the Second Republic, which was itself the product of a military coup that had unseated Kwame Nkrumah in 1966, and which promised social and economic transformations for a young nation that was in the midst of a long economic decline. In calling for a new revolution, Acheampong and other NRC leaders highlighted the limitations of the Second Republic and its democratically-elected leader, Kofi Busia. Busia's attempts to reverse the excesses of Nkrumah's socialist economic policies through austerity had failed to turn around the flagging economy. Busia's embrace of nascent neoliberalism proved no better than Nkrumahism in achieving industrialization or in shoring up the country's important agricultural sector. By the early 1970s, exports had fallen significantly and Ghana's debt ballooned in an attempt to cope with demands for imports and shortages of foreign exchange. Rising prices for imported goods coupled with the elimination of subsidies on agricultural products and other exports led many Ghanaians to smuggle their goods across the border to Cote d'Ivoire in order to mitigate the effects of inflation.

As Col. Acheampong declared to the Ghanaian population soon after the coup, what was necessary to reverse the crisis was nothing less than a total economic war—an action that required the expertise and organization of soldiers, not politicians.<sup>13</sup> While the NRC came to power with no concrete plans, they were convinced that Busia's external orientation was responsible for the crisis. Reviews of the various aspects of the crisis and all future plans to address that crisis, Acheampong promised, would be based on a principle of “self-reliance.”<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, self-reliance aimed to redirect the country's economic energies. Addressing a group of workers at the Hall of Trade Unions in early September 1972, Acheampong argued:

We have been spending more on imports than the foreign exchange we earn with the result that in the past, we have continually been borrowing to import things into the country. Surely, there must be a limit to the generosity of any creditor if he realizes that the debtor is not making any effort to improve his financial position. This is what we have set ourselves to correct; our aim is to produce the food and the raw materials we import and also to increase our export trade so that the foreign exchange we earn can be used to expand our industries and even to establish new ones.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, on the most practical level, “self-reliance” was a policy of economic development, similar to policies of import substitution industrialization and statist economic development that had resonated throughout much of the Third World since at least the 1950s.<sup>16</sup> In Ghana, Acheampong argued, this policy was nothing short of a revolution, which required all members

of the population to “make conscious efforts to change positively our attitudes and tastes.”<sup>17</sup> Government promises of improved infrastructure and distribution networks would only be successful if citizens committed themselves to “reduce our heavy dependence on the Central Government, revitalize local and regional initiatives, and adopt a new progressive philosophy based on responsible citizenship.”<sup>18</sup>

In particular, NRC policies sought to facilitate this new form of economic development by encouraging agricultural production. At the time of the coup, Ghana’s imports of food and agricultural goods reportedly totaled 90 million cedis per year—a relatively small sum considering the agricultural capacity of the country. In response, the NRC launched “Operation Feed Yourself,” which was aimed at producing “enough food to feed the nation, to provide import substitutes, to produce agricultural raw materials to feed our domestic factories, and to produce for the export market.”<sup>19</sup> The government declared 1972–1974 agricultural years, and they pledged 11.1 million cedis for the reconstruction of roads and bridges to help facilitate the distribution and trade of agricultural products. Those investments were targeted at rehabilitating and extending existing infrastructure—for example, making full use of Tema Harbor as a port of export for Ghana and its neighboring countries<sup>20</sup>—and to improve the quality of infrastructure in a way that would increase reliability and decrease the cost of annual maintenance. In the years immediately after the coup, the NRC government promised to provide permanent surfaces for all roads in the country and begin a project of new road construction to better connect rural and urban markets.<sup>21</sup>

Ultimately, however, the National Redemption Council argued that it was workers who were “the backbone of the Revolution.”<sup>22</sup> Development through self-reliance required not only an internal economic orientation, but also a profoundly decentralized and individualized one. In an address to workers in September 1972, Acheampong argued:

The Ghanaian worker needs a new vision and a new spirit. He needs the vision of a Great new nation, well industrialized with booming agriculture, and standing four square on its own resources: He needs the spirit of self-reliance which will make him see his greatest pride in his ability to do what he wants for himself. You have a Government which believes positively in self-reliance, a Government which is prepared to move away from the patterns of the past which have only brought us failure from the distress. We want to prove that we do not need to wait for foreign investment to be able to get ahead; that after all, it is people who create wealth and with a dedicated working people, a creative people, we shall overcome our present difficulties. As a Government, we shall not be deflected from this path of self-reliance.<sup>23</sup>

Acheampong’s aspirational message articulated a new vision of state authority and a new plan for the exercise of state power. In contrast with the state-centered models of development that defined economic policy over the first two decades of independence, the NRC’s policy of “self-reliance” characterized development as the product of partnership and participation. As such, it resonated with an Nkrumahist rhetoric of shared sacrifice and “self-help.”<sup>24</sup> Like Nkrumah, Acheampong and the NRC saw industrialization as an important means through which to transform the country’s economic fortunes. But, whereas Nkrumah saw agriculture (and particularly profitable cocoa) as a means to finance his vision of industrial development, the NRC understood that farmers themselves were central to the survival and prosperity of the nation—an important part of a larger economic strategy, rather than a means to an end. Everyone was encouraged to farm, to produce foods and goods locally, and to participate in and encourage the growth of a domestic economy rooted in agriculture, freeing up foreign exchange for other development goals. These were not sacrifices. They were new forms of empowerment and participation in the nation’s political and economic future, drawing on indigenous systems of economic and social exchange and supported by government investments in infrastructure.

Undoubtedly, this discourse of economic insularity through “self-reliance” sought to encourage national economic development by addressing directly the dangers of neocolonialism that came with foreign loans and unfavorable terms of trade. However, the NRC’s vision of “self-reliance” was far from isolationist; the policies of “self-reliance” and “no isolation” among NRC leaders were intimately interconnected with regional and pan-Africanist politics of the 1970s. By September 1972, the NRC government had signed trade agreements with Mali, Upper Volta (aka Burkina Faso), Niger, and Algeria, and they began to work toward the eventual formation of a West African Economic Union—later known as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which was founded in 1975.<sup>25</sup> In line with such efforts at economic cooperation, Ghana opened Tema Harbor to neighboring countries in order to facilitate exports and improve the distribution of goods throughout the region.<sup>26</sup>

## Drivers and the Revolution

If farmers were important to the project of self-reliance by producing the nation’s food, motor transport infrastructure and the drivers who shaped the country’s culture and economy of automobility were central to its distribution and, thus, to the larger project of “Operation Feed Yourself.” Farmers and drivers had long been partners in the country’s “mobility-system,”<sup>27</sup>

transporting food and other goods for trade and export between rural production regions, urban markets, and coastal ports. African farmers and drivers embraced the new technology as a way to control local systems of production and trade as early as the 1920s, and the interconnected industries quickly developed their own networks and systems of distribution and circulation that simultaneously mapped onto older models and made use of new technologies and infrastructures. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, the social and economic interaction and exchange of Ghana's unique culture of automobility facilitated the expanding wealth of cocoa farmers and other export producers and traders in both rural and urban areas.

However, declining terms of trade and the limited availability of foreign exchange, which plagued the country's economy beginning in the mid-1960s with the drop in cocoa prices on the global market, also had profound consequences for the country's auto/mobility. The NRC's declaration of "revolution" in 1972 was far from the first attempt to correct this crisis. Rather, the "transport difficulties facing workers in the region" were the subject of long-standing debates, regulations, and reforms<sup>28</sup>—a "transport problem" that stymied government officials and caused increasing difficulties for both drivers and passengers, regardless of economic orientation or political affiliation.

The NRC understood the centrality of drivers and motor transportation in the broader project of economic development.<sup>29</sup> Their plan, drawn up to address persistent transport problems and increase access for workers, farmers, and traders, centered on the construction of roads. Ashanti Regional Commissioner Lt. Col. E.A. Baidoo acknowledged, "The success of the 'Operation Feed Yourself' programme depends on the good conditions of the feeder roads."<sup>30</sup> Roads connected producers and consumers, and members of the public pushed the government to increase road construction in the pages of the nation's largest newspaper. Building roads, the editors of the *Daily Graphic* argued, was not merely a means of encouraging trade. Rather, "to rural folk a road is not just an important development project, it is a vital link-up with the world."<sup>31</sup> If self-reliance was supposed to include everyone in the project of national development, roads would need to be extended into the remotest parts of the country, making maximum use of the country's productivity and connecting all members of the country with the national economy. After initially suspending all rural development projects, the NRC called on all regions to submit new plans for the construction and maintenance of the country's feeder roads in May 1972.<sup>32</sup>

However, in light of the broader regional and pan-African rhetoric of "self-reliance," infrastructural development and road construction alone



could not bring about the full realization of the aims of the revolution. Speaking to the Economic Society of Ghana in July 1972, R.P. Baffour, a Ghanaian engineering and management consultant, called on the NRC to quickly adopt a right-hand drive system in the country, which would bring Ghana in line with its neighbors and facilitate travel and trade between all countries in the region.<sup>33</sup> The NRC concurred, announcing: “Ghana should change from driving on the left-hand side to driving on the right-hand side of the road with effect from the middle of 1974.”<sup>34</sup> Their justifications for this major operation resonated with the broader logics of self-reliance. Ghana was the only remaining country in West Africa that still drove on the left-hand side. By continuing this practice, the NRC argued, Ghana inhibited plans for the Trans-African Highway and limited the efficacy of regional trading partnerships. However, driving on the left also produced unnecessary costs for the country and continued its economic dependence on Britain.<sup>35</sup> Termed “Operation Keep Right,” the switch to the right-hand side of the road furthered the NRC’s agenda for regional economic cooperation, while also creating added urgency for the reconstruction of the road system that was part of “Operation Feed Yourself.”

### **“Right-Hand Traffic and You”: Public Education and Public Debate**

Whereas “Operation Feed Yourself” was a longer-term strategy of economic development, “Operation Keep Right” required planning, precision, and efficiency that would ultimately be realized in a single example of massive social, economic, and infrastructural engineering. The extent of the task was simultaneously exciting and frightening for members of the Ghanaian public. While many applauded the logic of the NRC’s initiative and looked forward to the change, others debated the practicality and safety of such an endeavor. Private drivers like Kodwo Grey-Mills argued that technological inconsistencies in the months before and after the change-over would lead to accidents. Individuals who did not adapt their vehicles to fit the new realities would be at a sight disadvantage and, thus, increase the danger of the roads.<sup>36</sup> Others, like Robert Eldridge Browne, complained that the costs of the changeover were unnecessary and “would cause more harm than good in Ghana,” particularly when the immediate practical benefits seem to directly impact so few of the country’s citizens.<sup>37</sup> Commercial drivers, too, were concerned that restrictions and regulations, which forced drivers to remove right-hand drive vehicles from the road, would create financial and logistical inconveniences for drivers. S.B. Lokko, a taxi driver in Cape Coast, observed that by restricting the availability of left-hand drive

vehicles, the government made it more difficult for drivers to accommodate the new driving practice.<sup>38</sup>

As Grey-Mills pointed out, this was not the first time that the issue had been considered. The First Parliament introduced a bill, but it was later abandoned for what, he argues, were technical and logistical issues associated with road safety. The example of other transitions in the late 1960s and early 1970s—most notably Nigeria and Sweden—seemed to assuage many fears, assuring the Ghanaian public that such a massive change-over was possible, desirable, and safe.<sup>39</sup> These examples served as both a model and a challenge, as NRC leaders sought to produce even better results that would help establish the reputation of the nation and its new government. The date was set for August 4, 1974, the first day of a long weekend that included a Bank Holiday. The long weekend, NRC leaders argued, would give everyone the opportunity to adjust to the new system before business resumed. August was also early enough in the year to provide adequate preparation and training before the busy holiday travel season in December.<sup>40</sup>

However, government leaders also addressed the public's fears directly through a campaign of public education, organized and administered through a web of bureaucratic committees, which included government representatives, doctors, engineers, and union officials. The members of the National Right-Hand Traffic Committee, chaired by the Army Commander Brigadier General E.A. Erskine, were assisted by sub-committees and regional and district Right-Hand Traffic Committees throughout the country.<sup>41</sup> Such committees produced the requisite new Highway Code, and new road safety regulations were put in place, which lowered speed limits throughout the country, particularly within urban centers, introduced new signs and road markings to create safe pedestrian crossings ("zebra crossings"), and familiarized drivers with the new system. However, the Commissioner for Transport and Communications, Major Kwame Asante, also launched a major publicity campaign on September 19, 1973, announcing the winners of national crest, poster, and highlife song competitions that effectively branded the campaign in the national media.<sup>42</sup> Various slogans were prominently displayed in public space and throughout national media outlets, declaring "Left to right is right," and illustrating new practices that would improve the safety of drivers and pedestrians.<sup>43</sup> As Commissioner of Transport and Communications, Maj. Asante made full use of his position, coopting "press, radio and television, schools, posters, handbills, booklets, car stickers, bill boards, pulpits and banners" as part of the campaign, while government spokesman Tony Ghansah regularly reported on the Committee's progress and explained the justifications for and achievements of the campaign to national media outlets.<sup>44</sup>

The campaign coordinated efforts from a number of ministries. By October 1973, Brigadier Erskine and other members of the Right-Hand Traffic Committee were conducting residential training courses for police, border guards, and military personnel alongside the Ghana Private Road Transport Union. Lecturers from the Attorney General’s Office, the Building and Road Research Institute, the Public Works Department, St. John’s Ambulance, the Police and the Ministry of Education gave talks on the new system to willing listeners around the country. And the Information Services Department used cinema vans to bring educational films to rural communities.<sup>45</sup> Taxi drivers in Accra and other municipalities were encouraged to attend one-day seminars, supported by the Ghana Private Road Transport Union, and the committee released short, informational pamphlets for the general public with titles like “RHT and You,” which encouraged members of the public to get involved in the campaign.<sup>46</sup> The Revised Highway Code was sold at only 40 pesewas, so as to be accessible to the general public, and it was printed in a number of languages.<sup>47</sup> Yet another round of competitions in the month leading up to the change-over produced even more highlife songs and posters in English and various Ghanaian languages that reminded the public: “Less than 14 Days to Right. Be Prepared, Study Your Guide to Right.”<sup>48</sup> A mere week before the transition, the Eastern Region Right-Hand Drive Committee crowned a “Miss Operation Keep Right” who was to herald the coming change-over.<sup>49</sup>

The setting of a date for the changeover should not obscure the slow process that was fundamental to such a change or the important ongoing role of the driver and passenger public. As Joshua Maama Larbi recalled, “It’s just something that we have to change gradually because you have to take the car to the fitting shop so that they change it for you. So they just change from the right to the left (-hand drive). We understood, so we went to the fitting shop and started changing it, and it went gradually. We are all mixed drivers on the road because people are just changing it gradually until one day we all are driving on the right side.”<sup>50</sup> The public began registering left-hand drive vehicles in January 1973. Right-hand drive vehicles were prohibited beginning August 1, 1973. By the time that August 4, 1974, arrived, “nifa nifa” seemed to be everywhere. As Ben Akumanyi noted in March 1974, “Almost every Ghanaian knows now that on August 4 this year traffic will shift to the right side of the road—which is good enough.”<sup>51</sup> Major A.H. Selormey, Commissioner for Transport and Communications in 1973, estimated that the Operation cost the Government approximately 2 million cedis.<sup>52</sup> The expense fundamentally changed the bureaucracy and infrastructure of the country’s motor transport industry, creating a new office within the Ministry for Transport and Communications and producing a

wholesale restructuring of the country's road network. On August 3, Brigadier F.W.K. Akuffo, Minister for Transport and Communications, addressed the country, officially announcing the change-over on television and radio.<sup>53</sup> At 6 A.M. on August 4, Akuffo and other members of the National Right-Hand Traffic Committee led a convoy of cars in Accra to inaugurate the change-over, while similar parades took place in other regional capitals.<sup>54</sup>

### **"Hazards Unto Death": Road Safety and Regulation**

Despite the large-scale propaganda and public education campaign, some members of the public remained pessimistic about the outcome of the operation. Kwasi Mensah reported that "many have indeed vowed to ground their vehicles for at least a week after the shift from "left to right" in order to give themselves a battling chance of survival."<sup>55</sup> In a country that already had a persistently high rate of fatal accidents, such a change-over was bound to be dangerous, and rumours circulated that people would be killed during the Operation.<sup>56</sup> However, as Mensah noted, the shift to the right on August 4 "need not usher in an era of tragedy. [. . .] Shift to the Right, but shift SAFELY to the right."<sup>57</sup> Police and volunteer traffic wardens were placed at major intersections, and police began regularly checking the speed of drivers in urban areas. In case they did encounter accidents, Colonel J.B.B. Asafu-Adjaye, Director of Medical Services of the Ghana Armed Forces and chairman of a sub-committee on Right Hand Traffic, instructed drivers to learn first-aid and carry first-aid boxes in their vehicles to treat any minor injuries.<sup>58</sup> However, government officials insisted that a safe transition required responsible action among all citizens. New regulations, such as lowered speed limits, were more strictly enforced in the months surrounding the change-over, and drivers like Kwaku Danquah, who were brought to court for reckless driving and obstruction of traffic received "deterrent sentences" with high fines and longer jail time from Magistrates like S.A. Afful.<sup>59</sup> On-the-spot fines between two and ten cedis were introduced for motor offences in 1974,<sup>60</sup> and Mr. J.W. Mould, Deputy Superintendent of Police in the Bibiani District and District Chairman of the Operation Keep Right Committee, warned the public that, "in order that the nation would not be overtaken by events, drivers should re-examine themselves critically and endeavor to abstain from bad habits such as excessive drinking, over speeding and improper maintenance of their vehicles, which were the major causes of accidents on the road"<sup>61</sup>—a sentiment echoed throughout all levels of government and public discourse. Drivers, passengers, pedestrians, and cyclists all "must necessarily re-adjust themselves to the Right-Hand Traffic System."<sup>62</sup> Those who participated actively in the campaign

were hailed as patriots,<sup>63</sup> and the newness of the system seemed to level all drivers—professionals and amateurs, men and women, young and old—in an ethos of vigilance.<sup>64</sup>

Ultimately, public education and new road safety regulations appeared to work. The Right-Hand Traffic Committee boasted a 25% decline in accidents for the month of August—from 1,153 accidents in 1973 to 893 in 1974. Casualties also declined by 20%—from 256 deaths in 1973 to 192 in 1974.<sup>65</sup> In successfully lowering the number of accidents during the change-over, the NRC seemed to follow the model of recent transitions in countries like Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Sweden. Individual drivers like Joshua Larbi were unsurprised by the relatively uneventful shift, which they attributed to their own skills as professional drivers. Larbi recalled that, “we didn’t experience any accidents when the change came because all we have to do is that they give an order that we should drive on the right side, so you just drive on the right side.”<sup>66</sup> Government representatives, however, attributed the successful and safe transition to a regime of regulation and surveillance, which produced better driving through discipline.

Proud of their accomplishments, the NRC sought to translate this temporary awareness of road safety into a more permanent change. During the campaign, public education and training began “correcting the commonest causes of accidents on the roads.”<sup>67</sup> Undoubtedly, accident prevention also required improved road maintenance, and the Right-Hand Traffic Committee partnered with the Accra-Tema City Council, the State Construction Corporation, and the Public Works Department to repair roads and install signs on more than 300 miles of road in the Greater Accra area.<sup>68</sup> Similar arrangements in other parts of the country sought to prepare roads for the new traffic requirements, including signs and road markings. However, the majority of the Committee’s efforts were expended organizing demonstration practices on right-hand drive that not only taught drivers about new road signs and driving practices, but also sought to curb the most common offenses that were thought to cause accidents.<sup>69</sup> Heavy policing persisted one month after the change-over, enforcing lower speed limits (beginning at 6 A.M. on August 4, 50 M.P.H. for motorcars on highways; 35 M.P.H. for trucks, lorries, and public transit vehicles on highways; 20 M.P.H. for all vehicles within the perimeter of every town) and checking vehicle specifications. Compulsory regulations on Omnibus and private Benz buses plying within towns and cities stipulated that their present doors on the left be closed and re-opened on the right. Tro-tro vehicles were expected to have their exit doors at the rear.<sup>70</sup>

As Committee Chairman Akuffo noted in early October 1974, “It is interesting to note that the overall national accident rate has rather dropped,

obviously as a result of people being more careful than normal.”<sup>71</sup> However, the government’s inability to eliminate accidents completely suggested that road safety remained an issue of national concern. Less than a month after the change-over, Brigadier Akuffo announced the second phase of the “Operation Keep Right” campaign. The new phase of the operation focused squarely on road safety and sought to eliminate practices like overspeeding, overtaking, and drunkenness, which led directly to accidents.<sup>72</sup> Rather than appeasing fears of accidents, then, “Operation Keep Right” seemed to heighten bureaucratic anxiety and resolve to address issues of road safety. If such a massive change-over did not factor significantly into accident numbers, what caused those accidents? If Ghanaian drivers could negotiate such a significant change safely, why could they not also adopt basic new driving practices, which would decrease the dangers of the road?

The public education campaign of “Operation Keep Right” was redirected toward correcting what Akuffo noted as the “over confidence most drivers seem to be displaying of late,”<sup>73</sup> encouraging drivers to continue working on four key areas: tolerance, patience, safety consciousness, and knowledge of signs. This new phase of “Operation Keep Right” sought to “permanently imprint the rules and regulations about the right-hand traffic on the minds of the road user,” guaranteeing the long-term success of the project and “keeping death off the road.”<sup>74</sup> Posters, radio and television campaigns, newspaper advertisements and articles, and films screened in cinema vans and cinema houses all sought to extract and publicly display the critical elements of the Highway Code, essentially confronting all drivers with the demands of road safety while in their cars, on the road, or at home. Such a campaign, Akuffo argued, would educate “the majority of Ghanaian motorists [who] have not bothered to as much as open the Highway Code,” out of either laziness or busy-ness.<sup>75</sup> Such efforts were particularly important in December, when traffic reached its peak and when accidents were common. However, six months after the change-over, many regulations and restrictions remained in effect. The results were tangible: the 4.2 million cedis ultimately spent on the campaign resulted in 630 fewer accidents in 1974 than in the previous year (August to December). The formation of a Highway Authority in December 1974 and a Road Safety Council in February 1975 highlighted that these regulations were there to stay.<sup>76</sup>

## **The Risks of Regionalism and the Limits of Pan-African Solidarity**

The successes of “Operation Keep Right” and the tangible benefits for the country’s trade and transport infrastructures came with unintended

consequences, which the NRC regime had to grapple with in the aftermath of August 4. In particular, the new system of right-hand drive raised questions about the practical consequences of the regionalism and pan-African solidarity that lay at root of justifications for the change-over itself. The ability to travel easily across borders made smuggling easier and encouraged the transnational migration of businessmen and traders whose economic activities had long been held in suspicion.

Smuggling was certainly not new in Ghana. The persistence of smuggling across the country's borders dated back to the colonial period and reflected both the persistence of regional trade networks that predated European colonial rule and the artificiality of colonial borders, which divided families and communities but which also created trans-border networks of social and economic exchange. While many goods were traded legally across borders, cocoa farmers and others also used those connections to illegally export goods for sale in order to receive more beneficial terms of trade. Colonial and, later, postcolonial attempts to control the prices of primary commodity exports like cocoa and domestic agricultural products for urban markets drove farmers across the borders to Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, or Togo.<sup>77</sup> By the 1970s, economic decline, spurred by a global drop in commodity prices and a shortage of foreign exchange and imported goods, motivated new forms of smuggling that were increasingly cast as “profiteering.” As early as August 1972, Acheampong condemned “the tendency among Ghanaians to “get rich quick” [that] has become so endemic that people are prepared to risk their lives in the dirty business of smuggling and hoarding, regardless of the baneful consequences such practices have on the national economy.”<sup>78</sup> Acheampong promised that “the widespread smuggling at our frontiers will be brought under control,” and warned “all and sundry that in future, smuggling and hoarding will no longer be profitable occupations.”<sup>79</sup> The government's crackdown on smuggling was cast as a campaign on behalf of patriotic citizens, as Acheampong encouraged workers to report smugglers and the NRC sought to register all tenants in order to more effectively keep track of urban residents' activities.<sup>80</sup>

The economic regionalism and transnational cooperation that encouraged the free flow of goods across national borders and underpinned the “Operation Keep Right” campaign seemed at odds with the nationalist and patriotic rhetoric surrounding anti-smuggling. The NRC sought to negotiate the thin line between national development and regional economic cooperation by focusing on the moral and ethical limits of accumulation. By casting such activities as “profiteering,” the NRC turned Ghanaian citizens into watchdogs, policing the behavior of their neighbors and the borders of their country. In August 1973, drivers in the Brong Ahafo Region met

their counterparts in Cote d'Ivoire to devise a plan to reduce smuggling across the border.<sup>81</sup> In doing so, they joined drivers around the country who sought to cast themselves as allies of the state. At national borders and in major lorry parks in cities like Kumasi, drivers served as both the exemplars of transnational mobility and a vanguard to protect national development—embodiments of the spirit of self-reliance.<sup>82</sup>

## Conclusion

When asked about “Operation Keep Right,” drivers in twenty-first century Ghana recalled the shift with a nonchalance that suggests an ordinariness of the experience that could have only been possible through great efficiency, education, and organization. As Larbi recalled, “When [Acheampong] came and changed from left to right, oh, it’s very fine because if you go to places like Togo and other countries—especially the French countries—they’re all driving on the right. So when he changed it to the right, we liked it and it didn’t trouble us at all because before they introduced it into the system they would be announcing it all the time and educating us about how the change should happen. And when we reached the time when we had to switch from the left to the right, we didn’t find it too difficult. We are happy that we are also driving on the right.”<sup>83</sup> As Larbi’s account suggests, while rural producers may have had different memories of the Acheampong years, for drivers and many urban residents, “Operation Feed Yourself” and “Operation Keep Right” were models of efficiency and government responsibility.<sup>84</sup> The clear goals and achievable outcomes guaranteed a degree of success and influence over the everyday practices of social and economic life that were impossible to achieve in the later, more abstract, campaigns for road traffic safety, which sought to regulate the practices of both drivers and pedestrians. And while the government’s attempts to reform driving practice and resurrect a state-owned public transport system ultimately languished, much like the “Operation Feed Yourself” campaign, the switch to right-hand drive and the economic networks (ECOWAS) that it facilitated have proven long-lasting.

Compared to the governments of Kwame Nkrumah or Jerry John Rawlings, we know comparatively little about the NRC and Acheampong. In part, that is a function of the lack of archives, evident here in the reliance on oral histories, speeches, and newspaper articles. But that scholarly silence also reflects the relative weakness of analytical frameworks that seek to explain postcolonial political and economic history through the discourses of state failure and decline. The technopolitics of mobility provide a new and useful lens through which to think about postcolonial governance and economic



development after the initial moments of nationalist fervor—an approach that necessarily requires consideration of both state rhetoric and popular politics, government policy and everyday practice. As Alice Wiemers’ excellent study of rural agriculture and development politics during the Acheampong regime reminds us, we must be careful not to over-state the significance of the success of “Operation Keep Right” as a symbol of the broader effectiveness and legitimacy of the Acheampong regime.<sup>85</sup> However, examining the practical efficiency and tangible success of “Operation Keep Right” forces us to look beyond these overly simplistic narratives of military rule and authoritarian dictatorship; their tropes of violence, instability, corruption, and decline; and the polarized analyses of postcolonial politics as either (and often simultaneously) weak and over-developed in order to begin to better understand the way that Ghanaians experienced this period of dramatic political and economic change.<sup>86</sup>

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## Notes

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2. Discourses about prosperity and power in Ghana, as elsewhere on the continent, are often articulated through what Bayart calls “the politics of the belly” (*The State in Africa*). As I have argued elsewhere, postcolonial debates about economic development and decline were articulated through debates about licit and illicit wealth/accumulation. Even if their proposed solutions differed, the political and economic discourses of the Acheampong regime were part of this much longer conversation and contestation over who “chops the money,” that sought to balance what Ferguson identifies as “the two modalities of power [that] usually correspond to two kinds of wealth—broadly, the kind that feeds people and the kind that eats them”; see James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 73 and Jennifer Hart, “‘One Man, No Chop’: Licit Wealth, Good Citizens, and the Criminalization of Drivers in Postcolonial Ghana,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 46, 3 (2013): 373–396; Jennifer Hart, *Ghana on the Go: African Mobility in the Age of Motor Transportation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016); Paul Schauert, *Staging Ghana: Artistry and Nationalism in State Dance Ensembles* (Bloomington, IN:

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6. Hart, “‘One Man, No Chop’.” For parallel sorts of arguments in relation to Ghanaian market women, see Gracia Clark, *Onions Are My Husband: Survival and Accumulation by West African Market Women* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).

7. Franco Barchiesi, “Wage Labor, Precarious Employment, and Social Inclusion in the Making of South Africa’s Postapartheid Transition,” *African Studies Review* 51, 2 (2008): 124. See also Ralph Callebert, “Working Class Action and Informal Trade on the Durban Docks, 1930s–1950s,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38, 4 (2012): 847–861.

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9. Pellow and Chazan, *Ghana*, 47.

10. Joshua Maama Larbi, interview by Author, Teshie, Accra, Ghana, 10 August 2009.

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