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Motorcycle taxis, personhood, and the moral landscape of mobility

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Abstract

How are moral values involved in the production of urban mobilities? Through an ethnographic analysis of the boda boda motorcycle taxi industry in Kampala, Uganda, this paper describes the norms, institutions, and social practices through which multiple form of ethical personhood are realized and spatialized. Focusing on how digital ride-hailing platforms and municipal registration efforts have interacted with the city's existing transport infrastructures, the paper examines the competing moral logics of personhood, the historically and culturally variable conception of what constitutes a full ethical person, that these projects embody. Motorcycle taxi drivers have developed intensive moral economies, with corresponding spatial institutions, that mediate the harsh competition of the industry. Rather than simply displacing existing norms, digital platforms build on and supplement the long-standing embedded institutions and moral economies of the boda boda industry. By contrast, municipal reforms were rejected, however, because they failed to recognize the moral norms and practices at the heart of the boda boda industry and thus negated drivers' personhood.

Keywords

Mobility, Informality, Personhood, Morality, infrastructure, Uganda

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1 Introduction

In July 2018, the Kampala journalist Baker Batte Lule observed an unprecedented event on the city streets: “To my amusement, the [motorbike] rider stopped at the Wandegeya traffic lights just like other motorists did. Those I have taken before never stop at traffic lights. As we waited for the lights to signal green, I saw other riders in yellow and green reflector jackets also in tow” (The Observer, 2018). These drivers, he goes on to reveal, are working with the new ride-hailing platforms that have made major inroads in Kampala in the last four years. That stopping at a light is remarkable attests to the dramatic transformation in everyday road practices that these platforms involve, and the challenges they face in changing public perceptions of the long-established boda boda motorcycle taxi in Uganda’s capital.

What happens when digital ride-hailing platforms encounter post-colonial social conditions and the social infrastructures that have emerged, prior to digital mediation, to respond to the mobility needs and precarious economic realities of African cities? This paper focuses on the encounter of boda boda motorcycle taxis with both ride-hailing apps and with municipal reforms. It explores these encounters through the lens of personhood, the socio-culturally variable understanding of what constitutes a full adult person and the ethical norms and practices through which such persons are formed (Strathern and Stewart, 1998). Personhood is a critical concept for understanding moral economies that reveals a great deal about how informal mobilities are embedded in urban society and how transport workers understand and navigate ongoing processes of digitalization.

Boda bodas are motorcycle taxis driven primarily by young men. Nationally, 1.7 million people, or 7% of the Ugandan population, received part, or all, of their livelihood from the industry (Howe, 2010; Evans et al., 2018), with estimates ranging from 50,000 to 300,000 drivers operating in Kampala alone. Boda bodas occupy a complex position in the city’s moral landscape, providing a vital means of mobility, but also widely pathologized as unsafe, criminal, and guilty of causing congestion (Doherty, 2017). The basic organizing unit of this vast industry is the stage. As detailed below, stages are a socio-spatial institution established by drivers to fix themselves in set locations at the roadside, most commonly in groups of 5 to 15, where they wait for passengers. In 2013, the municipal government set out on a short-lived attempt to organize and “streamline” the boda boda industry, starting with an effort to register every driver in the city. Since 2014, a variety of ride-hailing platforms have emerged in Kampala to profit from the industry, with the promise of making it safer, easier, and smarter.

To examine how urban mobilities are situated within and productive of specific, and changing, moral landscapes, I compare the kinds of person imagined and enacted by each of these social institutions – the stage, the platform, and the municipal registry – and how these conceptions of personhood shape the working conditions and political agency of drivers. I contrast the norms and forms of stage personhood, platform personhood, and registered personhood. The practices and forms of moral reasoning these modes of personhood involve reveal how the transport industry is embedded in place and in the ongoing social relationships of Kampala’s neoliberal moral economy (Weigratz, 2016). Rather than a specific type of socio-economic system organized around a subsistence ethic and opposed to markets (Thompson, 1971), I use moral economy in a broader sense to refer to the values, norms, and ethical persons (re)produced by any economic system (Muehlebach, 2012), understanding all economies as involving moral regimes. The concept of moral landscapes builds on this to emphasize that moral economies are embedded in and productive of

spatial arrangements, place-making institutions, and mobility practices (Smith, 2000). Rather than the straightforward displacement of moral economies by market values, this framing foregrounds the complex sedimentation and articulation of multiple moral regimes in place. Technologies like ride-hailing platforms that, on the surface, appear as disembedding interact with and depend upon prior social infrastructures to operate (Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev, 2018). Disembedding is thus not a linear transition, nor can embedded and disembedded mobilities be neatly opposed. Rather, as feminist geographers JK Gibson-Graham (1996) have argued, market economies are not only characterized by internal heterogeneity, but are also functionally dependent on non-market relations of social reproduction, particularly the production of persons. Insofar as they replicate, in digital form, the existing socio-technical institutions of the global south, digital mobility platforms, I argue, are less innovative than their proponents hold. Likewise, since they extend both the mobility practices and forms of precarity that informal transport workers are already familiar with, they are less disruptive than many commenters speculate.

Understanding the moral landscape of the city is particularly important as much policy and academic attention is currently being directed toward the project of formalizing transport systems across urban Africa. In tandem with massive multi-national investments in Bus-Rapid Transit systems and driven by the need to improve road safety and reduce traffic fatalities, municipalities across the continent are engaging with long-standing actors in the urban transport sector in new ways (Behrens et al., 2016; Ehebrecht et al., 2018). Critical questions posed by these projects include whether to reform or to replace these systems, how to modernize aging vehicle fleets, and how to coordinate between new and old infrastructures. Diagnosing “informality” broadly as a core problem with systems ranging from Nairobi’s matatus, to Abidjan’s gbakas, to Johannesburg’s taxis, the World Bank and other development agencies are promoting “formalization” through initiatives including mapping projects, consultation processes, digital apps, business formation and training schemes, loans, and vehicle buy-backs (Schalekamp, 2017; Rizzo, 2017; Klopp and Cavoli, 2018; Global Labour Institute, 2019). While the Kampala government has made efforts to introduce new transport options through public-private partnerships, its attempts at formalization have met with significant resistance and had only limited success, partially because the politically powerful position of boda boda and taxi operators’ associations makes any such interventions highly inflammatory at a delicate moment in the city’s politics (Goodfellow and Titeca, 2012).

To understand the scope and limitations of such mobility transitions, it is vital to examine not only how they impact the function of urban transport, but also how they reshape the moral landscapes in which mobilities play out. Drawing on the well-established body of historical and anthropological research on African mobilities (Beck et al., 2017; Klaeger, 2013), this paper contributes to the ongoing project of worlding transport geography, an effort to expand the breadth of the mobility turn thus far located primarily within scholarship on the historical experience of Western societies (Uteng and Lucas, 2018). This effort builds on Ananya Roy’s critiques of hegemonic theories of globalization and urban modernity (2011), her insistence that “the cities of the global south are the centre of a world order that is being created and recreated through the urban revolution” (Roy, 2014: 14), and collaborative attention to “distinctive visions of the global that exist without essential reference to the West” (Ong, 2011: 5). Rather than simply applying pre-existing theoretical frameworks to more diverse empirical cases, or rejecting them a priori, worlding entails “circumventing and reworking understandings of transport in the spatial formations of Africa, Asia and Latin America [framed] in terms of lack, absence or incompleteness relative to a (western) other” (Schwanen, 2018: 468). Regarding African mobilities, this requires speaking back to a

developmentalist epistemology that views transport through a lens derived primarily from economics and engineering (Esson et al., 2016; Porter, 2016). Here, the “focus tends to be on flows of vehicles on networks, or on individuals and sometimes households constituted by co-resident individuals as (boundedly) rational sovereign actors” (Schwanen, 2018: 3). As the case of boda bodas illustrates, the social geographies of urban mobility in the global south do not conform neatly to a west/rest binary as they draw on commodity chains and social practices that cross borders. Overcoming these assumptions requires engaging with the variety of norms and forms of personhood present in any given socio-spatial context. While historians have emphasized the relation between transport, political economy, gender identity, and personhood (Hart, 2016; Mutongi, 2017; Gibbs, 2014), there is little citational cross-over with transport geography.

How, then, are moral values such as ethical personhood involved in the production of mobilities? Unpacking the heterogeneity of forms of personhood involved in Kampala’s motorcycle taxi industry, I show how divergent kinds of person, beyond the bounded, sovereign, liberal individual, are embodied in and constituted through the institutions that comprise a transport system and how these shape the success and failure of efforts to digitize and regulate so-called “informal” transport systems. This analysis unfolds in three parts: section two briefly elucidates the concept of personhood and its implications for mobility; section three presents the contested conceptions of adult male personhood present in contemporary Kampala’s moral economy; section four contains the bulk of my ethnographic description, detailing in turn how the institutions of the stage, the platform, and the registry envision, enact, and spatialize personhood. Section five concludes by posing moral questions as a core problematic in the study of the digitalization of “informal” mobilities.

My analysis draws on 6 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Kampala from 2013 to 2014 and a month-long return visit in 2018. During this time I conducted 15 group interviews, lasting from 45 min to 2 h, with drivers at 15 stages (3 in each of the city’s 5 divisions), interviewed leaders of drivers’ organizations and municipal authorities charged with regulating the sector, attended rallies and registration events, and examined media coverage of the industry in 3 major newspapers and online. I also spent several days a week conducting participant observation at a stage where I came to know a group of 11 drivers in more depth than possible through one-off interviews. I conducted semi-structured interviews in 2018 with 10 drivers who were using the SafeBoda app, and gathered information about the company’s practices from newspaper coverage and the company’s website.

2 Personhood in motion

A long-standing line of inquiry in anthropology, the study of personhood cross-culturally examines what kinds of entities count as persons, what rights and responsibilities are afforded to persons, how persons are made, the boundaries and limits of persons, and how changing social, cultural, technological, and legal conditions change the constitution of personhood (Mauss, 1985; Dumont, 1992; Strathern, 1988). Far from a universal constant, the modern individual inscribed in liberal rights theory as indivisible, autonomous, self-sovereign, independent, and of equal moral status to all other individuals, is but one expression of personhood. Questions of personhood are not simply a matter of esoteric philosophical debate, but centrally involved in high-stakes moral judgements surrounding, for example, the commodification of human body parts (Waldby and Mitchell, 2006), emergent medical technologies (Dumit, 2004), end of life care (Lock, 2002), the right to political speech (Coleman, 2014), and corporate social responsibility (Dolan and Rajak, 2016) – as well as

informing everyday ethical practice (Obadia, 2020). The key idea underpinning this expansive body of research is that personhood, not just personality, is an effect of particular fundamental social institutions such as religious rituals, rites of passage, systems of marriage, norms around cooking and sharing food, the organization of the space of the home, and forms of political authority.

Here, I interpret the stage, the platform, and the municipal registry as examples of such person-making institutions. Each institution contains an implicit theory of personhood that becomes manifest through a range of norms, social relations, spatial patterns, and bodily techniques. This process is never fully realized, however, and cannot be totalizing because these models of personhood are themselves hybrids and because the persons they shape interact with and are formed by multiple competing and overlapping social institutions, each predicated on and reproducing specific, if not entirely distinct, notions of ethical personhood. The point here is neither to paint a stark contrast between generic African and Western notions of personhood, nor to describe a linear historical transition from one form to another (Kaphagawani, 2004; Menkiti, 2004). None of these institutions' model of person is fully stable or internally consistent. Rather, the aim is to point to the ways that multiple forms of personhood – with different histories rooted in pre-colonial political structures, colonial missionization, post-colonial statecraft, and neoliberal reforms – come to overlap, occupying and differentially structuring the same social space (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001). These overlapping ethical regimes and their norms of personhood constitute a complex and shifting moral landscape. The convergence and friction of these modes illuminates the dramatically different ways that mobility platforms and registration efforts have been taken up and contested by boda boda drivers.

3 Cash rules everything around me? The moral landscape of Kampala

Three decades of neoliberal reforms have transformed the moral landscape of Kampala, as the commercialization of ever more spheres of everyday life corrodes the ability to participate in relationships defined by mutual obligation. Neoliberal Uganda is marked by the growing dominance of an ethics of individual rights, self-interest, and short-termism in economies structured more and more by privatization, insecurity, and competition (Weigratz, 2016) that have placed extreme strain on norms and obligations of ethics, kinship, and personhood (Weigratz and Cesnulyte, 2016; Bocast, 2017; Monteith and Camfield, 2019). This ethical change is hotly contested and widely commented upon in the local media and in everyday conversation. The boda boda industry seems to exemplify the neoliberal moral economy of the past few decades. It is characterized by high levels of competition (for space on the road and for passengers), constant transactional exchanges, the atomization of drivers as individual entrepreneurs, extreme physical and economic insecurity (insofar as the risks of accidents are borne almost entirely by the bodies and finances of drivers), and the ongoing pursuit of money. This, however, is not the whole story. By immersing drivers in place, the institution of the stage mediates these aspects of the industry, structuring mobilities through embedded ethical norms and affording drivers a space of mutuality and reciprocity that, in fact, underpins the viability of their work. In this way, the moral landscape of mobility in Kampala has much in common with the forms of solidarity and care that exist in a wide range of popular transport systems around the world that articulate with divergent histories of capital investment and state regulation, from motorcyclists in Thailand (Sopranzetti, 2017), to transit workers in Ecuador (Gamble and Dávalos, 2019), to bus operators across the post-Soviet world (Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev, 2018).

Neoliberal moral economy has not straightforwardly replaced all other ethical systems in Kampala. Most visibly, the governance of care in fields like education, health, and healing continue to be shaped by heterogeneous forms of indigenous Ganda ethical practice (Scherz and Mpanga, 2019; Cheney, 2007; Zoanni, 2018). Baganda are the dominant ethno-linguistic group in Kampala and central Uganda, home to the Buganda Kingdom, the ethno-linguistic and political entity reconstituted by Uganda's 1996 constitution as, in theory, a purely cultural traditional institution (Karlström, 1996). The main contrast I draw here is between Ganda forms of personhood and those that inhere in western/liberal modes of citizenship. This is not intended to establish liberal norms as a universal comparative baseline, but rather to recognize that such liberal norms are central to the forms of personhood that are constructed in and through contemporary urban governance and the platform economy in Kampala. Nor is this contrast meant to imply that Ganda norms are themselves singular, ahistorical, or uncontested. Self-consciously traditional moral concepts are most often the terms in which neoliberal moral economies are explicitly contested. While they have changed and adapted over time as Buganda has gone through dramatic historical transformations, many of these norms are widely cited locally as timeless "African" values, particularly when they are seen to be under threat from external forces. While it can be tempting to romanticize reciprocity, when reified such moral strictures can form the basis of violent and exclusionary forms of un-personing that deny the personhood of subjects who are unwilling, unable, or forced out of forms of mutual recognition, as is the case when kinship is narrowly and conservatively defined exclusively in terms of heterosexual reproduction (Nyanzi, 2013).

Ganda ethical personhood is normatively structured by the concept of *ekitiibwa*, meaning respectability, honor, and disciplined behavior. *Ekitiibwa* entails "a way of behaving that reinforces relationships defined by reciprocal obligation and, in the realm of intimate relationships, [it] is largely marked by the maintenance and reproduction of kin ties" (Boyd, 2013: 705). The nature of these relationships and the norms and obligations that they involve are highly gendered, but, for men and women alike, *Ekitiibwa* places the moral emphasis on interdependence (as opposed to autonomy), attributing full personhood to those embedded in a complex of multi-generational relationships shaped by ties of kinship and clan membership. One of the implications of this is that ethical personhood is predicated not on egalitarian bounded individualism, but on one's embeddedness in multiple hierarchal sets of relationships of dependence that form the basis of a stable, peaceful, social order (Hansen, 2003).

In this context, adult manhood is achieved gradually by transitioning from the status of dependent to provider in these relationships (Wyrod, 2016), accomplished via work, marriage, building a home, and "producing children," as several boda drivers put it. Indeed, many of the young men I met understood their jobs as boda drivers in these terms. Entry into the industry was often facilitated by a loan or patronage of an older, wealthier relative, while young men worked to support wives and children, or saved to contribute to establishing a home of their own. As I have described elsewhere (Doherty, 2017), in addition to highlighting the critical service they provide in the city, the idioms of feeding families and building homes is the primary way drivers valorize their work. Echoing a common sentiment among long-term drivers, a driver at Radio Simba Stage in Central Division explained, "I have been at this job for ten years now. I have four children and a wife. That is six people all together. It is boda boda business which has done all that for me and my family, I have even built a house out of it." Drivers often cited the number of dependents they provide for as a primary reason the industry must not be abolished. Enumerating dependencies

well beyond the confines of kinship, drivers at Bwaise Junction Stage put it this way during a group interview:

First Driver: “even the boss’s [bike owner’s] family depend on that bike.”

Second Driver: “Also, the police men’s families depend on those bikes. He gets 50.000 from me [in a bribe], he will pay school fees for his children.”

Third Driver: “Even those at the fuel station are looking at us to feed their families.”

Here, driving is a worthy pursuit because earnings are channeled into extended networks of morally virtuous social relations (even through bribes to the police) that enmesh the driver in the modes mutual recognition that sustain personhood: nourishing families, educating the next generation, and building for the future. In an economy marked by high levels of unemployment, even for the most well-educated youth, driving a boda was thus an invaluable and rare pathway to adult male personhood.

4 Institutions of personhood: Stage, platform, registry

4.1 Stage personhood

One of the main appeals of bodas for passengers is that they go where the city’s major mode of public transport – 14-seater mini-buses known locally as taxis – do not. They offer on-demand service directly connecting homes to jobs, schools to markets, shopping malls to government offices, hospitals to pharmacies. Bodas are well-suited to Kampala’s congested streets, dirt roads, steep hills, narrow pathways, and shortcuts (Kisaalita and Setongo-Kibalama, 2007). What’s more, they do not get stuck in traffic in the same way that buses and private cars do. In this way, bodas operate both as a door-to-door taxi service and as a last-mile system that feeds the mini-bus system and extends it from main routes into residential neighborhoods. Stages provide a degree of order and regularity within this unscheduled, flexibly routed, and individually negotiated system. They are the basic socio-spatial organizational unit of Kampala’s boda boda industry.

Stages are designated spots where a group of drivers park and wait for customers. Most stages have about 10 drivers, but a few mega-stages at key intersections have up to 100. Walking down a busy road, a Kampala resident would find a stage about every 100 m, if not more often. There are stages outside markets, malls, factories, government offices, banks, hospitals, schools, and stadiums. The bulk of my ethnographic research was conducted at one such stage, Katale Stage, located at a busy intersection near a major market in Nakawa Division, where I was able to spend three days a week parked alongside the 11 drivers who made up the stage, engaging in ongoing dialogues about their work, passengers, opinions on urban politics, and personal lives, while observing the everyday operations of the industry.

The standard practice is for drivers to wait for customers at their stage, take them to their destination, and then return to the stage to wait for more customers. Returning drivers may pick up a new passenger if hailed, and will often seek new passengers by honking at pedestrians on rides back, but this is considered an added bonus. Drivers who operate without stages purely by circulating through traffic are widely demonized by other drivers because they are seen as disreputable and untrustworthy rogue agents not properly embedded in the boda boda system. The chairman of Dembe Stage in Naalya described the challenge that such drivers pose: “the problem is that there are people we know as ‘lubyanza,’ those who have no stages. Those are the people who

steal people's bags and tarnish our name. Here we resolved that if we catch you when you don't have a stage, we notify the police." Because there is no obvious visible difference between most staged and rogue drivers, they are criticized for undermining the entire industry.

The legal status of stages, as with the industry in general, is ambiguous. They are not formally recognized by the technical side of the municipal government, which has refused to take any steps that would officially accept the boda boda industry. However, in order to establish a new stage, boda drivers must seek permission from at least two levels of local political representatives, typically paying bribes and facilitation fees at both offices. In doing so, they acquire letters of support and other forms of semi-official paperwork. Drivers must be organized to succeed in this, and every stage is represented by a chairman, vice-chairman, treasurer, and secretary, and may even have a written constitution outlining the roles of each representative and the duties of drivers. The representatives of the stage are also responsible for vetting new drivers, who typically have to apply and pay to join a stage.

The boda boda industry is not viewed as reputable by the broader public. Because drivers are often assumed to be uneducated, delinquent, and dirty, they struggle to present themselves with dignity and honor, and can be both fastidious about those aspects of their reputation that they can control and very strict with members of the profession who bring them a bad name. At Katale Stage, drivers had a self-enforced code of conduct requiring them to keep their motorbikes clean, to wear dress shirts tucked in, and to be polite with all their customers. Referring to the occasional story on the local tabloid TV station in which a boda boda driver is subject to a forced bath at the hands of a mob, a member of the stage laughingly explained:

"It is good to carry a passenger when you are clean, rather than making a passenger hang up his nose because of the smell. A driver has to be smart because we drive clean people. We shall be so strict on cleanness because we are ashamed of watching news of boda boda guys being bathed forcefully. And those who speak vulgar words will be done away with. Of course if one is caught stealing, he will be chased from the stage and never be allowed to drive boda boda."

Not all drivers viewed things this way, however. Some play into public stereotypes in order to attract passengers. As one driver in Katwe recounted: "One day I came to work dressed very well. I asked a passenger if she wanted a lift, but she said 'You don't look like a boda guy. If you do, you must be expensive.' But she instead boarded a boda with a dirty jacket. If one is clean like me, even a passenger may not call him but may call the one who has dressed in dirty clothes." Recognizing this double bind, another driver, from a stage in Kasubi, reflected that "maybe the reason why some people despise [us] is because some of us drivers do not respect ourselves. Maybe it is caused because some refer to us as 'abaana ba boda' [boda children] even though we are over 18." Stages are a spatial institution that allow drivers to mitigate these perceptions and to demonstrate empisa, civility defined through good manners, discipline, self-presentation, and proper behavior, a central everyday manifestation of respectable personhood.

In an industry defined by high levels of mobility, stages are also a moral institution ensuring that a small number of drivers become a regular and recognizable presence in a given location. They embed drivers, who rarely live nearby, in a place, ensuring that they know the streets and landmarks well and allowing them to establish a regular clientele. Successful drivers will cultivate relations with customers by exchanging phone numbers, meeting them on demand at home or at work, and eventually adding errands and other duties to the taxi services they provide. In this way,

drivers seek to establish ongoing client-patron relations, enmeshing themselves in the family lives of valued customers. Taking children to school, paying visits to relatives, and running domestic chores, trusted drivers become vital mobility providers for the emerging middle class and for small businesses. Similarly, stages are the spatial basis for building friendly relations with nearby shop-owners, vendors, security guards, and other eyes on the street. Likewise, drivers reported that if a passenger has a problem with a driver they can report him to his stage chairman or to the police, knowing where he was based: "If you get a boda boda from a stage, it is not easy for the driver to steal because he knows that you may come back and ask. But you can also trust someone from a stage to deliver something," explained a Mengo-based boda driver. The stage establishes trust in a number of ways. It embeds drivers as a regular presence in the neighborhood and constructs lines of authority and accountability within and beyond the industry. The ambivalent relationship that many passengers and Kampalans in general have with bodas is evidence of how this works: many express distrust and even hostility towards boda bodas in general, but positive feelings towards specific drivers they have come to know and rely upon.

Stages also form the basis for solidarity and camaraderie among drivers and for the resolution of routine disagreements and tensions between drivers. While stages only occasionally institute formal turn-taking procedures, and drivers do compete for the attention of potential clients, they mediate competition insofar as drivers within a stage generally refuse to undercut one another on prices when passengers are negotiating fares. Sitting for hours a day waiting for passengers, they form close bonds to the extent that drivers often refer to one another as their true brothers. Drivers become involved in one another's lives in many ways, attending family weddings and funerals, forming football teams, and starting small businesses together. At stages, drivers share information among themselves about police checkpoints, traffic jams, and flooded roads. Drivers will also act together in the all-too-frequent event of a crash, attempting to apprehend and arrest any car or bus driver who would seek to hit and run, picking up a fallen motorcycle from the road to protect it from thieves or traffic police, or pooling resources at a stage to help cover expenses for hospitalization or funerals. As is characteristic of transport and other street economies around the world, stages mitigate some of the more competitive and atomizing aspects of the industry, ensuring that it does not devolve into an overly individualizing, hostile, or aggressive form of work. As Ibrahim and Bize's research in Nairobi illustrates, the highly individualized and fragmented motorcycle taxi labor force becomes an urban infrastructure precisely through the stage's social practices of "waiting together" that "stabilize precarious work, reducing its contingencies and establishing it more solidly within the physical and social fabric of the city" (Ibrahim and Bize, 2018: 74).

While it is fundamentally oriented towards offering a commodified service to an urban market, the social institution of the stage nonetheless produces embedded persons through what could be considered a form of "thick recognition" (Ferguson, 2013: 237). Stage personhood is enmeshed in ongoing social relations within and without the industry that recognize drivers through ongoing forms of mutual obligation, patronage, camaraderie, and place. However, thick recognition also entails specific forms of exposure and mutual obligation that easily slide into exploitation and disposability (Doherty, 2017). In addition to the dangers of the road itself, patronage relations mean drivers' livelihoods are often based on taking big risks like driving to deliver cash payments on behalf of vendors, exposing them to robbery and liability. Drivers also often leverage familial ties to peri-urban land as collateral on high interest loans to buy motorbikes. Predatory lenders use the social embeddedness of drivers to accumulate these valuable properties for real estate speculation.

Despite these risks, a stage is a spatial manifestation of *ekitiibwa* constituted by the norms and social relationships that make up a specific form of ethical person: honorable young men embedded in multiple forms of mutual obligation. As with *ekitiibwa* more generally, these norms are highly gendered and define respectability primarily in terms of one's contribution to kin relations and social reproduction. Stages entail a form of socially thick recognition that encourages drivers to develop ongoing relations and social ties that form the basis of trust in *bodas* and mediate the extremely competitive nature of the work.

4.2 Platform Personhood

If stage personhood manifests the principle of *ekitiibwa*, by contrast, the organizing principle of platform personhood is safety. The importance of safety in the conception and marketing of ride-hailing platforms in Kampala is evident in the name *SafeBoda*, one of the three main ride-hailing apps, along with Uber and Taxify (an Estonian app since rebranded as Bolt), that have made inroads in the *boda boda* industry since 2014. Founded in 2015 by a former *boda boda* driver and two young European economists with backgrounds in development consulting and social enterprises, *SafeBoda* is the only locally developed app, the only one focusing exclusively on *bodas*, and the one with the most visible presence on the city's streets. It has large billboards throughout town, but even more pronounced are the number of drivers visibly clad in its signature orange helmets and safety vests doing remarkable things like stopping at traffic lights. Their drivers' equipment reveals a lot about how *SafeBoda* conceives of safety and how the platform, in turn, enacts personhood.

While stages build trust by extending personhood beyond the driver's body into an expanding set of social ties, platforms do so by precisely delineating and hardening the boundaries of a disembedded individual body. A *SafeBoda* driver's uniform consists of an orange helmet and reflector vest, issued by the company and bearing its name. Drivers also carry a second orange helmet and a packet of disposable hairnets intended to protect the body of the passenger from accidents and from unwanted bodily contact with previous riders. These are the most widely remarked upon aspects of the service in press coverage, and feature prominently in the company's online promotional material. Drivers' equipment thus seeks to protect drivers and passengers by fortifying their individual bodies, supplementing the skin to strengthen their boundaries, and protecting them from trauma. Albeit through different means, both the stage and the platform are institutions concerned with the safety and security of both passengers and drivers.

On platforms, safety is not just defined in terms of accidents but also incorporates fears of crime, as well as more abstract existential questions about trust posed by the close contact with anonymous drivers that riding a motorbike involves. Towards these concerns, drivers' helmets and vests also bear their names and company ID numbers. As the primary forms of recognition constructed by the app, these are important parts of the platform's technology of individuation. To hail a *SafeBoda*, a passenger opens the app on her phone, enters her location, destination, and preferred payment mode (cash or cashless travel wallet), and waits for a nearby driver to accept the ride. Once he does so, the driver's name, photograph, and ID number appear on the user's phone alongside a GPS map showing his location. *SafeBoda* fares are set by the app according to distance and the time it takes to complete a journey. This is advertised as being cheaper and more convenient than negotiating individually with drivers over fares. This is another widely advertised feature of *SafeBoda*, with promotional materials contrasting the convenience and ease of their "no bargaining" and cashless service to the much more fraught, tense process of negotiating prices on a ride by ride basis directly with drivers who often do not have the cash to make proper change.

This mode of fare-setting, however, eliminates the ubiquitous distributive sliding scale pricing that drivers and passengers negotiate based on passengers' perceived ability to pay and the price of being based at more desirable stages. Without the app, fare-setting takes place in the context of efforts to establish reciprocal relations. Drivers appeal to hierarchical relationships to solicit larger fares from those who they think can, and ought to, pay them more. They also offer cheap fares and even free rides as favors to those with whom they seek to establish good relationships, particularly women they flirt with. While rides on SafeBoda are significantly cheaper than those passengers would negotiate individually, the company suggests that their drivers earn more because they are able to give rides in two directions and thus spend more of their time driving passengers and less time waiting.

After a ride, drivers and passengers are asked to rate one another, with drivers often reminding passengers about this and requesting five stars to keep their rating up. These ratings are the basis of discipline and trust within the platform. Along with a newly opened road safety training academy and the driver application process, ratings underpin the platform's efforts to professionalize the boda industry. To join the app, drivers are required to have been in the business for at least three years, maintain a place at a stage, have a valid national ID and driver's license, and submit to a background check that includes an interview with their stage chairman. In this way, even as it seeks to transform mobility in the city, SafeBoda builds on the existing social infrastructure of stages that underpins the boda boda industry. One factor that excludes many drivers from joining the platform is that acquiring these documents, the driver's license in particular, can be both time consuming and costly – the process to acquire a license costs 235,000UGX (\$64) and must be renewed every three years for 150,000UGX (\$41), an amount approximately equivalent to three months' rent in an informal settlement. Once registered with SafeBoda, drivers then pay a down payment on a package that includes training, safety equipment, a smartphone, and access to mechanics availed through the app. To complement this process, the company opened the SafeBoda Academy in September 2018, in partnership with the Red Cross and a World Bank funded safety initiative, with the aim of training as many as 50,000 drivers per year in road safety and customer service who will, in turn, model good practices to other drivers on the roads (East African Business Week, 2018).

As with stages, this system also has the effect of mediating competition and managing conflict within the industry, both among drivers and between drivers and passengers, but it does so through the disembodied medium of the platform, rather than the institution of the stage. Rather than rushing to solicit passengers in competition with one another, for example, SafeBoda drivers are selected based on proximity and availability, appearing when and where needed by customers, for whom fares are set by a third-party rather than through bargaining. While the system is highly individualizing via these disciplinary technologies, the effect of this is to locate trust in the app and its system of ratings, vetting, safety equipment, driver trainings, and expectation of adherence to the rules of the road, rather than in any individual driver as such. Platform personhood is predicated on a thin form of social recognition: SafeBoda drivers are seen as a safe, trustworthy, and interchangeable means of mobility. In this way, the app constructs individual transactions mediated through the platform, rather than the ongoing relationships of obligation and reciprocity of the stage.

As construed by apps like SafeBoda, then, ethical personhood emerges from the tightly circumscribed body and behaviors of the driver as an autonomous individual who is recognized as such, disembedded from other forms of socio-spatial relations. Many of the innovations of SafeBoda

in fact build on experiments carried out by individual stages, particularly those serving elite clientele. At Kisimenti, an elite shopping area home to the city's most glamorous mall and within 100 m of SafeBoda's HQ, one stage mandated that drivers wear numbered safety jackets and helmets several years before the introduction of apps to the market. Drivers in fact occupy these two social institutions, the stage and the platform, and engage simultaneously with the forms of personhood they reproduce. Drivers on SafeBoda remain active members of stages, and a recommendation from a stage leader is an essential component of drivers' applications to join the SafeBoda platform. A boda driver working at a stage on a main road in Ntinda, a middle class area with dozens of NGO offices, referred to SafeBoda as his "second stage," explaining the complementary ways he balances his existing practices with those enabled by the new ride-hailing technology: "I can wait here for clients, and they can also find me on their phone so I come to them at the office and it's easy for them like that." It is also possible for drivers to seek to establish lasting ties with SafeBoda passengers beyond immediate transactions, in order to cultivate thicker ongoing forms of relationality.

This compatibility with existing norms, whereby the platform exists as a layered add-on that extends existing social infrastructures, is an important aspect of SafeBoda and other mobility platforms' success. In January 2019, SafeBoda reached over 8000 drivers, and is held up as a model of professionalism for the industry (The Independent, 2019). It has expanded into Kenya, and is targeting Nigeria and Tanzania as its next markets. It has received nearly uniformly glowing media coverage in Kampala and praise from public health experts for improving safety standards in the industry (Muni et al., 2018). While there have been business problems with scaling rapidly, it has not experienced political backlash or protest from within the boda boda industry, a stark contrast to the earlier efforts initiated by the city government to regulate the industry.

The mobility platform economy in Kampala is far less disruptive than either its boosters suggest, or its critics might fear. It ultimately depends on the skills, labor, and embeddedness of an already existing and extensive set of drivers who have, over time, created the boda boda sector as a vital urban infrastructure. It relies on and recognizes the value of existing stages and the modes of personhood they constitute through ongoing social relationships and spatial arrangements as the basis of its vetting and recruitment model. The stage in many ways prefigures the functionality of app-based mobility platforms insofar as it brings together the supply of and demand for mobility services, and accommodates transactions between actors likely to be previously unknown to each other. The primary differences between the stage and the apps of platform-capitalism is the use of mobile phones and the presence of a third-party mediator aiming to collect revenue from each transaction and harvest data from the platform (Srnicek, 2017: 75–88). While drivers and passengers had used phones prior to the arrival of ride-hailing apps, this practice was dissimilar to ride-hailing platforms insofar as it relied on pre-existing social connections between drivers and passengers, if only to the extent of having exchanged numbers. Platforms like SafeBoda work because the form of personhood they entail, while operating along a different model, does not, in their current institutional iteration, disembed drivers. As is the case in a variety of other socio-cultural arenas like health, kinship, and religion, Kampalans navigate the multiple, overlapping, sometimes contradictory cultural logics of a host of institutions, making lives and livelihoods in the messy moral landscapes of the neoliberal urban economy.

4.3 Registered personhood

In 2013, the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) began a project to streamline and organize the boda boda industry, beginning with a mass-registration exercise. The KCCA sought to bring order to an urban industry many saw as chaotic, disorderly, and largely responsible for the high levels of fatality on the city's roads. Inspired by the way bodas are regulated in Rwanda, the KCCA envisioned helmeted and vest-clad drivers tied to approved permanent stages with well-built shelters. They foresaw a division-level organization of drivers who could control the growth and entry of new drivers and bikes into the system. As this effort coincided with my fieldwork in Kampala, I was able to interview municipal officials involved in this project, to attend and observe registration events as well as rallies to protest registration, and to discuss the ongoing municipal efforts with drivers. I also gathered and analysed a wide array of newspaper and other media coverage of the industry as well as municipal documents referring to plans to formalize and streamline it. On the surface, this project seems remarkably similar to that proposed by mobility platforms: issue uniforms, mandate helmet use, record the personal details of drivers, and create distinct identity numbers. However, one of the major differences lies in way the KCCA's project was predicated on a form of political authority many drivers perceived as hostile to their industry, threatening to their future in the city, and high-handed in ways that ran counter to the ethical norms underpinning the industry.

The underlying principle of registered personhood was official knowledge. Drivers were recognized first and foremost as a disorganized mass entity that had to be disaggregated and mapped. As such, the first step towards streamlining was an effort to audit the industry, starting with a register of every driver in the city. This campaign rolled out in October 2013, with locations at City Hall and other official venues around the city. This 17-day campaign, however, ultimately registered only 50,000 drivers and the rest of the proposals to streamline the industry were quietly abandoned. Understanding the forms of personhood, recognition, and political authority involved in this reform project helps to make sense of why the effort was rejected.

The central technology of the campaign was the "Boda Boda Registration Form 2013," which collected basic information about the motorcycle, its owner, and the driver. It asked for names, photographs, phone numbers, dates and places of birth, the name of the driver's stage, its chairman, the date of joining, the make and type of the bike, the ownership status and usage of the motorbike (boda, individual, corporate, or other), how many helmets a driver had, and safety training, as well as about the status of other legalities like drivers' licenses, registration numbers, number plates, insurance, and passenger-service vehicle status. Combining motorcycle, ownership, and driver information onto one form assumed a degree of stability that does not capture the social reality of the industry. It took a snapshot of the industry, tying an owner to a bike, to a rider, to a stage, all at a single moment, without any apparent way to update or register changes in these relationships. This made it hard for drivers to know what exactly was being registered and subject to new regulations: themselves or their bikes. Such ambiguity and municipal inability to grasp the complexities of the industry ran throughout the streamlining campaign.

The registration document itself expressed this ambiguity directly, asserting that, without registration drivers "may find it IMPOSSIBLE to work in Kampala," while reinforcing that the registration "is NOT a license to operate in Kampala." This gave rise to one of the most widely cited reasons drivers I interviewed gave for objecting to the KCCA's registration exercise: they feared it would lead either to an additional layer of taxation and costly licensing or, eventually, to the dismantling and displacement of the industry.

The other most common response drivers shared was that, while they were not opposed to registration and the regulation of the industry in principle, they objected to the distant and uncaring way the KCCA went about it. They feared the KCCA would seek to implement impractical and pointless reforms, like the highly touted idea to color-code uniforms according to the city's divisions and accord rights to operate accordingly. This plan would remake the industry to correspond more neatly with the city's official map and the forms of authority it entails, but drivers pointed out that this idea simply did not make sense for an industry defined by moving to cater to passengers' needs regardless of municipal boundaries, and would expose them to the possibility of increased police harassment when inevitably operating outside of their division. The KCCA, drivers objected, obviously did not understand the industry at a basic level, had not consulted drivers, and so had no ability, or right, to reform them.

The KCCA's effort took place at a time when its own legitimacy was already in question./ It had come into being controversially through an act of parliament that stripped the elected mayor of his powers and replaced him with a presidentially appointed technocrat wielding executive power over planning, budgeting, and policy in the city (Doherty, 2019). The registration was one of an array of early initiatives undertaken by the KCCA to consolidate its authority by cleaning up the city. These were widely perceived as a power grab by the president coming at the expense of the informal sector. Moreover, this exacerbated ongoing tensions between the central government and the Baganda population, for whom the national state is often perceived as an outsider or tenant in the city (Monteith, 2017; Tomas, 2019).

The KCCA, drivers complained, acted as if it already owned the industry and had the right to tell drivers what to do and how to operate. It did not recognize their contribution to the city, and, more importantly, did not consult them or their representatives in planning their wide-ranging reforms. In the words of one driver, "they did not come to us through our leaders."

This complaint registers a breach in what drivers saw as proper forms of rule: specifically, that the KCCA was unwilling even to listen to their concerns. Ganda theories of political authority and proper forms of rule are based on nested hierarchies, with the Kabaka (King) at the apex. The politico-moral order of the Kingdom has been spatially inscribed in the city through the location of palaces and tombs, the construction of roads, and the distribution of land since the pre-colonial era. The health and progress of the Kingdom continues to index collective wellbeing for many Baganda working in the informal economy (Monteith, 2017). This hierarchy's legitimacy stems from practices of ongoing reciprocity, recognition, and, as noted above, *empisa*: "standards of civility, manners and proper conduct" (Karlström, 1996: 490). These norms hold that, while it is the duty of subordinates to be loyal and obedient to superiors, the legitimacy of leadership is predicated "on open lines of communication between a ruler and his subjects" (Karlström, 1996: 488) and, in particular, on an understanding of free speech as the right of subjects to speak to and be heard by leaders and the reciprocal obligation of leaders to listen and consult. This norm shapes both everyday interactions and the practices of local politicians and community organizations who aim to recognize and reproduce the hierarchical relations of dependence constitutive of Ganda personhood.

Proper political conduct was demonstrated one afternoon at Katala stage when the drivers were eagerly listening to the radio, following the Kabaka's movements to anticipate the moment when his motorcade would pass by. When it did, all but two of the drivers peeled away from the stage to join the hundreds of other boda drivers accompanying and glorifying the Kabaka as he crossed

town. When I next saw him, one of the drivers who had joined the Kabaka's convoy explained to me that he did so to express his support and love, as well as his hope that the King would represent his loyal subjects' interests well. By failing to listen to drivers, by contrast, the KCCA's behavior posed not just a threat to their livelihoods but amounted to a failure to recognize their being.

Boda drivers' intense sense of ownership over the industry stemmed from the idea that it was something that they had built themselves without government involvement, NGO meddling, or outside investment. In the words of a boda driver and savings group leader from a stage in Nalukongo, "we started our own job of boda boda. No organization ever came to assist us in any way. It is true that KCCA is the concerned party of Kampala city but we started this work ourselves." The industry was constituted by the long-standing norms, relations, and hierarchies established at stages, by drivers' associations, and by organizations like the violent quasi-union Boda Boda 2010. These nested hierarchies and modes of representation literally gave drivers a place in the city and embedded them in ongoing relations of obligation and exchange they perceived as legitimate, if not perfectly functioning at all times. They formed an important part of the basis of their identities as drivers in particular and as persons in general. Because the KCCA ignored these established relations, drivers saw that the government was negating their existence and claiming a unidirectional authority to command.

Registered personhood manifests municipal control without reciprocity. It was predicated on drivers having an unmediated, direct relationship to a state that claimed the authority to know and reform the industry, but not the obligation to listen. The registration form did ask drivers "what are the major problems you have found in this business?" and "how would you like KCCA to assist you to improve your boda boda business?" But these questions were posed by a form, not through a relationship. It was not clear who, if anyone, might hear drivers' answers and what the response might be. Drivers' problems and desires became more data gathered by the KCCA without any discernible sense of what would be done with it.

Drivers' critiques were not of the registry as such, but at the way it was deployed as part of a high-handed campaign to transform, or even eradicate, the industry without their input. Emphasizing that every player should have his role and be treated with respect, the chairman of a group of drivers from Makindye Division put it this way at a 2013 rally protesting the registration exercise: "Registering itself is not bad, but KCCA should coordinate directly with the lower person. I grew up in Masaka where matooke [a green banana that is the staple food of central Uganda] is grown in plenty, but I never saw any axe in the peeling place. However powerful you are, you can't be the master of everything." Referring to an axe in the peeling place, the speaker argued that, in a morally proper division of labor, each person has their place in provisioning the family and respects the limits of their authority. While registration itself was not the problem, transgressions of authority were. Groups like Boda Boda 2010 advocating for drivers themselves used similar registries to enumerate their members and demonstrate their legitimacy, but in that case the registry was part of an institution that recognized drivers' personhood and was itself a technique of political reciprocity: registration in exchange for representation. By contrast, the KCCA's streamlining campaign implemented technologies that barely registered personhood, instead recognizing other forms of registration and ownership, and casting drivers alongside their motorcycles as entities to be recorded and organized.

In this way, the state failed to recognize drivers in ways they took as appropriate to ethical relations between rulers and ruled. By ignoring and over-riding the dense forms of representation,

leadership, and mutual obligation that drivers have constructed and that constitute them as ethical persons, the Kampala government's effort to register, discipline, and professionalize the industry was perceived not only as extractive and predatory, but, perhaps even more importantly, as disrespectful and dehumanizing.

5. Conclusion

In places where popular vernacular mobility infrastructures have evolved over the last century to respond to the growing needs of urban populations, a host of social institutions have been developed to embed these systems in place and in everyday life, mediating the hyper-competitive and individualizing dimensions of this work. As ride-hailing and other platforms proliferate around African cities, and as urban governments seek to regulate the "informal" urban mobility systems that have emerged around the continent, Kampala's moral landscape provides important lessons.

Ethical personhood is an especially important dimension of mobility platforms because of the particular problem such platforms seek to resolve in African cities. The problem is not availability. Nobody who has ever been to Kampala would complain about the shortage of boda bodas; on the contrary, there are constant complaints in the press that they are overwhelming the city. Rather, the problem that apps address in this context is framed around trust and safety: how can you know that your driver will not rob you or risk your life by driving recklessly? The aim of platforms like SafeBoda is to render the moral quality of drivers transparent to passengers. Apps act as a filtration system to evaluate, rank, and discipline boda boda drivers, establishing trust through digital mediation. In doing so, they deploy techniques and technologies of individuation I have referred to as platform personhood. By contrast, the existing boda boda industry addresses the trust problem through stage personhood: a specific form of socio-spatial organization that establishes trust through the embeddedness of drivers in particular places. In their efforts to regulate and "streamline" the industry, the Kampala Capital City Authority attempted to institute registered personhood, predicated on the authority of the government to individually register, license, and authorize the entire pool of drivers as the basis for safety and order.

Focusing on the overlapping, and often contradictory, social institutions through which urban mobility emerges reveals that personhood is not a monolithic, singular socio-cultural form, but is constituted within a complex moral landscape comprised of multiple, unevenly sedimented, historical layers. For many motorcycle taxi drivers, Ganda norms retain a certain primacy as the proper moral basis for social order, governance, and ethical personhood, albeit that these norms are increasingly being stretched and challenged by the everyday demands of making a living in a highly competitive industry in a highly unequal city. Nonetheless, the embedding norms of Ganda personhood and the social institution of the stage form the basis upon which new mobility platforms like SafeBoda take shape and upon which regulatory interventions like the KCCA's streamlining efforts must act. Rather than simply being technologies that disembed mobilities, the success of platforms depends on the extent to which they accommodate, complement, and extend existing practices and institutions. Kampala's government has rolled out a suite of transport reforms in the city, including road-paving and highway construction, public-private investments in bus and rail transport, proposed BRT and cable-car projects, and the establishment of an experimental non-motorized transport corridor. The success of these policies will largely depend on the buy-in and participation of existing transport actors who will oppose reforms not simply on the basis of their political-economic impacts, but also their effects on the moral landscape of the city and the forms of life and livelihood that the new mobility institutions engender or foreclose.

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