The Minibus Breakdown:  
Exploring Social Dynamics in a Neoliberal Urban Environment in Blantyre, Malawi

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Chapter 1: General Introduction

1.1. Central Research Question

This thesis is about minibuses, or is it? This is the consideration that constantly ran through my mind while I was conducting fieldwork and even during the writing process, when all the pieces started falling in place. The minibus, both as a mode and a medium, is the object of analysis that runs through this thesis and connects all the different chapters. However, this thesis, I would argue, is about much more than ‘the minibus’. The story that is about to be told deals with flows and stoppages, inside(rs) and outside(rs), departures and arrivals, opportunities and restrictions, control and freedom, and expectation and deceptions. Above all, however, this story is about people, people who move in very different directions on different routes in their lives and within different environments. As a social scientist, I was taught never to be satisfied with apparent dichotomies as presented above. By describing the movements of people, buses, institutions, money, goods and ideas I therefore look not only for commonalities in these different trajectories, but also for particularities since the exception more than often confirms the rule. I question how journeys are experienced and what they imply in terms of social relations and the organisation of social life in the city. For now, let me briefly elaborate on the central question that runs through the various chapters.

The issues that are addressed in this thesis can be categorised under several common denominators. First, of course, there is the minibus. Second, the empirical setting, which is crucial to the understanding of my analysis, is the city of Blantyre. Third, this city is best labelled as a neoliberal environment. Finally, as a social scientist, I am fascinated by social relations and the nature of sociality among urban residents. Accordingly, the central research question that runs through this thesis addresses how the presence and the working of the minibus influences social relations within a neoliberal urban environment. In the various chapters I address sub-questions around the political, economic and social aspects of this process (cf. below). Before doing so, however, it is necessary to elaborate briefly on the characteristics of a neoliberal urban environment, the empirical setting where I conducted my research and the methodological implications of conducting research on the minibus.
1.2. Towards a Neoliberal Urban Environment

This thesis is built around the notion of neoliberalism. Before moving on to the actual discussion of my research data, it is thus necessary to develop an understanding of what this notion implies in relation to minibus transport in Blantyre. In recent years, a lot has been written on the rise and impact of neoliberalism, not at least within an African context (see, for instance, Ferguson 2006). I would argue that three aspects of neoliberalism, which in itself a complex notion, are relevant to the argument that will be develop throughout this thesis. First, this ideology is often discussed as an economic process where the laws of the free market are said to control and determine the outcome of international and local trade relations. Second, neoliberalism also has political implications since it proposes a drawback from state institutions and overall state intervention. Third, there are also strong social implications related to neoliberalism. For instance, a strong emphasis on individual freedom and liberty gains momentum in spite of the collective good. Throughout the various chapters of this thesis, all three issues are discussed at length. Of course, this representation of neoliberalism is rather general. Therefore, it is necessary to come up with a workable description which allows ‘using’ neoliberalism in a more analytical way. Concretely, the implications of a neoliberal ideology run through my analysis as I attempt to identify how it affects social relations within the city. In the various chapters of this thesis I describe and identify how urban residents encounter and adopt or, from a different point of view, resist a neoliberal stance in their everyday life and in their attempts to move around the town.

First introduced in Africa at an international scale through the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP), neoliberalism has aggressively taken over from socialism and the project of postcolonial nation-building. This dynamic can be seen at work not at least within the transport sector (Mwase 2003). In my further analysis I link this process to mobility and the process of urbanisation. More specifically, I look at the social implications of a liberalised transport market within an urban environment. Overall, I argue that the influence of neoliberalism transforms social relations. In order to come to such a statement it is necessary to look at how neoliberalism plays out in everyday practices. Following this proposition I argue against a model where neoliberalism becomes a mere abstraction of a highly complex set of social, political and economic processes. I will accordingly demonstrate that the notion of neoliberalism and its meaning does not exist as such but instead that it is a construction which allows identifying, analysing and understanding certain dynamics in a contemporary globalising world. Therefore, I do not only approach this ideology as being imposed ‘from
above’ but also to how it is appropriated by social actors who operate within a neoliberal structure. In other words, neoliberalism is not an all-encompassing ideology or condition but, in this case, all the stakeholders involved in the minibus industry have a say in how they deal with this process.

To link neoliberalism and its implications to the notion of urban mobility is not arbitrary. The transport industry, especially within the city as will become clear in the next sections and chapters, is a sector where neoliberalism is felt strongly. This is not only the case at an institutional level where nationalised transport is slowly disappearing and where private entrepreneurs take over the market but also in everyday practice. If people want to move across town, they encounter how the provision of a public service is replaced by the urge to maximise of profits for minibus operators. Also, passengers need access to the necessary financial capital, to give but one example.

Overall, I would argue that the city is a place of great complexity and contradiction not at least because of its scalar position in an increasingly globalised world. In other words, it offers a perfect context to explore how neoliberalism plays out. But first, an analysis of urbanisation requires some insight into how the city is perceived and defined. More specifically, over the past few years the process of urbanisation has raised a number of questions or revised old discussions within the social sciences. A good part of these questions, I would argue, addresses the dynamics of integration, difference and conflict within the urban space. For instance, questions emerged around the notion of ‘community’ within the city or, somehow related to this topic, around shifting identities, belonging or rootedness. Also, the city seems to be an interesting place from where the process of globalisation and the local appropriation of ‘new’ global dynamics can be observed. Accordingly, an important discussion raised within the social sciences during the last few decades evolved around the nature of ‘the urban’. More in particular, attention has been paid to the dynamic of rural-urban migration and the temporality of urbanisation (Englund 2002). Also, many of these analyses questioned the importance of culture or more specifically urban culture and how this affects forms of social organisation when people move from their villages and into the city.

Overall, it seems inevitable that urbanization is becoming one of the most prevalent challenges in Africa and the global South in general. The main characteristic of this process is in many cases best described as one of material and infrastructural deprivation. Extreme poverty, no access to clean water and sanitation, lack of proper housing, etc. all characterize living conditions of the large majority of African urbanites. It seems, in this view, that people are not moving into a more developed or a more modern world, as proposed in the
modernization theories which ruled the development ideology during the early postcolonial period. At first sight this seems to be no different within Malawi, one of the poorest countries in Africa with no natural resources and with about half of the GDP coming from development aid. Also, like many other countries, the large majority of the urban residents are below the age of 25 and have minimal formal opportunities. Many of them look for opportunities in the popular economy which offers little security with regard to their survival. Rather, within this context of abjection (Ferguson 1999: 236) where people seem to be “thrown down” or “expelled”, it is interesting to see how they find ways to creatively counter these dynamics. Here, I am particularly interested in questions which challenge us to think about emerging issues with regard to the development of social and cultural forms of organization within an urban context. These questions are especially relevant because urbanization is never an isolated process but is, as mentioned before, best perceived in relation to global and local dynamics. The establishments of connections at different levels are highly relevant here. Research, for instance, focuses on the diaspora and the influence of transnational connections which influence social relations within and between cities. Equally important, I tend to argue, are connections established within the urban space itself. Therefore, this research project provides an analysis of minibus transport as one of the modes people turn to in order to move, mobilize and connect. In the next section I briefly sketch the empirical context within these processes are set.

1.3. Some Reflections on the Empirical Context

As part of the MPhil African Studies programme at Leiden University, I conducted six months of ethnographic field research in Blantyre, Malawi. This city is not the metropolis one finds in other parts of Africa or that is often the focus of discussions on urbanisation. As will become clear, Blantyre has somewhat been neglected as an urban centre during the colonial and the post-colonial era. Despite being one of the earliest colonial urban settlements on the continent, the city never developed in a major city where regional trade converged. The city was established on behalf of the Free Church of Scotland. This institution received a large amount of their funding from the Scottish industrial class (McCracken 1977: 176). One of their initial concerns was the abolition of the slave trade. Due to the involvement of the Scottish by the end of the nineteenth century, there came an abrupt end to this long lasting trade network dominated by Yao Muslim traders. The slave trade formed part of a larger network that extended throughout Eastern and Southern Africa (Good 2004: 50-51).
alternative, the African Lakes Corporation, also known as Mandala, was erected in 1878 (Power 1990: 22). This company focused mainly on the trade and transport industry and eventually covered a large number of countries in the wider Southern African region. In 1891, Malawi belonged to the British Central Africa Protectorate and Harry Johnston became its first Commissioner. He decided to establish the administrative capital in Zomba. In 1907 the territory that is today known as Malawi was renamed as the Nyasaland Protectorate and a system of indirect rule was established under the British Empire. Also at the same time (1907) it was decided that Limbe would be the terminus of the railway network (McCracken 1998: 247).

Urbanisation in Malawi has, up till today, remained rather modest. This has several reasons. First, the administrative, commercial and industrial centres of the country were scattered over three main areas: Zomba, Limbe and Blantyre. The second main reason was that throughout the colonial history, and some time afterwards, Malawi operated as the labour reserve for the mining industry in South Africa and Rhodesia. This implies that levels of urbanisation in Malawi did not only remain relatively small, but also that a large part of Malawians gained their urban experiences outside of the country, in the Southern African metropolis. Both the early colonial government and the religious authorities played their part in the development of labour migration. First of all through the introduction of the hut tax by the first commissioner which made it profitable to engage in wage labour outside of the country (Baker 1975). Second, the education provided by the missionaries made that Africans were highly skilled and, accordingly, well suited for administrative jobs in and around the mining industry. Today, a large number of Malawians still hope to try their luck in South Africa. During my research a relatively large number of interlocutors were either preparing to leave for South Africa or actually left “looking for green pastures”\(^1\).

A third factor that contributed to low urbanisation rates in Malawi is its agricultural economy. On the one hand, the large majority of the rural population relied on peasant farming in order to secure a basic livelihood. On the other hand, because of the scattering of the urban centres, the white settler population remained rather modest in all three cities mentioned above. The absence of white settlers, the only group of people who paid full rate taxes, made that financial means were not abundant. Despite the rather small number of white settlers in the country, they occupied a large amount of land. This led to the development of large estate agriculture. This development, together with a basic industry in and around

\(^1\) This is a common expression, especially among the many young, uneducated men who are talking about South Africa.
Blantyre, in its turn led to a massive influx of poor Africans in the urban periphery. As a result of this increasing population pressure in the townships, land became a primary preoccupation of the population. Furthermore, it became increasingly clear that urban dwellers needed to rely on ties within the city that could provide goods and services in the townships.

Overall, the development of a dominantly agricultural economy and the marginal position of Malawi in the larger Southern African region had a significant influence on political and social relations and the distribution of power within Malawian society. In the case of Malawi, I would argue that indeed, “in the long run, brute economic realities prevail over political interventions” (Chirwa 1996: 642). Because of these reasons, Blantyre was never considered the prime city in the country. I will return to the implications of this policy at a later stage but for now I merely elaborate on the empirical context within which I conducted my field research.

With, according to a recent survey\(^2\), approximately 660,000 inhabitants, Blantyre is slowly loosing its position of most populated city to Lilongwe, the administrative capital located in the central region of the country. However, together with its twin city Limbe, Blantyre remains the commercial and economic heart of the country. Here Blantyre is an interesting case because, within Malawi, the city heavily relies on commerce and trade where the North of the country is renowned for its education and the central region largely depends on the production of tobacco. Also, with regard to my own research, Blantyre is the city where minibus transport took off right after the transition to multi-party democracy in 1994 and where, up till today, the majority of minibuses are registered. During my stay in Malawi I also travelled to Mzuzu and Salima, two slightly more modest towns where minibuses only pass by on long distance routes. Intra-urban transport there is organised with bicycle taxis. Even though I passed through these cities for only a short time, I could already feel the difference with a city like Blantyre or Lilongwe simply because of the absence of minibuses that created a totally different atmosphere. Moreover, what makes Blantyre an interesting city to study compared, for instance, to Lilongwe is that it grew relatively naturally throughout history whereas Lilongwe was carefully planned out and each geographical zone was appointed a specific function (Potts 1986).

When I talk about Blantyre throughout this thesis, I mostly refer to the city centre. More specifically, my interlocutors identified ‘Blantyre’ as the colonial centre focused within

\(^2\) 2008 Population and Housing Census: Preliminary Report, National Statistics Office, Zomba (Malawi)
the triangle of Victoria Avenue, Sir Glyn Jones Road and Haile Selassie Road. Located just outside of the central triangle are the city’s central market area and Mibawa, the main bus terminal where all the minibuses from the various neighbourhoods converge. Overall, the city centre is the place where mainly day-time activities occur. During the night these streets are virtually empty and when I was sitting on the curbs of Victoria Avenue during the early morning hours I could see how the city slowly awakes and how a growing number of bodies enter the streets, the shops and the offices throughout the day. This in contrast to the residential areas located on the geographical periphery of the city centre where people can be found roaming the street at any hour of the day. Because Blantyre is a small city, from a geographical point of view, the distance with the residential areas is relatively short. Most of the minibus journeys, for example, take about half an hour. Also, the lay-out of the various townships still reflects the historical legacy of segregation and discrimination during the colonial era. For instance, areas like Sunnyside or Namiwawa, located close to the city centre, are still inhabited by the upper middle class, the plots are bigger than in other areas and the houses consist of compounds inclusive of gates and other security measures. Within these neighbourhoods, there are fewer minibuses because most of its inhabitants have private means of transport.

Since it is impossible to get a proper understanding of minibus transport on every route within the city, I was forced to make a selection of minibus routes. I started off by focusing on the minibus traffic between Ndirande and Blantyre. Ndirande is not only one of the oldest neighbourhoods in the city but due to its location close to the industrial Makata area it is also the highest populated with over a hundred thousand inhabitants\(^3\). My choice for this neighbourhood was further strengthened by the fact that a number of social, mainly historical, analyses exist which would make its description in this thesis more elaborate. Living with my guest family in Chilomoni, a more recent and more middle-class neighbourhood located on the other side of the Blantyre triangle with about 37,000\(^4\) inhabitants, I soon noticed how the minibuses there were organised in a very different way than in Ndirande. Therefore, almost half way through my research, I decided to shift my focus and also include this second neighbourhood in my research.

From this brief descriptive lay-out of Blantyre, it is clear that the complexity of the city is a key aspect of my research. A focus on movements, connections and minibuses within

\(^3\) 2008 Population and Housing Census: Preliminary Report, National Statistics Office, Zomba (Malawi)
\(^4\) 2008 Population and Housing Census: Preliminary Report, National Statistics Office, Zomba (Malawi)
this complex terrain holds some methodological implications. These are address in the next
section.

1.4. The Minibus and its Methodological Implications

The complexity of urban life and the construction of an urban environment as it is described
here, makes grasping social dynamics through academic research often a difficult task.
Therefore, I find it useful and even necessary to reflect further on the object of the minibus as
a possible case study from which to approach the process of urbanisation and the production
of space within the city. Also, related to this issue is a brief note on the methodology.

First and foremost there is a need to explain what I am talking about when I refer to
the minibus throughout this thesis since it concerns a very specific type of motor vehicle.
Minibuses can be found in all types and colours in Blantyre. However, the large majority of
the buses are white Toyota Hiace or Hiroof. Also, very few cars are ‘new’. Most are sold and
bought among minibus operators or imported from Dubai or South Africa. The buses that
form the object around which this thesis is built are registered as Public Service Vehicles
(PSV) and carry red and white number plates (cf. chapter three and five). The carrying
capacity of the vehicles varies according to the type of bus. On average, however, buses can
take around thirteen passengers. That is, if the legal capacity is respected. If this is not the
case, there are about sixteen or seventeen passengers on board. On the inside, the buses are
divided in two main segments. First, in the front there is a place for the drivers who can take
two passengers. The latter have to enter the bus through the door at the front of the bus. For
the passengers who sit in the back there is a sliding door where the conductor of the bus has
his place. When the official carrying capacity is respected, minibuses carry three passengers
per row. However, in many cases they do take four or five, despite common complaints. The
seats on the left side of the bus are folding seats in order to allow passengers to move to the
back without problems. The driver is mainly in control over the front of the bus while the
conductor controls the back section. There is a physical connection between these two
sections which enables the conductor and the driver to communicate and pass money or a
newspaper if necessary. Also, with most buses there is a small loading space at the back
where extra luggage can be stored.

The material conditions of the buses are often not very good. However, as will become
clear throughout this thesis, I do not follow the popular imagination where the minibus should
represent all that is wrong with ‘Africa’. I argue that these buses are elaborate technological
constructions. Despite the fact that engine checks do not occur regularly or that breakdowns happen too often, these buses are in many cases an example of technological proficiency. With spare parts or through mere creativity, mechanics are able to wire the whole thing together each time a problem arises (cf. chapter five). These are of course mainly the physical characteristics of this peculiar object. Nevertheless, it is important in the light of my further analysis as will already become clear in the remainder of this section.

Looking at the city through the window of a minibus is very different than looking through the window of a church, a mosque or through the eyes of a youth movement, to name but a few examples of ‘community’ formation at the urban scale. The difference lies in the fact that, for passengers at least, the minibus is not a space where long lasting social relations are established but, on the contrary, it is characterised by ephemeral, fluid and brief connections between people and places. Based on these encounters, the image that is constructed of the city is a highly particular one and, at first sight at least, maybe even superficial. However, as I hope to demonstrate throughout this thesis, there is more to the connections established within and around the minibus than first meets the eye. I do so by identifying and highlighting the connection between what is going on within the minibus and the world outside of the bus. Rather than merely looking at the bus as a microcosm of wider urban life, I would argue that an insight into how minibus transport operates in a broad sense informs us about some continuities and discontinuities of urban dynamics and furthermore help identify how new forms of urban social life emerge.

In general, the large majority of research conducted in relation to (minibus) transport is based primarily on quantitative research methods and surveys. D'hondt (2006) notes that “the primary objective of these studies is to identify average users, describe usage patterns, and inventarize sources of commuter discontent” (2006: 2). Although the author’s focus is on interaction in and around minibuses, I follow his idea that “these surveys consistently gloss over the ‘how’ of minibus transportation and pay little attention to the situated complexes of practical knowledge that are implicated in the reproduction of the phenomenon” (ibid: 3).

From a methodological point of view therefore, this type of research also holds a number of serious challenges. To give but one example: since I was not working with a bounded community of interlocutors, I found myself constantly struggling with the question whether my data were representative and whether the image that I construct and present here is reflective for the urbanites who rely on everyday mobility within Blantyre. Throughout the writing process, on the other hand, I noticed that I had collected a good number of interviews and observations to build my case. Also more than often I encountered the occasional deviant
comment which made me reflect on the collected data and, in the end, only strengthened my motivation to delve deeper into certain themes and topics related to minibus transport. Overall, I need to stress that my research is ultimately qualitative in nature. Therefore, the image that I present of the city and how it is experienced, lived and appropriated is the result of a subjective reading of the city as I understood it through my interlocutors.

I regret the fact that I never counted – or better, that I lost count of – the number of minibus trips I did while being in Blantyre. Overall, all my movements were made in a minibus, from home to town and back, or just moving around town. On average I made about three or four trips per day from the point of departure to the terminus. During these trips I made observations and took notes when possible. However, even when I was just going home after a long day’s work and something ‘exceptional’ occurred along the road – which it did quite regularly since the minibus is a place where you can expect anything at any time – I rushed home to write down as many details as I could remember. Since these trips only take about twenty minutes to half an hour, depending on the number of stops or on the police presence on the road, I also conducted extensive participant observation at the various depots in Ndirande, Chilomoni and Blantyre. This was very convenient since I could go there any time of the day and I was certain that I would encounter drivers or conductors I knew. The first few times of course this felt a bit inconvenient but the word quickly spread and I soon realised how the network of people working in the minibus industry operates as a “community of experience”, working together and sharing both the good and the bad news they encounter while being on the road. At the end of the day I could literally spend hours at the depots just hanging around, chatting with drivers and conductors, putting gas, counting money, doing timing or cleaning cars all while exchanging information that contributed to the data I gathered for my research. Among minibus operators, except in the beginning of my research, I hardly ever organised structured or even semi-structured interviews. Moreover, when I was talking to one person while hanging out in one of the minibuses waiting to load, private conversations often turned into focus group discussions since others always joined in with comments or remarks and started discussing and arguing about the issue at hand.

The search for interlocutors among the minibus passengers is a different story. I quickly realised that it was rather difficult to introduce my research to anybody during a minibus journey. Moreover, since the minibus is a place where people’s paths cross rather than a meeting place it was difficult to engage in any type of conversation. I started out, together with one of the minibus conductors in Ndirande, by organising a small survey where we questioned about two hundred people about where they were travelling to, how often they
travelled, about their occupation and their age. Although these data would make interesting statistics, they do not bring more qualitative data concerning the experience and the complexities around minibus transport within the city. Therefore, I turned to my contacts within the minibus industry to point out some friends or acquaintances who travel on a regular basis and whom I could talk to with regard to my research. Luckily this tactic turned out rather well and the snowball effect set in motion quickly and convincingly. By getting to know one person a bit better, they almost always pointed me in the direction of another interesting interlocutor. These people, together with the ones I found due to my own efforts constitute the main corpus of data that I gathered. With minibus passengers I almost always had to resort to structured or semi-structured interviews and set a meeting at a particular time and place because when travelling in a minibus, they are always under way to their destination. Throughout this thesis the names of interlocutors are altered in order to protect their privacy. First, because most of my informants asked me to do so and second, because some of the information could be regarded as controversial or damaging.

In order to have a better idea about the information I gathered and how I structured it, the remainder of this introduction elaborates on the outline of this thesis.

1.5. Thesis Outline

This thesis consists of four main chapters where various aspects of neoliberalism in relation to minibus transport are explored. The minibus runs through the various chapters as the central object of analysis. However, as I claimed in the beginning if this chapter, all the following chapters deal with a number of highly diverse themes. In order to introduce these various topics and find a connection between them, I find it necessary to elaborate briefly on each one.

Chapter two presents a more empirical description on the position of the minibus within a neoliberal urban environment. Overall, this chapter serves as a prelude where I sketch the context within which my further analysis is situated. Four main issues are addressed here. First, I further develop a conceptual framework based on the dynamic of fragmentation and connection that allows for an understanding of how a neoliberal urban environment is perceived. Second, I present a selective social history of Blantyre, its position within Malawi and the wider Southern African region. Third, I describe the importance of the minibus in the social organisation of urban life and the social infrastructure within the city. Finally, I further elaborate on the areas of Chilomoni and Ndirande by zooming out and
looking at how these neighbourhoods are perceived and how mobility plays an important role in establishing a viable social network within the wider urban environment.

Chapter three addresses issues related to the political implications of neoliberalism. First, I briefly introduce a conceptual framework on how neoliberalism is perceived in socio-political terms. Second, the historical relationship between entrepreneurs and governmental institutions are addressed. Third, liberalisation and privatisation of public services are discussed at an institutional level. Fourth, I move away from the offices and back to the street to see how power and control over – socially produced – space is negotiated. Three practices are discussed in this section: the role of police checkpoints when it comes to imposing power and control, the criminalisation of the use of public space through the introduction of illegal parking zones and the role of personal connections between minibus operators and police officers.

Chapter four analyses the economic aspects of neoliberalism and travel. More specifically I discuss how these influence social relations within the city. In the first section the position of the passengers is central. Here I argue that travelling by minibus is not something people ‘just do’. It requires access to resources, and more specifically to money. The second section interprets how money establishes and enforces social hierarchies among minibus operators by looking at how money is made and ‘remade’ around the notion of masculinity. Access to minibus transport can also be considered as a ‘gift’. Again, based on empirical descriptions, the third section looks at the social context which enables these kinds of ‘contracts’ to unfold. In the Fourth section, the moral side of travelling is considered in relation to witchcraft.

Chapter five focuses on yet another perspective of minibus transport. More specifically, it focuses on the position of the minibus within the urban landscape and on how it determines the nature of social relations within the city. First, it is argued that looking at the minibus as a border zone offers new ways of approaching the dynamics surrounding it. In order to understand this ambiguity it is necessary to elaborate on the study of material culture. The second section therefore discusses the ‘cultural biography of things’. In the third section, these arguments are taken to a next level by arguing that the minibus fits within the realm of popular culture since it is difficult to control by authorities and since it seems to hold several powers that can be compared to that of the trickster. Accordingly, the final section elaborates on the powers of the minibus: the power over life and death, the power to comment on society and the power to subvert social hierarchies and conventions.
Chapter six brings all the above presented arguments together in an attempt to establish some final concluding remarks in relation to the process of urbanisation, neoliberalism and the role of the minibus within this process. In short, the diversity of the themes that are discussed in relation to the minibus allow for an interpretation where the minibus can be looked at as a metaphor for the process of urbanisation.
2.1. Urban Fragmentation and its Social Implications

This chapter elaborates on a first aspect of neoliberalism namely the fragmentation of the urban space. I would argue that fragmentation can be interpreted from two points of view. First, the term refers to the multiplicity of both individual and collective trajectories that come together within the city. Second, the notion of fragmentation also refers to the transformation of the urban public space which is no longer accessible to all and where rigid boundaries are implemented to demarcate private or privatised properties (see Caldeira 2000). Both of these aspects will be discussed at length in the remainder of this chapter. For now, I briefly develop a more argument around which my own analysis is built.

The process of urbanisation in Africa can not, and should not, be approached as phenomenon on its own. Cities emerge on the verge between local, regional, national and global dynamics. Also, the nature of urbanisation is often not permanent or a teleological movement towards an imagined end point. The work of James Ferguson (1999) in relation to the Zambian Copperbelt, for instance, eloquently points out how urban identities are never fixed but rather the result of a cultivation of styles moving between the local and the cosmopolitan based on wealth, education and cultural competence (see also Larkin 2004: 92-93). Moreover, the author elaborates on the nature of urban settlement patterns by deconstructing the notion of rural-urban migration and the “myth” of permanent urbanisation. Overall, his work demonstrates that the pattern of urbanisation is not a singular one but rather consists of a “full house of variations” (Ferguson 1999: 78-81). Accordingly the city and the urban space can not be approached as a monolithic unit or as one singular space (see also Murray 2004). In other words multiplicity and contradiction are two notions inherent in what constitutes a city. People “create and transform the cities in which they live; yet they are shaped by urban infrastructure” (Howard 2003: 200). Several authors have further elaborated on this argument and they go even further. Rather than being “shaped” by the urban infrastructure, people themselves shape the physical environment in which they live and move through their everyday practices (e.g. De Boeck 2005, Simone 1998). The idea that space is socially produced (Gupta and Ferguson 1992) is closely connected with the idea of imagined communities. Trough the appropriation of space, segregation, exclusion and the formation of
urban communities’ or in short, urban life, is produced. In this respect, several authors noted that the urban context offers an “arena” (Anderson and Rathbone 2000: 7) for struggle on many different levels and scales. As Simone (1998: 70) indicates: “The diverse social, economic and cultural spaces constituting the physical entity of the city, and over which government institutions nominally preside, are aspects and nodes of proliferating networks of influence and exchange. Within such a configuration, these spaces can also be highly insular embodiments of specialised interest, often operating in relative autonomy from the dynamics and concerns which prevail in the rest of the city”. Following this line of interpretation, the urban environment is highly fragmented on various scales. This fragmentation does not only take place on the level of the neighbourhoods but also within various residential areas. In his comprehensive work on Kinshasa, Filip de Boeck (2004) explores the multiplicity of and in the city. Taking Italo Calvino’s (1997 [1972]) invisible cities as a point of departure, the author takes up the concepts of reflection and that of the mirror hall. In short, he seeks “to analyze the various levels of mirroring which fracture Kinshasa’s urban world into a series of kaleidoscopic, multiple, but simultaneously existing, worlds. Each of these micro cities constantly reflects the others, though this reflection is not always symmetrical. Some of these cities, and some levels of mirroring between them, are more visible than others” (de Boeck 2004: 17-18). Throughout his work, the author focuses not only on the lived experience of the physical infrastructure but also takes his analysis to a different level by paying attention to how urban space is imagined. Without going into further detail, it is important to stress how, generally speaking, the fragmentation of the urban space is strongly influenced by, among other things, historical dynamics as well as socio-economic factors. Chilivumbo (1975) describes the ecology of social types in Blantyre in terms of strict socio-spatial characteristics. The author distinguishes four different types of neighbourhoods within the city. First, “exclusive, formerly European, residential neighbourhood” (Chilivumbo 1975: 310). Second, residential areas with less elaborate housing and facilities. Third, there are areas where the houses are much smaller, with badly eroded roads. And finally, the fourth type is simply characterised as peri-urban with a lack of basic sanitation infrastructure and little or no housing regulations. Similar to the distinct physical characteristics of these different types of neighbourhoods, the author identifies separated social identities – or “social personality types” (Chilivumbo 1975: 312) – among the people who inhabit these areas. Basically, the author describes these social identities along a continuum where the ‘highest’ type of social identity is westernised and the ‘lowest’ resembles structures of social organisation similar to village life with a strong emphasis on traditional values and relations among people from the
same ethnic background. This type of analysis is functionalistic in the sense that everybody has his own geographical space and that rigid social boundaries are erected. Overall, the analysis presented in this chapter goes against this rather functional spatial representation of the city.

A lack of cohesion and homogeneity within the urban space might be perceived, especially from the point of view of local, urban and national administrations, in a negative way since it poses a number of problems in relation to the implementation of effective governance structures. However, the question that is addressed throughout this chapter concerns the implications that are generated through this fragmentation. In an attempt to answer this question, I move beyond mere administrative issues and look at how fragmentation allows for new forms of social collaboration and organisations to emerge. For now, in short, I argue that analyses of minibus transport and the position of the minibus within the urban space can highlight a more positive interpretation of urban fragmentation. Rather than focussing on mere fragmentation and the articulation of difference, the minibus also establishes connections between various spaces.

The minibus is not an object that emerged solely in Malawi or Blantyre for that matter. On the contrary, in most African cities, this object roams the streets in its capacity as mode of transportation. Within the current framework of fragmentation and connection then, it might not come as a surprise that it forms the prime subject of analysis. Of course, the types of connections that are addressed here go beyond mere geographical movements in space. In their attempt to come to grips with the limitation and shortcomings of academic analyses in relation to urban dynamics, Mbembe and Nuthall (2004: 349) argue that “the conceptual categories with which to account for social velocity, the power of the unforeseen and of the unfolding, are in need of refinement” (ibid: 349, emphasis in original). Two examples indicate what this implies and how this works out methodologically. First, I briefly discuss a case study in relation to minibus transport. Hansen (2006) looks at taxis in a formerly Indian township close to Durban in South Africa as a perfect example of how social velocity as described by Mbembe and Nuthall (2004) is manifested in post-apartheid Durban. He does so by identifying how these taxis are an expression of the transformation from order and fixity within the neighbourhood to anxiety, unknowability and eros (Hansen 2006: 186). For one, the taxis contribute to a re-articulation and redefinition of identities, whether ethnic, gender or racial through the choice of music or through their colours and the way they move through town. Also, due to increased mobility and spatial penetration, the composition of the neighbourhood is no longer “proper Indian” as it used to be under apartheid. In a way, the
involvement of the minibus contributes to a feeling of uprootedness among its inhabitants. In conclusion, Hansen (ibid: 206) states that “[i]n view of the wider South African context, the taxi, its colours, and its deafening *kwai*to signifies much more than a demotic celebration of postapartheid freedom. It also signifies a new inhabitation of urban space and a new morally ambiguous cultural genre […] that cannot recognize itself as an identity”. In short, he analyses how the taxi embodies the unforeseen and the unexpected.

Second, I briefly indicate how urban fragmentation can be identified through the story of Anthony, a minibus driver and owner operating within Blantyre. Overall, this story will indicate the complexity of moving around within the urban environment. This narrative also shows the implications of an increasingly fractured urban landscape in very practical terms. Anthony needs to be flexible and creative when he attempts to navigate the urban landscape despite numerous constraints. Throughout this description I also touch upon some of the issues I address in the remainder of this chapter.

Anthony is a thirty-two year old man who lives in Chilomoni, a middle class neighbourhood in Blantyre. Since he came back from South Africa where he spent a few years looking for money, he earns his money as a minibus owner. He also drives his bus on the route between Ndirande and the City Centre. This is not always easy since his minibus is almost falling apart: the wood is old and rusty, the engine is failing, the petrol tank does not operate properly and his insurance and licenses are out of date. Compared to some of the other drivers I would argue that Anthony is a very social person. He moves within various circles ranging from upper-class owners who have a whole fleet of buses to the vendors on the streets. Anthony pays a lot of attention to his job. Despite the condition of his minibus, passengers often showed their appreciation for the way they are treated. He wants his bus to be clean and every morning he buys a newspaper for the passengers to read. He always refers to his passengers as “customers” or as being “expensive people” that need to be taken good care of. Despite, or maybe because of, his mobility and his ability to move across different social groups, he does not really seem to belong anywhere. While he stays in Chilomoni, where he takes care of his family and occasionally goes out for a drink at night, he largely relies on his network of colleagues at the stage in Ndirande. These contacts do stay rather ephemeral since the majority of the minibus operators in Ndirande consider him to be an outsider. The condition of his car is often the subject of mockery and when business is slow he easily becomes the first victim because business is shared among a small group of Ndirande based drivers.
As will become clear in the remainder of this chapter, the various factors that play in and influence Anthony’s everyday practices – the condition of his bus, his customers, the stage, the authorities, his colleagues – all relate to the process fragmentation. For now, in the next section, I describe how fragmentation is not a recent phenomenon but that a number of historical dynamics contributed to, and still influence, current urbanisation trends within Malawi.

2.2. A Selective Social History of Blantyre

Urban fragmentation is not a recent phenomenon. However, I would argue that neoliberalism has its part to play in how it develops today. Nevertheless, it is important to put current day dynamics in a historical context to be able to situate and analyse them properly. Accordingly in this historical overview, three main time periods are distinguished starting with the early colonial period which indicates the start of the urbanisation process in Malawi as it is known today. A next period in time is demarcated with the coming of independence and the transition to the authoritarian rule under Dr. Kamuzu Banda. Finally, there is the transition to multi-party democracy and the implementation of neoliberal governance within the urban sphere.

The living conditions of African urbanites within Blantyre throughout the colonial regime are, according to McCracken, best described through the notions of segregation and poverty (McCracken 1998: 250). For instance, settler patterns in Blantyre were very similar to South African cities under apartheid characterised by strict segregation of the different population groups. With most white settlers living in Sunnyside – which is still an upper class neighbourhood today –, all Asian entrepreneurs were confined within the boundaries of the ‘Asian Ward’ and the African population lived in peri-urban villages and later barracks provided by companies in Ndirande and Chichiri. In comparison to the European presence in surrounding countries, Malawi’s white population remained rather modest throughout the colonial period. Notwithstanding, Blantyre was a city developed especially to encourage non-African businesses. Within the city centre, few Africans were operating private businesses or even visibly present.

The African’s movements were strictly controlled and restricted. The townships and peri-urban villages were developed on native land which only increased the possibilities to enforce the rule of law. There was strict police surveillance on the borders of the native land but inside there was little or no control by the colonial government (Power 1990: 36-37). The
Africans lived under a curfew and needed a special pass from their employees in order to move around between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m. Also, African inhabitants were not allowed to own and purchase property so under the legislation at that time it was impossible to obtain the right to vote (McCracken 1998: 250-251).

In 1936 the area of Ndirande, the oldest and most densely populated township around Blantyre, was renamed as Native Trust Land and fell under the rule of chief Kapeni. During this period the area expanded and people built where and what they wanted without any sense of planning (Power 1990: 196). Between 1930 and 1945, Ndirande housed the African urban elite and was regarded as a ‘good’ place to live. In 1939 the colonial administration decided to expand its control and a suburban sub-council was created. Despite this incentive, the involvement of African residents within the city’s economy during that time was heavily dependant on the colonial economy which contributed to its fragility (ibid: 202-203). This situation continued until 1948 when there was an expansion of the city’s boundaries and, for example, large parts of Ndirande were included into Blantyre (ibid: 42). However, until 1963, the land did not fall under town planning control. Because a lack of official government control, a large number of illegal squatter settlements developed. Here, most new urbanites lived without any form of social security from the government. This led to the development of social structures where new inhabitants were incorporated into existing kinship and family structures (Norwood 1972: 135).

The economic boom after the Second World War led to a severe increase of the cost of living within the city. Since the African working population did not profit form the increase in production, they were the first who felt an increase in expenses. This is especially the case since more and more people living in the townships relied on materials and services that were provided in the city centre. Also within the townships people found – or created – job opportunities as carpenters, tinsmiths, shop keepers, market sellers, hawkers, builders or brickfield labourers in order to escape extreme poverty (ibid: 137). In general, during this time, there were more opportunities for small-scale entrepreneurs within a still highly repressive regime. Also, the increasing number of private businesses attracted many young men who entered wage labour positions. Due to high unemployment, a lot of these businesses continue to provide an income for many inhabitants of Ndirande today. Throughout the 1950s entrepreneurs became more and more involved in local and national politics which resulted in an initial demand for independence. I shall return to this discussion at a later stage (cf. Chapter 3) but for now it suffices to recount that colonial policies were aimed at segregation and exclusion, both on a physical and geographical level, as well as on a social level.
In 1964, Malawi gained its independence from British rule and The Malawi Congress Party (MCP) became the ruling party with Kamuzu Banda as the president, and later the president for life, of the country. In general, little is known about the process of urbanisation under his regime. There are however, a number of interesting all-encompassing tendencies that characterised his rule and that can be translated or applied to the urban areas. For instance, centralisation of government provisions was key to the president and his stronghold. What is more, Banda relocated the country’s capital from Zomba to Lilongwe. Although this shift lies beyond the scope of the main argument that I am trying to develop in this chapter, it is necessary to say that there were a lot of good arguments to shift its location to Blantyre. But because of, among other things, the central location of Lilongwe, the city – again – did not become the centre of administrative action (Potts 1986). Until today, this shift in policy has its consequences for urban development and policies.

Within Blantyre’s urban environment, the MCP was omnipresent and controlled every aspect of social life during the Banda regime. Rijk van Dijk (1992) identifies three main forms of authority within the townships during the one-party regime. These are the village headman, the established churches and the officials of the MCP. Since the incorporation of the peri-urban villages into the structure of the city, the village headman’s influence gradually diminished. This form of authority is relatively weak and its influence remains relatively small (ibid: 128). The established churches (CCAP and the Roman Catholics) both claimed an important amount of members within the different neighbourhoods. Their influence is especially strong through their organisation of education. They also play a role in the election of the MCP officials by granting their support to one of the candidates every four years (ibid: 131-133).

During the 1980s Kamuzu Banda was, little by little, loosing grip over the absolute control he had in every domain of society. Within the political sphere, voices of protest were getting louder both inside and outside the country. During the Cold War, the Banda regime enjoyed great support from donor countries. In 1989, at the end of the tensions between the East and the West, the international community stopped all donor aid to the Malawian government, except for humanitarian aid (van Donge 1995: 231). Also, the World Bank and the IMF continued giving financial support for the restructuring of the economy. Within Malawi, opposition came from different directions. In March 1992, the Catholic Bishops issued an Episcopal letter (Lenten Letter) in which they talk about the lack of democracy in

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5 For an analysis of how Banda ‘built’ his legitimacy, see Forster (1994).
the country and raise issues about persistent poverty and corruption. Following the Episcopal
from the Bishops there were outbursts of violence among students at both Chancellor college
in Zomba and the Polytechnic University in Blantyre. This revolt was initially oppressed by a
violent reaction from Banda’s troops but when Chakufwa Chihana, who was also involved in
the Transport Union before the coming of Kamuzu Banda, called for a public referendum on
multi-party democracy the president backed down and opened the way for change. During
this same period two new ‘pressure groups’ – political parties would have been illegal – were
established, namely the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (AFORD) under the
leadership of Chihana and the United Democratic Front (UDF) under Bakili Muluzi. In 1994
Kamuzu Banda stepped down and allowed for the organisation of democratic elections.
Nevertheless, Banda was still the official MCP presidential candidate despite serious physical
health problems. John Tembo, the second in line and often held responsible for the gruesome
crimes committed by the party was also actively involved in the maintenance of the position
of the MCP within the political field. The period preceding the elections was characterised by
insecurity and sudden shifts in alliances among the three major different parties. In 1994
Bakili Muluzi became the first democratic elected president of Malawi and governed the
country for ten years. His rule was dominated by a policy of economic neo-liberalisation and
political decentralisation. It is during this period that heavy state control loosened and that
room for private initiatives emerged. Also, during this period of political and economic
transition, the minibuses entered Blantyre’s roads. This development has serious implications
for how social life is organised within the city.

Overall, the story presented here mainly discusses developments as they are perceived
‘from above’. This point of view demonstrates how various efforts to control the process of
fragmentation within the city are put in place. Throughout the various time periods and under
different governments, rules and regulations like the introduction of an entry pass for specific
spaces, the discouragement of African businesses within the city centre or the implementation
of party officials during the Banda regime were maintained to control and restrict peoples’
movements. Despite these efforts, urban residents have always found ways to bend and escape
those restrictions. With the coming of multi-party democracy, a feeling of freedom suddenly
emerged. While some argue that multi-party democracy in Malawi has failed when it comes
to the implementation of a democratic regime (Khembo 2004) I argue that significant changes
have occurred. For instance, the rise of the minibuses and the rather aggressive way in which
they took over the city streets in a relatively short period of time is a perfect indication of this
development. The next section elaborates on how and where these minibuses move on the routes between Chilomoni, Ndirande and Blantyre as part of the physical urban environment.

2.3. Embarking on a Journey through Town

This section demonstrates how the minibus is part of the physical urban environment. Accordingly, they contribute to an understanding of how the city is perceived and to how fragmentation is not an all-encompassing dynamic. The journey as it is described here indicates that neighbourhoods open up and how they are connected through the presence and the working of the minibus.

This journey starts at the Rumour’s Den, a small bar that can only be reached through a narrow alley in between two vendor’s stalls next to the main minibus stage at Ntukwa, the biggest market in Chilomoni. First, this place became an entry point for me since I met a number of drivers and conductors there during their lunch, on an occasional free day or when they were having a drink because their car broke down. Second, I would argue that this place is representative for the way Chilomoni is ‘developing’ into a middle-class neighbourhood today based on the comments made by the BCA Town Planning Manager (cf. below). The first time I arrived there, the place looked relatively basic. Adam, the owner of the bar, just started operating and offered a very limited assortment of drinks (mainly Chibuku) and cigarettes. He did not have a freezer to keep the drinks cool throughout the day, there were only a few chairs for the customers and outside there was a pile of dirt and, when it rained, sticky mud. By the time I left Malawi he had built a wall around the premise, a terrace with protection from the rain, a nice brick floor and painted walls, a descent assortment of drinks and installed a music system which really brought the place alive. Above all, he had customers at every hour of the day. Adam moved to Blantyre in 2005 together with his brother to look for opportunities to do business. He settled in Ndirande for two years and started selling clothes and shoes. Although the business was not doing badly, he found the transport costs to get his merchandise too high since he went to Mbayani where the market for clothes is said to be of high quality. This severely cut his profit margins. He believes Ndirande is a good place and he still has contacts and former clients there but because he wanted more, he moved to Chilomoni in 2007 in order to open up a bar. Overall, I believe this neighbourhood has two faces. On the one hand, it is a place where the emerging middle class

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6 Chilomoni, 02/12/2008
is buying land and building big, fenced houses where they have space to park their private vehicles. On the other hand, there are still a lot of people who rent a house and who do not have access to basic infrastructural supplies. For instance, outside of the Rumour’s Den there is Ntukwa, the market area with temporary and ramshackle vendor’s stalls along a dirt road which becomes almost inaccessible during the rainy season. This is indicative for the absence of the basic infrastructure within the township.

At the minibus depot, a number of relatively new minibuses are waiting with conductors and callboys urging the passengers to get in. In general, both passengers and operators agree that Chilomoni minibuses are among the best within Blantyre. They refer to these buses as nyatwa or kamfuti, bullets or guns. These names indicate how competition is deadly among various operators. For instance, when drivers operate a new bus, they do not have to fear the competition when they try to steal customers. One day, a brand new bus with tainted windows and a blasting sound system started operating on the route between Blantyre and Chilomoni. The driver of this bus never complained because passengers were more than willing to enter and therefore his loading time was incredibly fast. Once on the road, they drive straight through the neighbourhood along a tarmac road. Because of the minibuses, this

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7 Chilomoni, 26/12/2008
road becomes a central point within Chilomoni and at every time of the day people pop-up from all the little side allies trying to find transportation to move out of the neighbourhood. The stages along the road form a point of reference and orientation within the area. On the side of the road, there are a number of shops that look clean and well maintained. From Ntukwa, the buses pass the small market which is a first nodal point. There, a lot of people drop-off while others get on the bus. At this point, some of the buses coming from Sigelege enter the same route. Near the police station on the Chilomoni Ring road there is a sharp corner that takes the buses through Namiwawa, an upper-class neighbourhood with one official stage but hardly any passengers. The majority of the minibuses go straight through to the British Petrol (BP) filling station where they stop to put gas in their cars. However, most of the filling stations in Blantyre also operate as a money exchange bureau. Passengers from Chilomoni often pay with K 500 bills and in order to be able to give back the right change, conductors turn to the pump assistants who walk around with big stacks of cash throughout the day. Naturally, the pump assistants demand a small percentage for their service. In a way, the filling stations in town are of major importance to minibus transport for both the operators and the passengers since the calculation of the fares is linked to the international oil and fuel price. I will discuss this issue elsewhere (cf. Chapter 4). For now, I merely want to point out that the filling station operates as a point of exchange. Exchange of money, passengers who drop-off and take a minibus for a different route, information about the police among minibus operators, etc.

For many passengers coming from Chilomoni, the stage at Ryalls Hotel is the official entry point into the city, this hotel was built during the colonial period and still operates as one of the most prestigious and expensive hotels in town. For many buses, Ryalls is their final stage. The large majority of the people drop-off there and proceed to their destination on foot. Others cross the street and continue their journey in the direction of Limbe. Theoretically, all buses operating on the route between Chilomoni and Blantyre are supposed to proceed to Mibawa, the central minibus depot in town located next to the market, and named after the Mibawa trees which surround the area. Although a lot of minibuses do not enter this place because of the way it is managed, it is an important location within the urban environment.

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8 Sigelege is a small neighbourhood on the outskirts of Blantyre. Interestingly, there is no competition there among the minibuses. Buses go one at the time and when a new bus arrives, the other one leaves regardless of the number of passengers. This is the only neighbourhood in Blantyre where I encountered this practice. Moreover, the route to Sigelege is occupied by buses in a deplorable state or without proper licences, permits or insurance. These buses are the outcasts among the rest and would not be able to compete on more popular routes.

9 At the time of my fieldwork the exchange rate was about € 1 = K 200
Mibawa is the property of the Minibus Owners Association of Malawi (MOAM), the only official association that unites all the different owners. The organisation is responsible for the management and development of Mibawa (cf. Chapter 3). However, mainly because of the absence of money, they are unable to improve the site. For instance, during six months of fieldwork they failed to construct public toilets on the premises. Besides the minibus operators and the callboys, Mibawa is occupied by a large number of vendors who claim the right to sell their goods. They often come from relatively far because there is a guaranteed business within Mibawa. At this stage, there is always a long line of buses that go to Ndirande. These buses are of a much lesser quality than the ones in Chilomoni. Many claim that operators in Ndirande work with the leftovers from owners who have the capital to renew their fleet regularly. For instance, Albert is a 57 year old owner who has two minibuses. About ten years ago he decided to quit his soap making business to enter the minibus industry. He started off with one minibus which he bought from Mike, an Ndirande based entrepreneur who has over fifteen minibuses driving on all the different routes in town and a number of retail stores across the city. Mike buys those buses in Dubai and ships them to Tanzania from where he lets his drivers pick them up and bring them to Blantyre. A few years later Albert bought a second bus, again from the same man. After he bought the buses, he painted them in a different colour and applies his own label to the back of the bus. At one of the stages in Ndirande, his wife has a restaurant with the same name as the one on the buses.

When the bus leaves from Mibawa to Ndirande, it passes the Chipembere Highway that connects Blantyre and Limbe. In 2008, this road was totally reconstructed and upgraded thanks to the direct involvement of Japanese money and engineers. The construction of this road has not only been an important incentive for the image of Blantyre, it has also been a major topic of political discussion. Former president Bakili Muluzi initiated this project but never managed to find the necessary funds. His plan was to build a viaduct. Current president Bingu wa Mutharika did manage to complete the project and dwelled on the results to support his campaign for the national and presidential elections in May 2009. Also, along this road, in the middle between Blantyre and Limbe there is the big Chichiri shopping centre of which the South African owned Shoprite, built in 2001, forms the main store. Around this store, there are numerous smaller shops and restaurants and a huge parking area in order to accommodate all its visitors. The development of this shopping mall made that the ‘city

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10 Wenera, 12/08/2008
11 During my fieldwork the election campaign was at full force. While writing the elections took place and the Malawian population granted Bingu wa Mutharika a new five year term in office.
centre’ as it was perceived in the past as a place of consumption ceased to exist\(^1\). In the
centre of town the biggest supermarket is a People’s Trading Centre (PTC) formerly owned
by Kamuzu Banda and mainly supplying Malawian products. Today the Chichiri shopping
centre forms a meeting point for those Malawians who can afford to travel and spend the extra
money.

The minibuses on the route to Ndirande do not pass Shoprite, instead they go around
the clock tower roundabout, pass Blantyre’s main police station and Wenera, the long distance
bus depot. A bit further down the road they turn right on the Ndirande Ring Road, a tarmac
road constructed during the 1960s and the only decent tarmac road that connects the
neighbourhood with the ‘outside world’ up till today. Also, the buses pass by the Makata
industrial area, for which Ndirande still operates as a labour reservoir. Inside Ndirande the
first big stage is Chinseu. In this area, there are a lot of bars and small shops and connecting
buses going back to Blantyre, to Limbe and to Chilobwe.

The stage at Chinseu was the first official end point for minibuses in Ndirande and was
established around the same time the minibuses took over from the government operated big
buses in the mid 1990s. The buses follow the road and the informal character of economic
activities within this neighbourhood becomes visibly clear along the roadside which is filled

\(^1\) Personal communication with Jan Kees van Donge (April 2009).
with carpenters, mechanics, electronic shops and other small scale entrepreneurs. In general, this roadside looks much more informal than the one in Chilomoni. After passing the market, there is a stage next to a big PTC store where the buses on the route between Blantyre and Ndirande stop. At this stage, I gathered most of my data with regard to this neighbourhood. The physical outlay of this stage, I would argue, can be seen as representative for the physical environment of much of Ndirande. Established in the early 2000s, the place is now managed by two cousins and a third friend. They own a stall built with some cardboard and wood which, every time it rains, risks collapsing. At this stall, named ‘Skwinjani’, they sell Kachasu, a locally brewed liquor, and cigarettes in order to increase their income. During my time there, they bought a second hand pool table and built a temporary shelter right next to a dump site which makes the smell hardly bearable. The pool area is representative for the minimal private initiatives that are intended to improve the general living conditions in the area. On the side of the road, there is a not too expensive tyre fitter who can count almost all of the minibus operators as his clientele. He also, in case of an emergency – when the police is on the road – , provides spare tyres (those in dire conditions) for those drivers who are his regular customers and who do not have one. Not unimportant, at the stage, there is a mechanic who does a lot of small-scale repairs for the minibuses and, when he is not drunk, does a pretty good job. There are also a number of vendors located on the side of the road who try to sell water, juice and peanuts to the passengers and the minibus operators. And finally, there are a number of bars and restaurants who do great business because of the minibus operators. When the market in Ndirande burned down (cf. below) a number of ‘new’ restaurants were established near the stage. In general, the minibus stage is a social place that serves as a point of entry for the many travellers and residents. In close proximity to the stage, everything can be found or bought. As some would call it, there is an operational “second economy” (MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000) conducted within a decaying infrastructure. As I shall discuss below, this area poses many problems from the perspective of town planning.

Overall, there is more to this description than mere sight seeing. By describing where and how the minibus moves through the city, it becomes clear that it actively appropriates and changes the environment. For instance, the stages that surround the minibuses become places of trade and connection within the neighbourhood. André Czeglédy (2004) analyses mass transportation in South Africa as a case study that allows identifying how the public space and de relation between public and private space, transforms. He acknowledges the importance of “understanding the built environment in tandem with movement within it” (ibid: 64). I tend to go even further by stating that the minibus, in this case, is part of the physical urban

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environment and that it influences how people configure social networks and connections. The minibus in Blantyre on the one hand creates opportunities for people to move away from the locality of the neighbourhood and move into a larger terrain. On the other hand, the minibus operates as a modality with rules, regulations and restrictions through the way it operates. Moreover, the working of the minibus within the urban environment indicates how mobility and movement are ultimately locally embedded, appropriated and negotiated. Therefore, access to minibus transport requires an understanding of these conventions and rules (see also Chapter 5). The next section elaborates further on these considerations. Although it never disappears, the minibus is no longer the central object of analysis here. Instead, I describe how people imagine the neighbourhood where they reside and how they look at the connection with the city and other neighbourhoods. This perspective highlights yet again another perspective to how the dialectic between fragmentation and connection is perceived and experienced among urban residents in Blantyre.

2.4. Subjective Readings of Fragmentation and Connection

Fragmentation of the urban space is, as demonstrated in the first section, not only related to the physical infrastructure of which the minibus is part and through which it moves. Therefore, it is necessary to further explore the idea of fragmentation and connection from a somewhat different perspective. Here, Ndirande and Chilomoni, the two neighbourhoods that form the background against which my research throughout this thesis is set, operate as the empirical point of departure. I argue that movement is a crucial notion in analysing the dynamic of fragmentation, both geographically and socially. The analytical point of departure within this framework is that spatial representations are the result of social processes.

More concretely then, the following descriptions look at how space is imagined and mapped and how the need for connections is articulated in relation to the creation of opportunities. This dialectic is presented, first, by addressing the perspective of the Blantyre City Assembly (BCA). Second, an analysis of how minibus transport is organised at the various stages in the different neighbourhoods is presented to indicate how the buses and it’s operators thrive on fragmentation. Third, I explore some of the implications brought about by the presence of the minibus. Here, the perception of space and the economic and social opportunities among urban residents are explored.

In his analysis of ‘urban social fields’ in African cities, Simone (1998: 80) writes: “[t]here is a general trend towards a reterritorialization of cities on the basis of class, as new
estates and developments offer new residential choices to an African urban middle class. In some cities, major internal displacements of the urban population are underway as land marketing, rezoning, and real estate development break up many economically mixed quarters”. Although I would not generalise this idea or look at it as an absolute fact this dynamic is occurring within Blantyre as well. The Town Planning Officer of the Blantyre City Assembly (BCA) briefly explained the development of Chilomoni from a policy point of view. Chilomoni is a Traditional Housing Area (THA). The different plots that were available in this area were initially intended to attract low cost housing settlers. First developed in the early 1970s, the lay-out plans all demonstrated sizable plots and included provisions of access to clean water and electricity to all the different areas. Since the late 1970s, there has been a first major expansion. This is the area that is now called Zambia. Another expansion came only in 2001-2002. The area where this latest development took place goes by the name of Chilomoni Fargo. Fargo was again intended to target low income and lower middle-class households conform to the majority of the other inhabitants. Fargo entailed an expansion with 450 plots which was sponsored and heavily subsidised by a World Bank project. When the plots were first sold, they were relatively small in size and cheap. Today Chilomoni is no longer considered as a low income area. Some people even consider Fargo, to a certain extend at least, as an extension of Namiwawa, the neighbouring upper class area where prices are much higher and the plot sizes much bigger. The initial cheap plots were first bought by low income households but several people managed to buy more than one adjacent plot and sold them as one for a much higher price to higher income residents. Today, the BCA is developing a plan to reduce the size of new plots even further and to prevent people from buying more than one in order to restore the homogenous character of the neighbourhood. Interestingly, Chilomoni is not on the list of neighbourhoods consisting of slum areas according to BCA’s ‘City Without Slums’ program from 2007-2015.

In interviews conducted among people who stay in Chilomoni, I often asked whether they could compare their living situation with that of Ndirande and vice versa. Interestingly, people from Chilomoni were keen to stress the problems that exist in Ndirande. These were explicitly acknowledged during the interview with the BCA planning director where he claimed that one of the biggest problems in the area is over population and the still growing number of illegal settlements. In the past there have been initiatives to move those people who are living in squatter settlements to Machinjiri or South Lunzu but people quickly started

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13 Blantyre City Assembly, 21/11/2008
coming back because of the distance to the industrial sites. From the latter neighbourhoods it is impossible to walk to Makata industrial area adjacent to Ndirande. Other reasons given by the town planning director in one of the interviews we had were that people are just very determinate to stay because their livelihood consists of the industrial areas and they consider Ndirande to be their “home”. Others, again, just like the area because everything can be found there. Today there are initiatives underway to upgrade existing settlements by providing access points to clear water and the improvement of road infrastructure within Ndirande. There is however, a different side to this story: while most Ndirandeans acknowledge these problems and tensions, they also see more positive sides of how social life is organised. During my research, I found a number of people who made the somewhat surprising shift from Chilomoni to Ndirande while most people dream of relocating the other way around. A more detailed analysis of these interviews later in this chapter might elaborate how social life is equally fragmented in Ndirande.

Overall, based on the comments made by the urban planning director, it is clear that fragmentation is considered to be a challenge, if not a problem, when it comes to managing urban development and the urban population. This is expressed especially through his focus on housing within the different neighbourhoods. When I went to see the planning director for a first time to discuss the importance of minibus transport within the city and the efforts to control the flow of buses, he eagerly shifted the attention of the conversation to housing and settlement patterns within the various residential areas, only to indicate the relative importance of this issue. Moreover, the involvement of the World Bank indicates how this is not merely a local issue but also an international concern. By controlling the supply of land, housing and other basic infrastructure, authorities hope to stay on top of the process of fragmentation and steer it in a certain direction. Based on the comments made by the planning director, it already becomes clear how fragmentation goes beyond the scale of the neighbourhood. Fargo is clearly an upper middle class area while the area around the market, at the centre of the Chilomoni, consists mainly of lower income housing. A similar dynamic takes place in Ndirande where the more upper class settlements are less prominently visible and the illegal squatter settlements are more widespread. Overall these two neighbourhoods are not so much different in nature but rather fragmentation is taking place at a different degree. Despite the efforts to contain this development by the government, there are also indications of how fragmentation can lead to new opportunities. Here, the minibus serves as a prime example. In what follows I elaborate on how the minibuses are organised at the various
stages in the city to indicate how they thrive on fragmentation and how they create connections for residents that turn out to be crucial in their perception of ‘the neighbourhood’.

One specific issue related to the organisation of the minibuses in Chilomoni and Ndirande should be addressed first, namely the allocation of routes. The Minibus Owners Association (MOAM) has no say in where the buses drive or how routes are allocated. In other words, the decision of where the buses go is up to the individual owners, and even more so to the drivers. Many drivers I spoke to have a certain affectionate relation with specific routes, namely the one between the city and their ‘home’ neighbourhood. Also the other way around, many passengers feel that the buses on their route are of better quality than on others. One of the questions I discussed with the drivers dealt with the most profitable routes in town. Where I had expected a certain hierarchy between the different routes according to the number and intensity of passengers and movements, I only heard that each route is the most profitable depending on whom I discussed this issue with. For instance, Thom is one of the drivers in Ndirande who worked for a Muslim owner with three minibuses. Since both Thom and his owner stay in Ndirande their choice to drive on the route between Ndirande and Blantyre seems rather obvious. During my research, the owner sold two of his minibuses, one of them being Thom’s. Therefore he had to look for another owner whom he found in Mbayani. The first condition for Thom to take the job as a driver was that he could drive on that very same route. If this was not possible, there was a good chance that he would not have accepted the job. In general, both drivers from Ndirande and from Chilomoni stressed that they prefer to “drive home” because they know the area best and they know the people who live there. A lot of drivers and owners express this relationship in terms of money: they know “where the money is” in a specific neighbourhood, or they know “how to make money” on a certain route. Although the relationships between minibus operators and their customers are at best ephemeral, it shows that a personal connection is crucial in the organisation of minibus transport within Blantyre. Here, neoliberalism where the working of the market would determine the organisation of minibuses on the different routes is not the sole factor that is at play. Social connections within neighbourhoods and with its inhabitants are just as important in determining where drivers operate. In other words, being ‘grounded’ in a specific place may lead to larger profits rather than mere economic factors. Moreover, this description shows, on yet another level, how the minibus is part of both the physical and social infrastructure of the city. More than just a feeling, the importance of urban fragmentation is reflected in the way the minibuses are organised at the various stages in the city. The
distinctive difference of how this takes place in Ndirande and Chilomoni is indicative for the larger social context within they move.

In Chilomoni there happen to be a relatively large number of minibus owners who live in the neighbourhood. This might not come as a surprise since many owners belong to the new emerging urban middle class as successful businessmen. At Ntukwa, there is no real line where the buses wait their turn. Different interlocutors told me that, in the past, there have been attempts to organise one, but due to the influence of powerful owners, it was never maintained. Also, because a lot of owners who operate on this route have a strong voice within MOAM, the organisation is reluctant to enforce a line. The main result is that competition is much tougher and that the market is open to anybody. For instance, four or five buses can be loading at the same time. In order to attract customers, the prices highly fluctuate. Especially for empty buses, conductors are obliged to lower the price to compensate for the long waiting time. This form of organisation, in turn, affects the quality of the buses that operate on the route to Blantyre. For instance, as mentioned before, the minibuses in Chilomoni are considered by both passengers and operators as being of high quality. In order to keep up with the competition it is necessary to invest regularly in new buses. During peak hours, buses from all different routes in town go to Chilomoni to make extra money. However, operators in Chilomoni do not fear this competition because of the quality of their buses and because they “know how to make money on this route”.

Minibus transport at the stage near the market in Ndirande is organised in a very different and strict way. I worked mainly at this stage because it accommodates the large majority of the buses which drive to the City Centre. When the buses turn right at the market, they enter the official stage where the buses are parked next to or sometimes on the road. They pass the Skwinjani booth which, as I mentioned before, is operated by two cousins and a friend: Thomas, Lucas and Mverani. At this place one of the three is always present to write down the licence plate number in order to establish the right order in which the different busses are supposed to leave. When buses arrive, they pay K 50 to go on the line and to make sure there spot is maintained throughout the whole waiting period. Buses at this stage take three passengers per row and charge K 70. During the morning hours, there is an alternative line around the corner, in front of the PTC store. The buses there load much faster and passengers pay only K 50 per trip. This alternative line is supposed to accommodate passengers who leave for work early in the morning and who do not have time to wait for hours until the bus is full. However, when times get rough and business is picking up slowly,
some of the drivers decide to keep this line throughout the day and sometimes even take passengers for K 40 (see also Chapter 3) despite the disapproval of the Skwinjani crew.

Interestingly, minibuses operating from Ndirande do not allow ‘outsiders’ coming from different neighbourhoods to work on this route. Many drivers explained to me that they can always try but they will be chased away, if necessary, with violence. This way, business is guaranteed for insiders only: business for Ndirande stays within the neighbourhood. Anthony (cf. above) is the only driver I know who stays in Chilomoni and who operates from Ndirande. Apparently the others gave him a hard time when he first started out. Also, even after some years, he still has no power to decide anything. He is supposed to abide by the rules or otherwise he is kicked out. And even for other drivers as well, the rules are upheld rather strictly. For instance, there is a practice which is called kumenya mimba, “to hit in the stomach” (cf. Chapter 5), which means that buses do not wait in line but drive straight through and pick people in the street for a reduced price. Because of this practice, I saw callboys and conductors chasing buses and pulling passengers out when they were about to enter.

Overall, the organisation of minibuses at the various stages is influenced by a number of factors: the residents of that neighbourhood, the location of the stage within the area, the preference of the drivers, the quality of the vehicles, etc. The difference in organisation is interesting because it indicates how social relations together with the physical infrastructure rather than economic competition seem to determine how and where the minibuses operate within the city. The mere presence of minibuses does, as will become clear in what follows, significantly change the perception of space for urban residents. Rather than a mere illustration of how fragmentation of the urban space impacts the organisation of the buses the remainder of this section indicates how the minibuses also enable connections between various places. These connections lead to new modes of social organisation both within the neighbourhoods and between them. Again, the possible establishment of connections within the city is infused by mobility, flexibility and creativity of people when they navigate the urban terrain.

In Chilomoni new constructions constantly rise from the ground. A lot of these houses have some type of wall or fence demarcating the compound. In this area, security is becoming a major preoccupation. And with a small, relatively inefficient police station located just outside of the neighbourhood, people find other ways to protect themselves from outside intruders. Teresa Caldeira (2000) describes the phenomenon of the construction of fortified enclaves in Sao Paulo, Brazil. This phenomenon has a severe impact on the social
organisation within the neighbourhood. She writes: “the effects of these security strategies go far beyond self-protection. By transforming the urban landscape, citizens’ strategies of security also affect patterns of circulation, habits and gestures related to the use of streets, public transportation, parks and all public spaces” (ibid: 297). In Chilomoni, even those who do not have the resources to protect themselves by building fortresses, discuss the ongoing transformations of public space. Two examples illustrate this.

First, I briefly narrate the story of Charles. This narrative illustrates the importance of minibus transport when it comes to gaining access to various places. Charles originally comes from Zomba but moved to Blantyre in 2004. He settled in Chilomoni and explicitly calls this place his ‘home’. He is, in other words, not planning to move anywhere else. He finished his education up to standard eight and holds his MSCE. He also holds a diploma of Malawi Catering Services and worked for two months as head chef at a hotel restaurant but he quit because his K 3000 salary did not cover the high cost of transport he had a hard time to make ends meet. Instead of enjoying the comfort of this job he is now unemployed and looking for a corporate job. And he knows very well that qualifications alone are not enough to get a job these days. Instead, in order to get into a corporate structure, anybody needs back-up. It is always interesting or even necessary, he claims, to know somebody on the inside. For now he needs to rely on his family members who all stay in Chilomoni. However, this is not always possible because the large majority are also currently without a job. He is staying by himself in a small house which he rents in close proximity to the minibus stage and the market at Ntukwa. Close to where he stays, he has a girlfriend who is also taking care of their daughter. Since they are not married, it is not acceptable for them to live together. About life in Chilomoni his is relatively lyrical. It is a peaceful place with little or no fighting and people can go wherever they want at any time of the day. However, in his case, the connection with town is crucial for his survival. Blantyre is not without reason the most important commercial city of the country. In contrast, “Chilomoni looks more like a small village”. Access to the city is important in order to find resources and money. Not that there is no money in Chilomoni but, according to Charles, this money does not circulate widely. It is kept within the privacy of the increasingly closed off compounds. For him it is an absolute necessity to travel in order to do piecework or to find help from friends who have a good job. “Those who stay in Chilomoni are the ones who suffer”. Though there are possibilities to engage in small-scale trade, this is hardly enough to provide for a whole family. From this point of view, the

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14 Chilomoni, 26/12/2008
presence of the minibus within the township is important. The physical and social connection that exists between Chilomoni and town is crucial to many people’s survival within the city. And Charles’s position is interesting in this respect since he used to work as a minibus driver for about a year. During that time, he operated on the route between Chilomoni and Blantyre. About his job as a driver, he is rather straightforward. On the one hand it is a very easy job to get but not a very nice job to have. For one, according to Charles, the lousy treatment by the owner is one of the major reasons he decided to quit the job. When I asked him whether he would be interested in buying a minibus and employing a driver, he categorically replied that there is no future in the minibus business. There is too much corruption and trouble in order to make a sustainable profit. It is obvious that the mere presence of minibuses is not enough. Because the fares are often relatively high (cf. Chapter 4) they need access to resources and be prepared to invest in their mobility. For Charles, this is less of a problem. Because of his background as a driver, he established a certain relationship with most of the drivers in Chilomoni. Therefore, he often rides for free. The connections that he has within the minibus industry indicate how he is able to travel to town and back in order to make a living for himself. The way the minibuses operate, therefore, make the city accessible. In other words, through his personal status, he can make use of the minibus to negotiate his social position in relation to the city which is necessary because of the closed-off character of Chilomoni.

Afterwards, when reflecting on the interview, I started thinking about how and where it took place. I knew Charles through a mutual friend who put us in contact. The interview was conducted in the middle of the afternoon and I was sitting on a piece of wood with my legs hanging over an open sewer line next to a dirt road where Charles and two of his cousins (who occasionally stepped in with comments or verified some facts) were sitting on a broken chair. This context signifies that Charles is not (yet) part of the rising urban middle class which is building extensively in Chilomoni. However, he is feeling the consequences of the changing living conditions and social relations within this neighbourhood. These ideas are strongly articulated during the interview. Fortunately, as mentioned before, the minibus allows for him to escape from the township and “reach out” to a larger world (Simone 2003) both physically and socially. Therefore, the minibus not only draws on fragmentation of the urban landscape but it also establishes connections that are necessary to the construction of a viable social network.
The second narrative is that of Bob, a 38 year old man who came to town around 1994. When he got married he moved to Chilomoni where he now lives together with his wife and his two children. The wife is doing business within Chilomoni and has a copy shop not too far from the central market. Both of his children are going to school. After doing some piecework here and there, he managed to obtain his marketing diploma and, in 2003, he found a job with the sales department of an insurance company. Since 2006 he is working for another, formerly nationalised, insurance company. On top of his job, he is studying accounting at the Polytechnic University in Blantyre. One day he hopes to find a good job within the financial sector and gradually work his way to the top. When I asked him about life in Chilomoni he replied without hesitating that it is a quiet place. The neighbourhood is peaceful and there are no thieves lurking around. People can walk around during the night and do whatever they want. He highly values the fact that people respect his privacy and that they leave him alone at night. The increasing sense of privacy in Chilomoni has another side. People who stay at home lack opportunities and access to information or money. Therefore, as Bob sees it, it is necessary to have a connection with life in town. In his personal case, the connection to life in town is crucial because of the type of work he is engaged in. As a salesman of insurance policies, his salary is based on commission. This implies that his basic income is relatively small but that, if he is successful, he is able to make a lot of money. And for him, that money is to be found in town. In Blantyre life is very fast, he claims. Moreover, people are business and in his case this can be taken quite literally.

While these examples indicate mainly the economic consequences of a connection between the residential areas and the city centre, they also point to emerging forms of social organisation due to internal fragmentation. That the latter examples are situated in Chilomoni might not come as a surprise because of its geographical location within the wider urban landscape. For instance, in Ndirande I got a different story when dealing with the importance of connections to the outside world mainly because its proximity to the industrial area where a lot of residents find an income. However, as indicated before, it is important to stress that although there is a significant difference between both neighbourhoods, it is a difference in degree rather than in nature. Also, these differences can not be disconnected from the larger urban environment within which they take place.

Chisomo is a man of all trades. With only 27 years of age, he works as a freelance journalist, as a representative for people who work in the informal economy and he does

15 Blantyre, 08/12/2008
16 Blantyre, 22/10/2008
occasional consultancy work for (inter)national NGOs. He lived in Chilomoni for three years but, since one year, he moved to Ndirande. He acknowledges that this is somewhat a strange move since most urban immigrants see Ndirande as a place to start and, later, they move to areas like Chilomoni which they regard as an improvement. The primary reason for this relocation is the access to minibus transport. First, on the route between Blantyre and Ndirande, the buses drive till late, much later than Chilomoni. And second, from Ndirande, there are straight connections to Blantyre, Limbe and Chilobwe, three places he regularly visits in relation to his different jobs. As Ndirande’s biggest problems he identifies overpopulation and the related high levels of crime. Also, because of the massive influx of people, the quality of housing and provision of electricity and clean water are not up to standards. Therefore, people have to rely on each other to survive and to make something of their lives. In stark contrast to the gated communities in Chilomoni, Chisomo would argue that people in Ndirande know each other rather well, at least the ones who live in close proximity of their own house. For instance, there is a lot of social control and if he would experience any type of problem, he can rely on his neighbours for help. He goes as far as saying that, within the city, people no longer rely on their extended family. Also, many families are simply scattered over the city’s various neighbourhoods. His neighbours, in a way, take over that role and become an urban alternative to the extended family.

The way he sees it, Ndirande is very much a self-reliant area. Residents find all the basic needs in close proximity and for a reasonable price, especially compared to the prices in Blantyre. The area’s biggest trump then is its market. Residents claim that they have the biggest market in Blantyre and even the country. People from all over the country are said to travel to Ndirande market to find what they need. Significantly, a lot of what is sold consists of stolen goods and every transaction takes place in a very informal sphere. As one of the minibus drivers in Ndirande later explained to me, “you can walk into the market and drive out in a fully assembled car”17. Chisomo states that, more than just a residential area, Ndirande operates as a true trading centre. Not too long before the interview took place, there was a huge fire at Ndirande market which wiped out almost all of the vendor’s stalls and their livelihood. After the fire occurred, there were many speculations on whether it was a mere accident or a political move. The weeks preceding the fire, markets all over the country were set alight and later smaller fires also occurred at other markets around Blantyre. Following

17 Ndirande, 22/10/2008
this drama, many national politicians\(^{18}\), public and private organisations promised compensation for the unfortunate vendors\(^{19}\). In contrast, no outsiders cried about the fire at the market in Chilomoni a few days later. Chisomo only had one conclusion for all these initiatives: “life and politics start in Ndirande!” Because of the high population, there are a large number of potential voters in this area. Every five years, politicians go back there to make promises but every five years people have to conclude that nothing really changes. In a way, according to Chisomo, people in Ndirande govern themselves because the BCA does not care about them. Also, residents can not expect a lot from local chiefs so they often have to take the law into their own hands.

If Ndirande is self-sufficient and self-governed in many ways, how about its relation to town? Chisomo answered this question with another question. He asked me if I had ever travelled to Ndirande early in the morning? Between six and seven there is a huge exodus of people travelling on foot to the industrial areas whereas a similar movement in Chilomoni does not exist. There, a lot more private cars and minibuses are on the move with people who go to their jobs in town. The cost of living in the city centre is very high, too high for most residents in Ndirande. In many ways, they are two different worlds. People who are able to travel by minibus make a statement. There is a serious difference in class between people who are able to travel and those who are forced to stay home. On the other hand, for people like Chisomo, the city offers access to information and connections that are crucial for his job. From this perspective the city becomes a site of consumption rather than production while for people in Chilomoni it is the other way around.

By way of summary, these descriptions point to how the city and the neighbourhood are imagined in various ways. They point out the importance of mobility and movement and, more concretely, the importance of the minibus and the opportunities it creates within this environment. The minibus thus, and here I relate back to the story about Anthony that I used to introduce this chapter, influences whether actors have physical access to different spaces and places and to social networks. In an article on international migration and the importance of scaling the city, van Dijk (forthcoming) calls for a move away from literature that studies urban segmentation and ghettoization as forms of socio-economic exclusion since “[m]uch of it is based on the assumption that objectifying and ‘measurable’ principles such as status and class allow for the determination of how fragmented inner city spaces emerge […]”. The

\(^{18}\) Both Bakili Muluzi (UDF – opposition) and president Bingu wa Mutharika (DPP – ruling president) pledged K3 and K4 million respectively. Barely enough to compensate for the estimated K185 million worth of damage. (Daily times 17/10/2008, The Nation 15/10/2008, The Nation 20/10/2008)

\(^{19}\) Daily Times 22/10/2008: ‘Katsonga Hounours K2 Million Pledge’
author suggests a subjective approach of how the urban landscape is remade and rescaled through social interaction and the establishment of social networks. Especially in the case of Ndirande, one could be easily tempted to describe it in terms of a ‘ghetto’. On the other hand, this neighbourhood is imagined as being an important trading centre which ascribes it characteristics of a “hot spot” (van Dijk forthcoming) within the informal economy of the city. Overall thus rather than mere fragmentation of the urban landscape, the minibus offers an example of how boundaries are broken transgressed through physical mobility. Therefore, the process of fragmentation should be complemented by connectivity through increased mobility and the necessity to move around.

2.5. Concluding Remarks

The analysis presented in this chapter started from the assumption that ‘the city’ or the urban space can not be interpreted as a monolithic unit. Instead, the urban space is ultimately fragmented on a number of different levels. Not only, for instance, on the level of the neighbourhood but even within one neighbourhood, does this fragmentation take place. Fragmentation is often associated with neoliberal planning schemes and fits the discourse around western cities that are part of a global network. Notions like ‘global cities’ or ‘world cities’ are often applied in analyses. However, the point of departure within many of these analyses is the political economy of the city (Murray 2004: 139). Blantyre, of course, has not yet achieved access to this global network of urban centres. Nevertheless, the fragmentation of the urban space is equally visible. As I demonstrated, the fragmentation of the urban environment, both on a physical and a social level, is strongly influenced by historical developments. Moreover, this fragmentation is still an ongoing and even intensifying process today. The minibus then offers an interesting point of view from which to approach these dynamics because of how it socially produces space within the city and how it affects people’s perception of places and boundaries. Moreover, the presence of the minibus within the city clearly not only makes use of the fragmentation but also establishes vital connections between the various socially produced spaces. Simply put, I opt for a more subjective reading of the different forms of social relations within the city and look at dynamics of spatial fragmentation and segregation on the one hand and a dynamic of reaching out characterised by the establishment of connections throughout the urban environment on the other hand. I look at these dynamics mainly through the window of the minibus. The minibuses are best approached as an urban “hot spot” (van Dijk forthcoming) which operates as a gateway for
many urbanites that enables them to reach out. The main point in this overview, accordingly, addresses how urban residents are not confined to a localised world or restricted in their opportunities due to the decay of the physical infrastructure. Although the situation differs between Ndirande and Chilomoni, I have shown that the minibus is both part of the physical urban environment and, moreover, crucial in the way people re-make that environment through the use of creativity. Beyond the minibus, I described some general characteristics of both neighbourhoods. Based on these descriptions, it is clear that social organisation within the city goes beyond mere confinement of the neighbourhood. For instance, social organisation in Chilomoni is heavily influenced by privatisation of the public space through the construction of gated houses and compounds. As such, there is a need to establish the connection with the city. In Ndirande, we find a different story. Here the area around the market can be considered as a hot spot because of its general character as a trading centre. But nevertheless, the location of the minibus as part of this infrastructure allows people to move between a formal (town) and informal or second economy (Ndirande). The minibus itself operates as a hot spot because of its attractiveness to those people who are looking for economic and social opportunities. Operating within the minibus industry makes that they are relying on a much broader network of social relations.

Overall, the dynamics of fragmentation and the possibility of establishing new connections within the city have certain social implications. In the following chapters I elaborate on this idea and explore how new modes of political organisation and governmentality emerge, how new economic relations develop based on an analysis of the value that is attached to travelling and how the nature of social relations changes within the city.
Chapter 3

Neoliberalism and Urban Governmentality From Below

3.1. Introduction

One question that puzzled me at the beginning of my research and which returned in many interviews is whether minibus transport has to be looked at as a private business or as a public service. I soon realised however that this might be, on the one hand, a wrong question to ask since it is obviously both at the same time and, on the other hand, not a very ‘useful’ question in trying to analyse the relation between the entrepreneurs and the authorities since it does not lead anywhere. Nonetheless, much of the literature on the minibus or public transport more generally focuses on the aspects of privatisation and liberalisation. Moreover, this discussion often concerns the implications of these dynamics at an institutional level. Here, I also approach the minibus from a relatively different perspective and take it as a case study in order to highlight issues related to urban governance and more generally focus on the political implications of neoliberalism where the retreat of ‘the state’ is proclaimed to be one of the major implications. The central question I intend to answer in this chapter addresses how neoliberal policies and attitudes work for both private entrepreneurs and public authorities.

Since the global economic crisis in 1973, David Harvey (1989) identifies a shift in the perception of urban governance from managerialism to entrepreneurialism. Harvey’s analysis focuses on Western cities in a world influenced by global capitalism. Although Blantyre does not fit this profile, I find it interesting to borrow the author’s main insights and translate them into the frame of my own research. Scholars working on African cities often address the question of how globalisation and liberalisation influence ‘local’ forms of social organisation, collaboration and governance. They make it clear that even when cities might be at the margins of the whole globalisation and liberalisation debate, they are not totally excluded from it (Ferguson 1999, 2005, 2006, 2008; Simone 2001, 2004; Smith 1997). When Harvey writes that “the greater emphasis on local action […] seems to have something to do with the declining of powers of the nation state to control multinational money flow, so that the investment increasingly takes the form of a negotiation between international finance capital and local powers doing the best they can to maximise the attractiveness of the local site as a lure for capitalist development” (Harvey 1989: 5), I read this as the growing importance of ‘glocalisation’ (Swyngedouw 1997) which is an increasingly prominent theme within social
sciences and African studies in order to explain the local appropriation of global tendencies, not at least within urban areas (Geschiere and Meyer 1999, Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000). Harvey’s argument is built around inter-city competition. While my research does not incorporate international or transnational connections, I believe the importance of entrepreneurialism can be translated onto the context of urban governance with reference to the minibus industry. This is especially the case since the discussion here is framed within the larger context of power relations within the urban environment. I follow Harvey when he writes that “urban governance means so much more than urban government […]. The power to organise space derives from a whole complex of forces mobilised by diverse social agents” (Harvey 1989: 6). A focus on social agents and the tactics and strategies they apply allows looking beyond ‘the city’ as a monolithic unit. Rather, as I already described in the previous chapter, it enables an argumentation that pays attention to the multiple layers or scales at which social relations are organised within the city (Nielsen and Simonsen 2003; see also Simone 2004, de Boeck 2004). However, there is an important side note to be made here: the shift from managerialism to entrepreneurialism is not all-encompassing. Liberalisation and privatisation does not necessarily imply an absolute freedom. In what follows, I describe how the minibus, on the one hand, creates opportunities for private entrepreneurs and, on the other hand, how it is still restricted through state or governmental coercion and control. I do so based on the ideas posed by Ferguson and Gupta (2002) in their article on the ethnography of neoliberal governmentality. Overall, this chapter indicates how neoliberalism allows for more private initiatives and individual freedom which in turn leads to the emergence of governmentality ‘from below’.

For Ferguson and Gupta (idem) states are not merely “functional bureaucratic apparatuses, but powerful sites of symbolic and cultural production that are themselves always culturally represented and understood in particular ways” (Ferguson and Gupta 2002: 981). In their account on the ethnography of the state, they focus on how states are spatialized. They identify two processes through which this occurs namely verticality – the idea that the state is located “above” society – and encompassment – the location of the state within a series of circles from the family to the nation state (ibid: 982). The relevance of this proposition is not derived from the question whether it is true or not but rather from the realisation that the idea of the state is constructed. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the processes through which the state is made effective and authoritative. Here, one should not only look for obvious practices which allude to the spatialization of the state like policing or
acts of repression and coercion but, equally important, to mundane and everyday articulations of state benevolence.

This is however only one side of the story. Rather than focusing on the state as the prime or most important actor where legitimacy and authority are located, the authors identify serious challenges for the nation-state with the ever growing influence of transnational governmentality through globalisation and neoliberalism. This could be understood in terms of the rolling back of the state, but I follow the authors when they argue, based on Barry et al. (1996), that this process “entailed a transfer of the operations of governments […] to nonstate entities […] (Ferguson and Gupta 2002: 989, emphasis added). The newly emerging landscape should then be understood through rethinking notions of space and scale. This is exactly the issue I address in the remainder of this chapter. I identify how control over minibus transport within the city is transferred from the government to private entrepreneurs. Moreover, I argue that this analysis leads not necessarily to an ethnography of the state in the narrow sense but rather an exploration in the analysis of urban governmentality. This implies a move away from the perspective that takes the ‘the state’ – with its characteristics of verticality and encompassment – for granted and towards the dialectic relation between the private entrepreneurs and governmental institutions with regard to the regulation of minibus transport. This idea came to me when I conducted an interview with the president of the Passenger Welfare Association (PAWA). During our discussion we touched upon the necessity for this type of organisation. He claimed that with the coming of multi-party democracy a number of laws changed that allowed for the minibuses to take over the market. Moreover, since 1997, PAWA identified a steep increase in the number of road accidents simply because there are no rules that regulate the buses. The deplorable condition of the buses together with the reckless behaviour of the drivers and the police who are loose on regulations made that the rights and preoccupations of the passengers needed to be addressed\(^{20}\). Therefore, an ethnography of the political aspects of neoliberalism implies that all stakeholders involved need to be included. Before entering this discussion, two implications of neoliberalism in relation to what follows need to be addressed.

First, according to Hibou (2004:3) neoliberalism entails the privatisation of the state. With this notion, the author identifies a parallel process namely the “extended use of private intermediaries for an increasing number of functions previously devolving upon the state, and a redeployment of the state”. In short, these dynamics “displace and blur the frontier between

\(^{20}\) Blantyre 09/10/2008
The author turns to the notion of governmentality because it allows an understanding of the privatisation of the state as a “mutation in modes of government and – as a corollary – as the expression of subjectivation” (Hibou 2004: 21). The privatisation of state services is an example of the transfer between state and non-state actors as described by Ferguson and Gupta (2002). In her analysis, Hibou focuses mainly on the national state. Therefore, she manages to identify some interesting general developments. Also, Hibou talks in terms of privatisation as if it is a rational choice from the point of view of the government. In the case of the minibuses in Blantyre, the transport market was simply taken over by the minibus rather than being outsourced.

The second, related, implication of neoliberal governmentality concerns a shift of the boundary between public and private spaces. Here, I follow Das and Poole (2004) in their argument against a spatial centre-periphery dichotomy when they analyse state control. Instead, they propose the notion of “margins”. The latter points to “spaces, forms, and practices through which the state is continually both experienced and undone through the illegibility of its own practices, documents and words” (Das and Pool 2004: 10). Overall, within this margin there appears to be more room for private initiatives, as will be discussed in the remainder of this chapter.

In the next section I provide a brief historical overview of the position of small-scale entrepreneurs, especially within the transport sector, and public authorities. Next, I look at how liberalisation and privatisation influenced the organisation of public transport on an institutional level and finally I discuss how this liberalisation plays out in the street by looking at the relation between minibus operators and traffic police officers in Blantyre.

3.2. A Selective History of Urban Governmentality

Because of the focus on the role of the police force in relation to coercion and control in the following sections of this chapter, I briefly start this historical overview with the analysis of John McCracken (1986) who looks at police officers in Malawi, and particularly in Blantyre during the early colonial period as “African intermediaries”, attracted by steady salaries and a certain job security, through which the state was able to “ensure that hut tax was paid, labour coerced, workers disciplined and European property protected” (ibid: 127). As mentioned in chapter two, the 1930s saw a significant growth of the population in Ndirande due to the country’s general economic boom. This population increase was however not followed by the
expansion of the police force in this area. From then onwards, there was an African police force, paid for by the taxes of the African inhabitants, but in retrospect it never operated very effectively. In 1934 the motor traffic licensing board was erected in order to deal with and regulate the increasing number of motor vehicles. Its primary task was to restrict the use of motor vehicles and motor transport and to promote the railway business. Due to this policy only four people were granted a license to carry goods and people by 1940 (Power 1990: 208-209). During the early 1950s the position of the African entrepreneurs who tried their luck in the transport industry is representative for the relation between the businessmen and the government. In short, African entrepreneurs required serious ingenuity and creativity because of the restrictions implemented by the government. Most of the actions undertaken by these entrepreneurs largely occur within the margins of the law. Their creativity was made possible due of the involvement of Africans in the Second World War. First, there was an absolute necessity to find ways to establish and secure a livelihood because of the restrictions and rationings that came as a consequence of the war. Second, the army recruited many Africans from the peri-urban villages and offered various forms of training. The development of technical skills allowed them to create opportunities to work for themselves at a later stage. Also during this period, together with a number of returnees from the South African and Rhodesian mines, more and more Africans were visible within the city and worked in town. Overall, the number of self-employed Africans remained relatively low but there were important possibilities for those who proved to be creative and inventive.

In his chapter dealing with the position of entrepreneurs in the 1950s, Power (1990: 261-263) describes the story of James Mpunga which, in the light of this thesis, is worthwhile mentioning. James Mpunga was a small-scale African entrepreneur and operated a lorry which he bought from a non-African businessman in Blantyre. At first, he did not have a license and operated during the night and early in the morning in order to escape the police who were not operating at those hours. He set out from Blantyre to drive around the surrounding villages where he bought goods like bananas and firewood and brought them back to the city where they were sold. After some time, when he made enough money from these small-scale endeavours, he managed to buy insurance and a license for his vehicle. From then onwards, he also operated during the daytime. His business was quiet successful and he had both African and non-African customers. Mpunga was a man of many trades and also engaged in the popular and lucrative business of brick making which was very popular in the post-war era. With the money he made from that business, he bought himself a saloon car and operated a private taxi. In order to attract customers, he painted a phoenix on the back
window of the car and wrote the national motto ‘Lux in Tenebris’ (Light in Darkness). Indicative for this period was the lack of confidence in fellow Africans and entrepreneurs. This led to the fact that most entrepreneurs – including Mpunga – organised, managed and operated every aspect of their businesses themselves.

Mpunga is closely related to the figures of Lubani and Makata. The latter two were, according to McCracken (1998) “the most prominent representatives of the new urban culture that emerged in Blantyre-Limbe in the 1940s and 1950s” (ibid: 258), and according to Power (1990), the most successful African entrepreneurs in colonial Malawi (ibid: 297). Makata, born into a prominent Yao lineage in the Ndirande area, turned his back to mission education and, throughout his career, made use of a social network based on his ethnic identity. He started out as a wage labourer in one of the main garages in Blantyre. In 1947, together with a colleague he started the Driver’s association in reaction to the boom in the transport business and to the establishment of a nation wide bus service. In 1949 the organisation was officially registered as Nyasaland’s first trade union under the name African Workers Association. Generally, from 1949 onwards, ideas and motivations related to private entrepreneurialism were easier to translate into actual practice. For instance, during the 1950s it is much easier to obtain a vehicle license. This opened opportunities for African entrepreneurs in the lime and bricks business (Power 1990: 283). The government, through the Traffic Licensing Board, introduced Public Service Vehicle licenses and permits for which people paid an annual tax of 2 pounds.

The emergence of possibilities is illustrated through the story of Lawrence Makata. In 1953, Makata starts operating the first bus service from Majinjiri Court to Ndirande. He also had two more buses that went around the secondary girls and boys schools and to Blantyre Market. This initiative was originally applauded by the District Commissioner for filling in a void in the public service provision for African urban residents. However, his bus service was only operational for three years. In 1956, Makata stops all services because the conductors of the bus kept money from the fares to increase their own salaries. This way, there was little profit to be made for Makata. More success came with the organisation of private taxi services. Cars in green and yellow drove around town under the name of “Yellow Line Taxi” (Power 1990).

Makata and Lali Lubani (see also McCracken 1998), partners in business and working together under the Nyasaland African Drivers Association and later the National African
Congress (NAC)\textsuperscript{21} also heavily invested in social services for Africans residing in the densely populated area of Ndirande through the building of schools and providing other social services. In order to establish his businesses more firmly, Makata maintained ties with the local African communities by providing transport for funerals, meetings and political rallies. Overall, the success of the private entrepreneurs during that time inspired many in the years and generations to come. Even today, in interviews with minibus operators and owners, the importance of aspirations and expectations towards the future is something that often came to the forefront. Entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship, in this sense, complement the lack of opportunities provided through the physical and socio-political urban infrastructure.

Overall, when it comes to private entrepreneurs in the Blantyre-Limbe area during the twentieth century, one interesting remark by Power (1990) cannot be left out. He mentions that before 1915, the social position of businessmen is relatively unappreciated and is occupied by the uneducated. During the 1940s this status totally shifts and entrepreneurs become the bearers of the higher class and occupy an influential position within society (Power 1990: 395).

During the Regime of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and more especially Dr. Kamuzu Banda, the position of small-scale entrepreneurs changes completely. Centralisation and total control are two policies that characterise the entrepreneurial climate throughout this period. A striking example of Kamuzu Banda’s personal leadership is his absolute power over the Malawi Press Corporation. In his economic and political analysis of Press, van Donge (2002: 651) writes:

“African politicians straddled, and still straddle, business and politics, but politicians' business interests were formerly often hidden under the cloak of a leadership code, while nowadays they are often concealed under the nominal ownership of a business partner. Kamuzu Banda […] had no such modesty: he considered himself not only the supreme political leader but also the supreme businessman, as illustrated by his ownership of Press Corporation”.

The Malawi Press Corporation started off as the relatively small Malawi Press Ltd. in 1960. Through this organisation, the MCP published Malawi News and later also the Daily Times, two national newspapers. Both were virtually under the ownership of Kamuzu Banda. After independence, the focus of the Press shifted and Banda started buying large estates in order to develop the tobacco industry. He kept control over these estates and also handed them out to

\textsuperscript{21} NAC is de predecessor of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) which becomes the ruling party after independence.
high ranked MCP members. All of these businesses were centralised under the Press Holding Ltd. in 1969. Before 1970, Malawi operated as a labour reserve for the South African and Rhodesian mining industry. After that date, the contract with WENELA, the labour recruiting institution was stopped by Banda. This termination is again an illustration of the control exercised over the labour force (van Dijk 1992: 152). In general, the development of the estate based agricultural economy and the discouragement of peasant farming through heavy taxation, forced many Malawian into wage labour, and, therefore, under government control (Kydd and Christiansen 1982: 366). During the 1970s, the scope of the Press owned businesses expanded and included, among others, PTC stores all over the country. In general, “[t]hrough extensive licensing requirements, the government has the power to decide whether any person or initiative may go into business. As in the rural sector, a central organisation, the Malawi Development Corporation (MDC), has been set up to control the establishment of businesses” (van Dijk 1992: 152).

In the early 1980s Press became the biggest private enterprise in the country owning 45 companies and 10 percent of the national paid labour force on its payroll. This conglomerate also held over 40 percent of the shares in two private banks. Overall, the centralisation of economic activities left little room for private initiatives in the country. Nevertheless, the success of the 1970s came to an abrupt end in the early 1980s. Press had serious liquidity problems and because of the incorporation of the various banks, these also experienced a set back. During the early 1980s, Malawi received three consecutive Government loans under the Structural Adjustment Programmes directed by the World Bank and the IMF (Anders 2005:37). These loans led to the restructuring of the company in “an operating company called Press Corporation, and Press Trust to hold the shares” (van Donge 2002: 659). Banda gave his shares in the company to the trust but this “gift to the nation did not of course mean that he lost ultimate control: he was the principal trustee or settler in Press Trust” (idem). Despite the intentions to separate the political and economic aspects of Press, Banda remained in control through a yearly dividend payment.

After the transition to multi-party democracy in the early 1990s, the political and economic spheres of influence within Press were separated and a period of privatisation began (cf. below). This development had serious consequences for the position of private entrepreneurs. Van Donge describes how “[I]liberalisation and privatisation were supposed to lead to an upsurge in entrepreneurship and the offer of a wider range of high-quality goods and services. However, several companies have moved from private into state hands in the past years, as they could not cope with the liberalised conditions” (van Donge 2002: 675). The
author briefly refers to the provision of public transport with the example of Stagecoach, a UK-based transport company who took over the transport industry in a number of Southern African countries. This company had to stop operating because of the emerging minibuses which took over the most profitable routes with much more competitive prices and fares. Van Donge concludes that “[c]losing down the bus company would have left outlying areas without transport, and so it was taken over by the state under the name Shire Buslines” (ibid: 675-676).

Here, the emergence of the minibus is interesting. The story of the developments around the Malawi Press Corporation indicates that there is a strong link between the political and the economical sphere of influence. The minibus, operated by – often small-scale – private entrepreneurs came to the forefront during a specific time in history. The first democratic elections were organised in 1994 won by UDF presidential candidate Bakili Muluzi. His party received strong support from the many street vendors who were banned during the Banda era and flooded the street from then onwards. In general Muluzi supported small-scale initiatives through loose regulations and a relatively loose policy of coercion and control. His economic reforms were backed up by the general reforms initiated by the World Bank and the IMF. In general, Englund (2002) comments how, since 1994, “the enhanced liberalisation of the economy opened up new possibilities for small-scale entrepreneurs with no restrictions on spatial mobility within the country” (ibid: 138). The author furthermore argues that the influx of, mainly traders, occurs in a somewhat chaotic manner when vendors occupy the urban space with their economic activities. It is a politically sensitive issue that raises questions about democracy, freedom and livelihoods.

Throughout history, urban transport in general and minibus transport in particular proves to be relevant from two different points of view. One the one hand, it takes over the responsibility of providing public transport from the government where they are unable or unwilling to do so. On the other hand, the organisation of public transport by private entrepreneurs, both during the colonial area and as a response to the democratisation and liberalisation process, can be interpreted as a form of social and political resistance. However, it is necessary here to point to the difference in context. As Power (1990: 400) mentions, the opportunities for entrepreneurs at the end of the colonial period are the result of loosened restrictions when it comes to issuing licenses rather than the introduction of a new liberalism. The next section explores what happens in the latter case.
3.3. Privatisation and Institutional Reform

Within Malawi, there are obviously a number of options for people who want to travel, whether it be long or short distances. Therefore, a brief overview of the various types of ‘public’ transport is presented in order to place the minibus within a spectrum of possibilities. First, there are a number of Public-Private Partnerships that provide public transportation. This type of co-operation occurs mainly on long distance or intercity routes. For instance, a number of companies have big buses on the routes between Blantyre, Lilongwe, Mzuzu and other smaller cities. While some of these are in private hands, others rely on partial government support. In the rural areas where neither the big buses nor minibuses are present, the matola (lorry pick-up) is the most popular mode of travelling. When it comes to intra-urban transport, there is a virtual monopoly for the minibuses which took over the market rather aggressively. The main reasons for the success of the minibuses are related to speed. With fourteen seats, the capacity of minibuses is lower than the bigger buses and therefore it leaves the stage much quicker. Also, because of the extreme competition in the business, prices and fares are kept relatively low.

In order to combine all the efforts of the individual owners, the Minibus Owners Association of Malawi (MOAM) was established in 1994, almost immediately after the establishment of multi-party democracy in the country. The board of the organisation consists of minibus owners who usually own a whole fleet of buses. Elections to determine the management are held every three years among all registered members. The organisation has its national office in Limbe but has branches in the main urban centres around the country (Blantyre in the Southern Province, Lilongwe in the Central province and Mzuzu in the Northern Province). The organisation, as well as the boom in the minibus industry started in the Southern Province where they still have most members. According to the Executive Manager there are about 3000 minibus owners in the South, 2500 in the in the Centre and 800 in the North. According to a recent survey however, there are about 2000-3500 minibuses all over the country. The same survey claims that the minibuses hold a market share of 47% of the passenger transport in Malawi (TAG 2007: 10). MOAM does not receive any funding but manages to keep operating through an annual registration fee of K 2,500 and a small amount (varying from K 35 to K 50) every time a bus passes by Mibawa or, if the townships organise

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22 The most successful bus company is AXA. During my fieldwork Malawi Bus Services (MBS), a new company, started operating long distance routes. At first it seemed like the government would buy shares within the company but in the end only private investors partook in this endeavour.
one, on ‘the line’. In contrast to many other African countries\textsuperscript{23} MOAM holds a monopoly. Despite encouragement from the government to establish a number of associations under the auspices of liberalisation, nobody manages to do so. In a discussion with the executive manager of MOAM\textsuperscript{24}, he explained that the association promotes these initiatives but every time somebody starts the process, they end up paying their MOAM membership fees again. From outside MOAM there are several initiatives undertaken to break the monopoly or at least the strong position of the minibuses within the urban areas. These initiatives, however, get a lot of critique and opposition from MOAM. For instance, the Malawi Post Corporation (MPC) has eleven minibuses all over the country with the aim of picking passengers from different locations while delivering mail. This initiative receives a lot of support from the World Bank under its Privatization and Utility Programme. MPC has abandoned this service within the urban areas because, according to an article in The Daily Times\textsuperscript{25}, they succumbed to the pressure of MOAM who intend to maintain control over the very lucrative commuter services. As the article states: “MOAM has insisted time and again that MPC is misusing donor funds to suffocate local entrepreneurs in the minibus industry since the business is not the core duty of post offices”. A similar reaction, “it would be suicidal”\textsuperscript{26}, came from MOAM in response to the introduction of bigger City Buses. Some passengers called upon this initiative because the minibuses are said to overcharge the extra luggage of local vendors who travel to the central market area in Blantyre.

MOAM, officially at least, does not interfere with the organisation of minibus transport within the city. Registration is not compulsory since the minibus industry is totally liberalised. However, the biggest infraction of the competition act of 1998 is the setting of the fares. Both member and non-members work with the set prices which reduces competition and works in the disadvantage of the consumers (TAG 2007: 13-14). In practice however, there is room for manoeuvre when it comes to the prices on intra-urban routes (cf. below).

As the title of the organisation already suggests, the organisation’s most important preoccupation is the protection of the rights of the minibus owners. In order to do so, its prime activity is lobbying with the local and national government to ensure a good business environment. And, to say the least, the relation between governmental institutions and the minibus owners is not always easy. Because of the deplorable state of many minibuses and

\textsuperscript{23} For instance, South Africa is renowned for it taxi ‘wars’ and competition between the various associations (Khosa 1992).
\textsuperscript{24} Limbe, 04/08/2008
\textsuperscript{25} Daily Times 14/08/2008
\textsuperscript{26} Sunday Times 11/01/2009
frequent complaints of reckless behaviour of drivers, the biggest worry goes out to issues related to safety. In order to increase the safety on the road, the government is keen to impose a number of rules and regulations that control minibus transport for its citizens. One example that got a lot of protest from MOAM is the limitation on the carrying capacity of the buses from four – and sometimes even five – passengers per row to three passengers per row. Since the minibus fares are calculated on the international fuel price, the distance of the routes and the carrying capacity, this would mean a loss of profit for the owners (cf. Chapter 4). In November 2007 the Road Traffic Department (RTD) stopped issuing licences and permits to all minibuses because they refused to follow the new rules. After three months, the minibus owners threatened with a nation-wide strike. At that moment, president Bingu wa Mutharika stepped in and commented on the situation: “I am surprised that these minibus owners have called for a stay away. I thought they are self-employed and if they are striking who will lose? I want to warn you that if a minibus is supposed to carry 10 passengers and you carry 12 you have broken the law and this government will not allow that. If you want stay away as long as you want and if you want to stay on the road you have to follow the laws and regulation”27. In the end, an inclement of the fares for the passengers was the result. Despite this mayhem, most of the minibuses, whenever they get a chance, still carry four passengers per row.

Another prominent issue during my research involved the minibuses and the Blantyre City Assembly (BCA). It concerns the location of minibus stages within the City Centre. In the past the main minibus depot used to be governed by the BCA. Now this location is the property of MOAM and they are supposed to manage and improve the site in order to accommodate all the minibuses in town. This site is located in the heart of the town, right next to the market. During my fieldwork the site only gradually improved with the building of a wall to demarcate the site and the construction of a public toilet for the passengers and the minibus crew. These constructions were supposed to be finished in December 2008 but due to the transition from four-four to three-three and the refusal to issue licenses and permits for several months, MOAM’s budget experienced a severe setback. Before the development of Mibawa, the minibuses would stop anywhere in town, at stages that existed along the different routes. The construction of Mibawa and the abolition of other stages was often a topic of discussion and a leading story in the national newspapers. In some cases, minibuses were chased by local police and forced out of their previous locations. This also caused confusion among the passengers. One example illustrates this. Minibuses from Chilomoni and those

27 Nyasa Times 14/12/2007
going to Chirimba, Chileka and Mwanza used to park at the Kandodo corner shop, next to the Caltex filling station on land owned by the Christian Service Committee (CSC). They still do so, in somehow smaller numbers and risking a serious fine of K 3,000 (cf. below). Due to traffic congestion and complaints from motorists about unacceptable behaviour from callboys and conductors, the Road Traffic Directorate (RTD) moved the stage a bit further around the corner, to a stage adjacent to the National Library. According to the RTD this was necessary to control and regulate the different routes and to bring discipline to the minibus industry. However, commuters started complaining about thievery and the “inhuman”\textsuperscript{28} conditions that characterise travelling from this stage.

![Figure 3: Illegal parking at the filling station.](image)

Initially MOAM was happy with this shift because at that time Mibawa was not ready to accommodate all the minibuses from those specific routes. However, only few weeks later, there were complaints from visitors of the library about the loud behaviour of minibus touts disturbing the peace and quiet. The responsibility for the relocation of the stage was discussed in a newspaper article\textsuperscript{29}. The responsible for the BCA was not consulted about this practice and stressed that this was an illegal stage and that all the minibuses should be parked at

\textsuperscript{28}Daily Times 04/09/2008

\textsuperscript{29}Daily Times 25/09/2008
Mibawa. Also, the traffic police denied every involvement in the relocation of the stages. Little less than two months later the minibuses were removed – or better, chased – by the police force and relocated to Mibawa after a decision by the BCA Chief Executive Officer despite complaints from minibus operators.

Many analysts relate the discourse on neoliberalism to the retreat or the rolling back of the state. Some, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, even go as far as claiming that states collapsed or failed. Rather than interpreting these dynamics in a negative way I relate this discussion to the conceptual framework on the transfer of state responsibilities. The emergence of the minibus is a prime example of how public transport is transferred from state hands to private management. Academic analyses of this phenomenon often focus on its implications at an institutional level (see, for instance, Khosa 1992; Rizzo 2002; Mwase 2003). Overall, I suggest developing an elaborate interpretation of this state privatisation (Hibou 1999, 2004) as discussed in the introduction of this chapter. On the one hand there is a transfer of state responsibilities to private actors within a neoliberal framework. On the other hand, there is the urban fragmentation that has to be taken into account. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the organisation of the minibuses within the city thrives on this fragmentation. Both dynamics, I would argue, lead to the emergence of new organisational structures of which MOAM is a prime example. Interestingly, the organisation operates as a broker that negotiates between different levels of authority, ranging from national and regional governments, police officers and lower ranked minibus operators. The aims of the organisation can be summarised as maintaining and preserving the rights of a number of powerful owners. On the one hand, as will become clear in the next section as well, when problems arise, the owners mostly stay out of sight and the drivers are supposed to deal with the consequences. On the other hand, they lobby with the authorities to maintain their profitable position. Overall, the emergence of MOAM might come as a surprise within the context of neoliberalism. The working of the market, governed by the laws of supply and demand, is intended to provide a certain freedom for entrepreneurs and to develop an entrepreneurial climate without any state involvement. Interestingly then, MOAM apparently feels the need to mediate between the various actors and institutions, or more specifically, the authorities and the operators that have a stake in the industry. Two conclusions can be drawn from this dynamic. First, the working of MOAM allows for a certain class formation within society. Self-made entrepreneurs in the person of the minibus owners succeed in establishing and preserving power and control over their monopoly despite pressure from the government and the operators. It is obvious that MOAM does not operate as a (labour) union representing
or ready to fight for the rights of all the people involved in the industry. On the contrary, they form an exclusive club that took over a segment of the transport market in a relatively short time since the disappearance of the authoritarian Banda regime. The second conclusion is related to the first. Where the art of governing is usually perceived from above, MOAM indicates how governmentality is initiated “from below”. Apparently, the stronger minibus owners fear the neoliberal ideology, where supply and demand are supposed to reign, and feel the need to protect their position by establishing a lobby organisation within the urban space. Governmentality thus is not a neutral issue. It requires resources and resourceful actors. For instance, the minibus operators do not seem able to organise themselves in a similar way despite their crucial position in the working of the buses within the city. The latter, I would argue, requires more elaboration. In the next section therefore, I move away from an institutionalised context and look at how this proposed liberalisation plays out in the streets.

3.4. Liberalism and its Implications on the Street

In this section I look at how the presence of the minibus in the urban landscape turns the street into a site of contestation where access to and control over public space are renegotiated. First, I look at how public roads are taken over by the private entrepreneurs within the townships and in town. Next, I elaborate on how this view needs to be nuanced and how a grey zone or a margin emerges where public and private forms of control meet. I argue that neoliberalism does not necessarily imply a retreat from ‘the state’ but rather that both state and non-state actors work together through a series of social and political entanglements.

Before analysing the interaction between public and private actors in relation to the control over space, I briefly summarize the historical overview which I presented earlier with respect to the role of the police force and coercion. McCracken concludes his analysis of the police force during the colonial era by stating that while, “police coercion was constant […] the extent of their control was not” (McCracken 1986: 146). And although an analysis of the colonial police force only provides us with a limited point of view on the notion of coercion within the colonial government, it is highly significant because I believe his conclusion is still valid today. This in contrast to the Banda era where control was apparently omnipresent because of the involvement of the Youth League, police, army and party officials. While, in the previous chapter, I highlighted how the minibus produces space and place with regard to the social relations, I here analyse the dynamics that emerge in relation to control over
specific spaces. I argue that both public and private forms of control are caught up in a complex play where neoliberal policy and an urge to regulate merge.

The Public Officer and the Private Operator

In an interview with Don, one of the traffic officers in Chilomoni, I discussed the duties and responsibilities of the police force both in general and more specifically in relation to minibus transport. The interview was conducted over lunch while sitting on a rock outside. At first I was surprised about his openness but soon I realised how his answers were rather straightforward as from a textbook. The more in-depth questions were often tactically evaded or denounced. Despite of his attitude, this interview gives an idea about how the police officers look at the minibuses in town. Don has been with the traffic police for almost five years at the time the interview took place. The first three years he was stationed at the main office and since two years he is solely operating from the Chilomoni station. His repositioning came with the general decentralisation of the police force in March 2006 in order to “bring the police close to the people”, to become a “servant to the people and to be able to establish a personal relation with them”. Also, the proximity to the different townships makes it easier to respond quickly when problems arise. When I asked about the core duties of a traffic police officer he rather proudly listed four main points. First, the regulation of traffic – vehicles, troops, processions and animals – on public roads (my emphasis). Second, a lot of work goes into prevention and making sure the number of accidents is reduced to a minimum. Third, the traffic police helps the government in upholding the rule of law and order (my emphasis), otherwise there would be nothing less than chaos. And lastly, they have to report accidents, offences and give warnings where necessary. From this overview I take on one specific message namely, upholding the rule of law on public roads. The question then becomes what constitutes a public road and how the rule of law is applied in these locations.

Within the residential areas, operators are free to organise the buses as they please. In Chilomoni there is little or no organisation which leads to intense competition over passengers. Drivers and conductors lower the price in order to lure their customers. Also, one can find up to three or four buses loading at the same time. In Ndirande, local officials organise a line and demand K 50 for each car that passes under the motto of “first come, first serve”. Ignoring the line can lead to expulsion from that route. I argue that this development

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30 Chilomoni, 07/01/2009
indicates how the public space is privatised. For instance, inside Chilomoni, the traffic signs are covered with posters and loose all their significance. Also, the traffic police never have any checkpoints inside the townships. Wrong parking, one of the most common illegal practices, is not an issue there. The police officers do not consider stops along the road as parking but simply “stoppages” which are not worth disciplining. Moreover, the large majority of the drivers declared that they are totally free to do whatever they want within their neighbourhoods: they stop where they want, they take anybody they please and they do not feel obliged to stick to the rules and regulations that apply “in town”. Another interesting example that indicates a similar feeling addresses the position of the callboys within the townships. In Ndirande the conductors have a significant influence because they make sure the line is maintained. They therefore decide the order in which the buses load. As Mbonziye, one of the conductors in Ndirande indicated: “I am a free man in a free state and right here [at the stage in Ndirande] I am a boss, I can walk wherever I want, whenever I want and people can’t hurt me”\textsuperscript{31}. Anthony, who is operating in Ndirande as a ‘stranger’ among the other Ndirandeans, often feels the consequences of the callboys’ influence.
Whenever a driver who experienced a problem comes on the line, Anthony has to give up his place and move to the back. After yet another set back, he commented: “they [the callboys and the conductors] are the kings of Ndirande”. More specifically, he pointed to their power to control the organisation of the minibuses on the streets of Ndirande. In their analysis of the criminalisation of callboys since January 2006, Tambulasi and Kayuni (2008: 220-221) describe that these men not only have a social responsibility which they have to live up to but also that they have serious economic power. The money that they are able to make, largely because they are in a position to make demands, can rise to impressive amounts.

Within the City Centre, a similar dynamic can be observed. Mibawa, the central depot in town, is property of MOAM and, accordingly, also controlled by the organisation. During one of my first visits to the MOAM branch in Blantyre, the officials who were present asked me whether I knew how to fight. When I asked why they asked me this question, they explained that I was welcome to join the Minibus Patrol and go after those operators who do not respect the rules. Towards the end of my research I encountered one of the drivers who received a fine from the “disciplinary committee” of the Minibus Owners Association which stated: “I, The driver of [plate number] Accept my wrong conduct before the Disciplinary committee and also accept to pay a Disciplinary fee of K 500.00”. This document was then signed by the driver after the fine was paid. This particular incident occurred, as the drivers explained to me, because of ‘wrong parking’. The money collected from the fines would go to the MOAM Management and will be used to further develop Mibawa and other facilities. The main assignment of the Minibus Patrol is to make sure all the buses enter Mibawa when they are in town and that they pay the K 30 registration fee. Control over the buses in Mibawa does not only fall under institutionalised rules and regulations. The example presented above indicates how MOAM is implementing a certain organisational structure to impose and retain a position of power among the minibus operators as I described in the previous section. Inside Mibawa however, there are a large number of callboys who try to make some money on a daily basis. Interestingly, the callboys who operate on a specific route that leaves from Mibawa also come from that neighbourhood. For example, Edward is a twenty-five year old man who stays in Safalao, a smaller area within Ndirande. Every morning, early in the morning he travels to Mibawa hoping to make some money as a callboy. He travels by minibus and is always taken for free (cf. Chapter 4). By the end of the day he is usually drunk because he spends his money on spirits and beer. His parents, one brother and one sister past

32 Ndirande 16/12/2008
33 Blantyre, 2/12/2008
away which means that he has nobody to rely on anymore. He explained to me that he travels to Mibawa to escape from the everyday trouble in Ndirande. When I asked him whether it was an option to stay there and work as a callboy, he did not see that happening. “People work hard in Ndirande every day, there is no money there and too many people trying”, he concluded cynically. From the perspective of the drivers coming from Ndirande, it is interesting to see that they are welcomed by people from their own neighbourhood in the city centre.

This description indicates how minibuses move between privatised spaces as they travel from the townships to the City Centre. In between, they move on public roads which are governed by the traffic police. However, the picture is not as straightforward as it seems. I argue that the liberalisation of minibus transport is not naturalised but that there is a tension between public and private control of and on the road. In what follows, I take a closer look on how this works out empirically. Three issues will be discussed in more detail. First, the establishment of police checkpoints on the road marks the transition from a privately managed space to a publicly managed one. Second, I discuss the practice of “wrong parking” and the criminalisation of the use of public space. Third, the relation between private and public control over the road is influenced by the specific relation between the drivers and officers and corruption that characterises that relationship. Overall, I argue that the ‘retreat’ of the state is not fully accomplished because police officers have to engage in a network of social relations and confer to the rules, regulations and conventions when dealing with minibus operators.

**Where the Tension Arises: Checkpoints, Cleanliness and Corruption**

First, public and private actors meet when traffic officers are on the road with police checkpoints. Police officers have two main points from where they organise check points on the route between Chilomoni and town. One is based at the stage near the police station and the other at the Chilomoni Ring Road where the traffic between Sigelege and Chilomoni converges. The checkpoint at the police station is never a full check because minibuses have the chance to take a different route to town. The decision to organise police controls does not come from the BCA or from national officials. Instead, a certain office routine is followed. Drivers are never sure whether there will be a checkpoint. In comparison, on the route to Ndirande, there is always a chance of running into the police at specific, predetermined points because that route passes the central police station in Blantyre. The team of traffic police
officers in Chilomoni consists of three people, two men and one woman. Among the drivers they are popularly referred to as “the three of Chilomoni”. In general, the checkpoints mark the entry into ‘the city’. Here I find the remark by Jeganathan (2004) who describes the emergence of checkpoints in Sri Lanka in relation to violent bomb threats within the city interesting. She distinguishes between an immigration post which “seems to mark boundaries that are well mapped and defined”. In short they mark the boundary of the state while the position of a checkpoint may be different because of its location within the state. Therefore, the author argues, it is not so much located at the boundary of the state but rather at its “shifting, fluid margins” (Jeganathan 2004: 75).34

Although police patrols occur regularly, the minibuses have found a way to get around them. For instance, in Chilomoni there is a lot of solidarity on the road between the drivers and conductors of the different buses. From the moment there is a police checkpoint they start signalling each other (pointing down with one finger and making circles means that there is police at the Ring Road and pointing upwards with your hand means that there is a checkpoint at the police station, when there is no police they just signal with a go-through movement). When a minibus is overloaded and the driver receives a signal that the police are on the road, he can return to the main stage and offload the excessive passengers. Also, when police checkpoints are just erected, these buses can park at the side of the road and wait for another bus that still has available space. The driver or the conductor will then shout out of the window “thandize amodzi”, help me with one passenger, and there would be an exchange of passengers. Don sees a positive and negative aspect to this practice. On the one hand “the purpose of police patrols is making sure that the rules are obeyed. Our presence makes sure that they are, even when the buses signal each other”. But on the other hand, the element of surprise totally disappears because “by the time we are set-up, everybody knows we are there. They do not fear the police anymore, they obey the rules but they are never caught or sanctioned”.

Police control, whether on the route from Chilomoni or from Ndirande, goes according to a certain routine. First, the car is pulled over to the side of the road. Next, the officer steps towards the driver and asks for his licence in order to check the validation and the expiring date. From there, holding on to the licence throughout the whole process, they move on to check the insurance and the certificate of fitness to see whether the vehicle is roadworthy. Next, they walk around the car to check whether the seating capacity is respected (three

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34 “Margins” here, corresponds with the interpretation given by Das and Pool (2004) as described in the introduction of this section.
passengers per row) and they check the condition of the tyres, last but not least, they check whether a spare tyre is present. This last issue is often a reason to impound the vehicle. I only realised the importance of this routine after some time. During my fieldwork I read Hunter S. Thompson’s Kingdom of Fear where he writes about autumn as a time of “Fear and Greed and Hoarding for the winter coming on” (Thomson 2003: 40). He elaborates on this argument by listing all the evil that people encounter during this period – from kidnappings to debt collectors coming by to rape - and he concludes:

“This quote made me think about the purpose of insurance. And within the context of minibus transport it is clear that it about much more than something to rely on in case of an accident or other misfortune. Don saw it as his core duty to protect the safety of the passengers because they are “expensive people”. Therefore, it is unacceptable that drivers go around with expired driver’s licences or with vehicles that do not have proper insurance or permits. There is however a distinction to make between both practices. The driver license is the responsibility of the driver and therefore, when owners come to collect an impounded car, they often inquire about the reason or the behaviour of the driver. When the reason for the arrest falls beyond their own responsibility, they often refuse to pay the fine and leave it to the drivers.

Because of the police checkpoints and the explicit importance of the insurance and permits during a control, I would argue that they, as a sticker on the front windshield, operate as one of the mechanisms through which ‘the state’ is imagined within the minibus industry. Or in the terms of Gupta (1995: 378) it is one of the many ways in which people “encounter” the state at a local level since “representations of the state are effected through the public practices of different government institutions and agents” (idem). Moreover, ‘the state’ is not only imagined but it also employs an identification effect (Trouillot 2001) which extends the margins of the state to wherever the bus moves. In cases where some documents are not present or not up to standards, the passengers are ordered out of the bus and kindly asked to wait for another bus. When a bus does get caught there is almost always the chance to buy
your way out of this situation by bribing the police officer in charge. Overall, the police has to
inscribe into the logic of how minibus transport ‘works’.

From the point of view of the police, a second problem related to the minibuses has an
explicit spatial dimension, namely the criminalisation of the use of space. One of the trainee
police officers35 affirmed that the biggest problem with the minibuses lies in the City Centre.
This view is supported by Don who states that Blantyre is especially busy because all the
traffic from the different townships converges there. Also, in the city centre there is less
official parking space for minibuses. Only Mibawa and Wenera count as proper depots. In the
previous section I described the abolition of the Kandodo stage. According to the police, this
was necessary because today “there is chaos in town” and in the end “we [the police] want to
keep our city clean”. Due to the shift to Mibawa, the police presence in town was more visible
and, through harsh repression, more effective than at other times. In short, I argue that the
police consider the streets within the City as their territory which falls under their control.
However, as the following narratives illustrate, the repercussions of these actions have a
strong influence on the way minibus transport is organised within Mibawa or at the various
stages in the townships.

The relocation of this specific stage made that Mibawa was heavily overpopulated
which eventually led to rising tensions and conflicts. During difficult times like these, MOAM
is often used as a way to ventilate frustrations. “In the end”, a lot of commentators said,
“MOAM does not care about us and they don’t do anything for us. We pay K 50 every time
we enter Mibawa but where does the money go?” Another commented that “the management
of MOAM consists of uneducated people who happen to have a lot of minibuses and make
tonnes of money. In this world of competition they only think of themselves and they don’t
operate as an association or a union”. But the biggest concern for many drivers remains
money. The targets set by the owners do not change when there is no business or when they
literally have to wait for hours in Mibawa. A lot of the drivers become creative and look for
ways to escape the strict regulations. Since it is too dangerous to drive around on the road and
take passengers they pretend to enter Mibawa but drive straight through, around the
compound and return to the road straight away. When necessary, they can always give the
MOAM representatives some money to ensure an easy go-through. Although they know the
risks of going outside to find passengers, it is still, in many cases, very profitable. At the stage
in Ndirande, which is usually well organised, the whole system of ‘first come, first serve’

35 Chilomoni, 05/01/2009
totally collapsed because of the control in town. Since most drivers already spent hours in Mibawa, they refused to stay on the line and started loading from the moment they arrived. Also, the fares started fluctuating because of the increased competition. This is an indication of how the city centre and the townships cannot be separated from each other.

Towards the end of my research I went back to the stage in Ndirande because I had some final questions for Peter, one of the drivers. When I reached there, it turned out that he was at home because the police chased him through town the previous day and threatened to put him in jail if they found him on the road again. This particular driver is very much liked by his owner and he does not have a specific target at the end of the day. Moreover, he does not follow the line in Ndirande but drives up and down throughout the whole day. He starts around 4 a.m. and knocks off when the sun goes down. In the city centre, he avoids going to Mibawa but instead he takes passengers on the road for a reduced price. Since he is very skilled in operating this way, he manages to get a serious amount of money at the end of the day and keeps the extra nsuzy, that what remains. But the risk of taking passengers outside of Mibawa is that the police are allowed to arrest him, and they frequently do so. His style of driving makes that he always has a serious amount of diesel in his tank. When he was loading that particular day he noticed the police approaching ready with handcuffs to place him under arrest and, since his friend and conductor was arrested the previous day because of foul language, he decided to run and the police chased him all the way to Chilomoni and Chirimba. Fortunately, he managed to escape just before the police caught him and he immediately returned the car to the owner who decided to go and clear this issue out with the police because they might hold a grudge with this particular car for the time coming. The latter were, obviously not to happy about the situation and decided that they did not want to see Peter on the road again. This case is an exception since, in most cases, the buses are chased only until they leave the city centre.

Usually the police drive around in customised 4x4s but recently they purchased top of the bill and fast police patrol vehicles equipped with flash lights and sirens which move around in the streets looking for offences committed by minibuses. These cars are popularly referred to as Nokia. When discussing how they operate in town, Mbonziye explained how they are compared to the phones with the same name especially because they are so small and manoeuvrable. In general there is a tendency to criminalise the use of public space through the introduction of the notion “wrong parking”. This idea corresponds with the authority’s stress on the notion of cleanliness within the city and its policy to keep out all the polluting factors. Merry (2001) describes these practices as spatial governmentality whereby she
identifies “new regulatory mechanisms that target spaces rather than persons. They exclude offensive behaviour from specified spaces rather than attempting to correct or reform offenders” (Merry 2001: 16). Here, I would like to pick up the idea of keeping the city free from congestion and, more generally, the maintenance of order and control by the BCA. The minibuses are not the only ones who suffer the consequences of these policies. For instance, street vendors have always been subject of restrictions, limitations and oppression when it comes to their occupation of the public space. Jimu (2005) gives an interesting overview of the position of vendors starting with the rule of Kamuzu Banda until the coming of multi-party democracy. In this article, the idea of keeping Blantyre ‘clean’ is one that returns under the different government regimes (Jimu 2005: 44). I would argue that this idea is still reflected in the policies of Bingu wa Mutharika. During my fieldwork I encountered many vendors in the centre of the town who were chased or even arrested by the police because they were trying to sell their goods outside the designated market area. In case of the latter, the police are authorised to confiscate the vendors’ goods.

Another initiative to keep the city ‘clean’ is the introduction of parking fees in the central streets of Blantyre. This issue was already addressed in a background study for the town planning office in Blantyre. Recently, more concrete steps were undertaken to deal with problems related to parking in the city. In a document presented by the Director of Engineering Services, an overview is given on the introduction of parking fees. Prior to the implementation of this rule, a number of official and authorised parking zones were assigned in Victoria Avenue and around the market. Three main objectives were behind the introduction of this new rule: “to decongest the roads, to deal with traffic indiscipline and to generate revenue from parking which would be used in supplementing traffic management and road maintenance”36. According to the report, many minibus operators at first protested against this new rule but “[t]he Police assisted in getting those resisting out of the main street by confining them to specified parking area”. Working together with the police are various traffic wardens who collect the payments and issue parking tickets. Also, in groups of two, mostly in civilian clothing, there are clamping teams who impound vehicles that are parked illegally. They are supposed to stay with the vehicle until it is towed or until the police come to clear out the case. Throughout the implementation, numerous cases of corruption and wrongful clamping were reported. And interestingly, the minibuses were among the only

36 Blantyre City Assembly: “Presentation of the Director of Engineering Services to Second Congress on the Best Practices in Urban Planning and Urban Management in Malawi. On: Introduction of Parking fees in Blantyre”.

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vehicles, though renowned wrong parkers, who escaped the new regulations. In general there is a tendency to look at the minibuses as a polluting factor within the urban landscape. The introduction of illegal parking spaces allows for the police to maintain control over “public space”. These spaces become a no-go zone for the buses. However, it is clear that control over public and private space can not simply be distinguished from each other because of the repercussions they have on each other. I would argue that public and private control over space work like communicating barrels.

A third factor that marks the boundary between private and public forms of control when it comes to the organisation of minibus transport involves the personal relationship between the minibus operators and the traffic police officers. Again, the margin within which these relationships emerge results from the shifting boundary between the public and the private as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. For example, the three officers who are responsible for the area around Chilomoni are referred to as “the three of Chilomoni”. I spoke to several drivers on the route between Blantyre, Chilomoni and Sigelege who acknowledge the importance of this personal connection. Drivers who go to Sigelege, a small neighbourhood on the outskirts of Blantyre where there is no competition at all, for the large majority operate minibuses that have expired insurance documents or permits. Also, many of the drivers do not carry around diver licences or the vehicle is in a deplorable state. Normally, they would be subject to arrest every time they are on the road. However, through this personal connection with traffic officers, they are able to escape from punishment and negotiate their way out of it. This attitude is similar to what Gupta (1995: 379) identifies in India. Negotiating, as is the giving of bribes, is an open process with a performative aspect that needs to be mastered by those who are involved. For instance, the drivers who do not master these techniques are often the victim of severe repercussion and are often targeted by certain police officers. However, I share Gupta’s point of view when he states that corruption should not be treated as a “dysfunctional aspect of state organisation” but rather “as a mechanisms through which “the state” itself is discursively constituted” (Gupta 1995: 376).37

According to Don it is important, as a police officer, to take into account “the human factor and understand the human side of society”. Therefore, the same driver will not be arrested

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37 In an African context, Pierre Olivier de Sardan identifies a ‘corruption complex’ which he applies to indicate a similar line of thought: “[t]he notion of corruption may be broadened into what may be termed a ‘corruption complex’, in other words beyond corruption in the strict sense of the word, to include nepotism, abuse of power, embezzlement and various forms of misappropriation, influence-peddling, prevarication, insider trading and the abuse of the public purse, in order to consider what these various practices have in common, what affinities link them together and to what extend they enter into the same fabric of customary social norms and attitudes (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 27).
three days in a row. Instead, a large part of their job is to engage in civic education on top of the punishment. There is, however, no exception when it concerns driving without a license or insurance because minibuses are “carrying the lives of people”. Also, because the police officers live and work in the same area, they develop a certain connection with the minibus owners so there are a lot of issues that can be solved in a friendly way rather than in the city centre where anonymity often leads to a lack of mutual understanding. But in the end, Don thinks that a rotating system between the traffic officers of the different areas in Blantyre would be a solution to this problem. In other words, this is a system which consists of checks and balances rather than of total domination. For example, when I was talking to one of the police officers at the station, I asked her what the official fine was for wrong parking. To my surprise she could not answer this question and it was only later, by the time her shift was finished that she called me and whispered the official amount to me. Also, the amounts that circulate in the stories of the drivers that got arrested during my fieldwork varied enormously. This merely to demonstrate how corruption and the payment of bribes is not totally dysfunctional but rather part of how the system works, and in the end, how the state is imagined. Nevertheless, there are severe consequences to this system.

According to many of the drivers I spoke to, the minibuses from an easy target for the traffic police because they constantly carry around money. In this sense, they are an interesting object to consider for bribery. This became extensively clear in the weeks preceding Christmas and New Year. Many of the drivers mentioned that the roads in town “were on fire”, or in Chichewa, “njira ya moto”. On December 11 and December 12, I spent a day at Mibawa with drivers and conductors from Chilomoni and Ndirande, at Blantyre’s main police station and at the depot in Ndirande respectively and I could feel the desperation among the minibus operators growing by the hour when new stories about the police came in. During those days, the general comments towards the police indicated how they were “laughing”. “They will be doing their Christmas shopping this weekend”, one of the drivers stated. Most of the drivers who got caught became subject to the strong enforcement of the illegal parking rules. Any stop made by the minibuses outside of the official stages, however short, could lead to an arrest. Most of the buses were immediately released upon the payment of K 1,000 to 2,000. Some drivers were arrested multiple times in one day and at 2 p.m. it was like they started all over again. Others were lucky and because they know the right police officers or because they have an influential owner, they are released without any payment.

38 Chilomoni, 05/01/2009
Some of the drivers even work for a minibus owned by a police officer, so they never have to worry about getting caught. During the second day, while I was waiting with Anthony, we spoke to one of the conductors whose owner has a total of five buses. The latter was arrested seven times in total, with all of his buses. In the end, he paid K 6,000 for this one case: K 3,000 for wrong parking and 3,000 for “failing to comply”. The last fine was the result of the fact that he insisted on getting a receipt that makes everything official. Although, the rumours claim that there are multiple receipt books so that the police can still keep the money to themselves. Also, partly out of frustration, the police ripped out the (valid) insurance documents – a rather common practice – so before getting back on the road, he had to go back to the road traffic department.

In this section I described how public and private actors and institutions meet and interact on a daily basis. Again, it has become clear that neoliberalism and how it plays out in the streets is not a neutral given. On the contrary, all of the stakeholders are involved in a game where the need for control emerges. Therefore, it is possible to speak not of a state retreat as proposed in a neoliberal ideology but instead of a complex series of entanglements between state and non-state agents. The main question then becomes who controls, and accordingly profits from, this regulation of the minibuses. For instance, the police officers make use of their public position to become part of the minibus industry by inscribing themselves into the laws of the market. In their interaction with minibus operators they need to negotiate the right price for bribes based on supply and demand rather than merely imposing their will. Based on the analysis in this chapter, a number of general conclusions can be drawn. I attempt to do so in the next section.

3.5. Concluding Remarks

This chapter discusses the impact of a political neoliberal ideology on the transport industry within the city. First, I described how this process came about from a historical point of view. Based on the analysis of the relation between private entrepreneurs and governmental institutions, the emergence of the minibus can be seen as the filling of a void where authorities are unwilling or unable to provide public services on the one hand and as a political form of contestation and resistance on the other hand. The transition to multi-party democracy poses a number of analytical questions. Based on the ideas proposed by Ferguson and Gupta (2002) I argued that the notion of governance can be replaced by that of governmentality through highlighting a transfer from state responsibilities to non-state actors.
Rather than merely looking at government strategies, it becomes crucial to indicate how both the state and, in this case, private entrepreneurs work together. Next, this analytical frame is transferred to an empirical setting with a description of how liberalisation of public transport works out at an institutional level. Here, the position of the minibus owners association as represented in MOAM indicates how this transfer emerges and develops. Interestingly, within the framework of a neoliberal ideology the owners find it necessary to operate as a broker between different levels of authority in order to establish and maintain their monopoly over the transport market. This form of governmentality initiated ‘from below’ however is not free for all since it requires both economic and political resources to gain legitimacy and legibility. Through this process a class struggle within the urban sphere develops. Finally, I questioned this proposed liberalisation by looking at how it plays out in the streets. This was done by investigating the relation between minibus operators and the traffic police. More specifically, by looking at how control over space is negotiated between both parties. Overall, the last section of this chapter, as a brief but detailed ethnography of minibus transport within the urban environment, demonstrates how control over the road and the street is not only being transferred from public to private actors but also how both constantly negotiate their position in relation to one another. For instance, MOAM itself is not a private actor. Rather it operates as a public association to protect the rights of the private entrepreneurs. The same can be said about the minibus operators who act to preserve their own interests rather than a common good. And a look at the police officers in the light of corruption practices indicates how they are public officers who clearly try to secure an extra private income.
Chapter 4
The Commodification of Travel and the Monetization of Social Relations

4.1. Introduction

This chapter questions how new economic formations emerge within a neoliberal urban environment. On the one hand I will demonstrate how the minibus produces and enforces a neoliberal ideology. On the other hand I identify a number of aspects that deconstruct the image of neoliberalism, exchange and value. In short, this chapter addresses how travelling \textit{can} become a commodity and how money plays a determining role in the constitution of social relation among the minibus operators. Overall, I question what the implications are of these processes on the social organisation within the city.

A neoliberal economy, which entails a shift of control over the flow of media, people, technology and capital from the nation-state to the market leads to a series of challenges from both an analytical and an empirical point of view. Accordingly, within the social sciences the process of globalisation and the development of a worldwide market system has become an object of analysis. Within this framework Africa has often been located at the margins or the periphery of these developments. One of the main characteristics, especially in relation to macro-economic analyses, of this market dominated approach is a tendency towards cultural and economic rationalisation and homogenisation (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000). In analyses of economic exchange, the focus on rationalisation has led to a claim that the laws of the market, or the working of supply and demand, are characterised by a process of depersonalisation and disentanglements (Callon 1998). In a critique of this approach, Miller (2002: 224) proposes a framework built around the market as a representation rather than a practice. This point of view allows for a move away from economic exchange as being rational, depersonalisation and enables us to, ethnographically, identify a series of entanglements (ibid: 227-228). In other words, the nature of economic exchange is always embedded in a social context.

In the remainder of this chapter, I first analyse how travelling is turned into a commodity. Here, the point of view of the passengers who require resources in order to be able to travel is central. Second, I look at the influence of money in the constituency of social relation among minibus operators (ranging from owner, over drivers and conductors, to callboys).
4.2. The Commodification of Travel

With an analysis of the political economy of minibus transport (and of mobility by extension) within the city, two main issues need to be addressed, namely the process of commodification and the exchange value of money. Van Binsbergen (2005) provides a definition for a commodity as being a “domesticated object” which “becomes a commodity, is commoditized, through ‘exchange’, i.e. through a process of detachment, in space and time, from the immediacy and multiplex nature of the total network of social relations in which a person’s specific form of access to a specific item in the surrounding world is generally embedded, - replacing such access by generalized exchangeability and convertibility” (ibid: 46). The second issue, namely the importance of money exchange also requires some preliminary elaboration. In fact, Viviane Zelizer notes that, a classic interpretation of ‘modern’ money, “as an abstract medium of exchange”, looks at how it becomes “the vehicle of an inevitable commodification of society” (Zelizer 1989: 347). Other aspects from this point of view are that all money is the same, that it is profane and utilitarian, or that it leads to rationality and homogeneity. However, Zelizer argues for a qualitative interpretation of money through an analysis based on the social relations within which exchange takes place. From this point of view, she introduces the notion of “special monies” which she distinguishes from “market money” (Zelizer 1989). This notion allows for an analysis of micro-economic context where exchange takes place. The question then becomes why and how money is “special”. For instance, the author argues that extra-economic factors constrain and shape the use of money, its users, the way it is allocated and controlled or its sources (ibid: 351). Rather than departing from a universalising or homogenising tendency of money, it is important to look at how it is “incorporated, encompassed, and relocalized” (Maurer 2006: 21). This point of view corresponds with the general approach towards neoliberalism I posited in the general introduction of this thesis. There, I argued that neoliberalism should actually be approached as an analytical construction that allows interpreting occurring political, economic and social dynamics. Therefore, it does not suffice to look at abstract representations of economic processes but rather it is necessary to describe how actual economic practices occur in everyday life and how they are the result of social processes.

In what follows, I describe how the value (the price) of minibus transport is calculated based not only on a market oriented ideology but also through a series of social
entanglements. In a next step I look at the various strategies people turn to in order to come up with the required resources in order to travel.

Setting the price

If exchange value can be ascribed to mobility or travel through the minibus, it is necessary to determine how this value is calculated. At first sight, this might seem fairly straightforward but on the road, there are many factors that influence the price setting.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, minibus transport is or should be totally liberalised. The government is in no way allowed to influence the setting of prices. Officially, this is neither the responsibility of MOAM. In other words, prices and fares are supposed to be determined through the working of the market: the intertwining of demand and supply. However, MOAM does interfere and the organisation has official prices for each route within the city. These prices are calculated based on the seating capacity of the minibuses, on the distance of the specific route and on the international fuel prices. This implies that fares are not fixed but very often fluctuate. For instance, with the reduction of the seating capacity from four people per row to three, MOAM demanded a period whereby the owners had a chance to rearrange the seats of the buses. The government refused this demand and as a result the prices went up. Overall, since the emergence of the minibus in the early 1990s, the prices have risen tremendously. Today, the official fares between Chilomoni and Blantyre and Ndirande and Blantyre are K 70. One of the drivers in Ndirande explained to me that, when the fares were K 30 they were able to make more money simply because more people were able to afford travelling\textsuperscript{39}.

Throughout the six months that I spend in the field, the oil prices on the international market collapsed and newspapers regularly voiced the concerns of entrepreneurs, especially those involved in the transport industry, who demanded a lowering of the price at the pump. About a month after I returned home, in February 2009, when I called one of the minibus drivers, he told me that indeed the fuel prices had gone down and that, accordingly, the official fares were lowered from K 70 to K 50 on both the routes from town to Chilomoni and to Ndirande. Only two weeks after the rule had been enforced, minibus operators felt that more passengers were able to travel. In order to reduce the cost of fuel from the perspective of the minibus operators, there exists an illegal supply network for minibus operators. During my

\textsuperscript{39}Blantyre, 12/12/2008
fieldwork, five litres of petrol cost about K 1,200 at the pump. For diesel that was about K 1,000. At every stage there are people walking around with cans of five or ten litres of fuel (both diesel and petrol) which they sell for a lower price. More specifically, five litres of petrol was sold for K 900 which makes the difference with the price at the pump K 300. This difference can, at the end of the day, decide whether there will be nsuzvu for the driver or whether the conductor will receive anything at all in return for his services. In many cases, the vendors obtain the fuel from long distance truck drivers who want to make some extra money or from the Japanese construction company that is working on the construction of a new highway between Blantyre and Limbe. The biggest problem with this illegal fuel is that it is not always pure or clean. At the end of the ride, the engine will need service more regularly. Also, there is an increased risk of a breakdown on the road. However, for many drivers who are not the owner of the bus, this is not a prime concern (cf. below).

The price or the value of minibus transport is never entirely fixed or predetermined. In the previous chapter, I indicated how the organisation of transport in the different townships and at Mibawa is interconnected with the strictness of police checkpoints within the city centre. In what follows I address how the organisation of the minibuses in Chilomoni and Ndirande, also has an influence on setting the fares. As mentioned before, MOAM calculates the prices for the different routes based on a number of quantitative measures. These prices then, serve as a guideline for the operators. Minibus owners and operators are officially free to set prices according to their choice. Despite the enforcement of these prices, which are well known to the passengers, actual price setting at the different stages is highly variable. For instance, in Chilomoni there is no agreement on the fares. Because of the openness of this market and the extreme competition minibus fares range from K 40 to K 70. This distinction in prices makes that people have a choice. Most of the people specifically wait for a minibus that goes for K 40 or K 50 while a minority rides for K 70. The more expensive buses take only three passengers per row. Passengers for the latter type of buses stress the importance of comfort during their journey. However, sometimes passengers do not have a choice. For example, when the driver gets notified that the police are on the road, almost all of the minibuses take the legally allowed capacity of three passengers per row and charge K 70 where they previously announced K 50. An inclement in the price is also a way of shutting up complaining passengers. Often when I boarded a minibus carrying four-four I heard people complaining about the seating capacity and at that point the conductor threatened to increase the price while keeping the four-four seating arrangements. Nobody dared to utter more complaints from than onwards.
In Ndirande, it is the other way around. In the majority of the cases, there is a general price (K 70), except for the morning hours. In town, on the other hand, people have a choice. They either take a bus inside Mibawa for K 70 or one outside of Mibawa for K 50. With the latter there is always the risk of getting arrested but in general the busses load faster. The people who go to Golio and Ndirande Ma Flats during peak hours have no other option than to go inside Mibawa if they want to have a straight connection.

This description implies that minibus transport is relatively expensive in relation to the average income of urban residents in Malawi. In the following section, I elaborate on what this means for people who travel on a regular basis and how they cope with this apparent restriction.

The Search for Money

That the cost of transport is not attainable for everybody became clear during a focus group discussion with a number of women in Ndirande. The meeting took place at an orphanage where about fifteen women from the neighbourhood gathered to discuss the importance of having access to minibus transport and to the city. There, everybody agreed rather spontaneously that a lot of women depend on their husband if they need money. For instance, they receive money that only suffices for a one way ticket. Often, these women decide to walk to town and the keep the money in order to spend it on things they find more interesting. Another constraint is the extra cost for the goods that are carried by the many vendors who sell in town.

In general there is a big difference between the City Centre, Chilomoni and Ndirande when it comes to dealing with money. Most of the passengers I interviewed stressed that life in the city is much more expensive than in the townships. In Ndirande, as demonstrated in chapter two, money constantly circulates. Also, there is no real need to travel outside of Ndirande because everything can be found inside. In Chilomoni I got a totally different image. There, the people that stay home suffer because changes hands less obvious and less visible. Therefore the connection with the city is necessary when somebody wants to have access to goods and money. The ability to travel thus implies a difference in class compared to those who are forced to stay home.
According to my interlocutors, there is also a major difference between the city and the village when it comes to having access to money. As Chisomo mentioned: “in the village you only need money once a year, namely at the beginning of the rainy season when there is a need to buy fertiliser. The rest of the time, the farmers only need to sell their products and make sure they have enough to survive”. Especially the younger people in the village tend to spend the money they make from selling their crops all at once. Also according to Chisomo, this practice is practically unimaginable in the city. Here, people have to plan ahead and manage their income in order to be able to travel to work throughout the month. Also, people have to make investments to be able to travel on a regular basis. He identifies how people, when they move into the city, are less concerned about the extended family, even when they live in the same area. In the villages, a considerable amount of the income is spent on members of the extended family but in the city this money is often used to travel. And according to Chisomo it is definitely worthwhile the investment because he gains access to new media, ideas and information. He is also able to meet new people and he can establish contacts that might help him for “the future”. In short, the minibus creates a connection between people from different backgrounds. However, urban social relations seem to shift significantly in comparison to the village. I do not pretend here that kin and extended family are no longer significant social ties but, as Chisomo claims, in the search for opportunities, social configurations and preferences experience a shift away from the ‘family’. I hereby point to the significance of the choices people have to make and to how this is no different when it comes to how they spend their money. For many people, moving to the city brings a lot of insecurity, not at least on a financial level. Whether I spoke to minibus owners, drivers, conductors or passengers, they all claimed to live in a “world of competition”: it is easy to make fast money but it is a lot more difficult to establish a sustainable business. Also, they claim that solidarity among people is slowly disappearing. During interviews I often heard similar remarks. One example suggests the general tendency of these remarks: “If you want to get something done, you need to do it for yourself and you can’t rely on anybody else since everybody is trying to make it on their own”.

When people move into the city, families are often scattered, contacts and relations are broken or they are more difficult to maintain. In the following narrative, I describe an interview with Flora, a single woman who stays in Ndirande, addressing how she manages to

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40 Blantyre, 22/10/2008
41 Blantyre, 20/10/2008
access the necessary resources. The interview was conducted at Flora’s office which she shares with two other ladies and a man. During the interview the two other ladies were present and what was intended as a personal interview turned out to be a small focus group discussion addressing the frustrations and blessings of minibus transport and the importance of money related to mobility within the city. Flora works for a governmental institution in Blantyre and lives in Ndirande ma Flats, an area in Ndirande with housing provided by the Malawi Housing Corporation. She is renting a house for K2,000 per month. From interviews it became clear that for many people, transport and rent were the heaviest burden on their ability to spend money. During the day, she has to take two minibuses in order to get to her home. One from town to Ndirande (market) and one from the market on the way to Limbe where she gets off at the stage near Ma Flats. Because there are no discounts for shorter routes, she pays between K100 and K140 twice a day. Only during peak hours, there is a straight connection between town and the Golio - Ma Flats area for K80. In her case, walking is no option because she has fixed working hours and her boss does not accept latecomers. Although they are not always reliable, the minibuses are convenient because they are fast. Her senior official has the right to a transport allowance, but only very few people enjoy this privilege. For Flora and her colleagues, more than half of their income is allocated to transport and travelling. And, if her money is finished near the end of the month, she has to borrow “transport money” from friends or neighbours. Although she travels on a daily basis, she was never offered a ride for free. Moreover, drivers and conductors do not accept anything else than cash money. At the end of the interview, Flora offered me some samusa’s and while I took one out of the basket she ironically told me that she used the money from the sale to pay for her transport. This indicates how people find creative solutions in order to afford travelling on a regular basis. Another example, on top of the sale of baked goods, is involvement in a rotating micro credit group together with her two colleagues. One comes from Chilomoni and if she’s lucky, she pays K50 each trip while the third one comes from Chileka and has to pay K90 twice a day. Within the system they developed, everybody puts a small portion of their income into a common pot and every month somebody else receives this money to make extra investments according to their needs. As they all put it, it provides some “financial breathing space”.

On a number of occasions, I was confronted with people who attempted to board a minibus without (the sufficient amount of) money. I describe three cases of how people still manage to travel despite the absence of money. First, people can simply try their luck, go up

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42 Blantyre, 30/09/2008
to the driver and quietly ask whether they can board with K 50 instead of K 70. If the driver declined, they just have to go to the next bus and try again. In most cases however, the drivers do accept because they need to load the bus as fast as possible. Thom, a kind-hearted driver from Ndirande, always accepted those passengers because he “understands the difficulties that they have”. Also, he commented, these people always come begging because they don’t want to make a fool of themselves in front of the other passengers. The second case indicates what happens when passengers do not ask if they can board for a reduced price. The fares of a journey are fixed, regardless whether passengers go for the full distance or drop off at a close by stage. Once the bus leaves, people are supposed to pay the full amount. One young man who planned to go to HHI, a high school located between Ndirande and Blantyre boarded a minibus at the stage close to the market.\textsuperscript{43} When the conductor started collecting the money he only produced K 50. The conductor was not too happy about this and demanded the remaining K 20 three times. Each time the boy explained that he did not have the money and that he was planning to stop close by anyway. When the conductor passed this message on to the driver he abruptly stopped the bus and ordered the boy to step down without returning his money. The third case occurred that very same day\textsuperscript{44}. When I was at home taking notes on the first incident I received a phone call from one of the members of my guest family asking whether I could come to the nearest stage because she did not have any money with her. This last example is an exception. Usually, the payment happens inside the minibus when it is already on the road. I encountered a similar exception to this rule when I was riding from Chilomoni to Blantyre and when a mother paid the conductor in advance to bring two of her children to school.

Overall, these examples indicate the influence of the minibus as a mediator between the domestic and the market sphere. The former being traditionally identified as a sphere dominated by gift-relations and reciprocity and the latter characterised by impersonal commodity exchange. Two possible lines of interpretation are presented here. On the one hand, it is clear that the working of the market leads to the depersonalisation and rationalisation of economic transactions. This process even interferes with the way money is managed at a domestic level. On the other hand, economic transactions within the minibus industry are not at all determined solely by market factors but by a series of personal and social entanglements. Because of the high cost of transport, access to the minibus requires investments that are often beyond the capacity of individual actors. Therefore, women need to

\textsuperscript{43} Ndirande, 05/10/2008
\textsuperscript{44} Chilomoni, 05/10/2008
receive money from their husbands, Flora has to organise a rotating credit system with her colleagues, family members are called up to the stage to pay the fares, etc. In other words, access to transport, in many cases at least, creates a certain dependency not only on money but also on a strong network of social relations that can provide the necessary resources to travel. The minibus, in this case, enters the domestic sphere and interferes with social relations beyond the mere reciprocal. The process of commodification also has serious personal consequences. Here I briefly return to the importance of entanglements in the politics of exchange. Based on the description of Chisomo and Flora, it has become clear that travelling requires not only financial investments but also the development of personal competences. In order to have access to this commodity, passengers need to know how to deal with money and neatly plan how and when they spend it. Also, from the point of view of the passengers it has become clear that they do not just pay for transport. They make rational decisions and find creative ways to be able to invest in their mobility. Overall, they “earmark” (Zelizer 1989: 351, see also Guyer 2004: 21) money as “transport money”. For instance, one day when I was walking towards the stage at Ryalls in the city centre, I encountered a woman who was begging not just for money but explicitly demanded for “transport money” and if I could “buy [her] transport”\(^45\). In sum, looking at travel from an economic perspective tells something about how it interferes with people’s personality and the personal sphere. Rather than a mere rational question, access to transport is negotiated based on personal choices and considerations or, in other words, personal entanglements between the individual and their desire to travel. However, this is only one side of the story. The following section elaborates on how money influences the social relations and hierarchies among minibus operators. Here, too there is an intertwining between the process of commodification and the personal sphere.

4.3. The Monetization of Social Relations

Not only is money omnipresent and visible within the minibus industry, I argue that it defines social relations and hierarchies. Moreover, what follows will illustrate that accumulating wealth and spending money is strongly related to the notion of masculinity. In other words the value of money is not solely determined by the working of the market. The “taming” (de Boeck 1998: 790) of money requires personal skills and a dominant masculine identity. Again, in the case of the minibus operators, the meaning of money does not depend on a mere

\(^{45}\) Blantyre, 13/10/2008
rational conceptualisation but rather it is the result of a series of personal entanglements. Another, but similar, line of interpretation is based on the work of Jane Guyer (2004: 68-82) when she analyses how the ranking of people is based on monetary value. The author describes the case of the Ibo and Ibibio in the late nineteenth century and argues that “money wealth was culturally marked and referred to as a benchmark, not in the simple reproduction of established social statuses but in the expansive formation of a complex social ranking, with and beside social or conceptual “classes”, that preexisted the trade” (ibid: 68-69). Money in relation to ranking among the Ibo has a strong spiritual dimension, related to the ancestral world (ibid: 77). People bought titles in religious cults in order to obtain a higher ranking. And although these titles were available to everybody, the investment that had to be made could go as far as having to sell family members into slavery (ibid: 74). The central point the author gets across addresses the importance of money in relation to the ranking of people and how it is often underestimated. Often, in more ‘traditional’ accounts, “precedence accorded to age, gender, or primacy in a particular location tends to naturalize what is a much more elaborate construction” (ibid: 70). Of course, the historical context of her research differs greatly from mine. Nevertheless, I argue that the basic idea of the monetization of social relations can be transferred to the context of the minibus industry in contemporary Blantyre. In this case, money circulates among minibus operators within the informal sector. Outside the scope of any form of regulation or control, money is appropriated, and adapted or, again, “domesticated” (de Boeck 1998). This implies that numbers (quantitative) are attributed a qualitative value through economic performances which leads to the ranking of people within a specific social network. Access to money implies access to a certain social scale and therefore money serves as a marker of the boundary between insiders and outsiders or determines networks of power among minibus operators. The following brief account indicates what this implies. One day I was boarding a minibus at Ryalls to go to Chilomoni. When the bus was fully loaded, the driver slowly started to take off when one of the callboys who helped load the bus demanded his reward. At that moment, the driver took a whole stack of money from the side storage room in the door and took out K 50. When he started driving away, he waved the note out of the window to let the callboy know that it was on its way. Just before strongly accelerating, he threw the note out of the window onto the street right next to a small puddle of water. The callboy ran after the bus in order to collect the money, while at the same time he had to be aware of the other traffic passing by. Hungry for his money, he

46 Blantyre, 27/09/2008
picked it up from the street and moved on to the next bus, hoping it would load fast and he
would receive another payment. At the time I thought that it must be tremendously
humiliating for the callboy but I actually saw this practice several times throughout my
research. In the remains of this section I reflect on the importance of having access to money
and its importance in the establishment of social hierarchies and social relations among
minibus operators.

‘Making’ Money among Minibus Operators

As always, there are two sides to the story of money. On the one hand there are various ways
of earning money and on the other hand it is important how money is spent. Within the
minibus industry the owners are the ones who make ‘easy’ money. They give the minibus to
the driver ‘on loan’ and at the end of the day they receive a target. If the owner has more than
one minibus the target can take on considerable amounts. However, most of the owners only
have one or two minibuses and they immediately feel when the business is going relatively
slow. Minibuses are often a family business and the profits are used to support the whole
family, sometimes including the extended family. Putting a minibus on the road also requires
a serious investment. Many owners I interviewed were able to start their business through
loans, either micro-credits from the bank or personal loans from friends or relatives. Others
were able to buy their bus because they have a family member who resides abroad. When they
send remittances, the family often decides to purchase a minibus because that way, the whole
family benefits, rather than one specific member. The following two examples indicate the
importance of family networks within the minibus industry.

Joseph has lived in Chilomoni for most of his life. He spent some time in Zimbabwe
during the 1990s to complete his primary education and returned to Blantyre in 1995 where he
finished his secondary school and obtained his diploma from the Malawi College of
Accountancy. He has a brother who stays in Durban, South Africa. In 2001 Joseph’s brother
sent a small saloon car but he almost immediately sold it again because it only brought costs.
Accordingly, Joseph asked his brother for a minibus so that they could make money that
helped support the whole family. In this sense, the minibus works as a form of social security.
Joseph started out as a conductor in the first year. In the past, this practice occurred a lot
among families who operated minibuses. When the conductor was a member of the family,

47 Blantyre, 24/11/2008
they operated as a controller for the driver. Joseph’s business was quite successful and after six months he already had six second-hand minibuses with a petrol engine. He sold those buses because the cost for a petrol engine was too high. Today, he owns two coasters which drive on long-distance routes and ten minibuses of which, on average, eight are operational. Because of his connection to the neighbourhood, he demands new and starting drivers to operate between Blantyre and Chilomoni in order to be able to control their every move. Also, if they cause trouble, he can always negotiate with the police with whom he has a good personal relationship. More experienced and trustworthy drivers are free to choose the route they deem most profitable.

The second example is also an indication of the importance of (extended) family in the organisation of minibus transport. Anthony and his brother Paul each own one minibus which they drive themselves. Both brothers stay together in the same house but as the elder within the family, Anthony is responsible for providing an income for the rest of the family. That family comprises of his sister who is not working because her business of selling clothes fell apart, a 19 year old younger brother who is still going to school and who plays for the number one soccer team in Blantyre and occasionally another sister who comes over from Lilongwe to borrow money or a niece who has been accepted to an expensive private school for which he has to pay tuition fees. While Paul can keep his money to invest in the improvement of his bus or, as he prefers, in the purchase of alcohol, Anthony hardly manages to keep anything for himself. As an extra problem, his bus has all kinds of issues (cf. Chapter 2).

Buying a minibus is not the end of the story. In order to be able to operate it, and to actually make a profit there are considerable costs that have to be accounted for. For instance, registering the bus as a Public Service Vehicle or buying the necessary insurance and permits are all part of the deal. Also, there is a considerable difference between a diesel and a petrol engine. Since fares are calculated based on the international fuel price, the cost of gas is something that has to be taken into account. Diesel is less expensive than petrol so it might be more interesting on a daily basis. In the long run, petrol is often interesting because the cars required serve less regularly and the engine is relatively easy to maintain since spare parts can be found everywhere. Some of the owners have other business besides the minibus and in that sense the buses can provide an interesting extra income.

Between the owner and the driver, the exchange of money is based on mutual respect and trust. However, this is a complicated matter. Most minibus owners have permanent drivers. Although this notion is highly relative and the term of the relationships is often rather short, the drivers among my interlocutors receive a monthly wage varying from K 6,000 to K
21,000. Usually, when the wage is less, the target is lower and the chance to keep *nsuzi* increases. Most of the owners I spoke to operate their minibus on the route to the neighbourhood where they stay (cf. Chapter 2) and they also find their drivers within this region. That way it is easier to do a background check and to find out if they are reliable from friends and family. According to Joseph, there are three types of minibus drivers. The first type of drivers do the job merely for the sake of driving. This category is small because of the high unemployment rate and various other economic problems. A second type of driver is in it only for the money. They do not care about the vehicle or about the passengers for that matter. They drive up and down in order to find as many people as possible and, at the end of the day, they intend to keep as much money (*nsuzi*) as possible. The third category of drivers, which, from the point of view of the owners, is the most interesting, consists of those who actually take care of the vehicle as if it was their own. Someone who realises that, in case of a breakdown, the problem extends to everybody involved in the business. “If you say a minibus has a value of about K 2 million, it is like you give that two million to the driver on a daily basis, on loan. It is up to him to manage that value well”, he commented. According to many owners, there are only few drivers in this last category.

While being on the road, the driver is ultimately in control over money transactions and how the bus is managed. After every trip he collects the money from the conductor, carefully counts it and demands an explanation when anything is missing. In most cases, the driver already knows how much he can expect because he keeps a close eye on the number of passengers that board his bus at the different stages. As I will describe elsewhere (cf. Chapter 5) the driver decides who to take, where to stop and where to drop people. For many of the drivers, the minibus stage is a place where they have access to money. This only became clear when I visited the stages in Ndirande and Chilomoni more frequently. After they get arrested or when their bus is at the mechanics, drivers turn to their colleagues at the minibus depots to look for company and assistance.

There is a specific hierarchy between the driver and the conductor. For instance, having a driving licence brings a number of extra opportunities. It opens avenues to financial resources and it increases their social status. Driving a minibus and having a driver licence makes these men “marriage material”48. Moreover, there are a number of bars located at the side of the road, close to the depot. One of these bars is frequented by some of the drivers. Inside they can take a beer, play pool or exchange stories. This is a location where conductors

48 Ndirande, 14/08/2008
or callboys are hardly ever found, simply because they do not have enough money to spend. A Carlsberg, one of the most popular beers, easily costs K 120, over half the daily salary of many conductors. Drivers that visit this bar explicitly stress this difference in purchasing power and are proud of this privilege and distinguish themselves from the rest of the crew. The position of a conductor is much more insecure. A minority of the drivers work with the same conductor for a longer period. In very rare cases, it is the owner who employs and pays the conductors. A good conductor is supposed to take care of the bus as if it was his own. They have to clean it inside and out and make it accessible for the passengers. They also have to take care of the extra luggage of vendors or make sure the seating capacity is respected according to the drivers’ will. Also, an important characteristic of a conductor is that he has to be strong both mentally and physically to take on the competition and the pressure from his boss. A full time employed conductor usually also gets more money than the occasional ones. In the end they are more powerful than the latter because they dispose of a more steady source of income. Most drivers, however, opt for daily contracts. They drive to the depot early in the morning and choose their conductor. It is important for the conductors to show up on time at the stage in order to stand a chance. If he manages to find a position in the bus, he is able to build a reputation and get jobs more frequently. More than once I saw conductors thrown of the bus halfway through the day because they performed rather poorly. Their place was quickly taken by one of the many replacements ready to jump on board. In most cases, it is the driver who pays the conductor at the end of the day. The salaries vary between K 100 and K 500, depending on how the business went and on the willingness of the driver to share his nsuzy.

When the conductors do not manage to find a job, there are other alternatives to make money. While buses are loading, callboys and unemployed conductors are called upon to do timing. This means that they go inside the bus so that it appears to be full. This practice is taken rather seriously. There is a belief that passengers are tempted to board a certain bus when it is almost full. The conductors and callboys only leave when there is no other place available. At the end of their timing they receive a little amount of money, mostly K 20 or K 50. The other option is to make morale: standing outside and advertising the bus by shouting out its destination and the price or by addressing people in an attempt to persuade them by making personal comments. According to three conductors, this phrase comes from the expression “making morale to god” or worshipping. In a way, they are worshiping the minibus and the potential passengers in order to make good business. If they work hard and put in a lot of effort, they receive the same amount as for timing. In some cases the conductors
hang around at the stage while one of the callboys is doing all the hard work. When I asked one of them for an explanation, he told me that, since he has a job, there is no need to make himself tired and that he had other things to do. The money always comes straight from the driver but he can punish the conductor at the end of the day by reducing this wages because he did not perform up to standards.

Money is often a source of conflict. Many conductors are accused of stealing money from both the passengers, by not giving back the exact change, and from drivers, by not giving all the money after one trip. Also, conflicts over payments for timing and morale do occur rather frequently. These payments are often made at the end of the day because, at the beginning of the day, there is less small change available. And conductors in most cases depend on their driver to receive money for lunch or a drink during the day. In case they do not receive anything, small conflicts erupt. In rare cases, it comes to physical violence.

‘Remaking’ Money among Minibus Operators

The value of money is of course not endless. Above, I demonstrated how money is rather influential in establishing a social hierarchy within the minibus industry and among the minibus operators. The value of money is closely linked to the notions of respect and trust, again an indication of how important social and personal entanglements are within the minibus industry. People who do not have access to the necessary amounts of money are often despised or mistrusted. The same goes for people who generate ‘too much’ monetary wealth. In the latter case, accusations in relation to witchcraft arise and jealousy takes the upper hand. In Ndirande, these relations are more visible than in Chilomoni, especially because of its tight organisation and the strong social network among operators. In interviews and through observation it became clear that older drivers earn more respect than younger drivers regardless of their ability to make money. On the other hand, any driver who is a successful businessman receives praise from his colleagues. Closely linked to making money are expectations towards the future. Nobody can gain straightforward amounts of money without experiencing a serious financial setback at some point. Nevertheless, many conversations at the stage in Ndirande address questions related to how the money is spent. When, for instance, relatively old men still work as a conductor, they receive negative comments because money should be invested in serious business. The most frequent plan of drivers is to buy their own minibus one day. Others dream of making a shift from minibuses to big lorries or trucks.
The minibus industry is very much male dominated. Throughout my research I only met one female conductor but she wore with ‘male’ clothing and had her hair shaved. Veronica, a female minibus owner, has two minibuses on long distance routes but before, her buses drove on the route between Ndirande and Blantyre. She explained to me that she started working on her own bus as a conductor together with a female friend who operated as a driver. Together they were able to make an average of K 1,500 per day. This was barely enough to cover all the costs related to the minibus. Therefore, they decided to hand the buses over to male employees. The large majority of the men stressed that this type of work requires both physical and mental strength and that women are simply not qualified to do the job. A similar masculine image determines how money is spent. The majority of the operators spend it as fast as they make it. Similar to de Boeck’s (1998) analysis of young male diamond diggers in Congo, there is a strong link between spending money and masculinity. I tend to speak of an “economy of ejaculation” (ibid: 790). In this sense the run for nsuzy on a daily basis makes more sense. At the end of the day, if drivers are able to buy drinks and women for their friends, they gain respect among the minibus operators. Surprisingly, especially in Ndirande, I met a lot of relatively ‘poor’ men who showed up at the stage in brand new outfits of (fake) designer labels, fancy shoes and accessories. Callboys would come and show me their brand new phones with wireless internet access, cameras, radio and mp3 storage or second hand portable music players bought from the black market in Ndirande. Some of the drivers I met at their homes had an expensive TV and sound system and DVD players.

A lot of discourse around the minibus stages, both in Chilomoni and Ndirande address women and sexuality. A lot of the stories that circulate are based on rumours or gossip but nevertheless, they tell something about the importance of developing a strong sense of masculinity around the figure of minibus operators and they go beyond mere spielerei. On October, 5 there was a broadcast on TV Malawi (TVM) about the relation between minibus drivers and the spread of HIV/AIDS in Malawi. The drivers enjoy a position associated with power and status because a lot of people easily think they own the minibus and therefore have money to spend. One of the drivers in the broadcast explained how they sometimes call girls to join them to their destination and in most cases “it is difficult for those girls to resist the temptation”. The following day I went to the minibus depot in Ndirande and asked about this practice with some of the drivers. They not only acknowledged it but also shared stories about university students who spend three months on campus en when they are ‘released’, they

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49 Limbe, 25/08/2008
stand at the side of the road shouting at and pulling over those minibus drivers who are interested in sexual pleasures. Drivers that abstain from these practices are often shunned by the rest of the group. But there are also limits to the development of masculinity in relation to the spending of money. The story about Joe, one of the veteran drivers who came from a wealthy family with a number of houses and cars in Ndirande demonstrates this rather painfully. When his father died, he refused the inheritance of one of the houses and instead chose for the cars because he was convinced he would make a lot of money. He had a car hire service operating from Ndirande for a while and was “living on the bright side of life”. He regularly drove to Mzuzu in the North of the country to meet up with “beautiful bitches from Tanzania since there are plenty of those women there”. He also made trips to Lilongwe and the Lake where he spent considerable amounts of money. On one of his trips he was involved in an accident and the car was beyond repair. Not too long thereafter, his second vehicle had a problem with the engine and the cost to fix it was K 110,000. So he sold it and was left with nothing but his driver license which he uses to drive minibuses today. These examples indicate how wealth is not solely indicated by how much money somebody has on their bank account but also through the way they spend it. In other words, the construction of a masculine identity here serves as an example of how status is built through the management of social capital rather than financial capital.

Overall, the value of money needs to be nuanced. Where the latter seems to determine how travel becomes commoditised within an urban environment and how social hierarchies are established, there are also important aspects social entanglements in the analysis of everyday transactions. Moreover, the next section indicates that the working of the market is totally absent. More concretely, travelling with a minibus includes aspects of gift-giving. In the following section I further elaborate on this dynamic.

4.4. Mobility as a Gift: Catching a Free Ride

Two brief narratives are presented here in order to indicate how exchange in and around the minibus is about more than commodification. Rather, I argue that aspects of gift-giving become visible when people catch a ride for free. Conceptually, I refer to Appadurai (1986) who suggests looking at the *social life of things*. This implies that a ‘thing’ is never merely a gift or a commodity but instead that it can become both. Accordingly, Appadurai talks about

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50 Ndirande, 06/10/2008
the “commodity phase” (ibid: 13): “things can move in and out of the commodity state, […] such movements can be slow or fast, reversible or terminal, normative or deviant”. Drawing on this idea, the author argues that “commoditization lies at the complex intersection of temporal, cultural, and social factors” (ibid: 15). Accordingly, in what follows, through the analysis of exchange within and around the minibus, I would argue that both gift and commodity exchange exist within one place and within a similar timeframe. Based on this assumption, Appadurai proposes a paradigm of exchange characterized as a “tournament of value”. These are:

“complex periodic events that are removed in some culturally well-defined way from the routines of economic life. Participation in them is likely to be both a privilege of those in power and an instrument of status contests between them. The currency of such tournaments is also likely to be set apart through well understood cultural diacritics. Finally, what is at issue in such tournaments is not just status, rank, fame or reputation of actors, but the disposition of the central tokens of value in the society in question. Finally, though such tournaments of value occur in special times and places, their forms and outcomes are always consequential for the more mundane realities of power and value in ordinary life” (Appadurai 1986: 21).

Within this framework, there is no strict dichotomy to be drawn between ‘pure’ gift exchange and ‘pure’ commodity exchange. Throughout my research several indications of this dynamic came to the forefront. This became clear not only through interviews with both minibus operators and passengers but also through intensive participant observation among my interlocutors. For instance, the more I travelled to Ndirande and Chilomoni, the more I was offered to ride for free. In the beginning I felt a bit uncomfortable because I was occupying a seat and, therefore, my presence was interfering with the operator’s profit. However, when some of the drivers and conductors became close to aggressive, I realised that there was no need to insist on paying any longer. One example indicates how my relationship with the minibus operators changed over time. One day I took a minibus to Ndirande with one of the best conductors in the business who picked me up outside of Mibawa, close to the market. The fare was K 50 but he refused my money quite ostentatiously. After I got off at the stage in Ndirande, we kept talking about the business that day. After some time he asked whether I could buy him some Kachasu from the Skwinjani shop. One shot costs exactly K 50. At first I was reluctant to do so because I did not want to encourage drivers or conductors to drink while they are working especially because many passengers’ complaints about minibus operators concern their unacceptable behaviour when they are drunk. However, he was quick to remember that he offered me a free ride and therefore, I now had to return the favour. Still
not sure about what I was doing I gave in and bought him that drink. I felt that, if I would have refused, our relationship would have ended or significantly changed. In other words, this example demonstrates how a commodity exchange characterised by the alienability between the object and the subject turned into a gift exchange where the different parties involved were no longer ‘free’ but rather entangled on a different level. This example also demonstrates how I gained acceptance among the network of minibus operators.

The previous example is based on my personal experience and on my position as a researcher in the field. However, based on interviews with other passengers and minibus operators, similar dynamics can be identified. In what follows, I further elaborate on this idea.

When Anthony (cf. above) suspected his conductor of cheating and keeping money on the side, he decided to fire him. This meant that he had to start looking for another conductor. When he came to me with this problem I suggested that he could work with Mbonziye, one of the callboys I got to know rather well and whom I trusted completely. Eventually they started working together and things went well. Every day, around five o’clock in the morning, Mbonziye went to Chilomoni to prepare the bus for business and to pick up Anthony at his house. Together they went on the road and made a nice amount of money. Anthony pays his conductors relatively well, depending on how the business progressed. On a good day, he would spare K 500 while others never pay their conductors more than K 300. Two weeks later I found Anthony on the road with yet another conductor. When I asked about what happened to Mbonziye he explained that it just did not work out. Not because he was keeping money on the side but because he let too many people ride for free. “I’m still in this for the money, at the end of the day I need to pay for fuel and maintain my vehicle”\(^{51}\), he commented. I knew Mbonziye as a gentle person who is always kind to his peers. It turned out that he allowed people to ride for free by claiming that they are “family”. At first Anthony did not see this as a problem, when his auntie entered a minibus it would be wrong to charge her for the trip. However, towards the end, the majority of the clients turned out to have some kind of relationship with Mbonziye, whether they are aunts, uncles, cousins or friends. Overall, the minibus industry is still a business and operators need to make money. Therefore, there are limits to gift-giving. In interviews with other passengers it turned out that free rides were not a privilege for just anybody but only people who have a special relationship with drivers or conductors. For instance, people with history as a minibus driver or those who drive private taxis are more likely to ride minibuses for free. Some of the passengers I interviewed

\(^{51}\) Ndirande, 26/09/2008
acknowledged this. They claim that, if they do not have any money, they still travel to their job because of the similarity in their profession. When they do travel for free, they have the feeling that they are driving “with a friend”. Rather than feeling like a regular passenger they feel part of the minibus operators’ crew. This significantly changes their position within the minibus (cf. Chapter 5). I heard a similar story among regular passengers who develop a certain relationship with the minibus operators. Occasionally, they are offered a free ride. Surprisingly, when I enquired further about the characteristics of this relationship between drivers or conductors and passengers it turned out that it remained extremely superficial. For instance, passengers hardly ever know the name of the drivers and vice versa. This level of anonymity or impersonality has as a result that social networks remain rather ephemeral.

These ephemeral relations points to how transactions within the minibus industry are contextualised within a specific empirical setting. Overall, based on the descriptions above, a number of conclusions can be drawn. Gudeman (2001: 81) argues that economies are built “on the interlocked realms of communal and commercial value, not gift versus commodity”. He brings reciprocity into the equation. The latter signifies “non-market, lasting, two-way exchanges” while he refers to the gift as “an initial present” (ibid: 80) where a return is not a requirement. From this point of view, I would argue that ‘catching a free ride’ on a minibus can still be considered as a gift since it is a difficult one to return. What interests me in Gudeman’s analysis are the analytical implications of his model for social relations. He states that “[t]he gift extends the commons to someone outside the community, offering temporary participation or even permanent inclusion” (ibid: 86). Empirically, this is demonstrated through the feeling among my interlocutors that, when they are offered to ride for free, they become part of the minibus crew rather than being a mere passenger. In other words, for the time of the journey, they are included within the “community” of the minibus operators and the boundary between them and the passengers disappears. However, one important aspect of this initial gift and why it does not turn into reciprocity has to do with power relations. Minibus drivers, in this case, have the power to allow a passenger to travel for free without expecting something in return. From this point of view, they put themselves in a higher position because the passenger does not have the power to change this imbalance. This is, of course, a rather narrow interpretation of looking at what happens when mobility is turned into a gift. Relating the above descriptions back to the more general framework of neoliberalism shows how, as mentioned before, the working of the market is absent from these type of transactions. For instance, the urge to maximise profits totally disappears and the development or maintenance of a social network dominate the outcome of exchange.
In what follows, I turn to another set of examples that indicate social and cultural aspects of commodity exchange in relation to the minibus. The social dynamics described in the second and the third section influence the moral economy of exchange and the politics of witchcraft associated with money exchange within and around the minibus. In the next section I therefore briefly elaborate on the presence of Satan and the role of witchcraft within the minibus industry.

4.5. Money Exchange and Witchcraft

Although my research did not specifically focus on witchcraft or the occult, I encountered these stories on a regular basis. Therefore, I find it relevant to reflect on how they relate to the tactics associated with the accumulation of wealth and money exchange both on an empirical and an analytical level. As it turned out, a large number of the stories in relation to witchcraft or the occult are, in one way or another, connected to the notion of mobility. This indicates the importance of the value that is attached to travelling or its interpretation as a commodity. To introduce the analytical value of these stories I draw on the work of John and Jean Comaroff (1993) when they look for a link between ritual, witchcraft and modernity. In their introduction they claim that the former two practices are very much products of the latter. Analysis thus should focus on how they are a “response to contradictions created and (literally) engendered by processes of social, material and cultural transformation” (ibid: xxx, emphasis added). On a conceptual level, it is acknowledged that they are not purely imaginative but “chillingly” concrete and real in terms of micropolitics and the appropriation of economic and social processes. Overall, the relation between witchcraft, ritual and modernity is “animated by men and women as they seek to make their worlds manageable and meaningful” (ibid: xxix). The latter point is relevant in the case of the minibus. Rather than a mere rejection of modernity and the process of commodification within the city, I argue that stories related to witchcraft serve as a comment on these dynamics. Moreover, they are ultimately influenced by the process of commodification. For instance, the face of witchcraft adapts to new dynamics. Where, ‘traditionally’, witchcraft functions because of the intimacy between a witch and its victim, accusations “involve relations between peers, kin, and co-wives” (Austen 1993: 90). Within the context of the minibus, these relations disappear and are replaced by impersonal connections between the various actors involved. In a recent article, Todd Sanders (2008) reflects on the role of the Devil in relation to liberalisation and globalisation in Tanzania. Interestingly, his case study comprises of minibus transport. He
argues that “[t]he new structural inequalities and immoralities inherent in capitalist relations have manifested themselves in many ways, including the rapid proliferation of the occult in the privatized transport sector” (Sanders 2008: 108). He goes on to explain how devil discourse, or stories related to witchcraft and the occult have often been explained as a localised response or a critique of capitalism, modernity, neoliberalism, globalisation and alike (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002; Masquelier 2002; Sanders 2001). However, this does not mean that these stories and practices should be reduced to “traditional relics”. On the contrary, they are interpreted as active, flexible and deeply engaged with the contemporary moment” (Sanders 2008: 110). Linked to this line of interpretation the stories related to witchcraft as I collected them during my research also fit within the context of the argument I am building throughout this chapter and this thesis. The presence of witchcraft and spirits related to the use and importance of money and monetary value point out how socially entangled the latter are. For instance, one could argue that witchcraft is ultimately anti-social in nature. Nevertheless, I look at this characteristic as being an important aspect of how a moral framework is being constructed around the importance of accumulating monetary wealth. In order to translate this framework to an empirical context I sketch a brief anthology of the different stories that I collected.

A first type of stories takes place at specific geographical sites. For instance, this specific account takes place pa manda, at the graveyard. It was shared by people at the minibus depots in Ndirande, Mibawa and Chilomoni. People there claim that, at night, the graveyard is busy like “Heathrow airport in London”. During the night time all the ghosts and witches take off and land at that area. All these stories have a great idea of mobility in them. For instance, witches are said to fly across enormous distances in no time. One of the conductors in Ndirande is often eager to share stories on witchcraft. One afternoon, he openly expressed that he himself is a witch and that he is able to fly to the house where I was staying, enter the room while nobody is able to notice and observe him. He added that he can easily fly to Belgium or the Netherland to come and visit me after I left Malawi. Similar stories were told when drivers and conductors picked up a branch from a tree and put it on the floor. They continued by explaining how, when a witch doctor performs the appropriate ceremony, it is possible to travel to the United States or the UK just by stepping over the branch. One conductor explained how people from the North of the country tell stories where, in the middle of the bush, buses suddenly appear full of people. These stories stress the ability to move around freely, a highly relevant idea in relation to the opportunity of moving around town inside a minibus.
A second type of stories deals with issues related to night time activities. After dark, most of the minibuses cease to operate and a lot of areas, especially Ndirande, are considered to be far more dangerous than during the day. Two short stories illustrate this point rather explicitly. The first story was shared during a group discussion with three drivers who all heard the story before. Not too long after dawn, there was a man waiting along the road who later turned out to be a witch doctor. Because of the late hour there were not many buses on the road. He thought it would be impossible to find a ride home at this time so he decided to summon some people in order to make it look like a whole group of people were waiting for a ride. At this point, a driver who was on his way to bring the bus back to his owner, noticed the group and hoped to make some extra money for that day. Together with his conductor he decided to pull over and pick up the whole bunch. During the ride, everything went smoothly, everybody paid the right amount of money, nobody said a word, and the people were dropped off at the stage. At the point where the driver demanded the money from his conductor, the latter notices that he only had money from one passenger. A similar story worked the other way around. A whole group of actual passengers was waiting for a minibus after the sun set and, when they were about to loose all hope one minibus pulled over and collected the whole group. When they reached their destination, everybody got off and they noticed an incredible pain in their behind. It turned out that there never was a minibus and that they were dragged over the tarmac.

A third type of stories talks about the relation between money transfers and witchcraft inside of the minibus. After I conducted an interview with pastor Francis in town where we talked about Satanism and witchcraft, I returned to the stage in Ndirande and elaborated on the interview together with Mbonziye. He talked rather seriously about the practice of paying inside the minibus. One always has to be cautious when money is exchanged not to touch the hands of a passenger. When this happens, there is a risk of being affected by witchcraft because of the physical connection and the relation to money. People can perform a ritual on the money at home or with a witchdoctor. Also, in relation to this same story, he continued and made a link with payments in a supermarket or PTC. There, the cashier will ask you to put the money down on the counter and pick it up from there rather than accept the money straight from the customer’s hands.

A fourth type of stories deals with the presence of the devil inside or around the minibus. I spoke to several pastors who are regular travellers and who acknowledge these

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52 Ndirande, 17/09/2008
stories. Most of them relate these stories to the presence of Satanists on the bus. Both drivers and passengers see this as a more recent phenomenon. Satanists are usually well-off middle class men who dress nicely and whom you would never suspect of having connections with the Devil. Other cases describe a beautiful young woman. Some interlocutors told me the Devil always uses people one would least expect. In some cases, I was told how these people get on the bus at one stage and get off at the next. They never travel long distances or a whole route between town and the townships. After they get off the minibus they cause an accident. Right after the accident, they collect the blood from the victims. In these stories, there is a significant aspect of class. They always deal with well to do people and the fact that they spend money for very short distances indicates their financial status. Also interesting is the idea that in ‘traditional’ stories on witchcraft, there is a necessary personal link between the person that is being affected and the one that initiates the actions. In the case of Satanists, there is no relation with its victims whatsoever. Some informants frame this dynamic within the process of urbanisation which leads to increased anonymity, individuality and a sense of privacy.

Following the analysis which puts travelling on the verge between a commodity and a gift, I argue that stories which link mobility and occult forces sprawl from the influence of liberalisation and globalisation on a more localised context in general. I do follow Sanders’ (2008) analysis when he states that “devil discourses provide imaginative moral frameworks for mediating on the relation between individuals and society, the origins of value, morality and the production of wealth in the world, past, present and future” (ibid: 122). Moreover, the presence of witchcraft points to how the process of commodification and exchange is never a neutral one. On the contrary, it indicates how exchange is never the result of a series of disentanglements but rather how entanglements are imagined through the personification of occult practices. Rather than looking at money and exchange as universal and homogenous, the stories related to witchcraft, Satan and the occult indicate how these are appropriated and how, on a more general level, extra-economic value is attributed to the politics of exchange.

4.6. Concluding Remarks

This chapter discussed how the working of the minibus within the city leads to new economic and social configurations. First, travel appears to be determined by exchange value and is, accordingly, turned into a commodity. This point of view needs to be nuanced because the laws of the market do not extend endlessly. Despite this commodification, social
entanglements seem to influence the politics of mobility. People need to make serious investments and therefore need to make choices and adapt their personal approach to money. A similar dynamic can be found among the minibus operators. There, the market seems to determine the value of money which, accordingly, determines social hierarchies. However, I have demonstrated how, especially drivers, conductors and callboys, have to develop a masculine identity in order to ‘master’ the money that is earned. Second, I elaborated on how commodification is not the only process that plays in determining the value of transport by demonstrating how travelling also involves aspects of gift-giving. Overall, I argue that the value of travel fits within the paradigm of a tournament of values where it can be considered as a commodity as well as, within a different context, a gift. And third, I pointed to the moral economy that plays a part in exchange relations with regard to mobility. Here, a neoliberal ideology strongly influences how the face of witchcraft transforms. From this point of view, witchcraft can not be reduced to a mere local phenomenon or a neutral practice. For instance, Chisomo, a local journalist and a volunteer for an organisation to support the informal economy in Blantyre made an interesting comment in relation to witchcraft. He argues that witchcraft establishes a moral order within society. “It keeps people in order”, he claims “somehow similar to what the government is doing”. Moreover, it is strongly influenced by the process of commodification on the one hand while, on the other hand, it changes how money is perceived and personalised. Nevertheless, the visible and dominant presence of money indicates how a neoliberal ideology is taken over and how it influences social relations best characterised through a process of commodification.
Chapter 5
The Minibus as the City’s Trickster

5.1. Introduction

This chapter approaches the minibus as an object that is part of the urban landscape. More specifically, it takes into account its materiality of this object and places it within the wider social, political and cultural context of the city. Overall, I question how the minibus influences the nature of social relations within a neoliberal urban environment. In the previous chapters, I elaborated on how, rather than a monolithic unit, the urban space is fragmented on various levels and scales. Also, I indicated how the minibus establishes connections between a number of socially produced spaces, how it allows people to reach out beyond a localised environment and how these movements lead to the emergence of new political and economic social configurations. Rather than a neutral object that takes people from one place to the other in geographical terms, it is argued that the minibus entails transgression, both in the meaning of passing and of being offensive. Accordingly the minibus occupies a marginal position within the city which it partly acquired due to its historical legacy. Rather than looking at this proposed marginality in negative terms, a more positive approach focuses on the possibilities this creates for the minibuses as an object with a social life, an identity and, certain ‘powers’. Overall, there is a need to develop a framework that allows identifying how the minibus is constantly trying not only to establish itself but also maintain its position and moreover legitimise itself. Here, I make a link with the work of Michel the Certeau (1984) when he analyses the practice of every day life.

In this work, the author explicitly identifies a number of spatial practices. For instance, he distinguishes between strategies and tactics. On the relation between both, Henrik Vigh (2006: 134) writes: “strategy […] is an act, or set of acts, leading to the creation of a space, an institutional or sedentary demarcation, by subjects with influence to exercise their will; for those who lack the power to demarcate a space of their will the option is not passivity or resignation, but is instead tactical manoeuvring or navigation”. Spatial strategies, in de Certeau’s analysis relate to the possibility to carving out one’s “own” space (un espace propre). The absence of a proper locus makes that actors or, in the case of the minibus, objects have to “play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organised by the law of a foreign power” (de Certeau 1984: 36-37). To translate this back to the context of the minibus in
Blantyre, I refer to one of the interviews I conducted with the head for the engineering department. This department is, among other things, responsible for the implementation of the decisions made by the planning directorate. When I asked her about the department’s attitude towards the minibuses and whether there were any initiatives to make the physical infrastructure more accessible for the buses, she clearly stated that they intend to keep all the buses out of the city centre in order to avoid congestion. In new plans, they intend to do exactly the same thing in Limbe. And apparently they were not too worried about the fact that these rules implied that walking distances would increase for the passengers. It is clear that the minibuses only move on the relatively good roads in town. These roads fall under the control of the city’s authority and accordingly, the latter have the power to make them their “own” space. Also, this implies that the minibuses constantly move “within enemy territory” as de Certeau (ibid: 37) puts it.

Within this framework, I urge for an approach where the minibus is ascribed the same characteristics as a border zone or a borderland within the wider urban environment. From this point of view, it is interesting to see how the movement of the minibus within the urban landscape is perceived, experienced or even appropriated. Moreover, this comparison allows for the development of an analytical framework where the minibus is placed in a marginal position from where it seeks legitimacy within the urban landscape. In the end it will be possible to rethink the role of the minibus within the realm of popular culture and as a site of resistance and contestation.

The point of departure in this framework is the claim that spatial representations are never neutral but rather the result of social processes and constructions. Accordingly, in an attempt to “remake social analysis”, Rosaldo (1989) suggests to bring new objects of study in the picture. One of these “new objects” is the border zone. He argues that it is difficult, if not impossible to talk about “pure” cultures. Instead, he writes:

“More often than we usually care to think, our everyday lives are crisscrossed by border zones, pockets, and eruptions of all kinds. Social borders frequently become salient around such lines as sexual orientation, gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, politics, dress, food or taste. Along with “our” supposedly transparent cultural selves, such borderlands should be regarded not as analytically empty transitional zones but as sites of creative cultural production that require investigation” (Rosaldo 1989: 207-208).

53 Blantyre City Assembly, 11/08/2009
More specifically, border zones are interesting because people are on the move, they are not where they once were and not yet where they want to be. In a way, they find themselves somewhere “betwixt-and-between”, nowhere and everywhere. Because these zones are constantly in motion, they are “not frozen for inspection” (ibid: 217) and allow for acts of creativity, resistance and contestation.

In a more recent article, Gupta and Ferguson (1992) take up this idea and elaborate on the link between space and culture. Their argument is a reaction to how “representations of space within the social sciences are remarkably dependent on images of break, rupture and disjunction” (ibid: 6). In short, they move away from space as a “neutral grid” (ibid: 7) and opt for an analysis that focuses on the process where the representation of space is the result of social and cultural practices. They turn, for instance, to Anderson’s (1983) notion of “imagined communities” to indicate how places are ‘made’ and how they ‘work’ as social constructions. Following this interpretation of spatial representations, they look at how “difference” is produced between social networks, communities or nations, to give but a few examples. What is interesting in the light of my further analysis is their interest in borderlands within a “deterritorialised” world. In their conclusion they argue that borderlands are “a place of incommensurable contradictions” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 18). For instance, it shapes the identity of the “hybridized subject” (idem). I relate this point of view to Alvarez’s (1995) analysis when he states that interpretations of community and culture as geographically or territorially bounded no longer corresponds to empirical evidence. In contrast, he notes, “the concepts inherent in the borders genre are alert to the shifting of behavior and identity and the reconfiguration of social patterns at the dynamic interstices of cultural practices. When we looked for similarity and harmony we found adaptive patterns framed in functional formats of social equilibrium. The identification of paradox and contradiction specifies the importance of understanding differences, disequilibria, and the conflicting social patterns of human behavior on both the local and global scale” (ibid: 462)

In this review, the author states how “[b]orders are traditionally defined as international boundaries between nation-states” (ibid: 449). Notwithstanding, the type of border that I have in mind is one of a different kind. At this point, it is necessary to bring the minibus back in. The remainder of this chapter does not focus on borders as physical demarcations of geographical spaces. Rather, within the framework of transgression, the minibus shares the basic characteristics of a border zone when it moves across the urban space. Accordingly, the image of the border zone is primarily used as a conceptual
framework. As an object, the minibus occupies a ‘marginal’ space within the city, constantly moving between various places and difficult to control. Accordingly, in the remainder of this chapter, I argue for an approach that puts the minibus in the realm of popular culture. As an object, the minibus holds specific connotations and powers that enable it to operate as the city’s trickster. Before turning to further discussions on this topic, it is necessary to elaborate on the interpretation of material culture in anthropological literature and cultural studies to highlight its importance in relation to movements within the city and to be able to work towards an understanding of everyday practices.

5.2. The Social Life of Material Objects

“A bus is a microcosm of African life”, write de Bruijn et. al. (2001: 1) in the introduction to their edited volume on mobility in Africa. They use the bus as a metaphor to indicate the various aspects related to the notion of mobility: “the bus demonstrates how mobility appears to refer to an array of forms of human behaviour, each inspired by different motives, desires, aspirations and obligations” (idem). Travelling is of course only one specific form of mobility, let alone travelling by minibus. Nevertheless, I argue that an understanding of how this process evolves and how it is shaped can implicate certain wider dynamics within society. In my case, it says something about the configuration of society in Blantyre. In order to substantiate my claim that a material object like a bus holds several social and cultural implications I turn to Kopytoff’s (1986) suggestion to look at the “cultural biography of things”. His analysis is presented within the framework of commodification and focuses primarily on economic aspects. However, his approach towards objects and things can be enlarged to a broader framework. The author starts by elaborating on the importance of writing and analysing people’s biographies as an anthropological methodology or as a way to come up with theoretical models. The latter comprises of “a reasonable number of actual life histories. It presents the range of biographical possibilities that the society in question offers and examines the manner in which these possibilities are realised in the life stories of various categories of people” (Kopytoff 1986: 66). And he continues by arguing that a similar approach can be applied to things or objects. For instance, he writes: “The biography of a car in Africa would reveal a wealth of cultural data: the way it was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller to the buyer, the uses to which the car is regularly put, the identity of its most frequent passengers and of those who borrow it, the frequency of borrowing, the garages to which it is taken and the owner’s
relation to the mechanics, the movement of the car from hand to hand over the years, and in
the end, when the car collapses, the final disposition of its remains” (idem).

Based on this description, it is clear that a lot can be said about the materiality of an
object, like a car, which is otherwise taken for granted. Of course, my own analysis does not
focus on intercultural exchange as such. Nevertheless, the argument that objects have a life of
their own offers an interesting point of departure for an analysis occupied by the position of
the minibus within the urban landscape. But first, it is necessary to make the link between the
social life of things and the ‘identity’ of things. Here, I turn to Verrips and Meyer’s (2008)
analysis of “the struggles and stories of a Ghanaian long distance taxi driver”. In their article
they take up Kopytoff’s suggestions and explore the social life of a car based on the dairies of
Kwaku, the driver.

For instance, they describe when the car was bought, how much it cost, whom he
bought it from, the mechanical problems it suffered from, the costs of repairs, etc.
Interestingly though, they move beyond the mere descriptive. First, based on the label at the
back window, the car is given the name: ‘God Never Fails’. Also, as time passes, the car is
constantly adjusted and pimped. In short, the car is ‘revitalised’ over and over again (ibid: 160).
Moreover, the vehicle seems to have a proper identity. The authors write how, “though
it seems as if mechanics and people like Kwaku ‘will fix everything and bring it back to life
again’, this does not mean that their perception of cars, especially engines, and how they (dys-
function) is merely technical. Here one enters the fascinating area of the beliefs, images and
lore with regard to these material objects. Just like canoes used in artisanal fisheries, they very
often are seen and treated as a kind of beings with a will of their own, who can get hurt and
die and therefore have to be carefully protected against all kinds of evil influences. To make
things more complex, most drivers, as is also the case in Western societies, tend towards a
strong identification with their vehicles, that is, with already semi-anthropomorphized
material objects” (ibid: 161, see also Verrips 1994). Here, I briefly elaborate on how the
minibus is translated in the world of its operators. More specifically, three examples of how
they perceive and identify with their buses in relation to the body and bodily practices are
discussed. These examples have already been mentioned throughout the various chapters of
this thesis but I find it nevertheless interesting to bundle and properly explain them here.

The first example refers to the notion of nsuzy which indicates the money that is made
on top of the requested target by the owner. In the majority of cases, this money is partly used
to pay the conductor if he works based on a daily contract. The explanation of this term
originates from a culinary background. Within this context, nsuzy translates as soup and it is
usually served together with *nsima*, the staple food of most Malawians. Moreover, many interlocutors argue that they have not eaten properly unless they had *nsima*. The soup that is served on top of the *nsima* then is a little extra to make the taste better. *Nsima* is also the preferred food for minibus drivers who normally eat at small restaurants at the various stages in the respective neighbourhoods or at Mibawa, where women sell portions for prices varying between K 100 and K 200. On a good day, drivers can spare some money for some *nsuzy* while, when business is not picking up, they have to limit themselves to the strict minimum. The second example indicates the importance of the minibus as an object that enables operators not only to move around but the economic opportunities and possibilities it creates. When a bus experiences a breakdown on the road, when it is confiscated by the police or when it sits with the mechanics for a longer period of time, the drivers complain by using the expression *kudula mwendo*, to cut a leg. This expression identifies the importance of physical mobility on the part of the minibus operators. Though they constantly drive around rather than having a specific point of departure or destination, being on the road is crucial to their economic and social survival.

![Figure 5: Minibus in ‘perfect’ condition.](image)

Finally, when drivers decide not to wait on the line in Ndirande, they are accused of *kumenya mimba*, hitting in the stomach. Again, there is a link made here with the practice of eating, the
body and accumulating wealth. “If someone hits you in the stomach”, Anthony explained, “you are not able to take passengers and go on the road. In other words, you are not able to make money and as a result you will not be eating in the evening”\footnote{Ndirande, 06/09/2008}.

Overall, from the point of view of its operators, the minibus is translated in terms related to the working of the body, highlighting the importance of mobility, physical strength and survival. Anthony’s bus offers a good example of how this approach works on a daily basis. Throughout my six months of field research, his car never operated smoothly. Despite the dire condition of his car and the many mechanical problems, he still talked about it as being in perfect condition and running smoothly. However, the approach from outsiders is often very different than from those involved in the business. Passengers are always cramped next to each other, regardless of the official loading capacity. But it ends nor starts there.

As is the case with the minibuses in Blantyre, Kwaku’s car carries protective slogans referring to God. In interviews with passengers, I often enquired about what this means if they travel. Emanuel, a deeply religious Pentecostal Christian, explained how these slogans can affect peoples travelling behaviour. In his personal case, if he has the time, he will wait for a bus with some religious reference. Although, he immediately nuanced this practice by stating that the mere presence of these inscriptions is not that important. Far more important is “what is in the heart of the person who put that sticker there”\footnote{Chilomoni, 01/12/2008}. For instance, if there would be evil spirits inside the bus while it is on the road, there is always an increased risk of an accident: “the driver can suddenly be blinded or disturbed. At that point the bus can be grabbed off the road and cause a deadly accident”. Fortunately, he claims, “the presence of one believer is enough to safe all the passengers in the bus simply because the presence of the Holy Spirit is much stronger than any evil spirit”.

In their conclusion, the Verrips and Meyer (ibid: 163) establish the link between how the car is treated and represented on the one hand and the notion of modernity on the other hand. Rather than looking at this object merely as a broken down machine, like Mbembe and Roitman (1995) suggest, a more positive approach towards a life that is otherwise characterised by poverty and scarcity is put forward. The key word, in their eyes, is \textit{adjustment}. But instead of being imposed ‘from above’ as for instance in the Structural Adjustment Programmes, adjustments emerge through the practice of everyday life. From this point of view, I would argue that the minibus does not operate as an object in a deplorable condition that tends to fall apart each time it hits the road. On the contrary, the minibus
operators, conductors, but also mechanics work with these vehicles indicates how they are objects that represent great creativity and technological cleverness. Overall, based on Kopytoff’s suggestion to look at the social biography of things and on Verrips and Meyer’s attempt to ascribe an identity to an object, certain inherent powers can be ascribed to material objects. In order to apply this idea to my further analysis it is necessary to elaborate on the position of the minibus within the urban landscape. I am not focussing on one individual vehicle or object but rather on a whole category of vehicles. Nevertheless, it is clear by now that the minibus is a highly ambiguous object.

As described in chapter two and three, the minibuses emerged during a period of transition. Not merely an institutional transition from one-party rule to multi-party democracy but also from authoritarian repression where the state was omnipresent to an emerging sense of freedom where people are able to explore new avenues towards success. For instance, Chanza\textsuperscript{56}, a respected and renowned minibus owner from Chilomoni went around town selling vegetables together with his brother when Banda was President of Malawi. When his brother got married they split their capital between the two of them. This was not too long after Muluzi came to power in 1994. Chanza immediately invested his money and bought his first minibus. As he puts it, this turned out to be a brilliant move since it brought a lot of money in a relatively short period of time. Especially because he operated the bus himself and, accordingly there was no need to pay a driver. Nevertheless, the minibus industry requires patience. He only bought his second minibus two years after he started operating the first one. Today, he owns nine buses which he gives out to his drivers. On the side, he also conducts a car dealership, he sells televisions and clothing and he imports a lot of goods from South Africa. From this point of view, the minibus is a prime expression of this feeling of freedom. Moreover, as one of my interlocutors indicates, right after the transition and under the regime of Bakili Muluzi “everything was free for all”. In a relatively short period of time, the minibus has aggressively taken over the transport market and, moreover, tried to carve out its place within the urban landscape. In other words, it attempts to claim legitimacy for its position.

The result of these attempts has often been dubious. Governmental institutions still see the buses as a polluting factor causing more problems in terms of governance than it brings opportunities. In chapter three, for instance, I briefly elaborated on the importance of a notion like cleanliness which is enforced through the introduction of parking fees within the city

\textsuperscript{56} Chilomoni, 17/12/2008
centre. However, despite these efforts, minibuses seem to escape these rules with ease. In The Nation\textsuperscript{57}, one of the national newspapers, there appeared a picture of a clamped car accompanied by a text that warned vehicle owners only to park illegally at their own risk because “authorities are not thinking twice about clamping such vehicles”. The author of the text concluded: “what is puzzling, however, is that most minibuses notoriously known for illegal parking in the city are rarely clamped”. There is of course a simple explanation for this development. Minibus drivers always keep their engine running while they are between destinations, whether they are briefly stopping to take a passenger on the road or whether they are endlessly waiting for the bus to load at an (illegal) stage. Nevertheless, an atmosphere of lawlessness hangs around the object of the minibus as it moves through the streets. Similar feelings of resentment live among urban residents. Among my interlocutors, a lot of comments voiced negativity towards the minibuses while, on the other hand, they praise them for the opportunities they bring. I will return to this discussion at a later stage in this chapter but it should be clear that the minibuses stand out and they leave nobody unmoved.

Before moving on to the next section it is necessary to bring the position of the minibus within the urban landscape together with its biography and identity as described above. First, the movements of the minibus on the streets of the city that are laid out by those in power can be perceived as an ‘invasion’ of the latter’s “own” space. Also, because of the bus’s inherent mobility it is difficult to control. It moves as a marginal object, characterised by ambiguity and hybridity. Second, an analysis of the materiality of the minibus suggests that it can not be perceived as a neutral object. On the contrary, since its emergence around the mid 1990s, it has been highly controversial. Based on the description by Verrips and Meyer (2008) I would argue that a car or, in this specific case, the minibus has a ‘life of its own’. All these characteristics make up the framework within which my further analysis is set. For instance, in the next section I argue that the minibus fits within the realm of popular culture.

5.3. The Minibus as the City’s Trickster

“Loutish, lustful, puffed up with boasts and lies, ravenous for foolery and food, yet managing always to draw order from ordure, the trickster appears in the myths and folktales of nearly every traditional society, sometimes as a god, more often as an animal. Seemingly trivial and

\textsuperscript{57} The Nation, 10/09/2008
altogether lawless, he arouses affection and even esteem wherever his stories are told, as he defies mythic seriousness and social logic” (Pelton 1980: 1). With this statement, Pelton (ibid) opens his book on the trickster in West Africa. It describes the main characteristics of this character as it is brought to the stage in myths, oral traditions, plays and literature. In many analyses the trickster is related to the domain of symbols, mysticism, religion and ritual. For instance, a reoccurring reference is made to the work of Victor Turner on the relation between structure and anti-structure or on the notion of liminality in ritual. Structure, in Turner’s understanding refers to “a more or less distinctive arrangement of mutually dependent institutions and the institutional organization of social positions and/or actors which they imply” (Turner 1974: 272). Accordingly, anti structure points to a phase where this proposed organisation is either reversed or annihilated. Liminality and *communitas* are, according to Turner two concepts that characterise this process rather accurately. The liminal phase in ritual, for example, is “betwixt and between the categories of ordinary social life”. And the author continues:

“Symbols and metaphors found in abundance in liminality represent various dangerous ambiguities of this ritual stage, since the classifications on which order normally depends are annulled or obscured – other symbols designate temporary antinomic liberation from behavioural norms and cognitive rules. This aspect of danger requiring control is reflected in the paradox that in liminality extreme authority of elders over juniors often coexists with scenes and episodes of indicative of the utmost behavioural freedom and speculative license” (ibid: 273).

However, this line of inquiry is not very useful within the context of the minibus since the rite of passage suggests a transformation of identity or personhood. Nevertheless, a first characteristic of the trickster is often associated with the deviant, the marginal, the peripheral, chaos or it is looked at as a polluting factor within society. In an attempt to revise the literature on the position of the trickster, Babock Abrahams (1975: 152) makes the link between the marginal and Mary Douglas’ (1966) notion of dirt which is “matter out of place”. She furthermore argues that “we not only tolerate but need a “margin of mess”” (Babock-Abrahams 1975: 152). According to the author, this margin of mess is exactly where the trickster can be found. A second characteristic that can be ascribed to the trickster entails its tendency to inhabit open, public spaces, that they comprise of creative and destructive but also simply amusing powers, that they are amoral, asocial and characterised by ambiguity and paradox (ibid: 159-160).
The trickster is not the only figure that is ascribed these characteristics and that occupies a marginal position. Other examples that surface in social analyses comprise of, among others, the fool, the clown, the harlequin, the villain or the social bandit (Hobsbawm 1959), and the joker (Douglas 1968). For instance, Klapp (1949: 157) claims that “[t]he fool is distinguished from the normal group members by a deviation in person or conduct which is regarded as ludicrous and improper”. His behaviour is often described as pompous or associated with excess (ibid: 159). Accordingly, in relation to social structure, the fool is often ridiculed and occupies a rather low status. However, despite being despised, the fool is also valued and appreciated. He gains his legitimacy especially from his ambiguous status within society. However, as Adeleke (2005: 13-14) points out, the position of the fool or the trickster transcends mere entertainment. He is ultimately subversive in nature. Here, I would argue that a link can be established between the persona of the trickster in literature and the notion of popular culture as identified by Fabian (1978) when he states that these cultural expressions have strong connotations. First, it is not elitist but rather carried by the masses. Second, “it implies a challenge to accepted beliefs in the superiority of ‘pure’ or ‘high’ culture” and third, “it signifies processes occurring behind the back of established powers and accepted interpretations” (ibid: 315).

Since Fabian introduced this field of study a number of authors have picked up this theme and elaborated on it. This literature does, however, not focus on exclusively on ‘art’ but also includes other social phenomena. Here, the work of Michael Bachtin (1984) is of an important influence. In his discussion of Rabelais’ literature, he identifies what he calls “counter culture” to indicate how certain events and festivities resist and go against an established hegemony. More specifically, Bachtin pays attention to social developments that take place during carnivals. In an African context, I would argue that the work of Comi Toulabor (1981) represents a similar approach when he discusses how the official discourse associated with the cult around the person of Eyadema in Togo is reversed and translated in rather obscene and grotesque terms among the young Togolese plebs. This example is taken up by Mbembe (1992) when he identifies the banality of power in the post-colony. I would argue that the latter interpretation focuses too much on the notion of popular resistance. Far more interesting is the idea that expressions of popular culture take place in the margins of society despite the fact that they are often highly visible. In what follows I will illustrate these ideas through the description of two examples that will help me to establish the link between the character of the trickster, the notion of popular culture and the minibus as it moves through the Blantyre’s urban landscape.
The first example concerns Basile Ndjio’s (2005) analysis of the Carrefour de la joie in Cameroon which emerged at the end of the 1990s. The author relates the rise of this phenomenon to how the public space is organised and managed. The latter appears “as a politically structured space that not only restricts citizen’s freedom of movement, speech an assembly but also rationalizes the way of standing, speaking and walking” (ibid: 266). Or, in other words, it is a place where order, peace, security and discipline reign. One example through which this order is achieved is the repressive and even the aggressive behaviour of the police. Also, on a different level, order is instigated by overloading the public space with symbols and ideograms that validate and articulate the importance of the state. Within the context of Malawi, an interesting example of how the public space is supposed to be ordered and disciplined can be described by looking at how the President moves through the streets, especially in contrast to how the minibuses are perceived within the city. When the president moves between two locations he is always preceded by a convoy of police and military that has to secure a safe passing through. More specifically, a number of cars drive in front and literally clear the streets by stopping all the vehicles on the roads. Even pedestrians are not allowed to cross the street when the country’s leader is in the area. When the president finally arrives, he is surrounded by a motor home, an ambulance, cars with bodyguards, and more police and soldiers. Overall, the president moves in a clean and safe bubble through the streets characterised by total control and discipline. In short, to get back to Ndjio’s analysis, the government constantly attempts, whether through violent repression or through more subtle ways of alignment, to keep the urban public space clean and free from “popular practices of insubordination or impoliteness” (idem). Despite these initiatives the Carrefour de la joie is a space within, but at the moral margins of, the urban environment which allows for acts that transgress the “suffocating restrictions that the state authority imposes” (ibid: 267). These places are located in highly populated and disadvantaged quarters of the town where numerous bars and the prostitutes attract customers and visitors. Overall, since the mid 1990s these places appeal to lot of people who were ‘denied’ access to more reputable places like smart cafés or cocktailbars (ibid: 275). The Carrefours are places of heavy drinking and free sexuality, places where money flows, where dances are performed accompanied with obscene songs and lyrics and all that is considered indecent within society or, simply put, it is a site of uncontrolled and unsupervised pleasure and enjoyment (joie). In conclusion the author writes how:
Carrefour de la joie drunkards who ‘anarchically’ and ‘illegally’ invade he public space with their ‘dirty’ bodies to deface it or the frenzied Pédalé dancers who lings about the ‘petit pays’ (‘small penis’) [...] are very different from the docile and ‘civilized’ citizens whom the government expects to sing the praises of the Father of the Nation or dance in his prestige. Unlike the latter, Carrefour de la joie revellers gather in this public space not to glorify the ‘Provincial Guide’ who claims to have brought ‘democracy and liberty to his people’, but instead to create a disturbance, to disrupt public order, to break the rules of civility and good manners” (ibid: 289, emphasis in original).

The next example addresses a similar dynamic but from the opposite perspective. Where the people in the Carrefour de la joie celebrate pleasure and indecency, the young Born Again street preachers in Blantyre who emerged towards the end of the 1980s, when the Banda regime and his political machinery were at the height of its power, enter the streets in order to establish a new ideological order based on purity and decency. Rijk van Dijk (2001; see also van Dijk 1992, 2002) analyses how, during those days, a social climate characterised by fear, terror and witchcraft accusations reigned in the townships. In the midst of this turmoil, “street-preachers stepped forward, many of them teenagers, calling on people to repent before it was too late, before the wrath of God was unleashed on all believers” (van Dijk 2001: 97-98). These Pentecostal preachers started out in the early seventies and they were popular mainly among higher educated and urban middle class Malawians. Over the years, their message spread and gained acceptance among the urban poor who constituted the majority of the urban population in the country. Key to their preaching was a strong ideological message against popular beliefs that included ancestors and evil spirits. Also, they instructed their followers to submit to a strict moral code that prohibited them from using any alcohol or drugs or even to visit places in the city that were associated with these practices.

What interests me here is not so much the actual ideology they bring forward but rather the way they do so: the modalities they apply in order to get their message across. First, the author points out how, in their witchcraft-cleansing project, preachers used a lot of humour and laughter. For instance, van Dijk (ibid: 105-106) writes about Linley Mbeta and how, when she “pointed openly at people during her meetings as possible candidates of witchcraft-involvements, this was at the same time discussed in an ambivalent mixture of hilarity and fear, mockery and anxiety, jokes and images of the frightening”. Laughter and ridicule became associated with the rule of the elders within the city since witchcraft was often said to be taught by elders and young children were used and manipulated. A similar approach can be applied to the way the Pentecostal ideology was preached in the townships. The young puritan preachers did not meet in fancy churches but, on the contrary, choose to
step into the streets or ‘in the open’. Not only did they critique ‘traditional churches’ for not taking into account or even denying “what was so obviously a part of everyday African life: occult forces” (ibid: 102), they also critiqued the highly institutionalised structure of the church. In my reading of van Dijk’s account, moving into the streets became a way of contesting and subverting existing power structures within society.

In what follows, I relate both of the examples presented above to the conceptual framework I developed earlier on in this chapter. Next, I move back to the context of the minibus and the position it holds within the urban landscape. It is clear that the notion of popular culture is mainly linked to human actions and highlights various types of agency (see, for instance Argenti 1998; Scott 1985; Zemon Davis 1971). This is no different when it comes to social analyses that focus on the personae of the trickster, the fool, the clown, etc. For instance, Ndjio (2008) writes about the feymen en Cameroon. This category of mainly young people gets their name because of their activities as “professional swindlers and successful urban tricksters” (ibid: 205). As young disadvantaged urbanites, they were able to make the transformation from rags to riches in a very short time and without the help form the ‘post-colonial government’ (idem). In other words, the author describes this group of people in order to provide an alternative to Ferguson’s (1999) rather negative interpretation of the expectations of modernity. Overall, I would argue that similar characteristics can be ascribed to the object of the minibus. As an object it could be approached as a sign of deprivation or abjection and the way they are organised might seem conform the image of an ‘urban jungle’. On the contrary, they are places of serious economic gain, they fulfil a function similar to the provision of public transport all over the country and they operate according to their own logic and rules without or around will of the government. Also, with Verrip’s and Meyer’s analysis of Kwaku’s car, I indicated how material objects have a life of their own and how they are interpreted as a more positive expression of social developments within the city.

Moreover, the spatial aspects, where, and how popular expressions of resistance, contestation and subversive behaviour emerge are highly relevant. As the examples of the Carrefour de la joie in Cameroon and the Pentecostal Preachers in Malawi indicate, the street, as a public space that is actively being appropriated and domesticated allows for deviant acts. Due to limited control and regulation, it allows people to carve out their ‘proper’ ideological space. Again, this is no different in the case of the minibus. By describing its ‘powers’ in following section, I indicate how it is able to operate within the urban landscape and carve out a space where conventional a social structures are reversed. Overall, attention could be paid, especially in anthropological research, not only to human forms of agency but also to social
developments that take place within the materiality of a physical environment. A number of
descriptions will indicate how the minibus comprises of ‘powers’ similar to the figure of the
trickster. For instance, the minibus is capable of subverting social relations, the nature of
sociality and power relations within society. However, similar to the image of the trickster, it
is necessary to stress how the minibus is not anti-social in nature. On the contrary, it both
draws on and changes social conventions within a neoliberal urban landscape.

5.4. The Powers of the Minibus

This section describes three main issues related to the ‘power’ of the minibus. The first is the
power of life and death. Second, I argue that the minibus occupies a position within the urban
landscape that allows it to operate as a medium through which political and social comments
can be ventilated. Third, I describe a minibus journey with a focus on the interaction that
takes place inside. Based on this description it is argued that the minibus has the power to
subvert social relations and public order.

The Power over Life and Death

The ambiguity that surrounds the minibus has to do with its material conditions. Within
Blantyre, there is no differentiation between the buses that drive on specific routes. As
described in chapter two, the minibus owners or drivers are free to choose where they drive
and throughout the day they can decide to shift routes according to their will. In comparison
to other countries where buses are often painted in a specific colour according to the routes
they operate on, the majority of the buses in Malawi are plain white. Also, the large majority
of the buses are Toyota Hiace. On the road, they are easily recognisable through their red and
white number plates. They carry these plates because they are officially registered as Public
Service Vehicles. Most of the vehicles are second hand models. Only few fortunate and
successful entrepreneurs are able to purchase brand new vehicles and put them on the road. A
lot of the older vehicles are in a deplorable condition and more than often they experience a
serious breakdown along the way. If passengers are lucky they enter a bus with a radio where
they are entertained by either local or international hits. Most drivers also purchase a daily
newspaper for their customers. However, the importance of the bus’ material condition can
not be underestimated. First and foremost, from the point of view of the minibus operators
who rely on these vehicles in order to secure a daily income. From their point of view, the
buses are well maintained and despite limited opportunities they need to and are able to keep the buses on the road. In the previous section, I highlighted how the buses are talked about in relation to the body and bodily features. Second, the material condition is also a prime occupation for many of the passengers. Despite attempts to repair and “revitalise” (Meyer and Verrips 2008) the buses accidents and breakdowns do occur more than often. One Pentecostal pastor even compared the minibus to suicide bombers in Israel. There, “people walk in a bus with explosives tied to their body and blow themselves up. Here, the minibus itself can turn out to be a bomb because, at any time, it can cause an accident and there is always a risk that many people die at once. At least a few times a week, newspapers reported about accidents that involved a minibus. However, the minibuses are not the only type of vehicles on the road that form a treat to life. For instance, in The Nation Newspaper, a report about a truck that hit a minibus and three other cars filled the front page for a number of days. Fortunately only one passenger died in this accident because the number of casualties could be far higher. Nevertheless, safety is a major preoccupation for passengers as well as for law enforcers. This might not come as a surprise since, according to the biannual accident statistics for January-June 2008 published by the National Road Safety Council, a total of 1,535 crashes occurred nation wide. Of these accidents, 415 were fatal and, in total, over 460 people lost their life. In Lilongwe, newspapers reported about a police operation due to the increasing number of road accidents. Although the police targeted all types of vehicles, the large majority of the impounded cars were minibuses. Moreover, on a side note, the police arrested 69 minibus touts in the same exercise. In interviews, I always enquired about issues related to safety in and around the minibus. Two main issues were usually discussed. On the one hand safety is a matter of the physical condition of the bus while, on the other hand, it relates to the condition and the behaviour of the driver. Flora, whose story I described in chapter four, mentioned that she always checks the condition of the tyres before she enters a minibus. Also, she takes note of the number plate of the vehicle in case she needs to report certain problems to the police. She recalled how, about two months ago, she entered a minibus where the brakes did not work properly. Up till today, she remembered the number plate of this car and swore she would never enter it again. Also, Bernard, president of the Passenger Welfare Organisation (PAWA) advises people to talk to the driver and the conductor even before they enter. Not too

58 Ndirande, 15/09/2008
59 The Nation, 15/08/2008
60 Published in The Daily Times, 10/12/2008
61 The Nation, 08/10/2007
62 Blantyre, 30/09/2008
63 Blantyre, 09/10/2008
long ago, he stepped into a minibus with an intoxicated driver who had not slept the previous night. At the first stage Bernard called the conductor to stop and he got off, waiting for the next bus. A similar story was told by Alex, a choir leader who stays in Ndirande. Because of his job he constantly travels to churches and other meeting places to conduct his choirs. Previously, he worked as a mechanic for a few years. When he enters a minibus he always checks the tyres and the wood of the vehicle. He also pays attention to see whether the windows can open or not. Because of his experience as a mechanic in the past, he immediately hears if there is a technical problem with the car. If he notices something, he warns the driver quietly, so that other passengers do not hear it. Unless he thinks it is serious, then he just decides to leave the bus and wait for the next one. The general concern with safety even influences the preferable position of passengers inside the minibus. I usually closed interviews with the question which seat they preferred. To my surprise, people in most cases had a very outspoken answer to this question. Although the seats varied from the front row where they have more space for their legs to a seat near the window because there is fresh air coming in, the most popular is a seat right behind the driver because, in case an accident occurs, the driver will always try to save himself so on the seat right behind him, there is a greater chance to survive a crash.

In an article in The Nation, a commentator reflected on the problem of, as he puts it, “recycled drivers in Malawi”. These drivers are “road pests or wild animals aiming to cause or destroy the reputation of those working hard to improve the economy of the country”. And he continues:

“socially, we have lost several loved ones because of careless drivers who are not supposed to be on our roads. As if HIV/AIDS, hunger and social insecurity are not enough for poor Malawians, unnecessary accidents have claimed lives of those who were supporting orphans. These accidents have taken the lives [sic] of business people, bank managers, university lecturers, doctors and future policy makers. In the short term is the decreased number of children going to school, increased number of child labourers and more girls going into prostitution or early marriages with more people losing their body parts. In the long term are increased rates of poverty”.

The large majority of the drivers this author is trying to identify are minibus operators. The behaviour of these specific drivers, “they act as they are in their bedrooms” or “like hungry lions”, leads to congestion on the road, and more generally increases the number of accidents.

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64 Blantyre, 21/10/2008
65 The Nation, 05/11/2007
With this description I do not want to represent the minibus as an object characterised by its technical and material fragility but rather point out that being on the road is not without risks for both the minibus operators and its passengers. The power over life and death therefore should be interpreted both literally and as a figure of speech. The latter pointing mainly to the minibus as being a body that has to be well maintained in order to provide money and life to its many beneficiaries.

The Power to Comment on Society

On the fourth of January, 2009 the United Democratic front (UDF) held a political rally at a wasteland not too far from Ndirande in order to mobilise potential voters for the Presidential Elections later that year\(^{66}\). When current president Bingu wa Mutharika took office in 2003 he was a member of the UDF. However, not too long after his appointment, he started the Democratic Party (DDP) and since then the UDF is an opposition party. As the party’s front runner, Bakili Muluzi remains very popular. For instance, he is known and appreciated because he hands out K 50 notes to those who attend his rallies. Also, since the transition to multi-party democracy, he was the president who restored the position of the many vendors in the urban areas. On the day of the meeting, the majority of the minibuses at the depot in Ndirande were driving around with yellow political insignia ranging from huge flags hanging out of the windows or attached to the car’s antenna to drivers wearing hats and pins expressing their political affiliation to the UDF. The minority of the remaining cars decided to counter this yellow storm and wore blue accessories to express their affinity with the DPP. On that day, female passengers wearing yellow dresses or passengers expressing their loyalty to Muluzi in one way or the other were riding for free. When I asked one of the drivers who clearly belonged to the UDF whether his decorations resulted from his own initiative or whether they were instructions coming from his owner, he replied that the owner was not even aware of it. And if he was, he would probably disapprove of it. However, he admitted that he would not attend the actual rally because he had to make money first. He simply wanted to make use of the bus’ position within the city to ‘advertise’ the UDF. In other words, the public character of the bus makes it ideal for advertisement and mobilisation. However, not all connotations that are ascribed to the minibus have to concern serious issues like life

\(^{66}\) The Elections were held on 19\slash 05\slash 2009. At the time of the rally, Bakili Muluzi was still the party’s presidential candidate. However, only a few weeks from the elections, the High Court ruled that he was not allowed to run for president since he already served two consecutive terms in office as the first democratically elected president since the end of the Banda regime.
and death or national politics. In the next example I indicate how there is also room for more laconic messages.

In some cases these messages are very personal. For instance, all the minibus drivers I encountered carry nicknames. This practice contributes to the idea that the minibus moves within a space that resembles the ‘stage’ of a theatre and that the people involved are part of a performance in relation to what Mbembe (1992) calls ‘the banality of power’. Since I agreed with my interlocutors that I would not expose their real names it is not possible to discuss some examples at length. However, I can disclose that these names address religious affiliation, personal characteristics like appearance or historical cases. Overall, the use of nicknames points out how the depth of social relations among minibus operators is reduced to a relatively superficial and ephemeral level. A different practice that speaks to the world outside and that gains popularity is the usage of placards at the back of the bus with various messages. This practice was also picked up by a journalist working for The Nation\textsuperscript{67} who devoted a whole page to it. A number of examples he mentions are worthwhile reproducing here. Some of the placards refer directly to the practice of driving or conducting a minibus. Some of these slogans, according to the author, include \textit{zonse kwa bwana}, everything for the boss, or \textit{bwana salakwa}, the boss is never wrong. Others do not focus on the position of the owner but are directed at politicians who make up and enforce the rules. For instance, the reduction of the carrying capacity came at the same time as an ongoing discussion in parliament, namely the debate on Section 65 of the constitution which states that Members of Parliament (MP) are not allowed to change parties while being in office. The accompanying slogan stated: \textit{atatu atatu sikanthu koma Section 65}, three three (three passengers per row) is nothing, but Section 65. Other examples are more subtle. For instance, one minibus mentioned in the article and which I also identified drives around with the provocative statement: \textit{moni afiti nonsense}, greetings to all the witches, while another wishes to comment on the threatening aids pandemic when he decided to put the slogan \textit{long live aids} on this placard. Some drivers prefer to keep it light when they carry statements like ‘wife wanted, including a phone number’ or they expressed their support for Barack Obama when he was a presidential candidate. Rather than mere spielerei, the placards made by the drivers and conductors allude to the position that the minibus occupies within the urban landscape. Clearly, there is room for provocation, comments and even mere satire or laughter without having to worry about possible repercussions or restrictions. Moreover, within the minibus

\textsuperscript{67} The Nation, 08/12/2008
there is little or no control from the outside world. I will return to this issue later in this section but for now I wish to indicate the opportunities for popular expression the minibus entails.

*The Power to Subvert Social Conventions*

When I travelled with a minibus I preferred a seat in the back row close to the window behind the driver. Since I travelled the whole route, between Blantyre, Chilomoni and Ndirande, I was not bothered by people getting on or off the bus during the ride. More importantly however, from that seat I had a good view on everything that was going on both inside the bus and outside on the streets or at the various stages. The more I travelled, the more I noticed that nobody really talked to each other. Even when two friends entered the bus, the conversation that was going on outside stopped and only continued after they dropped off. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule but in the majority of cases a journey is characterised by a sometimes deadly silence. For instance, when I travelled together with Anthony between Ndirande and Blantyre he would often shout to me from his driver’s seat and I would feel a bit embarrassed because all the other passengers were just staring at me and wondering what I was doing in the bus. Even passengers I had interviewed or met many times before simply nodded their heads or quickly greeted me and then turned silent again.

Wondering whether this was just my feeling or whether it is a general characteristic of minibus travel within the city, I questioned most of the passengers about this issue. A bit to my surprise, the large majority of the passengers confirmed the idea that everybody is very much keeping to themselves when they are inside a minibus. Three fragments of interviews are described to indicate how passengers explain this feeling. I would like to stress that these cases are not general explanations or typical cases. However, the context or the background against which their explanation is framed makes it interesting and relevant for further analysis.

Augustin is a forty-six year old man with a Marketing degree from the University of Malawi. He has a physical disability which makes that he is unable to find a job as a regular employee for a company. Therefore, he started working for himself in 2005. Today, he operates two phone businesses, one at the Wenera Bus depot and one around Mibawa in Blantyre. He has been living in Ndirande since 1992 and moved there because it is relatively

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68 Wenera, 15/10/2008
close to Chiradzulu, where his family lives. Every month end he goes home to visit his relatives. With his physical disability this is not always easy since he needs assistance from the conductor to get on and off the bus. His mobility is not only important for business but also to get into contact with other businessmen and to learn new ideas and to access the newest developments in terms of telephone communication. When I asked him about the silence during a minibus ride, he first acknowledged this and then, in a rather negative way expressed his disapproval of this practice. “People should at least greet each other. Now they can only talk when something strange happens on the road”. He believes that what is going on inside of the bus is a reflection of the society outside of the bus. For instance, in the village travelling is a totally different experience. Moreover, some things that characterise village life should come to the city. “In the city”, he argues, “everybody is scattered all over. People only meet for a very short time and then move away again”. From this point of view, the minibus connects people in different and distant places, but it does so in a very particular way.

While Augustin makes the link between travelling in a minibus and village life, the next example looks at it from a very different angle. Isaac is a twenty-six year old local musician. He has recorded several albums and performs mostly in the area in and around Blantyre. Originally he came from Thyolo but his father was a police officer so each time he was redeployed he travelled along. He left school in form two when he decided to work on his music career. Until now this has worked out relatively well but “it is just not they way [he wants] it to be”. At the time the interview was conducted he was setting up a small drinking joint in Ndirande. After a few weeks, when I went to visit him, the place was finished and attracted a lot of customers. When the interview reached the point about how travelling is very much an individual experience he firmly stated that “people do their things while I am doing mine. We are living in a world of competition and people just don’t help each other out any more. For instance, in the past we used to show respect to our elders but now that totally changed. I do not see this as a very bad thing, it just happens. Overall, I believe it is because of our culture. Us Malawians, we are not very much friendly, at least not as friendly as a lot of people think”.

During the interview, Isaac also acknowledged that travelling within the city is very different than in the village but in this particular quote, he stresses the more general societal dynamics in of Malawi. This third example gives yet another interpretation to minibus silence. Emanuel is a Rwandan immigrant who came to Malawi in 2003. In the last five years, he

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69 Blantyre, 20/10/2008
70 Blantyre, 01/12/2008
lived in four different neighbourhoods. He has a doctor’s degree but when he came to Malawi he had to give up practicing and started a construction company with a friend of his. About two years ago, the business has gone bankrupt and his friend left with all of the money. Today he is staying in Chilomoni and he likes it there because it is a quiet and peaceful place. Emanuel is a Pentecostal Christian and operates a small restaurant close to the minibus station at Ntukwa. He has customers all over town and, during lunchtime, also delivers to people who are working in town. When he is delivering, he always travels by minibus. In certain cases, if he can not go to town himself, he can always give his goods to one of the drivers he came to know rather well over time. Because he is a Pentecostal Christian, he prefers to read the Bible or other books inspired by religion to get through the ride. In a way, as he claims, his proximity to God makes that a journey never a solitaire endeavour. However, when he gets into a minibus, he is reluctant to talk to others because he does not know their background. In his own words, he claims that “inside the minibus one can find very different people, not at least from a different class. The person right next to you can be a boss or in one or the other way higher than yourself. The passengers hardly ever know because from the moment somebody enters a minibus he becomes a totally different person than on he outside”. All three examples point out how travelling with a minibus influences social relations. Nevertheless, these examples can not be analysed without taking into account the larger context within which travel experiences take place. I do so based mainly on intensive participant observation and fragments of interviews with both minibus operators and passengers that confirm these observations.

When walking towards a minibus stage, whether in town, in Ndirande or in Chilomoni, passengers are welcomed by an army of young man who try to convince them to enter one of the buses. At this point everybody becomes important: the men become bwana (boss) or abambo (father) and the women are amayi (mother) or auntie. Where callboys usually position themselves on the streets, conductors always stand close to the bus or hang out of the sliding door. This has two reasons, on the one hand, it makes it easier and fast in case they have to run from the police and, on the other hand, it prevents people from getting out of the minibus. When the minibus is loading frustratingly slow, people try to get out and get on to another bus. I only witnessed very few cases where this actually worked out. The callboys who put in an extra effort and make sure the minibus is able to leave fast receive a reward from the driver. From that point onwards the minibus conductor becomes the director inside the minibus while the driver hits the road. Not too long after the departure the conductor starts collecting the money, starting at the front of the bus and working his way,
row by row, towards the back. One simple phrase, “tilandiranau mtsogolo” (“show me the money in the front”) is enough to alert all the passengers. Upon the question why it is necessary to start in front and work your way to the back, one of the conductors replied that, first of all, it makes it easier to remember who paid which amount and to make sure the change is correct. Second, it makes sense because the bus is driving in front so that is the right place to start collecting money. This very same conductor also used the alternative phrase: “ndalama mtsogolo”. Simply translated as “money in front” but he smilingly gave a second translation: “money for the future”, simply because everybody in the minibus industry has plans with the money for future endeavours.

Despite the seemingly powerful position of the conductor it is important to say that the driver is ultimately in control. For every decision that is made, the conductor either consults with the driver or the driver instructs the conductor. At the end of the day, the driver is the one responsible for the delivery of the money and the bus to the owner and also, the driver is the one who decides on how much the conductor will get paid. When the competition at stages is high I often heard drivers complaining. They claimed that conductors won’t ever work for them again in case they don’t find passengers. Some simply drove off while the conductor was still discussing with his colleagues. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the fares of a trip are fixed, and the conductor makes sure nobody gets around it. In the end however, it is the driver who decides the fare that shall be demanded from the customers. In this case, the conductor simply has to obey his orders.

From the moment somebody enters a minibus he or she becomes a passenger, ready to be transported and subject to the power of the conductor and the driver. It starts with the seating arrangements. The conductor tells passengers where to sit and decided on how many people to take. In some cases this means “atatu-atatu” (three-three), in other cases the driver instructs the conductor to take “four-four”. In many interviews with passengers, frustrations were uttered about the fact that an uneducated, rude young man is bossing them around, regardless of who they are and what they do. Moreover, many people claim that there is no unity whatsoever among the passengers and that they never have the courage to complain as one, as a group. On many occasions I witnessed one person complaining about the seating capacity or about the way of driving. At such times, the rest of the bus held their breath and kept quiet. Stripped from their identities and voice, they underwent the ‘ritual’. As one of the minibus drivers in Ndirande eloquently put it: “We take pastors, bitches, rastas, children,

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71 Ndirande, 19/09/2008
women, businessmen, Satanists, witches. All of them have their own thoughts but in here [the minibus], *it's all the same*.\(^{72}\)

Inside the minibus, passengers do not have names either. People are addressed by the conductor in terms of money. When change is given back, the conductor shouts for everybody to hear “*a five hands*”\(^{73}\) or “*two hands*”\(^{74}\), meaning the change for the person who paid with K 500 or K 200. When one of the passengers is a friend of either the driver or the conductor, I heard a totally different story. In this case, there is less reluctance to talk during the ride. The same goes for passengers who are offered a ride for free. Here, the boundary between the crew and the passengers disappears and the latter shifts from being an object within the bus to being an active subject.

Riding a minibus also requires some knowledge. Inside, Chichewa is the language of conduct and the names of the stages relate to nearby objects, buildings or institutions. Passengers also need to call the stops in advance – and they have to make sure they are not too late or too soon. They do so by introducing the name of the stage with “*ntsikanau [name of the stage]*” (I want to stop) to the conductor who then passes the command on to the driver. Here too, passengers are subject to the will of the driver and the conductor. When I was walking from the stage to a shop in town together with a pastor who comes to town four times a week to check his email to stay in touch with friends in Zimbabwe and South Africa, he told me there is a significant change in the behaviour of the conductor before and after the fare is paid\(^{75}\). For instance, when it comes to picking passengers in the street there is never any problem while, for people to drop off, the conductor can simply say “*palibe stage*” (there is no stage). Then the passenger has to wait until the next stage where the driver is willing to pull over.

The description above, which is mainly based on intensive participant observation throughout six months of fieldwork, indicates how travelling with a minibus follows a certain pattern. Passengers who want to travel do not only have to know that pattern but they moreover have to give in and submit to it. Regardless of what is going on in the outside world, the minibus operates based on its own logic and creates its own social order. The minibus moves around within and as part of the urban public space while the passengers are kept away on the inside and move in a ‘bubble’, a privatised environment similar to the “tourist bubble” used to describe the tourist gaze, the feeling of ‘being there’ from a very

\(^{72}\) Interview Driver 30/08/08  
\(^{73}\) Slang for K 500  
\(^{74}\) Slang for K 200  
\(^{75}\) Blantyre, 07/10/2008
particular perspective: The bubble allows the tourist to gaze through which he distances himself from the ‘reality’. What is being observed is reduced to a mere object that can be held at arm’s length (Van Beek 2007: 148). Or, from a different point of view, there is no possibility for outsiders to control whatever is going on inside the bus while it is on the move. I would argue that this seclusion contributes to the ‘power’ of the minibus and allows for the subversion of social relations as it moves through the urban landscape.

5.5. Concluding remarks

In this chapter I looked at the position of the minibus within the urban landscape and how it changes the nature of social relation. If, as described in the second chapter, the urban space is characterised by segregation and fragmentation, I would argue that there is room for ‘new’ spaces to emerge where the nature of social relations can be changed. More specifically I refer to those spaces in between, at the margin or the periphery of mainstream and conventional spaces. Outside the realm of the official and within the area of the officious or the popular, there emerges room for contestation. I would argue that the minibus occupies exactly such a space. As an example I refer to the work by Neil Smith (1996, see also Smith 1992) on the Poliscar, an art project by Krzysztof Wodiczko developed for the homeless in New York. The Poliscar or the ‘homeless vehicle’ operates as a ‘mobile home’ that offers people a place where they can sleep and which they can use to move around. The vehicle is equipped with modern technology and all the necessary utilities to serve the most basic needs. In other words, it allows for ‘evictees’ to re-enter a space of flows and out of marginality. On a micro scale, the author interprets this phenomenon within the urban landscape as the emergence of a “space of vulnerability” or “places where the power that directs and shapes the space of flows is surprisingly vulnerable or even absent” (ibid: 74-75). I would argue that within these spaces of vulnerability there is also room for creativity through which new forms of social organisation can emerge. I attempted to describe this by first, indicating the importance of the cultural biography of objects and by acknowledging their social ‘value’. Next I elaborated on how the minibus occupies a marginal position within the city because of its mobility and ambiguity. This way, it is hard to control it and to bring under the banner of general rules and regulations.

I suggested looking at the minibus as the city’s trickster. In a way, the minibus occupies a space from where it has the power over life and death, from where it can comment on social and cultural developments within the urban sphere and where it is able to subvert
social structures. These descriptions are used to indicate how the minibus operates within the scope of popular culture. In order to illustrate this, I drew on two examples that discuss how public spaces can be used or appropriated by ‘subjects’ in order to carve out their “own” ideological space (un espace propre). Moreover, on a methodological note, I elaborated on how anthropological research could broaden its scope and look at forms of human agency in relation to political and social contestation as well as material objects and their social lives. Overall, I would argue that the minibus makes use of the streets and the road as a public space in order to legitimise its position in a neoliberal urban environment characterised by segregation and fragmentation. The minibus, in itself often claimed to be a prime example of a neoliberal ideology should, following this line of interpretation, contribute to a social environment characterised by ephemerality and fluidity, an environment where the level of sociality is reduced to an absolute minimum. However, this chapter demonstrates that despite the often anti-social character of this object, the minibus enforces the subversion of social conventions. Rather than describing this dynamic as a growing sense of individuality I propose an analysis that looks at how social relations are transformed inside of the minibus. From this point of view a ‘new’ or different mode of sociality is established rather than that it merely disappears.
Chapter 6

Conclusion: The Minibus as Metaphor

6.1. Introduction

With this chapter, we have come to the end of the ride. Therefore, it is my intention to draw some general conclusions based on the descriptions provided in the previous chapters. Three issues are addressed in the remainder of this chapter. First, I address the relevance and the complexity of the minibus as an object of analysis. Second, throughout this thesis I have attempted to deconstruct the notion of neoliberalism. Third, I have demonstrated how an analysis of minibus transport allows highlighting a number of conclusions with regard to social dynamics as they develop within the urban sphere. Before moving on however, it is worthwhile recapitulating the central research question as it is posited in the general introduction.

Overall, throughout this thesis, the object of the minibus is taken as a case study that allows identifying emerging social dynamics within the city. More specifically, it helps to interpret the complex notion of neoliberalism and what this entails in the practice of everyday life. Accordingly, the central question that runs through the different chapters addresses how the presence and the working of the minibus influence social relations within a neoliberal urban environment. In this conclusion I suggest that the minibus can be looked at as a metaphor for urban social dynamics. In other words, all the various aspects that are addressed throughout this thesis tell us something about both neoliberalism and the process of urbanisation in Malawi. In what follows, I elaborate on how this works by filtering out and highlighting some striking elements across the various chapters. However, in the last section, a connection is made with the last chapter where the minibus is compared to the image of the trickster as an illustration of how the nature of social relations is transformed in and around the minibus.

6.2. The minibus as an object of analysis

The first issue addresses the implications of taking the minibus as an object of analysis. At the same time, this section, in retrospect, also points out the relevance of this research project.
It seems as if the minibus is a necessary evil within the city. On the one hand, it brings opportunities both for passengers, who can extend their social and geographical networks beyond a confined local space, and for the minibus operators who are able to secure a daily income either through driving, working as a conductor or simply as a callboy. On the other hand, the minibus is imagined as a dangerous object surrounded by death, accidents, and impoliteness among most of the urban residents.

It has not been my intention to romanticize or glorify the working of the minibus within the city. Neither has it been my intention to picture an image that reflects the negative sides of passenger transport. Furthermore, I have described how the minibus can not and should not be reduced to mere exoticism as is often the case in more popular representations. Minibus transport, whether in major urban centres or in somehow smaller times are often brought to the stage in order to illustrate arguments built around the “dysfunctional city”, the image of the “urban jungle” or the “unfinished city”. Contrary to this image, with the description in the above presented chapters, I hope to have contributed to an elaborate understanding of the practice of everyday life within a neoliberal urban environment and more specifically to an understanding of what mobility entails based on an ethnographic approach. More concretely, I have described how people make the minibus ‘work’. Here I point both to mechanical aspects where the minibus is maintained and operated as an example of how technology is appropriated and mastered by people involved in the business. Also, since the minibus has taken a crucial position within the urban landscape, both passengers and operators have found ways to make it a part of their everyday life. By taking the minibus as a case study I highlighted and interpreted a number of complexities that run through a highly heterogeneous urban terrain.

It should be clear that this story works because of the empirical context within which it is set. In other words, the city plays a crucial role here. The emerging social dynamics that are identified and highlighted only work because they occur on a relatively large scale. A similar approach on a smaller scale would most likely turn out to be very different. In the city there are not few but many minibuses endlessly driving up and down. Also, the materiality of this mode of transportation makes that social contacts and the development of social networks occurs within a very specific context. Nevertheless, as demonstrated in the second chapter, the minibus is an essential chain in the constitution of both the physical urban landscape and the city as a social environment.

As an object, the minibus occupies a highly visible position within the urban landscape. This is not only the case in Blantyre but in most African cities. I would argue
therefore that the minibus is exemplary or indicative for emerging dynamics in “postcolonial” or “neoliberal” Africa. More specifically, it points out how a neoliberal ideology has not only entered the urban sphere but also how it has been translated and appropriated at a micro scale. Second, in the everyday life of urban residents it plays an important role in the sense that they rely on it, not only as a mode of transportation, but also as a way to define the social terrain within which they move.

6.3. Neoliberalism Deconstructed

The minibus does not only work for urban residents in their everyday life. There is also a theoretical argument that can be constructed around it. Here, the notion of neoliberalism and what it implies within the context of minibus transport is addressed. In the general introduction of this thesis, I posited how neoliberalism should not be approached as an abstraction of reality. Instead, I argued for an approach where this notion is looked at as an analytical construction. In the various chapters I addressed four main characteristics that are ascribed to neoliberalism in an attempt to deconstruct them through an ethnographic description of how they are taken on in the practice of everyday life. First, neoliberalism implies the fragmentation of the urban space. In the second chapter, I depicted the blueprints for the city based on where and how the minibus moves. There, it is argued that Blantyre is not one city, but that it is many at once. The organisation of the minibuses in Ndirande and Chilomoni are good examples of this dynamic. It is clear that they thrive on this fragmentation when it comes to the allocation of routes. Urban fragmentation and segregation are however not recent phenomena but they are infused by a long historical legacy both during the colonial era and during the Banda regime. Without disregarding these historical roots it is possible to say that, partly due do the neoliberal ideology that ‘governs’ the city, fragmentation takes on a different scale. Since the transition to multi-party democracy, people are free to move and to settle where they please or where they can afford to live. Based on the transcription of interviews with both minibus operators and with passengers I argue that segregation does not only take place based on ‘rational’ or calculative values but that this dynamic should also be interpreted as taking place on a more subjective level. From this point of view the presence of the minibus within the urban environment makes even more sense. On the one hand, the buses are part of the physical infrastructure and take into account the increasing fragmentation while, on the other hand, they establish connections between multiple fragmented and socially produced spaces.
As the interviews indicate, many residents in Chilomoni need the connection with the city centre in order to manage a social network that allows them to support their expectations and aspirations. This line of interpretation goes against the growing argument that people withdraw from the public sphere and move into their completely privatised environments. Moreover, fragmentation should not be looked at as a problematic development as, for example, the Blantyre City Assembly (BCA) does. On the contrary, an analysis of how minibus transport is organised within the city allows for an interpretation where fragmentation creates opportunities and chances. I would therefore argue that the minibus is part of the larger ‘structure’, the physical urban environment, and that it is also able to distance itself from this structure and highlight, initiate or contribute to ongoing urban processes from the margins.

The second implication of neoliberalism is a diminishing state intervention. At first sight this dynamic might be easy to acknowledge because of the privatisation of public transport. However, the analysis presented in the third chapter provides a different line of interpretation. With a focus on the political implications of a neoliberal ideology, it looks at how new modes of governmentality emerge within this context. In order to develop an understanding of these dynamics it is necessary to grasp how liberalisation developed and worked historically in Blantyre. Interestingly, minibuses first emerged during the colonial era. Nevertheless, the current circumstances, characterised by the transition to multi-party democracy and the introduction of a number of state decentralisation policies, are rather different. Therefore, I described how, due to the transfer of state responsibilities to non-state actors at an institutional level, self-made entrepreneurs are able to enter the political sphere and carve out a position where they strive to maintain their power based on a sense of class. Also, by analysing how the minibus moves through the streets and how it interacts with figures that carry authority it is clear that no strict line can be drawn between public and private zones of control. Or, in other words, the street turns out to operate as an institution over which control can be exercised and, accordingly, which can also be privatised. Overall, thus, state withdrawal as it is proposed in an abstract neoliberal ideology does not occur as such. For instance, neoliberalism implies more room for private initiatives where ‘the state’ seems unable or unwilling to provide public services. Both at an institutional level and on the street, this proves not to be the case. Minibus owners have to lobby with government and police to maintain their powerful position and to be able to instigate governmentality from below. In the case of the minibus operators, this means that a grey zone emerges where traffic police and other public officers have to inscribe into the logics of the market if they want a
share of the wealth that is generated. Overall, the minibus operators work within a socio-political margin where they are able to negotiate their own code of conduct. Instead of a retreat, the position of public officers transforms since they still have a say in how minibuses operate.

Third, neoliberalism implies that economic transactions occur through the working of the market or through the laws of supply and demand. Chapter four addresses these issues by identifying new economic configurations within the city through an analysis of money, monetization, commodity exchange and the working of the market on the one hand and the influence of gift-giving, reciprocity and spiritual interpretation of economic exchange on the other hand. Clearly, economic activities surrounding the minibus are influenced by the increasing search for profits and the accumulation of wealth among minibus operators. Nevertheless, there remain aspects of gift-giving and reciprocity identifiable in economic exchange. For instance, through the description of how the commodification of travel interferes with the economic organisation of the household, which is traditionally characterised as a reciprocal environment, it is possible to identify how economic relations are infused by social and personal entanglements rather than mere ‘rational’ and economic exchange. Also, on the side of the minibus operators, the value of money is not solely based on the working of the market. On the contrary, in order to work with money, operators need to develop a certain form of masculinity to be able to ‘tame’ the economic value of their work. The examples described in relation to witchcraft and the presence of the occult furthermore show how money and exchange entail a strong moral framework. The image of the witch and that of evil spirits is often related to the emergence of neoliberalism within society. Within this framework these characters are ultimately anti-social in nature. Nevertheless, I would argue that their presence within and around the minibus indicates how entanglements are brought into being in order to ‘control’ transactions. Anonymity here is an important factor and the danger or being attacked by evil spirits or the devil forms a threat to any individual.

Overall, by way of conclusion, there is one general message that can be distilled from this overview. Neoliberalism does not occur in an abstract, general manner. Instead, these characteristics are appropriated to ‘work’ in a very specific, ethnographically grounded, way through the practices of urban residents as they are influenced by both global and local dynamics. This also takes me to the last point of this conclusion, namely the social implications of neoliberalism. These are discussed in the next section.
6.4. The Minibus as a Metaphor

This section reflects further on the descriptions presented in chapter five where the social implications of neoliberalism are discussed. Where individualism and individual freedom should reign, a number of social dynamics are identified that contradict this presumption. Overall, the minibus is not a neutral object. On the contrary, it holds inherent powers through which it is able to comment on events or conditions that occur within society. Furthermore, they seem able to reverse social conventions. Therefore, although it is tempting to claim that the minibus serves as the ultimate representation of a neoliberal ideology, I argue that social relations are transformed in and around the minibus. In other words, there is still a profound level of sociality that can be established among the various stakeholders in the business. Here, I briefly recapitulate a number of examples that were addressed throughout the various chapters. First, there is a strong network among minibus operators: the relation between owners and their drivers is basically based on trust, drivers and conductors need to work together closely in order to make their business successful, they need to make a connection with the neighbourhood where they operate from, etc. Second, it is argued that corruption should not be regarded as a dysfunctional aspect of ‘the state’. Within the line of the argument that is presented here, the relations between minibus operators and police officers are an indication of how social contracts are established as the bribes are negotiated or as some drivers are simply never pulled over. Third, ‘family members’, regardless of whether their connection is genuine, travel for free. Here, all economic aspects are replaced by mere kinship relations. Again this serves as an indication of social entanglements and the establishment of social contracts around the minibus.

Chapter five addressed how the nature of social relations is transformed in and around the minibus. The fragmentation of the urban landscape allows for ‘new’ spaces to emerge. Within these spaces, as an object that is constantly on the move, the minibus is difficult to control. Moreover, it is impossible to monitor what is going on inside the bus. The historical context within which the minibus emerged indicates how it is an expression of a newly gained freedom for localised, private entrepreneur who are no longer subject to an all encompassing state. Despite, or maybe because of its marginal position, the minibus holds a number of powers. I therefore describe how it is important to look beyond the façade of the buses. Then it becomes possible to see how they are able to decide of life and death of many urban residents. Also, they are in a position from where they can comment on dynamics in society without running the risk of getting punished. Most interestingly however, while the buses are
on the road social conventions seem to be reversed. Again, the dynamics as I described them in this chapter, based on observations as well as fragments of interviews could be interpreted as anti-social behaviour. I would however opt for an analysis that focuses on the transformation of social relations since anti-social behaviour is still a highly specific form of sociality. Overall, the various powers of the minibus are used to seek legitimacy and to claim a right to the city. Following this line of interpretation, as a social space, the minibus becomes a site of contestation, subversion and, at the same time, conviviality.

Throughout this thesis it has thus become clear that the minibus is a highly complex object. In other words, there are many ways to approach it just like there are many aspects that can be approached. I opted for a qualitative approach that brings to the front both how it ‘works’ within the city and how it works the city. Where a lot of analyses search for how urbanites attempt to establish a sense of community or, in the words of René Devisch (1996), how the city undergoes a process of villagisation, an analysis of minibus transport indicates how social relations are transformed in the process. This has, without any doubt, to do with the context that surrounds the minibus. Overall, I argue that the minibus can be seen as an object that undergoes urban dynamics while it also actively contributes or even initiates these dynamics. In conclusion then, the minibus is a blessing in disguise. When people step inside, they are able to move through town, they establish vital connections and they gain access to new information, ideas and opportunities. At the same time, there are high costs attached to these advantages. Segregation between different socio-economic classes increases, the competition among stakeholders becomes harsh and tense, control is replaced by corruption and, in short, social relations are transformed. Therefore, I argue that the minibus can be seen as a metaphor for the living conditions of many urban residents in Blantyre. An analysis of this object highlights and reflects the multiplicity of the urban environment as well as its inherent contradictions, confrontations, shortcomings and opportunities.
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