



# Characteristics of Bike taxis in African rural society: A case study of Dschang, West Cameroon

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# **Characteristics of Bike taxis in African rural society**

**A case study of Dschang, West Cameroon**

**Makiko Sakai**

(Tokyo University of Foreign Studies)

**July 2020**

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## **A case study of Dschang, West Cameroon**

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### **Abstract**

This paper, based on a field research using more than 100 questionnaire results, aims to clarify the current precarious realities of Bamiléké bike taxi men in Dschang, West Cameroon. In the recent decades, we see the significant increase of bike taxi activities in Sub-Sahara Africa as an organic initiative to tackling chronic youth unemployment due to a development of urbanization. We cannot ignore the increasing contribution of Chinese motorbikes in the diversification of the mode of marketing systems. In 2000s, China took a zero custom measure for a part of import goods toward Africa, which provides an opportunity to increase a number of imports of motorcycles. As a result, a lot of young who were seeking employment started to do bike taxi, and play an important role to connect between the production area in the mountainous location and local markets in the cities. Some research emphasizes its positive effects on local economy, other research focuses on the negatives as a curse on society, such as causes and symptoms of social disorder. This paper contributes to give alternative perspective viewed by drivers themselves. It is important to understand their concerns and anger due to predominant fears for their future, caused by the dysfunctional social and political structure.

### **Keywords**

Cameroon, West Region, Dschang, Bike taxi, local transport. periodic markets, Opération Villes Mortes, Regulatory Authority

### **Acknowledgement**

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## Map of Cameroon



Source: Wikimedia Commons

# 1. Introduction

Recently, one has observed a remarkable increase of bike taxi activities in both urban and rural areas in Sub-Saharan Africa as an organic initiative to tackling chronic youth unemployment. Considering their manifest impact on the local economy, this informal industry has become one of the important issues worth analyzing by social sciences. Most research on bike taxis has been conducted in big cities, leaving the rural situation relatively unexplored. To fill this gap, this research used more than 100 questionnaire results from Dschang – a mid-sized West Cameroonian city which combines both urban and rural features – to clarify the precarious realities of young Bamiléké bike taxi men.

The bike taxi phenomenon took off with the introduction in the 2000s of cheap made-in-China motorcycles following the creation of close diplomatic ties based on the Forum China African Cooperation (FOCAC). Since then, bike taxis have created low-barrier-to-entry vocational opportunities to young people who would otherwise suffer from chronic unemployment. Moreover, it has improved connections between rural and urban areas by facilitating the transfer of goods and people.

Despite the liberating image of bike taxis, the economic reality faced by their drivers in local cities is less appealing. It was quite surprising to learn that most bike taxi drivers consider their work a pastime or a stepping stone to another career. As research progressed emerged the difference between the stable employment enjoyed by big-city drivers, and the volatile demand for driving work in rural locales due to area limitations and the outsized impact of new competitors.

Furthermore, the crisis between “anglophones” and “francophones” in the North-West and South-West regions has accelerated the proliferation of bike taxis in recent years. The sudden saturation of the market has brought about significant decreases in income for bike taxi men. During the field research in August 2019 I observed their frustration and anger at the mounting career uncertainty they faced. Hopefully, this paper provides a basic foundation for discussing this issue.

## 2. The Bike Taxi phenomenon as a contemporary issue in Globalizing Africa

### 2.1. Prior research

Urbanization accompanies globalization in Africa as in the rest of the world, and it is this urbanization which has created a gap for services that bike taxis may fill.

Several researchers have examined the “bike taxi phenomenon” in Sub-Saharan Africa [Kumar 2011; Olvera et al. 2012; Olivera et al. 2015], particularly research launched by the World Bank and USAID analyzing the current state of transport and infrastructure development. The bulk of research has focused on the expansion of bike taxi activities in big cities such as Lagos, Lomé, and Douala, with very few covering the impact of bike taxi activities on rural areas. Notable articles on rural bike taxis do exist, however. Nkede Njie’s (2012) thesis analyzed interviews with bike taxi drivers in rural southeast Cameroon. Djouda Feudjio (2014) outlined the history of Cameroonian bike taxis and analyzed their place and influence in society, particularly when balanced against that of the authorities.

Two principal arguments concerning the bike taxi phenomenon stand out. Some research emphasizes the positive effects of bike taxis: creating employment for youth, improving transport services, and fostering local economies. Other research focuses on the negatives associated with bike taxis such as disorder, delinquency, and urban crime (Ketcheu 2014).

Ketcheu's (2014) research on bike taxis, based on interviews in several cities (Yaoundé, Douala, Bafoussam, Ngaoundré, Garoua, and Maroua), concludes that the phenomenon is a *fléau* (scourge) on society. This argument is made from the public order viewpoint from which bike taxis are seen as causes and symptoms of social disorder, leading to accidents, injuries, and crime, and which should be regulated if not banned.

One perspective notably absent from both positive and negative-leaning studies of bike taxis is that of drivers. Bike taxi driving as a vocation arose as individual responses to chronic youth unemployment, but does not provide long term career solutions. As such, it is important to understand the concerns and anger that the predominantly young male bike taxi drivers have about their future, and their distrust toward authorities. It is also important to understand the socioeconomic factors forcing them to take up driving to survive, and how they evolve from a stagnant economy in crisis caused by a dysfunctional social structure.

### 3. The Spread of Bike taxis in Sub-Saharan Africa

Half of Sub-Saharan Africa's main cities (with populations of at least 100,000 people) host bike taxi operations, with the biggest expansions since 1980 in Nigeria, Togo, and Ghana in the west, Cameroon, Central African Republic, and Chad in central Africa, Uganda, Kenya and Rwanda in the east, and Angola in the south [Pochet et al. 2017].

Bike taxis are known under different names in each country.

- Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania: "Boda-boda", as most work the *boda* (border) areas of the countries.
- Benin: "Zemidjan".
- Cameroon: "Bendskin", derived from the name of a Bamiléké traditional dance).
- Niger: "Kabu-kabu".
- Nigeria: "Alaloka", or "Okada" after Nigeria's Okada airlines which enjoys a reputation for punctuality.
- Togo: "Oleyia".
- Senegal: "Jakarta".

#### 3.1. Bike Taxi expansion: Cameroon

The bike taxi boom has many causes apart from accelerating urbanization, with two demand-driven causes highlighted by Olvera et al. [2012: 5].

The first is demand for cross-border transport, e.g. Niger-Nigeria, Kenya-Uganda, Togo-Burkina Faso. The second is demand for alternative public transport in the wake of disruptive general strikes in big cities like Lomé and Douala as a result of Structural Adjustment Programs in the 1990s.



Bike taxis in Cameroon are called “Bendskins”, after a traditional dance from the Bamiléké region in the west, but started in the northern Grand Nord and Adamawa regions during the 1980s. Poor border control in those regions, which share long boundaries with Nigeria, enables rampant smuggling to this day, including bootleg motorcycles. It follows that northern Cameroonian cities such as Maroua, Garoua, and Ngaoundéré have become centers of bike taxi activity [Djouda Feudjio 2014:100].

Bike taxis then spread east, through cities like Bertoua, Batouri, and Yokadouma. In the 1990s bike taxis reached Douala, Littoral province. The bike taxi booms in the capital Yaoundé (Central Province), in the western regional cities (Bafoussam, Mbouda, Dschang), and in the Anglophone Northwest Region (Bamenda) started later from about 2000, increasing rapidly thereafter.

Douala, the biggest commercial city in Cameroon, exemplifies the second bike taxi use-case. The 1990s marked serious economic crises in several African countries brought about by Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) which initiated the radical and immediate privatization of multiple sectors as directed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). SAPs intervened in local politics in the name of good governance, making funding conditional upon the establishment of democratic principles such as multi-party systems and transparent elections.

Introducing a multi-party system into Cameroon which had hitherto enjoyed stability, albeit under a one-party dictatorship, created tension between the ruling and opposition parties as well as sowing nation-wide political confusion. Moreover, liberalization and privatization impacted private citizens directly by leading to increased unemployment.

The Social Democratic Front (SDF) with its strong political foundation in Anglophone regions upheld opposition calls for a “national conference on sovereignty” which were rebuffed by the ruling Rassemblement Démocratique du Peuple Camerounais (RDPC). The people – taxi drivers, students, teachers, and merchants in particular - responded to the opposition’s subsequent calls for general strikes, leading to violent clashes and further stagnation in the economy [Djouda Feudjio 2014:100-101].

Cameroon’s nation-wide public opposition to the state fiscal authority was analyzed by Roitman (2005). This event was dubbed ‘Opération Villes Mortes’ (‘Running Dead Cities’) by participants and ‘Incivisme Fiscal’ (‘Tax Misbehaviour’) by the government who were intent on framing its opponents as failing in their civic obligations. Roitman saw the event as a “productive moment” (Roitman 2005:8) that questioned the intelligibility of the authorities’ exercise of power. An analysis of the conflict between the public and the authorities based on Roitman’s arguments will be conducted in the following section.

Due to the general strikes the public transport service SOTUC (la “SOCIÉTÉ de Transport Urbains au Cameroun”) was paralyzed for 6 months, leaving people desperate for alternatives. A system of mutual aid arose from this deadlock. As privately owned motorcycles were the most mobile urban vehicles - able to navigate heavy traffic on clogged, poorly maintained roads - owners helped otherwise stranded family members and friends travel within the city during the roughly six months of turmoil, after which some naturally extended their services to others as private bike taxis.

Transport in major Cameroonian cities is problematic because of a combination of poorly maintained roads, hazardous conditions, and increasing traffic, with the authorities being helpless to alleviate the worsening conditions. Flexible and maneuverable motorcycles are uniquely suited



to these conditions and as demand for bike-based transport increased, scores of unemployed youth re-purposed the bootleg bikes they had used to cart friends and family during the crisis in order to earn some money by meeting this demand. Thus, the bike taxi network developed rapidly to reinforce straining transport connections between the city center and gridlocked suburban areas like Bépanda, Bonabéri, PK8, and Mabanda.

Buses are a potential competitor to bike taxis. The public bus service SOTUC was established in 1973 but closed in 1995 as part of the privatization measures introduced by the Structural Adjustment Programme [Kumar 2011: 8]. It was replaced in 2001 by SOCATUR (la SOciété CAMerounaise de Transports URbains). Douala-based SOCATUR is privately owned by 35 Cameroonian investors but despite - or because of - private ownership has so far been unable to provide a reliable bus service to the population.

### 3.2. Material factors

People of limited means wanting to start bike taxis need easy access to cheap machines and petrol. In this regard, developing diplomatic and trade ties between China and African countries was the most significant factor.

China needs good relations with African countries to secure natural resources for its industrial development. To that end, the 3-yearly Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was established in 2000 as the basis for multiple strategic partnerships. It aimed to boost trade, investment, and aid within the framework of a south-south partnership, with no stipulated conditionality, and implicit non-interference in domestic affairs. This approach differs from many partnerships between Africa and OECD countries, which often include requirements from the Western “aid consensus.” China has formed many trade conventions with African countries and has taken several measures to encourage trade and investment, such as establishing special categories of priority investment, including trade in motorcycles.

An article in *Jeune Afrique* on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2012, titled “*Chinese Motorcycles invade Douala*” (“*Les motos chinoises envahissent Douala*”), reported that made-in-China motorcycles had overwhelmingly displaced traditionally popular motorcycles from Japan in Cameroon's biggest commercial city Douala. Douala's city council reported that 95% of the 40,000 motorcycles within its bounds – far beyond the 15,000 running in Yaoundé city – had been made in China. Demand for Japanese motorcycles is supported by the public sector and NGOs, particularly those running deep-pocketed development and foreign aid programs without vehicle price limits.

As the numbers of imported Chinese motorcycles grew from 2000 onward, so did the number of bike taxis. A new Chinese-made motorcycle plus *carte grise* (registration certificate) costs CFA 400,000 – 500,000 (€600-760), far cheaper than a Japanese Yamaha, Honda, or Suzuki, which cost around CFA 950,000 - 1,200,000 (€1500-1800 euros) in the 1990s. Japanese bike prices have since depleted to around CFA 800,000 (€1200) at time of writing. As Chinese motorcycles seemed to have depressed motorcycle prices in Africa, it is evident that their introduction facilitated the expansion of bike taxis.

In terms of motorcycle import pathways: in the case of Benin and Togo, those who went to Nigeria for temporary work often bought bikes abroad and rode them home [Olvera et al. 2012 : 6]. Most of Cameroon's imported motorcycles first arrive at the port of Douala, but a non-negligible

number are smuggled across the Nigeria-Cameroon border. Bootleg motorcycles and petrol makes it easier for entrants to start bike taxi driving.

It is also necessary to mention the emergence of young entrepreneurs called “feymen” who capitalized on the economic crisis to open shops for imported motorcycle sales, thereby contributing to bike taxi growth and influencing rural socioeconomics [Djouda Feudjio 2014:102-103]. “Feymen” in local language means to “light the flame”. They import motorcycles mainly via overland routes from Nigeria, the country with the biggest bike export share to the rest of West Africa.

For the purchase of petrol, some bike taxi men buy the smuggled one called “Zouazoua” from Nigeria. Zouazoua became popular during the frequent general strikes of the 1990s, but because it is often diluted and poorly refined to stay cheap, the risk of engine damage through long-term use is notorious.

## 4. Circumstances of Dschang Bike Taxi Men

### 4.1. Field Research Area Information

Dschang, Menoua Department, West Region of Cameroon, lies in the Equatorial Monsoon climate zone, with an altitude of about 1,400m above sea level and an average temperature of 16~21C. Dschang's population in 2005 was 285,764. Its main ethnic groups are Bamiléké (Bamiléké is not one ethnic group but an ensemble of several groups). High population density and a lack of farm land encourages Dschang locals to leave for bigger cities. Bamiléké people enjoy a reputation for being highly educated and entrepreneurial [Dongmo 1983; Warnier 1993].

### 4.2. Agriculture in the West Region

This region is characterized by mountainous areas situated around Mt. Bamboutos, altitude 3,008m. From the colonial era to the late 1980s the main industry was Arabica coffee production organized by a cooperative union (UCCAO). In the 1990s the coffee industry was smashed by crashing international prices due to SAP-implemented trade liberalization. Making the most of the favorable highland climate, local farmers shifted from coffee to growing vegetables like cabbages, potatoes, carrots, corn, and various beans. Coffee trees, visible throughout the area until the end of the 1990s, have all but been replaced by vegetables or other crops, demonstrating how thoroughly farmers have exited coffee growing.

That is not to say that the change happened quickly. There was a slight time lag between the bust in coffee production and the boom in vegetable growing due to problematic transport connections between marketplaces in the cities and production areas in the peripheral highlands. Despite the rapidly urbanizing West Region cities' increased demand for vegetables, farmers could not send large consignments because poor roads meant produce would spoil before they arrived. Bike taxis filled this transport gap with their ability to carry cargo across roads in disrepair, although in smaller quantities than four-wheeled vehicles.

### 4.3. 8-day periodic markets

One characteristic of this region is the 8-day periodic market network. Bike taxis have made it possible to ship products to these markets from mountainous areas, enabling a significant increase in vegetable production and marketing by smallholders, often individuals or households. While urbanization in medium and large cities like Yaoundé and Douala continue to drive demand for agricultural produce, bike taxis have opened up the access from mountainous production area to middle size cities and facilitated agricultural supply to neighboring countries like Chad, the Central African Republic, and Nigeria.

Thanks to the introduction of Chinese motorcycles, unemployed youth in West Cameroon, as in other areas of the country, seized this opportunity to buy cheap motorcycles and start bike taxi driving, meeting the dual demands for transport within urban areas, and between cities and mountain agricultural areas.

While bike taxi drivers are predominantly male, the expanding bike taxi industry has impacted the many women involved in the agricultural industry. Most of the thirty female vegetable merchants surveyed in 2015 and 2016 said they used bike taxis to distribute produce for around CFA 500-1,000 per bag.

### 4.4. Questionnaire Survey Statistics<sup>1</sup>

From 4 till 8 June 2019 our researchers visited 21 bike taxi “camps” or “stations” at crossroads throughout Dschang and asked bike taxi men to complete a questionnaire. These camps are not merely locations, they also denote affiliations akin to an informal taxi company. 57% of survey respondents belonged to a camp, with the unaffiliated remainder working freelance.

The questionnaires were initially only in French, but we soon realized that there were a significant number of drivers who had migrated in from Anglophone zones, and prepared English versions of the survey. Of the 113 sampled, 101 respondents answered in French and 13 in English, but this does not reflect the size of language groups because some Anglophone respondents used the French questionnaire.

Very few bike taxi men initially agreed to participate in the survey, suspecting us of working for authorities like the police and Dschang city, toward which they bore distrust and discontentment. However, as some came to understand our independence and purely academic interest, participation gradually increased.

---

1. This questionnaire was part of a socioeconomic research project run by Makiko SAKAI (Sociologist, Associate Professor, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies – TUFS) and assisted by:

1)- Metsagho Mekontcho Boris, PhD Student in Political Science, Faculty of Law and Political Sciences, University of Dschang;

2)- Tchaba Zébazé Rostand, Masters Student in Animal Biology (Physiology), Faculty of Sciences, University of Dschang, and Dschang Bike Taxi man;

3)- Koagne Defo Boris Stéphane, PhD Student in Sociology (Sociology of Politics), Faculty of Humanities, University of Dschang;

4)- Tchatchouang Pegmi Yves Serges PhD Student of Geography (option: risk geography), Faculty of Humanities.

## 4.5. Characteristics of Dschang Bike taxi drivers

A summary of the survey results.

### 4.5.1. Age, Educational background, and Family situation

Bike taxi drivers are overwhelmingly male and predominantly young. The largest age bracket of bike taxi men is 25 to 29 years of age (52%), with 30 to 34 years of age (13%) being the second largest age bracket. The third largest age bracket was 20 to 24 years of age. Only 3 survey respondents were in their 50s [Graph 1-4].

Bike taxi men are well educated for their professions [Graph 1-3], with 58% having completed secondary school (college and senior high school), and 33% having achieved a tertiary qualification: 15 respondents held bachelor degrees, 8 had completed a master's, and 2 were pursuing doctorates. Dschang's uniquely high youth education levels could be related to the town having been formed around a national university. Many respondents pursued or were pursuing professional qualifications such as in electrical engineering, carpentry, garage mechanics, pastry-making, and baking. Some were teachers in maternal schools, technical colleges, and similar educational institutions [Graph 2-6].

About half the bike taxi drivers were single, with the remainder in monogamous or polygamous marriages/relationships. Regardless of marital status, 77% of respondents bore the responsibility of financially supporting family members, with 62% supporting between one and five persons, and 20% supporting up to 20 persons [Graph 2-5].

Only 9 respondents (8%) specified bike taxi driving as their sole profession. Most drove bike taxis alongside other jobs: 30% were students, most likely at university, 18% worked in agriculture, 10% as merchants, 9% as teachers, 5% as finishing carpenters, with the remainder in diverse occupations such as confectioners and car mechanics. 6% of respondents worked more than two jobs. Most bike taxi men stated that driving bike taxis was not even their main occupation [Graph 2-6].

In the words of one bike taxi man, "As I was out of work, I had no other choice except to go for Moto-taxi". Running a bike taxi provides a meager hand-to-mouth income, so most drivers consider bike taxi driving transitory while they look for better jobs.

Interestingly, there is little social segregation or hierarchy formation among bike taxi drivers according to educational level or primary occupation.

### 4.5.2. Motorcycle Ownership and Financial Support

92% of surveyed drivers own their work motorcycles, with the rest purchasing their vehicle in installments (French: "acheter en location") [Graph 3-1].

65% of respondents started bike taxi driving rather recently: between 2015 to 2019. 32% started between 2010-2014. Only 9% of respondents started before 2009 [Graph 5-2]. These figures show that entrants into bike taxi driving increased significantly in the last few years. All of the respondents' motorcycles were made in China with an average price of CFA 450,000 [Graph 3-4]. Many understood and were appreciative that Chinese motorcycles had become affordable in recent years thanks to Chinese diplomatic engagement with Africa.

In terms of initial funding for motorcycles: 67% of respondents reported being self-funded and 15% received financial support from relatives or friends. 3% received bank loans, and none received micro-finance loans. 8% received financing by joining a tontine or ROSCA (Rotating Savings

and Credit Association). The remaining 7% - 8% raised a private loan by other means. Where self-funding is not possible strong ties among family and friends are clearly the preferred financial support mechanism, while formal financial services are the lender of last resort [Graph 4-1].

#### **4.5.3. Daily activities**

The figure shows that most bike taxi men spend a lot of time driving [Graph 6-1].

35% of bike taxi men work 6 days a week and 25% work 7 days a week with no days off. Their work shifts are notably severe: 44% are on standby on the street 11 hours per day. 37% perform work shifts of 7 to 10 hours. Since the benefit of bike taxi driving correlates with time spent working, the incentive to work long shifts is strong. Some drivers use drugs to combat fatigue despite the illegality, health risks, and increased risk of accidents.

#### **Average transport fares (interviewed in 2018):**

- Within Dschang City : CFA 200~300
- To and from the suburbs : CFA 500
- Rural (10+km from Dschang) : CFA 1500
- Bag transport: CFA 1000~2000 per bag

#### **Choice of Area: Urban vs the Rural Periphery**

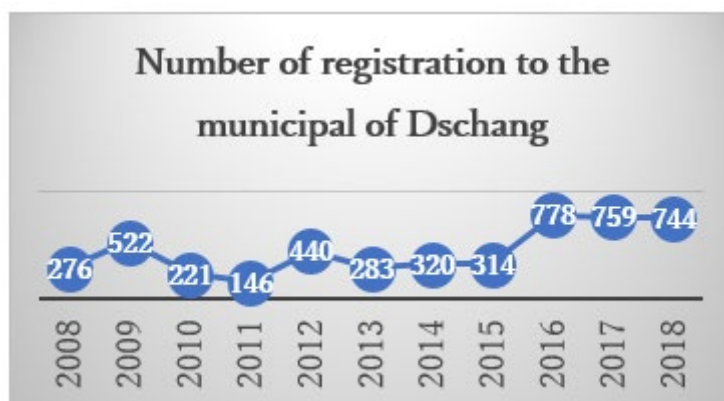
About half of drivers limit their work area to the city, with the rest working larger territories including peripheral rural areas [Graph 6-5]. Providing long-distance services is more profitable than restricting driving to the city, but requires local knowledge of rural routes and current events, which provides a barrier to unfamiliar entrants. For example, funerals are considered important village events and as a result drivers with local knowledge of impending funerals are advantaged when it comes to transporting people to and from their villages to attend funerals on weekends. Knowledge of local 8-day periodic market schedules is also important. For instance, demand for the transportation of agricultural products from farms in the periphery to the Dschang “Grand Marché” spikes during early mornings on market days. Similarly, drivers with local knowledge of market schedules for other cities are better placed to profit from the increased demand for farm-to-market transport on market days, and potentially fill otherwise unpaid return journeys with a fare. “It is lucky if you could get another passenger return from and to Dschang. Income doubles!” said a bike taxi man; whose knowledge of the local calendar gave him an advantage in providing long-distance transport.

Recent political developments have diminished bike taxi profitability. Increasingly violent combats between the government and separatists in the anglophone regions have caused refugees to flee from those areas to the Western Region. Official reports state that as of May 2019 more than 12,000 persons had been displaced to the Department of Menoua. Many of these internally displaced refugees, who had abandoned their fields, homes, and shops took up bike taxi driving to quickly gain an income, increasing competition and driving down the prices of bike taxi services in Dschang. According to interviews of bike taxi men in June 2019, takings enjoyed by established drivers halved from CFA 2500-5000 per day – sometimes CFA 10,000 in one day – since conflict started and refugees entered the industry. Frustration among bike taxi operators is mounting but local authorities still dependent on humanitarian aid programs from the likes of the Red Cross and local NGOs are in little position to help.

#### 4.6. Bike Taxis and Authority

Our researchers were surprised to discover that 42% of bike taxi men were unlicensed [Graph 3-8] and 59% were uninsured [Graph 3-10]. Only 36% had registered their bike taxi work with municipal authorities leaving the remaining 64% operating bike taxis without legal status [Graph 3-11]. Drivers have multiple reasons for non-registration [Graph 3-12-1]: 1) No money – 35%; 2) Distrust and dissatisfaction toward authorities (Municipality and Police) – 19%; 3) not considering it worthwhile to register/insure a temporary activity – 18%; 4) disinterest – 13%; 5) lack of supporting documents required for registration (tax records, driving licenses, etc.); 6) registration currently being processed - 3%. In contrast, of those registered, reasons for registration were as follows [Graph 3-12-2]: 8 respondents said registration helped avoid conflicts with police, and 4 respondents said registration was an expression of respect for the law.

According to local authorities, registration of bike taxis is in fact increasing: from 276 registrations in 2008 to 778 in 2016, to remaining steady at around 750 in 2017 and 2018. Despite the jump in registrations the official data still does not reflect the over 2,000 bike taxis counted in the field. Registered vehicles are the tip of a bike taxi iceberg, the true size of which is impossible to grasp.



*(made by the author according to the research with the head of office, Dschang, June 2019)*

Dschang authorities have increased regulation of bike taxis purportedly to promote security, peace, and order, including mandatory licensing, taxation, limiting passengers to 1 per voyage, and mandating yellow vests. The cost of compliance encourages drivers to remain informal, risking conflict and even violence with officials. The person in charge of Dschang City's registration section worried that poor driving and flouting regulations could cause severe accidents.<sup>2</sup>

In the face of this concern for public well-being the bike taxi men interviewed expressed deep distrust and resentment toward local authorities and the police. Those who were registered had been forced to do so during a police campaign. Of the 744 registered bike taxis in 2018, 264 (35%) had been registered during a week-long police crackdown running from 19 till 25 April. The number of registrations outside that campaign averaged less than 10 per week.

The negative attitudes held by bike taxi drivers towards police stem from reports of police violence during registration campaigns and police demands for bribes to allow drivers caught unregistered to avoid registering. These bribes are often priced such that it is cheaper for drivers

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Director, Registration Section, June 2019 in Dschang City.



to pay the bribe and avoid conflict than to incur the costs that registration entails, but bribes are still viewed as the preferential treatment of those with available money.

According to Roitman (2005), the conflictual relationship between Cameroon's authorities and its public originated in the French colonial era where fiscal and taxation systems were installed to exploit and deprive the public of local wealth. This led to the formation of illicit and unregulated "bush economy" businesses in northern Cameroon and the Lake Chad basin, such as smuggling across the Nigerian border.

During Cameroon's economic crisis in the 1990s, many Cameroonians were forced to cross the border to Nigeria to seek employment and escape regulation. However, these activities still attracted taxes and commercial license fees back home. Cameroonians were doubly frustrated at the sight of Nigerian retailers, already competitive with cheaper goods, evading regulation while selling on Cameroonian soil (Roitman 2005:25-31).

French colonial authorities targeted the wealth produced by intermediaries and the "population flottante" (literally: 'floating population') - nomads who frequently crossed borders – which they saw as causing price instability. This attitude has been passed on to the present government, with its continued targeting prolonging the region's conflict relations (Roitman 2005:149-150).

"In northern Cameroon today, the intermediaries are joined by itinerant sellers (*ambulants*), the clandestine (*les clandestos*), street hawkers (*les sauveteurs*), "the informal" (i.e., economy), refugees, and foreigners (regularly signaled as "Nigerians", "Chadians", and, less often, "Nigeriens") in the capricious and often criminalized category of the "*population flottante*." (Roitman 2005:150)".

Regulatory officials, namely customs officers or tax collectors (e.g. *dounaniers-combattants*), are granted carte-blanche in the methods they employ to collect money from the "bush economy".

In Chad, President Idriss Deby rewarded ex-soldiers who had been loyal in the civil war with customs collector posts, enabling them access and control over formal and informal economic activities on the border, presumably with which they could achieve financial autonomy.

A similar logic operates in many Cameroonian municipalities after public revenue significantly declined with the abolition of flat-rate tax collection in 1995. Based on Bennafla's argument (2002), Roitman (2005:204) explains that the municipalities considered "economic activities on the borders as an alternative source of rents" with which to pay civil servants, who could supplement their income through collecting rights-of-entry to marketplaces and tariffs on contraband.

In this regard, it is impossible for the state to assert its legitimacy because its integrity also depends upon illicit "bush economy" activities occurring at its borders. The West Region, where field research for this article was conducted, has more or less the same political structure based on the relationship of conflict between the state and the public, which began during the French colonial era, was strengthened through independence, and endures today.



## 5. Conclusion

Bike taxis have undoubtedly benefited the local economy by giving young people an alternative to joblessness and by providing transport within and between urban and rural areas despite less than ideal infrastructure, thus revitalizing the commercialization of agricultural products through the regional periodic markets. However, the bike taxi boom has its downsides: bike taxi work is uncertain, and persistent tensions between drivers and authorities mean safety and violence concerns around the regulation of drivers will remain for some time. Analysis of drivers' subjective experience is necessary to display a comprehensive picture of bike taxi work that goes beyond the ambivalent and dichotomous social image of the industry.

In this regard, youth career construction deserves focus. Although the majority of youth obtain high and often specialized qualifications, research has shown that many are unable to sustain themselves in their chosen field and must supplement their income by other means including bike taxi driving. Although easy to enter and profitable early on, bike taxi income is unstable and the field offers no prospects of progression. Though still viewed as short-term work, many are prolonging their stints, unable to find better jobs to transition into as the economy remains stagnant. At the same time, conflict in the anglophone regions increases competition and reduces profitability.

At the end of the questionnaire we asked respondents to freely describe their future plans [Graph 8-1]. Many wrote of wanting to start agriculture or livestock farming. Other aspirations included building homes, starting families, repaying loans, getting jobs appropriate to their qualifications, and opening bakeries, pharmacies, or garages. Unfortunately, young bike taxi men are aware that these modest wishes may never eventuate, that they may drive bike taxis indefinitely, and it is this socioeconomic dead end that lies at the heart of their frustration and anger. The current socioeconomic volatility must be contained to provide stability for the youth upon whom the future of Dschang depends.

The strike by Dschang bike taxi-men in August 2019 illustrates their frustration and their failed attempt to break their conflictual relationship with the authorities. Their demand for better conditions must be accompanied with citizenship. If the state considers bike taxis merely as a source of income upon which imposed licit or illicit regulation can accumulate they may repeat President Paul Biya's mistake during the Operation Villes Mortes in 1990, when he posed the "peace or wealth" dichotomy, ignoring the question of citizenship. If so, the relationship between public order and prosperity will remain one of conflict.

It is important to note that all participants depend on the ambiguous legality of daily economic activities resulting from rips of the state system. A series of democratic movements have forced the government to move towards a real democracy which demands citizen responsibilities in return for citizen rights. The population embracing that notion of "citizenship" may open Pandora's box, shaking Cameroon's political and social structures from the ground up.

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## **7. Appendix**

### **7.1. Inquiry into the economic activities of bike taxis in Dschang, West Region, Cameroun**

# INQUIRY INTO THE ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF BIKE TAXIS IN DSCHANG, WEST REGION, CAMEROUN

The 03- 24 June 2019

SAKAI Makiko (MS)(PhD/Sociology)  
Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS)  
TEL : 690691938

.....

■ No. of questionnaire :

■ Time/Date/Place :

■ Name of Interviewer :

.....

## 1. Basic Information

1-1 Name :

1-2 ☐M / ☐ F

1-3 School Background

1-4 Age :

1-5 Ethnic Group :

1-6 Birth Place :

1-7 Place of Residence :

## 2. Household

2-1 Marital Status : ☐Single / ☐Married

2-2 Number of spouses :

2-3 Spouse's occupation :

2-4 Number and age of children :

2-5 Total number of family members under your responsibility:

2-6 What other activities do you do?

- ☐ Teacher, ☐ Woodworker, ☐ Shopkeeper, ☐ Farmer, ☐ Student,  
☐ Others:

NB : Do you or your family own a field? ☐ Yes ☐ No

- If 'yes', how many hectares is your field?
- What produce do you plant in your field ?
- Do you sell the produce at market? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Do other people help you with field work ? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- (☐ Family members / ☐ Employed field hands/☐ Others : \_\_\_\_\_)

### 3. Your Motorcycle

3-1 Do you own this motorcycle? ☐ Yes / ☐ No

3-2 If 'yes', in which year did you buy your motorcycle?

3-3 If 'no', how did you acquire this motorcycle? ☐ Rental / ☐ Borrowed

3-4 How much did it cost without carte grise? CFA...

3-5 How much the carte grise cost ? CFA

3-6 What is the make and model of your motorcycle?

Example : SANILI TS125-6 (125cc)

3-7 What equipment did you buy to start bike taxi driving?

- ☐ ① Boots, ☐ ② Gloves, ☐ ③ Pull-over, ☐ ④ Glasses, ☐ ⑤ Other

3-8 Do you have a driving license? ☐ Yes/ ☐ No

3-9 If yes, in which year did you obtain your driving license?

3-10 Are you insured? ☐ Yes / ☐ No

3-11 Are you registered with a city ☐ Yes / ☐ No

3-12 Why?

4. Financial Background

4-1 Where did you find the money to buy your motorcycle?

- ☐ Self-funded. → How ?
- ☐ Someone else's support → whose ?
- ☐ Credit / Borrowed → From where ?
  - ☐ Institution : ☐Microfinance, ☐Bank, ☐Others
  - ☐ Reunion / tontine / ROSCA
  - ☐ Private loan
- ☐ What is/was the interest rate ?
- ☐ What were the other conditions of credit?
  - ☐Surety, ☐Guarantor, ☐Others

5. Personal history and motivation

5-1 What did you do before starting bike taxi driving?

5-2 Exactly when and where did you start bike taxi driving?



5-3 Why did you start bike taxi driving?

6. Daily Activities

6-1 How many hours a day do you work with your bike taxi?

6-2 What time do you start?

6-3 What time do you return home?

6-4 How many days do you work per week?

6-5 Is your work territory limited to the town/city or does it extend into rural areas?

6-6 Are you a member of a station (un camp)? ☐Yes ☐No

6-7 If 'yes', to which station do you belong?

6-8 Are you a member of a bike taxi organization?

☐Yes→ ☐Association/ ☐Workers' Union

☐No

6-9 Why? / Why not ?

## 7. Financial Management

### 7-1 Saving

7-1-1 Do you save part of your income regularly ?

☐Yes / ☐No

7-1-2 If 'yes', how did/do you use the savings ?

☐Microfinance / ☐ Bank account

☐Entrust to someone

☐Keep at home

☐Investment:

☐ Purchase of land for agriculture (palm trees, cacao, coffee...)

☐ Construction of a rental property

☐ Purchase of animals such as goats, sheep, etc.

☐Tontine

☐Other

### 7-2 Réunions / Tontines

7-2-1 In which kinds of reunions do you participate?

7-2-2 Do you participate in tontines in all the reunions to which you belong?

☐Yes / ☐No

7-2-3 If 'yes', how much do you pay in contributions to each reunion?

7-2-4 How much can you receive from each reunion when it is your turn?

7-2-5 How do you use this money ?

☐invest in business / ☐ help family members /

☐purchase goods, ☐Other

### 7-3 Borrowing money

7-3-1 Who do you ask favors from in difficult times?

7-3-2 Do they help?

7-3-3 Are you in debt now? ☐Yes / ☐No

7-3-4 If 'yes', to whom are you in debt?

7-3-5 What is the amount of the debt ?

7-3-6 For what reasons do you owe this debt ?

7-3-7 Is your debt with interest? ☐Yes / ☐No

7-3-8 If 'yes', how much is the interest rate?

7-3-9 Was security required for this debt? ☐Yes / ☐No

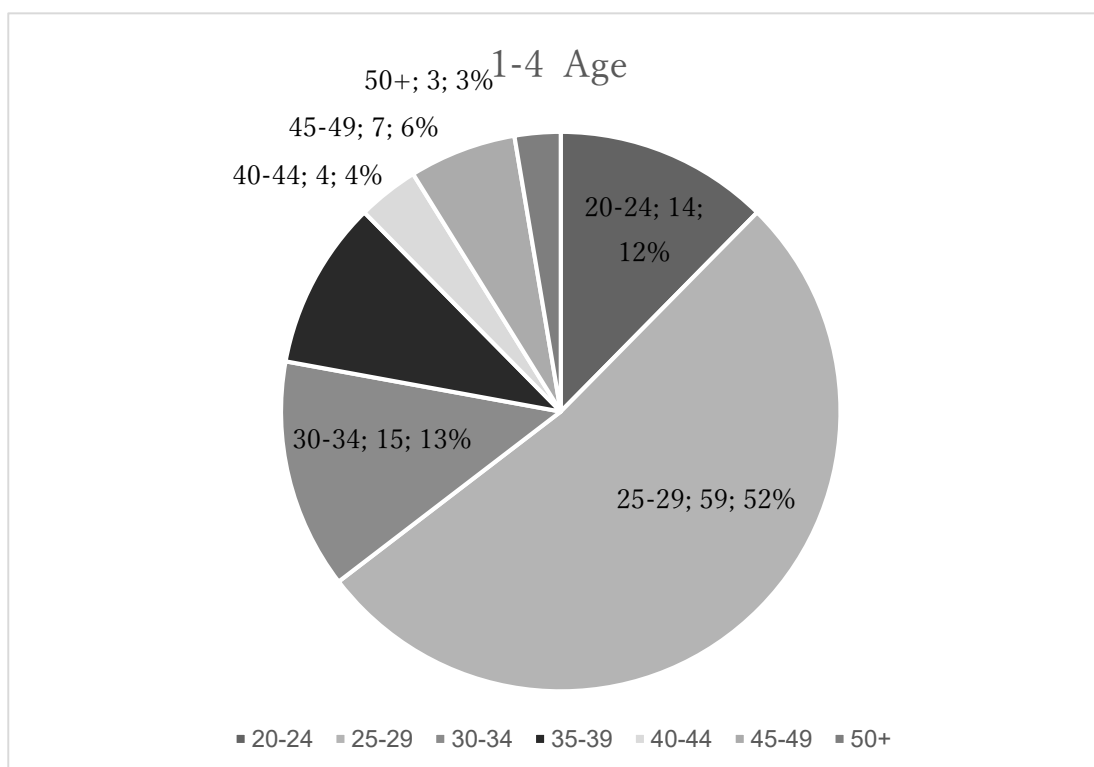
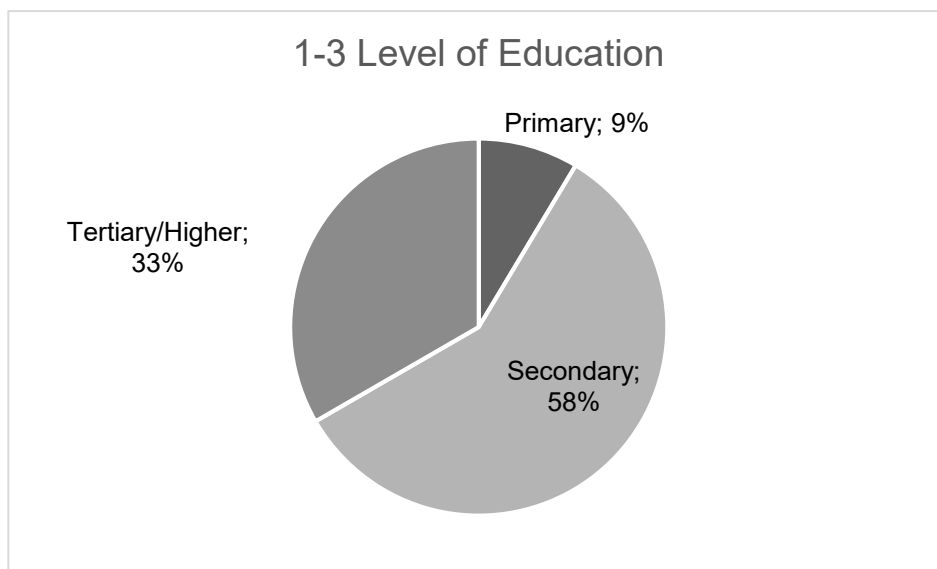
### 8. Projects for the future

8-1 What are your future projects?

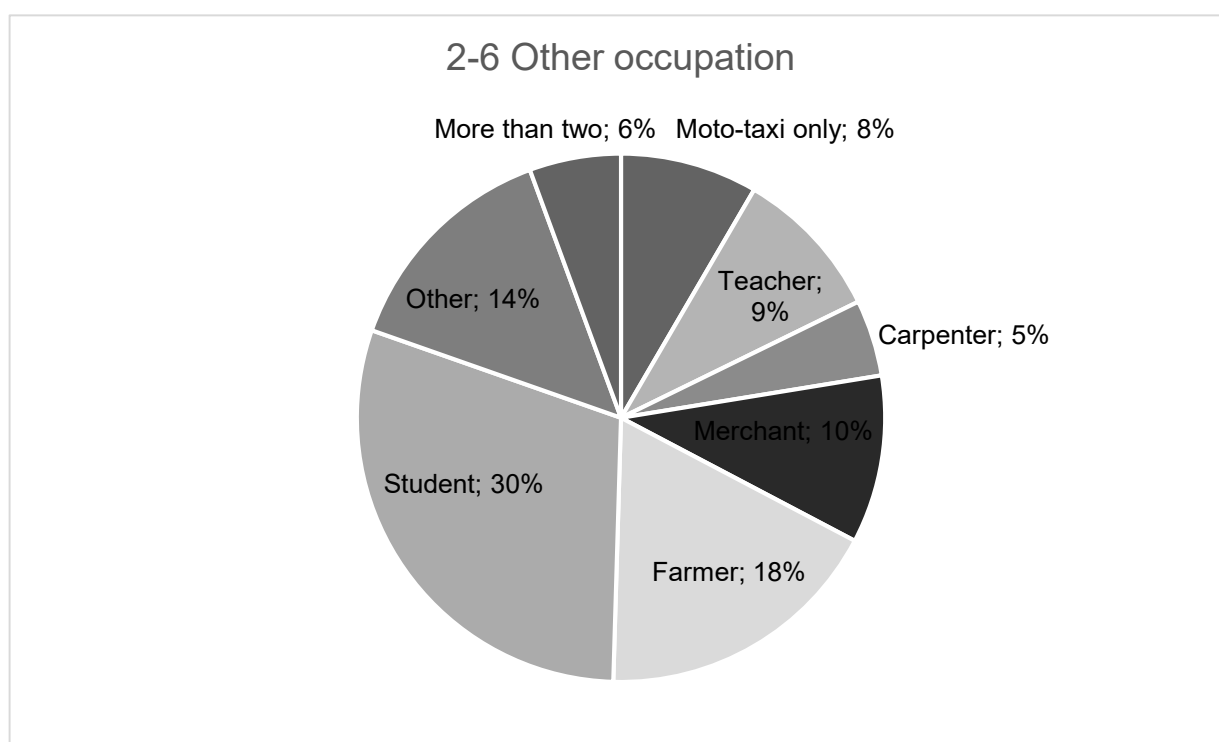
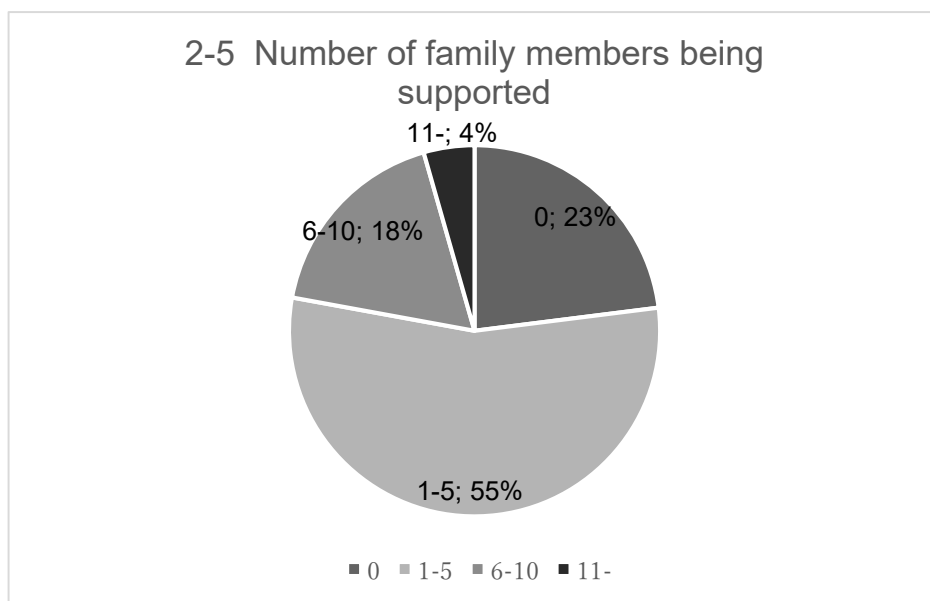
8-2 If you received CFA 100,000, how would you invest it?

## 7.2. Survey results

### 1. Basic Information

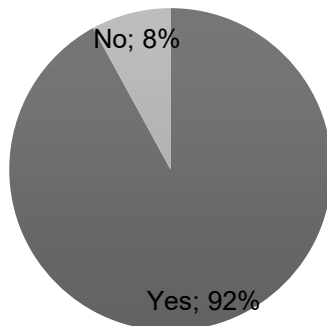


## 2. Characteristics of household

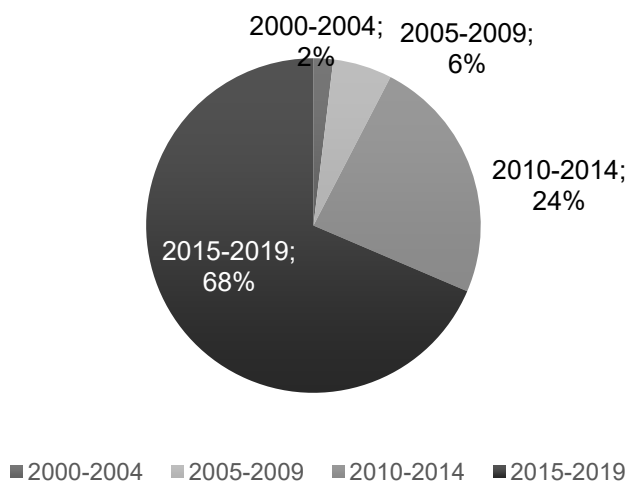


### 3. Your Motorcycle

#### 3-1 Do you own your motorcycle?



#### 3-2 Year of Purchase



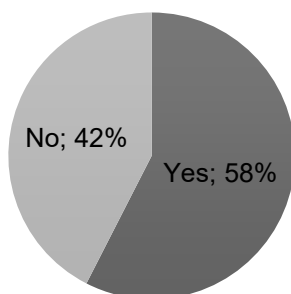
#### 3-4 Price paid for Motorcycle

Average: 448.000 F CFA

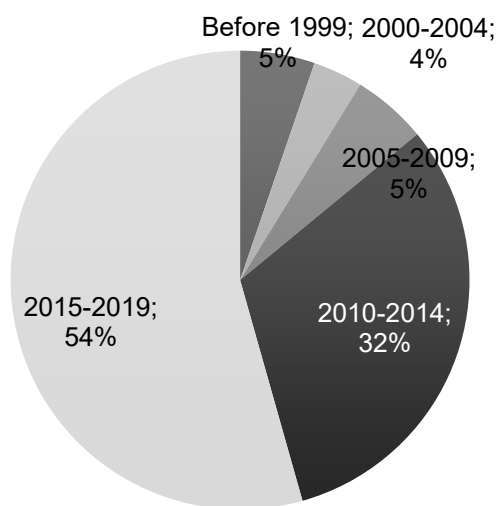
Minimum : 120.000 F CFA

Maximum : 570.000 F CFA

## 3-8 Do you have a driver's license ?

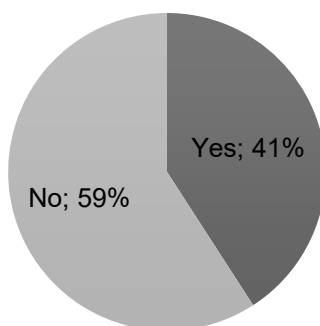


## 3-9 Year driver's license obtained



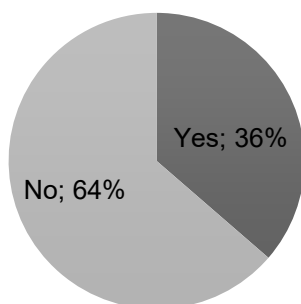
■ Before 1999 ■ 2000-2004 ■ 2005-2009 ■ 2010-2014 ■ 2015-2019

## 3-10 Do you have insurance?

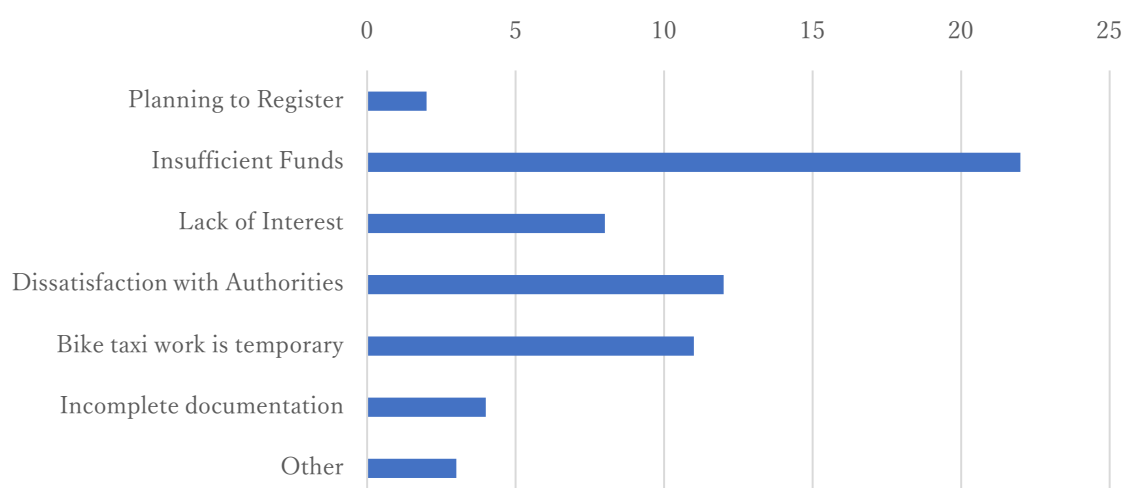




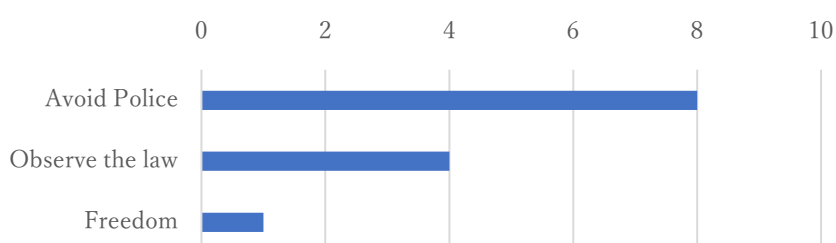
### 3-11 Registered with the city/town council?



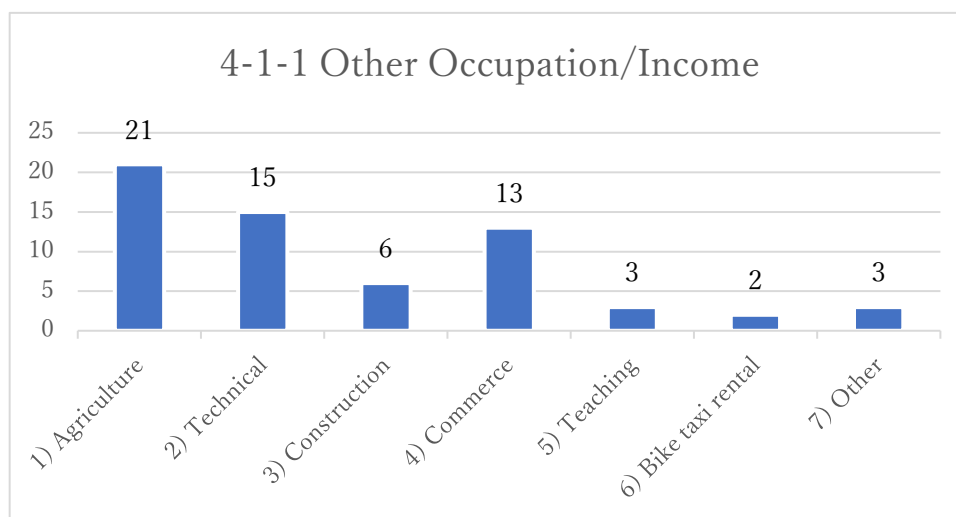
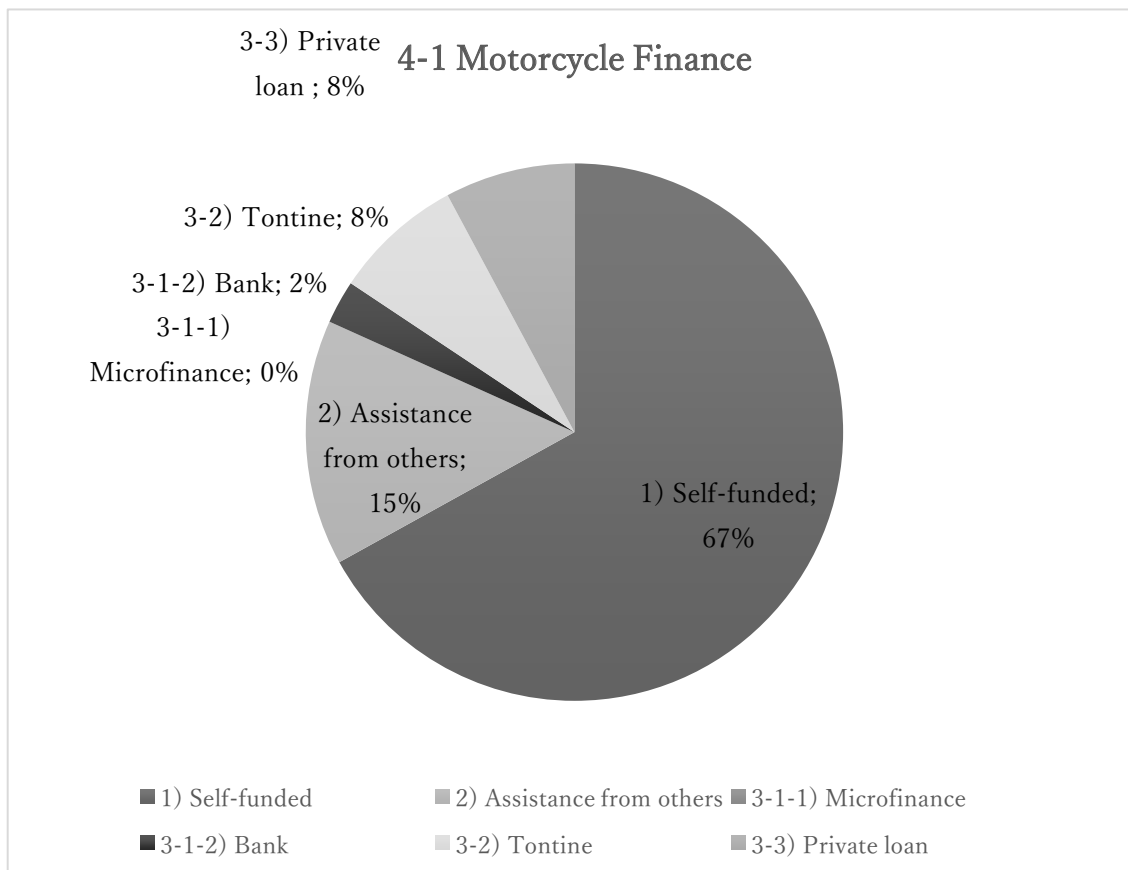
### 3-12-1 Reasons for Not Registering

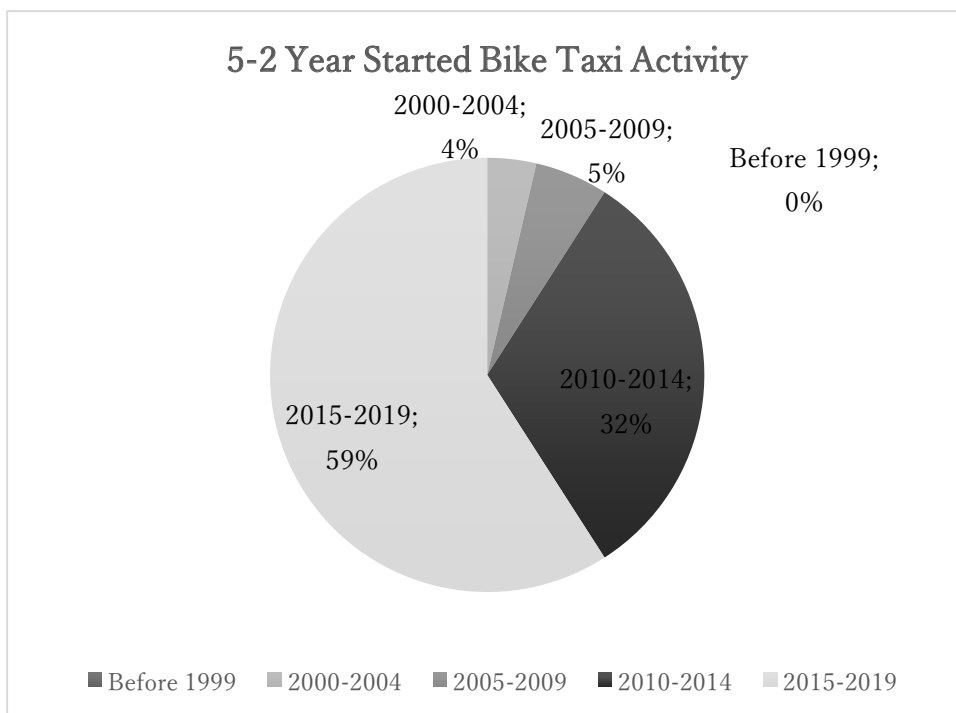


### 3-12-2 Reasons for Registration

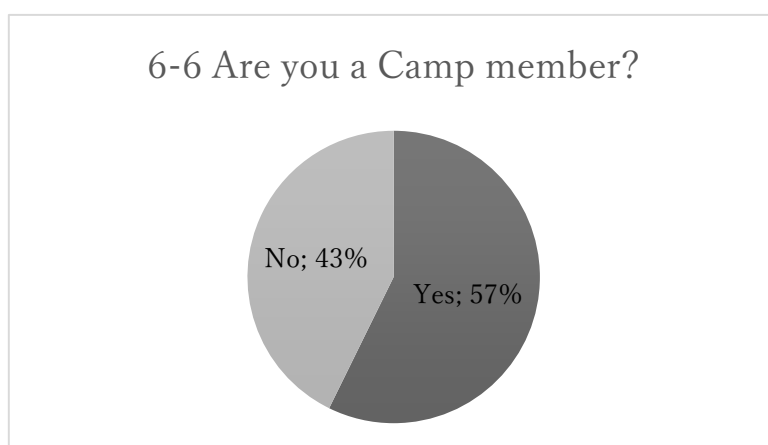
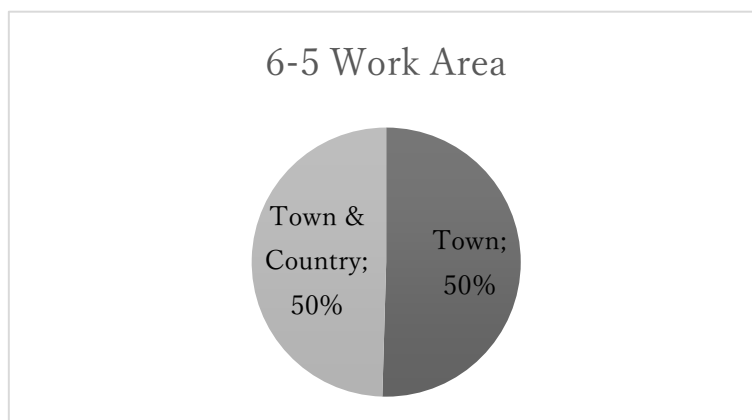
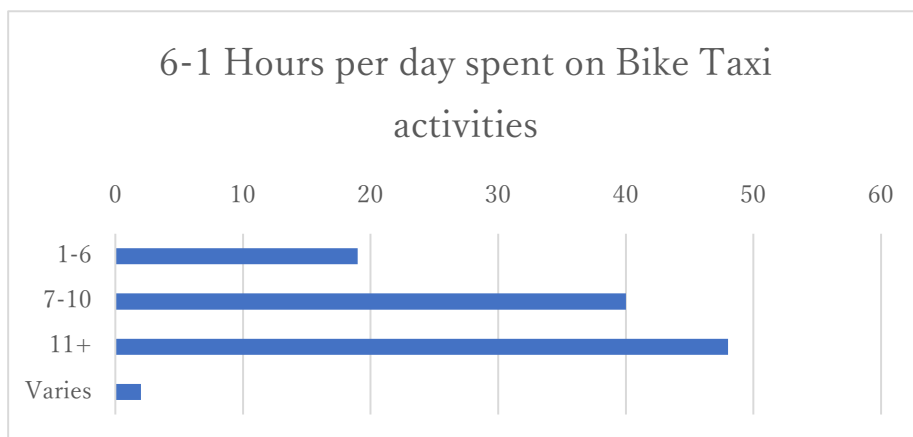


## 4. Financial Sources



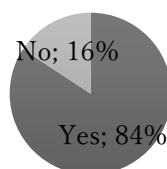


## 6. Daily Activities

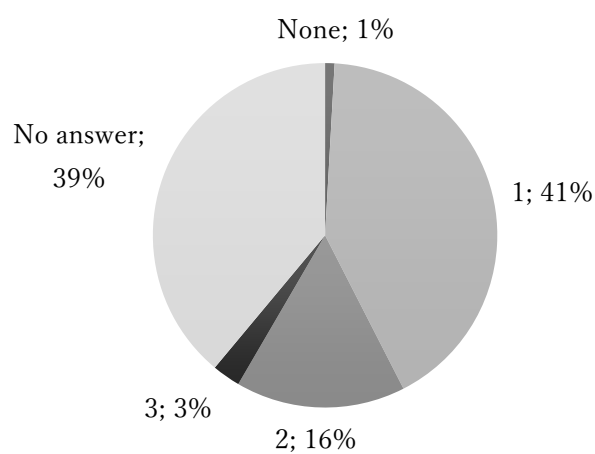


## 7. Financial Management

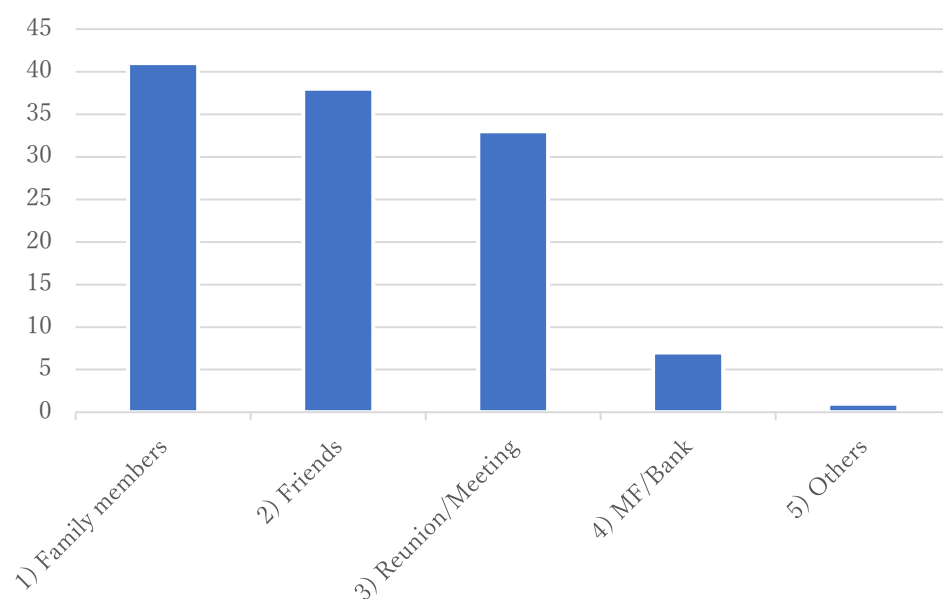
## 7-1-1 Regular Savings



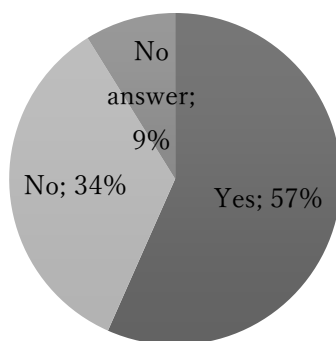
## 7-2-1 Number of Meetings/Reunions Joined



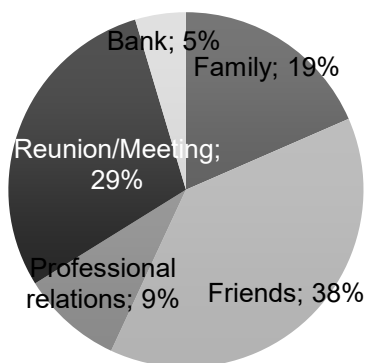
## 7-3-1 Where do you seek aid in difficulty?



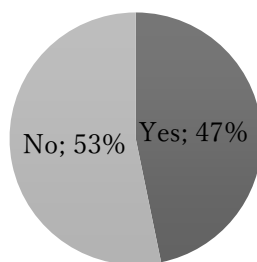
7-3-3 Do you have debt now ?

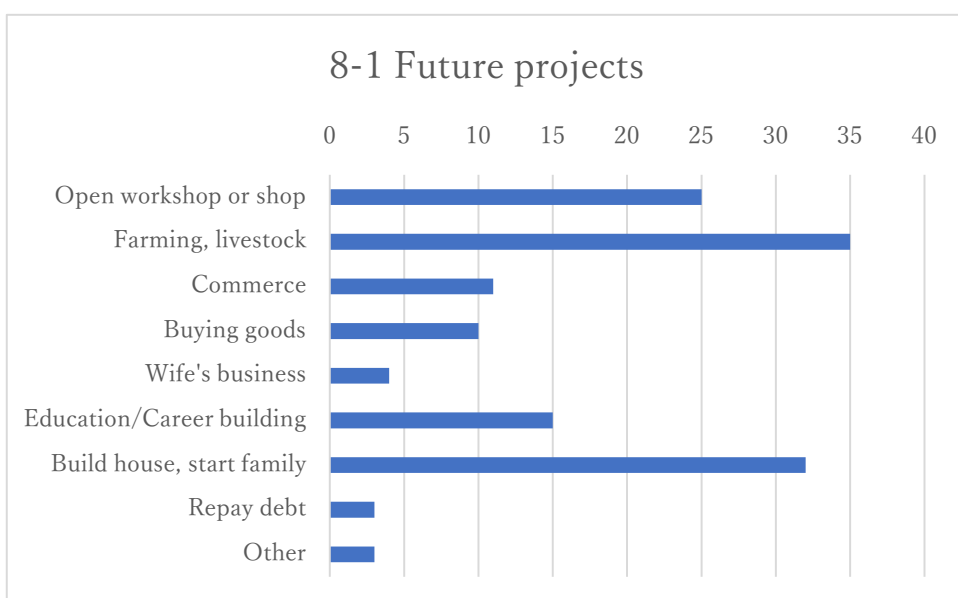
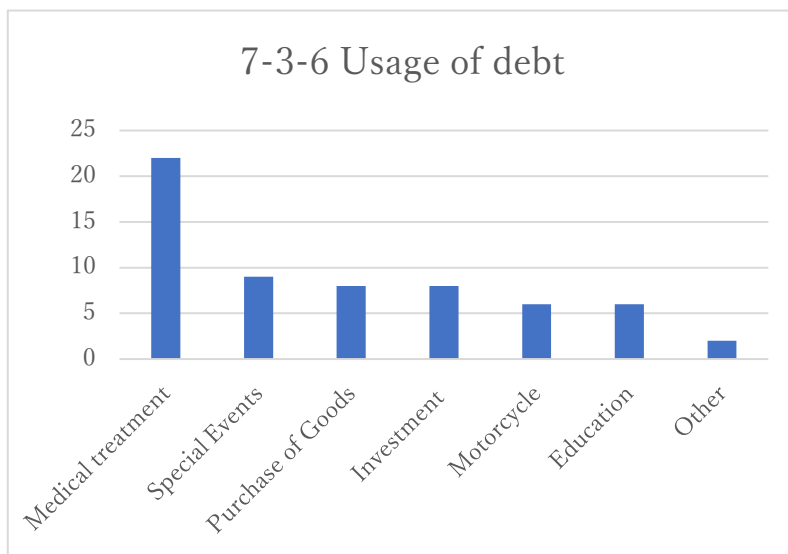


7-3-4 With whom did you contract this debt ?



7-3-7 Did you contract this debt with interest?







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