

Touting Perishable Products: The Temporalities of Trading, and at Times Tricking, on through Roads in Urban Ghana

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This paper examines the intricate temporalities of consuming and trading in bread on Ghanaian through roads. In a first step, I describe the regular habit among travellers of buying bread when leaving the capital or passing through urban centres. The white and varyingly sweet bread loaves, allegedly introduced by the wives of British colonial officers, are either presented as gifts at travellers' destination where they are valued as urban and modern consumer goods; or they serve as travel snacks and are eaten before reaching the destination. Travellers are usually keen on purchasing bread which is 'nice and soft'; and since it is quite a perishable product, some make particular efforts to find bread loaves which are (or at least appear as) fresh. Yet their efforts are often hampered as bread is bought while vehicles are moving, which leaves travellers only limited time to examine the goods offered by traffic hawkers through open car windows.

In a next step, I describe how urban hawkers make a living by using the roadside for informal trading activities. Those who attend to passing travellers with loaves of bread are required to run and chase vehicles in order to advertise their goods, compete with others and successfully complete the rushed exchange of bread and cash – tasks which are often risky, both bodily and financially. At the same time, the speedy and brief encounters are seen as a chance to tout the perishable products: With the help of particular verbal and aesthetic practices, they emphasize, simulate and thus advertise the bread loaves' alleged freshness, knowing that such quality speaks to customers' desires but can usually not be verified – or only too late, namely when the (at times tricked) travellers have already moved on.

These elaborations permit to shed light on the consumption practices and desires of travelling Ghanaians as well as at the attempts of roadside entrepreneurs to advertise these desired goods. In this context, the peculiar temporalities and time frames of perishable products and of trading in traffic appear to engender an intricate economy of speed: I argue that it is central to the commercial encounters of moving consumers with stationary vendors and intrinsically marks, facilitates and compromises the everyday interactions between travelling and roadside communities.