

*SUSTENANCE AND DYNAMICS OF INFORMAL TRANSPORTATION IN
ANGLOPHONE CAMEROON, 1961 TO 2016*

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Abstract

In most African cities, while there are state policies regulating the operation of motor transport activities, informal practices are usually visible creating some sought of anarchy. Using the case of Anglophone Cameroon, the territory roughly representing the former West Cameroon Federal State and the contemporary Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon, the study examines the extent by which informal transport actors created a sustainable operational niche. By profiling the informal transport practices in the towns of Bamenda, Buea and Limbe in Anglophone Cameroon, the paper asserts that, although considered informal and chaotic by the State because of the non-conformity to statutory regulations, the clandestine transport sector was not altogether a chaotic setup. It had a certain mode of organization with well-established protocols and disciplinary measures that gave it a semblance of order. The article is informed by evidence gathered from primary and secondary sources analyzed following a qualitative historical design.

Keywords. *Informal, transport, Policies, Practices, Anglophone Cameroon*

1. Background

The origins and evolution of vehicle transportation in Cameroon in general and Anglophone Cameroon particular, has an exciting and stored trajectory beginning from the colonial times down to the modern era. Initially, land transport was dominated by human carriers and animal aided transport, but the establishment of a functional intercontinental shipping system, with seaports allowed for the introduction of other forms of land transport namely railway system and vehicle

transportation in Cameroon¹. It is in this regard that as early as 1905 the very first motor transport service from Kribi to Yaoundé was launched in the territory.² It was consequent to this nascent development that, attention was given to land transport to serve as accompaniment to the railway system. This necessitated the use of automobile facilities consisting mainly of Lorries, buses and minibuses. With the end of German rule, automobile transportation gradually gained prominence in Anglophone Cameroon owing to improvement in the road system.

Although the first roads in West Cameroon³ were built during the mandate and Trusteeship periods, road transportation did not become generalized and popular until the 1940s. The first bus transportation services were provided by the British Colonial Officials and a few private individuals and cooperatives. In fact, by July 1942, there were a good number of private motor vehicles as well as commercial motor vehicles in Southern Cameroons. For privately owned, there were about 29 vehicles while for commercial vehicles there were about 16 vehicles as of 19 July 1942.⁴ For transportation services offered by commercial cooperative societies, the Bakeries Cooperative Union was actively involved in the transportation of bananas and plantation workers in Southern Cameroons to the seaports and farms. As the provision of road transportation services were then limited, more or less to the government, private road transporters were very few indeed.⁵ However, on the eve of independence, things changed given that the expansion of roads infrastructures in the Southern Cameroon attracted many transporters, indigenes and non-indigenes (Nigerians). The expansion of road infrastructure brought more people into the road transport business. Although the bus transporters did not as at this time operate within any defined organization, they nevertheless impacted the economy in many important ways.⁶

¹ Adams Philip and Franklin L. Tuner, *The Economic Potential of West Cameroon. Frontiers for Development 4*

(California: Stanford Research Institute, 1965), 89

² Harry R. Rudin, *Germans in the Cameroons, 1884-1914. A case study in Modern Imperialism* (New Haven Connecticut: Yale University, 1938), 54

³ West Cameroon was a Federated state in the Federal Republic of Cameroon from 1961-1972. Formerly the territory was known as the Southern Cameroons during the British Mandate period 1922 -1939 and later the Trusteeship era in 1945-1961

⁴ NAB. File No KP/T43(1947) Motor Transport Vehicles, The Southern Cameroons

⁵ Idem

⁶ NAB. File No: LG2372 Survey for the Establishment of a plan for Transport in West Cameroon

By 1962, there were over 1,231 Lorries and buses on the road in West Cameroon. As the demand for transport services increased, there was need to regulate the sector to guard against chaos. The transport operators primarily had to comply with the legal, security and safety policies instituted by the state. Commercial motor parks were also opened to ensure that passenger boarding, and

Freights were properly managed and controlled. In spite of the measures put by the state to supervise public transportation of persons and goods, some vehicle owners rather preferred to operate in violation of the statutory regulations. Such activities were informal in nature compared to those who firmly complied with the state policies.⁷

2. Profiling Informal Transport Practices

The operators of informal transport functionalize their buses in the informal system. They were known for their illegal operation often outside established norms. In fact, they were a collection of public transport with little or no control of its operations by public transport authorities nor control of its operations by overall regulatory authority. The sector consisted of pick-up vehicles with open cabins, small cars, minibuses, micro buses.⁸ The immediate post-independence period witnessed more informal transport vehicles than conventional buses. From the 1960s right up to the 1980s, public commuting in the towns of Bamenda, Buea and Limbe was managed mostly by the informal transport sector. This sector was noted for overloading, where persons were crushed against each other and at times against market produce and livestock, especially when it concerned vehicles that transported persons and goods on the same cabin. Informal transport buses/vehicles were not only discomfoting but were daunting.⁹

In some vehicles, while some passengers sat on wooden benches facing each other, others had to stand up for lack of spaces in the vehicle. This was common with vehicles that had open cabin carefully designed to transport persons and goods. These vehicles were common in Bamenda from the 1970s right up to the late 1980s where they were used by traders, businesspersons mostly for trading purposes in

⁷ NAB. File No Rclc {1963} Motor Vehicle Registration, West Cameroon

⁸ Hilling David. *Transport and Developing Countries* (London: Routledge Publication, 1996), 87.

⁹ Mbah Mathias, 81, Retired with West Cameroon State, bus proprietor, Bamenda, 28/04/2020

secondary towns like Wum, Mamfe and Nkambe. Most informal transport vehicles and buses evaded periodic vehicle testing for road worthiness which was required by the law and was regularly conducted by transport officials to ensure the proper functioning of transport vehicles. While the conventional buses did undergo periodic testing, majority of the informal transport buses and vehicles, aware of their status, evaded this very important road security need. Transport regulations in the former West Cameroon State and even the post Federal era previewed road worthiness certificates for transport vehicles, though they were not strictly applicable. Consequently, this gave room for clandestine operators to function at will. The early 1990s

witnessed stringent enforcements on vehicle testing control.¹⁰ Despite these measures, informal transporters operated without road worthiness certificates.

Registration and licensing of transport buses and vehicles. Transport vehicles owners were expected to register their vehicles in respect to the regulations in force. Most informal transport vehicles failed to comply with this process. The immediate post-independence years witnessed the use of foreign number plates in West Cameroon by public transport vehicles. For instance, in Bamenda, by 1962, about 12 vehicles still used Nigerian number plates despite government directives that vehicles that were registered in Nigeria before Southern Cameroon's independence ought to be registered again in West Cameroon. Unfortunately, a good number of them were unregistered and sadly they continued to ply the roads in West Cameroon.¹¹ Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the registration and licensing of transport vehicles especially informal ones continued to pose a serious problem to transport authorities and government. In addition, most of these vehicles failed to obtain transporters' licenses as prescribed by the law of 1979 which laid down the conditions for the practice of public transportation.¹² This law was further strengthened and amended in 1990 which classified transporters licenses into two categories: special and ordinary categories. Despite these developments, many

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ NAB, File no Rc/c {1963}1 Motor vehicle Registration.

¹² Decree No. 79/341 Of 3/9/1979, Fixing modalities for registration/transport licenses in the United Republic of Cameroon

transporters in the informal sector failed to meet up with these exigencies as they complained of stringent conditions to obtain transporters licences.¹³

Informal transport operators in Bamenda, Buea and Limbe did operate without fixed fares and charged rates as conventional buses did. Generally, up till 1963, there were no official rates charged by transporters to the commuting public in the Former West Cameroon State. However, in 1963, the Federal government assumed responsibility for road transport fares. As a follow-up, transport fares proposed by the Minister of National Economy did not go well with public transporters in West Cameroon. They argued the Minister's decision on fares made it impossible for public buses to operate at a profit.¹⁴ Consequently, it was ignored especially by informal transporters. The issue of transport fares was always a bone of contention between government and transporters syndicates. It witnessed several revisions in the 1970s up till 2008. Yet informal transporters hardly respected fixed fares and charged rates adopted by transport officials.

The variety of transport services available did not appeal to higher income groups because of insecurity and unreliability. As pointed out by Robert Civero many people in African cities did not possess private cars. As such they relied on informal transportation services in reaching job sites, markets, hospitals, farms and other destinations.¹⁵ This situation was reflected in Anglophone Cameroon given the fact that more than 70 percent of the population relied on informal transport facilities for their daily preoccupations. Furthermore, informal transport provided opportunities for interaction and economic survival, shaping the patterns of circulation of people, resources, and information in towns like Bamenda, Buea and Limbe. In effect informal transport motor parks were meeting points for daily conversations in which humor alternated with pathos and dreams, even about everyday corruption, politics and social life.¹⁶

Informal transportation provided a window into many socio economic and political facets of the society in Anglophone Cameroon. They were associated with issues of

¹³ Law no 90/1466/PM of 9/11/1990 fixing conditions for obtaining road transporters licenses.

¹⁴ NAB, File no RK {1967} Transport Passenger fare freight rates. 19108{7}.

¹⁵ Cevero Robert, *Informal Transport in the Developing World*. United Nation's Centre for Human Settlement Habitat, Nairobi 2000, p15.

¹⁶ Yeba Bernard, 75, retired clerk, Cameroon Development Corporation {CDC}, Buea 2/11/2020.

organized crime, indigenous entrepreneurship and informal economies, transition to democracy, political and social crisis, freemarket economies, popular culture, and rural urban migration. That is the reason why motor parts, bus stations, clandestine workers and their unions in the sector were key players in partisan politics; and politicians used the motor parks for political campaigns and hired the services of motor park actors during political campaigns.¹⁷ Despite the chaos that was commonly associated with the informal transport provision, there was a logic of practice that organized the sector and kept it on the go. Different brands of Vehicles were used by informal transporters.

Variation of Vehicle Brands

Varied types of vehicles were used for public transportation in Bamenda, Buea and Limbe. Between 1961 right up to the late 1970s, the most popular public transport vehicles included the stage carriage vehicles and the hackney carriage vehicles. However, these were conventional public transport vehicles involved in the transportation of persons and goods. But other vehicles and buses were used by informal transport operators. Vehicles used for informal operations included Peugeot 504, Peugeot Basher vans, wagon and pick-up trucks with well-arranged benches and stage carriage. However, in 1963, government directives banned the issuing of transport license to stage carriage vehicles involved in transporting goods of thirty thousand weight or more with passengers in the same vehicle.¹⁸ Despite these, informal transporters continued transporting goods and passengers on vehicle cabins right up to the 1990s, when such vehicles disappeared from the scene.

These brands later evolved to Toyota Dx small cars, Toyota corolla cars, Ford cars, Toyota Stout pickup vehicles, Dyna pick-up vehicles which transported both persons and goods parked on the same cabin. They operated rural roads and penetrated narrow or steep roads that were inaccessible by conventional buses.¹⁹ Clandestine vans operated in most municipalities in the Anglophone Cameroon. In the Southwest Region for instance, it was not a new thing as from the 1970s and 1980s, transport authorities were constantly at loggerheads with clandestine

¹⁷ File No: LG2372 Survey for the Establishment, NAB, p Also. File No.RK{1978} Annual reports, Provincial Services of Transport for Southwest Province, NAB, p

¹⁸ NAB, file no Rc{1963} Road Traffic Ordinance and Regulations, 396.

¹⁹ Mbah Mathias.

operators who lacked respect for official regulations. They operated mostly in the Tiko, Mutengene, Buea and Limbe towns.²⁰ Operators were engaged in poaching passengers using their small vans and carriers, which made it difficult for Transporters' Associations, Unions and Motor Park operators that were legally registered to either operate normally or at most break even.

The story of the Grass fields of Bamenda was not different. In Bamenda, the first authorized motorpark was at the Commercial center where conventional buses collected and deposited passengers right up to 1978 when the park was transferred to Nkwen. Yet clandestine operators still used small vans to disrupt transportation operations at bus terminals. Even with the decentralization of motor park activities to different locations within Bamenda urban municipality in 2001, i.e., Bali Park, Mbengwi Park, Mile 4-Nkwen Park, Bamendankwe Park to ease public commuting. Illegal clandestine activities remained a perennial problem to transport authorities and the Bamenda urban/City Council. For instance, the loading and offloading of passengers outside well-defined motor parks and bus terminals continued around Mobile Nkwen, within the vicinities of transportation agencies like Amour Mezam Company Ltd, Vatican Express Company Ltd and Hospital Roundabout.²¹

In recent years, informal transportation consists of pick-up trucks, minibuses, mid-size buses, sizable, small cars which look more comfortable and generally they were/are unlicensed. They include; eight-seater Nissen Urvan, Toyota Hiace, Toyota Littiace, Toyota Corolla, and Toyota Carina. Most were purchased second-hand because few operators had the capital for new vehicles and credit was difficult to obtain.²² In the early 1990's there were about 3000 informal transport vehicles operating in the Northwest Region, from all its Divisions, but most of them were in Bamenda, Nkambe, Ndop, Fundong, Wum, Mbengwi and Kumbo. Meanwhile in the Southwest Region there were more than 4000 of such vehicles operating in the region. Circulation was mostly between the towns of Kumba, Buea, Tiko, Mutengene, Limbe, moving to Douala and back for business activities.²³ These

²⁰ Samuel Nkwenti, 65, Retired Driver and Manager, Mile 4 Motor Park, Bamenda. 16/09/2020.

²¹ Ibid

²² Nformi Ebenezer Bongi, 52, Fako Independent Drivers Union, Mile 17 Motor Park. Buea, 7/4/21.

²³ Ibid

Clandos as they were popularly known acted both as competitors and complements to regular conventional buses and formal transport agencies. They complemented in the sense that they reached villages and semi-urban areas associated with bad roads where conventional buses could not ply. They suffered the fate of overcrowding, overloading, unsafe vehicle, speeding and reckless driving. Its ridership were mostly traders and businesspersons involved in rural- urban trading activities, but they equally had commuters of different ranks and files, low-income earners, the poor, students travelling to villages and semi-urban areas on social visits, economic trips and holidays. Most of its ridership could not afford private cars, or their destinations were inaccessible to the conventional registered buses due to bad roads.²⁴ This goes to prove that despite their informal activities, the informal transportation sector still contributed its own bit to the economy of Anglophone Cameroon judging from their complementary role within the formal public transport sector. Nonetheless, their informal status should be taken only for chaos and disorder, especially as they had some semblance of formality in their organization and mode of operation towards the late 1990s and early 2000s.

3. Organization and Mode of Operation

Just because unlicensed buses, minibus, otherwise referred to as *clandos*, were unregistered and sometimes operated outside established transportation regulations, this did not imply that they did not have organizational structures or a kind of internal framework for rationalizing their transportation services. In the various motor parks, association leaders were usually democratically elected, chosen amongst the ranks of the most senior and respected fellow operators. It was usually a moment of excitement and jubilation for operators to elect their peers to lead them. Minutes of such elections and the results were usually presented to administrative hierarchy, e.g. the local council and the Divisional Officer. The cost of the associations' activities was covered through membership fees. Interested persons presented a set of documents, namely: National identity card; photocopy of driver's License; procure a union card and payment of annual dues which the association used in conducting its affairs. In the Mile 17 Buea Motor Park, for instance, members were charged 500 francs CFA annually.²⁵ The same was true for

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ William Tajo, Alias Pa Willy, 68, President, Buea Motor Park. 07/04/2021

motor parks in Bamenda. From a user's perspective, associations were the frontlines of coordinating services and bringing some semblance of order at the bus sector. Without them, there could be chaos in the bus terminal. Many associations hire dispatcher's arid field agents to ensure orderly behavior at pick-up-points, along routes, and at major traffic intersections. Their loyalty laid survey with their members.

Even among nonregistered operators, some had commercial driving permits and insurance. Here, service production lay in the hands of a single individual; the owner-operator, although many other proprietors of vehicles bought them and entrusted them in the hands of drivers.²⁶ The transport industry was usually held together in a loose, horizontal fashion, dependent upon carefully cultivated linkage relationships amongst stakeholders including fellow operators, spare part suppliers, local police, creditors, and street hustlers amongst others. Thus, the informal transport sector depended upon inter-personal and inter-operator linkages and fellowship.²⁷ Informal transport buses and vehicles in the former West Cameroon exhibited the same characteristics. The stakeholders often included proprietors, drivers, conductors, the forces of laws and order, council officials, transporters syndicate transportation companies, providers of ancillary businesses and services across or around motor parks. In fact, the relationship among stakeholders have grown stronger over the years, with each party responsible for providing a particular service within the supply chain and putting the road transport industry on the go. Most often the relations amongst stakeholders ran on trust, notwithstanding the breakdowns and problems. When there were problems, especially in the Motor Park, a committee played the role of an adjudicator in tracing and proffering necessary solutions on the spot.²⁸

Transport associations and cooperatives were the sine qua none of any successful informal transport network. They were essential in rationalizing the delivery of services in a competitive environment like motor parks; i.e. takeoff and landing locations. Transport associations existed first and foremost to bring order and avoid insufficiencies and redundancies in an area. They set the groundrules to avoid chaos

²⁶ Nformi Ebenezer Bongi

²⁷ Robert Civero, *Informal Transport in the Developing World*

²⁸ Nformi Ebenezer

and anarchy in the streets; customers boarding, and alighting took place in an orderly fashion and with the level of civility and good citizenship was maintained. This was very evident in motor parks such as the Mile 17 Motor Park in Buea and the Half Mile Motor Park in Limbe, all found in the Southwest Region that hosted informal transport vehicles.²⁹ This was equally true of informal bus services which for long used the vicinity of the Finance Junction in Bamenda as a passenger embarkment point to destinations in the West Province (later Region) like Mbouda, Dschang and Bafoussam.³⁰

Transporters' Associations existed at all levels of transport agencies in Anglophone Cameroon, whether legitimate or illegitimate. Given that the business of these Transporters' Associations were the same in Bamenda, Buea and Limbe, they adopted internal rules and procedures focused on fairness and efficiency.

Some associations even operated their own form of traffic court wherein alleged offenders appeared before their own peers who acted as judges and meted fines to those found guilty. Associations also went after renegades, quick to alert the police of bandits who intruded the motor parks.³¹ In well-developed or organized countries, transport association provided financial services such as access to credits, purchase of vehicle insurance, equipment, and spare parts. Associations even lobbied for the rights of their members. This was very evident with the Metro Mass Transit Company in Ghana and the *Tros-Tros* (mini buses) organization in Kenya.³² Such an organizational structure, though existed in former West Cameroon was not well organized in such a manner to fully provide these vital services. However, most transport associations gave very little attention to matters of broader public concern like safety, vehicle upkeep and coordination of timetable routes arrangements. Vehicle owners and operators felt a mutual obligation to maximize proceeds and share in profits.

Business Relations with Others

The transport associations provided a framework for organizing inter-operator relationship. Below them we had more basic arrangements between the owners and

²⁹ Fon Franklin 48, President, Fako Independent Drivers Union, 07/04/2021.

³⁰ Mbah Mathias.

³¹ Amidu Kuaje 46, Secretary, Fako Transport Union, 02/02/2021

³² Hilling David, *Transport in Developing Countries* (London: Routledge Publications, 1996), 87.

operators of transport buses and vehicles and occasionally others involved in the day-to-day business., fare collectors and promoters. Those who owned and operated vehicles were usually individuals. In most cases drivers paid a specified amount each day to a vehicle proprietor or in some cases, the owners and drivers split proceeds based on some mutual agreement. Under such arrangements, vehicle owners and operators felt a mutual obligation to maximize proceeds and share in profits.³³

In most informal transport sectors like the Mile 4 Nkwen Motor Park in Bamenda, as well as the Mile 4 Motor Park in Limbe, permanent vehicles were organized in groups to assist other drivers in case they were held down by unforeseen circumstances such as ill health and accidents. Drivers with permanent vehicles/buses usually arrived at the motor parks as from 6 am. There, they picked a ballot which determined the correct order for embarkment at the station. This exercise was done daily and repeatedly to prevent disorder and chaos.³⁴ Since most members of the transporters' associations were equally vehicle owners, they had the greatest stake in ensuring commercial success over the long run. Drivers and conductors sometimes formed loose associations for purpose of promoting their partial interest and if necessary organized work stoppages to promote and protect their interest. In urban towns like Buea, Bamenda and Limbe business relationship varied according to class of vehicles. Buses were almost entirely owned by investors who hired drivers and

conductors following a mutual agreement.³⁵ In contrast in most rural and semi-urban areas, buses, minibuses, and transportation vessels were operated by vehicle owners.³⁶ The question arose whether there was any franchise by government or local councils for transport associations to operate within specific territories like the case of Ghana, where the Mass Metro Transit Company operates based on a government franchise over certain areas. With informal transport services and even formal transport operations in Cameroon such a franchise never existed.³⁷ In

³³ Ndah David, 61, Buss Proprietor and retired driver, Kumba, 13/01/2021

³⁴ Nformi Ebenezer Bongi

³⁵ William Tajo

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Divine Mbamame Nkendong, 48, Director of Road Transport, Ministry of Transport, Cameroon. 13/01/2021.

Anglophone Cameroon, drivers seem to have gained the upper hand over vehicle owners was in profit sharing. Bus and minibuses have historically depended on mutual profit sharing amongst absentee owner and vehicle operators. Owners entrusted their vehicles to salaried drivers who use them continuously, day and night for as long as the contract remained in effect. Owners paid all operating costs except for petrol. The driver paid the owner a daily lease fee if the vehicle was in good condition. In exchange the driver could operate whenever and wherever he chooses. His daily income was thus what was left after paying the lease fee, petrol and occasionally bribes to the forces of law and order. Tension occurred however since drivers wanted to run vehicles as many times/hours as possible but owner prefer more limited operating hours to prevent rapid depreciation. Because owners could not restrict vehicle usage, the tendency was for leased vehicles to be quickly damaged, forcing vehicle owners to abandon the business.³⁸

The ability of transport operators to accumulate capital assets and put themselves on sound financial footing depended on access to commercial credits- considered to be external relationships. It was these intense pressures that many operators failed to earn enough money to survive in terms of over- aggressive driving and cultural competition amongst operators.³⁹ The never-ending lease payments operators paid to ‘absentee landlords’- who were the owners of vehicles. Often, half or more of the daily generated revenue went to cover the lease payment which meant few were able to break out the shackles of urban poverty.⁴⁰

In another dimension, the relations between small scale private transport operators and commercial banks were never smooth. The banks were reluctant to lend to informal operators due to heavy risk involved, and even if they did, the interest rates were rather too exorbitant.⁴¹ Banks often considered small scale private transport operators as part of the underground economy involving too much risk.⁴² That notwithstanding, thrift and loan schemes were introduced in various motor parks and bus terminals, which became a strong social bond for the investments of wealth. It brought together drivers, conductors, park collectors, stevedores. Efforts at maintaining a strong relationship between transport operators and financing houses

³⁸ William Tajo

³⁹ Ganseh George, 55, Professional Bus driver, Bamenda, 16/03/2021

⁴⁰ Tayim Johnson, Commercial Agent, National Financial Credit Bank, Bamenda. 04/01/2020

⁴¹ Ganseh George

or unions yielded fruits in Bamenda in 2003, when a formal micro finance institution saw the light of day in Bamenda. It was known as “Professional Drivers Credit Union (Ltd). The micro-finance hosted the accounts of many professional drivers, transport operators, stevedores, and park collectors. The union encouraged its members to save regularly and borrow wisely to as to sustain their businesses, as well as live an economically stable life. In all, informal transport practices for long remained active in the road transport industry in Anglophone Cameroon.

4. Conclusion

The paper profiled the informal transport practices in Anglophone Cameroon from 1961 to 2016. By so doing, a brief history of vehicular transportation was presented, and it involved paving the way for informal transportation to operate in the territory. The different brands and vehicles used in operating informal transport business were equally analyzed as the brands and types of vehicles in use evolved with time. Although considered by many to be unregistered due to their non-compliance to existing statutory rules and regulations governing the public road transport sector, informal transport stakeholders to an extent had a good sense of organization and operation. They were referred to as *clandos*, depicting the informal or clandestine way the owners of such vehicles conducted their business. Yet, they were able to regroup in transporters associations whose membership comprised of proprietors, driver, and park collectors and united by the goal to defend their common interest especially when faced with difficulties. Transport stakeholders equally organized activities within Motor Parks to prevent and resolve conflicts between/among members. Apart from that, operators had business relation with others, such as fare collectors, microfinance officials, vehicles owners and drivers. Generally, despite their informal character in the transportation sector especially from their nascent stage in 1961, their mode of operation has evolved in space and overtime in keeping with an acceptable degree of formality given their good sense of organization.

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