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Later life mobilities at the margins of urban geography

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Abstract

The projected increase in older people within the African population, alongside rapid urbanisation, points to the growing importance of understanding how older people navigate towns and cities across the continent. This aligns with wider concerns that geographical scholarship needs to pay more sustained attention to ageing in Global South contexts. Rather than treating these developments as problems or absences, we approach them as opportunities to explore how geographies of later life can generate new ways to conceptualise the urban experience. To this end, the paper draws on the local vernacular of older residents in the Ghanaian cities of Accra and Sekondi-Takoradi to decentre, contextualise and expand the vocabulary used to depict and interpret urban mobilities. The findings reveal 'hidden geographies of ageing' through three forms of mobility practice: *Mpanyinfo ho hia* (respectful mobilities), *YƐ mboa nkoa* (collective mobilities) and *Me te fie* (retired mobilities). These insights enrich conceptual understandings of city life by showing how older people navigate, engage with and shape social hierarchies, communal support networks and economic rationalities. By amplifying the voices of a population often overlooked in epistemological and policy deliberations, this intervention supports interdisciplinary efforts to reimagine how knowledge is produced with and about cities in the Global South. Crucially, the paper challenges the Southern urban critique to better reflect the plurality of marginality that influences everyday life in the Majority World.

KEYWORDS

Africa, ageing, everyday, mobilities, qualitative, Southern urban critique

1 | INTRODUCTION

How do older people navigate African cities? While this may not be a question currently at the forefront of geographical debates, it is one that will become increasingly urgent in the years ahead, as demographic ageing intersects with rapid

urban change across the continent. Population ageing, a global phenomenon predicted a few decades ago (Aboderin & Ferreira, 2008; Lutz et al., 2008), is garnering attention in academic and policy discussions (Aboderin & Beard, 2015; Bloom & Zucker, 2023; Hoffman & Pype, 2016). The World Health Organization (WHO) projects that from 2000 to 2050, the global population share of individuals aged 60 and above will double, increasing from approximately 11% to 22% (WHO, 2023). The African continent is contributing to these trends, with a demographic transformation marked by increased life expectancy and declining fertility rates. This may come as a surprise to some readers given that, relative to other continents, the dominant demographic narrative for Africa has long been one of a youthful populace (African Union, 2024; Blum, 2007; World Bank, 2023). To some extent, this narrative has played a pivotal role in the emergence of an empirically diverse and theoretically dynamic body of geographical literature on the lifeworlds of children and youth across the continent (Abebe, 2007; Chigunta & Mwanza, 2016; Gough & Langevang, 2016; Twum-Danso, 2022; van Blerk et al., 2022).

The population ageing trends outlined above coincide with widespread urbanisation (Cobbinah et al., 2015; Potts, 2012; UN Habitat, 2024). Notwithstanding the risk of presenting a totalising narrative, urbanisation in many parts of the African continent can be broadly characterised by the convergence of positive fertility rates and rural-to-urban migration in search of economic opportunities and improved living conditions (Angelopulo, 2021). These dynamics underpin projections pointing to a doubling of Africa's urban population by 2050 (UN Habitat, 2024). Notably, while there is a rich geographical scholarship on everyday urbanism in African contexts (Alda-Vidal et al., 2018; Cante, 2023; Esson et al., 2021; Lemanski, 2020; McFarlane & Silver, 2017; Mushonga, 2022) and a nascent but vibrant literature on geographies of ageing (Andrews et al., 2009; Bastia et al., 2022; Curl & Musselwhite, 2018; Davies & James, 2016; Ho et al., 2024; Milligan & Liu, 2015; Naughton, 2022; Riley, 2021; Schwanen et al., 2012; Yu & Rosenberg, 2023), geographers have not paid much attention to experiences of urban life from the perspective of older populations in Africa. Crucially for this paper, we recognise the limited scholarship on the intersection of ageing and urbanisation as an opportunity to make two original and complementary contributions to geographical knowledge.

First, we aim to reveal what Skinner et al. (2015, p. 784) describe as 'hidden geographies of ageing': geographies of later life that are certainly 'out there', yet currently under-researched or largely neglected. More specifically, we bring efforts to uncover these hidden geographies of ageing into conversation with calls for more decentred and contextualised geographical research that foregrounds empirical insights from and about older people living outside Global North or Minority World contexts (Desai & Tye, 2009; McQuaid et al., 2021; Porter et al., 2018; Schwanen & Páez, 2010; Villena-Sanchez et al., 2022). In research on ageing and urban mobility, contextuality typically involves consideration of social relations and interactions, the built environment, institutional configurations and cultural norms and expectations (Schwanen & Páez, 2010). However, prior research has been critiqued for privileging quantitative approaches that centre infrastructure and the physical environment at the expense of understanding the lived, social and relational dimensions of older people's mobility (Kwan & Schwanen, 2016; Villena-Sanchez & Boschmann, 2022; Wignall et al., 2019). Our analysis responds to this critique by exploring the mobility practices of older people in Ghanaian cities, attending to the diverse, relational, negotiated and situated dimensions of their everyday urban mobilities.

Second, in decentring and contextualising geographies of ageing through a focus on everyday urban lives in Ghana, our paper furthers debates in urban geography concerning what is commonly termed the 'Southern urban critique'. A key feature of this critique is the argument that understanding urban life in and from the Global South requires more than the addition of Southern empirical examples to northern urban theories (Lawhon & Truelove, 2020; Parida & Agrawal, 2023). Rather, it demands a re-evaluation of how urban studies conceptualises and engages with urban realities, insisting on a paradigm in which urban theory is partial, situated and contextually grounded (Baptista & Cirolia, 2022; Bhan, 2019 cf. Van Meeteren et al., 2016). In this regard, the Southern urban critique has drawn critical attention to how urban life is made and sustained under conditions of inequality, precarity and infrastructural uncertainty (Pieterse et al., 2018; Schindler, 2017). This scholarship also argues against viewing Global South contexts merely through a lens of deficit or deviation from Global North theory, and instead highlights Southern urban spaces as sources of instructive practices that illuminate past, present and future forms of city-making (Cobbinah et al., 2015; Pieterse et al., 2018; Van Noorloos & Kloosterboer, 2018; Watson, 2015).

A key strand of the Southern urban critique centres on urban practice, which draws attention to the everyday terms, tactics and social logics through which residents navigate and shape city life, often in ways that exceed mainstream academic and policy debates. We are especially captivated by Bhan's (2019) call for substantive engagement with such practices, not simply as reactive responses to precarity but as meaningful forms of city-making that reflect alternative values and modes of social organisation. Critical urban scholars note the need to examine how these practices surface in

the vernaculars through which urban residents interpret and act upon the shifting conditions of everyday life (Dasgupta & Wahby, 2021; Mosselson, 2017; Sundaresan, 2020). Crucially, Bhan (2019) argues that advancing urban scholarship requires both documenting everyday practices and building on these empirical insights to diversify and expand the conceptual vocabularies through which we understand urbanism. In this paper, we contend that exploring the mobility practices of older residents, and the vernacular expressions through which these practices are made meaningful, offers a novel way to support these efforts.

Our paper is structured as follows. The next section outlines the research design and reflections on the process of undertaking research with older participants in Ghana. We then present our findings, which are organised thematically around three vernacular expressions of urban mobility practice articulated by older participants: *Mpanyinfo ho hia* (respectful mobilities), *Yɛ mboa nkoa* (collective mobilities) and *Me te fie* (retired mobilities). We bring these expressions into conversation with the analytical framing of ageing, mobility and urban contextuality in relation to social relations and interactions, the built environment, institutional configurations and cultural norms and expectations. In doing so, we argue that the Southern urban critique has dynamically redirected urban theory towards the everyday lives and spatial logics of contexts at the margins of global knowledge production. That said, there is scope for the critique to more fully reckon with the plurality of marginality within these settings. This article advances a step change in this direction by foregrounding older people's mobility practices in two Ghanaian cities.

2 | RESEARCHING AGEING AND URBAN MOBILITIES IN GHANA

This paper draws on qualitative data obtained from an extensive research project African Rural-City Connections (RurbanAfrica) with multiple workstreams focused on agricultural transformation, rural livelihoods, city dynamics and access to services. Here we focus on research associated with the city dynamics workstream, which aimed to explore urban residents' mobility patterns, livelihood strategies, connections to rural areas and the intersectional variations of these experiences across socio-economic characteristics. As part of the wider research project, two cities were selected as fieldwork sites in each country. In Ghana, the cities were Accra and Sekondi-Takoradi, two nationally renowned cities with distinctive cultures and political economies, which were selected due to the broader project decision to include the capital city and a secondary city.

Accra's trajectory from an agglomeration of villages to becoming the administrative hub of the Gold Coast colony in 1877 under British imperial rule portrays a complex history shaped by a multitude of factors, especially commerce and migration. Today, Accra's urban expanse encompasses approximately $3000 \, km^2$ within what is now known as the Greater Accra Region, accommodating a diverse population of roughly five million inhabitants (Clark et al., 2022). Amidst Accra's cosmopolitan allure, pockets of persistent poverty endure, impacting residents' access to essential services and opportunities (Adamtey et al., 2021; Songsore, 2020). Economic disparities are manifest in the juxtaposition of gleaming skyscrapers alongside signs of infrastructural strain, reflecting a duality that is arguably emblematic of many contemporary African cities (Pieterse et al., 2018).

Sekondi and Takoradi were autonomous settlements prior to and during the British colonial era. The merger of the towns in 1946, which later became one city in 1963, created a metropolis spanning approximately 100 square kilometres within the Western Region of Ghana, which is home to a diverse and growing populace (Yankson et al., 2017). This urban settlement emerged as a vital trade and transportation node due primarily to its maritime trading lineage and strategic positioning as a key port nexus (Biney & Boakye, 2021). The international importance of Sekondi-Takoradi was significantly elevated by the detection of offshore oil deposits in the early 2000s (Obeng-Odoom, 2014). The ensuing redevelopment of the port, the influx of foreign investment and the resultant upsurge in urban inhabitants have arguably exacerbated inequality in the region (Oteng-Ababio et al., 2017).

An overview of the communities we engaged with, and their current size based on the 2021 census is presented in Table 1. In terms of site selection, the project aimed to engage with both long-term and more recently arrived urban residents, as well as accounting for location within the city. Accordingly, five settlements were identified in each city to provide this coverage, including centrally located settlements and those on the periphery. Disaggregated census data for Accra and Sekondi-Takoradi were obtained directly from the Ghana Statistical Service via request in March 2023 (GSS, personal communication).

Given the exploratory nature of the project, and the aim to encompass a diverse spectrum of perspectives from both cities, qualitative data collection involving focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews was carried out in

TABLE 1 Overview of settlements studied in Accra and Sekondi-Takoradi.

City	Settlement	History	Location	Income level	Population (2021)
Accra	Korle Gonno	Indigenous/traditional settlement	Western edge of centre	Low income	27,944
	Labone	Traditionally a residential area	Eastern edge of centre	Middle/high income	6883
	Accra New Town	Migrant settlement established in 1940s, mainly Muslim	Northern edge of centre	Low/middle income	27,944
	Gbawe	Indigenous core, growing rapidly since 1990s	Peri-urban West	Heterogeneous	69,678
	Ashaley Botwe	Indigenous core, growing rapidly since 1990s	Peri-urban North East	Heterogeneous	37,681
Sekondi-Takoradi	New Takoradi	Indigenous	Central	Low-income	13,104
	Kwesimintsim	Established in 1930s	Western edge of centre	Heterogeneous	3644
	Anaji	Indigenous and newcomers	North Western edge of centre	Middle/upper income	10,689
	Assakae	Indigenous and newcomers since 2000	Peri-urban West	Low/middle income	15,671
	Kojokrom	Indigenous/migrants and newcomers since 2000	Peri-urban East	Low income	8168

several phases. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection; accordingly, all names used in this paper are pseudonyms. The participants were purposively selected to account for characteristics, such as gender, age, income level and residence. In the context of this paper, it is important to note we were mindful that being 'old' in contemporary African contexts is relational and socially determined, rather than solely determined by chronological age (Hoffman & Pype, 2016). Accordingly, we allowed our participants to self-identify as an 'old person', while also using the average life expectancy at birth in Ghana as a benchmark. Between 2015 and 2021, this figure was circa 65 years (WHO, 2024). Furthermore, the statutory retirement age in Ghana is 60 years. Our study, therefore, considered individuals within 10 years of the average life expectancy, that is, 55 years and above, to be an 'older' person in the Ghanaian context. The youngest age someone self-identified as an 'older' person was 53 years.

The focus groups were held first, both to gain perspectives on broader topics and themes, and to inform the interviews. The questions focused on the urban built environment, infrastructure/services, mobilities and livelihoods. In Accra, we held 14 focus group dialogues in total, including four discussions involving older male residents and two with older female residents (with ages ranging from 55 to 86). We were unable to hold focus groups in Labone (see below). A total of 19 focus group discussions took place in Sekondi-Takoradi, comprising three with older male residents, four with older female residents and two involving mixed older participants (with ages ranging from 55 to 86). These group conversations typically consisted of five to eight participants each and lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. In Accra, a total of 133 interviews were undertaken with individuals spanning ages 18–87 (18 participants were over 53). Meanwhile, in Sekondi-Takoradi, a total of 108 interviews were undertaken, encompassing participants aged 18–86 (25 participants were over 53). The interview questions focused on similar themes to the focus groups, but with more attention paid to residents' biographical and everyday mobilities. Interviews were conducted in homes, places of work and transport hubs, and lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, with a handful lasting more than 100 minutes. The wider research team co-developed the methodology and interview tools, and the data collection was led by three of the authors, all Ghanaian nationals, over a period of four months.

It is worth noting three reflections from our experiences undertaking data collection with older participants, which might be of help for others pursuing similar research. First, conducting the focus groups along gendered lines proved highly effective and resulted in some dynamic and animated conversations. Separating older participants was consistently encouraged by the communities themselves, on the basis that this was the participants' preferred approach as it would allow for more open discussion. Where the groups were mixed, we did notice a slightly more cautious dialogue, and especially women were less likely to speak. Second, before conducting the interviews, we spent time walking through the neighbourhoods and introducing ourselves to residents and, where appropriate, the Chief and/or Queen Mother (recognised leaders who hold cultural authority and play key roles in local governance, dispute resolution and community affairs). This proved effective in learning the geography and rhythm of the locale, respectfully introducing us to the community, recruiting participants and safely navigating the neighbourhood.

Third, recruiting interview participants from the middle- and high-income neighbourhoods proved particularly challenging. On the one hand, these participants tended to have a high level of formal education, so if we managed to speak with them, they were often keen to be part of the project based on intellectual curiosity. On the other hand, they tended to live in gated houses with a strong security presence designed to minimise unexpected intrusions. Negotiating with security staff to access participants was challenging but made more straightforward by using formal documents (e.g. participant information sheet) and ID cards illustrating our affiliation with universities. These access issues and the challenge of finding a convenient time to bring participants together contributed to our inability to host focus group discussions in Labone.

Interviews with our older participants were conducted in local languages, specifically Fante, Ga or Twi, which reflected their preferences and the geographical location of the cities along the southern coast of Ghana. These conversations were audio recorded and then transcribed, both in the original language and in English, to ensure we captured the essence of participants' accounts, while making them accessible for analysis and scholarly discussion across an international research team. Transcripts were initially reviewed independently by the three researchers who conducted the data collection, with the aim of identifying trends and categories using in vivo coding. These researchers then came together to compare their selections and strengthen the validity of codes identified through dialogue, before sharing with the wider research team who helped further refine the interpretation of the data and analysis.

3 | RESPECTFUL, COLLECTIVE AND RETIRED URBAN MOBILITIES

3.1 | *Mpanyinfo ho hia*: Respectful mobilities

Mpanyinfo ho hia is an expression that articulates the interplay of cultural norms and power dynamics within Ghanaian urban settings, where respect for elders and intergenerational relationships influence social interactions.[1] Ghanaian culture stresses the importance of respecting those in later life, regardless of whether they are a biological family member, with an onus placed on valuing the older person's life experiences and presumed contributions to society (Nukunya, 2003). This overarching cultural disposition is nuanced and marked by contradictions (Braimah & Rosenberg, 2021; Van der Geest, 2004), with some contemporary commentators going as far as to say that Ghana is witnessing a significant deviation from these well-established principles (Otchere, 2022). These caveats notwithstanding, this initial section of our empirical discussion illustrates how the cultural norm of respecting one's elders extends to mobility practices that influence our participants' interactions with the urban environment. We do so by exploring the theme of *Mpanyinfo ho hia* (respectful mobilities), which emerged as an important feature of our participants' accounts of their everyday urban (im) mobilities.

Mpanyinfo ho hia not only speaks to the unique interplay between age-related respect and (im)mobilities, but also reveals the subtle ways in which longstanding social values continue to shape contemporary urban dynamics. Before introducing two practices that demonstrate this expression through social interactions, it is important to understand the contemporary conditions of public urban transport, particularly the challenges associated with navigating trotros in ways that uphold older people's care, dignity and respect (see Figure 1 for an example of a trotro).

Trotros are minivans or small buses that operate fixed routes, providing low-cost transport options for both short and long distances. They account for approximately 70% of passenger trips in the country (Boateng, 2020). During focus group discussions and interviews with participants from low-income neighbourhoods, it became apparent that they, like many urban residents, are reliant on trotros as the main mode of public transportation.

The structure and operation of the trotro system often clashes with cultural norms of respect for elders, creating mobility barriers shaped by both institutional practices and the physical environment. One such practice is the widespread use of the 'fill and run' approach, where trotro drivers wait until vehicles are full before departing from major terminals (see also Möller-Jensen, 2021). Waiting for trotros to fill before departing is more financially expedient for the bus owner, but can be particularly challenging for older participants given Ghana's tropical climate. The heat and humidity can be physically taxing for older individuals, leading to discomfort, dehydration and fatigue. Meanwhile, trying to flag down a trotro closer to one's home is unpredictable as there is no guarantee of being able to board, either because the bus is already full and/or the driver does not notice the aspirant passenger. These challenges are compounded during flooding events in Accra, resulting in older people postponing planned mobility (Amankwaa & Gough, 2023).

FIGURE 1 Image of a trotro in Accra waiting to 'fill and run' (Photo taken by author).

One of the potential solutions to uncertainty about how long it might take for a trotro to fill up, and the challenges of flagging one down along the route, is to try and board at main terminals during peak times—the rationale being that they will fill more quickly. A drawback, however, is that these terminals are designed to get people on and off trotros quickly, not for waiting in-between departures. Put simply, the system has not been designed with *Mpanyinfo ho hia* in mind. During a focus group discussion with older women in Korle Gonno (Accra), Mama Hammond, a 64-year-old pensioner, articulated this issue well when she explained that: 'The trotro is a problem for us [elders]. At times you need to stand there for some time waiting for a vehicle, and with old age standing and waiting for a car in the sun becomes a challenge for the body'. These insights draw attention to how the built environment, particularly the design of transport hub infrastructure, reflects an institutional logic that prioritises throughput and efficiency over inclusion and care.

Alongside discomfort, the uncertainty of travel times associated with waiting for trotros to fill up also impacts the ability of older residents to plan their daily activities. Many of our participants valued routine and structure, and found the variability of trotro schedules frustrating and inconvenient, especially in peripheral areas (see also Andreasen et al., 2024). Walking was, therefore, a popular form of movement if physically feasible. Where possible, however, they would opt to hail a private taxi. Although considerably more expensive, unlike trotros, private taxis do not suffer from the issue of fill and run. Taxis also take a more direct route, enabling older passengers to be dropped off at their desired destinations, minimising the need to walk or wait for transfers. This not only reduces physical strain but also enhances the overall convenience and accessibility of travelling. There is a geography to this, as in both cities, participants in the central areas found it much easier to charter taxis than their counterparts in peri-urban areas. That said, as we noted earlier, this mode of transportation is relatively expensive compared to trotros. It was during discussions about these costs that examples of *Mpanyinfo ho hia* in practice emerged.

In Accra and Sekondi-Takoradi, and other cities across the country and continent, negotiating fares with private taxi drivers remains a customary practice (Agyemang, 2020; Boateng et al., 2022; Tchanche, 2019). While some drivers negotiate in their own favour—a source of frustration for older residents—others recognise the social status associated with age and respond accordingly. Participants from lower-income neighbourhoods described engaging in *wa bu me*, a form of negotiation rooted in *Mpanyinfo ho hia* that involves playfully requesting reduced fares from younger drivers. This practice reflects both economic pragmatism and intergenerational relationality. Drivers, influenced by cultural expectations of respect for elders, often accept these requests with humour and goodwill. Moses, a 64-year-old retired quality control officer and resident of New Takoradi, explained: 'Oh we often joke with the taxi owners about the fares, pleading with them to lower it for us as their elders. Some will even pretend as though we have used our age to rob them! But they entertain us [i.e., agree] and we appreciate this'.

Given the difficulties associated with using trotros, the negotiated reduced fares not only make transportation more affordable for older residents but are seen to reflect a conscious effort by the community to facilitate the mobility of older residents through a recognition of *Mpanyinfo ho hia*. In this way, the seemingly simple practice of *wa bu me* also

sheds light on a form of non-profit-driven social interaction within urban contexts typically associated with commercial imperatives (see Alacovska et al., 2021; Ardayfio-Schandorf et al., 2012). In this case, the notion of *Mpanyinfo ho hia* through *wa bu me* speaks to the coexistence of urban entrepreneurialism and the cultural value of respect for elders, demonstrating a nuanced blend of economic pragmatism and realisation of respectful forms of mobility. In doing so, *wa bu me* repositions mobility not only as transactional but also as a site of relational and cultural negotiation, challenging the presumed dominance of profit logics in everyday urban practice.

A second example of *Mpanyinfo ho hia* emerged through participants' accounts of *Oboafo*, individuals who assist older residents with their everyday movements. These reveal how mobility in later life is shaped by the interplay of social relations, cultural expectations of care and infrastructural limitations. Participants in their late 70s and 80s, grappling with reduced mobility due to health issues, explained how *Oboafo* support networks help bridge gaps in accessing goods, services and social spaces. *Oboafo* did not fall into a single archetype but were typically younger family members, neighbours or friends. These individuals, often with better physical mobility and access to public or private transportation, willingly step in to assist older residents and do so without receiving or expecting financial remuneration. This dynamic helps older residents access essential services without directly engaging with the sometimes challenging and unpredictable urban transport system outlined above. These insights speak to broader work on care and reciprocity in Ghanaian society, a field rich with literature, especially by anthropologists (Coe, 2016; Twum-Danso, 2022; Van der Geest, 1997, 2016). Collectively, these informal arrangements demonstrate how intergenerational care and mutual obligation operate as a form of distributed mobility support structure—a structure that responds to the limitations of formal provision and reflects enduring cultural expectations around respect, reciprocity and support in later life.

Sammy, a 78-year-old retired mechanical fabricator, provided an example of *Oboafo* dynamics in practice. He lives with his wife Mabel in New Takoradi, and his children are still in frequent contact but have moved away from the area. Sammy faces challenges with his mobility due to health issues, however, he and Mabel manage their day-to-day activities with assistance from *Oboafo*. One *Oboafo*, in his mid-thirties with access to a car, regularly helps by driving to the local clinic to collect Sammy's medical prescriptions, and Mabel accompanies him when purchasing groceries from larger markets that are not within walking distance, highlighting how mobility is shaped by access to transportation and the spatial configuration of essential services. Another *Oboafo*, who owns a food stall within walking distance, brings food parcels to Sammy and Mabel, ensuring they do not go prolonged periods without eating. A third *Oboafo* regularly fetches water to Sammy and Mabel's house, a task that simultaneously reflects service provision constraints and kindness, ensuring that the couple have enough. When asked why these individuals offer such consistent help, Sammy pointed to the strength of intergenerational relationships and cultural expectations of care that underpin these everyday acts of mobility support. As he explained 'We are not related but they have seen me living in this neighbourhood for many years and that my children are not by my side. They know our culture … one day they too will be older and in need of support'.

3.2 | *YƐ mboa nkoa*: Collective (im)mobilities

From within the project's cohort residing in lower-income neighbourhoods, a recurring narrative emerged that highlighted older Ghanaians' sustained engagement in economic activities even in advanced age. These participants continued to shape the urban economy by participating in a diverse array of livelihoods. From home-based retail enterprises linked with domestic routines through to selling wares by the roadside and in markets, these activities are testament to the 'hidden geographies' of older people's ongoing impacts on the urban economy in Ghana (Gough, 2010; Issahaku, 2022; Porter et al., 2018; Wignall et al., 2019). As Amina explains, her livelihood involves multiple forms of mobility that cut across space, time and social networks, which also reflect both economic necessity and a desire for continued engagement in urban life:

> I have a store at East Legon, I have a store at Kisseman, yes I have one also there. I supply Guinness and sell people the soft drinks. I also supply milk powder, big milk powder and foodstuff. I supply a lot. That is what I do. I do the import and export. I'm not just sitting around idle because I want money. I always want to count money. As you see me here [in my store], I want to count money, that is the reason why I'm here. Oh yes.

The expression *yƐ mboa nkoa* primarily arose through dialogue with and among our participants when seeking to understand how they sustained themselves financially. Initially picked up in the focus groups during discussions about the relationship between livelihoods and urban mobilities, then explored during the interviews, *yƐ mboa nkoa* denotes forms

of collective practice whereby people coordinate their mobility plans to help navigate the city more efficiently through an ethos of shared responsibility, rooted in relational obligations and interdependent mobilities. We use the case of Mama Adjoa, a food vendor from Ashaley Botwe on the periphery of Accra in her mid-sixties, as an illustrative example of *yɛ mboa nkoa* through the practice of *wo nsom mboa*.

Mama Adjoa owns a business selling freshly cooked kenkey, a traditional Ghanaian cuisine, in Ashaley Botwe. She can source the key ingredients, such as maize, from a nearby neighbourhood called Madina, which is approximately 5 km away (approximately 14 minutes by car). In this scenario, Mama Adjoa takes a trotro to the market in Madina and then charters a private taxi back home, as carrying bulky goods on a trotro is impractical, despite it being customary for private taxis to charge extra for this service. The typical cost of the goods and travel is GHC140, with around GHC30 of this spent on transport. Where possible, however, Mama Adjoa opts to source the maize from Asesawa, a small conurbation approximately 100 km away. She does this because 'The maize from Asesawa goes for GHC50 and the one from Madina goes for GHC110. Yes, the same maize'. The price differential is because the maize in Asesawa is purchased directly from producers. The lower price means larger purchases are preferable, which is made physically possible by the presence of *Goro-Boys*, a name used to denote people who help ferry goods from the vendor to transport hubs for a fee. Mama Adjoa explained that 'When the villagers bring maize to Asesawa, we from Accra like to go and buy it from them. But it is the transportation to Asesawa and back to Accra that worries us'. Her use of 'us' here is telling; to manage this burden, Mama Adjoa and her fellow traders coordinate their purchasing trips using a form of collective mobility known as *wo nsom mboa*, which reduces costs and travel time by consolidating individual journeys to Asesawa.

Mama Adjoa collaborates with her fellow traders, both young and old, rotating the responsibility of being the designated person who travels to Asesawa to procure goods and provisions on behalf of the collective; thereby addressing the needs of multiple traders simultaneously and reducing the individual burden of travelling. Crucially, by utilising *wo nsom mboa*, traders significantly curtail the expense of transportation and improve their profit margins, as multiple participants collectively contribute to the designated individual's travel costs by trotro to Asesawa and then charter an *aboboyaa* (a small, motorised truck used for carrying goods) with other traders back. This journey would typically cost an individual around GHC50, which is more than the travel cost when purchasing goods in Accra, but the net savings are considerable when split between multiple people. Furthermore, the collaborative nature of *yɛ mboa nkoa* creates a shared responsibility for others' well-being. This practice not only enables residents to pool resources for cost-effective transportation but also alleviates the physical strain of navigating the city's transport system, which can be particularly challenging for those with impaired mobility. Although *wo nsom mboa* is not unique to older people, it offers an example of how revealing the hidden geographies of ageing and engaging with older residents can make visible the informal infrastructures that help to sustain everyday urban life across the life course, situating older people within complex social networks.

In Accra, participants explained that the expression *Yɛ mboa nkoa* could be understood in relation to *oya oya* and *ntem ntem*—Ga and Akan expressions, respectively, that convey the urgency and pace of urban life (Ardayfio-Schandorf et al., 2012). These terms reflect the everyday hustle of the city, shaped by the relentless pursuit of financial security and personal advancement (Danso-Wiredu, 2021). Taken together, *oya oya/ntem ntem* and *Yɛ mboa nkoa* reveal a central paradox of contemporary urban life in Accra: the fast-paced, individuated logic of economic survival is in constant tension with cultural sensibilities grounded in reciprocity and collective obligation. Practices like *wo nsom mboa* offer a way to manage this contradiction by redistributing everyday tasks and sharing the burdens of mobility and provision. In doing so, they illustrate how older residents negotiate the intersecting demands of cultural expectations and urban economic pressures.

In contrast, the urban rhythm of Sekondi-Takoradi was often described by participants using the phrase *ɛyɛ slow*—an expression signalling a more relaxed pace of life. While undeniably urban, Sekondi-Takoradi was seen as distinct from the *oya oya/ntem ntem* atmosphere of Accra. This difference in tempo not only highlights the character of each city but also reveals how localised urban rhythms shape older residents' everyday experiences and mobility strategies. In Sekondi-Takoradi, the ethos of *Yɛ mboa nkoa* was expressed through a practice known as *Dwadie aboafo*, which we explore through the case of Efua. While *Dwadie aboafo* shares similarities with *wo nsom mboa* in Accra, it differs in an important way: rather than involving shared travel, it centres on staying in place and working collectively to enable others' mobility.

Efua, a trader in her early fifties based in Assakae on the outskirts of Sekondi-Takoradi, sells cassava, yam, plantain and vegetables in the local community market. She typically sources her produce from villages around 30 kilometres away. Until recently, she would travel to these villages via a trotro service that only operates at fixed times. She would then return using an *aboboyaa*, a small, motorised truck to carry her goods. As in Accra, traders like Efua

carefully weigh the higher cost of travel against the lower prices available outside the city. 'The fare may be higher but the foodstuff from the villages is much cheaper for me and offsets the transport', she explained. After purchasing her goods, Efua often partners with fellow traders who source in the area, enabling them to share the cost of the *aboboyaa* back to Assakae. This practice, rooted in *Yɛ mboa nkoa*, makes mobility more affordable and reduces the uncertainty of return journeys. Before this coordination, Efua faced difficult choices. She could wait, sometimes for hours, for an available *aboboyaa*, try to board a trotro and pay an extra fare for her goods, or hire a private taxi at much higher cost. Her case highlights the contrast between *oya oya/ntem ntem* and *ɛyɛ slow*. Unlike in Accra, Efua and her colleagues must travel themselves and negotiate transport in situ. These layered constraints, which are institutional, infrastructural and financial, make such collective efforts a necessary and practical tactic for sustaining mobility and economic participation in everyday urban life.

Recently, Efua has found it more difficult to travel to the villages herself due to a combination of managing her market stall, family responsibilities and what she described as a 'weary body.' In response, she now coordinates with other traders in Assakae and practises *Dwadie aboafo* by collectively contracting middlemen, known as *Adwadifo aboafo*, to purchase goods on their behalf. The traders provide lists of the items and quantities they need, and the middlemen work with local food vendors and Goro-Boys to *boa nneɛma bebree*, meaning to 'build bulk'. Once consolidated, the goods are transported to the community market, where they are *kyekye nneɛma mu*, or 'broken into smaller quantities', and distributed among traders. These coordinated practices not only support Efua's continued participation in the market but also compensate for the *ɛyɛ slow* nature of Sekondi-Takoradi's rural to urban supply chain. The collective typically pays between GHC80 and GHC100 for the service, in addition to the cost of goods. While this is more expensive than travelling individually, the cost is shared and the benefits are considerable. Efua noted that she is now able to purchase larger quantities of foodstuff because she no longer worries about transporting them home. Just as significantly, she explained that the time she would have spent travelling is now used to care for her grandchildren. This adaptation reflects not only the practical logic of *Yɛ mboa nkoa* but also challenges narrow portrayals of older people as dependents, by highlighting their ongoing contributions to and positions within, intergenerational care economies and informal economic networks that extend within and beyond the city.

The hidden geographies of ageing associated with *Yɛ mboa nkoa* reveal how older people are emplaced within complex intergenerational networks of people, goods and informal transport infrastructures that quite literally help to feed the city. While our aim is not to instrumentalise these findings, we suggest that *Yɛ mboa nkoa* also carries implications for how urban mobility is understood, planned and delivered in Ghanaian cities. The expression and its associated practices point to the value of recognising and supporting existing forms of collective and intergenerational transportation. Urban planners and policymakers might, for instance, consider how community organisations, transport providers and local businesses could work together to develop more inclusive mobility programmes that reflect and reinforce these everyday practices and tactics. Finally, practices associated with *Yɛ mboa nkoa* have the potential to contribute to wider conversations on commoning mobility (Nikolaeva et al., 2019) and offer grounded insights for advancing more socially embedded and low-carbon futures in Ghana and across African urban contexts (Agyemang et al., 2023; Simon & Leck, 2015; Tait & Euston-Brown, 2017).

3.3 | *Me te fie*: Retired mobilities

The self-identification of our participants as pensioners or retirees was often accompanied by the expression *Me te fie*, as demonstrated in this quote from Kofi, who was born and raised in Kojokrom and is in his late seventies:

> I worked at the port and I have been on retirement for more than 20 years. My five children are all grown up and I live here alone with my wife... The fuel prices have gone up and transport fares have also gone up so I don't travel much, I am just here sitting at home [*me te fie*].

On first glance, *Me te fie* suggests a sedentary lifestyle shaped by financial or physical constraints. However, through deeper interview exchanges, it became clear that this discursive and administrative identity often downplayed the dynamic and relational character of mobility in later life. As our conversation with Kofi unfolded, he noted that he regularly walks to visit friends nearby and is occasionally driven by a nephew to see relatives further afield. Rather than indicating immobility, *Me te fie* marks a reorientation of pace, purpose and spatial scale in retirees' everyday movements. Although the phrase was used widely across the cities in our study, in this section we focus on participants living in middle- and

higher-income neighbourhoods. In doing so, we aim to uncover not only the hidden geographies of ageing but also forms of elite urban mobility that remain largely unexamined in African urban and ageing studies.

The distinctive mobility patterns of older participants during retirement emerged when asked to describe their daily routines. Even though *Me te fie* points towards a sense of confinement and idleness at home, our participants were, in fact, actively engaged in a variety of activities that involved travelling around the city. This became particularly apparent when asked to expand upon what they meant by *Me te fie*, and about their modes of transportation if/when they venture outside of the home. Here, a common refrain was '*MƐ frƐ me driver*'. For example, Yaw, a retired banker in his early sixties living in Anaji, stated: 'Oh [travelling around the city], that one is not a problem at all. When I want to go out, *MƐ frƐ me driver* [I just call for the driver]. He's usually somewhere here [on the estate] ready to take me.'

While the expression *MƐ frƐ me driver* reflects the convenience of delegated mobility, our wealthier participants also used it to highlight the comfort and flexibility that come with having access to a personal driver. By availing themselves of the services of a personal driver, they avoid the unpredictability of Ghana's public transport system, as described above (see also Birago et al., 2017; Oppong-Yeboah & Gim, 2020), ensuring a more reliable mode of transport. Moreover, having access to a private driver offers an array of added benefits, which alters the experiential nature of their journeys around the city. These individuals described how they enjoy amenities like air conditioning, which provides relief from the tropical climate, as well as less cramped seating arrangements that ensure a more comfortable drive compared to a packed and sweaty trotro or even a shared taxi. The ability to bypass the challenges of public transportation, coupled with the added comfort and convenience of private vehicles, accentuates their privileged position within the urban landscape, affording them a more relaxed movement through the city.

For wealthier participants, their everyday mobility practices associated with *Me te fie* were often structured around religious and social engagements. These included attending choir practice, prayer meetings and charitable programmes—activities that reflect Ghana's religious landscape, where only 1.1% of the population report no religion, and most identify as Christian (71.2%) or Muslim (17.6%) (Ghana Statistical Service, 2023). These practices speak to the embeddedness of older residents in faith-based networks and institutions that act as important sites of urban social interaction and cultural continuity. The ability to call on a personal driver enabled participants to move more easily between these spaces, maintaining relational ties and routines that were widely seen as vital to wellbeing in later life. Such mobility was shaped not only by personal resources but also by broader configurations of urban life, including access to transport, neighbourhood layout and religious networks and institutions. We use the example of Eliza, a retired nurse in her late seventies living in Labone with her husband Christopher, as an illustrative example of the everyday mobilities associated with *Me te fie* and *MƐ frƐ me driver*.

Eliza begins her weekdays well before sunrise: 'I wake up at 4am because I was brought up in the convent and I believe in my faith, so I go to morning mass at 6am'. When we asked Eliza how she makes it to church at this time, she explained that: 'I have my own car and my husband also has his own car so [going to mass] it is not a problem'. However, while Eliza has access to a car, she now struggles to drive because 'my legs are not strong, so now our driver takes me'. After returning home around 7.30 am, Eliza makes breakfast for herself and Christopher before resting. She is a keen gardener and still tends to the plants and flowers, but a professional gardener now visits three times a week, as the estate is too large for her to manage alone. By mid-day, she returns indoors to avoid the heat and prepares lunch.

Eliza was keen to stress that even though they employ a housekeeper, who goes to the store with the driver to purchase groceries and helps with domestic chores, 'I do my own cooking'. Her emphasis on cooking was telling because her afternoons and early evenings revolve around socialising with friends, and shared meals play a central role in these gatherings: 'People who go to church with me and who live around here [Labone], we meet either here [my house] or somewhere else but mainly it's here'. In contrast to what is typically a lively social afternoon, as the evening approaches, Eliza and Christopher tend to remain at home, even though they have access to a driver and private vehicles: 'We are getting old, so we don't accept invitations in the night. Anything after 6 pm we don't go because that kind of life is no more'. With regards to weekends, 'On Saturdays if there is a funeral or if there is a wedding you go, and Sunday you go to church. By 11 am you are home because I go to the 8 o'clock service. If after [going to church] I have somewhere to go, like visit a friend or a relation, then I go but otherwise I am at home [*Me te fie*]'.

Eliza's account offers a rare glimpse into the hidden geographies of wealthier older residents in a West African context, revealing the interplay of faith, family, gender and mobility that often remains overlooked in understandings of urban ageing in the region. These reflections reveal a slower tempo of urban life shaped by a mix of cultural expectations and personal agency. Rather than marking withdrawal, *Me te fie* is expressed through selective participation, ageing bodies and the everyday rhythms of retirement. This illustrates another mode of urbanism that contrasts with the *oya oya* sensibility described by other participants, offering an alternative to the faster pace of the city. Her experiences also help extend our analysis of later-life mobility beyond the city. For example, when Eliza spoke about attending funerals on weekends,

she referred to travelling outside Accra, a common practice in Ghana where the deceased are often returned to their familial hometowns or villages (see De Witte, 2003). Among our participants in middle- and high-income neighbourhoods, such journeys were sometimes undertaken with personal drivers, but more often involved long-distance travel by public transport. Notably, this was not the standard trotro, but a 50-seater air-conditioned coach service known as VIP.

VIP Bus Transport is an executive coach service known for its relative punctuality, spacious seating and ample legroom, as well as direct routes with fewer diversions or extended stops. Unsurprisingly, these benefits come at a financial cost: fares are approximately two and a half times higher than those of a standard trotro. Yet for participants who could afford it, the comfort, reliability and convenience of the VIP service outweigh the expense. Ebo, a retired Electricity Company of Ghana employee in his early sixties, moved from Abandze to Sekondi-Takoradi 50 years ago and now lives in Anaji with his wife and two of his four children. When discussing how he travels to visit family outside of the city, he explained that:

> If we [me and my wife] have to go to Abandze or Cape Coast or Abura-Dunkwa then we go by bus transport, we call it the VIP... yes VIP is my favourite. One time I used the trotro and it was raining and all the water was on us, so now we only use the other one [VIP]... The cost is not a problem, and in fact for us, as we are now [older age], the comfortable seating is most important for us.

It is important to reflect on the contrast between the mobility practices of our wealthier participants and their counterparts in lower-income areas, as discussed in Sections 3.1 and 3.2. Notably, even when wealthier residents rely on public transport, they can draw on their elevated economic position to ensure a more comfortable experience. While such comforts may appear mundane, they underscore how privilege shapes not only mobility itself but the quality of the journey, bringing into sharper focus the everyday embodied inequities that define older people's experiences of urban mobility in Ghana, including in the context of *Me te fie*. It is also important to consider that participants' preference for private vehicles expressed through *Mɛ frɛ me driver* carries environmental consequences. These include contributions to climate change, air and noise pollution and traffic congestion. Yet such impacts often remain overlooked, partly due to urban geography's tendency to focus on the lives and mobilities of younger or lower-income residents. Considering these patterns, age-friendly city initiatives that seek to promote inclusivity and wellbeing in later life (Buffel et al., 2012; Fitzgerald & Caro, 2014; Steels, 2015) need to reconcile the pursuit of comfort and accessibility with a commitment to environmentally and socially equitable forms of mobility.

4 | CONCLUSIONS

This paper began with a question that urban geographers should be well positioned to answer: How do older people navigate African cities? Yet the limited geographical attention to ageing in the region means we do not currently have the conceptual tools or empirical knowledge to answer this as confidently as we could with a question about the mobilities of youth in African cities. This situation provides a compelling example of a broader disciplinary need to consider and reveal 'hidden geographies of ageing' (Skinner et al., 2015). In response, we explored the mobility practices of older residents in Accra and Sekondi-Takoradi, which enabled us to introduce three vernacular expressions: *Mpanyinfo ho hia* (respectful mobilities), *Yɛ mboa nkoa* (collective mobilities) and *Me te fie* (retired mobilities). Rather than treating these as culturally specific descriptors, we take up Bhan's (2019) call to theorise urban practice through the vernacular of Southern cities, engaging these expressions as interpretive frames that help us explore how older people engage with, shape and navigate the city.

But why does answering the question of how older people navigate African cities matter for urban theory? The Southern urban critique offers a crucial corrective to Eurocentric and US-centric accounts of the city by grounding theory in the lived experiences, everyday practices and spatial logics of the urban South. Yet while this literature has rightly reoriented attention towards marginalised urban contexts, we contend that critical urban scholarship must continue to interrogate who is visible within these settings, and whose experiences remain sidelined in the global production of urban knowledge. Put differently, we endorse the main tenets of the Southern urban critique but encourage geographers to stretch it further by remaining attentive to the plurality of marginality. This means confronting blind spots and engaging more fully with the diversity of lifeworlds, life courses, forms of agency and modes of participation that inhabit the margins of the Majority World. Older residents in African cities are one such marginal group. Engaging with their mobility practices, in this case as articulated through *Mpanyinfo ho hia*, *Yɛ mboa nkoa* and *Me te fie*, allows us to surface conceptually generative tools to think through how older people make sense of, and act within, the urban world.

Mpanyinfo ho hia draws attention to mobility as a moral economy structured around age, respect and everyday negotiations of dignity. An associated practice *wa bu me*, for instance, is more than a request for reduced taxi fares. It is shown to unfold within a context of intergenerational relationships and social norms shaped by cultural expectations around elder status. *Yɛ mboa nkoa* illustrates how collective provisioning and shared transport logics are sustained through reciprocal networks and infrastructural improvisation, often in response to limitations in the built environment and public transport system. The associated practices of *Wo nsom mboa* and *Dwadie aboafo* exemplify how older traders creatively navigate these constraints by pooling resources and responsibilities. These practices reveal how older people not only navigate but also influence the local economies and infrastructural logics of Ghanaian cities. In doing so, they bring into focus forms of later-life mobility that are embedded in cultural expectations, care relations and spatial negotiation.

Me te fie, while seemingly connoting domestic immobility, offers fresh insights into the everyday mobilities of retirement in African cities. Among older residents in middle- and high-income neighbourhoods, retirement was experienced not as withdrawal from city life but as a reconfiguration of urban participation shaped by ageing bodies, shifting priorities and accumulated privilege. Expressions such as *Me frɛ me driver* captured a mode of delegated mobility made possible by access to private vehicles, domestic support and service workers. These mobilities enabled continued engagement in religious, familial and social life shaped by a built environment and transport infrastructure that privileged car-based movement. Such practices reveal forms of elite urban experience that remain underexamined in urban studies, yet are crucial for understanding the full spectrum of how ageing intersects with class, gender and infrastructure. In this context, *Me te fie* is not only a personal expression of lifestyle but also a relational and infrastructural formation. By engaging with this vernacular expression, we spotlight a slower tempo of urban life in later years; one that contrasts with faster-paced imaginaries of the African city and invites a more differentiated account of urban ageing across socio-economic lines.

The practices uncovered in this paper not only enrich urban theory but also carry propositional potential for thinking differently about mobility governance, age-inclusive planning and low-carbon urban futures. Propositional thinking shifts the analytical gaze from critique to possibility, identifying practices that offer insights into how cities might be imagined otherwise (Baptista & Cirolia, 2022). For example, *Mpanyinfo ho hia* and *Yɛ mboa nkoa* highlight the importance of mutuality, coordination and shared responsibility in sustaining everyday mobility, especially in the face of infrastructural, bodily and economic limitations. These vernacular practices reveal a dynamic collective ethos that urban planners and policymakers could engage with when designing transport interventions, especially where formal provision remains fragmented or uneven. Initiatives to support ageing populations must not only recognise the diverse ways older residents move through the city but also build on the strategies they already employ. At the same time, *Me te fie* raises important questions about how ageing, comfort and environmental sustainability intersect amidst rising car use and a growing preference for private transport among older, higher-income residents. Future work could take this further by engaging more explicitly with decolonial, queer and crip theories of ageing (Jones et al., 2022; Sandberg & Marshall, 2017), which explore how age is shaped through intersecting gendered, racialised, classed, ableist and postcolonial structures (Kafer, 2013). In this way, later-life mobilities, often framed as a challenge or problem to be solved, become a site of innovation that can inform broader transitions towards socially and ecologically just urban futures in Ghana and beyond.

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ENDNOTE

[1] See Table A1 in the Appendix for a list of Ghanaian terms used in the paper, including their pronunciation and English translations.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE A1   Ghanaian terms, pronunciation and translation.

Term	Pronunciation	Translation
Mpanyinfo ho hia	M-pahn-yee-foh ho hee-ah	Seniors are present so act with care and respect
YƐ mboa nkoa	Yeh m-bwah n-koh-ah	Let's all go and work together
Me te fie	Meh-te fieh	I stay at home
Wa bu me	Waa boo meh	You have taken advantage of me
Oboafo	O-bwah-foh	A helper/those who help
Wo nsom mboa	Woh-nsoh-mu mbwah	Let's all do our part and work together
Oya oya and Ntem ntem	Woh-yah-woh-yah and En-tem-mu en-tem-mu	Quick and fast
ƐyƐ slow	Eh-yeh slow	Quiet and slow paced
Dwadie aboafo	Edwah-dieh a-bwah-foh	Middlemen who facilitate trade
Adwadifo aboafo	Adwah-di-foh a-bwah-foh	Middlemen who help traders
Boa neƐma bebree	Bwah nea-mah beh-bereeh	To gather in large quantities
Kye ky3 neƐma mu	Kyeh-kyeh nea-mah muh	To divide into smaller lots
MƐ frƐ me driver	Meh-freh meh driver	I call for my driver