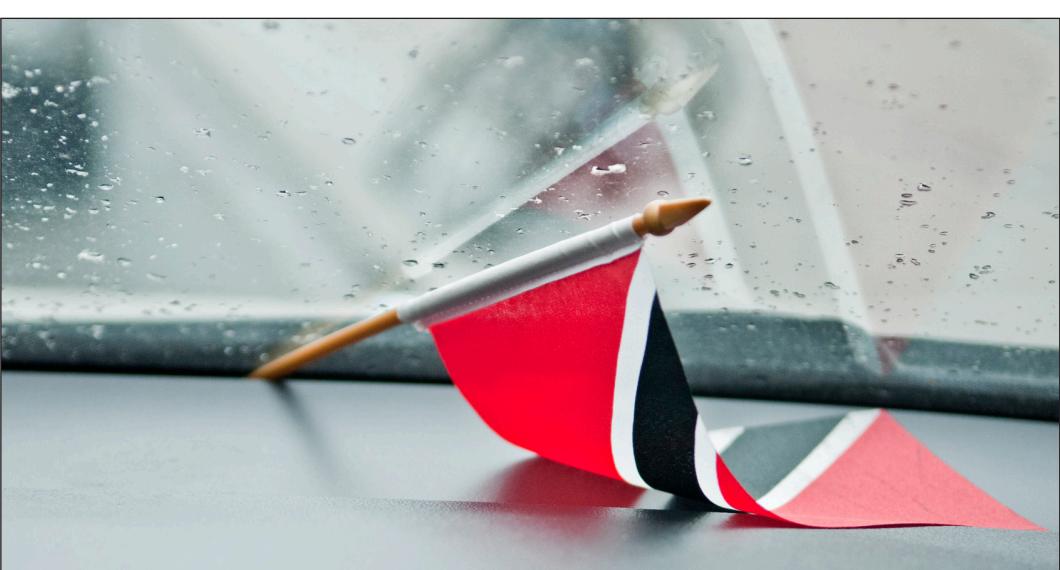




## Beyond THE METER

Story and Photography by Mariza Dunham Gaspar



We hail them on the side of the street. We open the door, slide into the back seat, direct them where to go, perhaps make light conversation.

We arrive at our destination, pay, say thank you. And then we shut the door.

What we may not have considered is that we just spent the last 15 minutes in silence, or in superficial small talk, with former engineers, doctors, business executives, parents and grandparents, that changed their lives to start anew in Canada.

For many of the 600 immigrants who land daily on Canadian soil, the move was not what was expected but is still believed to be for the best.

This was the case for 55 year-old Sam Asubontenge, and thousands of taxi drivers alike.

Asubontenge was once a business executive and owner of a transport company, as well as a highly praised chief of a tribe in Ghana. Asubontenge always keeps the thick, red photo album by his side while driving, filled with colourful photographs of his life in Ghana.

With soft Ghanaian music ringing from the car speakers, he rubs the corners of the plastic album pages, explaining he left Ghana with his wife in 1987 to start a family in a place where he knew a good education for them would be possible.

"Canada is the best country to live in the world. I now have four kids and my wife. And now we are all doing good, really good," explains Asubontenge with a wide grin.

For others, the move and severe change in lifestyle has created feelings of resentment towards their life in Canada and the Canadian government.

GTA taxi driver Oman Jafar came to Canada in 1990 to escape the political terrors of his home country of Somalia, leaving his family behind. He is now dealing with complicated government standards and a long-time corrupted taxi system.

Previously a mechanical engineer for the UN, Jafar is labeled overqualified for a job in Canada so he must resort to taxi driving, becoming another voice in the unsung tune of many underpaid and overqualified Canadian immigrant workforces.

"The City of Toronto particularly isn't doing a good job about protecting their drivers," Jafar shakes his head.

Whether the long voyage to Canada and sacrifices made along the way were worth it or not, low wages, long hours and overall disorganization in the taxi sector are the common denominator between drivers.

According to "Toronto Taxi Drivers: Ambassadors of the City," a report on the working conditions of the city's taxi drivers released in 2008, leased license drivers make on average \$3.44 per hour for a 72-hour working week. Renting drivers making even less at \$2.83 per hour with a 77-hour working week, not including the cost for gas.

The territory battles and illegal limousine drivers contribute further to the long list of problems in the taxi sector. Drivers must also deal with the obvious problems of health and safety while driving.

Even though we see them in our city everyday - and for many - use one just as much, there is more going on behind closed doors - or in this case, taxi doors.

(Top left) A Trinidad and Tobago flag is displayed on the dashboard of Garry Khan's cab to remind him of his home country but also to protect his identity.

(Left centre) Unlike many in the industry, Khan has done extremely well for himself but attributes it to his part-time work with limousine companies and his multilingual television and radio shows.

(Bottom left) In 1967, Khan was sponsored by his sister and moved to Canada, leaving the rest of his family behind. He has since started a new family in Canada and keeps a picture of his only child on the meter.

(Right) Hong Kong native Ken Lam moved to Canada in 1967. Formerly an accountant, Lam now drives taxis to support his family. He leaves little clip monkeys around his taxi.



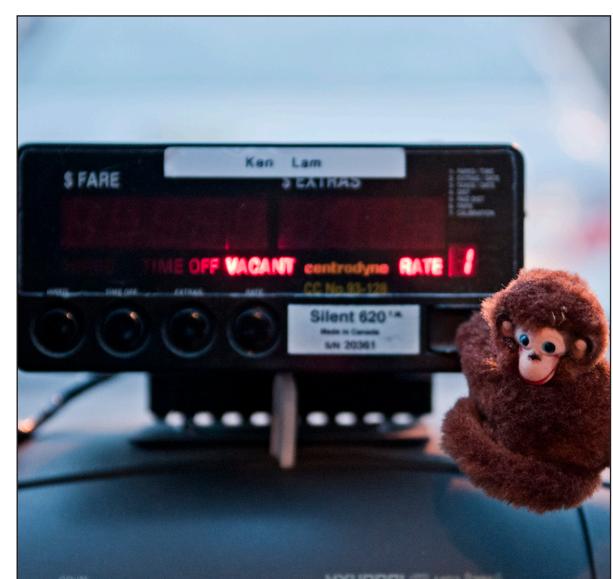
(Top left) Uzi Dalume moved from Israel in 1960s with his wife and children to start a new life in Canada. Previously working in the diamond business, he is now a taxi driver of 41 years, making him a veteran of the business.

(Top right) A sign posted near Finch Station in Toronto reveals one driver's need for more business in a city with over 10,000 taxi drivers.

(Above) Angel Heras, originally from Cuenca, Ecuador, came to Canada 38 years ago, and later on sponsored his family to join him.

(Left) Sam Asubontenge stands with his personal taxi van, which is decorated in a variety of Ghana memorabilia. Asubontenge has the privilege of owning his own transportation, which helps cut costs due to pricey rental fees.

(Below) Asubontenge leafs through the photo album that holds stories of his past life as a chief in Ghana. He keeps the album with him at all times while driving and shares it with anyone who wishes to take a look.



Being a taxi driver, you get the good and bad. I tell people it's like if you buy a bag of potatoes, you're going to get some bad ones.

— Garry Khan