SLOGANS AND MOTTOS ON MATATUS: A REFLECTION OF KENYAN URBAN YOUTH AND CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Matatus are privately owned mini-buses, and are the primary public transport service providers in Nairobi and generally in Kenya. Over the years, the Kenyan government has made attempts to regulate the matatu industry in order to create some form of order, but one thing has been constant - the “Matatu culture”. Although vehicle capacity remains an important aspect (the vehicles range from 14 seater-vans to buses with over 60 passengers capacity), what defines Matatus is not usually the size, but their mode of operation that is characterized by dropping and picking of passengers at non-designated locations, overlapping and using shortcuts to avoid traffic jams among others. Currently, the matatu industry is characterized by “pimped-up” vans and buses (fitted with nice seats, powerful sound systems, LCD screens etc). This denotes the level of investment in making the Matatus as competitive and attractive as possible. In addition, like in many other developing countries, the Matatus follow the common custom of writing slogans and mottos on the vehicles. The slogans and mottos on these commercial vehicles are an important source of information. The question is “what philosophy and culture do the slogans and mottos on Matatus reflect?” This paper investigates the extent to which the slogans and mottos are a reflection of the Kenyan urban youth, their philosophy as well as culture. The paper utilized a descriptive research design. Data was collected using a questionnaire and an observation guide. Information was collected from 72 Matatus that were purposively selected. The data collected was grouped in seven categories: religious messages; speed-related; morality / social education; music, artistic and personality messages; hard work-related; entrepreneurial / business practice-related and others. Most (43%) of the slogans and mottos on Matatus had a religious appeal to either God or heaven. The second and third most important categories of the slogans and mottos were the entrepreneurial or business practices; and music, artistic and personality-related, which accounted for 17% and (14%) respectively. Most music inscriptions on the Matatus related to reggae and hip hop types of music. The findings of this study confirm that the inscriptions on Matatus, to an extent, mirror the urban youth and the Kenyan society in general. For example, about 80% of Kenyans profess the Christian faith while hip hop and reggae music appeal strongly to the urban youth.

Key words: Matatus, Slogans, Mottos, Urban Youth, Culture.

INTRODUCTION

Urbanization is growing in both developed and developing countries. In the developing world, Africa has been experiencing the highest urban growth at 3.5% per year and this rate of growth is expected to hold into 2050 (African Development Bank Group 2012). According to the World Bank, the annual urban population growth rate in Kenya was 4.37 in 2013. Bruun, Del Mistro, Venter and Mfinanga (2015) contend that these rates of urbanization place considerable pressures on public infrastructures that serve the growing populations. More particularly with regard to the focus of this paper, they give rise to mobility-related problems. In Kenya, the urbanization rate has led to an increased, but unsatisfied demand for public transport services. This has seen the emergence and growth of the Matatu industry all over Kenya.

Matatus are privately owned mini-buses, and are the primary public transport service providers in Nairobi and generally in Kenya. According to Kapila, Manu and Lamba (1982), as quoted in Khayesi, Nafukho and Kemuma (2015), both research and eye witness accounts indicate that the matatus surfaced in Nairobi in the 1950s. Aduwo (1990) noted that the transportation service offered by the matatus was initially largely confined to the African residential zones where they
moved both people and goods between the nearby rural homes and the city residences. The African settled areas were inadequately catered for by the then existing scheduled bus services (Khayesi, Nafukho and Kemuma 2015). The emergence of matatus was therefore a response to the unmet demand for transportation services in the areas settled by Africans. The matatus initially charged a standard transportation rate of 30 cents (Kenya shillings 0.30) which in the Kikuyu language translates to mang’o tore matatu. The name matatu is thought to have originated from the Kikuyu phrase mang’o tore matatu. Today the matatu industry has metamorphosed into a strong political and economic player in Kenya.

Over the years, the matatu industry has been characterized by chaos, violence and recklessness. It is for this reason that the Kenyan government, through various legislative frameworks, has made attempts to regulate the Matatu industry in order to create some form of order and discipline. The industry has not only transformed lives. It has also created a value system and a style leading to the common and constant phrase today of “Matatu culture”. Although vehicle capacity remains an important aspect (the vehicles range from 14 seater-vans to buses with over 60 passengers capacity), what defines Matatus is not usually the size, but their mode of operation that is characterized by dropping and picking of passengers at non-designated locations, overlapping and using shortcuts to avoid traffic jams among others. Currently, the Matatu industry is also characterized by “pimped-up” vans and buses (fitted with nice seats, powerful sound systems, LCD screens etc). This denotes the level of investment in making the Matatus as competitive and attractive as possible.

In addition, like in many other developing countries such as Ghana, Tanzania, Liberia and Uganda among others, the Matatus follow the common custom of writing slogans and mottos on the vehicles. The slogans and mottos on these commercial vehicles are an important source of information. The question is ‘what philosophy and culture do the slogans and mottos on Matatus reflect?’ Do the slogans and mottos reveal the complex network of relationships, transactions and the depth of knowledge possessed by both the matatu owners and crew (who are largely the youth), not just about the matatu sector but life in Nairobi and Kenya in general? This paper investigates the extent to which the slogans and mottos are a reflection of the Kenyan urban youth, their philosophy as well as culture. As is the case with most other informal activities in the city of Nairobi, the operation and fabrication activities in the Matatu industry employ hundreds of youths who may express themselves in slogans and mottos that are dynamic and unique to them. Thus, the central issue addressed in this paper with respect to matatu transport service is the use of language in the form of texts and stickers on the bodies of matatus, and the extent to which it is a manifestation of the Kenyan urban youth and society. The next section reviews literature relevant to this study followed by methodology. This is followed by presentation and discussion of findings, and finally the summary and conclusions of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a brief review of relevant literature. It starts by putting the matatu concept into the global perspective before proceeding to examine some literature relating to Africa in general and to Kenya in specific.

Different Locations, Different Names, Same Means of Transport

The lack of homogeneity in the distribution of natural and man-related resources and services, inadvertently necessitates movements from locations of excesses to those of deficiencies in the absence of intervening opportunities. Movement is usually undertaken using different, but sometimes complementary means of transportation. Khayesi, Nafukho and Kemuma (2015) observe that while some societies and settings have subsidized public transport services provided by the state and/or public-private partnerships, others mainly rely on privately owned informal public transport services like the matatus. A review of literature reveals that matatus go by different names in different regions of the world. In Ghana, for example, Gewald, Luning and van Walraven (2009) observe that while some Ghanaians are ‘lucky enough’ to have their own private cars, other use the typical yellow taxis. However, the majority use the most affordable and famous means of transportation known as trotro. Trotro is the popular term for mini-buses found on both urban and regional roads.

In the Republic of Gambia matatus go by the name Tanka Tanka while in Sierra Leone they are referred to as Poda Poda (Khayesi, Nafukho and Kemuma 2015). In Benin and Nigeria (Lagos) this means of transport go by the names Kia Kia and Kabu Kabu respectively. In India they are referred to as Polaamboo or Jeepneys while in Tanzania they are known as Dala Dala (Khayesi, Nafukho and Kemuma 2015). The list can go
on and on, but the basic issue here is that matatus go by different names in different countries and regions of the world. The common strand that runs across is the characteristics that define this means of transport – low levels of efficiency, low passenger capacity, overloading, disregard for traffic rules, loud music (in some cases) and cut-throat competition among others.

Slogans and Mottos on Commercial Vehicles

In West Africa there are many painted texts on taxis, lorries and buses (Geest n.d). He noted that names and sayings on vehicles, elegantly framed by entwining flowers, little figures or other decorative motifs, are only one category sign painting. Texts on vehicles are not only directly visible but also enigmatic. They speak out and remain silent at the same time. Tourists read them but do not understand them, not even when they are painted in English. According to Geest, the texts are seldom original. They are derived from and refer to a world well known to Ghanaians. Ordinarily, the text may be taken from an old proverb, a modern saying, a Christian prayer, the Bible, a newspaper report, sport or a political event. Someone visiting the country would be struck by the picturesque decoration but would at the same time put in his/her place: she/he does not understand; she/he is an outsider. The writings are at times personalized that even some Ghanaians may well fail to understand the specific point of a given text, not knowing exactly to what or to whom the words apply. The inscriptions tell a personal history which is only known to the driver himself or to the car owner and a few insiders. The text may also be conventional but its full meaning is unique and private.

In Liberia, the slogans and mottos generally reveal a strong emphasis on God and religion, indicating that Liberians believe in God or a Supreme Being. They also suggest that traditional culture is very important in Liberia. A part of this culture is the practice of giving advice. Liberians are fond of giving unsolicited advice, which may be a manifestation of their kindness and goodwill as well as the belief in Africa that ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ (Guseh 2008). Trends in Liberia's political and social developments and the global popular culture are also reflected. The trends show the changing political environment from one in which political freedom was proscribed to one in which such freedom is permitted (Guseh 2008).

The slogans and mottos on commercial vehicles are an important source of information and education on Liberian philosophy, culture, and history. The Liberian Government could use commercial vehicles as a means of informing and educating the people or communities on important public policy issues (Guseh 2008).

Guseh (2008) observes that the writing of slogans and mottos on vehicles is a common custom in the developing world. These sayings often provide insights into the owner or operator's reflections on life and into the culture of the society in general. Lawuyi (1988), as quoted in Guseh (2008), analyzed slogans inscribed on taxis that operate within Oyo State in the southwestern region of Nigeria. He found that vehicle ownership reflects power in a social relationship, and the slogans are expressions of such social stratification among the Yorubas. He noted that a certain power inheres in the driver or owner's control of the vehicle and in a sense makes him a privileged citizen. For instance, although a taxi may not be roadworthy due, for example, to worn out treads on tyres, the slogan on this taxi may read ‘Where is yours?’ indicating that passengers know that if they anger the driver about the un-roadworthiness of the taxi, he may refuse to take them to their destinations (Lawuyi 1988).

Slogans were found to give insights into the various aspects of the Yorubas’ way of life. Some of the slogans examined by Lawuyi (1988) include: ‘It’s from a black pot that white porridge comes’. This was interpreted to mean that one must work hard in order to succeed. Maroukis (1994) used 69 inscriptions to analyze the mottos, maxims, and slogans on the Ghanaian public means of transport consisting of trotros, taxis, trucks and buses. He found that the majority of sayings were religious in nature and were some form of protection while travelling since the Son of God would be with the travelers.

Maharaj (2002) noted that some of the public means of transport in Kenya had such inscriptions as ‘You never know, heaven could be nearer than home’. This could be indicative of the reckless behavior of some of the drivers and conductors in the matatu industry. More recently, Khayesi, Nafukho and Kemuma (2015) have outlined some 25 messages that were found on the bodies of matatus in Kenya. According the trio, the messages were in the form of stickers or texts, and had deeper meanings often accompanied by irony, sarcasm, humour and provocation. Some of the inscriptions identified by the authors include: ‘Unajifanya ng’ombe ukamuiliwe na nani’ (You are behaving like a cow; who should milk you?); ‘Si ati ni gari haina mbio, jam ndio kubwa’ (It’s not that the vehicle isn’t moving fast; it’s the traffic jam that is huge); and ‘Ukitaka kuketi
starehe, nunua gari yako! (If you want comfort, buy your own car!). These authors, however, did not delve into a deeper analysis to reveal the key emerging themes from these messages and to demonstrate, if any, the connection to the urban youth in specific and the Kenyan society in general. This paper examines inscriptions embodied on the matatus, and analyzes the extent to which they are a manifestation of the Kenyan urban youth and society at large.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive research design. Descriptive research is one in which information is collected without changing the environment (i.e., nothing is manipulated). A descriptive design can provide information about the phenomenon under study, behavior, attitudes or other characteristics of a particular group like the matatus. Such studies are also conducted to demonstrate associations or relationships between things in the world around the element under study. Descriptive studies are usually the best methods for collecting information that will demonstrate relationships and describe the world as it exists (Bickman and Rog 1998).

Descriptive research is divided into two kinds: qualitative and quantitative. This study was qualitative-leaning with data being collected in the form of words (statements) or pictures rather than numbers. The qualitative approach has been used in this study to describe the data about kinds of slogans and mottos found on matatus in Nairobi, Kenya. Data was collected from 72 matatus that were purposively selected based on observable slogans and mottos. A questionnaire and observation guide were used to collect the required information. The data was the analyzed in excel.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The information collected on the inscriptions was organized in categories based on the most common emerging themes. Seven categories were identified in total: religious messages; speed-related; morality/social education; music, artistic and personality messages; hard work-related; entrepreneurial/business practice-related and others. Majority (43%) of the slogans and mottos fell in the religious messages category (see Figure 1). Messages relating to entrepreneurial or business practices accounted for 17% while music, artistic and personality accounted for 14%. Work and morality-related inscriptions accounted for 11% and 10% respectively.

Religious slogans and mottos were those that either praised God for His goodness or appealed to Him and/or heaven. Some of the religious messages sought to inspire and reassure that God cares. The religious slogans include: To God be the glory; God loves you; God first; Countless blessing, in God we trust; God is peace – Lamb of God; Jesus is my hero – King of Kings; Only one way to God, Jesus Christ; Taking gospel to the streets; and I can do all things in God, He who strengthens me.

![Slogans and Mottos by Category](image)

Figure 1: Matatu Slogans and Mottos by Category

The high percentage of the slogans and mottos laden with Christian faith messages could be a reflection of not only the Christian faith among the urban youth, but the Kenyan society in general. A majority of Kenyans believe in and profess the Christian faith. According to the United States Department of State (2012) approximately 80 percent of the Kenyan population is Christian while 10 percent is Muslim. There are other groups constituting less than 1 percent of the population. These include the Hindus, Sikhs and Bahais. Most of the remaining population adheres to various traditional religious groups. Of the Christian population, 58 percent is protestant and 42 percent is Roman Catholic. Kenyans largely believe in and look to God for protection, provisions, encouragement, and peace among other things. These findings may not be surprising given the background or context within which the matatus operate. The city and the country at large has some of the highest road traffic accident rates in the world. Roads are often in poor conditions with gaping potholes. In addition corruption is rife among the various government agencies involved in the management of the transport sector including the law enforcers. This scenario may depict hopelessness, leaving God as the only beacon of hope for the matatu owners and crew.
The findings of this study compare favourably to those of Guseh (2008) who found that 45% of slogans and mottos on commercial vehicles in Liberia had a religious appeal. Some of the sayings in the Liberian study included: God is great; God’s time is the best; if God says yes, no man can say no; God is in control; and God is with us. Guseh (2008) argued that these religious slogans and mottos showed that many Liberians believe in, and reverence God or some Supreme Being, and that God or the Supreme Being may have been their protection and survival during the fourteen years of civil war. The findings of this study also concur with those of Maroukis (1994) who used 69 inscriptions to analyze the mottos, maxims, and slogans on the Ghanaian public means of transport. The Ghanaian study had found that the majority of sayings were religious in nature and were some form of protection while travelling.

The slogans and mottos of entrepreneurial and/or business practices nature accounted for seventeen percent (17%) in the current study. Some of the inscriptions in this category included: Cosy; Caterpillar; Anyone, anytime, anyplace; Service you can’t doubt; All eyes on me, Oxygen; We create, they duplicate; ‘Kama tamu tamba’ (Board if interested); We rock in the city; and undefeated. This was a very interesting category given the history of matatus and the so evolved matatu culture. A part from offering the fare-paying passenger transport service, the matatu sector has been associated with violence, crime and insecurity. Khayesi, Nafukho and Kemuma (2015) have identified the types of crime and violence in the sector as including crime and violence against passengers in general; crime and violence among touts, stage managers, drivers; matatu fare-related crime and violence; violence against women and children; crime and violence as a result of overcrowding and over-speeding; and injuries and fatalities associated with road traffic crashes. In short, the matatu sector has been known for overloading, disregard to traffic rules, poor maintenance, careless driving, overlapping and cut-throat competition among others.

These slogans and mottos could be reflective of the changing trends in the Matatu industry and the Kenyan society in general. Currently, the entrepreneurs in Matatu industry are employing business strategies that are meant to attract customers. This explains why a number of matatus are today “pimped-up” and are fitted with nice seats, powerful sound systems, LCD screens etc. This denotes that there is an increased level of investment in making the Matatus not only as competitive and attractive as possible, but also comfortable. When asked to expound on the meanings of the inscriptions, the drivers gave the following responses: ‘Cosy’ – denoted travelling comfortably in a clean or neat matatu; ‘Service you can’t doubt’ – implied a high standard of passenger transport service; while ‘We rock in the city’ – was used to mean the matatu was the best in the city. The changing time in the matatu sector as reflected in these slogans and mottos could be mirroring the changing trends in Nairobi and Kenya in general where not only the youth are getting their voice and speaking out, but also the general public are demanding higher levels of accountability.

The slogans and mottos in the foregoing category also to an extent confirms the creativity in the matatu industry and among the youth in Nairobi in general. Khayesi, Nafukho and Kemuma (2015) writing on the industry as part of the entrepreneurial effort in Kenya observe that matatu entrepreneurship belongs to a wider family of creativity and innovation in Kenya. They note that Kenyans have generally been creative and try to have home-grown solutions to local challenges. The creativity of the Kenyan youth manifest in a number of unique innovations such as M-pesa, Solar Lantern and Iko Toilet among others. One of the most recent creative initiatives in the matatu sector is the ‘cashless’ fare payment system for public service vehicles. This initiative has since been given a legal backing through Notice No. 219 of 17 December 2013 in the Kenyan Gazette. This is a concept that, everything else being constant, should resonate well with the youth that are the majority of workers in the matatu sector. Of course everything else is never constant. This may explain why the up-take and implementation of this initiative has been slow.

Fourteen percent of the inscriptions contained messages as well as portraits of some famous music, sports, political and religious personalities. One of the music personalities whose portraits were inscribed on the matatus is Robert Nesta "Bob" Marley. Another text read: You are the best ever Bob Marley. “Bob” Marley was a Jamaican reggae singer, song writer, musician, and guitarist who achieved international fame and acclaim. He started out with the group The Wailers in 1963 and forged a distinctive songwriting and vocal style that made him popular with audiences worldwide. His songs still resonate with some youth in Nairobi today and are played in the matatus where they are employed as part of the crew. Although “Bob” died several years ago, his legacy lives on and continues to influence humanity, including the urban youth in
Nairobi. Ray Hitchins (a lecturer in the Institute of Caribbean Studies at the University of West Indies) as quoted by Fox News Latino on February 6, 2015 had this to say of Marley: "His legacy is not complete. His influence continues to grow and expand. It has not met its full potential."

It may be prudent to have some insight into Marley’s early childhood to youth life in order to appreciate why a musician like him may be popular among some of the matatu crew in Nairobi. Marley nurtured his musical skills during adolescence in Trench Town, a poor Kingston suburb where he met the members of The Wailers group. His writing of songs about social and political issues followed a mid-1960s sojourn in the United States, where his mother was then living. The racial situation Marley encountered in the United States inspired the lyrics of many of the songs that he recorded with The Wailers on his return to Jamaica. Marley’s songs about social transformation, rejection of colonialism and emancipation resonated very well with the fight against colonial rule and national liberation struggles. Today, a number of urban youth are still engaged in many liberation struggles, but more importantly against poverty as well as unemployment or underemployment. Currently, the unemployment rate in Kenya is estimated at 40%. Kinyanjui and Khayesi (2005), for example, observe that about 80% of the matatu crew work on verbal contractual engagements. This means that the drivers and conductors can be dismissed at any time and without any warning. With regard to remuneration, the matatu workers are mostly paid on a daily basis. This implies that on the days when the matatu is not on the road and transporting passengers, there would be no pay for the crew. The majority (57.4%) of the matatu crew are young people aged between 25 and 34 years and working long hours – typically between 13 to 15 hours (Khayesi 1997).

Another type of music that was found to be popular with matatu crew was the Kenyan hip hop (see Plate 1). It is commonly a combination of Kiswahili and English (Kenya’s national and official languages respectively) as well as Sheng and various local languages. Kenyan hip hop has grown over the years within the popular music scene. Wainaina (2008) observes that a particular form of hip hop known as genge that is characterized by danceable rhythm, pumping beats and raunchy lyrics has dominated the music scene and has become very popular with the youth. One of the matatus from which we collected data played very loud hip hop music with the following writings on its body: Niggaz with attitude (see Plate 2).

When the crew were asked to explain why they like this type of music, their explanation was that ‘Hip hop haina mambo mengi, haina masharti. Inakupatia freedom yako ya kudance, kuvaa na hata kuimba (Hip hop is not complicated, doesn’t have so many rules. It gives you freedom to dance, dress the way you want and even singing)’. Wainaina (2008) found that hip hop offers the youth opportunities and liberties in expressing and re-visioning their identities, especially as seen from

Plate 1: ‘Raw Hip Hop’

Plate 2: ‘Niggaz with attitude’
traditionally defined adult-controlled structures and institutions. The desire to not conform to the norms makes this genre appeal to a mass of young people. There is recognizable rising influence of hip hop culture, which is mass produced, transient and sensational. It enable the youth to eschew, negotiate and/or altogether subvert dominant perspectives as defined by adults, elite, social/legal institutions and structures (Wainaina 2008).

According to Land and Storall (2009), hip hop continues to be a constructive and contested space in which marginalized youth (and other people) around the world both resist and challenge social ideologies, practices and structures that have caused and maintained their subordinate positions. Full compliance to legal requirements and rules remain a challenge in the matatu sector. McCormick, Mitullah, Chitere, Orero and Ommeh (2015) observe that some regulations are generally accepted while some are mostly ignored. For example, they report that matatu owners (who are the employers) complain that the regulations regarding the seating capacity are often ignored by the crew. In defiance, conductors stand in order to allow fare-paying passengers to take up their seats. This is against the Legal Notice 161 which disallows standing in a public service vehicle.

Another possible attraction of the youth in the matatu industry is the artistic appeal and the media arts practices. Marsh (2012) observes that because of hip hop’s accessibility, politics, and inclusion of multiple media arts practices (see Plate 3), hip hop has become a culture for change and a site of resistance worldwide, which has generated a global identity. It is through its media arts practices and style that hip hop holds the interests of so many youth with some looking at hip hop as an identity, a worldview and a way of life (Morgan and Bennett 2011). Forman (2002) suggests that the youths who adhere to the styles, images, and values of hip hop culture have demonstrated unique capacities to construct different spaces, and simultaneously, to construct spaces differently. In Nairobi, and Kenya in general, the matatu sector has metamorphosed over the years in the process creating their own image, style and value systems. Against a number of odds, including legal, they have reconstructed space and created their own. Hip hop, probably, provides the musical platform to the youth in Nairobi, and specifically in the matatu sector to express their style and values, but also their frustration at possible continued marginalization.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the slogans and mottos used on Matatus and the extent to which they are a reflection of the Kenyan urban youth and culture. The information required for this paper was collected from 72 matatus that were purposively selected. The key too used for data collection was an observation guide while the data was analyzed in excel. The data collected was grouped in seven categories: religious messages; speed-related; morality / social education; music, artistic and personality messages; hard work-related; entrepreneurial / business practice-related and others. The overall impression is that most (43%) of the slogans and mottos on matatus had a religious appeal to either God or heaven. The second and third most important categories of the slogans and mottos were the entrepreneurial or business practices; and music, artistic and personality-related, which accounted for 17% and (14%) respectively.

These findings do not only mirror the urban youth, but the Kenyan society in general. Available statistics show that approximately 80% of the Kenyan population is Christian. Most places of worship in Kenya are full with congregants during worship days like Sunday and Saturday. How deep their faith runs and the extent to which they live by what the Christian faith dictates is a question for a different debate. Seventeen percent of the inscriptions had messages relating to entrepreneurial skills and/or business acumen. Again, this is a good reflection of the young entrepreneurial minds in Kenya, and the Kenyan business community in general. The Kenyan youth has been credited with some key and useful innovations such the M-pesa – a mobile phone-based money transfer service. The third most important category of the slogans and mottos on the matatus was that of music, artistic expressions and personality-related. Music and arts have a strong appeal to the youth. Music inscriptions in the current study had strong inclinations toward reggae and hip hop types of music. These types of music are popular and trendy among the young people in urban areas. Thus, it is safe to conclude, the slogans and mottos inscribed on matatus, to a large extent is not only a reflection of the urban youth, but the Kenyan society in general.

References


