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How Informal Transport Systems Drive African Cities

DANIEL E. AGBIBOA

By 2030, 50 percent of Africans will be urban dwellers. Yet African cities have some of the world’s worst cases of transport poverty. Survey evidence from Kampala, Lagos, and Douala (the largest cities in Uganda, Nigeria, and Cameroon, respectively) suggests that there are only 30 to 70 vehicles per 1,000 people—far below the global average of 180 vehicles. An estimated 75 percent of daily commuters in African cities walk to and from wherever they need to go, by necessity, according to a study by the Urban Intelligence Unit.

This reality has amplified calls for more efficient, environmentally friendly, and affordable rapid-transit bus lines and light rail systems. For now, though, African cities mainly run on informal modes of transport—typically minibuses, but also motorbikes, tricycles, and shared taxis. These are ground-level responses to growing demand for mobility in the face of absent or inadequate formal public transport services.

For many African urbanites, it is impossible to imagine city life without its ubiquitous minibuses. They are the subject of news, gossip, rumors, and urban myths. Minibus taxis account for an estimated 80 percent of Africa’s total motorized trips, according to a study by the Sub-Saharan Africa Transport Policy Program. They go by various appellations: *trotro* in Accra, *daladala* in Dar es Salaam, *matatu* in Kenya, *danfo* in Lagos, *car rapides* in Dakar, *kamuny* in Kampala, *gbaka* in Abidjan, *esprit de mort* in Kinshasa, *candongueiros* in Luanda, *poda-poda* in Freetown, *sotrama* in Bamako, *songa kidogo* in Kigali, and *kombi* in Cape Town.

The failure of state-owned mass transportation services occasioned the growth and popular-

ity of these informal and ostensibly unregulated services. They are also known as “paratransit” to indicate an alternate mode of flexible passenger services that cater to the poor in the developing world. Unlike modern mass transit systems with fixed stops, fares, routes, and timetables, paratransit services run flexible, even extralegal, schedules. As one *kombi-taxi* slogan in Cape Town puts it: “This Is a Taxi! It Can Stop Anywhere, Anytime, Anyplace.”

These vehicles are notorious for their squealing brakes, bald tires, and rattling exhaust pipes emitting thick, black smoke. And the practice of overloading has long been common in many African cities. In his 1965 play *The Road*, Nigerian Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka describes paratransit taxis as a form of “transportation torture on four wheels,” not simply because of the “famished road” they ply daily. He describes “humans crushed against one another and against market produce, sheep, and other livestock, suffocated by the stench of rotting food and anonymous farts.”

On his 1977 album *Shuffling and Shmiling*, Fela Kuti sang about the discomfort of informal transport services in Lagos, particularly the iconic *molues* (midibuses): “Everyday my people dey inside busbus / Forty-four seating and ninety-nine standing / Them go pack themselves in like sardine.”

Across African cities, paratransit services continue to vex vehicle inspection officers. “You wonder how these buses secured roadworthiness certificates in the first place,” an officer in Lagos told me. “And when you ban these buses from the roads, they still find a way of returning to them.”

Although paratransit services are notorious for their chaos and criminality, they nonetheless offer more than cheap transportation for multitudes of

DANIEL E. AGBIBOA is an assistant professor of African and African American studies at Harvard University.

city dwellers. They also provide employment opportunities for many jobless youths from both urban and rural areas, which partly explains their influence on politics and popular culture. In Lagos, there are more than 200,000 *okada* (motorbike-taxi) riders; overall, the industry provides jobs to approximately 500,000 young men as riders, renters, mechanics, and spare-parts dealers. The popularity of *okadas* stems from their relatively low start-up capital and maintenance costs, and the feeling of economic freedom and autonomy that motorcycles afford.

In Nairobi, according to historian Kenda Mutongi, the ubiquitous *matatus* embody “the era of cosmopolitanism, multiparty politics, neoliberalism, and global hip-hop.” In South African cities such as Durban, Thomas Blom Hansen writes, *kombi-taxi* vans became a powerful symbol of postapartheid freedom and an important arena for black economic empowerment, even as they retained underworld associations. Whatever their symbolism, paratransit vehicles provide the primary form of mobility for average Africans who otherwise rely on walking to navigate the city, especially those eking out a living on the margins of society.

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MULTIPLE IMPACTS

Considering that the informal transport sector has manifold impacts on the political economy of everyday life in Africa, it is remarkable how little research has been done to understand its contributions to African cities. First, informal transport essentially serves the African poor, who typically make up the large majority of the urban population—in many cases these services account for over 80 percent of urban mobility needs. In Africa, owning a vehicle is a key marker of wealth, power, and privilege. One study finds that 99 out of 100 households in Africa’s poorest cities do not own or have access to a private car, and thus are wholly dependent on paratransit services. Other studies show that the average household in African cities can afford just one round trip daily; for the poorest, even that is out of reach.

In Lagos, the average passenger spends about 40 percent of their income on bus fares. But walking is the primary way of getting around town for lower-income people who do not own a car. In Nairobi, only an estimated 12 percent of the population uses private vehicles, while the rest use

paratransit services such as *matatus* or simply “leg it.” Although paratransit services are widely available, they do not appeal to higher-income groups because they are seen as dangerous and unreliable.

Second, informal transport provides opportunities for interaction and a means of economic survival, shaping circulation patterns for people, resources, and information in urban space. The vehicles themselves do not simply express political, social, and economic relations, but rather shape and produce them. They are in effect meeting points for daily conversations in which humor alternates with pathos and dreams coexist with existential angst about bribery and corruption, endless road delays, dysfunctional services, moribund infrastructure, hard work and marginal gains, poverty and relative deprivation.

Third, the informal transport sector provides a unique window onto the political and social conditions of African cities. Operators and unions are key factors in party politics, often playing a decisive role in determining election outcomes.

Despite the chaos and disorder that is commonly associated with Africa’s informal transport sector, there is an underexplored “logic of practice” (to borrow a term from the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu) that organizes and

animates the sector: namely, a contested field of power relations, including the tactics and strategies of unions and operators in their dealings with the state. African cities do work amid the chaos, and we can gain a better understanding of how they work by studying an apparently chaotic sector like informal transport.

DIRTY WORK

The state of informal transport in African cities mirrors the harsh lived realities of its workers—mostly marginal men. Like many informal workers, transport operators have no fixed income, no days off, and no social protection. In 1958, the sociologist Everett Hughes used the phrase “dirty work” to describe occupations and labor conditions that are perceived as disgusting or degrading. This term well describes the workaday world of informal transport workers in African cities, from Lagos to Nairobi.

Despite lengthy workdays averaging around 20 hours (or “24 hours on the road,” as one *danfo* slogan puts it), informal transport workers take home

meager incomes due to the culture of corruption among police and other street-level bureaucrats, the exacting demands of vehicle owners, and the extortionate powers of mafia-like transport union touts who roam bus stations and junctions, collecting onerous fees from operators with impunity. “*Okada* [motorbike taxi] is just daily income,” said an operator in Nigeria. “What you get today you use today, and tomorrow you start again from scratch.”

There are four basic figures involved in running paratransit businesses in African cities: the fleet owner (also known as the taxi baron), the owner-driver, the taxi driver, and the bus conductor. In most cities, minibus-taxi drivers often have to remit a specific target income to the taxi owner each day; they are paid according to how much they bring in. The driver is responsible for all overhead costs, including fines frequently imposed by touts and police.

For motorbike-taxis, the arrangement is slightly different. Riders often acquire their motorbikes through a process of “hire purchase”: they run their bikes for owners to whom they must make daily payments known in Lagos as a “balance.” Drivers are under immense pressure to meet the financial targets set by owners or else forfeit their vehicles—their primary source of survival and social status—at the expiration of the 12-month agreement. This pressure results in long working hours, high accident rates, and poor health. To meet their daily targets, drivers must race between the two end points of their chosen routes, weaving in and out of traffic with little regard for life. For these operators, navigating the African city compels constant improvisation and experimentation.

In Lagos, according to the State Ministry of Transportation, 99 percent of *danfo* drivers suffer from hypertension, a health challenge directly related to the demanding and dangerous nature of their work. Survey evidence from the Lagos State Drivers’ Institute shows that 22 percent of *danfo* drivers are partially blind. The poor condition of the roads, especially the dust, mainly accounts for this problem (though many *danfo* drivers never had to undergo a vision test since they work without a license). In Nairobi, a study by the International Transport Workers Federation found that *matatu* workers regularly reported “respiratory problems [resulting from] long hours of exposure to air pollution . . . [as well as] back pain, aching joints, swollen and painful legs, eye conditions, dust-related issues, sore throats, headaches, and

ulcers.”

The struggle to get by or get ahead forces many paratransit operators to reproduce the transgressive system that they condemn. Behavior such as overloading passengers, speeding dangerously, engaging in arbitrary pricing, failing to comply with the rules of the road, and feuding contributes to the criminalization and stigmatization of Africa’s informal transport sector and workers. Many operators struggle to construct a positive self-image. They see their work not as a “real trade,” but as a temporary one to which they resort for lack of a better option.

But many still derive pride from their vehicles—the material symbols of their survival, manhood, and respectability. Across northern Nigerian cities, it is common to see tricycle-taxi (*keke napep*) drivers wiping dirt from their vehicles at the slightest opportunity, especially while stuck in traffic. In northern Nigeria, where a man’s social and marital statuses are inextricably linked, *okada* work is a way out of “social death” for unmarried men: it enables them to pay the oft-inflated bride price, marry, and acquire the status of *masu gida* (household heads) and *homi completo* (complete men).

INDIGENOUS ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Across Africa, the informal transport sector is a site of indigenous entrepreneurship and creative adaptation. Nowhere is this versatility more evident than in the building of Lagos’ trademark *molues*, known as “flying coffins” and “moving morgues.” They are built locally on chassis derived from second-hand (*tokumbo*) trucks and engines imported from Europe. This process of “hybridization,” as the scholar Adedamola Osinulu calls it, is the stuff of cultural production and globalization in postcolonial Africa.

Minibus-taxis in African cities often have slogans written on their sides, such as “Man Proposes, God Disposes,” “No Money, No Friend,” and “It Still Moves,” reflecting transport workers’ life histories, aspirations, fears, and philosophies. In cities like Durban and Nairobi, minibus-taxis fiercely compete to attract passengers with decoration and music.

In Lagos, *danfo* slogans shape the moods and choices of commuters on a daily basis. Commuters described to me how these slogans influence their decisions on which *danfos* to enter or avoid each day. As one market woman explained: “When I see a *danfo* slogan like ‘Relax: God Is in Control’ or ‘Be Not Afraid,’ I feel good about entering it be-

cause I feel protected. I feel like the driver really trusts in God's powers, not in his own abilities."

THE CORRUPTION TRAP

Corruption and violence are prevalent in African cities' informal transport sectors. Union touts, urban street gangs, and law enforcement officials run riot. Paratransit workers say that corruption has eaten deep into the fabric of their workaday world. In Nairobi, criminal gangs (so-called cartels) such as the *mungiki* use violence to control *matatu* terminals and routinely demand "security" fees to allow transport operators to ply specific routes. In the Lake Chad Basin (comprising Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and Chad), a region where the violent insurgency of Boko Haram has killed tens of thousands and displaced millions, truckers and bus drivers complain about the violent extortion and delay tactics of paramilitary police and cross-border security personnel.

For every 100 kilometers traveled in West Africa, truckers transporting goods often lose nearly an hour to illegal checkpoints en route. "At some checkpoints if you don't dash [bribe] them, they can delay you for up to four hours before you will be released," said a trucker in Maiduguri. "Due to all the delays, a two-hour journey will take you ten hours."

In Nairobi, a *matatu* driver often leaves a 50- or 100-shilling note hidden under the handle of the trunk to avoid any delays, since "time is money." Traffic police inspectors know just where to reach for the bribe as they "inspect" the vehicle. In Lagos, it is not uncommon for a *danfo* driver to drive right up to a traffic inspector and squeeze a 50-naira note into his hands, saying, "Officer, for beer." The police officer will quickly put the bill in his pocket and wave the driver through an illegal "one-way" lane.

Showing any reluctance to pay the required bribe can be a costly mistake that results in lengthy delays at roadblocks, detention in a police station, vehicle impoundment, or tire deflation. "We just pay them and go our way. What else can we do?" said a *danfo* driver in Lagos. It is not uncommon for security personnel to open fire on paratransit vehicles when drivers refuse to surrender a portion of their hard-earned cash.

In Lagos, the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW)—the most politicized and vio-

lent trade union in Nigeria—employs motor park touts (*agberos*) to extort illegal fees from *danfo* operators. The list of bribes is endless and borders on farcical, ranging from loading fees to "money for party" (*owo faji*). *Agberos* are typically men between the ages of 20 and 50, and can be easily recognized by their gruff voices, bloodshot eyes, and sometimes missing teeth (lost in street brawling).

At almost all the bus stations in Lagos, *agberos* can be seen racing after *danfo* operators off-loading or picking up passengers. They normally charge at the conductor, screaming "Owo da?" (Where is the money?). If the conductor fails to respond, his side-view mirror may be smashed, or his windshield wipers and fuel-tank cover removed. Sometimes a conductor is beaten to death, in full view of complicit police officers.

Most *agberos* are recruited from the large, ready pool of jobless "area boys" roaming the streets of Lagos. But to become an *agbero* it is not enough to be jobless; you must also be feared. As a former *agbero* told me: "If you're in your street and you can

create a scene, cut somebody's head, do whatever, the NURTW will find a motor park for you to control as an *agbero*. You're born to kill."

Paratransit vehicles provide the primary form of mobility for average Africans.

NETWORKS OF SOLIDARITY

Africa's informal transport workers are hardly passive in the face of police abuses, passenger insults, or other trouble. Despite their bottom-of-society status, paratransit operators draw power from their sheer numbers and capacity for collective organizing. The anthropologist Daniel Jordan Smith describes how road accidents involving cars and motorbike-taxis (*okadas*) in Nigeria often draw scores of supportive *okada* riders in a matter of minutes. "I have seen instances when they [*okada* riders] gang up in support of their colleague, even if it is he who is at fault," said a trader in Maiduguri.

Informal transport workers often belong to neighborhood associations that provide networks of solidarity, financial support (from informal cooperatives known in Nigeria as thrift collections), and protection to drivers. Such associations are directed by social relations of patronage, informed by trust and mutual dependence. Given the risk and radical uncertainty of urban life, coupled with its political economy of patronage, an operator will think twice before rejecting associational support, which he is sure to need one day. Operators

are compelled to pay one-time union membership fees, as well as “ticket fees” assessed on a daily basis. These fees tend to be exorbitant, and many operators complain that they cannot afford them. But failure to pay exposes them to violent attacks by union touts.

In Maiduguri, a leader of a tricycle-taxi association told me:

If one of us is involved in an accident, it is our job to look after him in the hospital and take care of his bill and to take him home. If there is any problem between our members and mobile police, you know this job involves a lot of youth bound to make mistakes, it's our job to resolve the problem amicably. Also, if your vehicle got damaged or malfunctions, the association will give you N2,000 [approximately \$5.50] on credit for you to repair the damage and pay back N1,000. If your wife delivers a baby and you can't afford a ram for the naming ceremony, the association will help you out.

This strong sense of solidarity among informal transport operators (especially motorbike-taxi drivers)—or what the Cameroonian anthropologist Francis B. Nyamnjoh calls “conviviality”—is often conveyed by vehicle inscriptions such as “Marry One, Marry All” or “Mourn One, Mourn All.”

UNION CLOUT

Transport trade unions in postcolonial Africa tend to oscillate between autonomy and political affiliation, cooperation and conflict. They are at once “agents of order” and “primary perpetrators of violence,” as political scientist Adrienne LeBas puts it. Across African cities, they typically double as “reservoirs of thugs” (as Human Rights Watch dubs them) for local politicians, especially during election season. In return, these unions are allowed by the state to appropriate transit spaces such as terminals and exploit informal transport operators with impunity.

Motor parks, bus stops, junctions, and roundabouts in African cities are sites of activity in a grey area between the legal and the illegal. Consider the NURTW branch in Lagos. Founded in 1978, the NURTW constitutes the primary support base for the Lagos state governor during election campaigns. The state is often unwilling or unable to rein in the union's predatory treatment of its workers. The union routinely engages in patronage politics and voter mobilization to support various parties and candidates in return for permis-

sion to levy taxes on informal transport operators in public spaces. “The NURTW is a law unto itself,” said a *danfo* driver.

In South Africa's cities, Hansen observes, taxi operators “enjoy a very substantial de facto autonomy in terms of regulation and police intervention” as a result of their “politically well-connected bosses.” He adds, “The sheer size and quasi-legality of the taxi industry have made it an important source of corruption.” In his study of the politics of order and chaos in the informal transport sectors of Kampala (Uganda) and Kigali (Rwanda), Tom Goodfellow found that *bayaye* touts constituted “both an important voting bloc and a potential source of violence [that] could be mobilized” by unions.

MODERNIZING AMBITIONS

Although paratransit services fill an important void in African cities, they also contribute to urban insecurity through traffic congestion (“go-slow,” as they say in Lagos), road accidents, air and noise pollution, and violent skirmishes among rival transport union touts. A study by the Stockholm Environment Institute estimates that Africa has less than 3 percent of the world's motor vehicles, but suffers 11 percent of global road fatalities. In Nairobi alone, the notorious *matatus* account for an estimated 95 percent of car-related fatalities; as many as 13,000 people die in road accidents involving these vehicles every year.

In many African cities, it can take up to 3 hours to cover 15 kilometers because of jammed roads at rush hour. In Nairobi, daily productivity lost to traffic congestion is estimated at 58 million Kenyan shillings (approximately \$550,000). South Africans reportedly lose about 90 working hours per year stuck in traffic. One study found that Lagosians spend an average of 30 hours in traffic each week, or 1,560 hours annually. Compare this with drivers in Los Angeles and Moscow, who spent only 128 and 210 hours in traffic, respectively, in the whole of 2018.

This inefficiency explains why Africa's informal transport sector has increasingly been treated by policymakers and city planners as disposable. Today, the political economy of urban megaprojects and megacity planning in Africa threatens to dislodge thousands of paratransit operators and reshape their localities, provoking shock, anger, and resistance from below.

Such large-scale projects, generally couched in the language of urban renewal, are shaped by ways

of seeing African cities that are still dominated by what Africanist scholars Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall call “metanarratives of urbanization, modernization, and crisis.” These assumptions give rise to the idea that African cities are “not-quite cities,” having failed to meet the “expectations of modernity” dictated by Western planning and logic. Such thinking activates state-led interventions and public-private partnerships aimed at “modernizing” and “ordering” the African city and transforming it into a clear text that is “planned and readable.”

Driven more by the logic of the market than by the needs of their inhabitants, urban authorities in Africa increasingly exercise power through what urbanist Ananya Roy calls the capacity to construct and reconstruct categories of legality and illegality. From Lagos to Johannesburg and Dar es Salaam, elite-driven modernizing ambitions have led to support for measures aimed at homogenizing and partitioning urban space, exemplified by the disruption of informal markets, the flattening of illegal structures, the deportation of street beggars, the violent eviction of dumpsite dwellers, and other measures aimed at purging African cities of supposedly undesirable elements.

In 2017, Lagos Governor Akinwunmi Ambode hinted of a plan to ban the yellow *danfos* from the city’s roads: “When I wake up in the morning and see all these yellow buses and see *okada* and all kinds of tricycles and then we claim we are a megacity, that is not true and we must acknowledge that that is a faulty connectivity that we are running.” Ambode’s comments highlight popular perceptions of the informal transport sector as a chaotic and violent embarrassment that needs to be replaced. The favored substitutes are bus rapid transit systems (BRTs), generally deemed more befitting of a “modernizing” city with world-class ambitions. BRTs, typically operated by public-private partnerships, feature dedicated lanes and right-of-way infrastructure to facilitate rapid and frequent service.

In February 2020, Ambode announced a ban on motorbike- and tricycle-taxis in Lagos, including burgeoning motorbike-hailing startups (like Gokada and O’Ride) that offer a much safer alternative to the notorious *okadas*. Given the limited reach of the state-endorsed BRTs, motorbikes and tricycle-taxis have bridged enduring

mobility gaps. The ban has caused widespread disruption and discontent in Lagos, leaving many drivers and passengers without options. A leader of one bike-hailing startup in Lagos believes that the ban reflects long-term state urban planning, which has no place for paratransit services. “They have a master plan,” he said, “but *okadas* are not in it.”

Over the past decade or so, African cities—such as Lagos, Accra, Johannesburg, and Dar es Salaam—have increasingly turned to BRT projects in their quest for a safer, efficient, and cost-effective solution to the need for mass transportation and the chaos of paratransit services. In 2008, Lagos introduced Africa’s first BRT corridor, with technical support from the World Bank. But sustainable development scholar Jacqueline Klopp contends that the shortcomings of BRT projects in African cities underscore the need to expand and enhance the capacity of the informal transport sector to effectively tackle traffic jams and environmental pollution.

BRTs undoubtedly can make a positive contribution to urban lives and productivity. Johannesburg’s Rea Vaya system—arguably the first true BRT in Africa—carries an estimated 16,000 passengers daily. According to a New Climate

Economy report, Rea Vaya has saved South Africa as much as \$890 million thus far by reducing travel time, improving road safety, and cutting carbon emissions.

But BRT systems present serious challenges. For one thing, their rise has spotlighted the struggles of Africa’s paratransit workers for survival, recognition, and inclusion in decision-making processes that affect their livelihoods. In Lagos, initial plans to restructure key public transport routes and introduce a BRT system were undercut by opposition from the NURTW, which feared that it would be forced out of the market if bus routes were reconfigured and sold off to the highest bidder.

Similarly, in South Africa, efforts to develop BRT corridors and to phase out paratransit services met with stiff resistance from informal transport operators. In Johannesburg, the arrival of BRTs set off strikes and violent clashes between transport workers in the informal and public sectors. In Kenya, a BRT system launched in 2015 by President Uhuru Kenyatta has remained on hold due to inadequate funding as well as protests by private

Informal transport provides opportunities for interaction and economic survival.

matatu owners who fear that the new system will relegate them to the margins of the city. In Dar es Salaam, Matteo Rizzo observes, the recent rapid growth of BRT systems has given rise to similar tensions.

TRANSPORT CULTURE

The urbanist AbdouMaliq Simone has argued that “while the absence of regulation is commonly seen as a bad thing, one must first start from the understanding that no form of regulation can keep the city ‘in line.’” Paratransit services in urban Africa are, above all, a way of life, an organizing urban logic that cannot simply be banned. At issue here is not just the informal sector, but the entire transport culture of African cities. As a vital element of mass mobility, paratransit services are embedded in social networks that are integral to the informal infrastructure of African cities—what

Simone calls “a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city.”

Africa’s informal transport sector is likely to continue to drive mass mobility well into the future and remain central to urban economies and the production of new city forms. This reality is slowly sinking in: rapid-transit bus lines in African cities such as Lagos and Dar es Salaam are beginning to change from an ineffective paradigm of displacement and replacement to a promising strategy of upgrading paratransit services while involving transport unions in the ownership and operation of new BRT systems. A hybrid transport governance—one that not only absorbs paratransit services but allows them to coexist with new forms of public transport such as BRTs, light-rail systems, and e-ridesharing—would be the most sustainable way of moving commuter journeys in African cities onward and upward. ■