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Language, Resistance and Subversive Identities in the Matatu Sub-Culture

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Abstract:

In this article, the author attempts a characterization of a matatu sub-culture that has distinct values, practices and norms that tend to resist, defy or challenge the mainstream culture in Kenya. This sub-culture is constructed as a means of providing an identity for individuals and members of the group as well as negotiating the relationship between them and the rest of society. Members of the matatu sub-culture are predominantly working class young men from poor backgrounds who include matatu crew (drivers, conductors, touts), graphic designers and graffiti artists. They have, over time, developed a unique ways and styles including manner of speech, choice of vocabulary and symbols of communication, ideology, dress code, music, among other features. The author uses sociological theories to conceptualize the matatu sub-culture and then applies an eclectic approach that combines principles of sociolinguistics, stylistics and discourse analysis to examine how the matatu sub-culture is expressed and enacted using various linguistic choices and practices in ways that tend to exhibit either manifest or subtle resistance to conventional social norms, values and practices. Emphasis is given to the use of Sheng, slang and jargon; eccentric vocabulary and stylistic techniques that express contempt, sarcasm, deviance or ridicule to the hegemonic social structures as well as those that aim to mock, challenge and resist authorities including policy makers and the political class in general.

Keywords: Kenya, subculture, matatu, identity, resistance, Sheng, style

1. Introduction

Matatus¹ are privately owned and operated mini-buses that initially begun as para-transit means of transport for urban areas to complement government-run public transport but has now become the only available road transport system in Kenya. The word "matatu" is derived from the Gikuyu phrase "mang'otore matatu" meaning "thirty cents" which was the standard fare per trip when privately owned vehicles started providing public transport in Nairobi in the 1950s (Aduwo, 1990; Khayesi, 1999). The matatu industry is a 100% private sector enterprise that provides means of public transportation for the vast majority people in Kenya in the absence of a government funded and structured transportation system (McCormick, et al 2013; Mitullah & Onsate, 2013).

Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, has a population of over 4 million inhabitants; 80% of whom rely on matatus to transport them from various neighborhoods to the Central Business District (CBD) and back. Matatus are critical for the public transport needs in Nairobi where the majority of residents who cannot afford private cars commute to and from work by use of matatus or walking (Gonzalez, et al 2009). According to estimates provided by Matatu Owners Association (MOA) and the National Transport and Safety Authority, there are 50, 000 and over 100,000 matatus operating in Nairobi and across the country, respectively.

The matatu industry is part of a thriving private sector economy in Kenya and it contributes immensely to national revenue and general economic growth of the country. Furthermore, there are about 500,000 Kenyans (mostly young men) who are directly employed in the matatu sector – including drivers, conductors, touts, stage managers among other employees (MOA online profile). Even more people are indirectly engaged in the matatu industry either as individuals, companies or institutions including motor vehicle assemblers, body fabricators, mechanics and garage operators, fuel and oil products retailers, insurance companies, among others.

¹Matatu refers to a privately owned and operated vehicle used for public transport in Kenya

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2. A Brief History of the Matatu Sector in Kenya

The first organized public transport system in Kenya can be traced to 1934 when the Overseas Transport Company of London (OTCL) was started and licensed to provide transport services in Nairobi; initially starting with 13 buses operating in 12 routes (Mukabanah, 2008; Oira & Makori, 2015; Eshiwani, 2016). In the 1950s, private taxis began providing transport services especially on the routes that were not serviced by OTCL especially the low-income estates. However, their operations were illegal and they faced constant restrictions from the city council. In the 1960s OTCL was changed and registered as Kenya Bus Services Ltd (KBS) a monopoly franchise which was licensed by the City Council of Nairobi to operate a bus transportation in exchange for a 25% shareholding stake by NCC. (Oira & Makori, 2015; Eshiwani, 2016).

After independence in 1963 and through into the 1970s, the demand for public transport continued to grow with the rural urban migration of people coming to seek for jobs in Nairobi and other urban centers. In particular, the population of the low-income East lands in Nairobi was increasing very fast and there was a huge unmet demand for transport services. The number of matatus operating illegally were also increasing accordingly as they continued to lobby the government for their legalization and licensing. By 1973, there were 400 matatus operating within Nairobi illegally. The nascent matatu sector received a major boost when in 1973, the then President Mzee Jomo Kenyatta issued a decree allowing matatus to operate in Nairobi without the need of obtaining licenses. This was seen a way of encouraging private investors and entrepreneurs who had put their money in the sector. This sparked a rapid growth in the privately owned and operated public transport sector. KBS continued to operate competitively alongside the flourishing private matatu sector until the 1980s when it was sold off to private investors. In 2006 it transformed into a transport management company called Kenya Bus Service Management Limited.

In 1986, the Government of Kenya (GoK) entered into the public transport sector through the launch of the Nyayo Bus Service, which provided subsidized public transportation – but it wound up after only 7 years (Mukabanah, 2008; Oira & Makori, 2015). The competition against the now established privately owned matatus was unsustainable for Nyayo Bus Service. The exponential growth of the matatu sector is remarkable especially in Nairobi where the number of vehicles has leaped from the 400 in 1990; 17,600 in 1990; 40,000 in 2004 to 50,000 in 2016 (Chitere & Kibua, 2004; Khayesi, 1999; Oira & Makori, 2015; MOA, 2017). According to estimates from the Kenya National Transport and Safety Authority (NTSA) and the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) office in Nairobi, there are over 100,000 matatus presently operating in the country.

3. Conceptualization of Matatu Sub-Culture

There is no universally accepted definition of subculture since various sociologists have advanced different explanations of this concept. In simple terms, a subculture is a sub-category of a broader culture; part of a whole. Youth subcultures arise when young people as groups create their own subversive identities, value systems and ideologies that seek to reject or at least challenge social norms and values. Cultures are not completely homogenous and integrated systems; instead, they are inherently diverse, complex and heterogeneous. Therefore, it is common for diverse groups to emerge in society propagating beliefs, values and behavior that contradict or challenge the generally accepted norms. This is what subcultures do. Some subcultures engage in delinquency, crime and violence but not all subcultures are involved in anti-social behavior.

According to Downes (as cited by Jenks, 2005:10) there are two types of subcultures; those that occur outside of and those that emerge within the context of a dominant culture. Downes adds that that the latter type has two subcategories of its own; those that “emerge in positive response to demands of cultural and structural demands” and those “emerging in negative response to social and cultural structures’ demands” (Jenks, 2005: 10). Matatus originally arose out a need to supplement government transport services to city dwellers but ended up becoming the dominant player in that sector. Therefore, it can be argued that the resultant matatu sector belongs to the positive subculture even when some delinquent and anti-social behaviors have been associated with it from time to time.

Johnston & Snow (1998) as quoted by Corte (2012:56), argues that there are 5 critical elements to consider in the conceptualization of a subculture (we shall consider 4 of them here). First, subcultures are not autonomous; rather, they share some values, behaviors and norms with the dominant culture. Secondly, subcultures are distinguishable from the larger culture by “fairly distinctive mélange of behaviors - such as style, demeanor and argot - that function as its material, art if actual, and behavioral markers.” Thirdly, subcultures can be distinguished by a shared “set of beliefs, interests, attributions and values”. Fourthly, subcultures are “characterized by patterned interactions and relationships within the subculture and between the subculture and the larger social structure.” These elements apply to the matatu subculture and how it negotiates its identity and relationships both within itself and with the larger Kenyan society.

Williams (2011:148) asserts that subcultures are “cultural bounded (but not closed) networks of people who come to share meaning of specific ideas, material objects and practices through interactions.” This contention is also relevant to the matatu subculture being a private enterprise driven by desire to maximize profits in a competitive society. Accordingly, a network of body fabricators, graffiti artists and crew all seek to give their matatus unique identities, names and colors in order to make them prominent and attractive to customers.

Culture is embedded and expressed in language. Therefore, subcultures exhibit their distinctive features in their language use habits. In particular, the use of language identity markers – that show who belongs and who does not belong to

the group. An analysis of language and style will, thus, reveal patterns, varieties, attitudes and ideologies shared within the matatu subculture. Hebdige (1979) argues that subcultures often do not challenge hegemony directly; rather, they express such resistance "obliquely, using style" (p. 17). This study analyses linguistic features that reflect resistance and other subversive attitudes and ideologies in the matatu subculture.

4. Literature Review

The matatu sector has attracted a significant number of studies focusing on various social, economic, political and cultural aspects. In this section, attention will be given to literature that is relevant to the key problem of this study: how language is used to express resistance, anti-establishment ideology and subversive identities in the matatu subculture.

Vallve (2005) examines sexism in the matatu sector that makes it a hostile environment for women in general – whether they are passengers or the few ones who venture to do matatu-related work. The author argues that majority of workers in the matatu sector are young men from poor backgrounds who work in highly competitive and exploitative circumstance and are constantly under pressure to survive, provide for their families and at the same time reaffirm their identity and masculinity by being aggressive and even misogynistic. The study concludes that socially assigned gender hierarchies and roles as well as the failure to confront sexist behavior and discourse by women and society in general appears to accept and normalize the harassment and humiliation that women tend to suffer in this industry.

Kayi (2016) investigated messages contained in slogans and mottos found on matatu and posed the question "what philosophy and culture these slogans and mottos reflect?" (p.51). The author makes reference to the popular cliché "matatu culture" without explicit delineation and characterization. Using a mixed method approach, this study found out that slogans with religious themes (about God and heaven) were the most popular category (43%) among other messages that included hard work and entrepreneurship, morality and social education as well as music and art. Kayi concludes, therefore, that the findings "do not only mirror the urban youth but the Kenyan society in general" (p. 57). The present study pursues a contrary argument; that matatu is a subculture in which working class urban male youth who work in the sector have developed values, attitudes, ideologies and practices that deviate from, challenge or resist broader cultural norms – and that these can be reflected, in part, in their style and linguistic choices (including manner of speech, Sheng, jargon and slang).

Onchiri & Mogambi (2015) employed lexical pragmatic approach to analyze intentionality, contextual grounding and communicative effectiveness in public service vehicle (matatu) graffiti. Focusing on textual elements of the graffiti, the study identified prominent linguistic features including fragmented sentences, ellipsis, short sentences, acronyms, abbreviations and humor, among other elements. The analysis revealed creative use of a range of phonological, morphological, syntactic and pragmatic strategies in order to convey intended messages.

There are several other studies that have interrogated and discussed the matatu sector (Khayesi, 1999; Nafukho & Khayesi, 2002; Mitullah & Onsate, 2013; McCormick, Mitullah & Chitere, Oira & Makori, 2015; Khayesi, Nafukho & Kemuma, 2016) but they have focused on different issues such as regulation and organization, investment and entrepreneurship, management and road safety, among other aspects of the sector.

5. Research Methods

This study utilized both primary and secondary data that was collected by the researcher through personal interviews, pictures, recorded interviews and online resources including dedicated websites and social media platforms. Over a period of two months in July – August 2017 and a similar period in January – February, 2018; the researcher interviewed a purposively selected sample of matatu crews in Nairobi including the coordinators of "Matwana Matatu Culture". "Matwana Matatu Culture" documents matatu activities by taking pictures and videos of the latest matatus and related activities and sharing them on Face book, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram under the tag "Matwana Matatu Culture". This enables the youth, matatu workers, investors and other enthusiasts to follow latest developments in the matatu sector in Kenya.

6. Subversive Identities and Practices

Nairobi is a cosmopolitan and multilingual city where people from different parts of the country and indeed the world reside. Swahili, English and Sheng are the most widely spoken languages among various demographic groups and social contexts in this city. In the matatu sector, Sheng is the most popular language used because majority of the actors, especially workers, are young males.

6.1. Sheng as Identity and Defiance

One of the fundamental characteristics of a subculture is opportunity it provides to its members to assume an identity that is distinct from the norm or the larger society. Widdicombe & Wooffitt (1995) emphasize that:

"...subcultures offer a culture and a collective identity which differs from identities ascribed through school, work and class. The culture includes the attributes of subcultures like style, lifestyle, music, image, values and ideology. These are said to provide a set of "symbolic resources" which individuals can draw upon or adopt, in order to project a particular image and hence achieve a different identity, thereby challenging the dominant social order. This in turn enables individuals to escape effectively their ascribed identities, and therefore (psychologically at least) to escape the problems which the ascribed categories entail." P. 24

Majority of matatu workers are young men from the poor neighborhoods and slums of Nairobi whose “ascribed identity” is the source of cheap labor in the matatu sector insofar as the capital versus labor dichotomy is concerned. Furthermore, matatu workers are often perceived as uneducated, rough and generally anti-social youth who are disposed to criminal activity. The matatu subculture offers these individuals a group identity and a platform to negotiate their relations and express their resistance to the dominant social order.

One such an opportunity to “talk back” to power and project their own identity is through the use of linguistic varieties, vocabulary and expressions that are non-standard, deviant and subversive. The language of choice in the matatu subculture is Sheng – a versatile and rapidly changing hybrid language that combines linguistic elements from Swahili, English and local languages and spoken by urban youth especially those from poor neighborhoods of Nairobi.

Sheng performs two core functions among the poor urban youth in the matatu subculture. First, Sheng promote unity, cohesion and identity among youth from diverse ethnic backgrounds and in the process, it becomes a tool to reject tribal identities often propagated by political class for their own gain. Secondly, Sheng is a means of expressing and promoting an anti-establishment ideology. The youth feel marginalized and alienated by the dominant political, social and economic order. In that context, Sheng allows them to not only challenge but also exclude the dominant culture from their own space and interactions.

The analysis of data revealed that whereas Sheng is popularly used in conversations among the matatu crews and their young clients, English and Kiswahili are also commonly used particularly in written texts that are found on and in matatus in the form of nicknames, catchwords and other artistic expressions. Sheng vocabulary commonly used among the matatu fraternity include those that describe relationships with other individuals and other entities like police and city council officers, matatu owners, drivers, conductors, touts, money (different denominations of the shilling), and general all activities that relate to matatu work.

The table below shows some Sheng vocabulary commonly used in among matatu workers and their clients; most of whom are typically urban youth.

Sheng	English	Sheng	English
Mathree	Matatu (generally)	Dau, doh, ganji, mkwanja, cheddar	Money
Nganya, mboko, mbogi, matwana, manyanga	“Cool” or “pimped” matatu	Brown, thao	1000 shillings
Wangora, mawe	“Un-pimped”, old matatu	Punch	500 shillings
Dere	Driver	Jil, rwabe	200 shillings
Donda, benje, konkodi	Conductor	Soo, red	100 shillings
Kamagera	Conductor’s assistant	Chwani, finje	50 shillings
Doh, ganji	Money	Salasa	30 shillings
Wasee wa seti	Passenger mobilizers	Mbao, mbaula	20 shillings
Shimo	Bus stop	Ashu, kinde	10 shillings
Karao, sanse, ponyi, danse, njako, sinya, beast/bist, akorino, ngalaste	Police officer (usually from traffic department)	Kobole, ngovo	5 shilling
Buda, bazenga	Elderly man/woman	Sare	Free ride
Sonko, mdosi	Rich man, boss	Kanjo	City council officer

Table 1: Commonly Used Sheng Vocabulary in Matatu Subculture

The sampled vocabulary above shows how the ability to use or understand that range of Sheng jargon creates a common identity and sense of belonging – whether as matatu workers or even passengers, most of whom are themselves young people from working class neighborhoods. Those from outside of this demographic group will not comprehend these terms.

Sheng plays an integral role in articulating and promoting various aspects of matatu subculture including expressing the values and issues that affect poor urban youth. In this context, the youth themselves have developed strategies to disseminate, preserve and appreciate matatu culture using various Internet based spaces and technologies including Face book, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube.

6.2. Matatu Naming as Identity and Resistance

The matatu (vehicle) is the primary object around which the matatu subculture is practiced. The competitive environment in which matatu business operates has led proprietors to use various means to gain more clients than their competitors. One of the ways is to make a matatu unique, comfortable and attractive to passengers through a process called pimping. Pimping is a process of customizing and adding extra features to a vehicle including body modification, painting,

distinct graffiti art, unique nickname and catch words, exterior as well as interior design, and installation of cutting edge electronic accessories for music, videos, Wi-Fi, among others.

Such a “pimped” matatu assumes an identity and a brand that both the crew and customers will identify themselves with. Furthermore, the more distinctive and attractive a matatu is, the more passengers it will have and this translates into more money for the owner and crew. Pimped matatus are fitted with state-of-the-art music systems and powerful speakers and screen to listen to and watch music.

That is partly why music genres popular among the youth (especially hip hop and dancehall) are the biggest sources of deviant matatu nicknames and catchphrases. Hip Hop emerged initially as movement of resistance, reclamation and empowerment by marginalized African American and Latino youth in South Bronx, New York. Dancehall is a subgenre of reggae music and it has its origins in Jamaica. Both of these styles have now spread to many urban spaces around the world, especially among working class youth who use it to project their identities, articulate their concerns and engage society on their conditions. The message and ideology resistance, deviance and rejection of dominant cultural values and practices resonate with the urban working-class youth.

Therefore, matatu naming is a critical aspect of identity but it can also be an expression of resistance and defiance. Many of the matatu nicknames are adapted from hip hop and dancehall stars and their top hits such as Vybz Kartel, Tupac Shakur, Lil Wayne, Lady Gaga, Eminem, Ne-Yo, The Game, 50 Cent, T.L.C., Despacito, Kanambo, Sauti Sol and many more. These nicknames on matatus may not mean anything to people outside the youth and other enthusiast of popular culture.

One artist with tremendous influence on the matatu subculture is Jamaican dancehall singer Vybz Kartel (his real name is Adidja Azim Palmer). He has several nicknames including Worl’ Boss, Addi the Teacher, Gaza Don, Gaza Emperor, and Daddy Devil. His most popular hits include The Teacher’s Back, Most Want, Fever, Western Union, The Voice of Jamaican Ghetto (Arrested but not Silenced), and Rambo Kanambo. On the streets of Nairobi, there are several matatus with one or more of Kartel’s many pseudonyms.

Behind those nicknames, the fact that in 2014, Vybz Kartel was convicted of the murder of his associate Clive “Lizard” Williams and sentenced to life in prison is hidden. Many passengers or members of the public on the streets of Nairobi do not know this. But to those within the matatu subculture, Kartel is a source of inspiration even with, or perhaps due to, his criminal record. It is claimed, ironically so, that Kartel has produced more hits from prison than when he was out of it. Sewer (2016) describes Kartel as the “defining artist” of dancehall who has become even more popular, more influential and more prolific from the confines of prison.



Figure 1: Matatu with Kartel's Nicknames

One of Kartel’s nicknames is Gaza Don and similarly, the catchphrase GAZA MI SEH!!! (I say Gaza) on the matatu as seen in the picture above makes reference to Gaza. Gaza is a Palestinian territory that is under Israeli blockade and is both the site and symbol of Palestinian resistance against Israeli occupation and oppression. Therefore, this is an allusion to symbolize

the ideology of resistance prevalent in the matatu subculture against perceived oppression by government agencies and by extension the broad social order.

Kanambo is perhaps the most ubiquitous moniker in the matatu subculture and there are several “siblings” that share this name under the umbrella of Royal Swift matatu sacco – they are distinguished by their numbers.



Figure 2: One of the “Kanambo” Matatus

Kanambo has even been adapted as a word within the matatu subculture to mean different things– the common meaning being a “threat to attack”. Below is an extract of Rambo Kanambo lyric:

Yo, CR...203
 Ghetto youth, when you hustle in the street, anuh joke thing
 Telephone ring
 Tell the earring anuh play thing
 A the food thing, a the house thing
 A the clothes dem, see the clothespin
 [Chorus]
 Rambo Kanambo
 Go fi the cash, wha' do Tango?
 We no bug shuffle, we a dweet in a one go
 Pon mi banana you can see no mango
 Get it?

The message targets young people from the ghet to who are hustling to earn a living, get food and clothing and so a vast majority of matatu workers identify with the situation. It does not matter that this message is propagated by an artist who is serving a life sentence. Secondly, the fact that a Caribbean artist can be so influential in the matatus, streets and “ghettos” of Nairobi emphasize the pervasive nature of popular culture in the world today. Thirdly, it indicates that resistance, assertiveness, rivalry and violence are values, beliefs and practices that members of the matatu subculture find appealing or intriguing.

Other than hip hop, reggae and dancehall musicians and their hits, matatu nicknames with messages of resistance, defiance and rebellion against what is considered to be an oppressive status quo are expressed by matatus named after freedom fighters and revolutionaries like Malcolm X, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Arafat, Mandela and others. These are political icons who led struggles to liberate their people in the irrespective societies and hence they inspire the marginalized youth to keep fighting for their own emancipation. Thousands of youth in the matatu sector are “hustlers” who have to endure poor working conditions including lack of job security (most of them only have verbal contracts), poor pay and working for long hours (Nafukho & Khayesi, 2002).

6.3. Rebuking Corruption through Sarcasm and Parody

The matatu sector is a private enterprise that begun in the 1950s as an illegal commercial enterprise of transporting people into Nairobi from poor neighborhoods (Khayesi, 1999). During that time, public transport in the city was a preserve of the city council. Even after matatus were allowed to operate legally following a presidential decree in 1973, the operators had perennial conflicts with the authorities because they tended to detest and resist regulation, control and oversight by the city council and other government agencies. For instance, the implementation of the Road Transport Act (2013) popularly known

as the “Michuki rules” that sought to bring order and discipline while eliminating cartels and criminal activities within the sector, was met with stiff resistance and violent protests from matatu workers.

This anti- regulation and anti-government stance, therefore, seems to suggest an underlying ideology of resistance within the matatu subculture. The predominantly poor urban youth feel the need to rise up against marginalization and also to defend their space. In this context, the matatu itself provides a space to express these anti-establishment sentiments through their nicknames, catchwords and other artistic expressions. Conversations and other communicative practices among matatu workers including the use of coded language and signs, Sheng and slang vocabulary are meant to solidify the identity and unity of matatu workers and at the same time display their frustration and protest against governmental agencies especially policy makers and law enforcement agents.

The antipathy towards law enforcement officers - especially the traffic police – among matatu crew is both passionate and widespread. In their efforts to enforce the traffic act and other relevant rules, the traffic police are always in pursuit of matatu crews who often seek to circumvent those rules. This leads to police officers demanding bribes in order to let the crew break established rules – a practice that has led to widespread corruption in the sector.

In a bid to avoid conflict with police officers, matatu crews, especially drivers and conductors have designed a communication system using gestures, hand or vehicular signs and jargon to alert their colleagues whenever police officers mount road blocks for vehicle inspection or speed checks on the highways. For example, a matatu crew will use two-finger sign to indicate the presence of police checks or shout out in Sheng “mabeast wako area” (literally “the beasts are around”) – a demonstration of the contempt with which matatu crew view law enforcement officers. There is a wide variety of Sheng words that refer to police officer including karau/karao, gova, sinyo, njako, ponyi, sanse, danse, bist – meaning that new labels keep emerging to maintain confidentiality and exclusion.

In spite (or perhaps because) of the antagonistic relationship between police department and matatu workers, it is common to find matatu nicknames and catchwords that ridicule or mock the police service or authorities in general. For instance, the picture below shows one side of a modified and beautified (‘pimped’) interior of a matatu nicknamed DUST.



Figure 3: Variation of NYPD inside DUST Matatu

The adaptation of the NYPD (New York Police Division) acronym as Nairobi Yetu Police Department (Our Nairobi Police Department) is a creative appropriation that ridicules the Kenyan police in the context of their control and regulation of matatu sector through practices that are perceived by matatu workers as oppression, harassment and exploitation. Apart from parodying the police department in Kenya, the reference to NYPD could, by means of implicatures, mean that the matatu operators symbolically associate and identify themselves with New York Police Division (instead of local police department). More fundamentally, however, such a figurative association with New York (where the hip hop movement began) accentuates the influence of hip-hop in the matatu subculture in Kenya.



Figure 4: Appropriation of 911 Emergency Numbers

The picture above shows the other side of the same matatu bearing a message "someone plz (please) call 9 one one (911) with an image of someone pointing a gun. This is an extended parody and mockery of the police department and the government in general. The police emergency telephone number for Kenya is 999 (and not 911 that is used in USA); again, an implication of the symbolic appreciation of American (Western) systems and values. Moreover, the 999 Kenya police emergency numbers has reportedly been out of service for decades.

Corruption is a critical problem not only in matatu sector but also in Kenya as a whole (Vallve, 2005). Ironically, matatu operators often view themselves as victims of this vice and therefore they express their disapproval of corruption through nicknames, catchphrases and graffiti. The matatu nicknamed "Eurobond" is one such example.



Figure 5: Matatu Mocking "Eurobond" Scandal

The graffiti on this matatu displays currency symbols for different countries across the globe, Japanese Yen, US dollar, Sterling Pound, European Euro, etc. But the targeted message is about the Eurobond scandal where the government lost shs. 176 billion (\$1.8 b) being proceeds from issue of Eurobonds in 2014. Critics say that this one of the biggest financial scandals to hit a Kenya government and it has not been resolved to date.

There is also a matatu christened "Computer Error" which ridicules the way government agencies often use that expression to cover up or attempt to explain their incompetence, corrupt and fraudulent practices once they are discovered. For instance, in 2009 a 9.2 billion shillings discrepancy was exposed in the budget, which was to be tabled in parliament by the finance minister. The minister denied it was a scheme to defraud Kenyans money and blamed the glitch on a "computer error". Another incident occurred during the closely contested 2013 presidential elections, when the electronic kit used to authenticate and transmit votes rejected an inordinately large number of votes. The head of the electoral commission explained that due to a "computer error", each rejected vote was being multiplied by a factor of eight.

Therefore, as "Eurobond" and "Computer Error" matatus (among others) ply the streets of Nairobi each day, they are a constant reminder to Kenyans that official corruption, incompetence and fraud exists in government and the dominant culture in general. Through these matatus, the subculture is sarcastically challenging the authorities and mocking their tolerance of graft and fraud while at the same time rejecting such status quo practices.

6.4. Anti-Social attitudes, Values and Practices

Matatu workers have been associated with antisocial behavior ranging from defying traffic rules, harassment of passengers and other motorists, assaulting women to extortion by Mungiki cartels that control matatu routes (Vallve, 2005). The Michuki rules sought to eliminate criminal elements from within the matatu workers and instill some discipline in public service transport operations. Among other rules, the matatu crews were required to wear uniforms and badges for ease of identification. Matatu graffiti was banned and the rules directed that matatus be painted with a single plain color with a yellow strip on the body of the vehicle. The matatu sector rejected these rules and held massive demonstrations to force the government not implement them. The government nevertheless enforced them from 2004 until 2014 when President Uhuru Kenyatta directed the authorities to allow matatu graffiti so that talented youth could earn a living from their creativity.

An analysis of language used in matatu subculture reveals apparent appeal to anti-social values, behaviors and practices such as violence, smoking bhang, lawlessness, gangs, sexist behaviors and promoting drug use. Some of the notable matatu nicknames that appear to promote anarchy, aggressive or deviant behavior include Necessary Noize, Bully wa Mtaa (Street bully), Heartless, Prison Break, and so on. Yet other names suggest control, power and domination (The Punisher, Catalyst, Street King); abnormal, irrational or delusional behavior (Mad Cat, Schizophrenic, Total Madness, Ecstasy).



Figure 6: "Twisted Herb" Matatu

The picture above shows that the graffiti work on the matatu nicknamed Twisted Herb blatantly promotes the smoking of marijuana. The catchwords "Rastafarians", "Rasta" together with images of marijuana leaves, Bob Marley and the Rastafarian color scheme all appeal to this drug. Marijuana and dreadlock hairstyle are some of the distinctive hallmarks of the Rastafarian movement. However, in Kenya, marijuana is classified as an illegal drug whose possession or use is a criminal offense. Yet, Twisted Herb defiantly promotes marijuana alongside other subversive practices of the Rastafarian movement in blatant disregard of the law. This illustrates the manifest rebellious attitudes, beliefs and practices commonly found in the matatu subculture inspired by global radical ideologies and movements such as Rastafarianism and hip-hop.



Figure 7: Back View of "Twisted Herb" Matatu

The picture above shows the graffiti on the rear side of the same matatu, which presents marijuana as an "international herb"; suggesting that many people beyond the national borders appreciate marijuana. At the same time, creative use of stylistic devices, namely pun (word play) and parallelism are evident. "Vela Added Talent" is a pun or wordplay of Value Added Tax (VAT), a tax levied on the purchase of goods and services in Kenya. The use of parallel constructions in "Positive Vibes", "Positive Mind", "Positive Life" suggests that one's feelings and mind determine the kind of life one leads.

6.5. Competition and Rivalry

The matatu sector is extremely competitive. This means that investors in this sector, graffiti artists and matatu crews have to look for means of gaining a competitive advantage over their rivals within the same route or from different routes in the city. In a man-eat-man society such as this one, it is survival for the fittest.



Figure 8: Competitive (Man-Eat-Man) Society

That is why matatu owners spend millions of shillings to pimp their matatus and make them stand out through unique body designs, color schemes and graffiti, names and catch phrases as well as comfortable seats, powerful music and television screens, Wi-Fi, CCTV, among other extras. The "hottest" and flashiest matatus are identified and then promoted in youth oriented social media platforms labeled Matwana Matatu Culture, Matatu Galore and Sheng Talk Matatu Edition whereby

pictures and videos of these matatus are shared on Face book, Twitter, You Tube and Instagram. Evidently, the Internet plays a huge role in the advancement and preservation of the activities, values and practices of the matatu subculture. Positive representation and promotion gives such matatus a definite advantage over their competitors in the business.

Occasionally, the rivalry between matatus degenerates into aggressive and even violent confrontations. But typically, inter-matatu rivalry is expressed and practiced indirectly through the display of nicknames, coded catch phrases and quotes embodied in the graffiti. These nicknames denote toughness, intimidation and assertiveness and they can be written in English, Swahili, Sheng or mixture of all three. Examples of such names include Mack Bully, Bully wa Mtaa (Street Bully), The Destroyer, The Punisher, Phantom 808, Sparxx(sparks), Kifaru (Rhinoceros), Prison Break, World Boss, Street King, Street Legal, 007 SkyFall, 007 Military Intelligence, and catchphrases like "Burning in the Skies", "Silence is defeat", "Harder than the rest", "Bite the dust", "Style up or bow down", "Ain't no stop in", "Shut Up", "Hit the floor", and so on.

Others messages are meant to ridicule, mock and tease the competitors who may be envious of the matatu that bears those coded messages. The messages are typically displayed on the rear windscreen (known as "the haters' screen" in matatu jargon) or on the sides of the vehicle. Some examples include:

- "To haters, your opinion is as useless as 'ea' in 'Tea': this is the same as saying "we don't care what you say or think (about this matatu)".

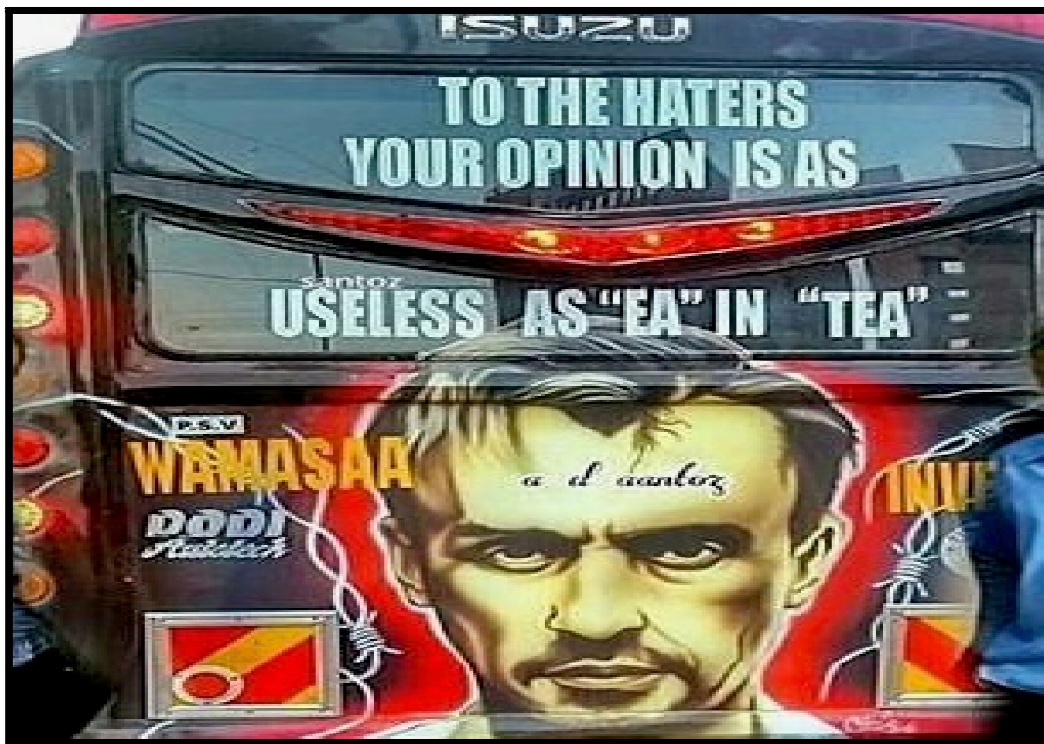


Figure 9: "Haters' Screen Messages

- "Sikuchukii, nakudharau" (I don't hate you, I just despise you): this one contemptuously mocks the competition.
- "Ka nyinyi mawika, basi sisi tunanguruma" (Literally "if you are crowing, then we are roaring") – meaning that "if you think you are doing well, we are doing much better" or "if you think your matatu is good, then this one is the best".
- "After hi, mtabaki na hicups (sic) kwa macho" (Literally "after this one, you will begin having hiccups with your eyes") – this is a message to competitors that they should not be envious of this (stylish) matatu because a more elegant one is on the way.

7. Conclusion

Matatu subculture is situated within wider cultural structures including youth culture, working class culture and the Kenyan cultural set up as a whole. Therefore, rather than being autonomous, matatu subculture is intricately connected and bound by these other social-cultural contexts. However, this study has demonstrated that, matatu subculture has a set of values, beliefs, attitudes and practices that significantly deviate from those of the larger Kenyan society – this serves to create a distinct identity for urban youth engaged in this sector. There are various avenues through which this identity, ideology and value system is negotiated and articulated such as music, dress, material artifacts, symbols and language.

This study focused on how the matatu subculture is articulated and conveyed through various linguistic aspects (including style, jargon and slang) and the role of Sheng, matatu nicknames and catchwords as well as other symbolic means of communication. Using principles of discourse analysis and stylistics, the study has shown that the matatu subculture is

propagated by marginalized urban youth who work in exploitative conditions and who have, as a result, have constructed subversive identities and practices. Their display of deviance, resistance and challenge to authorities, either overtly or symbolically, can be explained as an attempt to assert them and protect their territorial space.

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