

Book Review

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Kenda Mutongi, *Matatu: A History of Popular Transportation in Nairobi* (Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 2017); 350pp., £22.50, ISBN 978-0226471396.

Reviewed by: Gordon Pirie, *University of Cape Town, South Africa*

The published history of urban transport in Africa has just had an enormous boost. Mutongi's marvellous analysis of postcolonial minibus taxi transport in Nairobi is such a welcome record and such a remarkable injection of insight.

Drawing on a decade or so of annual research visits to Nairobi, Mutongi has written a history of the matatu 'from below'. As she remarks, there is no formal archival record of this indigenous transport industry that owes everything to spirited, resilient, audacious entrepreneurs who often operated beyond surveillance by city authorities. Anyway, their blindness, silence and inaction could also be bought. Twelve newspapers and magazines, and conversations and interviews with seventy-two Kenyans, are the bedrock of the book; their veracity is triangulated against one another and with government reports and a vast number of academic sources. The 'Popular Transportation' history is one peopled by myriad figures whose livelihoods are in and around the matatu industry: owners, drivers, touts, cleaners, mechanics, passengers, artists and enforcers.

Explosive urban growth, poverty and inadequate public bus transport, spurred the rise of the matatu in the 1960s. Enterprising owners of mostly improvised and ramshackle vehicles sensed a commercial opportunity to carry increasing numbers of people who had grown tired of walking to far-away bus stops to wait for overcrowded buses. The matatus nimbly steered alternate routes, connecting the sprawling city more adeptly, more frequently, and at lower cost. Convenience and affordability trumped comfort and safety.

The die was set for the emergence of a staggeringly successful, home-grown, locally owned transport enterprise. It is one, indeed, that almost defines Nairobi, touching every life and every corner. It is neither a story of collaborative or consultative transport planning nor one of centralised planning of land use and transportation. Rather, it is a 'southern' inflection of demand-led transport service. Or, better perhaps, of struggle-led transportation. Legislators, bureaucrats, bus and sedan taxi operators, commuters, matatu owners and drivers have all battled their way to the mobility now so deeply and widely installed in and constitutive of Nairobi.

Mutongi's *Matatu* reveals the ideological and physical clashes in a succession of superb chronological chapters. Hers is no bland homage to astonishing vehicles on a spectrum from contraption to flashy, luxury minibus. Their disparate features and use have long made visitors gasp and click. There's been even more gasping – not to say outrage – from past matatu passengers, competitors and city transport officials. Mutongi does not shy away from the penumbra of an industry that has kept Nairobi moving. At various moments, and in various degrees, there has been criminality and corruption: bribery, deceit, extortion, ethnic favouritism, abuse, brutality, murder. And a lot of accidental death. But Mutongi's text also notes the resolve and resourcefulness of the decolonised citizenry behind and inside the matatus. Among others, the matatu confronted a preferred (and partly corrupt) bus industry, febrile and duplicitous government, banning and spying and racketeering. It squared off to considerable public ambivalence or even hostility, and, most probably, had to weather cunning dealings over private automobility.

Mutongi is politically alert throughout. She puzzles about President Kenyatta's mysterious 1973 lifting of licensing requirements from matatus. Ten years later, in a reverse stunt, another autocratic President bolstered his own position by insisting on licensing. Posturing, arbitrariness, contradictions and hypocrisy abounded. Muddle, misfortune and counter-strategizing ensued. Then came consolidation, exclusion, politicisation, parasitism and gangsterism. In the 1990s, garish new minibuses, blaring hip-hop music and a hybrid argot spoken in matatus were associated with social and political criticism, and created a new cultural edge in Nairobi. It is a racy tale.

In her ethnographic analysis running up to 2014, Mutongi's artful balancing of the cursed (anarchy, harassment) and blessed (livelihoods, service) aspects of matatus has one reflecting on the wholesomeness and integrity of the orderly and sanitised histories of urban transport that emerge from official records in other cities. Readers familiar with incarnations of mass minibus mobility in other cities will ponder the similarities of chaos, compromise and cosmopolitanism, and the common one-sided, top-down denigration.

Crucially, the corrective in *Matatu* is that transport assemblages characteristic of cities in the global North are 'conventional' only there. Quite different conventions have been made and worked through in Nairobi. Colonists travelled with one set of ideas about ideal city transport. There was no template for decolonised transport in post-colonial Nairobi. Mutongi's is a hustle history of ever-evolving, spontaneous, suitable and sustainable transport. Of people's transport, indeed. No single luminary declared purpose, design or fitness. This is not to say that special interests did not hijack Nairobi's adaptive transport, or that sectarianism never sullied differently organised urban mass transport.

Mutongi's authoritative deconstruction and story-telling dazzles. Her *Matatu* becomes the baseline and re-entry point for African minibus research. Her antenna are acutely sensitive. Her phrasings are a treat. Not least, her gorgeously written and accessible presentation is testimony to the enduring value of books as vehicles for argument, learning and pleasure. This book glows with stamina, patient inquiry

and careful thought. Its coherence, layering and depth far surpass online capsule histories (even though the twenty-nine illustrations are just two-tone and not interactive). Note only that social media posts about matatus are among Mutongi's sources.

Matatu slices with diamond-tipped tools. May there be more such glinting dissections of urban transport history in Africa.