

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ART IN THE MATWANA MATATU CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Background: EA description of Kenyan culture would be incomplete without the inclusion of the buses and mini-buses colloquially known as matatus that make up a large part of the country's public transport system. This is because these vehicles comprise a fascinating facet of the country's pop culture. *Problem:* Matwana matatu culture is one of its kind and it is our role as Kenyans to embrace, preserve and pass the culture to the future generations. *Objective:* The main objective of this study is to analyze the Matwana matatu culture's sense of style, creativity, inspiration culture as a heritage of this country and East Africa at large. *Design:* In this study we used qualitative methods to analyze the incredible works of the digital graffiti artists. The source of data include; journals, blogs and websites. *Setting:* The study is being conducted in Nairobi, Kenya. *Subject:* The subject of this study is the artists and promoters of the Matwana matatu culture. *Results:* Studying Matwana matatu culture was quite interesting and inspiring. The study enabled us to appreciate the culture and the works of ambitious airbrush artists behind the impressive graffiti artworks. *Conclusion:* The Matwana matatu culture is part of us as Kenyans and East Africans. Indeed, we have incredible creativity within our sons and daughters for creating a movement that we can call our own.

1.0 BACKGROUND

A description of Kenyan culture would be incomplete without the inclusion of the buses and mini-buses colloquially known as matatus that make up a large part of the country's public transport system. This is because these vehicles comprise a fascinating facet of the country's pop culture.

'Moving discos', 'moving museums' and 'matatu menace' are some of the phrases used to describe matatus and the culture at large in Nairobi. They exhibit colourful artwork on their exterior and interior, announcing their presence with thunderous music as they hustle their way through traffic in the Kenyan capital.

After independence, Kenya had a well established public transportation service owned and operated by the government. They charged thirty cents at the time and the name of the coins in the Kikuyu language gave rise to the word 'matatu'.

As with any free market, price alone was not enough to attract customers, particularly the youth. Matatu owners had to think laterally to tap into this market. Differentiation started with the installation of music systems and quickly moved on to artwork on the sides of the buses. These featured all manner of messages and celebrities such as hip hop artists, TV and movie stars, footballers and even religious messages. Matatus came to sport customized bodies, with lively LED lights lining the interior and exterior. This was finished off with large flat-screen monitors on the front deck. Some matatus have gone further, including screens on the back of every seat, Wi-Fi, power sockets, CCTV and flat screens on the outside of the vehicles.

Brian Wanyama, or Graff, as he is popularly known on the streets of Nairobi, has been cataloging Kenya's matatu culture through online platforms for 11 years.

He grew up in Nairobi's Buru Buru, where many of Nairobi's garages are located. He had the opportunity to witness first-hand as matatus were fabricated from scratch. This included body paneling, glass fitting, the installation of seats and TV screens and, most intriguing for him, the paintwork. He took photos of the newest matatus in town and uploaded them on Facebook one day and the response was amazing; many people shared his posts. He, therefore, decided to create social media pages dedicated to matatus and now he runs the popular Matwana Matatu Culture pages on Instagram and Facebook.

Matwana matatu culture is one of its kind and it is our role as Kenyans to embrace, preserve and pass the culture to the future generations.

Most of the 20,000 or so matatus that operate in Nairobi are embellished with drawings, hand-painted portraits and bold, unique designs.

When we stand by the road, we don't see buses and mini-vans, we see art. We see Kenyan pop culture coming to life. Of particular note is the striking artwork that covers both the interior and exterior of the matatus, with every matatu trying to be flashier and more attractive than the rest.

The matatu that I board on my way to town is no different. Its name, "The Beast", is emblazoned in golden-plated metal grilles across its body. It has numerous paintings of former US President Barack Obama, who happens to have his roots in Kenya. Inside, the decked matatu has no fewer than a dozen LCD screens, which are complemented by a quKartarty audio system.



The 'night-club-on-wheels' ambience is further enhanced by strobe lights that flash around the window frames. In addition, fast and free Wi-Fi is provided on board.

One of the places where vehicles like The Beast get spruced up is Moha Graffix, a garage located in the heart of Eastleigh in Nairobi. DN2 arrives at the workspace at about noon to find the garage's proprietor, 39-year-old Mohammed Kartar, on his knees, sketching a design on the body of a matatu.

Standing around him are about 20 of his students and assistants, who observe every movement of their trainer's hands with the keenness of medical interns watching their boss conduct a brain surgery. Kartar is wearing earphones which, he says, block out distractions from the outside world. He later reveals that the earpieces also help prevent him from hearing any comments about his work by onlookers.

1.1 Work of Art

For two hours, all work has stopped at the garage as workers and passers-by mill around Kartar to watch him do what he does best, turning a plain vehicle body into an attractive work of art. Today he is translating the image of American Christian hip hop artist, Lacrae, onto a 14-seater mini-bus. Were it not for the continuous hum of a generator that powers Kartar's airbrush one could have heard a pin drop in the garage.

When Kartar declares that he is finally done, the crowd gives a brief round of applause before dashing to take selfies with the newly decorated ride. He says it takes him about two days to work on a mini-van and five days to decorate a bus. The artwork costs about Sh60,000 for a small van and can go up to Sh200,000 for a bus.

Meanwhile, Mr Ken Deya, the owner of the matatu which Kartar has just named Christhood, seems happy with Kartar's work.

This matatu used to ply an upcountry route but he wanted to use it in Nairobi. He put it on the road for two weeks but it was getting very few customers because Nairobians, especially the youth, wouldn't board a matatu that wasn't hip. That's why He brought it to Moha so that he can make it more attractive



to help me increase my profit margins.

2.2 Objective

The main objective of this study is to analyze the Matwana matatu culture's sense of style, creativity, inspiration, culture as a heritage of this country and East Africa at large.

Generally matatus are known for their wild driving, loud music, and equally loud artwork. Some people do not consider the artwork on them an expressive art form, but as offensive drawings. It was this school of thought that led to a ban on matatu artwork in 2004 as part of the government's plan to rein in the industry. Apart from a standard yellow stripe, nothing else was permitted on the public service vehicles.

The ban was lifted only a decade later, when a new government came to power. Kartar was hit extremely hard by the ban and was forced to lay off more than half his staff.

On the other side of Nairobi in the affluent suburb of Lavington is the Circle Art Gallery, inside of which hang magnificent matatu artwork by one of Kenya's leading contemporary artists, Dennis Muraguri.

Muraguri, who has been an artist for 13 years, uses painting, printmaking, installations and sculpturing for his body of work inspired by matatus. He credits the Circle Art Gallery for supporting him when he exhibited at the 1:54 international Contemporary Art Fair in London.

2.0 CONCLUSION

Studying Matwana matatu culture was quite interesting and inspiring. The study enabled us to appreciate the culture and the works of ambitious airbrush artists behind the impressive graffiti artworks. The Matwana matatu culture is part of us as Kenyans and East Africans. Indeed we have incredible creativity within our sons and daughters for creating a movement that we can call our own.

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