



# MATATUISM

STYLING A REBEL



ODIRA MOREWABONE



Royal Anthropological Institute

*Anthropology & Photography No. 11*

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# Anthropology & Photography

is an open-access RAI publication series edited by the RAI Photography Committee. Emerging from the international conference of the same name organized by the RAI at the British Museum in 2014, the series will highlight and make available to the widest possible audience the best new work in the field.

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X-TREME

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093



FRANKS ARTS THEATRE  
Panggung  
Hutan  
Birinci

A poster for 'Hutan Birinci' (The First Forest) is displayed on the side of the bus. It features a cartoon character with a large head and a small body, set against a background of trees. The text includes 'FRANKS ARTS THEATRE' and 'Panggung Hutan Birinci'.

Star



**DESTINY**

STANDING ON THE PROMISES OF THE LORD

36

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# MATATUISM: STYLING A REBEL

**MATATUISM:  
STYLING A REBEL**

**SETTING TRENDS AND  
REBELLING**

*Matatu*, as they are known in Kenya, are an informal system of privately owned minibus share-taxis that provide public transportation. They are known for their exuberant visual style, and for operating on fixed routes with no fixed timetable. *Matatu* drive into both personal and public lives as sound, rhythm, colour, creativity and brash male bravado. They are an assault on all the senses.

The *matatu* environment is often a contradictory and ironic space. You might see a sticker reminding you of road safety, yet the driver's seatbelt is generally open, and he will be ready to make an illegal and most likely dangerous driving manoeuvre to pick up a passenger. This is how some of these trendsetting men assert that they operate by different rules. The world of the *matatu* is a competitive one, a game of creative one-upmanship – creative both in the artistic sense and in terms of cutting corners and illegal road behaviour.



SPOLLER

MIWAMBA SACCO

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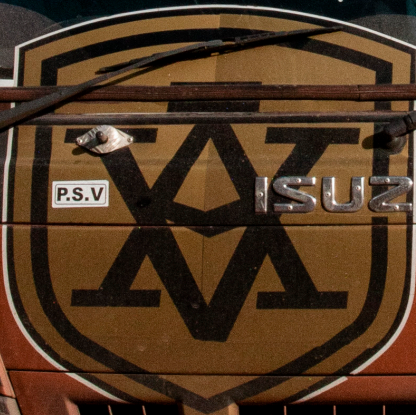
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ADRIAN HOTEL

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LOVE PATENT



IF GOD SAYS YES WHO YOU ARE TO SAY

ISUZU

NO

FEDERAL RESERVE NOTE  
AE 77665544B

UNITED  
OFAM



THIS NOTE IS LEGAL TENDER  
TO ALL LADIES AND GHETTO MEN



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TREND IS  
SHORT  
STYLE  
IS FOREVER



Almamba

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Autotech



ISUZU



MAHASIDI TUNAWAACHIA MOLA

KCF-141X

**VISUALISING A REBEL**

**LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND  
INFLUENCE**

A *matatu*, by definition, is never full – it may look as if it is, but there is always room for one more passenger. Which has led to the coining of the popular *matatuism*: ‘Always room for one more sardine.’ As the old saying goes, ‘You don’t ride a *matatu*, you experience it.’

The writings and drawings on the *matatu*, which mainstream society considers ‘graffiti’, are regarded by the *matatu* operators as artistic expression. Given the infiltration of American hip-hop culture in Kenya (as in many other countries), a trend adhering to common hip-hop themes has emerged, using names and images relating to hustling, rappers, money etc. It could be argued that some crews also use the naming of their vehicles as an opportunity to create a glamorous and romantic image of themselves, with slogans such as, ‘FLIGHT CLUB’, ‘SPOILER’, ‘FROST’, ‘VERSACE’ etc. In themselves, *matatu* decorations/ inscriptions can be seen as a shorthand by which they evoke ideas and practices in politics, religion, culture and current affairs (local and international).







FAN FEST

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**SPEAKING LIKE A REBEL**

**SPOKEN AND UNSPOKEN  
LANGUAGES**

In Nairobi, Sheng, a form of slang that mixes Kiswahili and English, is the main currency for any ‘cool’ young person who values their ‘street cred’. According to folklore and some texts, this spoken language developed out of necessity as a means for the *matatu* crews of yesteryear to communicate with each other without the understanding of the police, with whom Matatu crews regularly have dealings with – for example, through bribes to avoid being charged with traffic offences.

Despite its subsequent spread from the social margins to the middle class, Sheng is in constant flux, as a dynamic phenomenon with new lexemes and semantic meanings coming in while others are phased out, it is already outdated the moment it is captured on a page.



*Ambitious*



HIACE













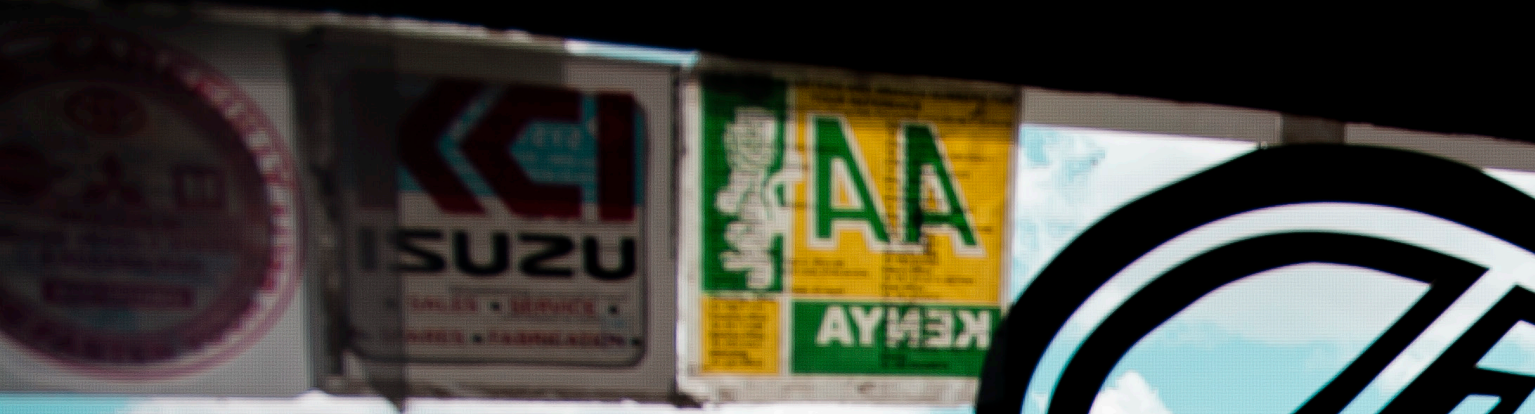
**LIFE OF A REBEL**

**A SUBCULTURAL AND  
CREATIVE WORKSPACE**

There's a clear record of many of Nairobi's underground musicians having had stints as *matatu* crew. They record music in home studios and hawk it on the *matatu*, an environment that means they are strategically placed to understand the everyday realities of urban life, especially in relation to young people. Marginality, a popular theme within urban youth, including many *matatu* crew, is inevitably a predominant element within this urban underground music. Most of the music distributed through *matatu* networks is rarely played on mainstream platforms. So this outlet is an important way for youth to circumnavigate 'taste censorship' enforced by the mainstream culture and the radio stations. Given that thousands of youth ride *matatus* on a daily basis, it can be seen that the messages in this music gets a wide reception.







*Stip*



*2020*



UJMNWOMU



**WHAT IS  
A SUBCULTURE?**

**MATATU MEN AND THEIR  
TRENDS**



As a young person, there is a strong desire to be seen to have ‘SWAG’ (a style of speaking, walking, dressing and ‘being’), simultaneously identifying with and setting yourself apart from peers. Thus, for Nairobi’s youth, *matatu* are important agents of cultural change: not only their artistic creativity but also their social prestige within youth groups turns *matatu* crews into trendsetters whose innovations are soon imitated by wider parts of the population. For example, linguistic innovations are picked up by Nairobi’s underground musicians, who use these terms in their lyrics, ensuring their omnipresence in everyday spoken language and an up to date connection with youth culture.

The pithy names of *matatu*, clearly visible on their sides, front and back, offers a glimpse into their worlds and, more importantly, the associated mentality and way of thinking. The designs are meant to represent the swaggering individuality of the *matatu* crew, a particular articulation of the *matatuist* ethos that carries over into youth culture more generally. Thus it would seem the philosophy of the *matatu* is a credo that encourages people to flout the law, doing whatever it takes to get ahead in life.



GATUA NG'ONGO

GOD IS GOOD

0725585852

TUMUSIFU

MUIGANA SACCO

BWANA

IYEGO KWAO

MITSUBISHI

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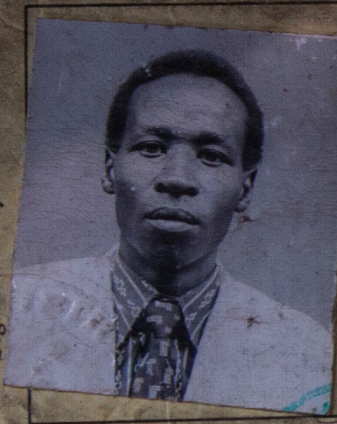
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Date 23.8.95

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