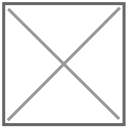




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## **Matatus... is small-scale transportation becoming trendy?**



Submitted by [Forum Vies Mobiles](#) on Wed, 03/29/2017 - 14:58

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Matatus... is small-scale transportation becoming trendy?

Chapô

Like in many African cities, Nairobi's minibuses are an informal mode of collective transportation that emerged due to a lack of efficient public transportation. As in many other cities, the latter ultimately disappeared as a result of competition from this type of minibus, which offers residents travel options in the form of fragmented collective transport services. Economic crises and the liberalization of the sector underlie the emergence of this system. In this context, this informal system meets both mobility and employment needs.

Continent

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In the majority of African cities, minibuses, collective taxis and motorcycle taxis zigzag through the streets in search of passengers, occasionally respecting hypothetical bus stops. Informal transportation takes different forms depending on the city. Minibuses can be found from Jakarta to Lima, and from Brazzaville to Nairobi, whereas motorcycle taxis are increasingly popular in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Cotonou and Lomé. Whatever their configuration, informal transportation unarguably provides mobility solutions to a large portion of the population. Nonetheless it is often regarded as archaic and outdated. Effectively, the sector's economic model often gives prominence to the competition and apparent disorganization. The lack of maps and schedules, the aging vehicles and the air/noise pollution are part of this outdated image. In the collective imagination, however, informal transportation opposes the model of modernity and development of centralized, highly-regulated, European transportation systems spread by official discourse. Informal transportation systems are poorly documented; travelers use word of mouth to plan their journeys, as comprehensive knowledge of the transportation system is inexistent. The lack of a database is also problematic for public authorities desirous to formalize or regulate the sector.

Yet today, informal collective transportation still enables the daily mobility of millions of city dwellers throughout the world. The variety of situations is undeniable. However, as we will see taking the case of *matatus*, the outdated nature of informal collective transportation can be questioned. The use of buses as a means of cultural and artistic expression, along with the growing use of new technologies, has given rise to a new form of modernity in informal collective transportation. <br /> <br />

## **Nairobi: a classic case of informal collective transportation?**

<br /> Today, the Kenyan capital of Nairobi is facing a number of traffic problems. Since the economic crisis and liberalization of transportation in 1973, *matatus* have been the dominant mode of transportation for the majority of the city's 3 million inhabitants, more than half of whom are under 20<sup>1</sup>. The 15-seat minibuses' decor is highly personalized, with artwork, fluorescent tubing, powerful sound systems and screens. The name *matatu* comes from the Swahili *tatu*, which means "three": when the service first appeared, the trip fare was equivalent to three 10-cent coins.

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Another feature makes *matatus* an original example in the informal collective transportation landscape. Ever since they appeared, drivers have personalized their *matatus*, thus making them a means of artistic expression. More or less fashionable, they sport the colors of popular football teams or fashionable brands. The *mchongoano* - popular poetic and/or humoristic expressions - blossom in the mouths of criers or in the form of stickers. The vehicles are decorated by local artists, who

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## **Matatus serving the mobility transition?**

<br /> Increased motorized mobility is not a sustainable solution for many reasons that we will not specify here. This process was notably observed in North America and Europe in the 20th century, with the massive spread of the automobile. Informal collective transportation is currently present in contexts with a low motorization rate<sup>[6]</sup>. Moving this bus system into the digital age as the means of achieving a mobility transition in countries with low motorization rates could offer an alternative to increasing the number of individual cars. These countries would avoid, or at least help to mitigate, car dominance and its negative externalities. Looking further ahead, we can envisage the use of electric buses (and accompanying infrastructure) through national or international subsidies, or private investments.

Indeed, this new mode of collective transportation could help to cause a shift towards smoother, more sustainable daily mobility. By combining informal transportation and new technology, *matatus* are an innovation whose spread will be interesting to observe. This system gives digital structure to informal transportation while maintaining flexibility due to the lack of centralization. The use of new technology and the personalized vehicles make this mode trendy and accessible, especially among young people — a potentially credible alternative to the individual car?

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The low motorization rate naturally influences the "popularity" of *matatus* and the use of informal transportation in general. The transfer of such alternative modes to contexts where individual car ownership is facilitated raises serious questions. The artistic dimensions, personalization of the vehicles or technophile outfittings alone are not sufficient incentive for a modal shift. Nevertheless, those features could be combined with added innovative flexibility to the planned, rigid public transportation services of North countries.

The modeling of a collective taxi service similar to informal transportation has shown promising results. In the case of Lisbon, the use of more flexible, connected public transportation would, among other things, reduce CO2 emissions, improve

accessibility and generate considerable financial and space savings. It remains to be seen how this type of organization can be developed.

Ubers and the UberPool carpool option might initially appear as a solution. However, the economic and social characteristics of this system are not sustainable and rather are a reflection of a logic of profit and the exploitation of drivers, and as such does not correspond to the inclusive vision of a flexible transportation system.

Finally, two convergent movements can be observed: the increase in connections within an already flexible transportation system in Nairobi's case and the flexibilization of an already connected transportation system in Lisbon. Flexibility and connection could serve as two pillars in a sustainable (r)evolution of collective transportation in both Souths and Norths. <br /> <br /> © Pictures by Cyrill Villemain <br />

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