Moving Texts: Popular Inscriptions/Slogans in *Matatus* as Protest Discourse

Maina T. Sammy

Department of Literature, Linguistics, Foreign languages and Film Studies,
Moi University E-mail: Mainasanchez@gmail.com ; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9117-4374-3596-2233

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Abstract

Many scholars have explored the crucial role oral literature played in the struggle for liberation and self-determination on the African continent. It is well established that African poets, authors, and musicians communicated their angst and outrage over colonization through poems, songs, proverbs, and folktales. Some studies also highlight how oral literature continues to drive protest discourse in post-colonial Africa. However, very little consideration has been put into how new forms of oral literature embody the struggles of the modern man. This study investigates matatu sayings as a 'new' frontier for protest discourse. Matatu slogans have received fresh attention in recent years as an emerging genre of oral literature. In Kenya, the matatu sector has played a key role in the country's biggest political battles, including the struggle for multi-parties and economic reforms in the late 90s. This study explores the history, arching themes, and language of matatu slogans. It finds that the culture of matatu protest has transitioned over the years from violent rallies and music to witty and satirical protest texts. The paper reviews these texts through a political lens to expose the politically charged atmosphere contained within the matatu interior. It subjects the 150 matatu slogans collected from matatus in Nakuru and Eldoret Cities to Critical Discourse Analysis and the Speech Act Theory to find that matatu slogans are a muted but powerful literary tool that the matatu man, an often-disregarded member of society, uses to self-identify, negotiate power dynamics, and inspire true change. This paper, thus, suggests that recognizing and studying matatu slogans in the context of protest discourse can reveal the social and political woes of the Kenyan society today. By extension, the paper suggests that exploring new orature forms in a similar light can expose how protest discourse is adapting to the rapidly evolving realities of the continent.

Key Words: *Moving Texts, Matatu Slogans, Protest Discourse, Eldoret, Nakuru, Sticker Lore*

INTRODUCTION

Africa has a long history of protest. From slavery and colonization to the more recent ills of neo-colonial dictators, protests have proven an effective means to negotiate power. Protests communicate that the people are dissatisfied and that those in power must enact social change. Given the frequency, veracity, and outcomes of protests in Africa, it is only natural that protest discourse would infiltrate our songs, dances, stories, and oral literatures among other individual and collective acts. Waita (2013) explains that oral literature provided an effective communication channel during the fight for independence in Kenya. He argues that oral literature created, articulated, and communicated a "Mau Mau consciousness" among the people. Songs of the time recorded and dispersed the Mau Mau's struggle against the colonial masters, Dedan Kimathi's troubles in detention, his leadership, and a call for other people to join the struggle. Post-

independence, the troubles of African communities changed; and so did their protest discourse. Africans realized they did not have nearly as much freedom and democracy as they thought they would after the white man left (Calenda, 2021). Their focus thus turned to the unfair economic, social, and political conditions set up by their newly-elected indigenous leaders.

Protests in Africa today address the need for political change, police accountability, and suitable economic conditions. Modern protest discourse seems to be primarily targeted at corrupt leaders who waste national resources, long-serving dictators who refuse to hand over power, law enforcement officers who use excessive force, and similarly-acting stakeholders. In recent years, calls for justice and reform on the continent have sparked what Mueller (2018) calls "Africa's third wave of protests." However, as the world evolves, indeed as social media proliferation continues, the way Africans protest is evolving in complex ways. Social media allows instant mobilization and provides an alternative source of information in a time when mainstream media continues to be unreliable, censored by the governments of the day, or driven by economic gain.

But because much of the continent still does not have access to the internet or a smartphone (Pew Research Center, 2018), protest discourse remains alive in physical spaces. This is evident in the frequent transformation of public spaces into political arenas. Recent protests across the world have seen city squares, public parks, urban spaces, and commercial vehicles transform into platforms for political dialogue (Arora, 2014). Protestors transform these spaces through signs, graffiti, and slogans. While protesting unfair policies and decisions, the African community uses visual protest materials to explain their demands and relay their struggles (Kasanga, 2014). As Kasanga (2014) puts it, these signs best complement physical acts of protest like sit-ins and better explain the feelings, hopes, and dreams of the protestors. It is within this context that this study analyses the protest discourse of *matatu* slogans.

For the purpose of this study, protest is defined as a type of political persuasion or communication where the powerless, as it applies to the protest subject matter, voice their concerns and express dissent (Seargeant, 2022). Protest literature then becomes any literary work through which an author expresses dissent against the ruling political class, a social situation, or the status quo in general. John Stauffer, in the "foreword" to *American Protest Literature*, argues that protest literature is "all literature and no literature" (Trodd, 2006; p. xii). Stauffer believes that all works of literature can be considered protest literature because they communicate the lessons, concerns, values, beliefs, emotions, and assumptions of the author. Despite this vague classification, Stauffer is careful to assert that protest literature must contain "language that changes the society and self" (Trodd, 2006). Veteran protestor Howard Zin defines protest literature as "any form of communication that engages social consciousness and may move someone to action" (Gewertz, 2005). Following Zin's analysis, works of protest literature work in two ways. They may notify us of issues in society we were previously unaware of and shock us into action. Or they may challenge our beliefs through satire.

Slogans are short and catchy statements or phrases that evoke emotion, capture attention, or inspire thought. While primarily used in advertising (Kohl, 2011), they can have applications in the political, religious, cultural, and social arenas. In societal and cultural conversations, slogans convey the everyday realities of their authors. In political discourse, they rally the masses to take action in defence of their interests, identities, or existence (Sharp, 1984). Politicians also use slogans for "popular persuasion" during political campaigns (Lu, 1999; p.7). Slogans are often written down and chanted during protests. They often appear on billboards, city walls, protest placards, the sides of residential buildings, or on commercial vehicles. This study focuses on the

latter, specifically on the commercial vehicles that ply Kenyan streets – *matatus.* Mutongi (2017) has called for an ethnography of the artists who design the stickers, the *matatu* operators who obtain and place them on their vehicles and the publics who use public service vehicles. This perspective is also reiterated by Wa-Mungai (2003) who underlies the importance of analysing aspects of *matatu* culture such as slogans within the political context which determines their mode of existence.

Matatus are privately-owned commercial vehicles used to transport the public in Kenya. The business is not unique to the country and the *matatu* has equivalents, more or less, in other parts of Africa, including the *Dala Dala* in Tanzania, *Kia Kia* in Benin, and *Kabu Kabu* in Nigeria. The *matatu* is the most popular and most widely used means of transportation in Kenya. Chitere (2004) and Klopp (2011) confirm that the commuter vehicles carry about 80 percent of the Nairobi population every day. The *matatu* sector is also a major employer, providing jobs to over 160,000 people, most of them young men below thirty-five (Chitere & Kibua, 2004; Chitere, 2004; Khayesi, 1997). *Matatu* slogans are, therefore, short catchy statements displayed on or inside *matatus*. They are usually mounted on the seat or on the car frame inside the *matatu* or displayed on the body or the windows of the matatu and are intended for passenger consumption. Kayi (2016) characterizes *matatu* slogans as "an important source of information." And because they use visual and verbal elements similar to political posters and other advertisements, Demarmels (2016) and Kasanga (2014) aver that these slogans are a form of discourse.

A report in *Article 19* (2022) finds that Kenyan authorities continually infringe on the constitutionally-safeguarded right of Kenyans to protest. According to the report, state apparatus, including the police force, use harassment, obstruction, and violence to "discourage, prevent, or disperse protests." The report also points to negative public attitudes, marginalization, and stigmatization of protestors exacerbated by negative media coverage as factors that limit the rights of protestors. In such an environment, alternative methods of protest become crucial to the identity and democracy of a country and its people. As Hill, Canniford and Millward (2018) explain, protest allows unsatisfied members of a community to express dissent and offers an "alternative to war." *Matatu* slogans communicate unrest and dissatisfaction in a civil and un-violent way. They offer a novel and refreshing way to challenge the government of the day and campaign for fair treatment and favourable conditions.

Nevertheless, this study is alive to the fact that, though not directly communicated, elements of violence could easily be implied through the slogans. As captured in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau (1984) regards the practices of everyday life as capable of carrying within them the elements of resistance. By focusing on the mundane activities of the "nobody", one can see how order is produced, consumed and repackaged. Through the 'ordinary' activities, the *matatu* man transcends the production chain and is at one time the recipient of the product, the consumer and then the producer of a new product that emanates from the consumption process. For instance, when engaging with the *matatu* slogans, the ways of consumption sometimes lead to the realization of a deeper meaning. This realization, coupled with its effect on the consumer, may lead to production of a 'silent' resistance whereby the consumer remains assimilated to the imposed order but has a new set of rules that govern their actions, hidden from the established order. This study is thus guided by the following questions: How do stakeholders in the *matatu* subculture engage linguistically in protest discourse? How has protest discourse in the *matatu* sector evolved over the years? Within the context of post-colonialism, what arching themes characterize protest discourse in *matatu* slogans? What stylistic features are present in *matatu* slogans in their bid to

communicate their protest message? And, how do members of the *matatu* subculture establish defiant identities and challenge the status quo in Kenya?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL GROUNDING

Many studies have investigated the role of slogans in political and protest discourse (Sharp, 1984; Urdangs & Robbins, 1984). Others like Kaul (2010) have studied how slogans embody the political, cultural, and social ideologies of their authors. Kaul considers slogans channels of dialogue customized to convey the goals and dreams of those who use them. McGee (1980) notes the power of slogans to control consciousness, enforce change, and impact audiences "in certain contexts."

In Africa, where public service vehicles are the most popular means of transportation, scholars have studied vehicle slogans extensively. Van der Geest (2009) assessed 569 vehicle inscriptions in Ghana and found that they are often accompanied by decorative graphics like flower images. From local interviews, he concluded that the "painted inscriptions, stickers, and printed texts" on vehicles in Ghana are often inarticulate and unconnected "to the larger discourse." This study seeks to demonstrate how *matatu* slogans reflect the true and lived realities and conversations of the larger Kenyan community. Following de Certeau (1984), the study considers the consumer central, and deviates from the tradition of focusing on the producer and product, since the consumer is the ultimate producer of meaning. Though passive, the consumer generates a web of meanings through the process of consumption. This is true of *matatu* slogans and echoes the sentiments of Iser (1980) who asserts that in the literary world, the focal point should always be the interaction between a text and its end user. As such, the actions that characterize the response to a text are as important as the text itself. This could perhaps account for de Certeau's belief that the "ordinary" everyday actions are not really 'innocent' but unconscious attempts at reconstituting order – a multifaceted way of resistance in the process of consuming imposed order.

In a similar study in Nigeria, Lawuyi (1988) found that *Kabu* slogans represent the "exercise and expression of power in personal and social relationships" within the community. He cites the power the *Kabu Kabu* driver has over the vehicle, the journey, and the passengers and how the driver negotiates this power through slogans. This study extends the examination of the power dynamics depicted in *matatu* slogans to include the political class and general status quo. After evaluating 250 slogans in the context of the Liberian Civil War, Guseh (2008) found that most of the messages revolve around themes like religion and traditional values. This study expands the categorization to include political and social protest genres. Like Guseh, the study demonstrates that slogans can impact society and enact change (2008, p. 159). Kipacha (2014), in a study of Swahili sayings in Tanzania, noted that the genre had moved from the famous *kangas* to the even more popular *Dala Dala*.

Within Kenya, the study considers the work of several scholars who have analysed *matatu* slogans in particular. Kayi (2016) investigates these moving texts to find out how much they reflect the culture, philosophy, and realities of the Kenyan urban youth. Kayi finds that *matatu* slogans mirror the entire society (p.57) and are majorly classified into religious (43%), entrepreneurial (17%), and personality-related (14%) messages. But as Kemuma, Khayesi and Nafukho (2015) assert, *matatu* slogans and mottos espouse a deeper meaning and often use irony, provocation, sarcasm, and humour to relay important messages. Taking up this line of thought, this study explores deeper themes than those suggested by Kayi and demonstrates how even religious slogans can be used to communicate protest through satire.

Of great help to this study is the work of Wa-Mungai (2003) on identity politics in *matatu* folklore in Nairobi. Wa-Mungai postulates that the "sticker lore" of the *matatu* subculture is complementary and acts within the "wider rhetoric of anti-state resistance." The study concurs with this statement, but disagrees with the claim that the use of *matatu* stickers – the primary mode of dissemination for *matatu* slogans – is waning; and shows instead that protest discourse in the *matatu* space continues to thrive today, and could be increasing especially among the youth. Urban culture anywhere is characteristically associated with more progressive and socially deviant individuals. As captured in the studies of Rule (1988), Santaro (1999) and Maharaj (2002), the *matatu* culture in Kenya very much embodies these negative perceptions of the urban culture. However, a study by Reed (2018) has shown that there is a changing trend in both the perception and expression of the *matatu* culture and its antecedent urban culture. Reed examines the art and performances of *matatu* crews in Nairobi. The general impression she gets is that a growing community of *matatu* crews in Nairobi are reclaiming the city's *matatu* culture using new practices, art and social media to undo negative stereotypes. The artwork, slogans and mottos painted on *matatus*, according to Reed, are now regarded as important features of the youthful urban expression. Moreover, the work that goes into these paintings is in itself a great source of income for the mostly young painters. As such, it is arguable that culture, though fluid and dynamic, influences what we write (literature). Consequently, what we write can and is usually used to interpret our culture. If we assume that the slogans, in their entirety, are also about the people, their political identities, the way they construct those identities and the identities of others through their specially crafted interactions, then the slogans become a way of understanding their political culture, and influencing it.

Matatu slogans as a vehicle for protest discourse can be best understood through the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as laid out by Norman Fairclough (2003). As a theoretical approach to linguistic texts, CDA is based in part on the idea that discourse and language play a crucial role in power mediation within a society. Fairclough defines CDA as discourse analysis that seeks to explore the often vague relationships between discourse and society. He posits that unveiling these relationships could help us understand how social behaviours within a society, such as practices of dissent, resistance, and protest, are shaped by and inform the preeminent power and power-struggle relations. Building on this foundation, this study investigates how and why members of the *matatu* subculture manufacture textual acts of dissent. The research herein also sheds a light on the relationships that exist between these texts and the wider social and political rhetoric and how the power relations negotiated through *matatu* discourse influence the creation of *matatu* protest slogans (Fairclough, 2003). Fairclough also theorizes that social and discursive practices create and recreate power imbalances in society. These unequal relations can arise between people of different social classes, ethnic majorities and minorities, men and women, et cetera. In line with this, the study further investigates how *matatu* slogans position members of the *matatu* subculture against the political class, the wealthy, law enforcement officers, and other members of society.

This study is also grounded in selected tenets of the speech-act theory as presented by Chrisman and Hubbs (2021). Chrisman and Hubbs suggest three analyses to distinguish protest discourse from demands, complaints, and other similar communications. They argue that protests possess an implied communicative structure that speech-act theory can illuminate, even in non-verbal presentations. They begin by identifying the key components of a protest: that a piece of communication can be considered protest if it features an *object*, which is the idea, condition, or situation that the protestor opposes; a prescribed *redress* through which the object can be resolved;

and a *means*, which is how the protestor communicates the object and redress. They further explain that when the object is something the protestor considers wrong or unfair, then the redress can be something as simple as an acknowledgment of the object or an apology. The object can also be a ban, in which case, the redress would be lifting the ban.

Sometimes, however, there is no clear object. The protestor may oppose the general status quo and fail to prescribe a specific redress. In this case, Chrisman and Hubbs offer that a protest must have an *addressee* – or the person required to perform the redress. The addressee is not always the primary audience of the protest. But, for an act or communication to count as a protest, the protestor must have reason to believe that the addressee could be a possible member of their audience, in whichever form. When a *matatu* man uses a slogan to protest against a corrupt governor, they do so with the understanding that the governor may never ride in their *matatu*. However, they have reason to believe that a passenger could photograph, copy, or repeat the slogan elsewhere, such as on social media, where the governor might then see or hear it. This would make the governor, or the addressee, part of the *matatu* man's audience.

A protest must also be public enough to be available to a wide general audience. For instance, when the *matatu* man from our example disparages the governor to their turn boy, they can be said to be complaining but not protesting. This is because the turn boy is not a wide or public enough audience that the *matatu* man has any reason to believe their protest would ever leave the confines of the *matatu.* As such, a reading of *matatu* slogans has the potential to show how consumers counterattack forms of imposed order. As the man on the periphery becomes both a consumer and producer, new frontiers of power emerge. This power creates an inversion of previous modes of operating, attributing meaning and purpose. By use of symbolism, allusion, metaphors and other literary devices, the moving text alters imposed order. The spatial practices discover the hidden and silenced, and while doing so, lead to the re-emergence of the marginalized vocabularies "… practices like reading …. organize an ensemble of possibilities … making the possibilities 'exist' as well as 'emerge', and moving them about to invent others, the spatial practices carry out a process of reorganization and redistribution" (de Certeau, 1984; p.98). this study thus argues that *matatu* slogans draw from various cultural, social and personal sources that end up creating ambiguities. These ambiguities, in turn, alter, locate and dislocate the intended meanings through semantic or stylistic itinerants, especially when the reader has to interpolate some of the information which has been presented in a manner different from the official discourse.

By this definition alone, *matatu* slogans meet the criteria for protest discourse. Take for instance the slogan "*karau alipe garii!!!"* (the policeman must pay fare!!!) collected from a *matatu* in Nakuru. The object of this message is the status quo that allows policemen on duty in Kenya to ride *matatus* without paying fare. The redress is clearly defined as the policeman paying the said fare. And while the policeman is not the primary audience of the message – policemen in Kenya rarely use public transport while on duty – the protestor, in this case the *matatu* owner, has every reason to believe that a policeman may board their *matatu*. And because the slogan is displayed in a commercial vehicle, the protestor has a large enough public audience that may, in some way, include the addressee.

Nonetheless, Chrisman and Hubbs believe that a deeper analysis of protest discourse is necessary. They recommend using the Austinian notion of felicity conditions to separate protest acts from other forms of communication. Specifically, they argue that in addition to opposing an object to a wide public audience, the protestor must act under the assumption of a shared conception of what is fair or just with the audience. Simply put, the object must be deemed wrong under an overlapping

notion of justice and fairness between the protestor and the audience. From our previous example, the status quo that allows the policeman on duty to ride the *matatu* for free is abuse of power. The slogan is only a protest, therefore, if both the driver and the passengers agree that abuse of power is wrong, unfair, or unjust.

Chrisman and Hubbs, however, agree that protest acts do not need maximum audience uptake to be considered protest. The audience need not share a protestor's conceptions for a protest to be valid as long as the object could be accepted as unfair and unjust by a different audience. Say the *matatu* man from our example is only ferrying policemen. Because of their status, they may not agree that riding a *matatu* for free is abuse of power. The object, therefore, would not be based on a shared conception between the *matatu* man and his policemen passengers. However, this does not compromise the validity of the protest because a different audience, say of civilian passengers, might share the *matatu* man's conceptions of the unjustness of abuse of power.

Stauffer Trodd (2006) supports this argument by recommending that protest literature not be judged by its effectiveness. He explains that protest discourse can be considered successful even if it does not "persuade or convert" the audience because it communicates a point that the audience acknowledges, whether they agree with it or not. Chrisman and Hubbs too suggest an analysis to deal with the power dynamics in protest discourse. We have established that an act is considered protest when it recommends a form or redress, whether explicit or implicit. This then suggests that the protestor must hold some power over the addressee that would compel the latter to enact the prescribed redress. However, the very nature of protests defies this. Our definition of protest identifies the protestor as one who is powerless against the addressee, at least in the context of the protest. From our example, the *matatu* man has no agency through which to force the policeman to pay him, which is why he turns to protest.

Building on a normative functionalist approach to speech acts, Chrisman and Hubbs aver that an act can be considered a protest if the protestor is entitled to oppose an object and the addressee has the prerogative to enact the redress. Here, the issue of a shared conception with the audience comes to into play again because the postulate is that if the object of a protest is wrong and unfair under a shared conception with the audience, then it is wrong and unfair in a way that entitles any member of that audience to protest it. And if the object entitles one person to protest it, then it entitles everyone. For example, if the *matatu* man and his passengers agree that abuse of power is wrong and unjust, they are entitled to protest it. Their shared conception of the unjustness of the object entitles not just the *matatu* man to protest but the passenger that decides to share his protest on social media. They can also, while on board the *matatu*, participate in compelling the police (wo)man to pay the fare.

In terms of the addressee, Chrisman and Hubbs maintain that the protestor need not have power over them as long as the addressee has it within their abilities and mandate to perform the redress. For instance, "*hustler apunguze bei ya unga*" (the hustler [Kenya President, William Ruto] should lower the cost of living) is a protest because the addressee, hustler or the president, has the prerogative to lower the cost of living even if the protestor has no power to compel him to do so. However, "*hustler alete mvua*" (the hustler should make it rain) is not a protest because the addressee, again the president, has no power to control the weather.

PROTESTING IN SILENCE? SWAPPING DEAFENING MUSIC FOR SLOGANS

Music was one of the most oft-used tactics of *matatu* protest during the Moi regime. Mutongi (2017) narrates how Kenyan musicians transformed hip hop music through sheng to create a

localized genre that decried the Kenyan condition. *Matatu* crew played political music and speeches in cassette tapes (Michira, 2018) that were 'illegal' to own at the time. Under the guise of protecting the nation from loud music that would make them deaf and indecent content that would corrupt their morals, the transportation and communications cabinet secretary allowed the police to fine or arrest *matatu* owners and conductors that played loud music (Mutongi, 2017). The situation forced the *matatu* industry to find a 'quieter' way to protest the Moi regime.

Mutongi explains that within a few months, every *matatu* owner had emblazoned his vehicle with snappy mottos and popular graffiti. The new look proved very popular with passengers and the more adorned a vehicle was, the more loyal passengers it attracted. However, the slogans, drawings, and paintings were meant to do more that bring in more fare; because the *matatu* subculture had been so embroiled in Kenyan politics, there was no helping that their slogans would contain political rhetoric. *Matatu* owners used slogans to affirm their identity and ridicule the status quo through hostile, humorous, or absurd opinions plastered all over their vehicles (Mutongi, 2017). It was a way for them to shout their political beliefs without actually saying anything. Van der Geest (2009) reasons that vehicle slogans have the rare benefit of being mysterious yet directly visible, that "They speak out and remain silent at the same time." This form of "saying-without-saying" protest was life-saving at a time when the African people were being oppressed but speaking out against their oppressor was tantamount to a death sentence. In analysing Maus's work on silent protests, Darcy (2015) avers that literary protests like slogans and graffiti use "subtle satire" and "passive aggression" not to inspire bloody revolutions but to invoke thought in the masses right under the glare of the oppressor.

In 2014, the Kenya government gazetted directives that would bar *matatu* passengers from paying bus fare in cash (Mwaniki, 2014). The intention was to curb corruption in the *matatu* industry and streamline tax collection for the Kenya Revenue Authority (KRA). The response from the *matatu* sector was that whatever the justification, the *matatu* man was against any form of interference from the government in how he received money from his passengers. *Matatu* owners responded with slogans aimed at Safaricom's Mpesa service. Protest slogans in response to the push for a cashless system included "*Hakuna kulipa na Mpesa,"* (No paying with Mpesa) and "*Hii gari si ya Safaricom, no Mpesa,"* (This vehicle does not belong to Safaricom, no Mpesa). The slogan "We accept cards too," can be seen as mocking the government because local *matatus* do not have the technology to process debit card payments.

In 2020, the government called for mandatory mask wearing in public spaces. The *matatu* industry was quick to voice its dissent. *Matatu* workers responded with slogans like "*Mask ni nje, ndani covid-19 free*" (Wear your mask outside, there is no COVID-19 inside [this vehicle]). Around the same time, the government asked truck drivers and other motorists to submit to COVID-19 tests that would earn them "COVID-19-free certificates," which they would need to traverse major borders and highways. The *matatu* industry again responded in the negative with messages like "*Sipimi ng'o mpaka dawa ipatikane*," (I am not getting tested until they find a cure) and "*Mbona nipimwe na hakuna dawa?*" (Why should I get tested when there is no cure?).

The public sector in Kenya is rife with corruption (Eboso, 2018) and the *matatu* industry is not immune. A short ride in a *matatu* in any metropolitan area will quickly reveal how "traffic laws" work in the country. Upon sighting a traffic officer, the *matatu* driver will immediately turn to his conductor who will hand him a 50- or 100-shilling note. The driver will slip this note into his driver's license and hand it to the waiting officer. It is a delicate dance that requires deft hands, an averted gaze, a nod of the head, perhaps a few pleasantries, and daily repetition. This has, however,

not stopped *matatu* workers from protesting corruption through their slogans. You encounter slogans like "*Una hire wakili wananua Judge*!!!" "You Hire a Lawyer They Buy the Judge."

Because the poor state of the economy (Ambani, 2022) affects the *matatu* man's ability to earn a good living, he protests that as well. This study unearthed several slogans with economic reform themes, including, *"Njaa ni kama hukumu ya makosa haujatenda"* (Poverty is like a punishment for a crime you did not commit) and "*Lipa fare, ata mimi nimesota. Mengine tutauliza Jayden*," (Pay your bus fare, I am also 'broke.' We will ask Jayden the rest). Jayden is a nickname Kenyans coined for former president, Uhuru Kenyatta. The slogan "*Kusoma si kazi, kazi ni kutafta kazi*" (It is easy to get an education. The hard part is finding a job) communicates dissatisfaction with the harsh realities of unemployment in Kenya that have left many young people, including university graduates, unable to secure a job. Meanwhile, "*Punda ijai enda shule na ijai kosa kazi*" (A donkey has never gone to school but has never been jobless) shows a reluctant acceptance of the status quo even as the author compares himself to one of the most overworked, neglected, and abused animals in Africa. More economic reform slogans include "*Unga ya hustler mama Mboga haezi afford*" (The common man cannot afford to feed himself in the 'hustler' economy) and "*Hustler anatesa mahustler*" (The Hustler [President Ruto's famous campaign slogan] is afflicting hustlers [the common man]."

The spread of the feminist message and developments in women empowerment have significantly changed gender dynamics within African society (Sadiqi, 2002). In the traditional setup, where women are supposed to be submissive wives and dutiful mothers, the independent career woman is considered a threat to the status quo. Matatu workers conceive these "developments" as a challenge to their position at the top of the "food chain." If women only want rich suitors, then the *matatu* man's economic status makes him undesirable to the many women who use his *matatu* every day. And if women no longer need a man to "survive" in this world, then the *matatu* man is all the more disposable. The *matatu* man's response to this perceived affront to his masculinity and desirability is evident in his slogans that carry misogynistic and anti-feminist themes. Examples include "*Mwanamke ni kama matatu, ukikosa moja, unaeza dandia ingine*," (A woman is like a *matatu*. If you miss the first one, you can "pounce" on the next one), "*Ata simba na ukali wake hutungwa mimba*" (Even the lioness with all her fierceness gets pregnant), and "*Mimba na kitambi yote ni bidiii ya mwanaume*" (Both the potbelly and baby bump are evidence of a man's efforts). In trying to cut his female passengers down to size, the *matatu* man is protesting feminism and the changes it is initiating in society. He seems to be strongly against the abandonment of traditional gender roles and his response is to reaffirm is alpha position. The *matatu* man is saying to the woman that no matter how many degrees she gets or how much money she makes; she still needs him.

Matatu discourse also provides a platform for *matatu* workers to challenge the dominant identity and establish one of their own. This is often achieved through acts of rebellion and subversion. A *matatu* owner may, for instance, boldly display slogans like "*Kama si marijuana, hatungejuana*," (We would not know each other were it not for Cannabis) and "*Utamu wa blunt ni kupitisha*" (The best thing about Cannabis is sharing it), even though marijuana is illegal in the country. Combined with the reggae music, Jamaican colours, and dreadlocks, the slogans serve to bestow a cool Rastafarian identity on the *matatu* man – one different from that which society ascribes him. The slogan "*Mungu si mzungu*" (God is not white) illustrates a more general rejection of another identity. The *matatu* man is protesting the colonial influences on racial status and religious identity

that remain pervasive in Africa today (Ross, 2019). He is asserting his belief that he cannot be considered a lesser race on the basis that God is white because *his* God is not white.

Kenyan political leaders have time and again played on the concept of tribe and ethnicity for political gain, especially during political elections. Even political parties are widely formulated on the basis of tribal and regional politics (Nyambura, 2017). Tribal conflicts are sometimes bloody and deadly, with the culmination being the 2007-08 post-election skirmishes. The slogan "*Ukipiga jirani yako mawe utaomba nani chumvi*?" (Who will you borrow salt from [tomorrow] if you stone your neighbour [today]?) represents an attempt by the *matatu* man to contest tribal conflict. Here, the author appeals to anyone who would harm his neighbour over tribal differences not to do it, reminding him that he will need his neighbour's help someday. In "*Ukitaka kuzua enda na wakidi wako*" (If you want to provoke war, go with your children), the *matatu* man takes on any leader who would use other people's children to wage tribal war on others for political gain.

Matatu slogans also call out bad behaviour in society and protest the slow degradation of African morals and community ideals. Slogans with this theme include "*Hata ukiringa aje tutameet kwa choo*," (No matter how much you look down on me, we all use the bathroom), which calls out elitism and "*Ukipenda mwanafunzi nunulia mke wako* uniform" (If you like school children, buy your wife a school uniform), which uses satire to condemn people, assumedly men, who pursue romantic liaisons with teenage or pre-pubescent girls – a practice largely responsible for the alarming rate of teenage births in the country (Kumar, *et al*., 2018). *Matatu* workers also call out human rights violations by pointing out, for instance, the absurdity of the Kenyan police teargassing protestors. This slogan "*Andamana ukule teargass*" (Demonstrate and get teargassed) may read like a warning, but is actually a deadpan representation of the horrific fate of public protestors in the country. *Matatu* protest discourse may also take on religious tones. The slogan *Na lindwa na Mungu* (I am under God's protection) may not initially look like protest but Wa-Mungai (2003) believes that the *matatu* man disguises his criticism of the government through "parodic 'religious' wording," which nonetheless remain "tools of subversion."

This religious theme remained prevalent over the years and seemed to suggest a highly religious industry (Mutongi, 2017). Mutongi believes the *matatu* man seemed to be challenging the authority of the government and police by implying that he was subject to a higher power, in this case, God. And while Mutongi is on the fence on his assessment, Wa-Mungai (2003) agrees. Wa-Mungai asserts that religious texts in *matatus* are used to undermine power constructs, that given the overall rebelliousness of the *matatu* man and his political background, it would be foolish to believe that his religious slogans were affirmations of faith. He proposes parody as a more productive lens through which to view these messages.

The slogans *Yesu ndiye ya kusema* (Jesus has the final say) and *Mbinguni hakuna kujuana* (You don't need to know anybody to get into heaven) look religious at first. But a deeper analysis reveals some subtext with subversive themes. If we assume the *matatu* man is mocking the government, then "Jesus has the final say" can be seen as a challenge to the authority of government stakeholders. "You don't need to know anybody to get into heaven" can be seen not as promising Christians an eternal home, but as mocking the nepotism, favouritism, and corruption in Kenya that allow some people to get jobs and opportunities if they know someone in power. Kenyans are familiar with the saying, "It's not what you know but who you know."

"*Ya Mungu ni Mengi, Ya karao ni hongo*" (Many things can be ascribed to God but the only thing synonymous with the police is bribe) is a more direct hit. It uses satire to play on a popular Swahili

saying "*Ya Mungu ni Mengi, ya kuku ni mayai*" (God is the author of many things but a hen can only beget an egg). While the first part is religious and acknowledges the immensities of God, the second part compares the policeman to a hen and implies that only one thing can come out of him – corruption. Outside religious texts, matatu slogans use satire to ridicule the police (Michira, 2018), this time, without religious overtones. *Utu-wizi kwa wote* (Ultra-theft to all) is a play on the official motto of the Kenya Police *Utumishi kwa wote* (Service to all). "Utu-wizi" is a coinage, not an official Swahili word. The slogan parodies the official police force motto and implies that rather than serve everyone, they steal from everyone. Clearly then, the *matatu* slogans as designed are representative of the wider rhetoric of anti-government and anti-establishment discourse necessitated by rampant corruption, negligence, and abuse of power within the Kenyan society.

These slogans are mainly written in *Sheng*, especially in urban areas. Muriira (2016) describes sheng as a complex linguistic code in Kenya, which can be an argot, a jargon and a slang. As an argot, it is considered the language of the mafia or criminal gangs, especially in the urban culture. As a jargon and slang, it is regarded as a language of a lowly profession, specifically that of *matatu* operators. Muriira insinuates that *matatu* operators or crew use *sheng* to define themselves and to isolate themselves from outsiders (passengers). As a complex language, *sheng* varies from one urban environment to the next. If *matatu* culture is a subculture as Michira (2018) suggests, then it imposes an identity on its members distinct from the norm (Widdicombe, 2017). This identity is exercised through the music, values, images, language, lifestyle, and ideologies that the subculture assumes. *Sheng* is a mixed urban dialect that combines a Swahili grammatical base with loan words from English and other local languages (Ference, 2013). Although spoken across the country, primarily by the urban youth, much of *sheng's* growth and dissemination is credited to the *matatu* world (Samper 2002; 2004).

Whereas youth-spoken languages are earmarked by semantic manipulations, neologisms and over lexicalization/ re-lexicalization, words do alter their form to gain new appearance for the aim of coding and identity definition (Kanana, 2019). For instance, Nakuru City *sheng* speakers borrow and re-invent words used by Nairobi City *sheng* speakers. Therefore, the Nakuru *matatu* crews have to constantly redefine themselves against identities mediated through *sheng* from Nairobi *matatus*. According to Kanana, Nakuru *matatu* crews use metathesis technique to re-formulate Swahili and Nairobi *sheng* and form a contextualised *sheng* for Nakuru. This process sometimes involves revival of words that had been regarded as extinct in Nairobi *sheng*. As such *matatu* crew use linguistic strategies to define their distinct space within the urban culture.

Michira (2018) characterizes *sheng* as a "non-standard, deviant and subversive" language that the youth use to rebel against the instruments of power. It provides a way for the *matatu* man to rally against the establishment. The urban youth that make up much of the *matatu* workforce are conceived as being below the dominant social strata and are excluded from economic, political, and social conversations. Through *sheng*, they can take own their space and lock out those who marginalize them. Ference (2013) sees *sheng* as building a solidarity within the *matatu* industry that empowers the *matatu* man to protest systems that exclude him. In line with this solidarity, *sheng* also rejects the tribal identities often emphasized by the political class. Through *sheng*, the *matatu* youth establish a uniform mode of communication accessible to all members regardless of ethnic background. The language also borrows from all ethnic languages in Kenya and, thus, allows greater inter-ethnic cooperation (Kiessling & Mous, 2004).

In studying the different slogans collected for this study, one must appreciate that protest *matatu* slogans differ from typical political slogans. While elevating opposition, defiance, and resistance

in their discourse, they are not exclusively created for political protest. Indeed, some *matatu* workers have no interest in challenging the instruments of power or the status quo. Mutongi (2017) notes that the political intent of *matatu* lore can sometimes be ambiguous. In echoing these sentiments, Wa-Mungai (2003) points out that *matatu* slogans are not generally produced as a reaction to "specific, immediate" political or social concerns or events. They are fluid in their meanings and their interpretation is subject to the audience and the changing times.

CONCLUSION

Protest becomes a necessary tool for liberation when a protestor has no reason to believe his condition will change unless he challenges the system (Williamson, 2004). And where physical protest, in the form of sit-ins, demonstrations, and barricades, is no longer a viable channel for redress, the protestor will often turn to alternative forms of protest to communicate his dissatisfaction. Kenya is a nascent democracy that recycles political leaders, remains in bondage to the west, devalues its young people, and thrives on corruption. For the people who want more from their leaders and systems, indeed from people in the periphery like the *matatu* man, protest becomes part of daily life, infiltrating the music we listen to, the poems we write, and the slogans we display on our vehicles. The use of slogans in *matatus* may have had initial commercial motives but *matatu* workers soon discovered a political platform. *Matatu* slogans allow *matatu* workers to challenge the dominant social order and establish a distinct identity for themselves. Through these moving texts, the *matatu* man can talk back to his government, to the women who ignore him, and to society members who misbehave. It is thus this study's conclusion that *matatu* slogans are a rich source of Kenyan protest discourse and a space within which resistance is as alive today as it was during the fight for independence several decades ago.

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