

Urban Taxi Slogans

The People's Arts

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all photos by the author, except where otherwise noted

Those of us who live and work in Africa know firsthand that the ways in which societies compose and invent themselves in the present—what we could call the creativity of practice—is always ahead of the knowledge we can ever produce about them.
—Achille Mbembe (Shipley, Comaroff, and Mbembe 2010: 654)

The contemporary African city runs on informal modes of public transportation. Typically, minibuses provide the core, but motorbikes, tricycles, and shared taxis all contribute to informal transport ecosystems. These privately operated services are ground-level responses to growing demand for mobility in the face of absent or inadequate formal public transportation services. For many African urbanites, it is impossible to imagine city life without its ubiquitous minibuses, which constitute a distinctive feature of many African urban environments and are the stuff of news, gossip, rumors, and urban myths. Far from being mere containers that form part of the *mise en scène* in African cities, the dilapidated yet decorated bodies of these minibus taxis mirror for urbanites the duplicity of the African city: both as a place filled with hope and *joie de vivre* and as a redoubt of stuntedness and immiseration. Minibus taxis account for an estimated 80% of Africa's total motorized trips (Medium 2018), contributing 50% of all motorized traffic in some corridors (Kumar and Barrett 2008: 5). They go by various appellations: *danfo*¹ in Lagos (Fig. 1), *trotro* in Accra, *daladala* in Dar es Salaam, *poda-poda* in Freetown, *matatu* in Nairobi, *otobis* in Cairo, *car rapides* in Dakar, *condongueiros* in Luanda, *gbaka* in Abidjan, *kamuny* in Kampala, *magbana* in Conakry, *sotrama* in Bamako, *songa kidogo* in Kigali, and *kombi* in Cape Town. Minibuses are supplemented by motorcycle taxis, popularly known as *okada* in Nigeria, *oleiya* in Togo, *zémidjan* in

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Benin, *pikipiki* in Kenya, and *boda-boda* in Uganda. This urban transportation complex expresses, shapes, produces, and refracts political, social, and economic relations.

Informal transport indicates an alternate mode of flexible passenger transport services that cater to the urban poor in the Global South. Unlike modern mass transit systems with fixed stops, fares, routes, and timetables, informal transport services have no predictable schedule: “they depart when they have reached maximum capacity and they arrive when they have successfully passed through all the checkpoints, paid all necessary fees and bribes, and fixed all parts that have broken down during the journey” (Green-Simms 2009: 31). The failure of state-owned mass transportation services occasioned the growth and popularity of these local and ostensibly unregulated services. In Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital and Africa's most populous city, *okadas* emerged in the 1980s as a popular means of mobility for hard-pressed subalterns during a time of massive economic crisis and urban population growth, when increased demand for mobility widened the gap between supply and demand (Agbiboa 2022a).

In Nigeria, the Lagos state government aims to phase out the use of the iconic *danfos*. Former governor Akinwunmi Ambode (2015–2019) lamented that, “When I wake up in the morning and see all these yellow buses ... and then we claim we are a megacity, that is not true and we must acknowledge that that is a faulty connectivity that we are running. Having accepted that, we have to look for the solution and that is why we want to banish yellow buses” (NCR 2017). Ambode's comment reproduces popular perceptions of Africa's informal transport sector as a chaotic embarrassment that needs to be “modernized.” The favored substitutes are the Lagos light rail project (also known as Lagos monorail)—contracted to the China Railway Construction Company—and Lagos BRT (bus rapid transit) system,² generally deemed more befitting of a modernizing megacity with world-class ambitions.

This language of modernity combines with an aesthetic mode of governing, or what Asher Ghertner (2011) calls “aesthetic governmentality,” to (re)produce pathological assessments of the African megalopolis, a pathology of which Lagos is its *ne plus ultra*. The fabric of the African city is perfunctorily read as a planning black hole, an insoluble problem. Johannesburg, for instance, is read as nothing but a “crime city.” In similar vein, the rich complexity of Lagos life is reduced to detritus, disease, and death, reproducing the colonial imaginary of “dirty natives” (Newell 2020) and an “impending apocalypse” (Sommers 2010: 319). This dystopian and



1 A minibus taxi with the slogan: "Thank you Jesus. Have you said it today?" Ikotun Egbe, Lagos. November 2014.

2 A tricycle taxi with the slogan: "Punctuality is the soul of business." Ikotun Egbe, Lagos, October 13, 2014.

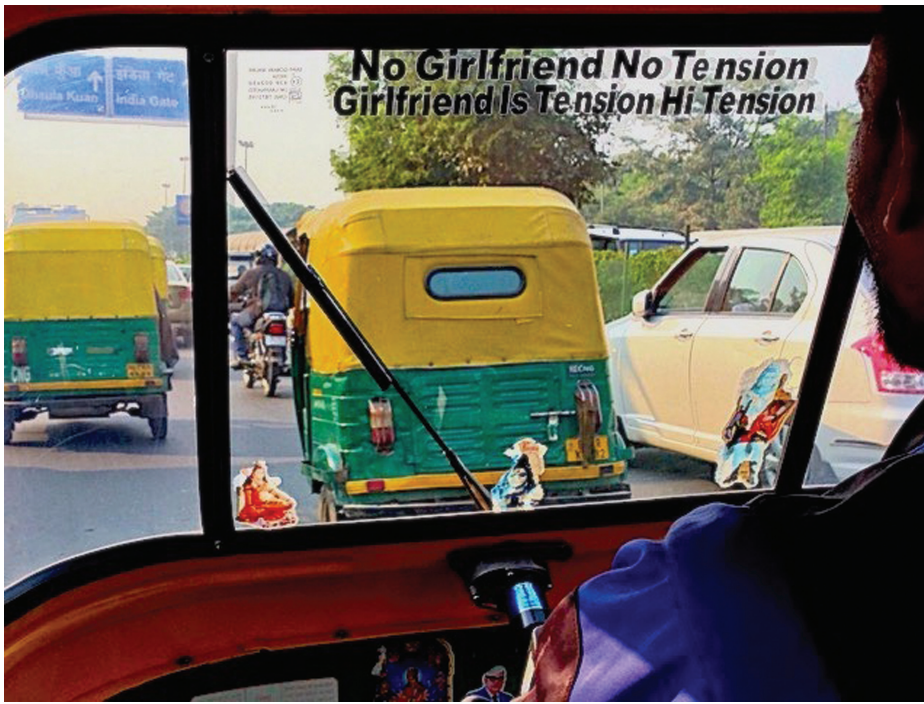
bland reading of the African city emboldens the leaky notion that contemporary African cities are not quite cities, having failed to meet the monolithic standard of (Western) modernity (Ferguson 1999; Myers 2011). While we now feel we know nearly everything that African cities are not, we still know remarkably little about what they actually are (Mbembe 2001: 9; see also Föster 2013).

Focusing on the coastal city of Lagos, with an estimated population of 18 million (more than Greater London and New York combined) and growing (by 2100, Lagos is estimated to be home to some 90 million inhabitants), this essay interrogates the popular artistic slogans painted on the exterior of *danfos* as a unique window into the interior, workaday world of their operators—marginal men struggling to survive under the shadow of the modern world system. My central argument is that slogans not only reflect how informal transport operators see, experience, and socially navigate the endemic crisis of city life; they are themselves ingenious ways through which these operators sustain a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances. In so doing, my aim is to show that there is more to informal transport than the popular narrative of dysfunction and criminality, and we gain a better understanding

of that more by studying an apparently chaotic system of automobility like the *danfo*.

This paper builds upon new approaches to contemporary African urbanism that interrogate the city as a lively archive of expression and aesthetic vision (Mbembe and Nuttall 2008;





THE OVERLAPPING RHYTHMS OF LAGOS

The French sociologist Henri Lefebvre argued that wherever place, time, and energy interact, rhythm is invariably present. And every rhythm indicates a “relation of a time to a space, a localized time, or if one prefers, a temporalized space” (Lefebvre 2004: 15). This triumvirate of time–space–energy has its ultimate reference point not only in the human body, but also in the nonhuman vessels that routinely move those bodies (e.g., the *danfos*). Inspired by Lefebvre’s conceptual approach of “rhythmanalysis” (Lefebvre 2004: 23)—a method for analyzing the rhythm of urban spaces and the effects of those rhythms on bodies dwelling in motion—I sought during my fieldwork to capture the manifold, overlapping rhythms that manifest themselves in the Lagos sense-world, especially what they tell us about the liminal space between

Quayson 2014; Green-Simms 2017). Specifically, the paper answers the call to defamiliarize commonsense thinking of African cities by engaging “new critical pedagogies—pedagogies of writing, talking, seeing, walking, telling, hearing, drawing, and making—each of which pairs the subject and object in novel ways to enliven the relationship between them and to better express life in motion” (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004: 352). The paper should be read alongside Damola Osinulu’s “Painters, Blacksmiths, and Wordsmiths: Building *Molues* in Lagos,” published in *African Arts* (2008), which invites us to explore how Lagosians translate the day-to-day challenges of the city into arts. While Osinulu’s incisive analysis focused on the now-banned *molues* (single-decker buses between 8 and 11 meters long), this paper uses *danfo* slogans as a veritable window into the aesthetics of order and chaos, or “ordered chaos,” that mark Lagos as simultaneously familiar and strange, moving and moored. In so doing, my goal is advance our limited knowledge of the neglected but vital linkages between texts, persons, and publics in urban Africa and beyond.

“dream world” and “catastrophe” (Buck-Moss 2002); in other words, the disconnect and contradiction between elite-driven utopian aspirations to make Lagos “world-class” and the really existing context of precarity and violence in which Lagosians weave their existence. In *Wisdom Sits in Places*, Keith Basso (1996) tells us that senses of place are intertwined with cultures, things, and shared bodies of local knowledge with which individuals and whole communities impose meaning and social importance on their places. This paper examines the ways in which public transport operators in Lagos harness vehicle slogans as aesthetic objects and archives of popular wisdom to negotiate visible and invisible constraints to mobility.



3 A rickshaw taxi with the slogan: “No Girlfriend No Tension. Girlfriend is Tension. Hi Tension.” Delhi, India, November 15, 2013. Photo: Mollie Laffin-Rose

4 A minibus taxi with the slogan: “Ola Egbon” [“brother’s generosity”]. Ikotun Egbe, Lagos, October 15, 2014.



With my digital camera-cum-sound recorder, I was able to capture the hypervisuality and soundscape of Lagos as one zig-zags along its potholed roads, trying to avoid piles of debris that compete with pedestrians for rights of way. Here, everything leads to excess. There is the phalanx of Lagosians dwelling in a kind of *perpetuum mobile*. There is the raw and percussive sound of Fuji³ blaring from *danfos*, revealing the confluences between music, mobility, and urban spatiality. There are the syncopated cries of *piya wata piya wata* by itinerant vendors, handing half-liter sachets of cold water through the windows of vehicles stuck in traffic jams⁴ (or go-slow, as they say in Lagos) to the keenly outstretched arms within. There are the rag-tag conductors sonorously calling out their respective termini, jostling for passengers, and warning passengers to “*wole pelu shenji e o*” (enter with the exact fare). There are the commercial motorcycle (*okada*) drivers weaving in and out of traffic without regard for human life.⁵ Like *danfo* drivers, *okada* drivers occupy what Gbemisola Animasawun (2017) calls the “struggle economy” in Lagos—a popular urban economy characterized by disposability. And, finally, there are the *agberos*—the dreaded tax collectors of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) (see Agbiboa 2018)—racing after public transport drivers and

5 A midibus taxi with the slogan: “O God! Do not be silent!” and “Life Na Jeje” [“Life is gentle”]. Oshodi, Lagos, November 6, 2014.

6 A minibus taxi with the slogan: “Alubarika” [“blessing”]. Ikotun Egbe, Lagos, January 26, 2015.

conductors off-loading and picking up passengers at every bus stop and roundabouts, shouting “*owoo da?*” (“where is the money?”). The NURTW—the most politicized and violent trade union in Nigeria (Albert 2007)—employs *agberos* to extort unreceipted fees and cash bribes (*egunje*) from *danfo* operators. *Agberos* are typically “youthmen” between the ages of 20 and 50 and can be easily recognized by their gruff voices, bloodshot eyes, and sometimes missing teeth (lost in street brawling). The list of bribes they collect is endless and borders on the farcical, ranging from loading fees (*owoo loading*) to “money for party” (*owoo faji*). If the operator fails to comply, his sideview mirror may be smashed or his windshield wipers and fuel tank cover removed. Sometimes a conductor is mauled to death, in full view of complicit police officers.

All this overlapping rhythm of Lagos constitutes an aspect, not of the urban environment, but of the culture itself (Mbembe 2001: 147). They enfold socioeconomic exchanges into the day-to-day ritual of *Eko Ile* (“Lagos, home”), turning the real into the semiotic.

From 2014 through 2015, I conducted a year-long fieldwork in Oshodi and Alimosho local government areas of Lagos state. Oshodi and Alimosho are central to urban flows in Lagos and are best imagined as “a living stage where a collage of scenes is acted and played out without a script” (Aradeon 1997: 51). I collected a total of 312 eclectic slogans from the mobile and stationary bodies of *danfos*. These open, artistic texts (*logos prophorikos*) were analyzed





7 A minibus taxi with the slogan: “No loss. No lack. No limitation.” Ikotun roundabout, Lagos, January 20, 2015.

in terms of their veiled meaning (*logos endiathetos*). In Lagos, *danfos* change hands several times during their lifecycle, with various operators keen to impose their own unique slogans—i.e., personal identity—on their newly acquired vehicles. My interpretive analysis was informed by in-depth interviews with operators and passengers. As an *omo eko* (child of Lagos), I tapped into my own longstanding embodied experiences of the quotidian rhythms of Lagos to enrich my data and content analysis. Some of the slogans collected were so cryptic that it was only by looking at them with the “inner eyes” (*oju inu*—which implies both a physical and meta-physical episteme) of the driver/owner that I was able to apprehend what Yuri Lotman (1988) calls “the text within the text.” In so doing, I avoided the one-sidedness of textual interpretation (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010: 1). Interviews were conducted in Yoruba, English, and Nigerian Pidgin, the common languages in Lagos.

Occasionally, I was unable to interview the operators because I photographed the slogans from moving *danfos*. Nonetheless, by virtue of their semantic variability, popular urban arts are never entirely under the owner’s control: “The text itself says more than

it knows; it generates ‘surplus’: meanings that go beyond and may subvert the purported intention of the work” (Barber 1987: 3). Taking a cue from the Yoruba philosopher Olabiyi Yai’s argument that art (visual or verbal) has *ashe* (or life force) and is both “unfinished and generative” (1994: 107), I derived the slogan’s essential character (*iwa*) from the insights offered by other transport operators and Lagosians who often commented on the slogans, joked about them, or expressed their (dis)likes for one over another. The import of popular arts such as slogans to local perceptions and



8 A minibus taxi with the slogan: “Shot Up!” Synagogue, Ikotun, Lagos, November 1, 2014.

9 A minibus taxi with the slogan: “Let Them Say.” Ile-iwe, Ikotun Egbe, Lagos, October 15, 2014.

worldviews is ably emphasized by Barber (1987: 8): “The view that ordinary people express may be ‘false consciousness’ (a concept not without its own problems) but they are also their consciousness: *the people’s arts represent what people do in fact think, believe and aspire to*” (my emphasis).

THE ANATOMY OF THE DANFO

Danfos are typically fashioned out of Mercedes 911, Bedford, or Volkswagen chassis and engines derived from preowned buses (*tokunbos*) imported from Europe, around which the steel frame is constructed. Depending on the model, the *danfo* is designed to seat anywhere between twelve and sixteen people. Constructing the outer body of a *danfo* is very much a process of “hybridization” that—much like the slogans painted on them—“reflect not only constant absorption of ideas from the outside but also long-standing adaptive processes through which Africans have always been innovative players in world forums” (Roberts 2020; see also Osinulu 2008: 49).

Danfos are notorious for their squealing breaks, bald tires, and rattling exhaust pipes emitting thick, black smoke. Most have lost the padding that is placed in the ceiling to insulate passengers from heat. Their windows are also permanently sealed off, creating a stuffy atmosphere inside. And the practice of overloading

has long been a trademark of *danfos*. Nigeria Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka describes the *danfo* as a form of “transportation torture on four wheels,” not simply because of the dangerous roads it plies. He describes “humans crushed against one another and against market produce, sheep, and other livestock suffocated by the stench of rotting food and anonymous farts” (quoted in Agbiboa 2022b: 99).

The form of *danfos* often conform to the slogans painted on them. Rickety *danfos* tend to be driven by older men

(over 30 years old) and bear slogans like “E Still Dey Go” (“It’s still going [strong]”), “Slow but Steady,” “No Shaking,” “Tested and Trusted,” “Experience is the Best Teacher,” and “All That Glitters Is not Gold.” Conversely, newer looking *danfos* are often driven by younger men (under 30 years) and generally bear slogans such as “Lagos to Las Vegas,” “Star Boy” (Fig. 2), “Fresh Boy No Pimples,” “Obama,” and “Land Cruiser.”

The *danfos* are meeting points for daily conversations about corruption, endless road delays, dysfunctional services,





10 A tricycle-taxi with the slogan: “Owo-Lewa” [“Money is Beauty”]. Idimu, Lagos. November 23, 2014.

11 A minibus taxi with the slogan: “Ododo lowo” [“Money is desirable”]. Ikotun, Lagos, December 16, 2014.

entities (Morgan 2008: 228). They exude powers of enchantment and symbolization through which the operator comes to think of his urban existence “not in a purely politico-instrumental way, but also as an artistic gesture and an aesthetic project open as much to action as to meditation and contemplation” (Mbembe 2002: 629; see also Meyer 2004: 105), even resistance. By way of illustration, the Lagos State Road Traffic Law 2012 stipulates that “Except as prescribed by the Motor Vehicle Administration Agency and the Lagos State Signage and Advert Agency, the use of slogans, stickers, painting, photos etc. on commercial vehicles is prohibited” (Lagos State Government 2012). By implication, the stylistic *danfo* slogans mark the rise and flourishing of an unstable and shifting public sphere that can resist confinement to the place assigned it by the urban government (Meyer 2004:

moribund infrastructure, occult economies, and marginal gains (Agbibo 2020, 2022b; cf. Guyer 2004; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). *Danfo* passengers are typically crowded together, like sardines in cans (“full loading,” as they say in Lagos). A passenger trying to squeeze into the back of a *danfo* will ask the other passengers seating cheek-by-jowl on the hard wooden seats to “*abeg dress small*,” meaning “please move over a little.” At bus stops, the driver slows down but never quite halts, leaving passengers to judge the best time to jump off/on. As passengers jostle to enter/exit *danfos* in slow motion, pickpockets may seize the opportunity to steal their valuables.

THE MORPHOLOGY OF THE SLOGAN

Danfo slogans are not only abstract and discursive but also embodied and felt





12 A minibus taxi with the slogan: “Fear of God.” Ile-iwe, Ikotun Egbe, Lagos. October 31, 2014.

13 A minibus taxi with the slogan: “One Day.” Ikotun Egbe, Lagos, October 31, 2014.

92, 95). In this light, then, *danfo* slogans signal a dominant “representational economy” (Keane 2002) clearly underscored by the assertion of power through a dialectics of presence.

Like paratransit services, vehicle slogans feature prominently in the informal urban economies of Africa and the Global South generally (Mutongi 2006: 550). In India’s capital city, Delhi, a slogan painted on the windshield of a rickshaw (*tuk tuk*) reads: “No Girlfriend No Tension. Girlfriend is Tension. Hi Tension”

(Fig. 3). This slogan reflects the view among some young men in Delhi that relationships with women are complicated, stressful, and best avoided. Given the intense visuality of the African cityscape, it is surprising that many studies still overlook the ocular, tactile, and emotional materiality of the city (Clammer 2014: 66).

Danfo slogans are translocal in nature. In terminals across Lagos, operators fiercely compete for passengers with slogans ranging from Tupac’s “All Eyes on Me” to Obama’s “Yes We Can” and Bob Marley’s “Africa Unite.” Slogans cover a wide range of sentiments: They may express the operator’s gratitude to a family member who provided the down payment on the vehicle (i.e., “*Ola Egbon*”—“brother’s generosity,” Fig. 4); they may relate to



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14 A minibus taxi with the slogan: “One Love.”
Ikotun Egbe, Lagos, January 20, 2015.

woman recounted: “When I see a *danfo* slogan like ‘Relax: God Is in Control,’ or ‘Fear of God’ [Fig. 12], I feel good about entering it because I feel like the driver really trusts in God’s powers, not in his own abilities.” Structure-wise, slogans are typically short and pithy (i.e., “One Day” or “One Love” (Figs. 13–14) and tend to draw on religious texts (i.e., “Blessed from Above,” Fig. 15), local slang (i.e., “Chop Liver”—to show courage), and proverbs (i.e., “*Ise loogun ise*”; “work cures poverty”). The Yoruba saying that “*Owe lesin oro*” (“The proverb is the horse of speech”) is more than relevant here. Through their slogans, operators convey their life histories, hopes, fears, and philosophies to road users. Yet, these slogans may blur the lines between fact and fiction. For instance, despite the fact that driving in Lagos can be lethal (one life is lost every two hours), some slogans controvert this truth—i.e., “No Cause for Alarm,” “Be Not Afraid,” and “Just Relax.” While reassuring for some, such slogans constitute an aspect of the everyday deception in

a personal idol (i.e., Nelson Mandela); they may remind people to show gratitude (“Thank You Jesus. Have You Said It Today?” Fig. 2); they may reflect the operator’s supplication to God (i.e., “Oh God! Do Not Be Silent!”; “*Alubarika*” [“blessing”]; “No Loss, No Lack, No Limitation,” Figs. 5–7); they may indicate an operator’s loyalty to a soccer club (i.e., “You’ll Never Walk Alone” and “Red Devils”); they may convey a message/warning to enemies (i.e., “Shut Up!” or “Let Them Say” (Figs. 8–9); they may celebrate the operator’s yearning for money (“*Owo-Lewa*”: “money is beauty,” and “*ododo lowo*”: “money is desirable,” Figs. 10–11); they may represent the operator’s approach to business (“Punctuality is the Soul of Business,” Fig. 2); or relate to his personal philosophy (i.e., “*Life Na Jeje*”: “life is easy,” Fig. 5, and “*No Lele*”: “stay vigilant,” Fig. 2).

In Lagos, *danfo* slogans shape the moods and choices of commuters on a daily basis, involving Lagosians in “operations of the productive imaginations” (Mbembe 2001: 159). During my fieldwork in Lagos, commuters described to me how slogans influence their decisions on which *danfos* to enter or avoid each day. As one

Lagos. Perhaps, the most tongue-in-cheek slogan that I photographed was, “Police Is Your Friend” (Fig. 16). For the rest of this article, I want to focus on a “deep” reading of slogans—which is at the heart of this paper—as a window into the social navigation of daily life in Lagos.

“AIYE MOJUBA” (“I RESPECT THE WORLD”)

City life in Africa is a process of constant negotiation of visible and invisible forces. Now more than ever before, argues Danny Hoffman, “what one cannot see, or cannot see clearly, determines one’s fortunes” (2011: 959). Nowhere is this more evident than on the bottlenecked roads of Lagos, governed as they are by the paradigm of danger. Here, widespread distrust and suspicion increasingly call for protection against enemies that are invisible (Mbembe 2006: 310) and situations that are “predictably unpredictable” (Petee 2017: 96).

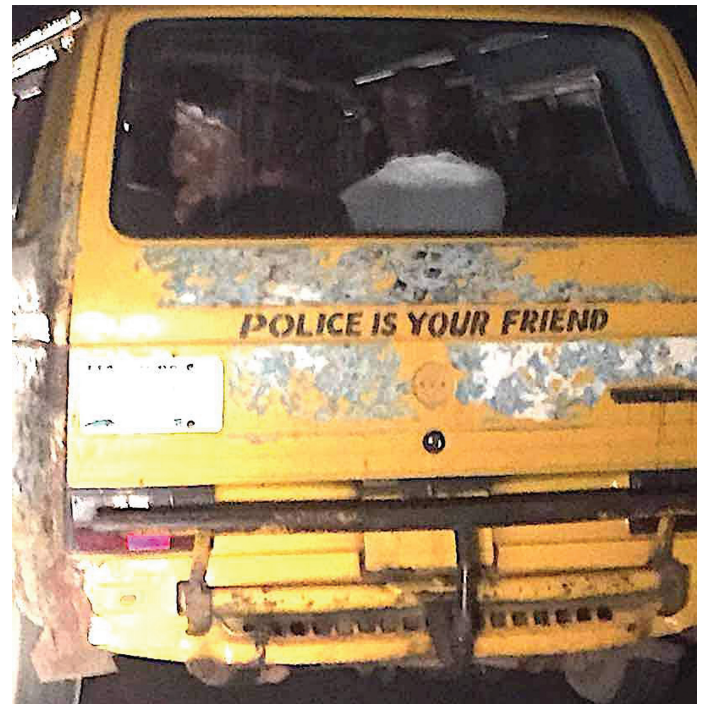
Whenever the double entendre *aiye/aye* (worldly life)—in contradistinction to *orun* (the hereafter, heaven)—is painted on a



15 A tricycle taxi with the slogan: "Blessed from above is above all." Ikotun Egbe, Lagos, October 13, 2014.

16 A minibus taxi with the slogan: "Police is your friend." Isolo, Lagos, January 6, 2015.

17 A minibus taxi with the slogan: "Aiyé Mojuba" ["I give my humble respect to the world"]. Iyana Ipaja, Lagos, November 26, 2014.



danfo, it is usually in recognition of the insecurity and radical uncertainty of road life, particularly the underworld or mysterious forces that have the power to cause misfortune en route. *Aiyé/ayé* is a superior agent that must be respected and supplicated (i.e., "*Aiyé Mojuba*," "I respect the world," Fig. 17) lest one's destiny be wickedly altered. The slogan "*Aiyé Ogun*" ("life is war") conveys the driver's constant struggle against in/visible enemies of progress. In the slogan "*ayé lo'ja*" ("the world is a marketplace," Fig. 18), the *danfo* driver sees the world (*aiyé/ayé*) as a marketplace, as a journey (*ajo*) to our eternal home in heaven/the spirit world (*orun ni'le*). According to Lawuyi (1994: 190), "*ayé* is characterized as a market and so is a place where the experiential, reflexive nature of day to day living implies the transformation of organized forms, transactional exchanges, and strong beliefs. To be alive is to experience the ups and downs of this journey." Through the repetitive/replicative power and unclosed possibility of

slogans, *danfo* drivers reclaim "a positive orientation to the near future" (Guyer 2017), which is steeped in Yoruba worldview. For these mobile subjects, hope is at once temporal and eternal. As Guyer notes, "Hope endures as a kind of daily promise that there is, indeed, an eternity, and it lies more in the recurrence by which it 'springs' than in any confident comprehension of an ultimate horizon" (2017: 152).

The habitus of fear and uncertainty that drivers/owners occupy is hardly surprising if we consider that car ownership symbolizes wealth and status, giving rise to envy. During the course of my fieldwork in Lagos, *danfo* owners expressed fears of being struck by sorcery orchestrated by *awon ota/aiyé* (in/visible enemies of progress). Which is why some operators fortify their vehicles with protective amulets—a dry animal skin twisted into a rope and tied to the rearview mirror—to ward off evil forces and attract



that words possess *ashe*, or life force. This meaning is conveyed in slogans such as “*Wibe Jebe*” (“Say it, and it shall come to pass”) and “No Loss, No Lack, No Limitation” (Fig. 7). Slogans like “Back to Sender” expresses the owner’s prayer that any bad wish towards his business backfires on the wisher. Others, like “Sea Never Dry,” reflect the owner’s wish that his *danfo*, his primary source of social livelihood, never leaves the road. Implicit in slogans such as “No Weapon Fashioned Against Me,” “Do My Prophet No Harm,” “Heaven’s Gate,” “The Presence of God” (Fig. 22), “Angels on Guard,” “Any Attempt!” or “*Iwo Dan Wo*” (“You try”), is a warning—a “Last Warning” (Fig. 23)—of the superior source of the owner’s power. Here, the message to *awon ota* is clear: by taking me on, you are taking on God himself (Olodumare—“the owner of the source of creation” in the Yoruba spiritual pantheon), whose power is unrivaled. This meaning is implied in slogans like, “No King as God” (Fig. 22), “Jesus Is Lord” (alongside a crucifix), “*Oba ju oba lo*” (“kings are greater than kings”) or “*Oga oga*” (“boss of bosses”) (Figs. 24–26).

passengers. One study of Yoruba taxi drivers found that 80% of Muslims and 60% of Christians had protective charms in their vehicles (Lawuyi 1988: 4). These charms reinforce the argument that “local reality itself has become impossible without a ‘knowledge of the hidden’ and of the spiritual worlds beyond the physical reality of everyday life” (De Boeck, Cassiman, and Van Wolputte 2009: 36).

Other operators wield their slogans as a talisman, reinforcing the Yoruba belief

REMEMBER UR SIX FEET

While the road remains one of the city’s most distinctive signs of modernity, it also embodies all the contradictions and trap-pings of modernity: “its inescapable enticements, its self-consuming passions, its discriminatory tactics, its devastating social costs” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993: xxix). Nigerian writers



18 A tricycle taxi with the slogan: “*Aye Loja*” [“The world is a marketplace”]. Agodo Egbe, Lagos, November 23, 2014.

19 A minibus taxi with the slogan: “*I Am Lifted.*” Ikotun, Lagos, October 5, 2014.



danfos that ply them) described by an age-old Yoruba saying as the “long coffin that holds 1,400 corpses.” Potholes are numerous, leading drivers to swerve around them, putting themselves and other road users at risk. A local reporter compared the scale of deaths caused by potholed roads in Lagos to Boko Haram, the Islamist group in northeast Nigeria. The reporter adduces the case of the Lagos-Badagry expressway, which in the past seven years has become a death trap, accounting for “over 10,000 potholes and several other valleys that are big enough to consume a car” (Osun Defender 2012). Taxis plying this road are easily damaged, making owners spend a lot of hard-earned money on repairs. The *danfos* are not only victims but also perpetrators of road accidents because they normally ply for hire without licenses and brazenly flout traffic rules. “You wonder how these yellow buses secured roadworthiness certificates in the first place,” a vehicle inspection officer told me. “And when you ban these buses from the roads, they still find a way of returning to them.”

Due to their propensity to cause accidents, Lagosians refer to *danfos* as “flying coffins.” As one trader recounted: “Many of us know that *danfos* are death traps, but since we can’t afford the high taxi fares, we have no choice but to use them. What else can we do?” Ironically, many *danfo* slogans announce to passengers their potential fate: “Carrying Me Home,” “Pray and Hope,” “See You in Heaven,” “Home Sweet Home,” “*Orun Ile*” (“Heaven, my Home”), “Free at Last,” “Remember Now Thy Creator.” A driver with the slogan “Remember Ur Six Feet” (Fig. 25) on his rear

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have graphically described the highways as an ogre that “swallows people” (Okri 1992) or as a “National Road Slaughter” (Soyinka 1977). Data from the Nigeria Bureau of Statistics and the Federal Road Safety Corps suggest that every year, about 20,000 of the 11,654 million vehicles in Nigeria are involved in road accidents. Between January 2013 and June 2018, a staggering 28,195 people lost their lives on Nigerian roads, an equivalent of 415 lives per month, and 14 persons per day (Vanguard 2018). With an estimated 33.7 deaths per 100,000 a year, Nigerian roads are the second most dangerous out of 193 United Nations member countries analyzed in a World Health Organization report (Blueprint 2014).

A large portion of accidents in Nigeria occurs on Lagos roads—roads (and the



20 A minibus taxi with the slogan: “The Presence of God.” Ikotun market, Lagos, January 26, 2015.

21 A minibus taxi with the slogan: “Last Warning.” Ikotun, Lagos, January 26, 2015.



22 A tricycle taxi with the slogan: “Jesus is Lord.” Ikotun, Lagos, January 26, 2015.

23 A minibus taxi with the slogan: “*Oba ju Oba lo*” [“Kings are greater than kings”]. Ikotun, Lagos, January 2015.

windshield told me he chose it as a warning to other road users behind him to “stay vigilant” because of the many demonic spirits yearning for human blood. “Six feet” is a common euphemism for death and dying because of the notion that cemetery workers always dig gravesites to a standard depth of six feet (1.83 meters).

24 HOURS ON THE ROAD

The poor/impassable condition of Lagos roads mirrors the oppressive and wretched conditions of road transport labor. Like most informal workers in Africa’s struggle economy, *danfo* operators have no fixed income, no days off, and no social protection. In 1958, sociologist Everett Hughes used the phrase “dirty work” to describe occupations and labor conditions that are perceived as degrading. This term well describes the workaday world of *danfo* operators in Lagos. Despite lengthy workdays averaging around twenty hours (or “24 Hours on the Road,” as one *danfo* slogan puts it—Fig. 4), operators take home meager incomes due to the culture of extortion among law enforcement agencies (e.g., officials of LASTMA [Lagos State Traffic Management Authority]), the exacting demands of *danfo* owners, and the extortionate powers





of the mafia-like *agberos* who roam bus stops and junctions, collecting onerous fees from operators with impunity. “This work is just daily income,” said one driver. “What you get today you use today, and tomorrow you start again from scratch.” After witnessing firsthand a *danfo* driver in Lagos set himself ablaze in protest after the seizure of his *danfo* by bribe-demanding LASTMA officials, a *danfo* driver lamented:

LASTMA officials are treating us like slaves. They arrest and extort us at will. We go through hell in their hands and those of *agberos* and local government officials. How much do we make? Out of the money we make daily, we will buy fuel, return money to the vehicle owners, and at the end of the day, we are left with little or nothing. We are appealing to the state government to wade into the matter and save us from the hands of LASTMA officials (Isaac 2022).

Drivers must remit a specific target income to the owner each day; they are paid according to how much they bring in. The driver is responsible for all overhead costs, including fines violently imposed by *agberos* and their partners in crime, the traffic/mobile police. As such,

operators are usually under immense pressure to meet the financial targets set by owners or else be replaced: there is a crowd of unemployed youth in Lagos ready to learn on the job. This pressure results in long working hours, high accident rates, and poor health. To meet their daily targets, drivers must race between the two end points of their chosen routes, weaving in and out of traffic with reckless abandon. For these chauffeurs, navigating Lagos requires constant improvisation and experimentation. They describe their driving work as *kosere* (a do-or-die situation, Fig. 26). As one slogan puts it: “Ghetto Boy. No Time to Check Time” (Fig. 27) This supports Kenda Mutongi’s (2006: 564) argument that, “Long hours, ruthless police and gang harassment, and susceptibility to deadly traffic accidents all render the work of [minibus taxi] operators one of the most dangerous jobs.”

In Lagos, according to the State Ministry of Transportation, 99% of *danfo* drivers suffer from hypertension (PM News 2015), a health challenge directly related to the demanding and dangerous nature of their driving work. Survey evidence from the Lagos State Driver’s Institute shows that 22% of *danfo* drivers are partially blind (Vanguard 2013). Yet, about 95% of sensory input to the brain needed for driving comes from vision (General Optical Council 2008). The poor condition of Lagos roads, especially the dust and debris, partly accounts for this problem (though many drivers told me they never had to undergo a vision test since they work without license). To complicate matters, *danfo* operators have easy access to a variety of alcoholic beverages sold in and around motor parks,⁷ from *alomo* bitters (herbal-based liquor) to *ogogoro* (a distilled spirit from the raffia palm tree). Rollups of different brands are also available, from *igbo* (marijuana) to cocaine and heroin. Some drivers justify their drinking habits by claiming that the herbs blended into the alcoholic beverages helps to boost their (driving and sexual) performance, while providing



24 A minibus taxi with the slogan: “Oga Oga” [“Boss of bosses”]. Ikotun, Lagos, November 23, 2014.

25 A minibus taxi with the slogan: “Remember Ur Six Feet.” Idimu, Lagos, November 23, 2014.



26 A minibus taxi with the slogan: “Kosere” [“A do-or-die situation”], Ikotun, Lagos, August 20, 2014.

27 A tricycle taxi with the slogan: “Ghetto Boy. No Time to Check Time.” Ile-Iwe, Lagos, January 6, 2015.

much-needed relief for work-related hazards caused by long driving hours along dusty and bumpy roads. These hazards include respiratory problems resulting from prolonged hours of exposure to air pollution, back pain, aching joints, swollen and painful legs, vision conditions, dust-related issues, sore throats, headaches, and ulcers. The dangers of driving in Lagos are best exemplified by slogans such as: “Are You Following Jesus this Close?” (a sticker on a rear windshield of a *danfo*), “Drive Soft—Life No Get Duplicate,” “Choose—Home or Mortuary?” “Be Easy, Life No Get Part 2,” and “Last Warning” (Fig. 21).

The struggle to maximize profit forces many operators to reproduce the transgressive system that they condemn. Behaviors such as overloading passengers, speeding, engaging in arbitrary pricing, failing to comply with the rules and protocols of the road, and feuding contributes to the criminalization and stigmatization of *danfo* operators. Drivers struggle to construct a positive self-image. They see their work not as a “real job,” but as a temporary one to which they resort *faute de mieux*. But many still derive great pride from their vehicles—the material symbols of their survival, manhood, and respectability. It is not uncommon in Lagos to see operators wiping dirt off their minibuses at the slightest opportunity or using the water that has accumulated on monstrous potholes to wash their vehicles, especially while stuck in go-slow. In a Nigerian context where a man’s social and marital status are closely entwined, driving work is not infrequently a way out of “social death” for unmarried men. This is particularly true of the predominantly Muslim cities (e.g., Maiduguri) in northern Nigeria, where *achaba* (commercial motorcycle) business enables youth waiting for adulthood to pay the oft-inflated bride price, marry, and acquire the esteemed status of *masu gida* (household head) (Agbiboa 2022a).

NO PAIN NO GAIN

Despite their precarious existence, public transport operators believe that hard work is a *conditio sine qua non* for survival and recognition. Steeped in Yoruba culture and philosophy, this view of work as the antidote for success is implied in slogans such as, “No Friend in Poverty,” “No Food 4 Lazy Man,” “Work and Pray,” “2Day’s Struggles, 2Morrow’s Success.” Other slogans draw upon traditional Yoruba worldview that ties laziness/idleness to theft/the propensity to steal—such as, “*Alapa ma sise ole ni da*” (“the one with hands yet refuses to work will turn a thief”), “*Eni*

o sise a ma jale” (“the one who refuses to work will steal”), “*Ole darun*” (“laziness is a disease”). Slogans such as “No Success without Struggle” and “No Pain No Gain” (Fig. 28) reinforce the Yoruba philosophy that each man is spiritually bestowed with the capacity for success, but has to make that success by himself. Sociologist Asef Bayat has suggested that, “although the poor are powerless, nevertheless they do not sit around waiting for their fate to determine their lives. Rather they are active in their own way to ensure their survival” (2000: 539). Many transport workers in Lagos see *agberos* and police officers as the epitome of laziness and daylight robbery—in short, as “thugs” who reap where they have not sown, so to speak. As one common *danfo* slogan puts it: “Monkey de work, Baboon de chop” (“one person works





28 A minibus taxi with the slogan: "No Pain, No Gain." Ikotun, Lagos, January 6, 2015.

29 A minibus taxi with the slogan: "Aiye Osenikanse" ["No man is an island"]. Egbeda, Lagos, November 26, 2014.

independence. Rather they seek ever-more powerful mediators who can use personal influence to get them jobs and scholarships and protect them from heavy-handed government bureaucrats or jealous neighbors who might trump up destructive court cases against them. In fact, the more desperately individuals need something, the more they need patrons with contacts and resources, and the more they grow vulnerable to demands of recompense (Bledsoe 1990: 75).

In Lagos, *danfo* drivers enact the "wealth in people" approach by aligning themselves with patrons who will stand for them in time of trouble. As one slogan admits: "Aiye Osenikanshe" ("no man is an island" or "no one is self-sufficient," Fig. 29). Absent

while another eats his sweat"). This slogan resonates with Dawson and Fouksman's study of an informal settlement in South Africa, which found that "surplus populations" often connect labor and income together within "a bidirectional logic that posits both that income must be deserved through work, and that the hardworking deserve income" (2020: 230).

NO MORE PERSON

Research suggests that the urban poor tendentially build relationships with urban "big men" or patrons who can advocate for them and boost their aspirational capacity (Appadurai 2004). For their part, big men often accumulate political power by amassing followers in urban life (Paller 2014: 123–24). In the risky and unpredictable environment in Lagos, big men are key to personal security and upward social mobility (e.g., finding gainful jobs). Here, patron-client relationships fulfill "the need for mechanisms of 'social insurance'" (van de Walle 2001: 118; see also Smith 2010: 248). As Caroline Bledsoe notes, "things work by influence":

People do not seek a dangerous state of





such as “Givers Never Lack,” “Oganla” (“Big Man,” Fig. 30), “Oga mi” (“My Big Man”), “5 & 6” (reflecting a driver’s closeness to his patron, Fig. 30) and “Oga tie da” (“Where’s Your Big Man?”). In the slogan “Ola Mummy” (“mother’s benevolence,” Fig. 20), the operator celebrates his mother, who played a major (financial) role in his *danfo* business. In an urban context where auto loans from banks or even loan sharks are virtually nonexistent, for many drivers, family members become the most promising avenues for obtaining start-up capital.

adequate social support, argues Sasha Newell (2012: 90), “a mere unfounded accusation can threaten one’s entire social identity.” J.-P. Olivier de Sardan (1999: 41) puts it bluntly: “Woe betide the man who knows no one, either directly or indirectly.” While some patrons may assist operators in time of trouble, others may not. Patrons who have the resources to help and do so are fondly celebrated in slogans



(clockwise from top left)
 30 A tricycle taxi with the slogan: “Oganla” [“Big Man”]. Ile-iwe, Lagos, January 21, 2015.

31 A minibus taxi with the slogan: “Iwa Eda” [“Human behavior”]. Ikotun, Lagos, October 13, 2014.

32 A minibus taxi with the slogan: “Your worst enemy can be your best friend.” Ikotun, Lagos, October 21, 2014.



Patrons (especially one's relatives) who have the means to help but fail to do so are subsumed under the category of "Awon Aiye" ("the wicked world"), demonstrating the benign and malignant possibilities that flow from social/familial relationships. When patrons disappoint, transport operators are reminded of the frailty of human behavior (i.e., "Iwa Eda," Fig. 31) and the wicked irony of Lagos life that serves at once to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. As one slogan puts it, "Your Worst Enemy Can Be Your Best

Friend" (Fig. 32). This harsh reality is conveyed by slogans like, "Such Is Life" (Fig. 5), "Helpers Are Scarce," "If Men Were God," "No Competition in Destiny" (Fig. 33), "Delay Is not Denial," and "Trust No Body." The slogan "No More Person" (Fig. 34) laments the loss of the organizing African philosophy of *ubuntu* ("I am because we are" or humanity towards others)—that is to say, the lack of the normative notions of personhood emerging from traditional African cultures and couched in terms of a dominant communitarian ethic (see Oyowe 2015).

The ultimate lesson in disappointment for operators is that the pursuit of survival is "Not by Struggle" (Fig. 35) alone but by the grace of God. This sense is conveyed in slogans such as "If Not for God" or "God Dey" (Fig. 15). In short, operators are reminded that "Igbekerele omo araye, asan ni" ("reliance on people gives rise to disappointment"). While many still see the world as generally ruled by the rich ("Olowo lo oga"), they also recognize that "Olowo kin se Olorun" (The rich person is not God). That realization compels operators to turn to God—"Oga pata pata" ("Biggest Man")—to lift themselves out of disappointments. This meaning is conveyed in the slogan, "I Am Lifted" (Fig. 19). In his classic work *State and Society in Nigeria*, Gavin Williams (1980: 114) argues that, "In an uncertain and competitive world where fortunes are seen to be made and lost and one's own fortune often appears to be beyond one's control, God, fate and luck are common (and not unwarranted) categories for the explanation of success or lack of it." This perspective reverberates with Guyer's (2017) point about the productivity and infinite possibilities of hope that springs eternal from the practice of repetition and replication.



33 A tricycle taxi with the slogan: "No Competition in Destiny." Ile-iwe, Ikotun Egbe, Lagos, October 28, 2014.

34 A minibus taxi with the slogan: "No More Person." Iyana Ejigbo, Lagos, October 28, 2014.



35 A tricycle taxi with the slogan: “Not by struggle.” Ile-iwe, Ikotun Egbe, Lagos, December 21, 2014

CONCLUSION

Through an interpretative approach to, and deep reading of, vehicle slogans in Lagos, this article has shed fresh light onto the neglected linkages between texts, persons, and publics in urban Africa. By using *danfo* slogans as a unique window into the life-worlds of mobile subjects *in extremis*, we have gained a better understanding of the aesthetic forms of self-expression through which urban survival, recognition, and belonging become legible.

Notes

- 1 The word *danfo* in Yoruba roughly translates as “everyone for himself” or “you’re on your own.”
- 2 In 2008, Lagos opened the first ever BRT system in Africa. Today, the system boasts different lines which cover over 35.5 km of track and transport over 350,000 commuters on a daily basis (Ogunola et al. 2019: 3).
- 3 Fuji is a popular Nigerian musical genre which arose from the improvisational Ajisari/Were music tradition. This is a kind of music performed to wake Muslims before dawn during the Ramadan fasting season.
- 4 Lagosians spend on average of 30 hours in traffic each week—or 1,560 hours annually—while drivers in Los Angeles and Moscow traffic spent only 128 and 210 hours respectively in the whole of 2018 (Akorede 2019).
- 5 *Okadas* are also known as *dáfáa-dukà* (“cook all”) taxis because of their reputation of being frequently involved in road accidents—where, metaphorically, all will be “cooked.” Across Lagos, nay Nigeria, general hospitals have special wards named after motorbike brands (i.e., “Jincheng Ward”) where victims of *okada* accidents are treated.
- 6 A term used by Webb Keane (2002: 95) to “capture the ways in which practices and ideologies put words, things, and actions into complex articulation with one another.”

7 More than just bus stations or bus stops, motor parks (also known as garages) are zones of commerce, social interactions, and everyday politics (e.g., Stasik and Cissokho 2018).

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By exploring the aesthetics of chaos in Lagos, this essay advances our limited knowledge of the visual, spatial, and temporal aspects of city life in Africa. Through a close analysis of the texts and contexts of *danfos*, we come to see informal transport as simultaneously a place (of action and meaning) and a “nonplace” (of anonymity and depersonalization) (Auge 1995). Above all, the *danfo* is a way of life that cannot be simply wished away by “world class” city ambitions. At issue here is not just the *danfos*, but the cultural economy and social imaginary of informal transport. As a vital technology of mass mobility, *danfos* are archives of popular wisdom that are integral to the productive imagination of Lagos and the reproduction of life therein (Simone 2004; Mbembe 2001). For now, the *danfos* continue to drive commuter journeys. But for how long?

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