

Tuk-tuk slogans in the coastal towns of Kenya: A glimpse behind communication practices on three wheels

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1. Introduction

The writings on commercial vehicles have a long tradition in Kenya. This holds true especially for matatus, the mini-buses, for which more literature is available relating to Kenya than it is for the tuk-tuks. The slogans are never just words, painted on the tuk-tuk, but are always very personal stories. The article deals with slogans on tuk-tuks on the streets of the coastal towns of Mombasa, Kombani, Diani and Ukunda in Kenya. The findings reveal that, unlike in other countries such as Ghana and Liberia, slogans on Kenyan tuk-tuks are categorized into four main fields: religious identity, private identity, effort given to the vehicles and information about the working-partnership relationship, when more than one owner exist. Often the slogans were different from other kinds of sayings, such as proverbs or advices, as it was not promptly (or even not at all) understandable what messages they meant to deliver. We had to seek for interpretation from the owner or their drivers to understand their meaning.

Interestingly, the decorations and the slogans found on the tuk-tuks are contextualized with youth languages by the customers, even though the owners usually do not drive the vehicles. The drivers tend to be younger people, who are seen as the typical candidates of youth languages (see Mugaddam 2012) and who are expected to use a youth register. The slogans are nevertheless designed by the owners of the tuk-tuks and typical youth language terms are not commonly found on them.

The number of tuk-tuks (an onomatopoeic word deriving from the sound they make) on the streets of the coastal towns of Mombasa, Kombani, Diani and Ukunda has increased immensely over the past decade, with more than 7,000 tuk-tuks currently providing a cheap and stylish mode of transport in Mombasa alone. At least 20,000 youths are (in)directly employed in the tuk-tuk business as spare parts dealers, owners, drivers, mechanics and even as guards1. Requiring very little capital to start and to operate with, the tuk-tuk industry has enabled a large number of small-scale entrepreneurs to enter the public transport business. Often, many of the drivers are not the actual owners of the vehicle and work for a nominal salary which is usually a percentage of the daily income. As taken from the website of FSD Kenya, a tuk-tuk owner earns an average of Ksh 1,200 per day (≈12 Euro), while the salary for a driver ranges between Ksh 500 to 600.2

Tuk-tuks are mostly preferred in estates with narrow streets such as those found in the small villages of Likoni, e.g. Ujamaa, Majengo Mapya or Jamvi La Wageni. Because of the few number of passengers (usually between 3 to 4 people), tuk-tuks provide a rapid and steady movement of people from one location to another. Indeed, the movement of people from Likoni to the south coastal towns of Kombani, Diani and Ukunda has been made easier because of the availability of many tuk-tuks.

With many tourist attraction sites such as Fort Jesus, Kayas³ and its white sand beaches, Mombasa, Kombani, Diani and Ukunda towns are cosmopolitan and many European tourists are found in these towns who enjoy taking tuk-tuk rides, seeing it as an adventure even for long-distance travels, as a frustrated taxi driver told us. The price for a tuk-tuk ride is often charged based on the social status or the skin color of the customer. The price charged for tourists can be ten times as high as for the locals, yet it is not impossible for tourists to enter and exit a tuk-tuk, leaving the regular local price with the driver. However, it is advisable to know the exact fare before boarding the tuk-tuk, as some clever drivers can trick you into their vehicles only to charge you an exorbitant price at your destination⁴.

Tuk-tuks are privately owned, and are known worldwide under various terms and designs, sometimes having four wheels and more space for passengers. The tuk-tuks in Mombasa and in South Coast all have the same shape and construction. However, some tuk-tuk operators have modified their vehicles with creative slogans, stickers, entertainment speakers, flashing neon and graffiti just to bring some uniqueness and maybe attract more

¹ See [http://www.ebru.co.ke/new-upgraded-tuk-tuks-launched-in-mombasa/] (last accessed 2 April 2018).

² See [http://fsdkenya.org/focus-note/finance-fortune-4/] (last accessed 2 April 2018).

³ Sacred forests of the local Mijikenda people.

⁴ See [https://zurukenya.com/2017/03/18/what-the-tuk-tuk-mombasas-love-hate-relationship-with-the-little-three-wheeled-hardy-vehicle/] (last accessed 2 April 2018).

customers5. Although they are quite small, the back bench of most tuk-tuks can carry three passengers and the front chair, which is reserved for the driver, can take one more passenger where necessary or possible, while the back is fitted with some space for carrying the luggage of the passengers.

The slogans, stickers and writings on commercial vehicles have a long tradition in Kenya but tourists are left out of this communication. This holds true especially for matatus, the mini-buses, for which more literature is available with respect to Kenya (Kayi 2016), Ghana (Geest n.d.) or Liberia (Guseh 2008), than can be found on tuk-tuks. According to Geest (n.d.),

the slogans used in Ghana refer to a proverb, a prayer, a modern saying and also for sports or political events. Furthermore, they often tell personal stories about the car owner or the driver.

Kayi (2016) in his research on matatu slogans in Kenya identified seven themes of slogans, of which the "[m]ajority (43%) of the slogans and mottos fell in the religious messages category [...]. Messages relating to entrepreneurial or business practices accounted for 17% while music, artis-

tic and personality accounted for 14%. Work and morality-related inscriptions accounted for 11% and 10% respectively" (Kayi 2016: 54). The slogans painted on transport vehicles, such as matatus, tuk-tuks or lorries are often interpreted and analyzed as a style or register of the youth (e.g. Kayi 2016). It seems likely not that the slogans depict a certain youth register but rather that they are identified by others as forming a part of youth culture by their mostly young drivers.

The slogans that are written on many of the tuk-tuks are a means of communication which is only understood by members of the Swahili or Kenyan society; even more so in certain sections of Mombasa or of the coastal society. This becomes clear in the following example:

Fig. 1. Huwezi chama wewe. Sisi ndio kusema



Frank, the owner and driver gave the information: "No one works or operates the way I do. I am a very hard-working guy, and this is meant to be read by other tuk-tuk

⁵ See [https://zurukenya.com/2017/03/18/what-the-tuk-tuk-mombasas-love-hate-relationship-with-the-little-three-wheeled-hardy-vehicle/] (last accessed 2 April 2018).

operators." Trying to translate the slogan into proper English, the German-speaking author of this text failed to manage and asked for assistance. A Kenyan, who was at the time on a bus in Tanzania kindly offered his help and the following WhatsApp conversation took place: the owners or the drivers. As we asked the drivers about the background of the slogan, we changed the perspective of the analysis and preferred not to interpret them ourselves. One of the results we experienced is that the drivers, even if they are not the owners of the



Fig. 2–3. WhatsApp conversation

In both conversations with different dialogue partners, the first, who is Tanzanian, recommended asking a Kenyan Swahili speaker, and the second, who is Kenyan, argued that he did not understand as well and that it was probably a Mombasa register. It thus seems as if Frank chose the slogan in order to show off his belonging to Mombasa, something he is as proud of as of his hard-working attitude. It is possible also that most of the sayings may be meaningless or show different meaning to the viewer and that unless you ask the owner, you may not get the true meaning.

This article provides insight into the explanation of the selection of the saying by

cars, know about the backgrounds of the slogans. The slogan was never just a word, painted on the tuktuk, but was always a very personal story, labeled by the owners or the tuk-tuk drivers. Labeling is driven by a feeling of wanting to be motivated, of expressing the tuk-tuk's ability, or of mocking.

In our sample of 31 tuk-tuk slogans, we found four main fields according to which the owners use the slogan in order to transmit a message: their religious identity, their

private identity, the ability that they give their vehicle and the message that they want to deliver as a working-partnership, when more than one owner exists. Different from other kinds of slogans, such as proverbs or advice, it is not promptly (or even not at all) comprehensible what the message is meant to deliver.

A descriptive research design, in particular that of the qualitative approach, was applied during this field study to collect information about the slogans on the tuk-tuks (Kayi 2016). Drivers were asked to explain the meanings of the sayings on their tuk-tuks. Data was collected from 31 tuk-tuks operating on the streets of Mombasa, Kombani, Diani and Ukunda in Kenya. The tuk-tuks were randomly selected based on their willingness to participate. Ethical considerations were followed during the entire fieldwork, like seeking consent before taking pictures (Berez 2001: 186).

2. Motifs of slogans

2.1 Religious identity

Similar to Kayi's (2016) findings, the religious slogans formed the majority in our research on tuk-tuks in Mombasa and in the south coastal towns of Kombani, Diani and Ukunda. These slogans were in English, Kiswahili, Arabic or any other local languages such as Kamba. While some slogans clearly predicted the religious denomination, others were ambiguous, revealing religious affiliations only after talking to the owner or drivers of

Fig. 4. Jehovah is the final say Fig. 5. Nevermix, trust God alone

the vehicle. Interestingly, all these saying revealed the existence of only two dominant religions in the coastal towns of Mombasa and on the south coast i.e. Christianity and Islam. The strong attachment to religion can be speculated to influence most tuk-tuk owners or drivers in Kenya to write their religious motto on their vehicles in order to communicate their beliefs.

with Further, corroborating Kayi's (2016: 54) findings, the slogans on the tuk-tuk portrayed God to be superior, caring and protective. For instance, while reporting on the choice of these slogans, the owners or drivers often had different narratives about their past lives or social status and how they had succeeded in life, all attributed to God. For instance, the Christian slogan Jehovah is the final say is supposed to communicate that the owner of this tuk-tuk is a Christian, coming from a very humble background. He had been condemned to poverty and went through trying situations

> throughout his school life. This affected his studies and made him perform poorly, hindering his chances of getting a decent job. Fortunately, God blessed him with some money to buy the tuk-tuk. To him, God has a solution to every problem and can determine the destiny of a person. He attests that truly God has the final word, translated in Christianity to mean Jehovah is the final say (Fig. 4). Another slogan Nevermix, trust God alone indicating that the owner of the tuk-tuk is a staunch

Christian who believes in Jesus as the only provider. He attests that God provides everything for him, the customers and money, thus for him it is God alone (Fig. 5).

The slogan *God is great* is meant to show that the owner of the tuk-tuk had undergone unspeakable challenges in life and believes that it was through God that he managed to overcome those challenges (Fig. 6). *No Ngai* 'it is only God' is a Kamba slogan, meaning that it is only God who provides everything. God is the one who can make someone succeed in life and that there is no business that can succeed without God. The owner of this tuk-tuk further says that God is the one who provides customers and money for the business (Fig. 7).

Another slogan *God's favor* indicates that the owner of the tuk-tuk is a Christian who believed that it was through God's favor that he managed to get enough money to buy the vehicle. He still believes that God continues to favor him by providing customers and money to maintain the business (Fig. 8). Yet another slogan *Jemedari*, a Swahili word meaning

Fig. 6. *God is Great* Fig. 7. *No Ngai* Fig. 8. God's favor Fig. 9. Jemedari



Fig. 10. Pepo haijai Fig. 11. Hasbinallah wanemal wakil



an army commander was on Odhiambo's tuk-tuk. Odhiambo believes that Jesus is the commander who controls everything in his business: the customers and the money he gets every day. He believes that his Christian faith has made him succeed in life (Fig. 9).

The slogan *Pepo haijai* is an Islamic slogan meaning that 'in heaven, there is a place for everyone' (Fig. 10). *Hasbinallah wanemal wakil* (in Arabic script) is another Islamic saying which can be translated in Swahili as *Utukufu wote uko kwa Mungu* or 'all glory and honor belongs to God' for an English translation (Fig. 11).

A study in Liberia has shown that more than 45% of slogans and mottos on commercial vehicles had religious connections, suggesting that most people in the country believe in God or in the Supreme Being (Guseh 2008). Ghanaians also use religious slogans to seek God's protection while travelling (reported in Kavi 2016: 53). The high number of religious slogans on Kenyan tuk-tuks also shows that Kenyans believe in God, although in different denominations. Christians form the majority, followed by Muslims and other religions. The United States Department of States (2012) as reported by Kayi (2016: 54), informs us that there are about 80% Christians and 10% Muslims in Kenya, while the remainder are other religions.

$2.2\,Attributes\,of\,tuk-tuks$

These slogans are meant to describe the ability of the vehicle in order to show the customers that it is powerful and can transport them anywhere at any time. They may offer some form of marketing and to some extent may show the entrepreneurial or business practices which are common on Kenyan matatus or commercial vehicles (Kayi 2016: 55). Introduced twelve years ago, tuk-tuks may not be very popular or even preferred by some customers. While running on diesel engines, these tuktuks make strong vibrations, producing a noisy sound. To overcome these challenges, tuk-tuk drivers and owners have come up with slogans and sayings to attract customers to ride their vehicles. For instance, George used the slogan *New Born* (Fig. 12) on his tuk-tuk to attract customers, while Msyoka used the word *Caterpillar* to symbolize a tuk-tuk that is very strong to carry passengers anywhere, just like a strong caterpillar tractor (Fig. 13).

Festus, a resident from Kwale, but operating a tuk-tuk in Mombasa, says that the slogan *Mkurunzinza* (Fig. 14) comes from the Swahili word *kurunzi* 'torch'. He says, "I am ready to look after my customers 24/7, from morning to morning. The tuk-tuk provides light in my life, it gives me my daily bread."

In Kenya, the public transport sector is transforming very fast. Creativity is greatly required in order to compete and to survive. For instance, matatus are fitted with powerful sound systems and LCD screens. Some tuktuks are also fitted with powerful sound systems and with attractive graffiti. Drivers also ensure that their tuk-tuks are clean, in order to draw customers.

2.3 Owner identity

A large percentage of the 31 slogans could be referred back to the owner and his very personal likes (*Bruce Lee; Del-Vincente*) and characteristics (*Mambo mengi; Mboko; Mtoto wa mama; First-born; Valid dreams* and *Lazima iwe*). The driver of the tuk-tuk named *Del-Vicente* told us that the owner used to be a football player of a club in Mombasa by the name of Fig. 12. New Born Fig. 13. Caterpillar Fig. 14. Mkurunzinzaza





Fig. 15. *Del-Vicente* Fig, 16. *Mboko* Fig. 17. *Bruce Lee* Fig. 18. *Mambo mengi*

Del-Vincente. His love for this club made him name his tuk-tuk *Del-Vincente* and this is his identity (Fig. 15). Mwendwa, another tuk-tuk owner, uses the slogan *Mboko* which is a word from the Kamba language. It means a straw used to take *mnazi* 'alcohol'. Mwendwa says he used to prepare this kind of brew to sell it. He managed to buy his tuk-tuk from the money he got from this business and uses the name as his identity (Fig. 16).

Yet another driver, Galoki Kassim for *Bruce Lee*, told us that the word comes from the famous actor in action movies. He proceeded to explain that the owner of the tuk-tuk was very poor but worked very hard to acquire money that he used to buy the tuk-tuk (Fig. 17). Kassim kept repeating the words "my boss is a 'fighter' just like Bruce Lee. He never gave up irrespective of the challenges." The driver of the tuk-tuk named *Mambo mengi* says that his boss is very talkative and is a social person. He is known to talk nicely to his clients and has been nicknamed *mzee wa mambo mengi*, 'a very talkative old man' (Fig. 18).

The slogan *First born* was used to indicate that the vehicle was the first for the owner. To ensure that the tuk-tuk works properly, the owner maintained it very well, as well as towards a first born (Fig. 19). Another owner identifies his tuk-tuk by the name of *Mtoto wa mama* 'mama's child or baby'. The vehicle was held so dearly, it was neat and well-maintained. The driver said that customers are treated as well as mothers toward their children. Moreover, the passengers are loved and respected (Fig. 20).

Valid dreams was yet another slogan on a tuk-tuk. After an inquiry, the driver said that the owner of the vehicle had the inspiration or was dreaming to own a tuk-tuk one day. He worked so hard to make sure that this dream came true and when he got the opportunity to buy one he wrote the slogan *Valid dreams* to show his colleagues that he was not just dreaming but indeed had very valid dreams that came to pass (Fig. 21). *Lazima iwe* (Fig. 22) is to symbolize a person who was from a poor background

Fig. 19. *First born* Fig. 20. *Mtoto wa mama* Fig. 21. *Valid dreams* Fig. 22. *Lazima iwe*

but who succeeded in life. He had a very large family or many responsibilities. The tuk-tuk had to operate to generate income to sustain the needs of the many dependents, hence the slogan *Lazima iwe* 'it must operate'.

2.4 Team identity

Vehicles that are owned by a group are often labelled as such by using a team name. Joint ownerships show the struggle of generating income in the Kenyan society, as the purchase of a tuk-tuk is sometimes an unmanageable task for one person. The label 'team' shows that the group understands themselves as a team and not only as a partnership of convenience, which is then displayed in the slogans. For instance, we met Mng'aro, a driver of a tuk-tuk labeled Team focus/wacha wewe hata yeye. Mng'aro informed us that the tuk-tuk belonged to a group of men who do small-scale business. They contributed capital that enabled them to buy the tuk-tuk. The group is focused, which is why they labeled the tuk-tuk Team focus/wacha wewe hata yeye 'leave us! Even your friend cannot beat me in this game' (Fig. 23). The Swahili phrase is meant as mockery and means that the group is hardworking and cannot be compared with anyone. Mraja Aiphosisi informed us that the tuk-tuk with the slogan Team Jua Kali "belongs to a group of men who work in Jua Kali industries⁶. It is a difficult job, but they came together as a group to buy this tuk-tuk". The phrase is used as a team identity, whoever reads the records, knows that the tuk-tuk is a product of this group. The driver says he treats it with a lot of respect and the phrase always reminds him of what the owners have gone through (Fig. 24).

⁶ There is a booming informal sector in Kenya of small-scale traders, craftspeople, and entrepreneurs in Kenya known as the Jua Kali sector.



Fig. 23. Team focus/wacha wewe hata yeye Fig. 24. Team Jua Kali Fig. 25. True love Fig. 26. Double N company



Mutuku, the driver of the tuk-tuk *True love* said that the owners of the vehicle love each other. It belongs to a man and his wife. They work together and trust each other (Fig. 25). *Double N company* tuk-tuk belongs to a group of five people working in a small company in Mombasa. They gave the slogan *Double N company* as their identity (Fig. 26).

2.5. Messages on the working style

Some of the slogans relate to the way in which the drivers work when are on duty. These slogans are meant to attract the customers by offering them a fast vehicle (Flying dudu), travel without police checks (Colleague) and others. Wafisadi hawana likizo was translated as 'businessmen don't have vacation'. Although the driver gave this kind of translation, there was not any connection between the interpretation and the phrase. Wafisadi hawana likizo could be translated as the corrupt people do not have vacation. For further inquiry, Joshua says that "it is a corruption and a no-go zone." As he cannot offer bribes, he always tries to work within the traffic laws. Another vehicle, Flying dudu, was translated as 'flying parasite', Ludwig Munene says that "it runs very fast. Meant to attract customers" (Fig. 27 and 28).

The owner of the tuk-tuk with the phrase *Kaa mbali* takes very good care of the vehicle, which is clean and well-maintained with good entertainment devices. The saying is meant to convey a message that you cannot compare his tuk-tuk with any other. We enquired about the uniqueness of the vehicle and the owner told us that it is fitted with powerful speakers to entertain his customers (Fig. 29). Kassim, a driver of the vehicle *Waambie waje* translated the

slogan as 'tell them to come'. He says: "I am not afraid of any competition. Those who want to compete with me in this business should come and try. I am ready for anything" (Fig. 30).

"I am very serious with my business", said Kassim, who is the driver of *Kaa chonjo* tuk-tuk. He keeps time and takes very good care of the customers' needs (Fig. 31). *Kaza mwendo* is a Swahili saying, meaning 'moving very fast'. The driver of this tuk-tuk says that he moves very fast and that he is quick in his business. This trait allows him to earn good money from the business (Fig. 32).

I Will Remain Top; the owner of this tuk-tuk says that he is doing everything to ensure that he remains on top of his business. He knows how to talk to the customers and he never fails to earn money (Fig. 33). Katana, a driver of the tuk-tuk *Colleague* says, "this is a word used by the police. It is a form of identity. I like the word but more so I am using it to create an impression that I am like the police so that I can create friendship with the traffic police officers" (Fig. 34). The owner of this tuk-tuk probably knew that friendship with the traffic police would make his business hurdle-free resulting in huge success.

3. Conclusion

Tuk-tuk slogans are not just words painted on vehicles. Rather, they all tell stories of their purchase, the expectations and the hope that their owners connect with them. Often, tuk-tuk owners spell out their lives, loves or the troubles they go through before or after acquiring their vehicle. We analyzed 31 slogans on Kenyan tuk-tuks and identified five main themes, namely their religious identity, their private identity, the ability that they give Fig. 27. Wafisadi hawana likizo Fig. 28. Flying dudu Fig. 29. Kaa mbali Fig. 30. Wambie waje











Fig. 31. Kaa chonjo Fig. 32. Kaza mwendo Fig. 33. I will Remain Top Fig. 34. Colleague

to their vehicle, the message that they want to deliver as a working-partnership when more than one owner exists, as well as their working style.

The use of slogans and phrases on tuktuks is related to a name. Tuk-tuk drivers usually provide explanations such as Jina la tuk-tuk yangu ni kama kitambulisho changu. Watu hunitambulisha kwa jina hili 'the name of my tuk-tuk is my identity and I am usually referred to by this name'. This statement by one of the drivers showed that the phrases contain a deeper meaning which can only be understood by a few people. Based on the previous WhatsApp communication (Fig. 2 and 3), this confirms the argument on language being deeply understood in its local context and everyday communication (Storch submitted). The local way of choosing words, phrases and interpretation attached to them has to be considered. The coastal Kenyan tuk-tuk slogans are based on the way of interpretation by the local population, the drivers and the owners.

In their chapter on language and identity, Ferris et al. (2014: 409) introduce their work with the following statement: "How would you describe yourself? Which categories would you use for this description? How we describe ourselves and others is integral to our sense of self belonging". The kind of identities and descriptions given in our study were based on the way drivers viewed themselves, understood their personal lives or their bosses and the root cause behind the slogans. According to Pavlenko & Blackledge (2004), imposed, assumed and negotiable identity are the three kinds of identities used in the description of one's self.

In our study, it became clear that most tuktuk owners either had an imposed or a negotiable identity. They were once labeled as poor by the society (imposed identity). They saw themselves as poor but did not assume this kind of identity. They had to contest it by working hard in order to earn enough money that could enable them to buy a tuk-tuk and thereby change their status (negotiable identity). Hard work led to the change from an imposed identity that was once ascribed to them, to their present status.

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