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'Utanjenga -- you will build me': Moral ambiguity and the stigma of risky business in Nairobi's transportation Industry

Sammy Wambua writes a column under the moniker of 'The Sentinel' in Kenya's widely read *Daily Nation* newspaper. In a 2009 column entitled, "*Disciplining the Reckless Matatu Driver*" Wambua describes a harrowing experience he had in one of Kenya's *matatus*, the name of the mini-bus taxis that make up the majority of the country's urban transportation sector. He claims, "it was just a matter of time before we were transferred to a hearse from the Toyota" but argues, "he was not about to be killed by a dread-locked, twig chewing, twit"(Wambua 2009:13). Throughout the brief piece he refers to the driver as a "lunatic" and actually prompts Kenyans to act with physical violence towards *matatu* operators when he implores them: "Good Kenyans, it is incumbent on you to grab any speeding PSV (Public Service Vehicle) driver by the head and twist it until he sees his back"(Wambua 2009:13). Essentially, this would mean breaking the neck of the vehicle's driver. How this will ensure better discipline in the industry is not clear from the article, but it echoes a familiar sentiment from the general Kenyan population – *matatu* operators are undisciplined, reckless people who are putting everyone at risk and they should be punished.¹

Newspaper pieces like this are common and increase in number and intensity anytime transport policy comes up for debate in parliament or a transport strike occurs. For many Kenyans, the *matatu* industry "has largely degenerated into a by-word for disorder and indiscipline – a Kenyan wild west"(Ndirangu 2010:12). *Matatu* crews occupy an ambiguous role in Kenya, and especially in Nairobi, because even as they are implicated in much violent and illegal behavior they provide a necessary service for most people. *Matatus* carry up to 85% of the Kenyan population daily and employ the largest portion of working youth in the country (Chitere 2004; Kimani 2004). Although they are essential to daily life and the functioning of the Kenyan economy they are also blamed

¹ The data used for this paper comes from 32 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Nairobi between 2004 and 2010. During this time I observed an almost constant stream of negative perceptions, stereotypes and remarks about *matatu* crewmember's bad behavior and criminal nature.

for the horrendous Nairobi traffic jam, high incidents of road deaths, corrupt policing and all manner of criminality. Again the *Daily Nation* illustrates my point, “Today the *matatu* industry is associated with several social maladies: teenage delinquency, teenage pregnancy and Mungiki,” an extremely violent gang (Kisero 2010:13).

Even academics have noted the several “transgressions of the crews” mentioning “their misogynistic language, their overcrowding, their playing of loud music, their speeding, their rough-handling of passengers”(Mutongi 2006:549). Kenda Mutongi’s article describes at length the way the *matatu* worker is “hated” by commuters, politicians and media in Kenya, and then she argues that passengers perpetuate the bad behavior of the crew and use “*matatu* men” as “scapegoats”(2006:549).

However, this may be an oversimplification of the *matatu* crew’s plight. A scapegoat implies that someone is *unjustly* blamed for the faults of others. But *matatu* crews do indeed break the rules and participate in wrongdoings on their own, even though passengers encourage them, as Mutongi suggests. Upon closer inspection stigma, and the process of stigmatization, is perhaps a more precise analytical framework with which to think and talk about the world of the *matatu* crews in Kenya.

I argue that this stigmatization stems from the highly profitable, legally questionable and very dangerous economic transactions that *matatu* operators engage in every day. These risky business practices, such as paying bribes to police, paying off extortionist criminals, and stealing or cheating the owners of vehicles, are inherent in the daily functioning of the *matatu* sector. Therefore, when the media and general public claim that *matatu* operators are ‘criminals’ it is, in many ways, true but not straightforward. I will show how transport operators in Nairobi struggle with a moral landscape that is ambiguous, constantly negotiated and, often, painfully compromised. The *matatu* sector has multiple actors with varying interests who depend on and use the sector for their livelihood. How those actors straddle the line between theft, harassment and extortion also has deep historical roots. The moral ambiguity embedded in the risky business practices of the sector engenders both stigmatization by the media, the government and the general public but also functions as a cohesive element that pulls *matatus* crews together. The danger and stigma inherent in their daily work uses their outsider status to establish insider cooperation through linguistic and economic tactics.

Theories of Stigma

Erving Goffman, who pioneered the sociological study of the concept of stigma in 1963, wrote a short book entitled *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity* where he defines the term stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” to the perceived social identity of an individual (1963:3). The person possessing this attribute is “reduced...from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” and therefore has a spoiled social identity (Goffman 1963:3). He urges scholars to approach the concept through a language of relationships, specifically through a “special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype” and names three broad categories of stigma: physical deformity, tribal stigma of race, nation and religion and lastly blemishes of individual character (Goffman 1963:4). *Matatu* crewmembers fall under this last category of stigma. That of people with blemished individual characters who are perceived to have abnormal passions and underhanded beliefs.

Goffman’s essay is specifically concerned with what he calls “mixed contacts” between those who are stigmatized and their interaction with those who do not suffer the stigma, whom he refers to “normals” (1963:5). He describes these mixed social situations, as unanchored interactions where the stigmatized person has a sense of not knowing what the others present are “really thinking about him” which can lead to a fear of strangers and the feeling of inferiority (Goffman 1963:14). However, Goffman also remarks that “instead of cowering, the stigmatized individual may attempt to approach mixed contacts with hostile bravado” or the stigmatized person can sometimes “vacillate between cowering and bravado” as interactions “run amok”(1963:17-18). In many descriptions of *matatu* crews, this type of bravado is depicted and is often a marker of why crewmembers should be feared and disciplined. For instance, “Nothing illustrates the *matatu* chaos better than the phenomenon of the tout. He is loud and self-assertive in a menacing way, and is quick to show the middle finger to other motorists, especially those who try to resist his ways”(Kisero 2010).

The sociological definition of stigma as a concept has five interrelated components: 1) people label and distinguish human difference, 2) dominant cultural beliefs link labeled persons to undesirable characteristics or negative stereotypes, 3)

labeled persons are put in distinct categories, 4) labeled persons experience status loss and discrimination and 5) stigmatization is contingent on social, economic and political power (Link and Phelan 2001:363).

Although this multifaceted definition makes great strides towards incorporating much of the literature into a working conceptualization of stigma, anthropologists provide the missing piece of this definition, which incorporates “moral experiences” of actors in a local world (Yang et al. 2007:1530). For anthropologists, stigma is a social process “embedded in the interpretive engagements of social actors, involving cultural meanings, affective states, roles and ideal types” and they see “both stigmatizers and the stigmatized as sharing the same social space...bound together in getting things done”(Yang et al. 2007:1530).

Anthropologists further argue that “stigmatizing someone is...a highly pragmatic, even tactical response to perceived threats, real dangers or fear of the unknown” and this is why stigma is dangerous, durable and difficult to undo (Yang et al. 2007:1528). Perhaps this can help to explain the motivation of ‘The Sentinel’s’ call to ‘all good Kenyans’ to attack PSV drivers because for the stigmatizer, “stigma seems to be an effective and natural response, emergent not only as an act of self-preservation or psychological defense, but also in the existential or moral experience that one is being threatened”(Yang et al. 2007:1528). *Matatu* operators are both physically and morally threatening. Not only because of the danger and risk of physical harm that they and their passengers experience on the road, but also because of their participation and implication in a variety of illegal activities.

Matatu crews are, in fact, stigmatized for many reasons including, but not limited to bad driving behavior.² First, their stigma stems from the moral ambiguity embedded in the informal transportation sector’s risky business practices. Historically, transportation in Nairobi has always straddled licit and illicit lines. From its very inception the illegal nature of its practices are what made it function as an efficient form of urban transport given Nairobi’s planning and infrastructural limitations such as the lack of transport services for African settlements and the expense of the colonial bus services.

² I argue elsewhere that *matatu* crewmembers use space creatively. Often this use of space will be vilified and simultaneously imitated by other drivers on the road.

Second, participation in this morally questionable behavior is difficult to reconcile for the general commuting public but also for the crewmembers themselves. Even the title of Mutongi's piece, "*Thugs or Entrepreneurs?*" reveals a need for further analysis because the answer seems to be that *matatu* operators are not one or the other, but both (2006).

Historical Legacy of informal transport in Nairobi

To fully understand the development of stigma and the risky business practices that are inherent in the industry today, it is important to look at the historical context of transportation in Nairobi. Two historical stages are of particular importance here: the role of Kikuyu taxis in the Mau Mau Rebellion during the late 1940s and early 1950s and the emergence of pirate taxis in direct competition with the monopoly enjoyed by the colonial bus service, Kenya Bus Service (KBS), in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

During what is referred to as Kenya's Mau Mau Rebellion in the 1950s, taxi drivers, specifically Kikuyu taxi drivers, played an integral role in what was seen by the British colonial administration and the European settler community as a nightmarish and savage race war. Although, scholars have shown that Mau Mau was more about internal Kikuyu conflicts than it was about racially motivated violence, Nairobi was a hotbed for radical politics during this time and transportation was key to this process (Lonsdale 1992; Anderson 2005). The transport union to which the taxi drivers belonged was the first and largest union in Kenya and the heads of the union became an organizing body for the Mau Mau movement, not least because of how transportation moves information as well as people (Spencer 1985). The taxi drivers were among one of the first groups to take the Mau Mau oath in Nairobi and they subsequently facilitated the oathing of many others in addition to carrying politicians and information from the city to the forest and back (Furedi 1973).

About a decade after Mau Mau, in the early 1960s, 'pirate taxis', the precursors to today's *matatu* sector, emerged as an illegal and informal mode of transport that worked to undermine the colonial bus system in Nairobi. The Kenya Bus Service (KBS) held a monopoly over providing public transport in Nairobi from 1934 (Aduwo 1990). By the late 1950s and early 1960s, with Independence on the horizon, African entrepreneurs

took it upon themselves to provide informal transport using small cars and mini-buses to surreptitiously pick-up passengers while they waited for the KBS buses (Kenya National Archive File 1960). Over the next decade the role of these pirate taxis expanded. They became known as *matatus* because it cost three cents, three 10-cent coins to ride (Kimani 2004; Aduwo 1990). The reason they were so extremely competitive was because the KBS buses cost forty cents (Personal Communication, November 26, 2009).

These two phases of transport in Nairobi, the role of the Kikuyu taxis of the late 1940s in radical politics and the emergence of the pirate taxis in the 1960s to the detriment of the colonial bus service, both contributed to the earliest perceptions of criminality that they suffer today.³ Often people are nostalgic for the KBS system although it was not efficient. This nostalgia is articulated by Jaindi Kiseru when he writes that “We shouldn’t have allowed the former Kenya Bus Service to collapse. Indeed what we have now is the law of the jungle – an industry totally without discipline, in which *matatu* numbers increase daily and unpredictably, creating a market environment where fair and proper competition between players is impossible”(Kiseru 2010).

It was during these early years of the industry that some of the illegal practices *matatus* depend on to function developed. One of those practices involves the large role that police corruption plays in the greasing of the wheels in the *matatu* sector. It is clear that police and *matatus* have been intertwined for decades. For example, in 1970, a *Daily Nation* reporter named Martin Njoroge did a feature on *matatus* and wrote that “it is amusing to watch the *matatus* play hide and seek with the police. When one sights a police van they speed away”(1970). Njoroge mentions that when the driver knows he’s been spotted, he will ask all passengers to alight before the police arrive and then there is no proof that there were passengers. However, he also notes that the *matatus* were more efficient than the KBS services and that many times a simple payment to the police would keep the *matatu* vehicle in business. So, it would seem that from the inception of the *matatu* form of transportation, illegal economic transactions were part and parcel of the business.

³ To trace the entire history of *matatu* transport in Nairobi is beyond the scope of this paper, however the industry was a key site of oppositional politics throughout Kenya’s history, particularly during the single party system under Kenya’s second President Moi (See Haugerud 1997).

Risky Business and Spoiled Identity

I will now turn to a discussion of three types of risky business practices that *matatu* operators negotiate daily, which contributes to their stigmatization: 1) police corruption, 2) extortion by gangs, like Mungiki and 3) stealing or cheating the owners of the vehicles on which they work. I argue that practices such as these are laden with danger, risk and exploitation for all parties involved and that it is these types of interactions and transactions that saddle the average *matatu* operator with a ‘spoiled identity.’ Although operators are more engaged and responsible with these practices than the term ‘scapegoat’ suggests, they also struggle with the dual nature of providing public service in a legitimate and difficult job while participating in corruption, colluding with criminals and being dishonest to their employers.

Corruption

Since the 1960s and the growth of pirate taxis, who were poaching customers from the colonial KBS, police have been key actors in the sector. It was necessary to pay off the police in order to function as a pirate taxi and that trend has grown just as the *matatu* industry has grown. Transparency International currently ranks the Kenya Police as the most corrupt institution in the country through the National Bribery League (2009).

It is well known that the traffic police take and ask for bribes from *matatu* drivers and conductors sometimes several times a day.⁴ It has reached such a formalized level that recently my informants have told me how police and *matatu* drivers use the electronic banking system MPESA to transfer money from one account to another through their mobile phones instead of exchanging cash on the street. As more regulations are put in place in the transport industry the avenues for corruption is ever widening. The variety of things that a police officer can arrest *matatus* and their crew for is almost endless. As one of my informants laughingly said, “every *matatu* on the road is guilty” (Personal Communication, February 2010). Because no vehicle is truly

⁴ During a small corruption project I had several *matatu* drivers mark down the time, place and amount paid to police. The average was about 200Ksh (US\$2.50) per stop and sometimes they would be stopped several times a day.

roadworthy according to the rules and regulations, in order to operate in the business, one must be willing to pay a bribe or go to jail.

In surveys I conducted with over 60 *matatu* operators, police harassment was the number one answer listed as “the worst part of working in the *matatu* industry” 98% of the time. Anthony, a *matatu* conductor and a devoted Christian, talked to me at length about how paying bribes to police was difficult for him. As he strived to be “a good person” he knew that he either paid the bribe or ended up in jail (Personal Communication, February 2010). When I asked many drivers and conductors if they had ever been arrested, they would often laugh and Steve Frost, a driver, articulated why they laugh when he said, “of course I have been arrested, I am a *matatu* driver, it is part of my job”(Personal Communication, March 2010).

At the same time, this everyday “job practice” of paying off police or being arrested further corrodes the respect for the rule of law on Kenya’s roads. Many crewmembers wonder why they would ever need to listen to a police officer or any authority figure when all they really want is money. This is a crucial part of the way stigma is built around *matatu* drivers and conductors. Not only is their participation in daily corruption with police undermining the governance in the country, but also if they resist this action they are arrested and actually reinforce the stereotype that they are all criminals. Often, *matatu* drivers and conductors will sit in jail cells for days, weeks or even months at a time because they cannot afford bail to be released.

Extortion

One of the best publicized and most terrifying facet of the *matatu* sector in the past several years is perhaps their connection to Mungiki and other violent gangs.⁵ Mungiki is a Kikuyu vigilante gang, characterized both by rural religious tenets and urban political activity, and who in 2001 waged a war with rival groups for control of large portions of Nairobi’s *matatu* sector (Anderson 2002:538).

Not all routes have to deal with Mungiki members, but several routes are under almost constant surveillance by the sect. One particular route that I worked on during my

⁵ Although a deep discussion of Mungiki’s changing political face is beyond the scope of this paper, the topic deserves a great deal of scholarly attention.

research was number 105 to Kikuyu. This route was almost entirely controlled by Mungiki. My informants would not even mention the name Mungiki, they simply referred to them as “members” and were very afraid of Mungiki violence. Jackson, a veteran driver, about 40 years of age with several children, was particularly vocal about Mungiki’s tactics on route 105. While slowly drawing his thumb across his neck, he warned, “if you don’t pay they will whip you and sometimes they can even burn your *matatu* or kill you”(Personal Communication, December 2009).

He told me that each *matatu* paid 200Ksh per day, usually in the morning. He told me that you knew who to pay because of they had signs that marked them like the way they wore their hats and the language they used. He also mentioned a more chilling feature, which was the look in their eyes. I asked how they knew who had paid and who had not and he pointed to the ashtray. I opened and pulled out what looked to me to be small scraps of paper. When I asked what they were, Jackson told me that they were receipts issued by the “members” and they were color coded for different days, yellow was for that day and red was issued the day before (Personal Communication, December 2009). Just as payments to police are becoming more formalized, so are payments to Mungiki as they are now issuing receipts.

The crews often pay Mungiki members, or members of other extortionist gangs, with a polite smile or laugh because they are afraid. This can often give the impression that the driver or conductor are in collusion with the gangsters. Additionally, many gang members work on *matatus* at times and this can also mar the perception of crews for the general public who tend to lump them all together, perhaps never knowing that the crews are just as afraid of these group members as their passengers are.

Stealing

The third risky business practice concerns the relationship between owners and crewmembers and is extremely complicated because there are many types of *matatu* owners. Because the *matatu* industry is not formally regulated, *matatu* ownership is a unique and personal experience and owners have their own motivation for entering into the business. Each owner handles their crew differently and some are deeply engaged

with their well being, while others may not even know the names of most of their employees.

Many owners employ relatives, but others simply hire people they have heard are good. The relationship between the owner and the crew is contingent on meeting the daily targets and staying out of trouble. Neither of these things will happen everyday. It is inevitable that *matatu* owners will have to assist their crews at some point or another and this is why in the opinion of the *matatu* owner, it is an exhausting business, but lucrative if you can handle it. The owner of the vehicle invests heavily in vehicle purchase and import, decoration and maintenance and then they have to find people to work on it whom they trust with their investment. The owner has to trust that the crew he hires will do their best to take care of the vehicle and to meet the target required. At the same time the crew has to trust that the owner will not leave them in jail when they are inevitably arrested.

The economics of *matatu* ownership is generally organized by daily targets that crews are expected to meet. The target amount usually comes from research done by the owner before joining the route. For most routes in Nairobi a 14-seater mini-bus the owner will expect 3,500Ksh (US\$50) at the end of each day, for bigger vehicles 5,000Ksh (US\$75) is the average. The owner will also expect the vehicle to be returned with a full tank of gas, which can cost around 3,000Ksh (US\$45) as well. Whatever is left over from this target, the driver and conductor split between them. It usually works out to around 500-600 shillings (US\$8-9) a day.

However, there are many obstacles that the crew encounters through the day that will eat into the profits of the vehicle. Police corruption and violent extortion by groups like Mungiki, described above, can take up to 500Ksh (US\$8) or more, a day. Also, there are the smaller daily purchases like stickers, new music or videos for the vehicle, in addition to maintenance such as tire punctures, oil and windshield wipers. All of this cuts into the target that the owner is looking for at the end of the day, which the crew is responsible for meeting while also making money for themselves.

It is often a difficult experience for owners because they have very little knowledge of what happens to their vehicle once it leaves their sight and for this reason there is an immense amount of trust in effect every day. This trust, and the betrayal that

inevitably follows, often causes relationships between owners and crews to be strained. One owner put it like this, “This is the only business I know of where the investor has no power...at all.” He followed that statement by saying that “This industry makes people cheat...because there is no accounts!” (Personal Communication, December 2009). On the other hand, Maina, a young hustler who had worked as a driver, a conductor, a tout and also held jobs outside the industry, told me, “We are not bad people. The owners know we are stealing from them, it is not really stealing...we say, *utanijenga*, you will build me. They know that they need to help us. So it is not stealing” (Personal Communication, June 2010).

Therefore, there is simultaneously a large amount of trust between owners and crews and also none at all. Owners will sometimes even employ someone called a ‘trustee’ that will sit in the vehicle all day just counting the passengers in order to make sure that the crews are paying what they need to be paying. At the same time the crews take huge risks for the owners who give them no sense of security. The crews are saddled with a large responsibility for a vehicle that is not theirs while facing the very real possibility of physical injury, possible jail time and even death.

Negotiating Moral Ambiguity

Thus far I have attempted to show how *matatu* operators are more stigmatized than scapegoated in their role as transport operators because they knowingly participate in risky, dangerous and illegal business practices. To say that they are simply scapegoats of the Kenyan public takes away their agency and their complexity. However, that is not the whole story. On the one hand they deserve the spoiled identity they have attained. On the other hand, as individuals who are just working for their daily bread, they struggle with the consequences of their stigma and stereotype.

Like Anthony, who struggled to reconcile his Christian beliefs with his daily participation in corruption, many *matatu* crewmembers constantly negotiate their place in Kenyan society outside of working hours. Many operators told me that they would often change out of their uniforms before going home so that people in their neighborhood would not know that they were working in the *matatu* industry. Consider also Maina, who says *utanijenga* (you will build me) as a reference to the fact that there is no security

in the industry for the workers. At any point you may be arrested and left to rot in jail, you may be injured or robbed by armed gangsters because the owner of your vehicle did not pay the necessary people, and you are always at risk of death on the roads that are filled with unlicensed drivers behind the wheels of personal cars and *matatus* alike.

However, through this struggle, transport operators in Nairobi develop bonds with other members of their group. The relationship crewmembers have with other crewmembers includes both cooperation and conflict. There are elements of healthy competition, masculine showboating and convivial chatter as well as deeper bonds built through the danger of the job itself. Goffman emphasizes how “persons who have a particular stigma tend to have similar learning experiences regarding their plight, and similar changes in the conception of self – a similar moral career that is both cause and effect of commitment to a similar sequence of personal adjustments” (1968: 32). One way that this is expressed in *matatu* crewmembers is through a linguistic practice called sheng.

Sheng is an urban dialect that uses a Swahili grammatical base with a variety of loan words from English and many of Kenya’s 42 other ethnic languages.⁶ Sheng is spoken all over Nairobi but *matatu* crews are known to create and disseminate much of the new phrases and words. Sometimes they use what is called ‘deep sheng’, which is a collection of code words that only a small number of people know (Samper 2002). For example, a driver and conductor may develop their own ‘deep sheng’ that no one else understands. ‘Deep Sheng’ is often used to talk about pretty female without their knowledge. However, another important function of their ‘deep sheng’ is so that gang members and police do not understand them. The safety in sheng that *matatu* crews share is a marker of the bonds they experience and much of that comes through experiencing the daily life of risk in their worlds.

Another way that the bonds of *matatu* crews are expressed and experienced are through quasi-formal groups, which go by a variety of names such as route associations, Savings and Credit Co-Operatives (SACCOS) or cartels. For people who are stigmatized

⁶ There is a healthy debate around what category of language Sheng falls under: pidgin, dialect, slang, which is beyond the scope of this paper but for more about this interesting debate (see Abdulaziz 1997, Githiora 2002, Githinji 2006). For my purposes here I will be using the definition of Sheng that David Samper (2002) puts forth.

“the relationship of the stigmatized individual to the informal community and the formal organizations of his own kind is...crucial” (Goffman 1968: 38). However, the route associations are another misunderstood realm of the *matatu* industry such as this description illustrates, “Without reference to any authority, *matatu* touts will organize themselves into vicious cartels, practicing restrictive practices with powers to levy charges on operators and new entrants – more or less like a parallel revenue authority” (Kisero 2010). One group from my fieldwork is a particularly good example of the way danger bonds *matatu* operators together and how that is economically expressed and organized.

This group is called the Matatu Drivers and Conductors Welfare Association or MADCOWA. It is attempting to be a nationwide group where all drivers and conductors register, pay dues and attend meetings. In return they will assist any member with court or jail related issues. As I have already discussed, being arrested and not having a good relationship with the owner of the vehicle can mean that drivers and conductors spend quite a while in jail. In the case that you are a registered member of MADCOWA, they will assist you. Within MADCOWA ethnicity, age or sex does not matter. The Executive Board of MADCOWA are drivers and conductors and they put on workshops and hold meetings to discuss things surrounding politics, traffic policy and collective action, like strikes. As a wide ranging, city or countrywide organization they are not that well known, but there are certain routes where they are well represented. Route 48 to Kileleshwa was perhaps their most well represented route at the time of my research.

Steve Frost was the Chairman of the route 48 branch of MADCOWA and he was only 32 years old when he was in the *matatu* accident that eventually took his life. It was 11am on a Sunday morning when a drunk driver hit him. The young man who hit him had spent the night drinking in a bar and was driving his father’s SUV home in the morning when he swerved into Steve’s *matatu* and crushed the driver’s side. Steve’s leg was shattered and he sustained internal injuries as well. He was taken to the nearest hospital, which happened to be private. He did not have the necessary 2,500Ksh (US\$40) they required for treatment, so he was sent to the public hospital down the street. By the time Steve was finally seen by the doctor several hours later, his leg could not be saved.

They amputated it the next day and two weeks later Steve died from complications of the surgery.

Because of the surgery and the time he spent in the hospital recovering, Steve's bill was around 500,000Ksh (US\$7,000). His friends and family had raised some money while he was still in the hospital but when he died the hospital would not to release his body until the rest of the bill was paid. The route 48 branch of MADCOWA collected over 80,000Ksh (US\$1,000) for Steve's bills. They did this through what from an outside view may looked like extortion. They demanded that every *matatu* vehicle give 200Ksh (US\$3) a day and each driver and conductor give 70Ksh (US\$1) from their personal wages. They wrote down the name of each contribution in a logbook keeping track of who had paid and who had not. Most crewmembers were happy to do it. Steve was their friend.

Steve was the first person to die on route 48 in as long as anyone could remember. This was unique, however, as *matatu* drivers and conductors are often killed in road accidents, police shootouts or gang related violence. This was a reminder for route 48 that they are at risk and this, in many ways, brought them together. They realized that there was no insurance for Steve or his family and that they were the ones to take responsibility for him economically because they were all in the same situation. They were all at risk for the same death.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to show the complicated nature of transport operations in Nairobi. The morally ambiguous world of risky business that crewmembers negotiate daily results in a stigma that does in fact affect their life chances and brings the possibility of imprisonment and death to the fore. The average *matatu* crewmember will have to negotiate a series of illegal, dangerous and compromising transactions on a daily basis. These interactions and transactions are all too readily witnessed and often oversimplified by the general commuting public and mainstream media. What is not seen so regularly is the human face of this large sector of Kenyan workers who struggle personally, and as a group, with the risk and ambivalence of their work.

When I started working on the *matatu* as a conductor near the end of my fieldwork, I was told that many young men come into the industry shy. But before long these young men know how to talk to police, thugs, pretty women and elderly people. *Matatu* workers would tell me that one loses their shyness working in the *matatu* industry and they become stronger versions of themselves as they live a dangerous life. During my short stint as a *matatu* conductor I can attest to this as well because I became less afraid of Nairobi and the larger world around me.

It is the participation in these risky behaviors and illegal interactions that leads to the perception that all *matatu* people are bad people, criminals, gangsters with loose morals, and this stigma is combated with bravado by the crews. It is not a new cycle but one that is historically rooted in the roles that informal transport operators have always experienced in Nairobi. Although many people will blame the youth, it has been this way since before Kenya's Independence. As one of my informants pondered, "*matatus* have been here since before Independence, so why do people hate them so much?" (Personal Communication, March 2010). Perhaps it is because they lay bare some of the worst parts of Kenya and put at great risk the most vulnerable of their population as well.

In contrast, as they become more integrated and used to their daily moral negotiations *matatu* operators also find ways to bond and cooperate. They creatively contribute to the larger linguistic world around them and sacrifice economically for their fellow co-workers. They know that it is only through each other that they will find any sympathy and understanding and that through their relationships of risk they develop dangerous, but strong, bonds.

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