



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Matatu: A History of Popular Transportation in Nairobi

Institution: William College

Project Director: Kenda Mutongi

Grant Program: Fellowships

“Coming for to Carry me Home”: Matatu Workers, Passengers, and Transport Culture in Nairobi

Research and contribution

My project examines the history of *matatus*, minibuses that Nairobi residents rely on daily for transportation. Beyond their utilitarian function, *matatus* are also a powerful site of historical and cultural analysis because they provide a window on many socio-economic and political facets of late twentieth century Africa—for example, rapid urbanization, organized crime, indigenous entrepreneurship and capitalism, transition to democracy, the development of markets, labor disputes, class and respectability, and popular culture. *Matatu*-like transportation is in fact a definitive Third World phenomenon. Called *peseros* in Mexico, *jeepney* in the Philippines, *songthaew* in Thailand, *otobus* in Egypt, *combis* in South Africa, and *dala dala* in Tanzania, they can be found wherever there is a history of uneven development, informal economies, and a large-scale public need for transportation. Their life and importance in Kenya reflect these global conditions, but also offer a focused point of departure for a study of their distinctive modernity and its paradoxes.

In Nairobi, the vehicles are easily recognized by their dilapidated bodies and bald tires, their loud music, their screeching two-wheel turns, and the choking haze of exhaust trailing behind them. Highly individualized, with paint jobs ranging from somber black to a Rubik’s cube assortment of colors, or the sort of airbrushed creations normally reserved for prison tattoos or subway graffiti, they look like anything but assembly-line products. And they are usually so crowded with passengers that riders are left hanging out of the doors and windows, clutching their belongings. Indeed, deaths from *matatu*-related accidents account for nearly 85 percent of deaths by car accident in Kenya. Accidents are so common that newspaper headlines routinely announce the tragedies with an attitude of shrugging resignation: “Another horror *matatu* crash,” “Twenty people perish in a *matatu* accident,” “*Matatus* are a Black Hole of Calcutta,” and so on. Often, slogans plastered on the sides of these minibuses mordantly announce their potential fate: “See you in Heaven” or “Coming for to Carry me Home.”

I examine the history of these minibuses, and of the cultural, social, economic, and expressive practices that have intersected in their use since the late 1950s when the first *matatu* took to the streets of Nairobi. Over 80 percent of the Nairobi population has used these vehicles since the 1960s, and the *matatu* industry has also been the largest employer in the so-called informal economy—mechanics, touts, fee collectors, drivers, artists, and many others. Moreover, the *matatu* industry is the only indigenous industry that has not been infiltrated by foreign aid workers in Kenya’s recent history. It is perhaps because of this lack of foreign aid workers that the industry has survived, evolved, and, more importantly—thrived—since Kenya’s independence in 1963. What has enabled this industry to take such deep root and have such a long and successful life? What does this industry teach us about indigenous capitalism? What does it teach us about self-sufficiency, empowerment, hard work, effort, national pride, hope, and respectability? *Matatus* also serve as public sites where gossip is exchanged, fashions are displayed, politics are disputed, and crimes are perpetrated. What form has organized crime in the *matatu* industry taken? How has it set music, video, and fashion trends? How has politics infiltrated into this business?

Matatus go almost everywhere in Nairobi, and so I take the reader to these places so he or she can see, smell, feel, and hear the sounds of various neighborhoods in Nairobi. In a way, this project is also a history of Nairobi from the perspective of *matatu* passengers and workers. It is fitting to conceptualize the book as such, for *matatus* are so ubiquitous in the city, such an integral part of the Nairobi landscape, that, it is difficult to separate the two: Nairobi is *matatus* and *matatus* are Nairobi. A *matatu* is in many ways a text of the city; I study Nairobi through the history of people’s movements in *matatus*.

What I try to do in this project is to study Nairobi's problems along with its promises. The development of matatus, for example, can be viewed as both an example of everything that has failed in Kenya (the apparent chaos, the congestion, the insecurity, the lack of respect for law, etc) as well as everything that is vibrant and promises a better future (the enterprising and hardworking drivers, the fact that at the end of the day it delivers millions of people to and from work). I try to see the matatu industry—indeed the whole city of Nairobi—as a thriving place that attracts and repels in the same breath, a place where agency and ingenuity are prerequisites for survival and success. In spite of the staggering problems Kenya faces, I argue, many of the men and women I interviewed in Nairobi see Kenya, and perhaps many other African countries—now more than ever before—as places bursting with promise and opportunity, even if that opportunity may require challenges to conventional thinking and politics made in wholly new ways. Through historical and contemporary analysis, I demonstrate how the matatu industry has helped build pathways toward this more hopeful future.

This study is, in fact, a social, cultural, political, and economic history of the matatu industry. I argue that only an analysis that takes up all these angles on matatus can do justice to the importance of their place in Nairobi (and, by inference, allow scholars to understand the importance of similar minibuses in other developing countries). A history of the cultures and subcultures of these minibuses will contribute to recent scholarship on indigenous entrepreneurship and capitalism, organized crime, the politics of state intervention, the history of mobility and space, the history of popular culture, labor history, and—especially—economic history and the history of political economy.

Historiographical Significance

No history of popular transportation exists for Africa. The available research on matatus has been carried out primarily by urban planners and engineers who have focused on the physical and environmental hazards of the vehicles, particularly their contribution to congestion, accidents and pollution. These issues are obviously important. But to understand the significance of matatus more fully, of this important form of transportation in Kenya, we also need to study the process of urbanization and the cultures and subcultures of matatu operators and passengers, and especially the relationships between the two groups.

I also hope to use the study of matatus to help me reconstruct the history of post-colonial Nairobi. With over four million people, Nairobi today is the hub of eastern and central Africa; it is a typical Third World city where Asian, Arab, European, and African cultures intermingle and converge in complicated ways. Yet no history of post-colonial Nairobi exists. Since the matatu industry is so deeply connected to almost every aspect of Nairobi life, and particularly the growth of unplanned settlements and rapid urbanization, this study will inevitably yield a rich history of Nairobi from the perspective of this very important industry. Indeed, viewing Nairobi through the lens of the matatu industry will allow me to explore Nairobi's "street life" with the inquisitiveness of a private investigator, the zeal of a voyeur and, the sensibility of an ethno-historian.

More importantly, though, this study should help put the history of political economy and the history of indigenous entrepreneurship in Africa on the map again. For quite a while now historians and other social science and humanities scholars have concentrated on studies of "development" in Africa, and especially on the role of foreign aid and NGOs in development. I find that the "development" model tends to stunt our thinking and we get trapped into unending binaries of success and failure and of hope and despair. My study departs from these works and instead focuses on what the Africans themselves are doing with their economies, creating businesses, for example, and accumulating capital. Mine is, I think, a more complex story of African entrepreneurship and capitalism.

Methods and work plan

I employ historical ethnography as my main methodology, but I also draw heavily from colonial records and archives, local newspapers, magazines, and internet sources, such as blogs and facebook. In the past four years, I have spent about a total of 15 months in Nairobi doing fieldwork, and I have come to know the city well. I want my readers to know it, too, to learn about the inner lives of the people who move around in these vehicles, and the flavor of the places they go to and from. I examine the basic ways in which people in Nairobi live and work and move through the city; what they eat, drink, wear, for example, or how they furnish their houses or talk to each other and about each other, and how they discuss the problems as well as the joys of their metropolis. This allows me to discern the complexities and contradictions in their lives. It also gives me points of departure to study closely the general social, economic, and political context that has allowed the industry to exist, grow, and change over the past fifty years. Indeed, when I look closely, I find that the matatu industry has provided a great deal of energy and vibrancy and opportunity to the people who live in Nairobi. I find that this is one area where there are hardworking Kenyans, Kenyans who believe that hard work can, sometimes, actually pay. I find that the matatu crews have tended to take a great deal of pride in the industry. More important, I find that this is an industry whereby one can actually make a living wage in Kenya.

These advantages must be noted, for all too often discussions of African cities become a litany of boundless chaos. The primary focus in such discussions is often decay—both moral and physical, with emphatic attention to marginalized slums and third-rate housing swamped in insecurity, hunger, and disease. Next comes a focus on unemployment and poverty, as if Africans had no other ways of occupying towns. Nairobi is more than these things; it is as complicated as any other city in the world. For example, while Nairobi may appear to be a paragon of “survival of the fittest” and a wily one at that, people still help each other in this “city in the sun.” When Nairobians seem on the point of despair, for example, something shining rescues them: the setting sun, the clean *Iko* toilets, the well-tended bourganivilla gardens, the conductor who rushes a pregnant woman in labor to the nearest hospital. Nairobi is a city that teaches one ways to survive against all odds, a city where the lines between good and bad often seem to blur, where ingenuity and resourcefulness are crucial. In many ways, *Coming For to Carry Me Home* shows numerous ways in which Nairobians learn to live together, to adjust—to bend the rules, to help those worse off, to *kaa square* or “squeeze in” and make room in a crowded matatu for one more.

Competencies, Skills, and Access

I have lived in Nairobi on and off for the last twenty years. I know many people in the city, and I have already spent more than 15 months doing fieldwork on this project. I have interviewed matatu owners, workers, and passengers as well as many other people in the city. I have also worked extensively in the various newspaper archives in Nairobi, especially those of the *Nation* and *Standard* newspapers. I think I have done most of the fieldwork and archival research I need so far, and I have already written five draft chapters of the book. However, I have at least five more chapters left, and that is why I am applying for the NEH. I need the time off to write these chapters and also make another trip to Nairobi if I need to.

Final Product and Dissemination

I hope to publish the results of this project into a book. The book will be useful to scholars in the Humanities and Social Sciences because it provides a window on many socio-economic and political facets of late twentieth century Africa—for example, rapid urbanization, organized crime, indigenous entrepreneurship, transition to democracy, the development of markets, labor disputes, class and respectability, and popular culture. The book is highly interdisciplinary and uses historical, ethnographic, literary, linguistic, and economic methods. More specifically, economic and cultural historians, linguists, ethnographers, ethnomusicologists, and literary studies students will find the book useful.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Materials

Nairobi City Council Archives

Kenya National Archives in Nairobi

Nation, The Standard, The East African Standard newspapers

Viva, True Love, Drum, Matatu, The Weekly Review journals

Facebook sites and blogs such as “Kenyans Against Mugiki,” “Eastlands,” “Fuck The Police (aka

Popoz),” “You Know You Grew up in the 90s in Nairobi When,” “All Kenyans in Memory of Wahome

Mutahi (aka Whispers),” “Kwani?” “Whispers Column Fans,” “Khat (aka miraa, veye, shamba, tepa,

chai, jaba),” “Which Hood/Area Code Are U From,” “24 Nairobi Matatu Stickers Craze,” “The Matatu

Project,” “Matatu Appreciation Society,” “Matatu Madness.

Interviews with Matatu owners, workers, passenger, and other Nairobi residents.

Secondary Sources

Bates, Robert. 2008. *When Things Fell Apart: State Failure in Late-Century Africa*. Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press.

Berry, Sara. 1985. *Fathers Work for their Sons: Accumulation, Mobility, and Class Formation in an Extended Yoruba Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Berry, Sara. 1993. *No Condition is Permanent: The Social Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Chabal, Patrick and Jean-Pascal Daloz. 1999. *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

de Certeau, Michel. 1988. *The Practice of Everyday Life* Berkeley: University of California Press.

de Soto, Hernando. 1990. *The other Path: The Invisible Revolution in the Third World*, New York: Perennial Library.

de Soto, Hernando. 2000. *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Succeeds in the West and fails almost Everywhere Else*. New York : Basic Books.

Gambetta, Diego. 1993. *The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ghannam, Farha. 2002 *Remaking the Modern: Space, Relocation, and the Politics of Identity in Global Cairo*. University of California Press.

Guyer, Jane. 2004. *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hake, Andrew. 1977. *African Metropolis: Nairobi's Self-Help City*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Hopkins, A. G. 2009. “The New Economic History of Africa.” *Journal of African History* 50:155-77.

Kapila, S. et al. 1982. *The Matatu Mode of Public Transportation in Metropolitan*. Nairobi. Nairobi: Mazingira Institute.