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# CREATIVITY AND SOCIAL IDENTITY IN URBAN TRANSPORT: TRICYCLE DECORATION IN KANO METROPOLIS



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## **CREATIVITY AND SOCIAL IDENTITY IN URBAN TRANSPORT: TRICYCLE DECORATION IN KANO METROPOLIS**

### **Abstract**

As tricycles (popularly known as *Adaidaita sahu*) have emerged to become the dominant form of transport in Kano metropolis, a new form of decoration has emerged with them, one that is quite different from the long history of vehicle decoration in Africa. What are the features of this decoration? How does it take place? Why did it emerge? These are the issues we explore in this work. The paper was written as a field report during the Masterclass on “New Forms of Popular Transport of Goods and Persons in Nigeria” held at the Mambayya House, Gwammaja, Kano from July 2 to 7, 2018. The authors pursued their study as an ethnographic research; they conducted interviews, rode along in tricycles, and went on field visits to different important sites.

**Key words:** tricycle decoration, social identity, creativity, urban transport.

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Fig 1, *Adaidaita Sahu* Kano. Photo: Oluronke Popoola

## Introduction

This paper examines the near-ubiquitous culture of tricycle decoration in Kano metropolis. Totally absent from Kano streets two decades ago, tricycles are now by far the dominant form of popular transport in urban Kano. Indeed, anyone can get to anywhere, anytime in Kano city by means of the *Adaidaita sahu*—the popular name by which tricycles are known locally—as they have now taken over virtually all routes and roads in the city. *Adaidaita Sahu* is an organization established after the introduction of Islamic law in 2001 to re-orientate citizens and educate them about sharia law. Part of this effort demanded the separation of the sexes so female use of *achabas* (motorbike taxis) were banned and, to compensate, the state imported 1600 tricycles which, because the driver is separated from passenger preserved the sexual segregation of men and women. But it was not until 2012 when *achaba* were totally banned after a series of attacks by Boko Haram (Madugu 2017) that the

mass import of these machines began.<sup>5</sup> Currently, there are some 45,000 registered tricycles operating in the state, and about 15,000 unregistered ones<sup>6</sup>.

The decoration of taxis, buses and lorries with designs and slogans has been a longstanding practice in Africa and has attracted sustained scholarly attention. These scholars have analysed vehicle decoration for what it tells us about three main issues: religion, labour, and creativity in urban Africa. In an important early article, O.B. Lawuyi (1988) analysed the slogans painted on Yoruba taxis, arguing that drivers deploy these slogans as a means of expressing economic status and desire for mobility. Many slogans employ religious themes partly, he argues, because religion is seen to improve the chances of success in a hazardous and unpredictable business. This theme of precarity, of using slogans to bear witness of the violence and uncertainty of transport or as an amulet against those dangers, marks nearly all of this literature including Lawuyi, Osinulu (2008) and Agbiboa (2017). Closely related to precarity, scholars have focussed on the religious dimension of decoration which express religious identity and often appeal to religious forces for help and protection against the uncertainty of life.<sup>7</sup> More recently, Damilola Osinulu (2008), analysed the building and decoration of brightly painted *Molue* trucks arguing that this decoration is a result of different forces: a means for the production

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5. Yusuf Umar Madugu, "From Motorcycle to Tricycle: Security Challenges and Re-Emergence of Tricycles in Kano Metropolis," *Kaduna Journal of Humanities* 1, no. 1 (2017): 288-300.

6. State Chairman, Tricycle Operators Association of Kano (TOAKAN) in communication with Temitayo Odeyemi, Olayemi Dickson and Ibrahim Adamu Basirka, July 4, 2018. The Managing Director and the Legal Adviser of KAROTA supported this, placing the numbers at between 50,000 and 55,000 tricycles. (Temitayo Odeyemi, Olayemi Dickson and Ibrahim Adamu Basirka, July 4, 2018).

7. Lawuyi argues that all religious adherents, 80% of Muslims and 60% of Christians used juju in their taxis along with religiously themes slogans. O. B. Lawuyi, "The World of the Yoruba Taxi Driver: An Interpretive Approach to Vehicle Slogans, Africa," *Journal of the International African Institute* 58, no. 1 (1988): 1-13.

of identity and individuality; a form of resistance to and tactical subversion of the demands of the state, and the expression of religious and cosmological outlook.<sup>8</sup> Agbiboa (2017) extends this argument, drawing on his ethnography of *Danfo* operators, arguing that slogans can be read as a means by which danfo operators express and hedge against the extreme precarity and daily vulnerability of their profession.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the single article on vehicle decoration in northern Nigeria by Katrin Schulze (2012) sees the iconography of mosques, palm trees and swords that dominate lorry decoration in Northern Nigeria as part of an Islamic worldview that is connected to a distinctive religious visual culture in the north.<sup>10</sup> In contemporary northern Nigeria, decoration (*kwalliya*) has migrated onto the machine of the tricycle whose presence is ubiquitous on Kano roads, in the process innovating a series of new visual forms that differs strikingly from earlier modes of decoration. Tricycle decoration in Kano is a way by which a people creatively express their social identity in new and different ways.

In exploring these issues, we sourced primary data by which of ethnographic research methods. We rode along with tricycle riders,

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8. D. Osinulu, "Painters, Blacksmith and Wordsmith: Building *Molues* in Lagos," *African Arts* (autumn, 2008): 44-53.

9. Daniel E. Agbiboa, "Mobile Bodies of Meaning: City Lie and the Horizons of Possibility," *Journal of Modern Studies* 55, no. 3 (2017): 371-393; Daniel E. Agbiboa, "'No Condition is Permanent: Informal Transport Workers and Labour Precarity in Africa's Largest City,'" *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40, no. 5 (2017): 936-957.

10. Daniel E. Agbiboa, "Mobile Bodies of Meaning: City Lie and the Horizons of Possibility," *Journal of Modern Studies* 55, no. 3 (2017): 371-393; Daniel E. Agbiboa, "'No Condition is Permanent: Informal Transport Workers and Labour Precarity in Africa's Largest City,'" *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40, no. 5 (2017): 936-957; O. B. Lawuyi, "The World of the Yoruba Taxi Driver: An Interpretive Approach to Vehicle Slogans, Africa," *Journal of the International African Institute* 58, no. 1 (1988): 1-13; Katrin Schulze, "Mosques, Palm Trees and Swords: Religious Symbolism in Northern Nigerian Lorry Decorations," *Annual Review of Islam in Africa* 11 (2012): 12-17.

interviewed them, visited the printers, sticker sellers, artists, as well as spoke with passengers.<sup>11</sup>

### **Tricycles and Decorations in Kano Metropolis: An Overview**

The emergence of tricycle design represents a complete change from the entire literature on taxi, truck and lorry design in African studies, going all the way back to the painting of mammy wagons during the colonial period. This is because in tricycles, decoration has migrated from the exterior to the interior of the vehicle. One reason for this difference is the architecture of tricycles, the fact that they have no doors or windows, making the interior available for display in a way that is impossible for taxis and buses and even motorbikes (which has no inside outside distinction). In older forms of transport it is the exterior that provides the canvas for design but in tricycles the interior is made available for display and Kano drivers have aggressively made use of this arena in ways that are markedly different than other parts of the country. This is not to say that there are no exterior decorations on the *Adaidaita sahu* in Kano, but they are nowhere near as elaborate as the designs inside the vehicle.

Tricycles originally come from the manufacturers in a bright yellow colour and state transport authorities have stipulated this colour to be the only approved colour for tricycles operating in the state<sup>12</sup>. Each has their registration number prominently displayed identifying the local government in which the tricycle is registered along with the numeric registration of the tricycle aside those on the number plate of the tricycles (see figure two). Unlike other parts of

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11. Our research was based on ethnographic methods. We rode along with tricycle drivers, interviewed them, visited the printers and sticker sellers and artists who produce the designs they use and spoke with passengers who This saw us going to places such as Kofar Na'isa, Court Road junction, Zoo Road junction, and along New Road in Sabongari.

12. In Kano metropolis, the most prominent type of tricycle is, by far, the Bajaj RE Two Strike although there are a few TVS and Piaggio makes also.

the country, all are required to use interior lights to illuminate the inside of the tricycle in the evening so that security operatives would be able to see the people and what goes on inside the tricycle even from a distance.



Fig 2: Registration number. Note how even this number is designed by hand in a unique calligraphy by roadside artists rather simply stencilled. Photo: Brian Larkin

The result of all this is a distinctive culture of tricycle decoration. Drivers spend time to clean and maintain tricycles in a far better condition than many other parts of the country and, besides decoration, drivers install sound systems and lights embedded into them to increase their embellishment and distinction.

### **Design Typology**

There are three major arenas for display which are often combined in each tricycle. First, and by far the most extensive is a custom-made design printed on self-adhesive vinyl (SAV) stickers using computer graphics applications and large format printers. These designs are used to cover many parts of the tricycle and represent the strongest visual element. This includes upholstery for the front-



and back-seat, backrests, the dashboard, and all sorts of accessories including rims, handbrake, fuel-tank cover, and the rails holding up the soft roof of the tricycle (see figs 3-10 for seats and 14-18 for accessories).



Fig. 3 Photo by Oluwaseun Williams  
Fig. 4. Photo by Oluwaseun Williams



Fig. 5. Photo by Oluronke Popoola  
Fig. 6. Photo by Oluronke Popoola





Fig. 7. Photo by Brian Larkin

Fig. 8. Photo by Brian Larkin



Fig. 9. Photo by Brian Larkin  
Fig. 10. Photo by Brian Larkin





Fig. 14. Photo by Brian Larkin  
Fig. 15. Photo by Brian Larkin

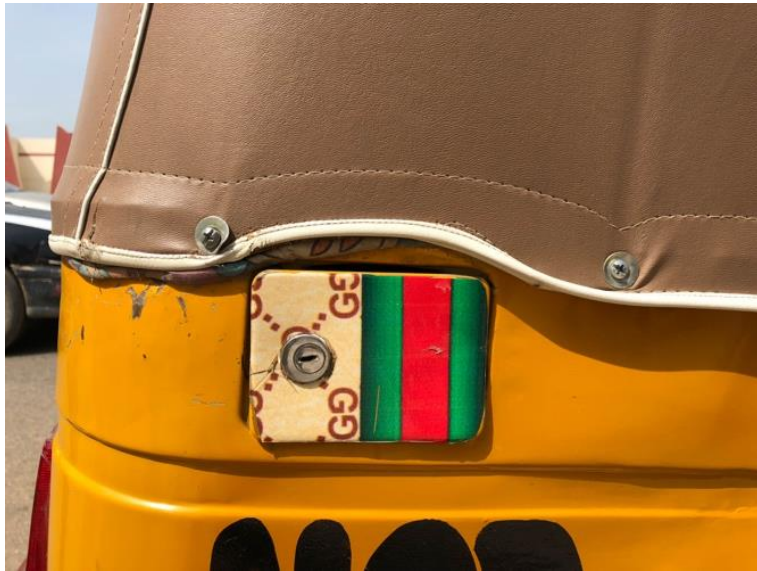


Fig 16 Handbrake design. Photo: Brian Larkin  
Fig 17 Petrol cover design, Photo: Brian Larkin



Fig 18. Rim design. Photo Oluronke Popoola

The design of the seats is both patterned and individualized drawing on a medley of images and themes in the pictures captured on the SAV stickers. It is common to find Nigerian hip-hop artistes (such as Wizkid, Olamide, Davido, Reekado Banks), international pop artistes, local Hausa artistes (such as Alan Waka and Lil Amir), Reggae musicians (particularly Bob Marley), Bollywood/Kannywood actresses, popular cartoon characters like Mickey Mouse, as well as local traditional authorities particularly the Emir of Kano. All of these are usually laid over a background of different currency notes from diverse countries and have superimposed over them expensive watches and symbols from international brands – most especially Gucci which was one of the most widely disseminated patterns used in decoration. Military symbols like crossed guns, beret, skull, are used. Any or all of these elements are combined to make each seat a pastiche of images, symbols and colours that draw upon this reservoir of patterns and elements. Drivers then personalise this design by adding text such as *Ka Huta* (Relax, see figs 8, 9), their name (fig 10), their group (Arewa Empire Mates, fig 5) or their area of origin (i.e. Ajumawa,

a Kano neighbourhood fig 4). While the decision regarding the image used on the seats and backrests is often the rider's choice, it seems an unwritten rule that each tricycle must carry some form of Gucci design or brand colours on the dashboard and rails (see figs 14,15, 18).

Decorating tricycles is expensive and requires a substantial investment of money. Drivers must go to a printer who produces a design on computer and prints it onto SAV stickers that will be used for upholstery and decoration (figure 19). For the 7 yards of printed SAV stickers required to cover the two seats, their backrests, the dashboards as well as the rails of a tricycle, a tricycle owner or the rider pays the sum of ₦8,400 at ₦1,200 per yard. On top of that comes a cost of ₦2,500 for fixing it.<sup>13</sup> The design and printing takes around 2.5 hours as does the installation meaning that the driver also has to factor in a loss of income for five hours so that cumulatively this is an expensive proposition – especially so in that the life of the upholstery is about 5 or 6 months before it begins to fall apart (fig 22).

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13. Hassan Sas, manager, Extra Printing Solution Ltd., Gyadi-Gyadi, Court Road, Kano, July 4, 2018.





Fig. 19. Printing studio. Photo by Brian Larkin  
Fig. 20. Large format SAV printer Photo by Oluwaseun Williams



Fig. 21. Photo by Brian Larkin  
Fig. 22. Photo by Brian Larkin

Because of the cost and short life of printed sticker vinyl, not all decorated tricycles follow this form. Others use stronger materials that offer colour and last longer, while still others have their seats and backrests covered in yards of fabrics with floral patterns



(otherwise used as bedsheets) overlaid with polythene sheets (see figures 23 and 24).



Fig. 23. Photo by Brian Larkin  
Fig. 24. Photo by Oluwaseun Williams

The second major decorative elaboration involves fixating fabrics of different materials and motif patterns onto the tarpaulin ceiling and side- and back-covers of the tricycle. This covering stands in contrast to seat designs as they never incorporate the same motifs or

are made from the same material but draw instead from materials more commonly used for bed covering (see figs 25-28). Partly this is because they are used to deflect the heat of the sun, but the overall effect is to create a strong contrast between ceiling and seats and produces an overall visual effect (figs 29-30).



Fig. 25. Photo by Brian Larkin  
Fig. 26 Photo by Oluronke Popoola



Fig. 27. Photo by Oluwaseun Williams  
Fig. 28. Photo by Oluronke Popoola

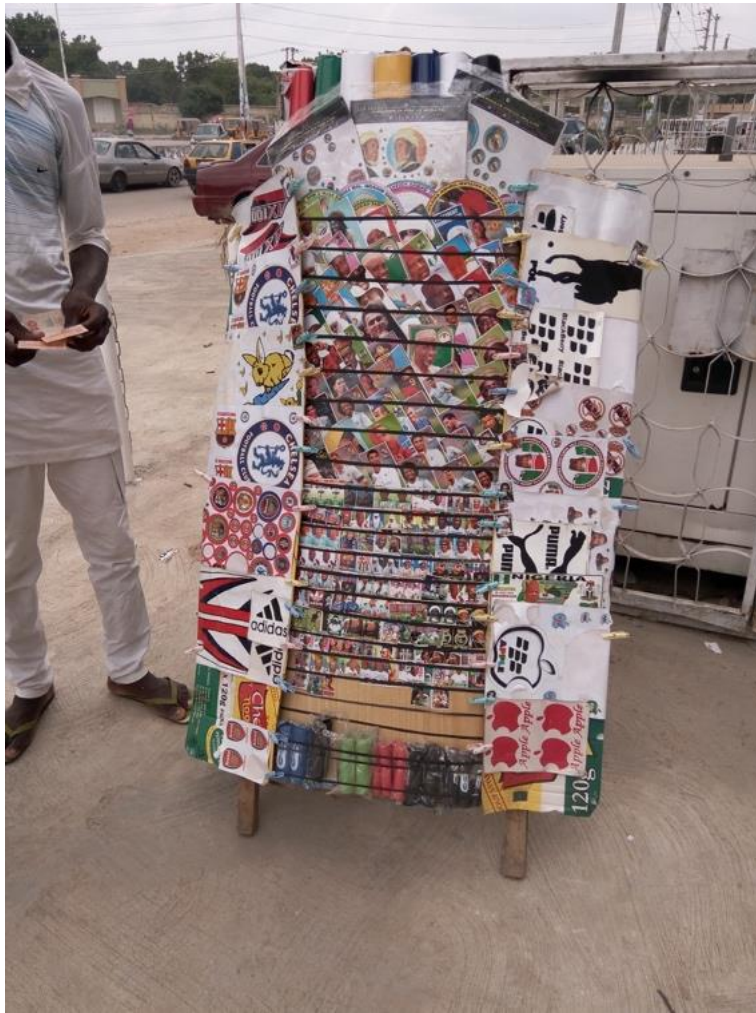




Fig. 29. Photo by Brian Larkin

Fig. 30. Photo by Brian Larkin

Finally, tricycles still make use of the ready-made mass-produced stickers (see figs 33-35), have long used on *achabas* (known elsewhere in Nigeria as *okadas*), taxis and buses and which are glued onto any part of the tricycle but particularly dashboards and exteriors. All sticker sellers also offer sheets of coloured sticker paper used by artists to make custom designs (figs 36-40). Smaller ready-made mass-produced stickers, cost between ₦20 and ₦100, while those designed by artists can reach as much as ₦1,000 or ₦1,500 depending on complexity.<sup>14</sup>



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14. Romeo, a sticker designer, Gidan Dan Asabe, Zoo Road, Kano metropolis, July 4, 2018.



Fig 31. Fig. 32 Photo by Brian Larkin



Figures 33, 34, 35. Images of the cleric Ibrahim Niass,  
 Fig 36. Paper used by artists for sticker design.  
 the Hausa singer Fadar Bege and Bob Marley.  
 Photo by Oluwaseun Williams  
 Photos by Oluronke Popoola (33) and Brian Larkin





Fig 37. Photo by Oluwaseun Williams  
Fig 38. Photo by Oluwaseun Williams



Fig. 39. Photo by Oluwaseun Williams



Fig. 40. Photo by Oluwaseun Williams

### **Creativity and Social Identity in Tricycle Decorations**

What, then, can we make of this new culture of design and decoration? What does it tell us about northern Nigeria and about the ways in which scholars have analysed vehicle decoration? We mentioned earlier that tricycle decoration is unique in that it is located in the interior of the vehicle rather than its exterior. But in several other ways it also is markedly distinct. The first of these is religion. As noted above, most scholarship on vehicle design tends to center around the religious nature of previous design styles. Schulze argues it dominates the brightly painted images of lorries. We were struck by the fact that the vast majority of designs we recorded were dominantly secular in nature. This is remarkable given the fact it is common for people in southern Nigeria and beyond to hold the essentialist view that religion permeates all aspects of life and living in northern Nigeria - a position that is not tenable as far as this study is concerned.<sup>15</sup> Religion was present on

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15. Emeka Aniagolu, "Religious zealotry, radicalism among northern Nigerian Muslims," *The Nation* newspaper, April 30, 2018, <http://theonlineng.net/religious-zealotry-radicalism-among-northern-nigerian-muslims/>; Tony, "Behaviours to avoid when traveling in some parts of northern Nigeria," *Vanguard* newspaper,

tricycles – most often in mass produced stickers of the famous Sufi Sheikh, Ibrahim Niass - but relatively religion and politics play a negligible role in tricycle decorations in Kano. Instead, youth and popular culture take the centre stage.

What most marks these designs is the theme of wealth. Many printed SAV stickers use a background of currency from all over the world over which are imposed images of watches or wealthy brands such as Gucci (see figs 41-43). Where Agbiboa sees vehicle design as a means of dealing with the harshness and precarity of urban life, for many northern drivers, operating a tricycle was a means of advancement, something to be proud of, and the investment into decorating and maintaining tricycles was evidence of this. This is why it is common to see riders using dusters to clean dust and any other forms of dirt from their tricycles at the slightest opportunity, particularly while waiting in traffic. It indicates a sense of self-accomplishment that a rider derives from owning or riding a well-decorated tricycle. For instance, Mohammed, a rider, we spoke to, saw riding a tricycle he decorated as a feat of social mobility now that he is riding a decorated tricycle as he was previously a peddler of *goro* (kolanuts).



Fig 41. Photo by Brian Larkin

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<http://www.vanguardngr.com/2017/02/behaviours-avoid-traveling-parts-northern-nigeria/>  
accessed June 6, 2018.





Fig. 42. Photo by Oluronke Popoola



Fig. 43. Photo by Oluwaseun Williams

One other distinct aspect of these designs is that the use of painted slogans on the sides and windows of taxis and buses (which have been extensively analysed) has dwindled. What has replaced these slogans is a hybrid series of images that blend of transnational icons with local Hausa symbols and concepts. Southern Nigerian singers, Indian film stars, Bob Marley and other iconography of rasta culture indicates connections to broader black public culture that is combined with Western cartoon characters, and local motifs from images of the Kano Emir blended with the *tambarin Arewa* (the popular icon of Northern Nigeria).

While Agbiboa and Osinulu conceive of vehicular decorations largely in terms of resistance, we see the creative ways in which riders decorate their tricycles, especially the interior, as an expression of social identity. This sense of social identity relates to both the personality of the rider himself as well as his environment. Young riders who are largely between ages 16 and 25 years who favour decorations see their tricycles as an extension of their own person and agency. Struggling to redefine the ways in which they, as tricycle riders are commonly seen within society, it is easy to understand the tricycle rider's predisposition to looking handsome and dandy, very much concerned with the cleanliness, aesthetics and comfortability of his tricycle especially for himself, and also for his passengers.

The connection between the look of the tricycle and the rider's sense of self-worth and prestige is evident in the quite handsome investments the riders put into producing the decorations. This is expensive work especially given the fact they wear out after 5 or 6 months (although, in fact, many riders consider the decorations to have been too old and appreciate the opportunity to introduce a new design). Older drivers cannot or are uninterested in making this investment. This is particularly the case for drivers who ply the Sabongari section of the city home to a major market and the settlement of southern migrants to Kano. Drivers there are relatively older, largely family men with responsibilities, who find it hard to invest their money in decorating their tricycles. The community is characterised with bad roads and poor sanitation, and majority of the tricycles that ply the axis are either rickety or not as new as the ones that operate in the upscale parts of the metropolis. Specifically, one tricycle rider in Sabongari area believed that any effort at decorating

his vehicle could be reduced to a mess the moment a passenger comes on with dirty feet, loads of perishable goods, etc.<sup>16</sup>

For young Hausa tricycle operators, however, decoration is a strategy for staying competitive, as there are so many tricycles operating in the metropolis which are hotly competing for patronage. According to Abdullahi “Uban Kachudi”, a tricycle rider, for instance, “Some passengers would wait longer at bus stop just to find an *adaidaita sahu* with decorations.”<sup>17</sup> While other studies on vehicular decorations in other parts of Nigeria have identified issues relating to precarity and chaos, hope and coping strategy, cosmology, religiosity among others, the findings of this study reveals a marked departure from these norms. It is our conclusion that a desire to creatively give expression to and launder one’s social identity is what is essentially at the core of the culture of tricycle decorations in Kano metropolis.



Fig. 35.  
Group members and their faculty: from the left Abdullahi Usman Kofar-Na'isa, Oluronke Dorcas Popoola, Dr. Yemi Ogunsanya, Idris Lawan, Oluwaseun Williams and Prof. Brian Larkin

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16. Hussein Mohammed, Tricycle rider, Sabongari, July 4, 2018.

17. Interview by authors, July 4, 2018.