



'Nita Ride Boda Boda': How the Bicycle Shaped Kenya

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“And you, do you go on a bicycle?”

“I do go on a bicycle, yes.”

The question was meant to be an insult but there was no comeback to the answer. Tom Mboya had just interrupted Martin Shikuku’s speech in Parliament to ask him whether he was any different from others who “...change cars everyday...” Shikuku’s answer, even then in 1964, was shocking – and even true to an extent. A few years later, he would be cycling to Parliament in a bid to encourage his colleagues to follow suit and “meet the people”. It clearly never caught on.

Shikuku had reason to be concerned. Everyone in the independence generation had grown up in a time where the bicycle was the most accessible means of transport. In their varied careers in the colony, they had cycled to school, work, social events, and political meetings. As soon as they could upgrade to motor vehicles, they ditched their bicycles and became part of a capitalist class with a penchant for conspicuous consumption. In the years just before and after independence, this newly minted political elite engaged in a race to purchase the best cars they could find. The only rule was to not get cars, or a fleet, better than the president’s.

As he unveiled the national flag in September 1963, Tom Mboya set out the rules for flying it. He specifically asked people “not to fly the national flag on bicycles and so forth” and not to make copies of it with “cheap material in River Road”. The flag, he said, “must be treated with respect”.

In 1963, an American businessman gifted Jomo Kenyatta a Lincoln Convertible to add to his fleet, which included a Mercedes 300 SE and a Rolls Royce, setting the bar quite high. By 1966, he had yet another Mercedes, but ordered a Rolls Royce meant for the mayor of Nairobi returned to London. This acquisition spree by men, many of whom had been careless just a few years earlier, was a waste of public funds. It was also a psychological coup, a statement of a new class that did not want to be associated with poverty in any form.

As he unveiled the national flag in September 1963, Tom Mboya set out the rules for flying it. He specifically asked people “not to fly the national flag on bicycles and so forth” and not to make copies of it with “cheap material in River Road”. The flag, he said, “must be treated with respect”. This critical symbol of a new nation was now limited to the select few who could afford, by virtue of their political and economic positions, to drive. To fly it on a bicycle was sacrilege. The bicycle was now what [shhecyclesNairobi calls](#) “a strong symbol of poor man’s mobility in Nairobi, second to walking.”

In Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s short story “[Wedding at the Cross](#)”, the (Raleigh) bicycle features prominently as a symbol of poverty that was not acceptable to the “Christian and propertied class”. The protagonist, Wariuki, has to lose his bicycle, and himself, to become what he thinks society needs him to be, and to show his parents-in-law that he is good enough to marry their daughter, Mariamu. By the time he meets them again after independence, he is a rich businessman driving a new Mercedes Benz. In another of Ngugi’s short stories, “[A Mercedes Funeral](#)”, a poor man’s funeral planning becomes the epicentre of political competition. One politician offers a Mercedes to transport the corpse, trumping his competitors. The implication in these postcolonial tales is the same: the bicycle had lost its cool.

The earliest bicycles in Kenya were used by the unholy tripartite of colonial conquest: administrators, missionaries, and settlers. Some were given as presents to servants and friends, such as Nabongo Mumia, and before long the domestic market grew. It was still significantly smaller than the Ugandan market, where a cycling craze was well underway by the mid-1920s. Of the 4,852 bicycles that were imported in 1927, for example, only 1,719 of them were meant for the Kenyan market. At the time, overall demand in both countries had been falling steadily from a short-lived peak of nearly 24,000 bicycles two years earlier.

By 1930, demand had dipped to 1,295 bicycles. It recovered, clocking 14,003 units by 1936. Despite these fluctuations, bicycles were still outselling all other forms of mechanised transport. They were an expensive purchase only affordable to a select few who had jobs that paid well enough to save up. This cost element also meant that only men, who had actively been forced into wage labour since the early 1900s, could afford them. In the migrant labour economy, a bicycle was the fastest way for them to get to work, and for some, to get the work done.

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Even when more women were employed in formal wage labour, they were mostly limited to resident

agriculture and low wage employment. Combined with pre-existing perspectives on gendered roles, cycling emerged as an exclusively male space. It explains why nearly all the major stories involving bikes from this time involve male riders, from Kenyatta's famous bicycle in the 1920s to the story of Kamawe Musungu, whose murder led to the first (and only) execution of a white man in Kenya. A forgotten detail of the assassination of Chief Waruhiu, which triggered the State of Emergency, is that his bodyguard was not in the car with him because he (Waruhiu) had forced him to cycle back on his friend's bicycle.

Most of the women who rode bicycles during this time came from families that already owned a bicycle. A good number of stories of the first women to get an education involve a bicycle, often a father carrying his daughter to school. Before long, in the 1940s and 1950s especially, women were riding too, although female riders never became as prevalent as male ones. This was partly because, as bicycle use became an almost exclusively rural form of transport, cultural views on female riders did not change. They extended not just to riding, but also to usage, as a by-law requiring women to sit sideways, introduced in the Kisumu County Assembly in 2013, shows.

The safety bicycle

Bicycles were still a rather recent innovation at the start of the colonial conquest of the African continent. A German man, Baron Karl Von Drais, filed the first patent of the modern bike's ancestor in 1818. His design was inspired by the "Year without a Summer" (1816), which followed the volcanic eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia the year before. Considered the worst eruption in recent history, it lowered global temperatures and ruined crop harvests for several years. The ensuing famine killed humans, and more importantly for this story, horses. That presented a transport problem for which Drais had an answer.

His invention, the Laufmaschine ("running machine") was a wooden, human-propelled, two-wheeled machine. It had no gears or pedals, which would take another five decades to invent. But it, and later variants, caught on. One of those variants was called The Boneshaker because it had a wooden frame and metal tires, making for an uncomfortable ride. Others had one massive wheel and a much smaller one. Still, they had the same basic problems as Drais's machine; they were heavy, uncomfortable, and unsafe. Such variants informed the perception that the bicycle was a toy for daring, wealthy young men.

All that changed in 1885, when the "safety bicycle", as we know it today, with its metal frame and two same-sized wheels, was invented. Two years later, a Scottish veterinarian called John B. Dunlop experimented with pneumatic tyres on his son's tricycle. He filed and got a patent for the tyres, although he lost it two years later because another Scotsman had filed a similar patent four decades prior. Combined, these inventions triggered a cycling craze in the 1890s that led to more affordable bicycles and eventually, their presence in the colonies. Colonies became even more important markets after bicycle demand stalled in the United States as Americans ditched other forms of transport for Henry Ford's Model T.

By the 1930s, there were several brands battling for the East African market. Almost all were British, and the most prestigious of them was Raleigh. The introduction to the 1932 Raleigh Sales Catalogue claims that the Baganda were so enthralled with the bicycle that "the name has been adopted as their common definition of quality, and should a necktie, cap, or any other object meet with their enthusiastic approval, immediately it is dubbed 'Raleigh'."

The brands advertised heavily, and many of them were some of the earliest advertisers in local-language newspapers. In a *Mambo Leo* newspaper advert from June 1930,

Raleigh advertised this claim: “It has strength of a lion! The lightness of a feather! It goes faster than the wind!”

The competition, which had brands such as Humber, Hercules, and BSA, was still formidable. Bicycles, unlike gramophones (the other luxury item of the day), had a primary appeal beyond prestige. They offered mobility in an economy that was increasingly demanding it, with few public options in place.

The bicycle economy

The bicycle that caught on was the single-speed, steel-frame roadster. Like Henry Ford’s Model T, it came in black. It was relatively within reach, economically, and to some extent, durable. It also needed to be registered, and over time, modified to add parts, such as reflectors, as road rules evolved. But bicycles offered an unmatched utility because they could perform many other roles, including as economic and social tools.

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This primary market also spawned off another source of employment – bicycle mechanics. Bicycle mechanics were a unique class at the time because they were mostly self-employed, and their primary customers were black. The competition among them drove down repair prices so that if you owned a bicycle by the 1940s, you didn’t need to pay a herd of cattle to get it repaired, as Nabongo Mumia had done in 1910.

Mechanics and bicycle owners got their spares from Asian-owned shops, which thrived as bicycle usage increased. In 1936, for example, bicycle tyre imports were ten times higher than the number of bicycles imported. This trade built a few Indian tycoons, such as [Kassam Kanji Rahim Varsi](#), who got a loan from his father-in-law and opened a bicycle parts shop in Nairobi. By the 1950s, Bata and the Avon Rubber Company made bicycle tyres in Kenya, but other parts still had to be shipped in.

While many of the bicycle’s earliest users used it to commute to and from, and during, work, people found other economic uses as well. The most resilient of these is transport, which grew out of a demand for transport services at the Kenya-Uganda border. The bicycle was also used to transport food, at times animals, tools, and other materials. Others modified their bicycles to create mobile business units, such as mounting a knife-sharpening stone on the bicycle.

The prestige and utility of cycling also meant bicycles were a frequent target for burglary. Bicycle theft was such a problem in East Africa in the 1950s that Dar es Salaam had a special Bicycle Squad within its police force and Uganda had a Bicycle Thefts Committee around the same time. In Kenya, it was often listed among the most common thefts of property, and magistrates regularly whipped young offenders who were caught with stolen bicycles. Early administrators in Nairobi also employed vagrancy laws to arrest people for a vaguely described offence called “misuse of bicycle”.

The Wabenzi class

In the post-war period of the late 1940s, thousands of demobilised soldiers sought transport licences. Many bought lorries and cars, but the bicycle remained the most frequently used form of transport in the country, especially in rural areas. As more people joined a fledging white collar class in the late 50s and the early 60s, the bicycle remained a symbol of the blue-collar worker and ultimately, poverty. The only black people who had cars before the 1950s were colonial chiefs and a few enterprising businessmen.

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Before long this cadre of car owners would include independence politicians, who bought them for campaigns and travels. They quickly ditched the small cars they had acquired in the late 50s and early 60s and switched to fuel guzzlers. What mattered now was what type of car one drove, hence the rise of the “Wabenzi” – a generation that even included at least one high profile theft of a Mercedes Benz from a showroom in Nairobi.

The statement “cannot even afford a bicycle” appears several times in the Hansard in reference to the economic plight of former legislators. By itself, it suggests a lifelong responsibility for the taxpayer to fund the lifestyles of its political class, even after they have left the public space. In a discussion about Daniel Arap Moi’s retirement benefits in 2003, one of the main issues was why his bodyguards and *watu wa mikono* also needed Mercedes Benzes. The alternative, of course, was not bicycles.

For this class, bicycles were only good as toys for children. This was not a view limited to Kenya or East Africa, as the global bicycle market was struggling as more people opted for cars. Bicycle manufacturers had to find new ways of selling them, which pushed them back to the original sales pitch of the bicycle as a children’s toy and a tool for extreme sports. The single-speed roadster was now a product more popular for its function over form, and its users invisible to the “cultured” classes.

Still, as grown-ups moved to cars, bicycles for their children became a major class distinction. In the 1970s and 1980s, owning a BMX was a middle-class status symbol. Ironically for these classes, the car craze meant that cyclists were forgotten in infrastructure and budget planning. Private cars and motorways took over, and riding a bicycle in an urban centre increasingly became dangerous. This meant that children who grew up in cities and towns were not allowed to ride bicycles on the roads because of the dangers cars represented.

The implication for the majority of bicycle users was far worse, as they were seen as a nuisance on the roads. Bicycle lanes were not a priority, and even essential things like proper bicycle parking were only available in some colonial-era structures. Import duty remained prohibitively high (in some years as high as 90 per cent) until the government started systematically reducing it in the mid-1980s. Even before then, bicycles remained an important economic tool for a silent majority who could not afford private cars or even the expense of public transport.

The end of the bicycle’s run as a symbol of prestige was to be expected, but it did not end its usage among the working class or even the lower cadres of government employees. In 1990, for example, the government imported 525 bicycles to be issued to field agricultural extension staff on loan basis. Bicycles were bought for local government employees, and even health workers working in

HIV/AIDS prevention in the early 2000s. They've even been used in political campaigns [as recently as 2017](#), before being quickly replaced with fuel-guzzlers that constitute the welcome package for our legislators.

The true threat to the bicycle's run as the wheels of the people was not the car, but its motorised descendant. There were only 525 registered motorcycles in Kenya in 1963, and only 4,136 in 2004. By the time duty on motorcycles below 250cc was waived in 2007, these numbers had grown to 16,923. Today, there are closer to a million bicycles, serving different functions but primarily as boda bodas (bicycle taxis).

But the single-speed roadster is still remarkably popular, mostly because of the same reason it has always been popular - it doesn't need fuel, and it is cheap to repair. Plus, it's good exercise.

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