



THE WALKING POOR: Nairobi Privileges the Motor Vehicle, Not the People

By Patrick Gathara



The return of the “Michuki Rules” (the stringent rules established by John Michuki, the former Transport Minister in Mwai Kibaki’s government) that targeted public transport operators has precipitated days of traffic chaos as matatus, the backbone of what passes for the city’s public transport system, declared a strike in protest. Newspaper headlines bemoaned the agony visited on drivers and commuters, with some decrying the traffic gridlock that ensued as private cars flooded the roads. The *Daily Nation* describing it as a “day of walking”.

It is a telling description and speaks to the low regard with which pedestrians in Nairobi are held. This despite the fact that even when matatus are on the roads, most Nairobians leg it to wherever they are going. According to the World Bank, more than 8 out of every 10 commutes involve walking as the primary or secondary mode of travel. Half of those trips are made completely on foot. The 2010 draft Sessional Paper on Integrated National Transport Policy states that nearly two-thirds of the city’s residents meet their daily travel needs by walking or cycling.

Despite this, the focus on motorised transport is understandable given the truly terrible state of transport infrastructure and traffic congestion. The Traffic Index 2018, a composite index published by the Serbia-based website numbeo.com (which claims to be “the world’s largest database of user contributed data about cities and countries”) rates Nairobi as having the 12th worst traffic in the

world, with one-way journeys averaging just under an hour. The World Bank [says](#) that Nairobi has “one of the world’s longest average journey-to-work times” with commuting speeds of just 14 kilometers per hour.

Since 2013, city authorities have embarked on an ambitious road expansion scheme to tackle the congestion, but it seems that the roads are filling up faster than they can build them. Dorothy McCormick, a researcher at the University of Nairobi, told the *Guardian* in 2016 that Nairobi’s vehicle population had grown 16-fold in under 30 years and the former Nairobi County Governor, Evans Kidero, once observed that at the current rate of registration, Nairobi’s vehicle population was likely to surpass 1.35 million by 2030.

In such circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that the needs of pedestrians are mostly kicked to the kerb. In fact, as New York-based CityLab [notes](#), “The ongoing battle for the roads of Nairobi is an extension of the city’s broader class segregation: Cars, a transit option for the city’s upper classes, command the road with superiority. Pedestrians, many of whom belong to Nairobi’s lower class of informal laborers, are funneled into dangerous and uncomfortable walking environments”.

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Nairobi’s love affair with the automobile and the classist segregation of public spaces it represents has a long history. The article [“Politics, policy and paratransit”](#) by Jacqueline Klopp of Columbia University and Winnie Mitullah of the University of Nairobi states that “European settlers and officials ‘planned’ the city of Nairobi around personalised transport which facilitated physical segregation in terms of mobility”. By 1928, just over two decades after it became the official capital of Kenya, the city had 5,000 cars “making it the city with the highest per capita private automobile ownership in the world”. Thus traffic was a major concern even then. But it was still a city more concerned with the problems of a wealthy motoring few rather than those of the majority of its citizens. Europeans and Asians drove. Poor Africans have always walked.

Just as there was little planning in place to cater for the residential needs of the African majority (which resulted in the mushrooming of slums across the city) so there was little thought given to how they would move around. “The colonial, segregationist urban economy failed to cater for people who were not formally employed by the colonial government,” Klopp and Mitullah note.

When the Nairobi Town Bus, the precursor to Kenya Bus Services, was inaugurated in the 1930s, it was largely for the benefit of Europeans and Asians, as Isaiah Gibson Aduwo [noted](#) in 1990. In the 1940s and 1950s, the Kenya Bus Services “served the Eastern parts of the city [where Africans lived] using vehicles built on lorry chassis” according to the paper [“The Metamorphosis of Kenya Bus Services Limited in the Provision of Urban Transport in Nairobi”](#) by Tom Opiyo of the Department of Civil Engineering.

In fact, the growth of the matatu industry, which is the source of so much grief nowadays, is a direct result of Africans entrepreneuring their way around the public transport problems that the city government had failed to resolve given that the bus service remained out of reach for all but a minority of city residents. Still, nearly a century after it received its charter as a city, the only major

change in the character of Nairobi has been the replacement of the colour bar with one based on class.

The class “battle for the roads” is over a tiny sliver of Nairobi’s land into which motorists, commuters and pedestrians have been pushed by decades of uncontrolled land-grabbing. A study by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) [revealed](#) that in the central part of Nairobi, the space allocated to streets and pavements is only about 12 per cent of the total land area, less than half of the [estimated 30 percent](#) required to support a functioning traffic system in a modern capital. The walking poor have to struggle daily for this constricted space on the street with the very perpetrators whose theft of public land has created this situation.

The privileging of the automobile has had a detrimental effect on the community life of the city. “Increased traffic has adverse impacts on public activities which once crowded the streets, such as markets, agoras, parades and processions, games, and community interactions. These have gradually disappeared to be replaced by automobiles,” notes the authors of the book [The Geography of Transport Systems](#). “In many cases, these activities have shifted to shopping malls while in other cases, they have been abandoned altogether.”

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Few stop to ask about who ends up sacrificing the most at the altar of the vehicle and whether it is fair. After all, the vast majority of the walking poor do not hang out at the new swanky malls popping up across the city. Regardless, it is they who end up paying the highest price, both in lives and treasure, for Nairobi’s dysfunctional system, even when they benefit least from it. According to the National Transport Safety Authority, 60 per cent of fatal accidents on the city’s roads involve pedestrians. They also suffer a much higher rate of injury than other road users. Even the introduction of bodaboda (motorcycle taxis), which have brought motorised transport closer to the poor, has been quickly followed by a spike in accidents and deaths involving them.

Further, the street network is ultimately funded by public taxes, and it is the poor who contribute most of that. The rich and the middle classes may have a higher share of income tax but the poor, by sheer force of numbers, more than make up for it in the taxes they pay for accessing goods and services - the government’s largest single source of tax revenue. They basically subsidise car-owning residents’ travel on roads from which they themselves are actively excluded. And this has real implications for their ability to escape poverty as, according to the World Bank, for the average household, only 2 out of every 10 formal jobs are accessible within an hour of either walking or using public transport. In a car, however, that number rises to 9 out of every 10 jobs.

Today, the walking poor are mostly still treated as an after-thought when designing, building and repairing streets. The expansion of roads may be popular but it also generates huge inconveniences and dangers. Pedestrians are forced to either take long detours to find the nearest safe bridge to cross or to risk their lives trying to dash across six or eight lanes of road. The recently expanded Outer Ring Road in the poorer eastern part of the city features almost no facilities, such as bridges or pavements, for pedestrians to safely cross or even walk. However, it is interesting to note that when roads were expanded in the wealthier parts of the city, such as in Kileleshwa, most of whose

residents drive to work, sidewalks and bicycle lanes were included.

But that is an exception. Even when it comes to patching up streets, pedestrians are still left with the short end of the stick. It is common to find smooth roads lined with cratered pavements, which are peppered with open manholes or have been turned into parking spaces.

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As we increase the city acreage devoted to cars, there is little corresponding increase in land devoted to people. Within the city's Central Business District, only two streets (Mama Ngina Drive and Aga Khan Walk) are devoted to pedestrian and non-motorised traffic. Hawkers are actively barred from accessing the CBD while matatus and buses can occupy streets (and pavements) for hours on end. In many city estates as well, home owners have grabbed sections of kerbs bordering their properties and converted them into parking spaces or flower gardens.

The county government has been making noises about introducing car-free days to encourage people to leave their vehicles at home but that will not happen as long as the city continues to be organised as it is. "[T]he default in Nairobi for the proper road user is the car," [notes](#) Amiel Bize, a Columbia PhD candidate who has been studying pedestrian safety in Kenya since 2010.

Undoubtedly, the capital needs a sane motorised public transport system. It also needs to take care of its congestion problem. However, none of these objectives can be achieved if it does not take care of its walkability problem. The goal of re-engineering and reinventing Nairobi as a city for people, rather than a city for vehicles, will remain elusive as long as it does not cater to the needs of the majority of its population. It is this that led to Nairobi being [ranked](#) a lowly 186 out of 231 global cities in the New York-based consultancy Mercer's 2018 quality of living survey.

Much of this will involve undoing a century of misconceptions about the desirability of walking. These misconceptions are captured in the *Business Daily* headline that read: "Traffic congestion slows down Nairobi to a walking city." Yet the idea of "a walking city" is not a lamentable consequence of a failure of motorised transport but rather should be the desired outcome of effective policies to decongest roads. In fact, as [The Geography of Transport Systems](#) notes, "people tend to walk and cycle less when traffic is heavy". The book emphasises that "traffic flows influence the life and interactions of residents and their usage of street space. More traffic impedes social interactions and street activities." With the introduction of modern light rail, the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, [demonstrates](#) how a combination of policies to improve public transport and a consistent commitment to investing in pedestrian infrastructure can help regenerate cities.

Rather than implementing separate policies, such as the Michuki Rules, to tame matatus and beating Kidero drums to tackle congestion, Nairobi should adopt an integrated plan whose aim should be to make the city a more humane and walkable place to live - a city where the streets are transformed from theatres of conflict and exclusion to arenas of interaction that welcome all people regardless of class.

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