“We make others wait now”
Youth, motorcycles, and masculinities on the road to development in Kenya

Joshua J. Ramisch
jramisch@uottawa.ca
ASAA, Nairobi
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@mwarv (Mwangi Kirubi, 2016)
“Waithood” and the road to development in Kenya

- “Stuck” masculinities and jams on the road to development
- Road infrastructure as metaphor for Kenyan development
- Contested, gendered versions of acceptable ways to get ahead
- Boda boda beyond the stereotypes
- Reconsidering “waithood”
① “The bike I am on is weaving through the traffic jam on Kenyatta Avenue. We’ve just passed through the canyon created by two lanes of standing buses, and wiggled around the driver’s side mirror of a private car trying to slowly change lanes ahead of them. When the jam gets too dense, we weave to the far right to climb up onto the central median, coming down only as we approach the roundabout with Uhuru Highway. Impatient matatus behind us now honk at the traffic policeman in the roundabout, urging him to give the Kenyatta Avenue jam a turn to move forward and rule the flow.

My rider and I slip unobtrusively behind the frontline of waiting cars to the far left, and slide into the roundabout alongside the pedestrians, leaving the jam behind us as we join a new throng of vehicles stuck on Valley Road.”
“Waithood”

- Prolonged gap between social childhood and adulthood (Singerman, 2007)
- (Male) youth “stuck” without access to land, capital, or marriage (Sommers 2009)
- Active moment of renegotiating identity and independence: raised expectations vs. constrained opportunities (Honwana 2012)
Roads in the Kenyan development imaginary

Images from “Vision 2030” (GoK 2007):
- p. 7 (left)
- back cover (above)

“World class” modernity is fetishized as “empty space” and “speed”

For whom? Implicit human-vehicle “cyborgs”
“Youth” have been frame as the “wrong” types of road users (since colonial times...)

- Unruly, undisciplined
- Dangerous to “legitimate” users
- The cause of road congestion
- Lured by quick money (away from “real” work)
**Boda boda**: Rural livelihood (bicycle taxi) → liberalized motorcycle imports in 2010 (Chinese, Indian bikes) & availability of cellphones, linking rural-urban

- **Young men** (stereotyped as “dropouts”), dangerous, linked to crime?
- “Transitory” livelihood? Strategy to accumulate, learn Nairobi’s roads & ways
“Ultimate” motorized (cyborg) mobility? Interstitial, precarious, disposable?
Two rounds of fieldwork
1. NAIROBI
   - 392 rider interviews
     * June 2017-Feb. 2018
     * 3 assistants, all city areas
   - 16 ethnographies
   - 5 focus groups
2. KILIFI (Coastal Kenya)
   - 105 rider interviews
     * May-July 2019
     * 2 assistants (49 in town, 32 North, 24 South)
   - 6 ethnographies
   - 3 focus groups
② Wycliff (Nairobi, Pangani stage)
“I started riding boda boda in 2014. I rode for about 8 months in Kisumu before I followed my wife back here to Nairobi. I used to be a metalworker, making tripod stands, stove stands, chairs, those sorts of things... but because life is about development, I decided to switch to boda boda. I earn money every day and I earn more if I sweat more. This life is good: I meet people and it is always interesting.”
Hypotheses (Markers of Waithood)

Boda boda are:
- “Youth”
- Unskilled / low education ("school leavers")
- No rural land / food insecure
- Unable to marry
H1. Boda boda are not “youth” per se
(but in Nairobi they do over-represent 25-40 male demographic)
In Kilifi, riders are younger, and over-represent the 20-29 male demographic, but aren’t the 15-19 year old “dropouts” of the stereotype.

Age of boda boda respondents vs frequency distribution of Kilifi's male population
H2. Boda boda are not “school leavers”

Education level of boda boda respondents vs Nairobi frequency distribution

- Never: 8%
- Primary: 24%
- Secondary: 61%
- Diploma: 5%
- University: 1%

Highest completed level of education

Frequency
H3. Boda boda are not lacking skills or job experience

Livelihood activity before *boda boda*

- **47%** Informal
- **30%** Formal
- **9%** Student
- **9%** Farming
- **5%** Nothing


H4. Boda boda are not necessarily driven by rural poverty / food insecurity

- **59%** of Nairobi respondents reported their rural homes grew “enough food”
  - An average of **7.8** months of food
  - Grown on an average of **4.14** acres of land

- Respondents:
  - **Sent** money to rural home (every **40.3** days)
  - **Received** things from home (every **99** days), which was more frequent than visits home (**118** days)
Mwangi (Nairobi, Korogocho)  
“Before I started riding boda boda I was not doing any kind of job. Let’s say I was a hustler... idling around the streets of Korogocho, sometimes mugging people. I tried selling stolen phones... but was eventually arrested. Street life is dangerous and unpredictable. *Boda boda* was better and an *honest way of earning*... I am known here by the other riders and residents, and I had to prove to everyone I have reformed... Every day on this bike I show them that I am no longer a street idler or a threat to anyone.”
Respectable ("Ordered")

Transgressive ("Disordered")

Youth

Adulthood

("
"Innovative"")
“Nairobi people have no time for goats and beehives [bridewealth]. I might pay those things eventually to her dad but even him he lives in [another estate in Nairobi]. Her parents were much more interested to know that I knew how to look after her and the kids, that I was serious and had plans for the future. After another year or two of riding boda boda I will buy a car and expand into taxi business.”
- “Daily cash” is the dominant attraction of boda boda
- Daily earnings: **500-3000 Ksh**
- No waiting, setting their own hours and place of work, combining with other livelihoods (especially a wife / partner’s business)
- **Diverse daily strategies:** A set list of clients? Parcels or deliveries? Rush hour / night time / midday? Focus on matatu stages / markets / malls / schools / etc.
“Why do I need to build a house in the rural area, a house my wife and I will only sleep in once or twice a year when we visit my parents? It’s better that we save all our coins to invest in our shop, maybe buy a plot we build on, a rental property here in Nairobi, anything that puts coins in our pockets. Not useless land upcountry that can’t make us any money.”
Not following “traditional” path to male adulthood

- Vast majority (70%) had URBAN-focused plans
  - E.g. Business (38%), Car purchase (19%), buying urban plots of land (13%)

- Only 20% prioritised RURAL investment
  - E.g. Farming or livestock (14%)
  - Prefer buying/building an urban home > rural one (36 vs. 11%)

- **Vehicle-related** investments (car, motorcycles, lorry) were much more common than **land-related** ones

- Many riders reported joint planning (business, land) with wives (“Why divide our assets?”)
"Struggling" and "freedom"

Struggle, hustle - Chandre (Luo)
Freedom, Self-determination - Wiathi (Kikuyu)

“ My life doesn’t look like my father’s or my grandfather’s, it is not even what I dreamed as a small boy. But my family is fed, they are schooling. I have made myself a man by all this struggling.”
Development (and masculinity) as “work in progress” ● Failures to attain “old” models of success (marriage, land, salaried labour, etc.) ➔ narrative of “stuck” masculinities (unable to “become a man”) ● Long co-existence of these rival (alternative) forms suggests “old” norms & categories are losing their appeal ● *Boda boda* men accumulate capital, marry, etc. *without* rural land or necessarily even social approval ● And... women occupying “male” spaces...
Asanteni ● Thank you ● Merci

jramisch@uottawa.ca

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