

WHAT THE TRUCK?

Tolu Ogunlesi investigates the phenomenon of eccentric slogans and paintings on Lagos' Molues, Danfos and Gwongworo vehicles.

Words Tolu Ogunles Photography Victor Politis

Each of the innumerable public buses and vans that daily criss-cross the city of Lagos is supposed to have a route number printed on to it. But even before you notice the route numbers you are likely to observe something else – that these vehicles, as they chain-smoke dangerously and merrily across the city, are mobile ‘canvases’, tireless in their quest to share slogans and murals with the throngs of Lagosians who use them.

Most iconic is the Molue, aka “Funky Train”, the Grandmaster of Lagos public mass transit, immortalized by Fela Kuti in his song *Zombie* as “44 sitting, 99 standing”, and described by a Nigerian blogger as “an ‘abandoned american school bus’ transformed into mass transit buses for low-income commuters in Lagos.” There are also the Danfos, 14 to 18-seater buses known for their wild driving and even wilder drivers’ assistants. And then there

are the ‘Tipper’ lorries – so called because one end of the ‘body’ can be pneumatically elevated to ‘tip’ the contents out under the influence of gravity. Domiciled in parks in Obalende, Ojota, Alaba, Ketu and other public transport hubs in the metropolis, the Tipper lorries bear sand, gravel and broken blocks to the countless construction sites scattered across the city.

The search for the story behind the art on these vehicles took me to Obalende, and to the heart of Lagos Island, a place where grand-sounding place names – Cow Lane, Lewis Street, Sandgrouse Market – belie a frenzied reality.

African Rat

Along the length of Igbosere road is an unplastered wall that immediately strikes you as the “business card” of a street artist. Or at the very least a blackboard for the training of street artists. Screaming from a prime position on the wall, in yellow lettering, are the letters D E M O N C R A







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Z Y. For effect the “N” is overlaid with blue paint, as though to subliminally suggest a link with “Nigeria.”

Welcome to the hole of the African Rat, Olaitan Theophilus Iwalokun. His frailness belies the name he has garnered for himself as one of Lagos’ outstanding “Truck Artists”.

“Any art that you see on a vehicle is called Van Display or Motor Display,” he explains. Olaitan sees himself as a street artist and trucks and buses are only part of the numerous media available to him for plying his trade. “This is no “Art for Art’s Sake,” he says, “the vans and trucks and buses that come to me for branding want to send a message to the world.” A pithy encapsulation of a much-cherished worldview, or even merely an aspiration, in Olaitan’s words, “the messages are things people will read and which will be meaningful and will speak about life - the social or economic or political aspects of life.”

Mobile Murals

For anyone who has spent time in Lagos, “No Condition is permanent” would be



one of the most popular bus slogans ever. And nowhere would that statement be more apt than in a city like Lagos, where the landscape is an endless slideshow of color, noise, debris, concrete, smoke and varied human characters; where traffic builds and dissipates in seconds, and where major accidents happen in the time it takes to blink.

On the scale of religiosity, “No Condition is permanent” or “No Food for Lazy Man” would play second fiddle to other popular slogans like “One with God is Majority”, “Blessed to be a Blessing”, “More Blessing”, “The Lord is My Shepherd” or “Over to God”, but what all these slogans,



religious or otherwise share in common is that they are forged from the same crucible – the harshness of daily existence and the stubborn hope (often in a Supreme Being) that makes present harshness bearable. Assuming Nigeria were a book, each of these slogans would be a complete chapter.

Nigerians have always been creative users of the English language. It is the same inventive spirit that keeps the crude engines of the Molues and Danfos moving that hi-jacks and transforms and renews the language that the colonial conquerors left behind. That appropriation of English has manifested in various forms at different

times of our national life, in the sixties and seventies as Onitsha Market Literature, and in the nineties as Nollywood, with its melodramatic titles and subtitles that sometimes read like they were composed by a computer without the slightest element of human interference.

It is not only slogans that make up these mobile murals. There are plenty of garish, sometimes-life-sized paintings, depicting everything from single petals to poses frozen straight out of low-budget Kung-fu movies. For the religious-minded, there is an array of biblical depictions – anything from David vs. Goliath to The Last Supper – to choose from.

Come Down, Let's Fight

African art – if one can argue that there is such a term as that, sufficient to encompass a continent as culturally diverse as this – is as old as mankind. It is not for nothing that this continent is called “the cradle of humanity”. It is estimated that there are as many as 200,000 rock-art sites scattered across Africa, a significant number of them many millennia old. Africans have been applying their hands to blank surfaces for thousands of years – rocks and caves in prehistoric times, shrines, tribal-marked faces, adire and kente clothing, and now automobiles.

Decades ago the major means of inter-city transportation in Nigeria was the “Mammy Wagon”, consisting of an ugly Bedford or Mercedes Benz 911 chassis upon which a crude wooden body, sometimes with open sides, would be built to hold farm produce, as well as passengers, who would step in through “open-and-close” doors and sit facing each other “thigh-to-thigh.” In western Nigeria the mammy wagons were known as ‘bolekaja’ - literally “come



down, let's fight!”, and in eastern Nigeria as “Gwongworo.”

According to African Rat the kind of art on a truck usually depends on its region of origin. “Look at Molues. Write-ups are the most popular,” he says, “Molues usually don't have as many paintings as the Gwongworo. Those coming from the North have their own style of art. Fulanis have theirs and Igbos have, Yorubas have theirs

as well.”

Vehicle Art has been in existence in Lagos from the days of the bolekajas, as many as fifty to sixty years ago. I wonder aloud how much longer the Molue, Bolekaja's successor has before it succumbs to its fast-approaching oblivion, inevitable taking into consideration the zeal of government to modernize the public transportation system in Lagos. Already Molues are banned from a number of routes and bridges, and will hardly be seen today on Lagos and Victoria Islands.

African Rat confidently turns his nose up at this doomsday prophecy. “If you say Molues are reducing, they will only reduce [in places] where the Government has put BRT buses, the new mass transit buses the Government is determinedly introducing to replace Molues. There are some places that BRT buses will never ply, like Sango to Oshodi; rugged places [where] they will wear out quickly. Those that can't afford better know how they catch their funky train.”

I cannot but agree with him. After all, only two millennia ago a famous religious leader expressed the same sentiments when he uttered the words “the poor you will always have with you.” This can only mean one thing: perhaps some conditions are permanent after all.

