Commentary

Beyond Words: Unpacking the Multifaceted Impact of Local Transportation Terminology in Africa

Emmanuel MOGAJI[1,c]

[1] Keele University, Staffordshire, UK
[c] Corresponding author: e.mogaji@keele.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper explores the complexities of transportation terminology in Africa, where names like Boda Boda, Tro Tro, and Okada carry rich cultural and historical significance. It addresses the tension between preserving local authenticity for regional audiences and adopting standardized terms like "paratransit" for global communication. To reconcile these challenges, the paper introduces "Flexi Transit" as a unifying terminology, emphasizing adaptability and responsiveness to evolving community needs. Leveraging technology, Flexi Transit reflects the dynamic nature of these systems while respecting their cultural roots. Adopting "Flexi Transit" provides a unifying terminology that balances local authenticity with global comprehensibility, offering practical benefits for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. Researchers can use it to standardize terminology in comparative studies, while policymakers can integrate it into frameworks to promote inclusivity and preserve cultural significance. For practitioners, it enables culturally resonant branding and communication strategies. While challenges such as translation and institutional resistance may arise, these can be addressed through contextual translations, stake-holder engagement, and advocacy. Ultimately, "Flexi Transit" offers a forward-thinking framework that preserves Africa's transportation heritage while aligning with global mobility trends.

Résumé

Cet article explore les complexités de la terminologie des transports en Afrique, où des noms comme Boda Boda, Tro Tro, et Okada ont une riche signification culturelle et historique. Il aborde la tension entre la préservation de l'authenticité locale pour les publics régionaux et l'adoption de termes normalisés tels que « transport adapté » pour la communication mondiale. Pour relever ces défis, le document présente « Flexi Transit » comme une terminologie unifiée, qui met l'accent sur l'adaptabilité et la réactivité à l'évolution des besoins de la communauté. En s'appuyant sur la technologie, Flexi Transit reflète la nature dynamique de ces systèmes tout en respectant leurs racines culturelles. L'adoption de « Flexi Transit » fournit une terminologie unifiée qui équilibre l'authenticité locale avec la compréhensibilité globale, offrant des avantages pratiques pour les chercheurs, les décideurs politiques et les praticiens. Les chercheurs peuvent l'utiliser pour normaliser la terminologie dans les études comparatives, tandis que les décideurs politiques peuvent l'intégrer dans des cadres visant à promouvoir l'inclusion et à préserver la signification culturelle. Pour les praticiens, elle permet de mettre en place des stratégies de marque et de communication qui résonnent culturellement. Bien que des défis tels que la traduction et la résistance institutionnelle puissent survenir, ils peuvent être résolus par des trans-lations contextuelles, l'engagement des parties prenantes et le plaidoyer. En fin de compte, «

Flexi Transit » offre un cadre avant-gardiste qui préserve l'héritage de l'Afrique en matière de transport tout en s'alignant sur les tendances mondiales en matière de mobilité.

1. Introduction

In our daily lives, terms like Hoover, Google, and Uber have seamlessly embedded themselves into shared language and culture, reflecting their evolution from mere names to representations of industries and lifestyles (Leland, 2017; Mogaji, 2021). This phenomenon parallels the distinct transportation nomenclature in Africa, where terms such as "Okada" in Nigeria, "Boda Boda" in Uganda, 'Woro-Woro' in Ivory Coast, 'Taxi-Bokko' in Senegal and "Tro Tro" in Ghana have become deeply ingrained in local identity and societal fabric. These indigenous names, rooted in cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts, transcend their practical use to embody the heritage and ethos of transportation systems across the continent (GNPT, 2024a,b,c; Maliro, 2023; Mogaji & Nguyen, 2023).

Despite their cultural richness, there is hesitancy in academia to fully embrace these indigenous names, with researchers often favoring Westernized terms like "motorcycle taxis" or adopting hybrid labels such as "paratransit (trotro)" (Nwaedozie et al., 2023). The academic reluctance to adopt indigenous transportation names often stems from a combination of cultural bias, linguistic constraints, and the need for standardization in international publications. Cultural bias may lead researchers to prioritize Westernized terms, perceiving them as more "scientific" or universally comprehensible, thus unintentionally marginalizing local nomenclature. Linguistic constraints, such as difficulty in translating or accurately conveying the cultural and contextual nuances of indigenous terms, also contribute to this hesitancy. Additionally, the pressure to align with standardized terminology in academic discourse, particularly for publications targeting global audiences, further discourages the use of local names. For example, terms like "paratransit" are often favored over "Tro Tro" or "Okada" in international studies to ensure consistency, even though they may not fully capture the cultural or operational nuances of these modes. Exploring such examples highlights the need for a more balanced approach that values cultural authenticity while addressing practical considerations.

These inconsistencies in naming practices underscore the complexities of integrating local terminology into scholarly work, as researchers balance cultural authenticity with global comprehensibility. The debate reflects broader tensions in defining transportation categories, such as the dichotomy of formal versus informal systems or hybrid urban transport models (Guillen et al., 2013; Mateo-Babiano et al., 2020). This discourse is particularly significant as both African and non-African scholars increasingly explore informal transportation modes, seeking to contextualize them within theoretical frameworks.

This tension between preserving indigenous nomenclature and the need for standardization can be enriched by examining precedents from other sectors or regions where this duality has been successfully managed. For instance, in the culinary industry, UNESCO's recognition of traditional foods like "Neapolitan pizza" and "Washoku" highlights how local names can retain cultural authenticity while gaining global acceptance. Similarly, in transportation, terms like "tuk-tuk" in Southeast Asia have been embraced internationally, balancing cultural specificity with widespread recognition. In Africa, examples such as the promotion of "Rooibos" tea from South Africa as a globally recognized yet distinctly local product illustrate how branding and

EPFL

standardization can coexist. These examples demonstrate that with strategic branding, stakeholder engagement, and inclusive policymaking, transport in Africa can similarly preserve its rich linguistic heritage while adopting a standardized framework for broader comprehension and application.

This article advocates for preserving indigenous nomenclature while recognizing the practical need for standardization in certain contexts. It proposes three guiding principles: first, employing local terms in single-country research to honor cultural identity; second, using unified terminology in multi-country studies to ensure clarity and inclusivity; and third, integrating native nomenclature into local policies to resonate with communities and preserve heritage. These principles aim to foster a balanced approach, respecting the cultural significance of indigenous names while facilitating broader understanding and collaboration.

By addressing the challenges and opportunities of transportation naming practices, this article highlights the critical role of terminology in shaping narratives, policies, and research. It calls for a nuanced reevaluation of how indigenous and standardized terms are used, encouraging dialogue across academia, industry, and policymaking. This discussion sets the stage for further exploration and collaboration, ensuring that Africa's rich transportation heritage is preserved and meaningfully integrated into global discourse.

2. Towards a unifying terminology

The diversity of transportation modes across the Global South has resulted in an array of names and terminologies that reflect their cultural and operational nuances (Alimo et al., 2022; Boateng, 2020; Dumedah & Eshun, 2020). However, existing descriptors such as "informal transit," "paratransit," and "Demand-Responsive Transit (DRT)" often fail to encapsulate the unique characteristics of these systems (Gorev et al, 2020; Guillen et al, 2013; Itani et al, 2024; Martin et al, 2023). As detailed in Table 1, these terms are either too narrow, overly generalized, or laden with negative connotations. For example, "informal transit" can imply a lack of legitimacy, while "paratransit" inadequately represents the diversity within these systems. Similarly, "DRT" emphasizes technological integration that is often absent in many con-texts, creating unrealistic expectations. These limitations highlight the need for a more comprehensive and adaptable nomenclature.

In response, this article proposes "Flexi Transit" as a unifying term that more accurately reflects the adaptability, diversity, and cultural significance of these transportation modes. Un-like previous terms, "Flexi Transit" does not impose stigmatizing labels or imply a transitional or secondary status. Instead, it acknowledges these systems as integral and permanent components of urban transportation networks. The term "Flexi Transit" captures the flexible operational structure of these modes, which respond dynamically to passenger needs and market demand, often with varied vehicle types and on-demand scheduling. This adaptability is particularly vital in regions where infrastructure constraints and economic realities necessitate innovative mobility solutions.

"Flexi Transit" also bridges the gap between global comprehension and local authenticity. By providing a term that is both inclusive and specific, it facilitates consistent usage across academic, policy, and practical domains. At the same time, it respects the cultural identity embedded in indigenous names, ensuring that the unique characteristics of local systems are not erased. For example, terms like "Okada" or "Boda Boda" can coexist with "Flexi Transit" in

research and policymaking by serving as localized identifiers under the broader unifying term. This dual approach allows for clarity and inclusivity in global discussions while maintaining the richness of local expressions.

Adopting "Flexi Transit" has practical implications for key stakeholders. Researchers can use it to standardize terminology in comparative studies, enhancing the clarity and relevance of their work. Policymakers can incorporate it into regulations and frameworks to ensure consistency and inclusivity in governance. Practitioners and service providers can leverage the term to align branding and communication strategies with both local and international audiences. As the transportation landscape continues to evolve, "Flexi Transit" provides a for-ward-thinking framework that respects the past, addresses present challenges, and prepares for future advancements in mobility systems.

3. Practitioners

Transportation professionals, including urban planners, engineers, policymakers, and transit agency staff, face the challenge of addressing diverse naming nomenclatures within their fields. Those involved in branding and marketing transportation services or products can adopt these recommendations to craft localization strategies that resonate with local audiences, while consultants in transportation planning, market research, and community engagement can integrate these insights into their projects. By employing indigenous nomenclature in reports, feasibility studies, or marketing strategies, practitioners can foster cultural pride, up-hold authenticity, and align branding with local identities. In multicounty or globalized contexts, however, adopting a unifying terminology ensures clarity and inclusivity in cross-cultural communication.

The use of Westernized terms such as "motorcycle taxis" risks eroding the cultural richness of African transportation modes, catering to Western audiences while potentially neglecting local realities. Practitioners must critically evaluate whether such terminology aligns with their brand values and corporate philosophy. Embracing indigenous names safeguards cultural heritage and strengthens community bonds, while localized marketing materials and signage ensure brand consistency across regions. Collaboration with local leaders and organizations, combined with sensitivity training for staff, helps practitioners develop culturally sensitive and community-driven branding strategies. This approach enables meaningful engagement with communities while maintaining a cohesive, recognizable brand identity.

4. Policy makers

Individuals in the policy sphere, such as government officials, advocacy groups, and non-profits, can play a vital role in preserving local identity through transportation terminology. By integrating indigenous names into official documents and policies, policymakers can highlight their cultural significance and heritage value. Awareness campaigns and funding incentives for research projects prioritizing local terminology further reinforce its importance in transportation discourse. Policymakers also contribute to inclusivity by advocating for culturally sensitive language that resonates with local communities. This effort aligns with broader decolonization movements, emphasizing the preservation of African cultural heritage in transportation planning and decision-making processes.

To balance cultural preservation with practical considerations, policymakers can work towards standardizing transportation nomenclature where appropriate. For instance, adopting terms like "Flexi Transit" can establish a unified framework for regulations, ensuring safety and accessibility while respecting local distinctions. Policymakers must carefully evaluate terminology in traffic laws and official documents to ensure it reflects local realities and supports effective governance. This process involves stakeholder engagement, research, and expert consultation to craft contextually relevant policies. Additionally, fostering global understanding of local terms through translations and context-driven explanations enables multinational organizations and researchers to align with indigenous nomenclature, promoting cross-cultural collaboration and inclusive knowledge sharing.

5. Conclusion

In a world valuing cultural diversity, preserving African identity through indigenous transportation nomenclature is vital. This article highlights the importance of celebrating African languages and cultures by resisting "westernized" terminology, which may erode local identity and heritage. Researchers and practitioners are urged to recognize the cultural and social implications of these choices, as indigenous transportation names not only reflect local identity but also strengthen communal bonds. Simultaneously, adopting standardized terms such as "Flexi Transit" (as illustrated in Figure 1) provides a framework for addressing linguistic precision while respecting cultural authenticity. The figure showcases diverse transportation names across Africa, emphasizing the complexities of unifying terminology. Despite criticisms of generalization, "Flexi Transit" emerges as a flexible, technology-driven solution catering to community needs, fostering clarity for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers alike.

While the commentary centers on Africa, its insights are not universally applicable, particularly in non-English-speaking contexts or regions outside the continent. The article aims to stimulate theoretical discourse rather than provide an exhaustive nomenclature list, acknowledging the omissions and limitations inherent in its scope. Future research opportunities include validating and refining "Flexi Transit," exploring transportation terminology in diverse linguistic and cultural settings, and investigating similar issues globally. Expanding on the cultural and linguistic complexities of these terms, particularly in non-English-speaking regions, could enrich understanding and foster a broader, comparative perspective. By focusing on these nuances, future studies can contribute significantly to preserving cultural heritage while aligning with global transport trends.
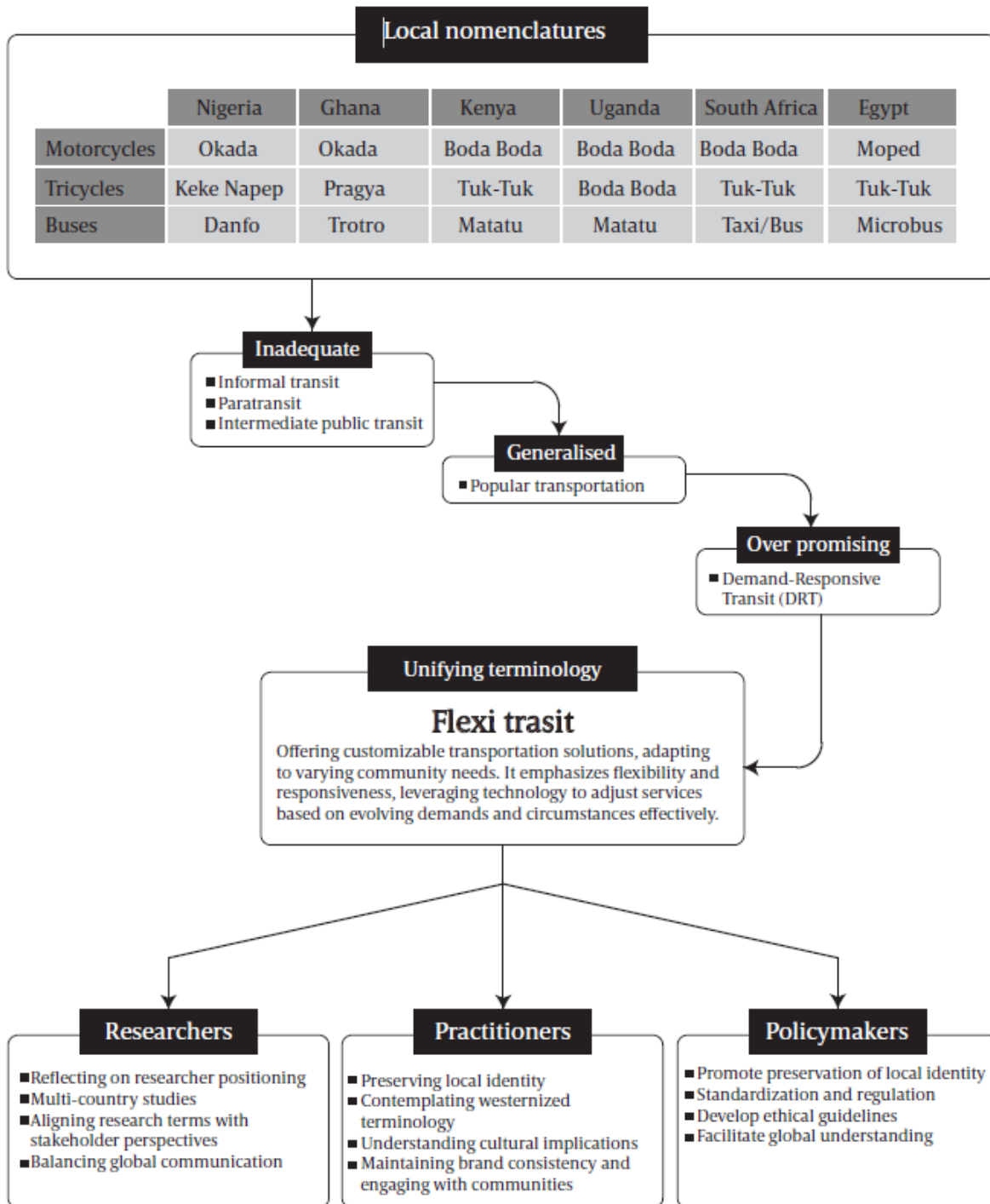
Figure 1. Navigating the landscape of transportation nomenclature and implications of Flexi Transit adoption for stakeholders. Source: Author

Use of generative AI

The author declares that while preparing this work, the author(s) used Grammarly and ChatGPT to enhance the manuscript's readability. These AI-assisted technologies improved grammar, style, and coherence. After using these tools, the author(s) carefully reviewed and edited the content as necessary, ensuring accuracy and clarity. The author(s) take full responsibility for the publication's content.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicting interests.

6. References

Alimo, P. et al., 2022. Investigating the increasing demand and formal regulation of motorcycle taxis in Ghana. Journal of Transport Geography, Volume 103, p. 103398. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2022.103398

Boateng, F., 2020. "Indiscipline" in context: a political-economic grounding for dangerous driving behaviors among Tro-Tro drivers in Ghana. Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, 7(1), pp. 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-0502-8

Dumedah, G. & Eshun, G., 2020. The case of Paratransit-'Trotro'service data as a credible location addressing of road networks in Ghana. Journal of Transport Geography, Volume 84, p. 102688. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2020.102688

GNPT, 2024a. What is the Global Network for Popular Transportation? [Online] Available at: https://www.populartransport.net/

GNPT, 2024b. What's in a name? [Online] Available at: https://www.popu-lartransport.net/about-words

GNPT, 2024c. The words and terms we use matter. [Online] Available at: https://www.popu-lartransport.net/popular-transportation

Gorev, A., Popova, O. & Solodkij, A., 2020. Demand-responsive transit systems in areas with low transport demand of "smart city" Transportation Research Procedia, Volume 50, pp. 160-166. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trpro.2020.10.020

Guillen, M., Ishida, H. & Okamoto, N., 2013. Is the use of informal public transport modes in developing countries habitual? An empirical study in Davao City, Philippines. Transport Policy, Volume 26, pp. 31-42. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tranpol.2012.03.008

Itani, A., Klumpenhouwer, W., Shalaby, A. & Hemily, B., 2024. Guiding principles for integrating on-demand transit into conventional transit networks: A review of literature and practice. Transport Policy, p. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tranpol.2024.01.007

Leland, K., 2017. Want to Be as Famous as Google and Uber? Turn Your Brand From a Noun Into a Verb. [Online] Available at: https://www.inc.com/karen-tiber-leland/want-to-be-as-famous-as-google-and-uber-turn-your-brand-from-a-noun-into-a-verb.html

Maliro, K., 2023. 30 years on: Boda-Boda taxis, East Africa's transport lifeline. [Online] Available at: https://www.trtafrika.com/africa/30-years-on-boda-boda-taxis-east-africas-transport-lifeline-14385534

Martin, E., Courtright, T., Nkurunziza, A. & Lah, O., 2023. Motorcycle taxis in transition? Review of digitalization and electrification trends in selected East African capital cities. Case Studies on Transport Policy, p. 101057. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cstp.2023.101057

EPFL

Mateo-Babiano, I. et al., 2020. Formalising the jeepney industry in the Philippines–A confirmatory thematic analysis of key transitionary issues. Research in Transportation Economics, 83(100839). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.retrec.2020.100839

Mogaji, E., 2021. Brand Architecture. In: Brand Management. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 225–239. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66119-9_11

Mogaji, E. & Nguyen, N., 2023. Exploring interactions between commuters with disabilities and transport service providers. Journal of Services Marketing, 37(6), pp. 762-787. https://doi.org/10.1108/JSM-04-2022-0145

Nwaedozie, U., Ugboma, O. & Hassan, A., 2023. Danfo in Lagos, Nigeria: unregulated, unsafe, and unreliable, yet meeting the growing transport needs. SSRN, Issue https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4450539.

EPFL