



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



Even Keke Talks: A stylistic and thematic analysis of Keke inscriptions as mobile Urban art

Akinsoji Francis Oni *, Kolawole K. Olojo-Kosoko and Omotunde Matthew Jeje

Department of Art and Industrial Design, School of Environmental Design and Technology. University of Science and Technology, Ikorodu Campus.

World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2022, 14(03), 895-903

Publication history: Received on 23 May 2022; revised on 24 June 2022; accepted on 29 June 2022

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2022.14.3.0643>

Abstract

Across societies, visual artists and non-visual artists have used their works of art to express their beliefs towards issues bothering on their socio-cultural lives, most often individual lifestyles. Some of these are displayed through diverse visual forms. One of the surfaces where artistic inscriptions are in Nigeria today is on the bodies and windscreens of commercial tricycles popularly known as Keke. Much has been discussed about the inscriptions on the bodies and windscreens of commercial tricycles in Nigeria. A good number of the discussions bother more on the sociolinguistic interpretation of the inscriptions, but with little about the themes and artistic styles employed in the production of inscriptions. However, the data of inscription will be collected using photography and analyzed its thematic and stylization.

Keywords: Graphical inscriptions; Commercial tricycles; Themes; Artistic styles; Keke; Keke Marwa

1. Introduction

The motorized tricycle, popularly known in Nigeria as Keke Marwa, is a recent form of commercial transportation that has become widespread across many cities and towns in Nigeria. It was introduced to Lagos in 1999 during the administration of the former military governor of the state, Mohammed Buba Marwa as part of his broader urban transportation reform to address the severe mobility crisis facing the state. At that time, Lagos was experiencing rapid population growth, heavy traffic congestion, and a shortage of affordable public transportation. As a result, Danfo (Lagos yellow buses) and Molue (large buses) were not sufficient to meet the transportation needs of the growing population. In addition, these vehicles were often unable to access inner streets and densely populated neighborhoods. Even motorcycles (Okada), which were expected to reduce transportation pressure, were frequently involved in accidents and became a major safety concern.

In response to these challenges, the Lagos State Government imported tricycles and licensed operators to run them commercially as a supplement to existing the transportation. These vehicles were considered safer than motorcycles and more accessible for navigating narrow streets. They became popular because they were cheaper than taxis, safer than motorcycles, and small enough to move through narrow or poorly planned roads. Because the initiative was introduced during Governor Marwa's administration, residents named the tricycles after him—"Keke Marwa". Within a short period, it became major means of transportation and spread very fast across Nigeria.

Over time, people began to use its body for art, advertisements, and other forms of writing for public consumption. However, vehicle art is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria. What distinguishes the keke from other forms of public transport is the scale at which its visual expressions have become popular, mass-produced, and commercialized since

* Corresponding author: Akinsoji Francis Oni

its introduction in the early 2000s. As far back as the 1950s, Nigerians creatively wrote or painted inscriptions on commercial transportation, using them as a means of public engagement (see Image 1 a&b). In recent years, however, Keke has emerged as one of the most visibly decorated forms of commercial transportation in Lagos.



Figure 1 (A and B). Sample of olden days lorries for commercial transportation in Nigeria with signwriting

One of the reasons for Keke art popularity is their ability to carry messages faster and reach wider audiences than many other commercial vehicles. They carry different inscriptions that reflect political issues, religious beliefs, advertisements, humor, and other personal or social matters related to either the rider or to the wider society. These inscriptions are often strategically placed or creatively designed to attract passengers, and other road users. In this way, Keke function not only as transportation but also as a mobile media platform and an active site of communication.

For clarity, this paper focuses on Keke art, particularly the theme, artistic styles and techniques of executions. It argues that many of these inscriptions are an important part of urban popular visual culture because they engage with social commentary, religious promotion, political concerns, and commercial advertising. It also suggests that some of the messages or inscription on Keke represent the riders themselves or were influenced by the society.

The paper further contends that these inscriptions operate as vernacular voices of the masses, especially in the politics. They reflect most of the socio or political concern and at the same time serve as platform the local artist to express their creativities and earn money. In addition, this study argues that Keke conveys messages faster and more widely than many other forms of advertisement.

2. Mobile Canvas: Keke Inscriptions and Vernacular Commercial Art

Keke inscriptions can be defined as a public mobile art created to beautify, communicate or express opinion of the rider to the public. These types of arts can be used to communicate social, religion or political issues directly to the larger audience and at the same time transform urban roads into active spaces of communication. Keke art, as a form of public art, corresponds with the description of "popular arts" discussed by Karin Barber (1987). Barber defines popular art as a form of art that occupies a "third space": modern, urban, commercial, and widely accessible art. In this sense, keke art functions as urban spaces for circulating or distributing information into densely populated areas within the city. According to Barber's definition, such arts can be classified as arenas where social tensions are negotiated. Artists use these arts to make statements about issues bordering the society, such as politics, religion, social and other related issues. In broader context, keke art functions beyond mere decoration; it is more communicative than aesthetically appealing.

Keke arts are made by local artists who work according to the instructions of commissioners, while others are digitally produced using computers and printing machines. The digital versions are usually branded posters of politicians, religious crusades, national flags, or product advertisements. Some of these stickers are paid advertisements pasted on the vehicles as a form of promotion (see figure 2b).



Figure 2 (A and B): Example of branded sticker and a paid product advert. Source: Oni Akin Soji, 2022

The handmade versions are typically created by local artists using enamel or glossy paint, and occasionally acrylic paint. They are creatively inscribed to enhance the overall beauty of the keke. Some feature illustrations, cartoons, or caricatures of celebrities or prominent figures, humorous messages, and similar imagery. Others are beautifully written in Yoruba or other languages with captions related to society or individual experiences. These writings are bold, attractive, and creatively written—often humorously—to capture the attention of viewers (see fig. 3 b & c). Some designs also include floral patterns, animals, and other basic decorative motifs.



Figure 3 (A, B and C). Handmade designs on Keke. Photo source: Faith Kesiena, 2022

Some of these designs are drawn or pasted on the windscreen and around the headlamps to enhance the vehicle's visual appeal. In some cases, stickers—such as emojis or various shapes—are creatively arranged on the windscreen as a border. Others combine text and images arranged sequentially to maximize visual impact. Bold colors, particularly red, black, and yellow, dominate the palette, providing strong contrast and sharpness (see fig. 2 b & c)). This chromatic intensity ensures that the messages attract the attention of both pedestrians and motorists. Some designs also reflect an intuitive understanding of artistic principles such as balance, rhythm, and emphasis. Texts are sometimes highlighted with shadows or other effects to enhance their prominence and visual brilliance (see the examples above in Fig. 3 b & c).

The digital ones are brightly printed, visually attractive, and creatively arranged to produce harmony. Sometimes they are arranged around the windshields and side panels as border designs, while other are pasted at the back across the vehicle (refer to fig 2 a). Popular stickers include national flags, religious posters, election campaign posters, and images of social figures such as musicians, footballers, and legendary personalities. For example, during election periods, politicians often pay Keke riders to display their campaign posters as part of their electoral campaigns (see fig. 5b).

In terms of quality and execution, some of these works demonstrate a clear understanding of basic artistic principles, while others appear poorly made. In some cases, colors are carefully blended and harmoniously arranged, while in other cases the designs appear poorly organized with excessive color combinations. These creative differences often reflect the competence and experience of the artists. Although many of these artists remain unknown, their work reveals the type of artistic training or practical experience they have received. Regardless of their level of technical skill, their work represents a creative practice that combines visual and verbal elements for communication.

The language used in these inscriptions also reflects the society and the linguistic identity of the vehicle owners. The most used languages on Keke are Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo, which are among the dominant languages in Nigeria. The choice of language often signals the cultural identity or regional affiliation of the Keke owner. Some inscriptions are philosophical and reflect the sociocultural complexity of the country. For example, the phrase “No fear, no competition” (see Fig. 4) expresses resilience in the face of urban uncertainty. In the highly competitive transport sector, where drivers struggle daily to secure passengers and income, such a statement becomes a declaration of confidence and determination. It expresses psychological strength in an environment shaped by economic pressure.



Figure 4 Example of handmade creative writings on Keke. Photo source: Oni Akin Soji

3. Analysis of Themes and Styles

The Keke selected for this analysis were taken from two locations in Lagos, Ikorodu and Ayobo, because of their dense population. These areas have major garages and large numbers of commuters, making them suitable locations for observing Keke inscriptions. The analysis is based on photographs that contain written texts, paintings, illustrations, and posters displayed on the vehicles.

The images are grouped according to identifiable themes, such as socio-cultural, religious, political, entertainment, and personal expressions. A total of ten images were selected for the study, and two examples were analyzed within each thematic category. Each image was examined through contextual analysis and interpreted according to its thematic and stylistic characteristics. In addition to thematic interpretation, the study also examines the materials, techniques, and execution used in the designs.

Field observations and personal interviews were conducted to obtain firsthand information about the production and meanings of the inscriptions. The information gathered revealed that many of the artists are self-taught or workshop-trained rather than formally trained artists. In many cases, they are roadside sign writers who develop their skills through practical experience.

4. Political Theme

The images selected for this category contain political posters of different political parties, such as the All Progressives Congress, the People's Democratic Party, and the Labour Party. Most of these posters are printed with large-format machines on adhesive stickers, while others appear as handbills pasted on the Keke for election campaigns. For example (see Fig 5 a), the sticker contains a campaign poster of a political aspirant from the All Progressives Congress, with his photograph prominently displayed. The portrait occupies the central visual space and functions as the dominant element of the composition. The candidate's image is made large, visible, and attractive in order to capture the attention of viewers. As the Keke moves through the streets, it exposes the candidate's image to wider audiences and functions like a mobile billboard within the urban environment. In this case, the visual hierarchy is structured around the candidate's photograph, while other graphic elements remain secondary. In the image below (Fig. 5b), the arrangement of the posters appears less organized. The stickers are irregularly pasted and create a clumsy and uneven composition. Several posters overlap one another, disrupting color harmony and producing a sense of visual congestion. The posters on this Keke are pasted without careful alignment, resulting in a fragmented visual structure. Because of this irregular arrangement, the composition lacks balance and coherence. However, the purpose of these posters is not primarily aesthetic. Instead, their main goal is to communicate political messages and promote the visibility of the candidate. These examples illustrate how commercial Keke function as important sites of social interaction and communication. The vehicles operate as mobile visual platforms where political messages circulate through everyday urban movement. In this way, Keke become powerful mediums through which political information travels rapidly across streets, markets, and residential areas within the urban environment.



Figure 5 (A and B) Political stickers. Photo Source: Faith Kesiena, 2022

4.1. Religious Theme

The selected photographs for this theme focus on religious flyers and icons representing both Christian and Muslim traditions. Some of the inscriptions include biblical quotations, Islamic phrases, devotional statements, portraits of pastors or imams, and symbols such as crosses or Qur'anic calligraphy. These inscriptions are either written or posted on Keke to project religious affiliation and spiritual conviction, or to promote evangelism. Such inscriptions are typically placed in highly visible areas such as the rear panels, side panels, or canopy surfaces, where they can easily be seen by passengers and pedestrians.

Color plays a significant role in this type of inscription. For example, dark blue and red are frequently used, sometimes referencing denominational associations or spiritual symbolism. In the poster example (see Fig. 6 a & b), the dominance of red and yellow, combined with a purple background and white outlines, creates strong visual contrast which is often associated with religious poster design. The choice of this color may relate to the idea of creating a heavenly or spiritual effect, which differs from sky blue, which often symbolizes calmness or the sky. In this design, the artist attempts to create an eye-catching poster by combining yellow letters with a purple background. In terms of color composition, yellow appears complementary to purple, suggesting that the designer has some knowledge of the color spectrum. The chromatic relationship between yellow, purple, and white creates a harmonious and visually appealing design.

Technically, the visual organization of these decorations reveals deliberate strategies of placement and emphasis. The caption words are written in bold and sharp yellow and are placed in highly visible areas so that they can easily attract viewers' attention. Bold, high-contrast lettering enhances legibility when the vehicle is in motion and at the same time establishes visual hierarchy within the design. Although the technical execution varies from one design to another, the

symbolic and communicative functions remain consistent. Even when the composition appears asymmetrical or visually dense, the inscriptions effectively convey message and communicate divine importance of the flier. In this sense, Keke inscriptions transform everyday vehicles into mobile sites of religious expression. As the keke moves through streets, markets, and residential areas, the religious messages circulate widely and reach diverse audiences. The vehicles therefore function not only as means of transportation but also as mobile platforms for disseminating religious beliefs and reinforcing spiritual presence within the urban environment.



Figure 6 (A and B). Gospel Poster, source: Faith Kesiena, March. 2022

5. Philosophical or Social Issues Theme

A significant number of inscriptions on Keke are philosophical or address social and cultural issues. They express personal, emotional, economic, and social concerns. Unlike political or religious inscriptions, these types of designs often blend humor with social and sociocultural commentary. Many of these inscriptions are written in Yoruba, Pidgin, Igbo, or Hausa, and they sometimes reflect the linguistic identity of the rider as well as the cultural environment in which the Keke operates.

For example, (Fig. 7 a) show different texts written on various parts of the Keke, such as “Alhaji Amusori Oga” and “Oba Lagata.” These phrases reflect praise language and urban slang. “Oga” (boss) and “Oba” (king) function rhetorically as honorific titles, while “Lagata” is a colloquial expression associated with dominance or authority within informal street hierarchies. The inscription may therefore be interpreted as a performative gesture of loyalty or respect toward a superior—possibly the owner of the vehicle or a patron within the transport network. Rather than viewing this simply as flattery, it can be understood as a visual expression of patron–client relationships embedded within the informal transport economy. Another inscription in the middle panel reads “Oluwa Is Involved” (“God is involved”), which introduces a spiritual dimension. This phrase is common in Nigerian popular discourse and signals reliance on divine intervention. In the context of hire-purchase systems—through which many operators acquire their vehicles—the statement expresses hope for economic success and divine assistance in meeting financial obligations. In this way, economic anxiety and spiritual faith appear together within the same visual space.

Another phrase eyes catching is “Gbe body e!!” (“Move your body!” or “Act quickly!”), which communicate urgency and industriousness. As a slogan, it reinforces an ethic of constant movement and responsiveness to passengers. When considered alongside the other inscriptions, the phrase constructs an identity of determination and alertness within a competitive urban transport environment. These types of messages operate on both explicit and implicit levels. Some are immediately understandable, while others require cultural familiarity with slang, praise poetry, and Yoruba rhetorical traditions. These types of inscriptions therefore function as vernacular systems of communication that convey layered of meanings to diverse audiences.

From a visual perspective, these philosophical inscriptions are often executed with careful attention with beautiful lettering and design. Bold letterforms, shadow effects, and high-contrast color combinations enhance readability when the vehicle is in motion. The placement of the texts across upper and middle panels creates compositional hierarchy and guides the viewer’s eye across the surface of the vehicle. Because the Keke is mobile, viewers encounter these

messages briefly but repeatedly, creating a rhythm of recognition across the urban landscape. Although many of these artists are informally trained through apprenticeship systems, yet their work demonstrates technical confidence and graphic awareness. In general, these works should therefore not be dismissed as amateur improvisations but understood as part of a vibrant vernacular visual culture within the informal artistic economy of urban Nigeria.



Figure 7 (A, B and C) Sample of Entertainment designs; Photo Source: Kabbeer Afuwape. 2022

6. Entertainment and Popular Culture Theme

This type of image includes popular musicians, footballers, football club logos, and other celebrities who many people admire or treat as idols. The two Keke examined here demonstrate how entertainment-oriented imagery and text transform everyday vehicles into powerful aesthetic and communicative objects. For example, the first Keke (see Fig 8 a) is a carefully executed painted portrait of a young male celebrity positioned at the back of the leather cover. The composition is visually striking, which employed a mixed color palette of black and yellow, appears to function as a background effect that enhances the prominence of the figure. The contrast between these colors creates depth and visual intensity, suggesting an intentional effort by the artist to draw attention. The figure is dressed in a formal black suit, white shirt, and a red tie, signifying sophistication, status, and modern masculinity. His dreadlocked hairstyle for example introduces an element of contemporary youth culture, blending formal elegance with popular stylistic identity. The textual elements are strategically integrated into the composition. At the top of the Keke, the bold inscription "Bories prominently displayed, asserting a strong visual and symbolic presence. Adjacent to the portrait, a smaller inscription also reads "Evil Elon Father," which introduces a more ambiguous and provocative tone and at the beneath the body of the Keke, the name "Chizaramekpere" is inscribed in black against a yellow background, reinforcing identity and possibly indicating ownership or the rider affiliation.

On both sides of the Keke, a handprinted logo "BL" enclosed within a circle, accompanied by the phrase "Blood Group," contributes to the overall branding of the vehicle. The repetition of "BL" across different areas of the Keke creates visual coherence and suggests a deliberate attempt at identity construction.

The second Keke (see Fig 8.b) adopts a different stylistic approach, relying on a large printed sticker rather than hand-painted imagery. The sticker, placed at the back, nearly covers the entire surface of the vehicle, demonstrating the dominance of mass-produced visual culture in contemporary urban art practices. The sticker promotes an entertainment event titled "Freeda's Party Anniversary." The designer employs bold yellow lettering for "Freeda's Party," making it highly visible and attention-grabbing, while the word "Anniversary" is rendered in a calligraphic style, adding a decorative and celebratory tone. The background features a dark palette of black blended with blue and white, creating a vibrant and energetic visual atmosphere associated with nightlife and entertainment. The inclusion of multiple images of the performing artist reinforces celebrity presence at the party. The depiction of a half-naked woman introduces sensual imagery, which aligns with popular entertainment aesthetics and is used to attract public attention.

Thematically, both Keke inscriptions engage strongly with entertainment culture and popular identity. The first Keke suggests a form of self-expression that aligns the owner with wealth, power, or influence. The inscriptions also indicate a desire to construct a recognizable identity within the public space. The second Keke, by contrast, emphasizes event promotion and mass entertainment culture. The sticker functions as a mobile advertisement, transforming the Keke into a moving billboard that circulates information about social events. The use of bold typography, vibrant colors, and sensual imagery reflects contemporary strategies of attracting attention within competitive urban environments. Both

examples highlight how Keke inscriptions operate as accessible and informal channels of communication, conveying messages that range from personal identity to commercial promotion.



Figure 8 (A and B) Entertainment sticker' phot source: Oni Akinsoji, 2022

7. Conclusion

This study has examined Keke inscriptions as a form of urban public art and a medium of communication within contemporary Nigeria. Although the Keke is primarily used for transportation, its surfaces have become important spaces for visual expression. Through texts, paintings, stickers, and posters, Keke riders and artists transform the vehicle into a mobile platform that carries social, political, religious, and personal messages across the urban environment.

The analysis shows that these inscriptions serve multiple purposes. Political posters promote candidates and circulate campaign messages within everyday urban spaces. Religious inscriptions express spiritual beliefs and function as tools of evangelism, projecting faith into the public sphere. Philosophical and socio-cultural inscriptions reveal personal experiences, humor, economic struggles, and cultural values. In each case, the inscriptions communicate messages that reflect the realities of urban life and the identities of the riders who operate the vehicles.

From a visual perspective, the inscriptions demonstrate a range of artistic approaches, including hand-painted lettering, digital stickers, posters, and decorative motifs. Although many of the artists are informally trained, their work reveals a practical understanding of color contrast, visual hierarchy, and compositional arrangement. These designs are intentionally created to attract attention and ensure that the messages remain visible even when the vehicle is in motion.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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