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CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY AND BELIEF SYSTEMS THROUGH INSCRIPTIONS ON COMMERCIAL VEHICLES IN YORUBALAND: SOCIO-HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study explores the construction of identity and belief systems through inscriptions found on commercial vehicles in Yorubaland, South-western Nigeria. Many factors have influenced the belief systems and cultural identity of the Yoruba people, and these belief systems cannot be dichotomised from what constitutes their perception and identity. Commercial vehicles, such as taxis, buses, and trucks, often display printed sayings, proverbs, religious verses, and popular maxims that offer insights into the worldview and lived experiences of their owners and drivers. The work employed a qualitative methodology using primary and secondary sources, including interviews, newspapers, vehicle inscriptions, books, journals, and internet materials. These inscriptions are mobile texts that serve as expressive tools for self-identification, self-protection, moral instruction, and spiritual invocation. This has had a positive impact on the owner businesses, their patronage, and their popularity. This paper reconstructs the past, contributing to the aspect of transport and inscription histories. The paper underscores the role of vehicle owners, inscriptions and belief systems as historical material artefacts, highlighting the power of culture and identity in shaping collective memory, public perception, and the identity of the Yoruba people.

Keywords: Identity, belief systems, inscriptions, commercial vehicles, Yorubaland

1. Introduction

In Yorubaland, public road transportation is a regular part of daily commercial activities, and in Nigeria at large. Individuals and entrepreneurs usually made their fortune through public transport business. Many of these vehicle owners have inscriptions on their vehicles that affirm their identities and beliefs. The Yoruba ethnic group,

like other African societies, projects its identity and belief systems through multiple ways, including inscriptions on commercial vehicles. Inscriptions on commercial vehicles have been adjudged powerful ways of communicating identity and belief systems in Yoruba society. These inscriptions are mobile texts accessible to members of the community and societies, since the vehicles usually move from one location to

another. This study explores the construction of identity and belief systems through inscriptions found on commercial vehicles in Yorubaland, South-western Nigeria.

Many factors have influenced the belief systems and cultural identity of the Yoruba people, and these belief systems cannot be detached from what constitutes their perception and identity. Commercial vehicles, such as taxis, buses, and trucks, often display printed sayings, proverbs, religious verses, and popular maxims that offer insights into the worldview and lived experiences of their owners and drivers. These inscriptions are not mere aesthetics or decorations but serve as expressive tools for self-identification, self-protection, moral instruction, and spiritual invocation. This has had a positive impact on the owners businesses, patronage and popularity. Such inscriptions include, *Aye kooto* (people hate truth), Psalm 23, *Iya ni Wura* (mothers are priceless), *Aaro lawa* (we are in the dawn of life).

Painting in the form of inscription is not unique to Yorubaland; it is also a familiar phenomenon in many societies around the world. Thompson records that painted texts and figures on vehicles are found in many countries. For instance, in Nigeria, Haiti, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Ghana, and Sierra Leone. Vehicle inscriptions are more common in Africa than elsewhere in the world, and their abundance began after colonialism (Thompson, 1996, 13). Inscription is a source of history, and Thompson highlights its universality, noting that many countries around the world engaged in inscribing

on vehicles and other materials. Inscriptions have a long history in various climes of the world. The history of inscription began with the development of early writing systems in Mesopotamia and Egypt around 4000 BCE, using materials like cuneiform on sun-dried brick and hieroglyphs. The study of inscriptions is known as epigraphy, and an inscription is anything written or engraved on stone, wood, metal, ivory plaques, bronze statues, bricks, clay, shells, pottery, etc. Epigraphy includes deciphering the text of inscriptions and analysing the information they contain (Khan and Vaidya, 2019, 194). This paper analyses and reconstructs the past, contributing to the aspect of transport and inscription histories, and argues that inscription is an independent source of history. The paper underscores the role of vehicle owners and their inscriptions and belief systems as historical material artefacts, highlighting the power of culture and identity in shaping collective memory, public perception, and the identity of the Yoruba people. This is an indigenous epistemic system through the knowledge that is transmitted from inscriptions on commercial vehicles which serves as a belief system among the Yoruba people. It is a branch of indigenous knowledge produced and validated by its use and continuity. The inscriptions are not mere decoration but serve as expressive tools for self-identification, self-protection, moral instruction, and spiritual invocation.

2. Literature

For this study, some relevant literature is consulted. Inscriptions have been a common phenomenon in almost all societies of the world. Empirical literature suggests that vehicle slogans reflect aspects of the social structure in which they are produced. For instance, Burke (1996) argues that ubiquitous mottoes painted on Lorries in Brazil represent one of many ways to explore and study culture. Lawuyi (1988) documents the expressions of social stratification among the Yoruba in Southwestern Nigeria. Similarly, Guseh (2008) elaborates on Liberian philosophy, culture, and history through vehicle slogans. El-Nashar (2016) observes that within the Egyptian socio-cultural milieu, vehicle slogans reflect expressions of social values, religious ideologies, and political affiliations, which are normally present in the form of 'Invocations graffiti'. Similarly, Baker's (2011) survey study on bumper stickers is an etymological documentary on the history, identification and preservation of the emblems. He traces the evolution of bumper stickers in America to the late 1940s, delineating some of their characteristics and how they can be preserved.

Goldwasser (2010) argues that the Alphabet originated from Hieroglyphs, tracing its origins to Egyptian hieroglyphics. Adeagbo et al. (2022) examine a semiotic analysis of vehicle inscriptions on selected shuttle buses in Oyo Town, Southwestern Nigeria. Semiotics and symbolic interactionism provide a framework for understanding how these inscriptions act as shared symbols that communicate drivers' identities and cultural values. Their study illuminates the

expression of beliefs, mood, socio-semiotic status, and roles through inscriptions on shuttle buses. Kenin et al., (2024) reveal a content analysis of slogans on commercial vehicles in Accra, Ghana. Their perspective provides material artefacts and insight into beliefs and values about the socio-cultural, spiritual, and political experiences of life in the contemporary Ghanaian context. This emphasises the importance of religiosity as a cultural value in the daily life of the people of Ghana.

Other scholars have examined vehicle inscriptions as identity construction, social communication, religious messaging, and conveyors of humour and witticism (Bature & Sani, 2019; Eshun, 2018; Ikotun et al., 2022; Faniran et al., 2021).

George Mead focused on how people interact in their daily lives by symbolic interaction and how they create order and meaning (Korgen & White, 2008). Blumer identified three core principles in the symbolic interaction perspective: meaning, language (which provides means [symbols] for debating meaning), and the *thinking* principle.

Many Yoruba vehicle inscriptions are identity statements—religious (Psalm 23, Olorun Adaba, Allah hu Akbar), ethnic pride (Omo Yoruba ni mi), or occupational bravado ("No food for lazy man"), among others. This helps to examine how inscriptions reinforce in-group and out-group boundaries, collective identity, and social solidarity among drivers. It helps to understand inscriptions as tools for identity performance, social positioning, and communal representation. This study benefits from unique theoretical

foundation from African philosophical traditions. Vehicle inscription's express identity, morality, religion, cooperation, destiny and communal living. Thus, inscriptions are a veritable means of communicating cultural values in society. Ubuntu is an African philosophical tradition that emphasises community, interdependence, and shared humanity. Commercial vehicle inscriptions often reflect collective values, social responsibility, and communal experiences rather than purely individual concerns. Through the texts, valuable messages are communicated: *Ajosepo* (togetherness), *Iya ni Wura* (Mother is Gold). This promotes unity and social solidarity. It is common for people indigenous to the African continent to believe that one's basic aim in life should be to exhibit ubuntu (though different linguistic groups will have their own corresponding term), which one can do by prizing communal relationships with other people (Metz, 2024). With this, a sense of shared value, identity and togetherness is encouraged among people.

The Yoruba philosophy of *Ori* (Destiny and personhood) is another theoretical foundation in African philosophical tradition which is directly connected to this study. Many of the vehicle owners, through their inscriptions, invoke destiny, success, divine guidance, luck, and fate. Examples include phrases such as "No Condition is Permanent," "Ori Mi Gbe Mi", "God's Time is the Best." The theory of *Ori* explains how drivers and vehicle owners construct identities around success, fortune, and spiritual protection. According to Yoruba metaphysical thought, an individual's

destiny significantly shapes life experiences and self-understanding. *Ori* is a central concept in the Yoruba-language conception of human personality (Abimbola, 1976). The Yoruba are said to believe that the personality of each individual is predetermined *Ori* (Ekaola, 2006).

However, the extant literature reviewed showed that the aspect of scholarship which this particular paper considered has not been explored. Thus, this paper reconstructs the past, contributing to the aspect of transport and inscription histories.

3. Methodology

Data collected for this research included both primary and secondary sources of historical writing. Primary data gathered through in-depth oral interviews and secondary sources of data were derived from relevant books, journal articles, and internet materials, focusing on identity and belief systems through inscriptions on commercial vehicles in Yorubaland. Six informants who were interviewed demonstrated sound knowledge of the subject matter and were quite aware that the information is for academic purposes before oral interviews were conducted. The inscriptions were randomly collected from different informants through questions and responses, while a recorder was used to record the interviews. The interviews were transcribed and used for this research. This section discusses the focus of this research.

4. Results and discussion

Historical Development and Significance of Inscriptions in Yorubaland

The practice of inscribing messages on surfaces in Yorubaland stretches back centuries, long before the advent of motorised transport that now carries these textual expressions across bustling city streets and rural highways. To properly understand the contemporary phenomenon of vehicle inscriptions amongst the Yoruba people, one must first examine the deep historical roots of written and symbolic communication in this cultural sphere. This historical foundation reveals that the Yoruba have consistently employed inscriptions as vehicles for transmitting philosophical ideas, religious convictions, social commentary, and personal identity across generations (Abimbola, 1976). The transition from traditional media to modern commercial vehicles represents not a radical departure but rather a continuation of established communicative practices adapted to changing technological and social circumstances. The Yoruba civilisation developed sophisticated systems of symbolic communication long before European contact, with inscriptions serving crucial functions in religious, political, and social domains. The Ifá divination system, central to Yoruba cosmology, employed a complex system of marks and symbols that priests inscribed on divination trays and other sacred objects (Bascom, 1969). These inscriptions were not merely decorative but carried profound metaphysical significance, encoding the wisdom of the ancestors and guiding the navigation of life's complexities. Similarly, palace walls in ancient Yoruba

kingdoms bore carved inscriptions and symbolic representations that communicated royal authority, historical narratives, and spiritual protection (Lawal, 1996). The practice of inscribing messages on cloth, particularly in the adire textile tradition, further demonstrates the Yoruba propensity to embed meaning in visual and textual forms (Renne, 2003). Through these various media, the Yoruba established a cultural framework in which inscriptions served as authoritative carriers of truth, wisdom, and identity.

From the fourteenth century, Islamic expansion introduced Arabic script and Quranic inscriptions on walls, talismans, and personal effects, which blended with existing Yoruba symbolic systems (Reichmuth, 1997; Gbadamosi, 1978). Importantly, the reverence accorded to these inscriptions stemmed not only from their religious content but also from the belief in the inherent power of written words to effect change in the physical and spiritual realms. This notion of inscription as a performative act capable of invoking divine protection or blessing would later manifest in vehicle inscriptions, where texts serve simultaneously as declarations of faith and as invocations of safety.

The arrival of Christian missionaries in the mid-nineteenth century and the subsequent introduction of Roman script transformed Yoruba inscriptional practices in fundamental ways (Ayandele, 1966). Missionaries established printing presses and produced Yoruba-language texts using Roman orthography, making literacy accessible to broader

segments of the population. The translation of the Bible into Yoruba, completed in stages throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, proved particularly influential in shaping contemporary inscriptional culture (Ajayi, 2005). Biblical phrases and proverbs became part of everyday Yoruba discourse, their widespread recognition making them ideal candidates for public display. Mission schools taught literacy in both Yoruba and English, creating generations of Yoruba people who could read and write in multiple scripts and languages. This multilingual literacy would become a defining characteristic of modern Yoruba inscriptions, which frequently code-switch between Yoruba and English or combine elements of both languages in creative ways (Bamgbose, 1995).

Colonial administration under British rule further institutionalised practices of public inscription through requirements for shop signage, vehicle registration, and commercial advertising (Falola & Heaton, 2008). The colonial period saw the emergence of what might be termed an official inscriptional culture, in which written texts on buildings, vehicles, and public spaces served bureaucratic and commercial functions. Early motor transport operators in cities like Ibadan, Lagos, and Abeokuta began adorning their vehicles with proverbs, religious phrases, and philosophical statements alongside the required registration details (Ogunbowale, 1973). This practice represented a distinctly Yoruba response to modernity, wherein imported technologies and administrative systems were indigenised through

the application of traditional communicative values.

The period following Nigerian independence in 1960 witnessed an explosion of vehicle inscriptions as commercial transport expanded rapidly to meet the needs of a growing, increasingly mobile population (Peil, 1991). The economic boom of the 1970s, fuelled by oil revenues, enabled more Yoruba people to purchase vehicles and enter the transport business. These vehicle owners treated their buses, lorries, and taxis not merely as commercial assets but as mobile canvases for self-expression and public pedagogy. The inscriptions that adorned these vehicles drew from the full range of Yoruba cultural resources, including traditional proverbs, religious texts from Christianity and Islam, popular music lyrics, and contemporary political slogans (Adeboye, 2016). Scholars began to recognise these inscriptions as a significant form of popular culture and social commentary, deserving serious academic attention.

Discussion

Inscriptions Inspired by Identity and Belief Systems on Commercial Vehicles

Identity is a fundamental aspect of human existence, without which there can be marginalisation, mistrust, and unrest. This, if care is not taken, can lead to the elimination of minority groups. Inscriptions are extremely vital for reconstructing history, as they not only give us insights into the political events of the period but also into its socio-economic conditions and

cultural aspects (Khan and Vaidya, 2019, 195). This present research engages the economic, socio-cultural, and belief systems of the Yoruba people, focusing on inscription on commercial vehicles. An instance of this larger industrial culture is vehicle slogans, which are typically displayed on vehicle windscreens and windows. Ordinarily, the texts for these slogans are derived from old proverbs, modern sayings, Christian prayers, the Bible, newspaper reports, and political events (Kayi, 2016; Powell, 2012). These offer a dynamic way to learn about cultural representations of society (Guseh, 2008). For instance, values could be acquired by studying the prevalence of these popular cultural practices. Empirical findings from diverse studies suggest that vehicle slogans are effective communication tools across socio-cultural contexts. They may further engender socio-cultural imperatives that are salient in determining how a group of people interrelate with others (Kenin et al., 2024: 379). In terms of business, inscriptions describing their job as commercial vehicles often include information about their daily activities. For instance, *Pay before service*, *Drive carefully* and so on. These two sentences indicate the type of job and also their commitment to it. They are also simple sentences, which are expressed in active voice construction (Bature and Sani, 2019: 37). These authors argued further that: the inscriptions also encourage people, especially the youth to engage in farming activity as an alternative to remaining idle and getting employed given the fact that Nigeria is blessed with huge and fertile land

suitable for all kinds of crops, fruits and vegetables both cash and food. Thus, the sentence *go to farm* is expressed in imperative form to call people to farm as a way of being self-reliant (Bature and Sani, 2019: 37).

The use of car inscriptions and stickers creates an experience and, at the same time, serves as a medium for expressing belief identification and sectarian attachment. It's also featured in a religious circle. The investigation of the use of inscriptions, banners, and stickers among the three religious adherents is very important because it showcases the major challenge and competition posed by belief systems that are not verbal but expressed through signs and symbols. The use of signs and symbols on cars is more prevalent among Christian and Muslim adherents than among indigenous religious adherents (Adebolu, Kola, and Taiwo, n. d., p. 50).

Language, society and culture are inextricably intertwined. They are related in such a way that one cannot be discussed in isolation from the other. Society serves as a place where people live to share their beliefs, opinions, and lives. Culture is mainly about social identity, communication and an important part of identity. However, identity cannot exist in a vacuum because people identify and communicate with each other for definite purposes, and it would personally seem that the main purpose is the economic subsistence of society. This is because, without an economy to sustain it, it would appear that language, society and culture could have no foundation upon which to exist. Language, culture and society are related

in that language operates in society, and language is an expression of culture (Adenugba, 2016: 1). Abiola Odejide recalled first noticing lorry inscriptions such as “Jeje laye gba,” “Telegan lo soro,” and “Aaro lawa” while travelling in her youth. She later observed passengers discussing these inscriptions as philosophies of life.¹

Another eminent retired professor who also demonstrated a sound grasp of the subject matter is Professor Funmilayo Okanlawon, who noted that: each inscription is born out of life experiences and challenges. The inscriptions guide their behaviour and how they interact with people and amount of trust they should put in persons around them, e.g., Banuso. The inscriptions guide the way they drive, e.g., E rora, Ile nyo; Aye gba Jeje; Epo ni Mo Ru. The inscriptions strengthens their beliefs that they can still make it in life irrespective of their situation and challenges, e.g., Eda O laropin. The inscriptions are a way of sending messages to those who mock them that the downfall of a man is not the end of life, e.g., Egan mi ko ye o; Aye nreti Eleya, nibo le fi t’Oluwa si. It also shows appreciation for what God has done for them, thereby asking for more blessings, e.g., Ma feyi sopin Oluwa. Most of these inscriptions can be found in core Yoruba towns and villages, more common in Ijebu, Egba, Ijesha, Ibadan, and the old Oyo Empire.²

He mirrors some of the meanings and contexts in which some of the captions are used. Many of the inscriptions carried personal experiences of the initiators and served as their moral compass for their belief systems. The lived experiences and the

challenges of the people inspire the inscriptions. Many of the vehicle owners envisaged that their downfall is being mocked by people around, so they had inscriptions like, *Egan mi ko ye O* (Don’t mock me), *Aye nreti Eleya , nibo le fi t’Oluwa si* (People want to laugh me to scorn, God will not allow it) or depending on the divinity to add to their blessings as captured in “Ma feyi sopin Oluwa.”

For instance, belief in God was communicated through slogans that depicted one’s belief in God’s existence, trust in Him and His ways, His attributes and power, and His grace, inter alia. Examples of such slogans include: ‘*Vote for God*’, ‘*Enemies are not God*’, ‘*God dey*’, ‘*Trust in the Lord*’, ‘*Continue praying*’ and ‘*Faith*’. With the majority of Ghanaians being religiously inclined, belief in God appears to reflect national identity. Consequently, representations of the Christian faith in commercial vehicles’ slogans are very common. In Ghana, not only do quotations which are based on Biblical references engender faith in God, but they also serve as a persuasive force that directs people to conform to certain value expectations (Dotsey & Kumi, 2019). Praise to God is largely an aspect of worship and is usually expressed through the attributes of God. The nature of praise slogans sometimes discloses the vehicle owner’s religious affiliation. Examples of slogans in relation to praise identified in the current study include: ‘*God is Great*’, ‘*Invisible God*’, ‘*Merciful God*’ and ‘*Alhamdu Lilah*’ (Kenin et al, 2024, 385)

Okanlawon further mentioned some other inscriptions which includes; Abanise ni Oluwa,

Eso laye gba, Ewe nla, Ayanmo ko gboogun,
 Olowo laye Mo, Eniyan soro, Bintin laye, Aye
 loja, Ta nfe a ni, Erora Ile nyo, Ire A Kari, E Maa
 Se dada, Feso Jaye, Aye Mo juba, Mo boluwa
 duro, Bale layo, Feso logba, Elegan tire da,
 Banuso, Aye gbege, Aye koto, Aimasiko, Aye
 nreti Eleya, Egan mi ko ye O, Riro ni ti eniyan, Ma
 feyi sopin, Eja lo nibu, Aropin ntenian, Omo bori
 owo, Ori lonise, Owo Ko niran.³ Indigenous
 musical maestros like I. K. Dairo, Chief
 Commander Ebenezer Obey and King Sunny Ade,
 have also created songs in albums titled around
 these short and witty sayings, signifying that the
 words are laden with meaning within the cultural
 milieu and they are meant to teach people various
 forms of moral lessons and for cultural
 preservation. For instance, Dairo had constructed
 a title, “E Rora Feso J’aiye”, Ebenezer Obey
 “Aimasiko” and “Aye nreti Eleya” by Sunny. The
 lyrics of these songs reveal profound meaning and
 convey messages that positively influence the
 character and attitude of people within society.

It is expedient to examine a few of these sayings that
 intersect with the domain of transport history,
 namely, vehicle inscriptions and music. This is
 indicated in the lyrics of the songs. In the case of I.
 K. Dairo’s “E Rora Feso J’aiye”:

E rora feso jaye, aye o lopin,
 Feso jaye, ire arakunrin,
 Feso jaye, ire arabirin,
 Baye baja ko se e so,
 Dakun dakun rora feso jaye o.

English Translation

Take caution while you enjoy life,
 Men, be careful while you are enjoying life.

Women as well be careful while enjoying life.
 If life ends, it cannot be brought back.
 Please, take life easy.⁴

Chief Commander Ebenezer Obey composed a song
 titled “Aimasiko”:

Aimasiko lo n damu eda o,
 Oro mi lowo Oluwa lowa,
 Hale hale kole hale momi rara
 Moti lalefihinti mo lo l’Oluwa,
 Oro mi lowo Oluwa lowa.

English Translation

Time of fortune is known to none,
 My case in the hand of the Divinity.
 My detractors cannot intimidate me,
 I have a backbone which is God.
 My case in the hand of the Divinity.⁵

King Sunny Ade also has a composition in line with
 one of the captions above, which is “Aye nreti
 Eleya.”

Aye nre ti Eleya mi
 Won n reti eleya mi o lojojumo,
 Won ti ko ra won ju o lati pegan mi...

English Translation

People want to mock me,
 They expect daily that I am put to shame.
 They have gathered together to deride me...⁶

Vehicle markings that convey warnings and
 cautionary messages are very common on the bodies
 of automobiles that ply Nigerian roads. Such
 writings are used to issue warnings to guide other
 drivers and pedestrians on the use of roads and
 highways. Much of the discourse in this domain is
 identifiable among haulage trucks, lorries, and other
 heavy-duty vehicles that traverse interstate and inter-
 regional routes. Because of the intimidating size of
 this category of vehicles, inscription texts on them
 are mostly used for cautionary purposes, either for
 oncoming vehicles or for those approaching from the

rear. The insignia, which signifies warnings and cautionary messages, is meant to help prevent avoidable crashes on the road by alerting both pedestrians and smaller vehicles. One unique characteristic of the texts signalling caution and warnings is that they are boldly and colourfully inscribed, mostly in red and yellow, on the back of the vehicles that transport them, to warn vehicle operators coming from behind to take note of the messages. They also serve as warnings to impatient pedestrians who may want to take advantage of the long vehicles to dash across to the other side of the road, reminding them always to exercise patience and restraint whenever they cross (Ikotun et al., 2022:34-35). Inscriptions or stickers in the domain are also used to communicate precautionary advice and suggestions to readers, so that they may achieve health and longevity, since it is only the living who celebrate. Vehicle inscriptions that are commonly used in this respect include ‘Slow down’, ‘Stop’, ‘Horn before overtaking’, ‘Speed thrills, but kills’ ‘Don’t kiss me’, ‘Speed limit’: 60km/h’, ‘Ambulance’, ‘Highly Inflammable’ and a host of others.

Mr Femi Afolayan added a succinct perspective to this discourse: cars and vehicles with inscription were very common growing up in late 70s to mid-80s. Almost all of them had this and the vehicle was effective in transporting passengers and their loads. The drivers were extremely patience as they drop off passengers and their loads at different points. Their speed limit was also reasonable due to bad roads. The drivers were like semi-Gods and well respected as very few people could drive that

time. The inscriptions depicts their beliefs and sometimes circumstances surrounding the purchase of the vehicle. Those inscriptions were a true mirror of their heart. What guided the philosophies of some of them in choosing these inscriptions might be the love for their mother and that is why you will see captions such as, “Iya ni Wura” (Mothers are priceless).

Apart from the fact that the inscriptions revealed their beliefs, the circumstances surrounding the purchase of their vehicles could influence the inscriptions they adopted. For many who had thought they could not purchase a vehicle at a certain age in their lives, but who made it a reality, they adopt inscriptions like “Were nise Oluwa”, “Eda o laro pin”, among others. Their messages are embedded with cultural values that praise the divinity for showing them unusual favour in times of difficulty; some use it to pay tribute to people who are special in their lives, some to respond to criticism, and others to emphasise an adage or proverb they believe. Mr Afolayan affirmed that these inscriptions were an identity for owners and their drivers, “Many of us don’t know these drivers by name beyond these inscriptions. It actually set their enterprise as a unique entity in those days. Some passengers will have to patronise the ones they identified with, especially in the 80s, when they were becoming common. In the 60s and early 70s, I doubt if passengers had such options. These inscriptions, by which they were identified, eventually became their names, with many of them becoming popular. This was common in Omu

Aran, Arandun, Agbonda in Kwara State, Igbajo, Ora igbomina in Osun State.”⁷

On the circumstances that could motivate their inscriptions, Odejide avers that circumstances of life influenced their philosophy of life; very often, their religion, as well as the source of funds for the purchase of the vehicles. So when you see writings like “Ola Ore,” you can guess that a friend has probably helped them purchase the vehicle, or sometimes it could be “Ola Iya” or “Iya ni wura” (mother is gold), meaning this was through the instrumentality of his mother. In Yoruba culture, there’s a lot of emphasis on the role and kindness of the mother, and on mothers’ willingness to sacrifice for their children, even borrowing on behalf of their children so that the children can succeed in life. In Yoruba society, there is a soft spot for mothers, that is the inference from the caption that says, mother is gold – “iya ni wura, baba ni digi”, but I never saw baba ni digi on any of those Lorries. Then there’s philosophy of life like “Bintin laye” “life is fragile; life is transient, that must be in connection with speed limit and attitude to life, and so on. Just to say that they are guided by the principle that they should not rush to do anything in life. Then, for the religious ones, for the Muslims, you saw something like “Tawakailtu” and for the Christians, such as “The Lord is my shepherd” that is from the Bible or sometimes, a philosophy like “Toluwa lase” meaning that it’s only God that has the power.⁸ Inscriptions have been encoded over the years, and people have understood their sources. Even in

short form, people can literally add the ending and make sense of it.⁹

Kafayat’s perspective is also germane to this discourse. She noted that she had boarded a few vehicles with such inscriptions, and it is believed that the inscriptions on the vehicles will guide drivers’ conduct and principles, as some drivers usually display tolerance and consideration for passengers. Many people have been attracted and boarded vehicles because the inscription aligns with their philosophy of life. Even the inscriptions make some vehicles and their owners popular and people easily recommend them to fellow commuters.¹⁰ Also, the inscriptions have significance beyond business; they can reveal what the inscriber believes in, their stance on life events, religion, and the universe, as well as their spirituality. This is associated with Yorùbá towns and areas like Ilé-Ifè, Ibadan, Ilàrè, Abúlé Ègbá, Àgbàdo Ojà, Ìtokì, et cetera.¹¹ Mr Jacob Ogundiya, also confirmed that: those inscriptions give motivation and at times, they tell about the vehicle owner’s beliefs, and his perception about life. Some chose it because of their personal experience about life and others did so because of what they have encountered or the good or bad situations they have passed through. Yes it does because it will increase the popularity of the owner, at times people may not know the real name of the owner of the vehicle but the inscription he has chosen, which he is well recognised for, among his colleagues and the people.¹²

Eshun (2018: 35), corroborating how authors of inscriptions on vehicles construct their identities,

revealed that the vehicle owners and drivers chose their inscriptions thoughtfully. Thus, the inscriptions helped them to create an identity for themselves. The Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) states that people can be identified by personal, enacted, relational, and communal layers, and each of these can be constructed or deconstructed depending on the purpose and context of the communication performance (Hecht et al., 2004). The individual's belief system is a great influence on what their inscription will be. Their religious beliefs influence many. Eshun (2018: 35), in his work, noted that an inscriber declared that she used this inscription to display her knowledge of the Bible and to identify herself with the Christian faith. So you have inscriptions like 'Saviour', 'Isaiah 41:10.' Having used it to relate to others, she had enacted that identity and had eventually gained some attention from the public, which, in a way, is conforming to the relational layer. Muslims also have identity inscriptions, such as *Allah Hu Akbar* (God is great), *Naagode Allah* (Thank you, Lord).

These inscriptions are used to encourage and address various life issues, including cultivating determination, diligence, and hard work. The inscription "*no pain, no gain*," according to one inscriber, has the same meaning. He added that when one works diligently, it can be regarded as "*determination*" because a person cannot gain from life without experiencing some form of pain or suffering. However, to achieve one's goals in life, determination is key. This theme was considered a social identity because it could

influence others to persevere in life and not give up. The inscriber thus, asserted that she wanted to identify with people who believed in little beginnings and also in hard work (Eshun, 2018: 40). Like every communicative act, texts of vehicle writings and inscriptions oftentimes communicate slang, humour, and light-hearted witticisms, which are aimed at amusing and entertaining the readers (Faniran et al, 2021:2). Beyond humour and entertainment, vehicle inscriptions mirror and convey messages about character building, discipline, patience, and hard work among the people within the society.

5. Conclusions

Inscriptions on commercial vehicles serve as mobile texts and viable, veritable means of constructing identity, belief systems, and communicating with the public in Yorubaland, Southwestern Nigeria. Many of these inscriptions have played a critical role in disseminating knowledge and teaching on ethos and character building, among other things, depending on the life philosophy of the inscribers. Many factors have influenced the belief systems and cultural identity of the Yoruba people, and these belief systems cannot be detached from what constitutes their perception and identity. Commercial vehicles, such as taxis, buses, and trucks, often display printed sayings, proverbs, religious verses, and popular maxims that offer insights into the worldview and lived experiences of their owners and drivers. The inscriptions function as mobile texts; they are not a mere decoration but serve as

an expressive tool for self-identification, self-protection, moral instruction, and spiritual invocation. This has had a positive impact on the owners' businesses, influencing patronage and popularity. Such inscriptions include *Aye kooto*, Psalm 23, *Iya ni Wura*, and *Aaro lawa*. This paper reconstructs the past, contributing to the aspect of transport and inscription histories. Vehicle inscription served as a historical material artefact, showcasing the power of culture, collective memory, and the identity of the Yoruba people.

Author contributions

The authors of this paper have contributed equally to the production of this research.

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Informed Consent Statement

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Interviews

Interview with Professor Funmilayo Okanlawon, University of Ibadan, 10/06/2025.

Interview with Mr Femi Afolayan, Civil Servant, Ibadan, 49

Interview with Odedele, Oluwatobiloba Kafayat, Teaching, Saki, 23 years, 12/06/2025

Interview with Ogundiya Jacob Oluwasegun, Teaching, Ọgbòrò (Şakí East Local Government), 27 years, 12/06/2025.

Interview with Emeritus Professor Abiola Odejide, United States of America (USA), 79+, 20/08/2025.

Songs

I. K. Dairo, “E Rora Feso J'aiye.”

Chief Commander Ebenezer Obey, “Aimasiko.”

King Sunny Ade, “Aye nreti Eleya Mi.”

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¹ Interview with Emeritus professor Abiola Odejide, United States of America (USA), 79+, 20/08/2025.

² Interview with Professor Funmilayo Okanlawon, University of Ibadan, 10/06/2025. He retired from the Department of Nursing, University of Ibadan.

³ Interview with Professor Funmilayo Okanlawon, University of Ibadan, 10/06/2025.

⁴ Transcription by the author.

⁵ Transcription by the authors.

⁶ Transcription by the authors.

⁷ Interview with Mr Femi Afolayan, Civil Servant, Ibadan, 49+

⁸ Interview with Professor Funmilayo Okanlawon, University of Ibadan, 10/06/2025.

⁹ Interview with Professor Funmilayo Okanlawon, University of Ibadan, 10/06/2025.

¹⁰ Interview with Odedele, Oluwatobiloba Kafayat, Teaching, Saki, 23 years, 12/06/2025.

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