Informal public transport in practice: Matatu entrepreneurship [Book Review]

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To my mind, the question of how people travel around our cities, towns and rural areas, is now ripe for change for a number of reasons. On the demand side, these include changes in demographics, attitudes to sharing, the nature of work, how we shop, and in how we use our leisure time. On the supply side, the major changes expected include increasingly automated vehicles that could one day ‘drive themselves’, coupled with an exponential growth in the level and type of information generated by society through smartphones, sensors and a range of other sources. In linking these two sides together meanwhile, is the idea that transport users will very soon be able communicate with a myriad of transport operators in near real-time and ‘negotiate’ a fare to be able to access a transport service that is tailored to their specific needs for that journey. Bluntly, such trends could potentially see a boom in so-called ‘mobility-as-a-service’-type transport options, that will likely be personalised and responsive to demand, and could well be delivered by small vehicles that are operated by market-savvy companies within a relatively relaxed operational environment. In this context, any insights that could be shed on such a future could be helpful and hence the experiences of the matatu – a jitney-style informal small bus service provided within a highly competitive marketplace that has operated in Kenya for many years – are salient.

The book begins with a foreword and a preface, and then Chapter 1 introduces the concept of the matatu, and in particular about how it has been/can be defined. Chapters 2 and 3 then explore how entrepreneurship functions in the matatu context, and Chapter 4 places how matatu entrepreneurship functions within the Kenyan political landscape more generally. Chapter 5 discusses the entrepreneurship performance of the matatu, and Chapter 6 focuses on the importance of self-organisation in the sector, before issues around violence, crime and safety are investigated in Chapter 7. Chapters 8, 9 and 10 then conclude the book by discussing how the industry contributes to entrepreneurship in Kenya as a whole; on how lessons for entrepreneurship can be learnt from the matatu experience; and on why the subject is important respectively. As such, the book is very much focused on the specific story of the matatu and entrepreneurship in Kenya, and to be fair it does this fairly well. Moreover, I found the chapters to be well evidenced and easy to read. It was also well put together – a benefit perhaps of it being an authored as opposed to an edited book.

However, as someone with an interest in how transport systems work, I do feel that more supporting information on the operational and geographical aspects of the matatu would have added to the story, e.g. how many routes are there, where do they go, how many passengers do they carry a year, and who are they? More figures, maps and tables could have helped in this regard too I think. Also, I think the lack of a chapter discussing similar informal public transport systems around the world somewhat limits the transferability of any lessons learnt from the case study. Finally, and perhaps as a result, there are no explicit insights that emerge for transport geography practitioners and policy makers beyond East Africa, and in that sense, the book represents a missed opportunity to make a direct contribution to the increasingly hyped mobility-as-a-service discussion which is rather a shame.

Overall, the book provides an interesting and valuable stand-alone case study on entrepreneurship and matatus in Kenya, and for that reason can be deemed worthy reading for those with an interest in niche examples of entrepreneurship and enterprise (and in the regulatory culture that enables them to function, and/or transport systems and policy in less developed countries.

Marcus Enoch,