

Review Article

Reconciling Economic Livelihood with Moral Integrity: Appraisal of the Socio-Economic Significance and Emerging Ethical Challenges in Kenya's Boda-Boda Sector

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Abstract: Boda-boda transport has emerged as one of the most significant socio-economic innovations in contemporary Kenya. It has transformed the mobility of people and goods, created widespread employment for young men and women, and contributed to the growth of local economies. Despite its immense value, the sector is increasingly associated with indiscipline, lawlessness, and moral decline. Riders frequently disregard traffic regulations, contribute to rising road accidents, and in some cases engage in criminal activities. This dual character of the boda-boda sector presents a complex moral dilemma that demands more than technical solutions. This paper employs Structural Functionalism and African Communitarian Ethical Theory (*Ubuntu*) to examine the socio-economic importance of boda-boda transport and its attendant moral challenges. Structural Functionalism provides a framework for understanding how boda-boda transport functions as a social system that both stabilizes and destabilizes society, while African Communitarian Ethics offers a moral lens grounded in the sacredness of life, communal harmony, and moral responsibility. The paper argues that the crisis of indiscipline in the boda-boda sector reflects a deeper moral and spiritual disorder that can only be addressed through a combination of structural regulation and moral reawakening. It concludes that reorienting boda-boda transport towards communal responsibility and respect for life, inspired by African religious values, can transform the sector into a moral and developmental asset for the nation.

Keywords: Reconciling Economic Livelihood, Moral Integrity, African Religio-Cultural, Kenya.

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INTRODUCTION

The term boda-boda is an adaptation of English word “border to border” started by the cyclist beckoning the passenger toward the border of Uganda. Bicycle rides would ferry people at fee from areas like Busia town to Malaba. (Nyachico, 2015 Murunga *et al.*, 2023), Today motorcycles have replaced bicycles offering faster and more efficient transport. Boda-bodas are more than just motorcycles. They are the backbone of Kenya’s transportation network. From rural villages to urban centers, motorcycles have become an indispensable mode of transport, offering fast, affordable, and flexible mobility to millions of Kenyans. For the youth, boda-boda riding presents a viable source of income, often providing daily sustenance where formal employment opportunities are scarce.

Despite the many positive contributions of boda-boda sector, the riders operate in a climate of indiscipline. They flout traffic laws, resist law enforcement, and sometimes engage in violence or criminal acts. Accidents involving motorcycles have surged, claiming lives and straining the healthcare system (NCRC, 2018) the use of boda-bodas in robberies and assaults has also generated public fear and eroded trust between riders and the communities they serve. This situation has sparked a national debate about the moral decay and loss of civic responsibility among segments of Kenyan youth.

The boda-boda phenomenon thus represents a social paradox. It is a symbol of empowerment yet a site of moral concern. Understanding this paradox requires an approach that goes beyond economic or legal explanations to include moral, cultural, and spiritual

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dimensions. Within the African worldview, morality is inseparable from religion and communal life. Human behavior is judged not only by its impact on individual welfare but also by its effect on the collective harmony of the community and the spiritual order that sustains it. When viewed through this lens, indiscipline within the boda-boda sector is not merely a matter of regulation but a deviation from the communal values of responsibility, respect, and reverence for life.

This paper therefore seeks to explore how boda-boda transport in Kenya, while serving as a socio-economic lifeline, has also become a mirror reflecting the moral challenges of modern African society.

Contextual and Analytical Review of the Boda-Boda transport Sector in Kenya

The existing literature on boda-boda transport in Kenya and East Africa provide important insights into both the socio-economic value and the moral dilemmas associated with this sector.

According to Mogo (2025), the boda-boda industry generates an estimated KES 660 billion annually and employs hundreds of thousands of youths across Kenya. It has created downstream economic opportunities in fuel sales, spare parts, and repair services. Nyachio (2015) emphasizes that boda-bodas provide essential mobility for the poor and marginalized, especially in areas underserved by public transport. Comparable findings from Uganda by Kitara *et al.*, (2022) indicate that motorcycle taxi operations frequently serve as the primary source of employment for young men with limited educational attainment, thereby playing a crucial role in ensuring their livelihood security.

Despite these economic benefits, boda-bodas contribute disproportionately to road accidents and public health challenges. The NTSA (2024) reported that boda-bodas accounted for a large share of pedestrian deaths and road injuries. Many studies highlight the growing burden on hospitals, with boda-boda crashes overwhelming trauma wards and diverting limited health resources. Kitara *et al.*, (2022) found that most riders lack helmets, insurance, or licenses, increasing both their vulnerability and that of passengers.

Road accidents aside, the use of boda-bodas in criminal activities has been well documented. NCRC (2018) reports widespread cases where motorcycles are used by riders in robberies, assaults, and as getaway vehicles. The FIA Foundation (2018) adds that, globally, motorcycle taxis in poorly regulated contexts often overlap with insecurity, creating mistrust between riders and the public. This perception of boda-bodas as both service providers and potential threats underscores the moral crisis at the heart of the sector.

While most literature focuses on policy, regulation, or health, fewer studies engage directly with the moral dimensions of the boda-boda phenomenon. However, African ethical philosophy offers useful frameworks. Dolamo (2013) argues that *Ubuntu* emphasizes interdependence, responsibility, and the sacredness of life. Similarly Gyekye (1997) stresses that African ethics are deeply communal, prioritizing harmony and order over individual gain. These perspectives allow us to regard reckless riding and criminal misuse of boda-bodas not just as legal violations but as violations of moral and religious principles that underpin African society.

Efforts to regulate the sector have included mandatory helmet and reflector jackets, rider registration, and the formation of Sacco-based associations. However, Muguro *et al.*, (2022) argues that enforcement has been weak and inconsistent, leading to widespread non-compliance. Without moral transformation alongside regulation, these measures have failed to curb recklessness and crime in the industry.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that while boda-bodas' socio-economic contributions are well acknowledged, and their risks well documented, the moral crisis underlying the sector has not been sufficiently interrogated. This paper fills that gap by bringing African religious ethics into the conversation.

Theoretical Foci of the Paper

This paper is anchored on two complementary theoretical perspectives namely Structural Functionalism and African Communitarian Ethical theory (*Ubuntu*). These frameworks offer both a sociological and moral lens through which to understand the boda-boda phenomenon in Kenya.

Structural Functionalism, as developed by early sociologists such as Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, and Robert Merton, views society as a complex system made up of interrelated parts that work together to promote stability and social order. Each institution, group, or social activity performs a function that contributes to the overall equilibrium of the social structure. When any part of the system becomes dysfunctional, social instability and disorder result. From this perspective, boda-boda transport can be viewed as a functional component of Kenya's socio-economic system. It fills a critical gap in public transport, particularly in informal settlements, rural areas, and urban peripheries where formal transport infrastructure is weak or absent. The boda-boda industry supports mobility, enhances access to economic opportunities, and provides employment to thousands of youths who would otherwise be unemployed. In this sense, it performs essential economic and social functions that sustain community life and contribute to social integration.

Structural Functionalism also acknowledges the concept of dysfunction, which refers to aspects of a system that produce negative consequences and potentially threaten its stability. The rising levels of indiscipline, traffic accidents, and criminal involvement among some boda-boda operators represent dysfunctions within the transport system. Instead of enhancing stability, these behaviours generate disorder, insecurity, and public mistrust. The theory thus helps explain how the boda-boda sector, while functionally valuable, can simultaneously undermine social equilibrium through deviant and morally questionable practices.

The growing indiscipline among boda-boda riders from a Durkheimian perspective reflect a state of anomie. This is a breakdown of norms and values that traditionally regulate behaviour. As many young people enter the boda-boda industry without formal training or moral guidance, they operate in an environment with weak social control and inconsistent enforcement of rules. This normlessness contributes to behaviours that disregard human life, public order, and communal responsibility. Therefore, the theory underscores the need to restore normative regulation through both institutional and moral interventions.

While Structural Functionalism offers a sociological explanation of order and disorder, African Communitarian Ethics often expressed through the concept of *Ubuntu* provides a moral and spiritual framework for understanding human behaviour within African contexts. *Ubuntu*, encapsulated in the maxim “*I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am,*” emphasizes the interconnectedness of all human beings and the moral responsibility of everyone to uphold the welfare of the community.

In African religious thought, morality is not merely a social convention, but a divine mandate rooted in the harmony between the human, spiritual, and natural realms. Good conduct promotes communal well-being and sustains cosmic balance, while moral failure introduces disharmony that affects not only individuals but the entire community. The boda-boda crisis that is marked by indiscipline, violence, and disregard for human life can therefore be interpreted as a symptom of moral disconnection from the communal and spiritual foundations that sustain African life.

African Communitarian Ethics emphasizes virtues such as respect for life, responsibility, honesty, cooperation, and justice. In this context, the reckless and often violent behaviour of some boda-boda riders constitutes a moral violation against the community and against the sacredness of life itself. The use of motorcycles to harm, rob, or kill contradicts the communal ethos of *Ubuntu*, which upholds solidarity, compassion, and peaceful coexistence. Furthermore, the lack of mutual respect between riders, passengers, and traffic authorities reflects a breakdown of the moral

fabric that once guided interdependence in African society. The Ubuntu philosophy therefore calls for a moral reawakening in the boda-boda sector, rooted in the African understanding that morality and religion are inseparable. Restoring discipline among riders cannot rely solely on law enforcement or policy regulation; it requires reorientation of character and values through moral education, mentorship, and community engagement.

Socio-Economic Significance of Boda-Boda Sector in Kenya

The boda-boda transport sector in Kenya has evolved from a small-scale, informal means of movement into a major socio-economic force shaping livelihoods, urban mobility, and local economies. It represents one of the most visible forms of self-employment among youth and low-income earners, offering both economic opportunity and social empowerment. However, beneath its economic promise lies a growing moral and ethical crisis that reflects the tension between livelihood pursuits and moral order within Kenyan society.

The number of boda-bodas in Kenya is not precisely tracked by the NTSA as many are unregistered. However, estimates suggest there are between 1.6 million and 3 million riders in total with an estimated 5 million Kenyans directly or indirectly depending on the sector for their livelihoods. This includes riders, mechanics, spare-part dealers, fuel suppliers, and small-scale traders who operate near boda-boda stages. The sector injects billions of shillings into the economy daily, serving as a critical pillar of employment in both rural and urban settings where formal job opportunities remain scarce.

In all the counties, boda-bodas have revolutionized rural transport, providing access to schools, hospitals, and markets in areas where infrastructure is poor. For many families, especially youth and school leavers, the motorcycle offers a dignified source of income, supporting education, household needs, and community development initiatives. For instance, community-based savings groups, popularly known as *chamas* or *saccos*, have emerged among riders in various counties enabling them to acquire assets such as land and build houses. This aligns with the African cultural ethos of self-help (*harambee*), where communal effort promotes economic resilience and social wellbeing.

Beyond individual livelihoods, the boda-boda industry facilitates small-scale commerce. In markets such as Gikomba in Nairobi, Kongowea in Mombasa, Daraja Mbili in Kisii among others, traders rely on boda-bodas for quick, affordable deliveries. In rural areas, farmers use boda bodas to transport produce to markets, reducing post-harvest losses. The sector has thus become a vital link between production and consumption,

symbolizing economic participation, creativity, and adaptability among Kenya's youth.

From a religio-cultural perspective, this entrepreneurial spirit resonates with traditional African values that dignify work and resourcefulness. In many African societies, work is viewed not merely as economic activity but as a moral duty and a means of contributing to the community's welfare. Thus, boda-boda transport exemplifies the ability to sustain oneself and one's family through honest labour.

Contemporary Moral and Ethical Issues in Kenya's Boda Boda Sector

Whereas the boda-boda sector contributes significantly to Kenya's economy it also reflects a growing erosion of moral values and communal accountability. The sector is associated with reckless driving, lawlessness, and criminal activity. The NTSA reports that boda-bodas accounted for 4282 deaths by November 2024 in road traffic accidents in Kenya, often due to speeding, overloading, lack of helmets, and disregard for traffic regulations. (Kenya News Agency Information for Development, 2024). Such behaviour undermines the African moral principle of the sanctity of life. Moreover, the sector has become a tool for criminal activities, including muggings, robbery, and getaways after crimes. Cases have been documented in various parts of the country where wicked riders collaborate with thugs to rob pedestrians or vandalize vehicles. This misuse of livelihood opportunities points to what Magesa (1997) calls the moral crisis of abundant life, where economic survival is pursued at the expense of moral integrity and communal harmony.

The challenge extends beyond crime to include social indiscipline and breakdown of moral order. In many towns, boda-boda riders exhibit open hostility to law enforcement and a disregard for authority. Such traits contradict the African religio-cultural expectation of respect for elders and leaders. As Bujo (1998) observed, moral order in African thought is maintained through adherence to communal norms and divine order. The visible defiance within the sector therefore symbolizes deeper cultural disintegration, where the pursuit of individual gain eclipses the traditional African ethic of communal responsibility.

Additionally, gender and moral exploitation are emerging issues. In some cases, boda-boda riders have been implicated in cases of sexual harassment or exploitation of young female passengers, particularly schoolgirls in rural areas. This behaviour desecrates both the cultural and spiritual fabric of the community, which traditionally regards women and children as under divine protection.

From an African religio-cultural standpoint, these challenges signify more than behavioural failures; they represent a spiritual imbalance. African ethics

emphasize harmony (*Ubuntu*) — the idea that a person becomes human only through right relationships with others. When boda-boda riders engage in reckless or violent conduct, they disrupt this moral harmony, harming not just victims but the entire community's well-being. As Tutu (1999) asserted, moral failure in African contexts is communal rather than individual because it stains the social fabric.

African Religious Moral Perspectives/ an African Religio-Cultural Perspective

In African societies, morality is inseparable from religion and community life. According to Magesa (1997) morality in traditional Africa is grounded in the belief of interconnectedness among God, the ancestors, the living, and nature. Every moral act sustains or disrupts this balance, making ethics not a matter of personal preference but a sacred responsibility. Similarly, Mbiti (1969) asserts that Africans are "notoriously religious," meaning religion permeates every aspect of life including economic activities such as trade, transport, and social relations. Thus, moral failure is simultaneously a religious failure.

The African moral universe is theocentric and communal. Magesa (1997) explains that African ethics are "life-promoting," guided by the sacred principle that life must be preserved, enhanced, and never destroyed. According to Kenyatta (1938) offences such as violence, theft, or carelessness that cause death or injury result in ritual impurity, which must be cleansed through confession and sacrifice to restore moral and spiritual harmony.

Applied to the boda-boda transport sector, this moral worldview exposes the gravity of indiscipline, recklessness, and violence often displayed by riders. From an African religious perspective, reckless riding that leads to accidents and loss of life is not simply a traffic violation, but it is a spiritual desecration of life, an act against the moral order upheld by God and the ancestors.

The involvement of some riders in theft, assault, and robbery undermines the fundamental African moral principles of truth, honesty, and respect for life. As Gyekye (1997) argues, African morality emphasizes communal well-being over individual gain; an act that benefits one person but harms the community is inherently immoral. The Swahili proverb "*Mtu ni watu*" (a person is people) reinforces this ethos of interdependence. Thus, a boda-boda rider who endangers passengers or uses the motorcycle for crime violates the core value of *Ubuntu*, which Tutu (1999) describes as "the essence of being human through others."

African traditional moral order also upholds respect for authority and order as a divine duty. Africans believe that authority originates from God, and disobedience to elders or leaders is tantamount to

rebellious against divine will. In modern Kenya, the defiance of traffic laws and police by boda-boda riders signals a moral collapse stemming from the erosion of this traditional reverence. As Mutua (2002) observes, modern legal systems often neglect African moral traditions, resulting in a widening gap between law and morality.

It should be noted that African morality is fundamentally restorative rather than punitive. Wrongdoers are rehabilitated through repentance, restitution, and reconciliation. This aligns with Bujo's (2001) argument that African ethics seek to restore broken relationships and reestablish life's vitality rather than merely punish offenders. This offers a model for reforming Kenya's boda-boda sector. African religious morality further teaches that when harmony is broken through violence, greed, or negligence the entire community suffers spiritually and socially. Magesa (1997) notes that life loses its sacredness when communal bonds weaken. The recklessness and violence among some boda-boda riders are therefore symptomatic of a deeper moral and spiritual disorder. The solution lies not only in stricter regulation but in moral reawakening by reviving Ubuntu values such as patience, compassion, and respect for life.

From the above discussion, it is evident that the African religious moral perspective calls for a holistic approach to reforming the boda-boda sector in Kenya. It invites policymakers, religious leaders, and communities to integrate moral education, spiritual guidance, and communal accountability into training and regulation. Therefore, addressing moral decay in boda-boda transport must begin with restoring the sacred values that affirm life, community, and divine order.

Integrating African Religious Moral Principles into Boda-Boda Regulation and Training in Kenya

While the boda-boda industry has become an economic lifeline for many Kenyans, its moral and behavioural challenges demand more than regulatory control. The African religious moral perspective offers a unique framework for shaping ethical consciousness, restoring discipline, and promoting communal responsibility among riders. The integration of African moral principles into boda-boda regulation and training would create not only safer roads but morally responsible citizens grounded in values that respect life and community.

In African traditional societies, moral education was a lifelong process transmitted through family, elders, and community rituals. The values of respect, honesty, self-control, and care for others were taught through stories, songs, and proverbs. This method can be adapted for modern boda-boda training programs. County governments and boda-boda associations can collaborate with elders, clergy, and community leaders to introduce moral mentorship sessions as part of rider registration or

annual training renewals. These sessions would go beyond technical riding skills to address issues of character, discipline, and moral responsibility. For instance, elders could narrate traditional stories emphasizing respect for life while religious leaders could teach the moral significance of obeying laws as part of divine order. An example can be drawn from Nyeri County, where church-led youth programs have successfully combined driving courses with moral formation workshops. Such initiatives demonstrate that ethical transformation is possible when spiritual and communal guidance complements technical training.

Proverbs are the vessels of African moral wisdom. They summarize centuries of ethical reflection in forms that are memorable and culturally resonant. Integrating these into official boda-boda training materials can make moral instruction both relatable and effective. For instance: "*Mwenda pole hajikwai*" (Swahili: he who walks slowly does not stumble) It teaches the virtue of patience and discourages speeding. Similarly, "*Mtu ni watu*" (Swahili: a person is people). It underscores the importance of shared responsibility and mutual respect for others, both on the road and in other settings. Training manuals could dedicate sections to such moral reflections, linking them with modern traffic laws. This would help riders understand that following traffic rules is not just a civic duty but a moral obligation that preserves life and promotes communal well-being.

Traditionally, every African community had a council of elders that acted as a moral court, arbitrating conflicts and ensuring moral conduct. A similar structure could be introduced within boda-boda associations as "Boda-Boda Councils of Elders." These councils, composed of respected community leaders, clergy, and experienced riders, would mediate disputes among riders and between riders and passengers, offer moral guidance and restorative justice instead of punitive measures, conduct reconciliation ceremonies after serious incidents such as accidents or violent altercations. This approach draws from traditional conflict resolution models found among African traditional council of elders where social harmony was prioritized over punishment. By reviving such indigenous mechanisms within the boda-boda context, communities would reinforce accountability and reawaken respect for communal moral authority.

African religion is rich in symbolic rituals that mark renewal, repentance, and reconciliation. Incorporating symbolic acts in moral reform initiatives could have strong psychological and cultural impact. For instance, after fatal accidents, riders could participate in community prayers or cleansing ceremonies led by elders and religious leaders, symbolizing repentance and commitment to safer conduct. Annual "Rider's Day of Reflection" could also be held, where riders gather to give thanks for life, remember those lost to accidents, and renew vows to protect life. Such rituals would

reconnect the boda-boda sector to its spiritual roots and reinforce the idea that life and community harmony are sacred responsibilities.

At the core of African religious morality is the *ubuntu* philosophy. When applied to the boda-boda sector, Ubuntu reorients the rider's identity from that of an autonomous, self-interested individual to a moral actor situated within an interconnected network of social and spiritual relationships. A rider guided by Ubuntu principles drives responsibly in recognition of the sacredness of human life, treats passengers with respect as an affirmation of shared humanity, and cooperates with law enforcement and the broader community in the pursuit of collective harmony. By internalizing these Ubuntu values, boda-boda riders transcend negative stereotypes and emerge as active contributors to community well-being, thus exemplifying an African ethical paradigm within contemporary economic enterprise.

CONCLUSION

Boda-boda transport in Kenya embodies a paradox of livelihood and morality. It has become an indispensable economic pillar while simultaneously posing moral and safety challenges. Through Structural Functionalism, this paper shows how boda-boda transport sustains and destabilizes society at the same time, while African Communitarian Ethics offers a moral framework rooted in the sacredness of life and communal responsibility. The sector's transformation requires moral awakening and structural cooperation. Integrating African religious moral principles into boda-boda regulation and rider training provides a culturally grounded, sustainable approach to transforming the sector. It acknowledges that true reform must touch both the system (through regulation and policy) and the soul (through moral reawakening). By drawing from the moral heritage of African religion Kenya can reclaim the boda-boda sector not merely as an economic venture, but as a moral institution that reflects the best of African values.

The way forward is not to demonize the boda-boda sector but to reform it through balanced interventions that integrate social structures and moral renewal. If the sector can be guided by communal ethics, discipline, and respect for life, it will evolve from a source of fear and instability into a model of responsible livelihood. In doing so, Kenya can demonstrate how traditional moral wisdom and modern economic activity can coexist harmoniously, upholding the dignity of life and the unity of the community.

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