The impact of motor-vehicles in Africa in the twentieth century: towards a socio-historical case study

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Towards a socio-historical case study

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Abstract

The introduction of the motor-vehicle into Africa during the course of the twentieth century led to far-reaching and complex transformations of African economies, politics, societies and cultures. Through African agency the motor-vehicle transformed all aspects of African life. Until now no systematic historical research has been conducted into this complex and multi-faceted topic. By researching the archival, oral and published source material, available in Europe, and Africa, a comparative social history documenting the far-reaching transformation of Africa engendered through the introduction of the motor-vehicle is now being written. The article provides an overview of the social historical material dealing with the introduction of the motor-vehicle in Africa, and seeks to briefly discuss the economic, political and socio-cultural impact of the motor-vehicle on African societies in the Twentieth century.

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Introduction:

The introduction of the motor-vehicle into Africa is arguably the single most important factor for change in Africa in the twentieth century. A factor for change which has hitherto been totally neglected in research, let alone literature. Yet its impact extends across the totality of human existence; from ecological devastation to economic advancement, from cultural transformation to political change, from social perceptions through to a myriad of other themes. There has been a tendency to see motor-vehicles as being attached solely to the state and the political and economic elite, yet their impact stretches far beyond the elite and into the everyday lives of people in the smallest villages at the furthest reaches of African states.

The bus, mammy truck, car, pick-up and so forth reach far beyond where railways, ferries and boats can reach. True, the introduction of railways had a tremendous impact on African societies. However, from the 1940s onwards the train dwindled in importance, and has come to be almost totally superceded by buses, trucks and lorries.[1] The extensive shanty town that has developed on the tracks of the shunting yards of Ghana railways in downtown Accra is a graphic example of this decline. In addition, in contrast to the motor-vehicle, the train is bound to run on the tracks laid out for it. The train does not allow for the initiative of a single individual or a small group of people. The capital input is such that it requires state funding and is quite simply beyond the finances of small entrepreneurs, whereas the purchase of a motor-cycle, taxi or truck is not.

Africa may possess but a minute proportion of the world´s motor-vehicles, yet it is precisely because of the scarcity of transport that they assume such importance. In addition, there has been a tendency to see Africa as pre-dominantly rural.Yet Africa is highly urbanised in sprawling cities that are often serviced solely by motor-vehicles. It is clear that the effects of the introduction of the motor-vehicle into Africa are to be found and studied in many overlapping fields of academic endeavour. However, in the interest of clarity, a short and necessarily brief overview detailing the impact of the

motor-vehicle upon the economies, politics, societies and cultures of Africa is given below.

Economy:

The introduction of motor-vehicles, in the course of the twentieth century, radically transformed the economies of Africa. The increased mobility of people, products, raw materials -from labour to iron ore-, information, goods and services led to the development of new economies.

In the formal economy the motor-vehicle led to the development and accessing of new markets as well as the establishment of a completely new economy centred around motor-vehicles. New entrepeneurial and technical skills were developed as petrol stations and automotive workshops came to be established. New companies were created that transported people and goods, from small single taxi companies to enormous freight enterprises. The presence of motor-vehicles necessitated the development of roads, which in turn led to futher economic development. The increased accessibility stimulated and allowed for the development and exploitation of resources which had been hitherto neglected; mining, agriculture and industry all received a boost. Apart from being a major pollutant motor-vehicles also caused extensive environmental degradation through strip-mining, logging, and forest clearance, as well as top soil loss and soil exhaustion through large scale mechanized farming practices.[2] In addition, the economic expansion and increased mobility led to the development of , not only, the itinerant migrant labourer, but also, the daily commuter; people essential to Africa´s formal economies, but heavily dependent on the taxi and bus services of the informal economy.

The impact of the motor-vehicle in the informal economy has primarily been in the service industry. African bus stations and transport depots are unthinkable without the myriad of services provided by transport touts, food and drink sales people, prostitution, informal bars, puncture repair men, welders, bush mechanics and many more. Drivers maintain their concentration through the supply of stimulants, legal or otherwise, and passengers are entertained and kept occupied by everything from acrobats to illegal copies of music cassettes and book and pamphlet sellers. Along the road villagers peddle handicrafts, agricultural produce, chickens, fish and more, as well as "bush meat" and charcoal for city dwellers. New forms of corruption and taxation have developed along African roads, and in many countries roadblocks

have become an important source of income for under paid civil servants.[3] Associated with the informal economy is the flourishing trade in second-hand cars, which has developed in the last twenty years of the 20th century between Europe and West Africa, and Japan and Central Africa. Vehicles written off in Europe and Japan are shipped to Africa where they continue to fulfil long and productive careers. Apart from the development of new African entrepreneurs, the second-hand car industry has also led to the establishment of a myriad of middle-men and interlopers essential to the trade.

Motor-vehicles also led to the collapse of other forms of economic enterprise. Old trade routes lost their importance. Portage and animal drawn freight came to be superseded. The service industries that had developed to cater for these now defunct routes and forms of transport ceased to exist. Similarly, during periods of extensive economic decline communities that have come to depend and rely on the motor-vehicle and its roads can be struck by economic ruin.[4]

Politics:

Motor-vehicles have had a tremendous impact on politics in Africa, transforming both the state, as well as the manner in which politics is conducted. The colonial state and later the nation state came to rely heavily on motor-vehicles for the extension and enforcement of its control both at a symbolic level as well as at a functional level. Motor-vehicles became indispensable to the running of the state, and came to be used at all levels of government, from tax collection to education, from health care to border patrols. With roads and motor-vehicles the African state spreads its message and seeks to enforce its will. The development or neglect of roads has become part and parcel of patronage systems, which allow for and enable economic development or economic demise. The motor-vehicle has allowed for the standardisation of bureaucracies and the rapid and frequent transfer of government employees. Policemen and soldiers can be rapidly deployed in areas other than those from which they had been recruited. Motor-vehicles have led to the development of new forms of warfare in Africa, the "Technicals" of Somalia, and the "Toyota wars" of Chad being cases in point.[5]

The colonial state did not only seek to enforce its will through the use of motor-vehicles, but also through the establishment of roads. Throughout Africa colonial states demanded labour for the construction of roads. Where labour was not

forthcoming reprisals were taken and prisoners made to build the roads. A colonial district commissioner in Tanzania was remembered in the following way, "He made us work long hours on the roads, and he was the only one who had a motor car".[6] That is, roads were built not so much for function but as a measure of colonial control and status; as a means by which to discipline a subject population and to create confidence amongst colonisers in a time when roads were a symbol of speed and modernity. The motor-vehicle also contributed substantially to the mystique of the lone White man, who was actually never really alone and could be assured of rapid re-supply and support should the need arise.

Motor-vehicles also allowed for the development of novel ways of politicking. Ghanaian political independence was gained in part through the use of propaganda trucks. Africans have sought to enforce political change through the boycotting of bus services, and or the enforcement of a complete ban on all forms of motorised transport. Many political rallies in Africa would be unthinkable without the party faithful bussed in from outlying areas or the political leaders standing in open backed cars.

Society and culture:

African societies were transformed by the advent of the motor-vehicle, apart from the economic and political changes, there were tremendous changes in health, education, information, religion, inter-personal relationships, ways of living and much more.

The access of people to health care was improved through the advent of motor-vehicles. The inoculation campaigns, primary health care projects, hospital transfers, and medical extension work that characterise African health care in the present would be unthinkable without the use of motor-vehicles. Yet at the same time motor-vehicles have become the main vectors for the spread of diseases in Africa. The rapid transfer of viruses from forest enclaves to cities, and the rapid spread of HIV/Aids and STDs along the highways transecting Africa are examples to be borne in mind.

Formal education changed in Africa with the advent of the motor-vehicle. Educational curricula came to be truly standardised and controlled through the state´s new found ability to rapidly transfer teachers and examiners as well as enforce the findings of school inspections. The educational criteria of African schools changed

with large emphasis being placed on the training of people capable of repairing and tending to motor-vehicles.

With motor-vehicles and the increased mobility of people there was a tremendous increase in the speed and amount of information transferred within African countries. Not only did letters travel faster to and from towns and villages, but also newspapers and, perhaps more importantly gossip, or as it is aptly known in West Africa "Radio Trottoir". Information regarding developments in the newly created state, from soccer scores through to political gossip, as well as the world beyond, all flow along the roads of Africa.

Central to the issue of motor-vehicles in Africa are the issues of status and power. To some extent motor-vehicles were incorporated as new status symbols into older pre-colonial forms and concepts relating to the expression of status and power, and to some extent motor-vehicles led to the development of new forms of cultural expression of power. It is not uncommon in large parts of Africa for people to become possessed by the spirits of motor-vehicles. People associated with and in control of motor-vehicles were granted status in accordance with the type of vehicle concerned, accordingly wealthy traders are known across Africa as waBenzi.

The motor-vehicle with its tendency to traverse language, social and cultural barriers led to new ways of seeing the world, and new relations that required new forms of cosmological understanding. The myriad of new images and views led to a world-view that of necessity transcended the limitations of village mores, and can to some extent account for the extensive spread of Christianity in Africa. Inter-personal relationships and responsibilities were transformed by the increased mobility of people. In addition there was the development of a completely new culture of taxi and bus driving.[7]

Motor-vehicles and African History
In early 1998, whilst dealing with German missionaries and Herero converts in Namibia in the late 1920´s, I was struck by the fact that the introduction of motor-cars led to a dramatic reduction in the quality of missionary reports. After I posted a single query on the electronic H-Africa discussion list I received no less than 32 replies, emphasising firstly the interesting nature of the topic, and secondly the near total absence of any literature or research dealing with the introduction of the motor-vehicle into Africa. Notably, only one of the more than one thousand papers presented

at the annual meetings of the African Studies Association in America between 1990 and 1997 deals with the impact of motor-vehicles in Africa. In the event the paper, which was later developed into a doctoral thesis dealing with both railways and roads, concentrated on economic history.[8] In contrast though, there have been a fair number of articles and papers dealing with the socio-economic impact of railways in Africa.[9] Roads and motor-vehicles do feature in a number of academic theses, but generally as a side issue to the main topic being discussed.[10] In works in which motor-vehicles are a major theme the emphasis has consistently been on economic aspects.[11] An exception being the classic work of Polly Hill which detailed the manner in which Ghanaian cocoa farmers utilised the motor-vehicle to their full advantage in exploiting ever larger areas of Ghanaian forest for cocoa production.[12] The more anthropological works by Lewis, Silverstein and Stoller with their investigations into the manner in which motorised road transport was structured and regulated are particularly interesting, albeit that they are not histories.[13] The highly fetishised impact of motor-vehicles as a symbol of high colonialism in Africa is an aspect that has thus far only attracted the attention of one researcher, albeit in a rather sketchy, disjointed and inconclusive article.[14] The work of Erdmute Alber is a notable exception in that it looks at "the introduction of motor cars in the West African colony of Dahomey and its consequences for colonial society".[15] On a personal note work done by myself has explicitly sought to document the social cultural impact of the introduction of motor-vehicles in Namibia prior to 1940.[16] Elsewhere in the world the broader social history of motor-vehicles has been extensively researched, particularly in the United States.[17]

Conclusion

Some of the works mentioned above provide insight into the manner in which motor-vehicles impacted upon the lives of people, they do not however do so for people in Africa. They do however provide us with comparative material and a certain amount of theoretical background and insight into the issue. This is most notably so in the fields of status and power, where motor-vehicles appear to take on values in excess of their mere utilitarian functions. Simply put, at present there is no social history dealing with the impact of motor-vehicles on the lives of people in Africa. It is in the light of this absence that this brief overview has been written, and that further research is currently being undertaken by the author.

Endnotes

[1] There is an extensive literature on trains in Africa, much of it of particular interest to train-spotters, e.g. Werner Sölch, *Kap-Kairo: Eisenbahn zwischen Ägypten und Südafrika* (Düsseldorf 1985). Of relevance here, John F. Due, "The problem of rail-transport in tropical Africa" in, *The Journal of Developing Areas* (1978/79), vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 375-393 & "Trends in rail transport in Zambia and Tanzania", in *Utafiti* (1986), vol. 8, no. 2, p. 43 - 58; Patrick Moriarty and Clive S. Beed, "Transport in tropical Africa", in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (1989), vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 125 – 132; Edward Vickery, "Pricing rail transport services in Ghana for increased efficiency" in, *Economic Bulletin of Ghana* (1971), vol. 1, 2nd S., no. 4. Pp. 28 – 48 & G.H. Pirie, *Aspects of the political-economy of railways in Southern Africa* (Johannesburg 1982).

[2] Polly Hill, *Indigenous trade and market places in Ghana, 1962 – 64* (Jos 1984); Olabode O. Alokan, "The determinants of the operating characteristics of trucking firms in Nigeria" in, *The Nigerian Geographical Journal* (1994), n.s., vol. 1, pp. 221 – 232; Christine Gilguy, "Tendances des marches de l'automobile en Afrique" in, *Marches tropicaux et mediterraneens* (1997), annee 52, no. 2681, pp. 668 – 679; "L'auntomobile en Afrique 1983" in, *Marches tropicaux et mediterraneens* (1983), vol. 39, no. 1984, pp. 2715 – 2790; Benoit Mougoue, "La circulation automobile a yaounde" in, *Cameroon Geographic Review* (1987), vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 109 – 124; S. Tetteh Addo, "Accessibility, mobility and the development process" in, *Research Review: Institute of African Studies* (1995), n.s., vol. 11, no. ½, p. 1 – 15; Inez Sutton, "Some aspects of traditional salt production in Ghana" in, *Annales de l'Universite d'Abidjan*, Serie I, Histoire: (1983), t. 11, pp. 5 – 23; E. Amonoo, *The flow and marketing of cassava in the central region with special reference to Cape Coast*, (Cape Coast 1972) & J. Brian Wills (ed.), *Agriculture and land use in Ghana* (Oxford 1962).

[3] There is a fair amount of literature on the informal economies of Africa, but very little on the relation between motor-vehicles and the informal economy. Jemimah Wainaina, "The 'parking boys' of Nairobi" in, *African Journal of Sociology* (1981), vol. 1, no, ½, pp. 7 – 45; D.H. Afejuku, "Theft under a motor insurance policy in Nigeria" in, *Zambia Law Journal* (1988), vol. 20, pp. 20 – 31; Ritah Marima, Josephine Jordan and Kenna Cormie, "Conversations with street children in Harare, Zimbabwe" in, *Zambezia* (1995), vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 1 – 24; Kaendi J. Munguti, "Health last: the paradox of 'jua kali' enterprises in Kenya" in, *Kenya Journal of Sciences*, Series C, Humanities and Social Sciences (1997), vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 44 – 60; O.Y. Oyeneye, "Apprentices in the informal sector of Nigeria" in, *Labour Capital and Society* (1980), vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 69 – 79; Margaret Grieco et. Al. , *At Christmas and on rainy days: transport, travel and the female traders of Accra* (Aldershot 1996); Garcia Clark, *Pools, clients and partners: relations of capital and risk control between Kumasi market women*, paper presented at ASA, 25 – 28 October 1984 & Sara S. Berry, *From peasant to artisan: motor mechanics in a Nigerian town* (Boston 1983).

[4] Patrick Moriarty and Clive S. Beed, "Transport in Africa" in, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (1989, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 125 – 132.

[5] Daniel Compagnon, "Somali armed movements: the interplay of political entrepreneurship & clan-based factions" in, *African guerillas*, ed. By Christopher Clapham (Oxford 1998), pp. 73 – 90; Nene Mburu, "Contemporary banditry in the Horn of Africa: causes, history and political implications" in, *Nordic Journal of African Studies* (1999), vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 89 – 107 & Robert Buijtenhuijs, "Chad in the age of the warlords" in, *History of Central Africa: the contemporary years since 1960*, ed. By David Birmingham and Phyllis M. Martin (London 1998), pp. 20 – 40.

[6] Gus Liebnow, *Colonial rule and political development in Tanzania: the case of the Makonde*, (Evanston 1971), p. 144.

[7] Sara Berry, *Fathers work for their sons: accumulation, mobility and class formation in an extended Yoruba community* (Berkeley 1985); Roy Gentle, *Crime and poverty* (Cape Town 1984); J.U. Obot, "Urban development planning and environmental population in Africa: the case of Calabar municipality, Nigeria" in, *African Urban Quarterly* (1987), vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 96 – 104; W.F. Banyikwa, "Urban passenger transport problems in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania" in, *African Urban Quarterly* (1988), vol. 3, no. ½, pp. 80 – 93; James William Jordan, "Role segregation for fun and profit: the daily behaviour of the west African lorry driver" in, *Africa* (1978), vol. 48, no. 1, p. 30 – 46; Sjaak van der Geest, "'Sunny boy', chauffeurs, auto´s en Highlife in Ghana" in, *Amsterdams sociologisch tijdschrift*, jrg. 16, nr. 1, mei 1989, pp. 19 – 38; D.C.I. Okpala, "Traffic consideration in urban expansion: reviewing the Enugu town plan" in, *Nigerian Geographical Journal* (1980), vol. 23, no. ½, pp. 83 – 97; Ernst Dammann, "Einiges ueber 'omitandu'" in, *Afrika und Uebersee* (1996), Bd. 79, H. 2, pp. 271 – 294; Andrzej Lisowski, "Functional structure of Ghanaian towns in 1970" in, Africana Bulletin (1990), no. 36, pp. 95 – 108; K.B. Dickson, "The development of road transport in Southern Ghana

and Ashanti since about 1850" in, *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* (1961), vol. 5, part 1, pp. 33 – 42 & Hortense Powdermaker, *Copper Town: changing Africa: the human situation on the Rhodesian Copperbelt* (New York 1962).

[8]   Arlindo Chilundo, *Roads, Road Transport, And The Expansion of Commodity Production in Northern Mozambique*, paper presented at ASA 1992; *Economic and Social Impact of Rail and Road Transportation Systems in the colonial district of Mozambique (1900 – 1961)*, PhD thesis University of Minnesota 1995.

[9]   Frederick Cooper, "'Our Strike': Equality, Anticolonial Politics and the 1947 – 48 Railway Strike in French West Africa", in *Journal of African History*, Vol. 37, 1996, no. 1, pp. 81-118; James A. Jones, *The political Aspirations of Railroad Labor on the Chemin de Fer Dakar-Niger, 1905-1963*, paper presented at ASA 1992 & *An African Response to European Technology: Railway Merchants on the Chemin de Fer, Dakar-Niger, 1897-1914*, paper presented at ASA 1995; Lisa A. Lindsay, *Shunting between Manly ideals: Nigerian Railway Men, 1935-65*, paper presented at ASA 1995; *The Nigerian Railway, Industrial Relations, and the Magic of Modernization*, paper presented at ASA 1998; Katherine Weist, *Women of Tabora: Of Trains, Credits and Micro-Enterprises*, paper presented at ASA 1997; Nkasa Yelengi, *Working and Living along the Port-Francqui-Bukama Railroad: Labor Policies and Household Economic Strategies in Kamina Camp in the Belgian Congo*, paper presented at ASA 1997; Wale Oyemakinde, "Railway construction and operation in Nigeria, 1895 – 1911: Labour problems and socio-economic impact", in *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, vii (1974), pp. 303-24.

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[11]   S. Heap, "The development of motor transport in the Gold Coast, 1900-1939" in *Journal of Transport History*, v. 11 no. 2 1990 pp. 19-37; R. Poutier, "Transports et developpement au Zaire", in *Afrique Contemporaine*, 153 1990, pp.3-26; Hélène D'Almeida-Topor et al. (eds) *Les Transports en Afrique XIX – XX Siecle*, (Paris 1992).

[12]   Polly Hill, *The Migrant Cocoa Farmers of Southern Ghana* (Cambridge 1963).

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[14]   Luise White, "Cars Out of Place: Vampires, Technology, and Labor in East and Central Africa", in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (eds.) *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, London 1997).

[15]   Erdmute Alber, *Motorisation and Colonial Rule*, paper presented for the conference "Colonial Everyday Life in Africa", 6-7 October 1998, Leipzig.

[16]   Jan-Bart Gewald, *"We Thought we would be Free…": Socio-Cultural Aspects of Herero History in Namibia 1915 – 1940* (Cologne, 2000), Chapter 7, "Mobility, Space and Inofrmation: The Social Impact of the Motor Car in Nambia before 1940" pp. 208 - 42. This chapter was recently published in revised form as, Missionaries, Hereros, and Motorcars: Mobility and the Impact of Motor Vehicles in Namibia Before 1940, in *International Journal of African Historical Studies* Vol. 35, No. 2 –3 (2002) pp. 257 – 285.

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