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Panel: 'Everyday Mobilities in Africa'

Using an imperial project to mundane ends: The remains of the Cape to Cairo Railway and its various users, c. 1918 - 1963

This paper looks at how different groups of users of the Cape to Cairo Railway in Northern and Southern Rhodesia tried to exert influence on the railway operations. Doing so, the users pressured the railway to adapt to local demands, thus shaping the transformation of the Cape to Cairo Railway from being an unfulfilled imperial dream to become a regional transport infrastructure. Shedding light on the unplanned effects and appropriations of colonial infrastructure through everyday uses by different groups of actors, this paper aims to better understand the local effects of an imperial project and thus complicate the 'tool of empire' narrative which is usually employed when discussing the Cape to Cairo Railway.

The increased attention to users and their impact is part of a shift away from invention-based to operation-based investigations in the History of Technology. Authors such as David Edgerton (2006) claim that the real effects of many technologies are only felt years after their original invention. This temporal shift entailed a different understanding of the agents of a certain technology, hence users came into view. It is understood that users in their everyday activities exert influence on the designs and operations of technologies and infrastructures. By fulfilling or contradicting the expectations of planners and engineers, by demanding certain changes or adaptations, by simply using or not using a technology in their own ways, (non-) users co-create and adapt, at times appropriate, universal technologies to their local circumstances (see for instance Oudshoorn and Pinch, 2003).

Looking at user influence is especially interesting when studying transport infrastructures. Taking inspiration from Ashley Carse (2017), Alexander Badenoch and Andreas Fickers (2010), a means of organised transport can only be regarded 'infrastructure' when actors use it to perform a crucial function for a society or economy. Following an understanding of infrastructure as

inherently fragile (as it needs continuous maintenance efforts; Denis, 2019) and outdated (as its construction often takes a long time and keeping it always up-to-date is difficult; Howe et al., 2016) allows to examine the manifold ways in which users co-create and shape infrastructures. Users demand and enact improvements, or work around pitfalls of infrastructure thus taking an active stand towards it.

For reasons that are rather unclear, railway users have hitherto not prominently been included in these investigations of user-influence and local adaption. Perhaps it is assumed that railway operations are such rigid and thoroughly planned enterprises that there is little room for co-creation and adaption by everyday users. Understanding railways as equally fragile and outdated allows to challenge this assumption.

Based on files of the Northern and Southern Rhodesian administrations, letters and circulars of Rhodesia Railways and newspaper articles from Northern Rhodesia, this paper explores different dimensions of user influence on the remains of the Cape to Cairo Railway, namely Rhodesia Railways. These groups include farmers, local businesses and angry parents of school children which employed different strategies to make their voices heard. The demands were manifold: farmers demanded the permission to import and export cattle on the railways; a cement company insisted on higher capacities for its raw materials, warning that otherwise construction works in Northern Rhodesia would come to a standstill; riders requested permission to cross the rails to drill their horses; and a member of parliament asked for a foot bridge over the rails to the next pub. A recurring theme was the question of who had permission to sell food on board the train and at the stations, among them African traders who had been selling food at the railway since its construction. The complaints of all kinds were directed at both lower-level employees of the colonial administration as well as up to the Minister of Transport, or sent directly to the directors of the railway company. A particularly effective way was to raise public awareness through newspaper articles. A group of angry parents created a veritable media scandal when a school train missed its connection and the children had to spend the night in a hotel in Bulawayo. The newspaper articles put several state and railway actors under pressure at once, as the railways sat at the junction between private company interests, public co-

ownership and the provision of a crucial public service. Ultimately, Rhodesia Railways had to publicly apologize and promise to improve their services of school trains in the future. Other successful implementations of user demands included the provision of special coaches or trains, reduced rates for specific goods, the provision of improved facilities on railway stations and grants of level crossings and private sidings. By pressuring the railway company to enact these small, low level adaptations local users managed to step by step influence railway operations in their favour.

This is especially relevant as the Cape to Cairo Railway had not originally been built for its users. The Cape to Cairo Railway was a British imperial project to traverse the entire African continent to conquer and capitalize British colonial possessions between Cape Town and Cairo. To make the large infrastructure project profitable its routes were designed to connect mineral rich areas with harbours. Users other than mining companies (most of those controlled by the same company as the railway builder, the British South Africa Company) played a negligible role in the original design of the railways between 1890 and 1915. This changed when the increasing number of (European) immigrants, but also of the African inhabitants, demanded better services for themselves. The achievement of self-government under white settler rule in Southern Rhodesia in 1923 allowed this group to wield larger influence on the privately owned Rhodesia Railways. The purchase of the railways in 1947 finally put the railways into the hands of the settlers, where it remained also throughout the short-lived period of the Central African Federation (1953-63). During all those years and under the changing circumstances, however, different groups of users had various demands of the railways and tried to influence railway operations accordingly. The voices of African users especially grew louder during the years of federation. User demands therefore were subject to constant change and the railways had to develop with them.

Exploring the role of these users is part of my overall dissertation project to reconsider the history of the Cape to Cairo Railway. Most studies of this railway are concerned with the construction period and discuss it as a 'tool' (Headrick, 1981) of British imperialism until the Great War. While not necessarily wrong, those histories are mostly concerned with the colonizers view and often offer predictable, if not determinist interpretations of the railway. A history of railway

operations after 1918 is almost absent; the legacy of the Cape to Cairo Railway for the region remains understudied. The investigation of user influence between c. 1918 and 1963 allows to uncover how different, at times conflicting, groups used the imperial railway for their own ends and thereby transformed and 'localised' this infrastructure.

Biography:

Friedrich N. Ammermann is a PhD Researcher at the Department of History and Civilization of the European University Institute, Fiesole. His PhD deals with the (remnants of the) Cape to Cairo Railway in Southern Africa, c. 1918 to 1965. Before joining the EUI Friedrich completed the Master in Global History, jointly run by the Free University Berlin and Humboldt University of Berlin, in 2018, and a Bachelor's in History and Political Science at Free University Berlin in 2015. Contact: friedrich.ammermann@eui.eu