

People, technology, and nature: Operating a railway in the evergreen rainforest of lower Ivory Coast

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In the early years of the twentieth century, the evergreen rainforest of lower Ivory Coast became the scene for a variety of activities triggered by the French colonial administration. As a result of the occupiers' efforts to make the supposedly impenetrable thick undergrowth of this unique ecosystem accessible to colonial infrastructure systems and enable the expansion of the colonial economy, this natural environment underwent a phase of agricultural intensification and deforestation. Deforestation became especially visible when a swathe was made through the forest and trees of sixty meters in height were cut down. The axis of the railway line itself and a corridor of 30 metres left and right of the tracks were generally cleared. This corridor had to be maintained constantly as the forest's scrub regrew very quickly making the operation of the railway impossible if it was not taken care of regularly. The natural vegetation meant a constant threat to the colonial railway endeavour as it worked against infrastructure projects and the intentions of the colonial administration.

For the preparatory and maintenance work as well as later construction work along the railway line, the French colonial administration established a specific labour regime for which thousands of railway and forestry workers were recruited from within and outside the colony. Cohorts of woodcutters, mechanics, train drivers and security personnel from various parts of French West Africa (AOF) played a crucial role in the establishment of colonial infrastructure networks, the railway company's repair workshops in Abidjan and re-occurring everyday maintenance of the railway. The maintenance works were organized along the line of train kilometres and were meant to include locally recruited labour force. Every village in near proximity to the railway line, for example in Abbey country between kilometre 34 and 126, was supposed to provide workers (forced labour) to clear the undergrowth and keep the corridor of the railway free of vegetation.

Besides such local recruits, since 1908, approximately 4000 workers were recruited and employed in the construction of the railway line, which even increased to 5000 workers in 1912. At that time, most of the workers were recruited from across the colony from various districts like Korhogo, Kong, Bondoukou, Touba, Mankono, N'Zi-Comoé as well as Baoulé-Nord. Others were brought from neighbouring colonial territories of the AOF like Dahomey, Guinea, Senegal, Haut-Senegal and Niger while a large proportion of these workers came from Dahomey, later even leading to an exchange of workers between Dahomey and Ivory Coast.

Operation of the trains began as soon as a section of the line had been finished. The railway company operated and constructed at the same time, and this in a natural environment which not even the French colonial administration controlled entirely at the time—neither militarily nor administratively. The density of the vegetation and the unfamiliarity with the natural terrain meant a constant challenge. It therefore does not come as a surprise that the French were overtaxed by the first enemy attacks by members of the Abbey ethnic group in early 1910. Only a few years after construction had started, in January 1910, this local group of the Ivorian population inhabiting the forest landscape waged a forest guerrilla war against the colonial government, one of the Abbeys' main targets being the French colonial infrastructure. During the precise and carefully planned attacks, locomotives, train cars, the tracks, train stations and the telegraph line were damaged considerably. Consequently, both mobile and immobile repair workshops became increasingly important for the maintenance of the railway. These sites in Abidjan and in the forest soon became the centres of repair work. As the workshops' tasks expanded, particularly the Ivorian group of workers and repairmen were called upon. Apart from the supply of construction sites in the northern part of the territory with building material, in those days of military confrontation, the workers had to perform different works: modify the trains and wagons for combat, repair damaged material, and serve as armed railway guards.

Well organized repair workshops and health services became crucial for the operation of the railway and the transport of raw materials to the coast like caoutchouc, ivory and wood—a major motive behind the overall construction of the colonial railway project in Ivory Coast. Therefore, a health station and a medical service team within the railway company was created. Just as the mobile and immobile repair workshops in Abidjan and in the forest, the two major infirmaries and ambulances along the railway line became critical infrastructure nodes in the everyday operation of the railway.

The repair work during the war took place in three different localities: at the affected train stations and administrative posts, at the central repair workshops in Abidjan or right on different parts of the battlefield in the forest where trains had been attacked and temporarily derailed. French support troops often needed days or maybe a week to reach the sites of battle along the tracks, and mechanics needed time to repair, change, or renew damaged pieces. In terms of labour force in this initial month of the war between January 13 and 22 in 1910, repairing and maintaining the railway on the one hand meant that approximately 300 workers repaired the destroyed infrastructure like railway tracks, buildings, and the telegraph lines. On the other hand, about 60 workers and more than hundred armed guards were usually present at the repair and construction sites to guarantee the safety of the repair personnel. Due to lacking military capacities, since the Senegalese *tirailleurs* and other soldiers were mostly involved in fighting the Abbey in the forest, it became necessary for the railway company to arm its own staff to protect their railway stations and the various construction and repair sites.

As the influence of the Abbey war of 1910 and the composition of the natural forest environment show, the maintenance of the railway line to guarantee the railway's operation could only be assured by the continuous use of West African (migrant) labour to keep mobile repair sites, immobile repair workshops and supply lines running. Considering all challenges, be it of natural origin, signs of wear and tear or damages resulting from war, this paper scrutinizes the maintenance and repair workshops and argues that the people running them became an indispensable factor in the French railway endeavour. Without this labour force, the railway would not have come about in the first place, and it would not have continued to exist.

With the example of the Abidjan-Niger railway this paper shows that the construction of railway lines was, at best, a necessary but never a sufficient prerequisite for everyday colonial mobility. Without the human infrastructure of (migrant) labour (William Lyon) and the maintenance work these workers carried out, rail traffic would soon have come to a halt. People, skilled and unskilled workers alike, formed the backbone of the railway and were the facilitating force behind both the construction and the continuous maintenance and repair efforts in the evergreen rainforest.

The paper concludes that (colonial) mobility in Ivory Coast was shaped by the interactive everyday relationship between the forest, West African labourers and (railway) technology. It adds a multi-faceted narrative of everyday maintenance and repair to the overarching history of (colonial) mobility in Africa and here positions West African labourers and repair works at centre stage.