

## **Niels P Petersson: 'Adventure', 'ruthless commercialism' and 'nuisance': The East African Safari Rally and the use of Kenya's public roads for sporting purposes**

The Safari Rally was an automobile race on open public roads in British East Africa, and later in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, first run in 1953. From 1957 to 2002, it was part of the international rally championship calendar. Use of the road for sporting purposes had not been uppermost in the minds of those who planned and built colonial and post-colonial East Africa's road infrastructure, but the Safari Rally's extraordinary and long-lasting local and global popularity suggests that historians of mobility and transport should not ignore such seemingly frivolous, idiosyncratic and ludic engagement with mobility technologies and infrastructures. This paper will therefore examine the Safari Rally from the perspective of what it can tell us about road and automobile use.

The Safari Rally was, during its 'golden age' in the 1960s and 1970s, an event of undeniable regional and international importance. A wide range of stakeholder groups coalesced around the Safari. Local drivers represented a predominantly white, rather transnational, middle class, with a small number of Asians and, later, a mere handful of African drivers also taking part. From the beginning, the local motoring trade supported a number of entrants to advertise the capabilities of the cars they imported from various European countries. Newspapers found the Safari provided them with frontpage material and lucrative advertising revenue. The diverse and deeply divided local populations in both rural and urban areas across colonial and then post-colonial East Africa were in various and changing ways affected by the rally, whether as fans and spectators or as road users inconvenienced or enthused by the event. The governments of newly independent Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda quickly began to see the rally, despite its colonial origins, as a national asset, while quarrelling over who should host the start and finish. International motor manufacturers got involved with an eye on sales and advertising opportunities, and they brought in professional drivers, mechanics and managers to compete in East Africa. The international media – TV as well as the mainstream and motoring press – and even international motorsport's governing body, the Federation Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) played an ever more important role. These stakeholders' interests and influence were obviously affected by the wider global and local transformations accompanying decolonisation and developmentalism.

The Safari was a truly popular event, relying on thousands of (mostly white) volunteers and mobilising hundreds of thousands of spectators from all communities in urban areas. In rural areas, the reaction to the Safari was mixed. Going by published opinion, the Safari was at times controversial. Critical voices portrayed it as dangerous, frivolous, a waste of scarce resources, a celebration of mindless capitalist consumerism, an event run by, and for, non-Africans, and giving encouragement to dangerous driving. However, given the strength of the feelings and interests vested in the rally, criticism was brushed under the carpet as far as possible, and instead a concerted effort was undertaken to address the main thrust of the criticism by making the rally more accessible for African spectators and participants.

The stakeholders' engagement with the Safari can be read through a political economy paradigm, highlighting how the rally served or impacted their various interests. The highly unequal access to motor cars in colonial and post-colonial East Africa would have to be addressed in such a reading, as well as the role of individual mobility and private enterprise vs. public transport and state-led development in public policy, the relative strength of the various stakeholder groups, to name but a few factors.

However, it is perhaps as important to consider the 'automotive emotions' (Mimi Sheller) that underpinned the Safari and were stimulated by it. As an event featuring showroom-specification cars and run on open roads, it was sufficiently close to everyday mobility practices to make it readable and accessible to the growing group of motorists and aspiring motorists, but at the same time it also allowed drivers to engage in and spectators to witness an approach to driving that under ordinary circumstances would have been regarded as satisfyingly spectacular but too risky to contemplate. The Safari can thus be read as an almost carnivalesque inversion of everyday mobility practices. In interpretation highlighting 'automotive emotions' may help explain why this event, clearly based on the mobility practices of a privileged elite, found wider popularity.

Over time, however, it proved difficult to keep the rally thriving and relevant under changing circumstances. As rallying evolved into an ever more professional, advertising-financed global sport, it became more expensive and less accessible to local participants. Economic development made East Africa's roads busier and road rallying increasingly difficult to organise. Ironically, the more automobility – including travel by minibus, bus and motorcycle as well as a substantial increase in lorry traffic – became a feature of everyday life, the less space there was to run an open road rally such as the Safari. While the Kenyan government saw the Safari as part of a strategy to promote the country as a destination for international tourism, it did not fit in with Tanzania's or Uganda's development strategies. Even in Kenya, economic constraints made it increasingly difficult for local drivers to import cars and homologated spare parts for use in the rally. The Safari thus over time developed into a 'manufacturers' battleground', an advertising spectacle aimed at consumers in developed countries that happened to use East Africa as an exotic backdrop.

If we situate the Safari in its social and political context, it allows insight into competing claims to the public road made by different groups of users. For a while, it was possible to reconcile the interests of playful driving and mild adventure, relative safety, local and global spectators, local and global competitors, manufacturers, and the host states. In its 'golden age' in the 1960s and 1970s, the Safari thrived because of its deep local roots and wide global appeal. It demonstrates that the public road was perceived by many of its users as more than a utilitarian infrastructure – when they used the road, many wanted to experience the positive emotions generated by mobility, speed, and control over a powerful machine. These highly emotional experiences underpinned and were reinforced by marketing strategies, and they may even help explain developmental policies supporting popular aspirations to car ownership and individual mobility. As time went on, however, the logics of Africanisation, economic growth, individual prosperity, and global consumer capitalism pulled into different directions. The limits of a ludic and idiosyncratic engagement with the road became apparent, be it through the negative externalities generated by increasing traffic, through enduring economic penury or through the political limits placed on automobility and international economic exchanges by states in East Africa.

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