



© Steven Rojas on Unsplash

RESEARCHING AUTOMOBILITY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY KENYA

Alina Oswald

According to various sources, the first automobile in what would become the Republic of Kenya was unloaded by dockworkers in Mombasa in 1903. The French-manufactured De Dion-Bouton sat idle, its owner awaiting the petrol to power its internal combustion engine. Even when fully fuelled, the automobile had limited use without a road network, spare parts or a fuel infrastructure. Over the following decades, people, cars and other necessary materials would form a successful socio-technical system of automobile transportation. Because they were prohibitively expensive at first, early consumers of automobiles were predominantly wealthy white settlers. After the First World War, African



© Alina Oswald

Automobility - Ghana Road, Nairobi - March 2016

and Indian entrepreneurs had taken over the urban taxi services. The transport sector was highly regulated by the 1930s, excluding Africans from owning vehicles. Eventually, through a series of petitions to the colonial government and a policy shift, African-owned transport businesses became a reality in the mid-1940s.

In my dissertation project, I trace the history of automobility in Kenya by focusing on the advent, adaptation and establishment of road transportation, from the arrival of the first motor vehicles in 1903 up until the early 1990s. Case studies are set in Kisumu and Mombasa, both places were joined by the Uganda Railway in the East African Protectorate in 1901. Already twenty years after the opening of the Uganda Railway, colonial officials grew anxious about the competition from motor vehicles. Automobility allowed people, goods and ideas to move relatively freely, at speed and without incurring railway taxation.

Based on primary sources (archival documents, photographs, literature, interviews, observations) and secondary sources (socioeconomic and political histories, technology studies, geographical work), my project enquires how residents

used the technology of motorised transportation to maintain varying degrees of autonomy over spatial movement. The core hypothesis is that automobility generated alternative urban possibilities for political

and economic participation, as well as social inclusion. Notions of race, class, and gender come into play when considering who drove, used, repaired or regulated the vehicles. Performing automobile practices has reinvented the habitus of drivers and passengers around the world. With the intersectional approach, I attempt to examine the constitution of social groupings, the power struggles between them and how this, in turn, brought about gendered, classed, and racialised automobility in the two case study cities.

In February this year, I explored Colonial and War Office documents relating to the construction of road infrastructure, transportation and urban planning, now held at The National Archives in Kew, England. From August to December 2019, I will begin another research phase in Kisumu and Mombasa, as well as in the capital while affiliated with the history department at the University of Nairobi. Much of the twentieth century can be covered by documents held at the city councils, business funds and state-wide, provincial and district branches of the Kenya National Archives. Working with colonial administration sources poses the challenge of bringing in perspectives of local communities even when reading documents “against the grain”. As such, photographs from private and public collections and a review of literary sources by

non-European authors may offer an illuminating counterpoint.

For the research on the second half of the twentieth century, I seek to establish a network of transport professionals and users for interviews as well as determine sites for observing automobile practices, e.g. transport departments of the administrations, central markets, or vehicle repair workshops. During previous research spells, I have experienced how transport professionals relate historical and life events to the vehicles they engage with. Accordingly, I will run a trial of treating motor vehicles as “biographical objects” with the intention of learning about interlocutors’ life stories. These narratives can provide evidence on whether, when and how various actors indeed secured “alternative possibilities” to meet their aspirations in urban spaces shaped by (post)colonial urban materiality and its politics. By taking these steps over the next months, I hope to specify key topics, actors, and arenas and refine research methods for further fieldwork in 2020.

About the Author:

Alina Oswald holds an MA in African Studies from the IAAW where she was an assistant lecturer for an international fieldwork course within the East African-German Transdisciplinary University Network (EAGER Trans-Net) in 2017/18. Her PhD project on automobility in twentieth-century Kenya is supervised by Prof. Baz Lecocq and is funded by an Elsa Neumann grant of the Land Berlin.



© Alina Oswald