



## **History Beyond “Manpower”: Toward a More Usable Past of Tanzanian Skill**

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This essay attempts to chart a more usable past for skill in Tanzania’s history. It does so by de-naturalizing a narrative of African skill-lessness, demonstrating instead that such gaps had to be produced and sustained by both colonial and national governments. In turn, these governments used problematic definitions of useful knowledge that ignored much of what Tanzanians did and knew (from farming to auto mechanics), including myriad examples of expertise available for historians to write empirical histories of African technological competence and creativity. Despite this evidence – and a broader move to take on colonialist narratives in historiography, as the call for this conference details – assumptions of absent African skill continue to shape public discourse and academic research from economics to world histories of technology (Mavhunga, 2017; Chrikikure, 2017; Brownell, 2022; Grace, 2022; d’Avignon, 2022). This essay focuses on one aspect of that absence narrative, “manpower” studies, and suggests a focus on material culture – and materiality more broadly – offers plentiful evidence to move beyond this mythic history of African incapacity and toward a more useful and factual narrative of skill.

While much attention has been paid to the disparaging of African creativity in the colonial period, during the era of independence, the belief in African skill gaps found expression in “manpower” studies that repeatedly identified absences in the “mid” and “high level” expertise that, planners asserted, were most critical for economic growth. Funded by the Ford Foundation, “manpower” studies conducted in the early 1960s in Tanzania laid the foundation for a repackaged belief in African skill-lessness that ultimately led to the creation of a Ministry of Manpower to create a closer match between skill, technology, and state-directed national development. In socialist Tanzania, such studies and planning sat uncomfortably alongside leader Julius Nyerere’s stated belief in using ideas and skills Tanzanians already had and the state’s ideology of “self-reliance” (Rweyewamu, 1973). In calling “manpower” approaches “an extension of the missionary atmosphere that produced white collar workers in the colonial period,” Walter Rodney recognized that who and/or what counted as skilled in such studies impacted what type of society Tanzanians could build (Rodney, 1967). Less than a decade after this statement, most planners admitted to the failures of “manpower” approaches to skill quantification and economic planning even as they clung to a belief of a creativity gap.

Pivoting from these confessions, I ask: In the historical wake of manpower’s admitted failures, what if historical narratives of Tanzanian knowledge started with the presence of multiple types of skill? And how can materiality move the conversation beyond existing categories about which types of skills count in public and academic technological histories?