

Approaching Adaption and Use of Automotive Technologies Based on Interviews: A Case Study of Two Kenyan Regions, 1950s-1970s

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In recent years more historical works were published which analyse technologies and material culture in an African context by eschewing a euro-centrism. A series of new works provide automobility histories that are counterpoints to the technology histories set in the Western Europe and North America by showing how technologies were adapted in a specific political context to fit the needs of communities and their socioeconomic circumstances (Grace 2022, Mutongi 2017, Hart 2016). Today, new policies are required to create more sustainable and equal transportation systems using less fossil fuel and creating less pollution than vehicles with internal combustion engines (Sheller 2018). Yet, to develop future transport systems requires an understanding of the different and variegated histories of the use and adaption of motor vehicles for transportation. This paper provides a case study on automobilities in coastal and western Kenya from circa the 1950s to the 1970s that shows how vehicle body builders, vehicle interior designer, mechanics, drivers and passengers brought about specific regional or local forms of passenger transport. The contribution suggests including interviews of automobilities' primary actors not only in writing 'usable pasts' but in teaching histories of technology and material culture. It argues that the use and adaption of motor transport was often shaped below the national level and resulted in a variety of different forms of maintenance, provision and function of motor transportation. Factors such as remoteness, absence of financial institutions, road conditions, holidays and cultural practices influenced the technologies in use. This paper concludes that more sustainable and equal transportation systems can only be achieved, firstly, by taking African technology histories and their actors seriously and secondly, by recognising and examining subnational processes in the adaption of technologies.