

## Book Review

Joshua Grace. *African Motors: Technology, Gender and the History of Development*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021

By

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As global histories of technology and technology adoption emerge, there has been general emphasis on STS scholarship to be decentred from the bastions of the global North to global South knowledge frontiers. Part of this development has been the growing interest in technology stories of repair and maintenance. Africa finds itself positioned within such scholarship that focuses on the everyday experiences of ordinary people with technology in use. On this backdrop, *African Motors: Technology, Gender and the History of Development* by Joshua Grace (2021) comes in handy to lend a great contribution to the discourse on the appropriation of motor vehicles as tools of mobility in the socio-cultural context of Tanzania in the colonial and independence periods respectively. Joshua Grace, through this work, aims at showing that both social and technological shaping applied differently for garage work and urban transport. The garage becomes a space where things could be reworked into viable, even desirable, worlds of socio-technical interaction.

The book comes out as a well-researched work that taps into the great potential of anthropological and other ethnographic methodologies to represent the history of urban mobility as a complex sociocultural and technopolitical space that is also gendered. The book is organized into five well-structured chapters with an introduction and conclusion as well.

*Chapter One* introduces readers to the main components of the book's mechanic complex that encompasses cars as incoming technologies for mobility, roads and paths as socio-culturally constructed and utilized; and people as users (African walkers and drivers) who forged their own institutions of training and validation on street corners and loading docks, as put by the author. The author explores the mobility landscape in the precolonial era where portage emerges as integral. It actually persists into the early 1900s during the advent of European imperial consolidation of power in Tanganyika (modern day Tanzania) despite the onset of automobiles. According to Joshua Grace, officials in Tanganyika had hoped to use vehicles to free up rural labour by shifting work from human transport (portage) to increased agricultural production in a sedentary space. Production "efficiency" and social change was by extension attached to the assumption that labour freed portage would align to colonial cultures of technology, movement and production. The question of labour migration assumes centre stage in the development of forms of mobility within the colonial context. The contrast between the vernacular *njia* (road/path) and the incoming British transport

technologies brings to the fore the dynamics of imperialist control vis-à-vis indigenous and localized modes of human and material movement.

It is in *Chapter Two* that the reader gets to interact with a lengthy history of car repair in Tanzanian cities. Repair and maintenance of cars becomes a landscape of masculinizing automobility. The government, right from colonialism into independence, controls the mobility techno-space through training, standardization, certification and creation of a certain breed of drivers, operators and motor vehicle mechanics. The question of technological artifacts as political entities and tools for economic exploitation of colonies is demonstrated by the indication that railway transport was given preference and the construction of motorable roads that would have challenged the railways monopoly on haulage forbidden. Funding requests were denied to fulfil this objective. Joshua Grace vividly tells a history of garages as landscapes for making and remaking both cars and men. Also garages, to a crop of young African men migrating to urban areas, offered opportunities for them to forge alternative cultures of expertise and validation of their newly acquired knowledge as they built, remodelled and fixed cars.

In *Chapter Three*, the author offers a history of urban mobility in Dar es Salaam as the capital of Tanzania. Nation building and the creation of a specific form of citizenship is ideologically navigated through the everyday technologies of transport as a mark of departure from that which had characterized the colonial political economy. The

expectation is that technologies, in this case buses, would be decolonized and adaptable to the vision of a socialist city space. Technological citizenship manifests through the objective of creating efficient workers and more humane socialists as a state demand. Chapter Four explores the chaos occasioned by the 1970s oil shocks and a dwindling economy juxtaposed on the socialist utopia that represented State failure. Technological citizenship is extended to the link between refined petroleum and rural modernization. Chapter Five relies on oral histories to illustrate that mobility as a gendered space was personalized to the making of lives and livelihoods for self and families. The author states that motorized domesticities required not only intimate knowledge of regional transport landscapes but also what drivers and passengers called a “cowardly” approach to motor mobilities.

For this work, the author employs a wealth of anthropological and historical methods to bring forth a detailed history of automobility that is premised on repair and also explores the garage as a production space. The remodeling, repurposing, redesigning and modification of cars and car parts relied on a mechanic’s ability to not only read a dynamic landscape of used parts but also make parts from different makes and models commensurate with a broken vehicle. Unionizing as the bringing together of different car parts is seen by the author as a form of resurrection or giving back life. The idea of place and location in technological representation comes out clearly as rural mechanics see their urban counterparts as simply

lacking in skill as they only “take off and put on”. This is because they can access spare parts from the many spare part shops in the city while in the rural areas that lack readily available spare parts, the mechanic has to bring to the fore novel expertise of repurposing, remodeling and sometimes simply bringing together of various parts to inject life back to the broken-down vehicles. The garage is also a techno-political space where identity is shaped, status earned and raised. Nick-naming reinforces the created identities that are forged within these landscapes of motor vehicle repair and maintenance.

Joshua Grace not only shows mastery of research methods that help bring to the fore this detailed history of motors in Tanzania and that which is hinged on the location of repair garages as in-between places linking producers and consumers but also undertakes an active role in one of the repair garages. This offers a first-hand experience through which the detailed account is made possible. It is also obvious that the author as a researcher benefits from the deeper understanding of Kiswahili as a local language. Through *African Motors*, Joshua Grace helps provide a knowledge base for understanding African mobility landscapes and also augments repair and maintenance studies within STS in general.