

Ruin of Empire

The Uganda Railway and Memory Work in Kenya

Norman Aselmeyer

Abstract • This article is concerned with the memory of the Uganda Railway in Kenya. Built during the heyday of British imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century, the colonial railway has been a highly contested infrastructure. Drawing on museum exhibitions, public speeches, and publications, the article argues that the main narrative of the railway line as a tool of oppression began to change when the railway infrastructure gradually deteriorated in the mid-twentieth century. I show how three distinct groups (white expatriates, Kenyan-Asians, and Kenya's political elite) were involved in creating a new public memory that popularized the Uganda Railway as a cornerstone of the postcolonial nation. Their uncoordinated but simultaneous efforts toward a new reading of the past all aimed, albeit for different reasons, at reimagining the nation. The article thus shows mechanisms of coming to terms with the colonial past in a postcolonial nation.

Keywords • British Empire, colonialism, infrastructure, Kenya, nation building, Uganda Railway

Kenya's official languages:
English, Kiswahili, and Silence.
There was also memory.
— Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor¹

When Kenya went to the polls in 2017, the reelection bid of the ruling coalition centered on the infrastructure projects (roads, electrification, and railway) that the national government had successfully implemented.² The flagship project was the new Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), an almost five hundred kilometer-long train link between Mombasa at the Kenyan coast and the national capital Nairobi, which aimed to replace the old and dilapidated colonial railway built by the British over a century earlier. President Uhuru Kenyatta wanted to see the line completed during his first term in office. And he succeeded. Started in November 2013, the construction of the Chinese-built railway reached Nairobi on 31 May 2017, a few months before the election.³ At the inauguration ceremony, the president called the railway a “cornerstone for future development” that would mark “Kenya's transformation to an industrialized, prosperous and middle-income country.”⁴ In a campaign



rally shortly before the election, he reiterated this promise by declaring the SGR to be “the foundation for prosperity.”⁵

Besides its political value, the new railway had a symbolic meaning too. Already at the inauguration ceremony, Kenyatta linked the new line with the old colonial railway, saying he expected the new railway “to transform the economy and landscape of Kenya in a similar fashion as the lunatic express changed the face of Kenya.” He added that the old colonial railway had been the foundation of modern Kenya despite the criticisms it faced at the time of construction.⁶ For a ruling president of a postcolonial African nation, this was a perplexing statement. After all, historians have shown that railroads, like other colonial infrastructure, rarely were carriers of prosperity, as the president insinuated. Rather than an accurate historical analysis, Kenyatta’s speech relates to common representations of the country’s first railway in the Kenyan public. The memory of the colonial railway has been a contested terrain since the opening of the line in 1901, having produced several competing representations of the railway up to this day.

This article deals with the way in which the Uganda Railway has been remembered in Kenya, from the early beginnings of railway construction in the late nineteenth century to the most recent election in 2017. My main question relates to the forces that shaped public memory; that is, the actors, ideas, and agendas that formed the basis of memory work in the East African country. I use the term “memory work” to indicate that although historical memory is made and is always and ever under construction, it becomes tangible at specific moments and places, such as museum exhibitions, publications, and political campaigns. The outcome of the process of “memory work” is open but cannot be separated from political and social interests.⁷ Such a perspective turns attention to both the actors who prompt certain kinds of memories and their motives. For my analysis, I will draw on the moments and events that made “memory work” visible, focusing on museum exhibitions (particularly the history exhibition at the National Museum of Kenya and the Nairobi Railway Museum) and on public discourse (particularly newspapers and book publications). I argue that the Uganda Railway, once stripped of its colonial core, was able to fill gaps in the nation-building process and provide a common national experience (or, as Jan Assmann would have it, a “connective structure”) to the fragmented and diverse nation.⁸

In public discourse over the legacy of empire, colonial railroads have played a rather unfortunate role. Ignoring most of the research on the complex history of railway infrastructure in colonial contexts, two opposing sides have fought over the impact of railways with largely clichéd and monolithic arguments. While the “ameliorist” school claims that railways were beneficial to colonial development, the “immiserationist” school conceives of them exclusively as tools of oppression.⁹ Colonial

railways have become, as Nitin Sinha has persuasively argued, a “whipping boy of reductionist arguments.”¹⁰ Hardly ever, however, were the people asked whose lives the railways permeated.¹¹ In order to interrogate the ways Kenyans have remembered their colonial infrastructure, I read the Uganda Railway as a “ruin of empire.” The concept of “ruin” is borrowed from Christopher Woodward, who defines it as a “dialogue between an incomplete reality and the imagination of the spectator.”¹² The concept is a conflation of past and present that articulates an interpretative process based on a material witness (whose history is messy and still being written) and the perspective of a viewer whose perception is bound to the present. By providing the missing fragments, the eye of the contemporary observer reassembles the ruin and endows it with new meaning. Hence, Woodward remarks that “ruins do not speak; we speak for them.”¹³ In this sense, colonial infrastructures can be understood as archives of their own that can be interrogated via their materiality and cultural representations.

Railway and Nationhood

The Uganda Railway has a prominent position in Kenya’s central museum, the Nairobi National Museum. Located on Museum Hill, north of the Central Business District of Kenya’s capital, the Nairobi National Museum is the flagship museum of Kenya’s history, culture, and nature. While the natural heritage exhibition in the museum has a long history going all the way back to the colonial origins of the museum in 1910, the history exhibition is a recent addition. The history gallery was opened in October 2010, after the museum had been closed for several years for renovations.¹⁴ Although the museum management did not originally intend to create a history exhibition, in 2005 strong public demand prompted the management to include a section dealing with the country’s past.¹⁵ The “History of Kenya” gallery, which serves primarily Kenyan visitors, was a milestone and filled an important gap in the Kenyan museum landscape.

The script for the permanent history exhibition was a collaborative effort written by three distinguished Kenyan historians and discussed in subsequent planning meetings.¹⁶ The storyline worked around the country’s colonial past with three distinct rooms on the precolonial, the colonial, and the postcolonial period. The Uganda Railway opens the second room on the colonial phase, which is dedicated to the “creation of modern Kenya” and shows a front fender of an old steam locomotive and railway tracks (see Figure 1).¹⁷ While this part of the exhibition is particularly popular with children, as it appeals to their visual and haptic senses, it is not without symbolic meaning. The railroad tracks represent an actual threshold that visitors must cross to enter “modern Kenya,” as the



Figure 1. The Uganda Railway in the “History of Kenya” exhibition at the Nairobi National Museum. (© Saitabau ole Lulunken)

museum’s storyboard refers to the country’s colonial era. In this reading, the Uganda Railway paved Kenya’s transition into modernity. Such an interpretation is supported by a quote of Charles Eliot, the commissioner at the time of the railway’s construction, which is uncritically engraved on a golden plaque at the entrance of the colonial history section. The plaque reads “It is not uncommon for a country to create a railway, but it is uncommon for a railway to create a country.”¹⁸

The memory of the Uganda Railway, crystallized here in the Nairobi National Museum, tells the story of the railway as a story of nationalism and modernity. It is this very memory of the line that Uhuru Kenyatta referred to when he inaugurated the Chinese built SGR. The new railway, Kenyatta remarked in 2017, will open a “new chapter in Kenya’s history, [a history that began 122 years ago] when the British kicked off the train to nowhere...that ultimately formed the basis of the new nation of Kenya.”¹⁹ The president and the museum curators alike linked the country’s foundation to a colonial railway.

The Uganda Railway was constructed as a colonial infrastructure. In 1896, a year after the British proclaimed a protectorate over the territory, the construction of the line began. Only five years later, in 1901, the

track reached its destination at Lake Victoria. Connecting Mombasa at the Indian Ocean with Kisumu in the East African interior, the railway ran through the territory of present-day Kenya from its eastern shore to its western border (see Figure 2). At the time of its construction, the railway's destination was still in Uganda, hence its name. The nearly one thousand kilometers of railway were built by African workers and indentured laborers from British India, of whom several thousand died on the job. Although many British groups lobbied for the building of a railway in East Africa, the main reasons for its construction were strategic. Natural resources were not known in the territory, and European settlers had not arrived yet. But the country was important as a passageway to Uganda, which was thought to harbor the source of the Nile. Since the Upper Nile was considered central to the security of Egypt and the Suez Canal, the Foreign Office decided to build a railroad to forestall the encroachment of other empires.²⁰

Originally planned as a strategic military line, the Uganda Railway had to be assigned to another purpose after its completion in 1901, as the political situation in East Africa had eased after the Fashoda Incident in 1898. The protectorate's commissioner, Charles Eliot (1900–1904), opted to open the Kenyan Highlands for white settlement in order to generate revenue for the railway and repay the huge loan to the British Treasury for its construction. Consequently, the railway became an instrument of violent conquest and land expropriation.



Figure 2. Map of Colonial East Africa and the Uganda Railway. (© Norman Aselmeyer)

The British were both “the author and the audience” of the railway.²¹ Its colonial and violent history makes today’s memory of the Uganda Railway paradoxical. Since the late 1990s, the railway has become the centerpiece of a new national founding myth, which credits it with the foundation of the country. Kenya prides itself on a “railway that built a nation,” to quote the title of a recent publication.²² Peter Kimani, a Kenyan author and journalist, gave an interesting explanation in a recent newspaper article, without referring to the myth itself. He wrote that “the railway line created something new: a tapestry of townships hewn from the train stations, kneading a beadwork that formed modern Kenya.” By establishing and tying together urban Kenya, Kimani argued, the railroad created the country spatially by connecting the country’s urban centers on a string of rails.²³ These urban centers formed the “cradle of Kenyan-ness” and the country’s economic backbone. While Kimani describes the railroad from the perspective of the present, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Kenya’s leading writer and postcolonial thinker, provides a historical perspective. In 2019, he wrote that the railway was “the single most important event in Kenyan modern history.”²⁴ In other words, the railway was that event in Kenyan history that constructed a common identity, an identity that united the patchwork of territories, peoples, and cultures into a national whole. Thus, the railway was the joint reference point of Kenyan history.

The representation of the Uganda Railway is the result of nation-building efforts and the deliberate outcome of “memory work.” By drawing on mainly western narratives of transport infrastructure (which were often based on connotations of integration and modernity, reinforced by a politically enforced process of colonial aphasia), it was possible to sideline the dark history of the Uganda Railway.

Prophecies of Domination

As the deliberate outcome of memory work, the representations of the railway have changed in the past hundred years. In this article, I outline the changes in public memory regarding the Uganda Railway. At the very beginning, the railroad was seen as an alien imposition. At the time of the Scramble for Africa, soothsayers in nearly all Kenyan communities predicted the coming of European invaders and the beginning of the colonial age.²⁵ Kimnyole arap Turukat, the Nandi *orkoiyot* (spiritual leader), prophesied on his deathbed in 1890 that in the near future, “white people would come who would wage war with the Nandi, kill their sons, seize their cattle, and drive them out of their homes.” They would bring with them, Kimnyole’s prophecy went on, a huge “serpent that would crawl along the ground, shriek, and puff smoke,” later identified as the Uganda Railway. He advised his people to leave the earth as it was no longer a

safe place.²⁶ Regardless of the community, the prophecies were told in a similar way throughout the country. They announced the coming of white strangers with terrifying objects. To this day, the prophecies are still remembered and told to younger generations, although they have lost their immediate relevance. It was from these stories that the old colonial railway derived its still popular nickname “iron snake.”²⁷

In the early years of colonial rule in East Africa, the railway had already been identified as the prime tool of foreign conquest. Most prophecies were recorded in later years, beginning in the late 1900s, when the consequences of colonial domination were felt the strongest. It is very telling that there are no recorded prophecies regarding slavery, forced labor, Mau Mau, the world wars, famines, epidemics, or other events that shaped the experiences of millions of Kenyans. As a tool of colonial rule, the railway was associated with the misery people endured. There was also stiff resistance to the construction of the line by several communities, especially by the Nandi of Western Kenya who fought for more than a decade against the British presence in their territory, sabotaging the material infrastructure and attacking railway workers. The Nandi were subdued by force in several small wars with troops and materiel transported by the railway. After the Nandi *orkoiyot* Koitalel arap Samoei was killed in an ambush in 1905, precipitating the end of the Nandi resistance a year later, the British created a reserve north of the railway to move the people away from the colony’s central infrastructure. By transporting troops and white settlers to the Kenyan Highlands, the railway paved the way for the loss of land and livelihoods.²⁸

It took until the 1920s for the railway to become a medium of mass transport. Until then, most Kenyans avoided riding the railway. They only did so when their fare was paid by their employers. Kenyans preferred to walk along the railway line, sometimes hundreds of kilometers. The reasons for this ranged from the expensive fares and the poor hygienic condition of the third-class coaches to culturally induced skepticism about mechanized transport. There are several accounts of East Africans admitting their fear of train travel. For example, Sameni ole Kivasis, who first traveled on the Uganda Railway in 1897, wrote that “I began my journey by boarding the train at Kilindini. This was the first time I entered a railroad car, and it frightened me...even more than the journey by ship.”²⁹

Although rail travel became more common and the railroad permeated the lives of Kenyans, the train retained its colonial aura. As the testimonies before the Carter Land Commission in the 1930s show, the railroad was strongly associated with the crimes of colonial conquest. Harry Thuku of the Kikuyu Central Association complained that “our land was never won by conquest, by the force of arms, nor even by peaceful penetration.” Instead, it was the railroad “which took away a big

chunk of our homeland....Little did we dream that the innocent looking trains of the railway would...rob us of our very existence and drive us from our homelands."³⁰ The railway was also the space where colonial society was molded. This was evident in the preferential treatment given to Europeans as passengers and laborers but also in the fact that all railroad extensions served the interests of white settlers only.³¹ As a microcosm of colonial society, the railway amplified the racial, economic, and political inequalities of the colony. For Parmenas Githendu Mockerie, a Kikuyu from Murang'a, the fabric of colonial society became apparent in the railroad car. After getting into the train in 1931, he was told that "as we were Africans (we were traveling second class), we were not entitled to use the dining-car, which was reserved for Europeans." Africans had to eat their meals in their carriage, the steward informed him. "It was very late when he brought the supper, and when I tasted the soup it made me feel sick, as it was very cold, being what was left after the Europeans had been served; and afterwards I could not fall asleep because I felt hungry, for although I had paid for the supper I did not eat it."³² Until independence, the Uganda Railway was the face of the injustices of the colonial era.

This general perception of the railroad gradually crumbled by the end of empire. Over time, the Uganda Railway became an integral part of urban life in Kenya, rail transport came to be considered an equal form of transport and traveling, and the railway corporation shaped the private and work lives of many Kenyans. Particularly important for the change of perception was the railway workforce. In Kenya, the railway became the single largest employer in the country. By 1955, the East African Railways and Harbours Corporation had more than fifty-six thousand permanent African staff.³³ Working with the railway was considered prestigious. The job offered a stable income and came with certain advantages, such as workers' housing, which was among the best in Nairobi.³⁴

Nevertheless, the situation was extremely tense in the 1940s and 1950s. While the African and Indian workers took pride in their work at the railways, deplorable living conditions, low wages, and hazardous working environments led to a wave of strikes in Mombasa and Nairobi. The railway workers became the "torchbearers of labour militancy in Kenya," which shook the British colonial government and accelerated the struggle for independence.³⁵ In addition, railroad workers became an important source of Mau Mau supporters; one of them was Waruhiu Itote, who acted as "a fireman on the Railways by day and a revolutionary by night."³⁶ African and Indian unionists, nationalists, and freedom fighters all used the railway for their ends. In this climate, the identification of the railways with colonial power dissolved. The railroad had joined the anticolonial struggle.

Memory after Independence

An example of this changed perspective is a letter by Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of independent Kenya, addressed to railroad workers after the country gained freedom, in which he wrote that “Kenya and the Railways are indissolubly linked.” Contrary to later interpretations, Kenyatta did not see a causal relationship between the two. Rather, he saw both the country and the railroad as having developed side by side; in his words, “They have grown together from small beginnings to manhood, from nothing to nationhood.” Since the railroad was now in the service of the new nation, he enlisted it for the difficult task ahead. Kenyatta called on the railroad to contribute to nation building. His letter ended with a plea “to work hard and to work together for a greater Kenya.”³⁷

From the middle of the century, the railway line faded into the background both politically and symbolically. Particularly, the economic decline of the railroad was instrumental. As road transport expanded and proved to be a cheaper and more reliable alternative to rail traffic, fewer people and goods traveled by train. Subsequent reductions in revenues delayed the maintenance and modernization of the infrastructure and rolling stock, which deteriorated sometimes beyond repair.³⁸ The decaying state of the railroad correlated with the academic interest of Kenyan historians in its colonial history. While the railroad has attracted considerable attention from British writers,³⁹ Kenyan scholars have avoided studying the Uganda Railway.

As the railroad gradually became a ruin, its altered material status allowed for a rereading of its history. The violent memories of the line faded away amidst the efforts for independence and nation building. However, it took until the 1990s for public memory to change and for a new memory paradigm to take hold. *Maendeleo* (development) became the buzzword in the post one-party state era after Daniel arap Moi left office as president in 2002. It was via this development agenda of the subsequent governments and the political liberation of the country after Moi’s rule that the memory of the railway as founding stone of the Kenyan nation was firmly established. Three groups (British activists and writers, Kenyan politicians, and the Kenyan-Asian community) actively shaped public memory in this process. Interestingly, their effort was not coordinated but coincidental. Nonetheless, their attempts to direct Kenyan memory converged and reinforced each other. In what follows, I will briefly portray the “memory work” of each group.

White Expatriates

The first group who promoted a specific memory of the Uganda Railway were British nationals and white Kenyans. A very influential group were those historians and writers who first historicized the railway, such as Mervyn Hill, Charles Miller, Ronald Hardy, Brian Yonge, and Kevin Patience, who mostly perpetuated colonial narratives. According to Miller, the railway played an indispensable role in the making of Kenya. He argued that the Uganda Railway transformed Kenya from an “isolated trash heap” into an “imperial promised land.”⁴⁰ In 1985, John Brian Hollingsworth wrote that the “Construction of the so-called Uganda Railway was the start of civilization in what is now known as Kenya.”⁴¹

Other key players included a group of white railway employees, particularly Fred Jordan and Joe Sheffield, who laid the foundation for the Nairobi Railway Museum. Jordan became the first curator of the museum in 1971. Owned by the Kenya Railways Corporation, the museum was established in order to preserve the history of the railway (see Figure 3). From the onset, there were strong colonial underpinnings to the exhibition, which focused on the railway’s masterful engineering and the



Figure 3. Permanent Exhibition at the Nairobi Railway Museum, 2017. (© Norman Aselmeyer)

contribution of the line to the country's development, while leaving out any critical aspects of its history.

The museum exhibition has not changed significantly since it first opened its doors. "The Nairobi Railway Museum narrates the tale of Kenya's evolvment," a recent brochure states, summarizing its mission.⁴² In doing so, the exhibition, though largely descriptive and disconnected, establishes a progressive and largely naïve reading of the railroad. An older, undated booklet written by Bryan Harris and Judith Sidi Odhiambo declares that,

The truth is that the building of the Uganda Railway...literally created the country that became Kenya....How this all came to pass is a story that incorporates all the ingredients of a good novel, namely: mystery, intrigue, death and some romance thrown in just to thicken the plot.⁴³

Until today, the museum exhibition avoids any critical engagement with the railway's history. When the group of British railway enthusiasts started the museum, they reproduced narratives about the line that had been voiced by British colonialists from the early twentieth century onwards. Edward Grigg, governor of Kenya from 1925 to 1930, stated in 1927 that,

Into this empty paradise...there enters a British Government and British Colonists, all on the back of the Uganda Railway—which alone made it possible—for the Railway is the beginning of all history in Kenya. Without it, there would be no history of Kenya.⁴⁴

This narrative is still alive in the museum. In a recent newspaper interview, the museum's curator, Maurice Barasa, insisted that the railway had "made the country."⁴⁵

Kenya's Political Class

The second group pushing for a nationalist memory of the railway is Kenya's political elite. With independence, Kenya embarked on a nation-building process. Jomo Kenyatta attempted to create a unified national narrative characterized by a rhetoric of progress and prosperity. This idea was embodied in Kenyatta's slogan *uhuru na kazi* (freedom and work). For such a future-oriented nationalist project, Kenyatta believed that the past needed to be forgotten. As he observed, "We cannot build a happy and progressive nation as long as men harbour ill feelings about the past." Kenyatta's mantra of "forgive and forget" became official state policy, fostering a state-orchestrated aphasia of the country's past.⁴⁶ The result

was silence in the official representation of history. Accordingly, Kenyan writer Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor remarks that silence was one of the country's official languages. Yet despite the public silence, memory has survived.

The problem with Kenya's past was that, unlike in other countries, in Kenya there was no common nationalist movement. The Land and Freedom Army (commonly referred to as Mau Mau) was dominated by the Kikuyu people. Kenyatta, however, established the narrative that all Kenyan communities had fought for independence, without referring to any specific period or event. Instead of seeking a common and inclusive national narrative, the country took refuge in compartmentalized histories of ethnic communities.

Kenya thus lacked a shared identity to grow as a country. According to historian Bethwell Ogot, "A nation is never built through random documents such as a constitution, but through shared experiences, something Kenya doesn't have."⁴⁷ Nevertheless, he believed that there was a tacit understanding in the country that Kenyan unity was constituted through "a shared colonial experience."⁴⁸ At least since the 1990s, this shared experience has been embodied by the Uganda Railway. After years of one-party rule and clientele politics during the presidency of Daniel arap Moi, the successor government led by Mwai Kibaki had to reestablish national unity via reconciliation. Kibaki opted for democratic change and echoed Kenyatta's development agenda, encapsulated in the Kenya Vision 2030 project, a major plan for the county's economic and infrastructural transformation.

At the same time, people in urban centers, especially in Nairobi, started to reinvent Kenyan identity as multiracial and multicultural, striving for a more comprehensive integration of different communities living in the country. What is more, Kenya's official memory policy took a dramatic shift. History gained value in official politics. Now, the Mau Mau's contribution to independence was officially recognized, and in 2003, the ban on the movement was lifted.⁴⁹ These changes in Kenyan society and public remembrance gave the railway a new prominence in public life and revitalized the old narrative of the railway as the backbone of the nation. The trend gained momentum with the decision to replace the old line with a new, Chinese-built railroad, which became a key element of the Kenya Vision 2030 program. The government promoted the new SGR as the country's biggest infrastructure project since independence and a pillar of the nation's development efforts, placing it in the tradition of the old colonial railroad.

The Kenyan-Asian Community

The Kenyan-Asian community was perhaps the most influential in pushing for a change of Kenya's public memory regarding the railway. Their objective was to advocate a new idea of nationhood that promoted peaceful coexistence between the communities. People from the Indian subcontinent had interacted with the East African coast for several hundred years, while their current presence in Kenya dates back to the colonization of East Africa and the construction of the Uganda Railway, for which more than forty thousand indentured laborers were recruited in British India. In the early 2000s, members of the Kenyan-Asian community found their contributions to the country misrepresented in the public eye. First, they were not officially recognized as one of Kenya's ethnic communities and thus not visible in Kenya's national history, neither in textbooks nor museums, although many had been citizens since independence. Second, Indians were generally viewed as an exploitative business elite rather than as equal citizens who had helped build the country. With the social liberation of the late 1990s, Kenyan-Asians pushed for a change of perspective in which the railway became a focal point. When the Nairobi National Museum acknowledged the Asian African heritage in the country with a special exhibition in 2000, it centered around the railway as the foundation of the Kenyan nation.⁵⁰ According to the exhibit, Indian railway workers had built the foundation of the nation, not via trade but by the work of their hands. This claim was strongly supported by various publications on Kenyan history, particularly centering on the Uganda Railway, all written by lay historians of South Asian descent. Neera Kapila's account of the railway, for instance, stressed the "centrality of the Indian in the making of modern Kenya by...building the railway."⁵¹

This narrative also received official political acclaim. Only few years ago, in 2017, President Uhuru Kenyatta recognized the contribution of the Kenyan-Asian community to the nation by officially declaring them "Kenya's 44th tribe."⁵² During the ceremony, the country's interior cabinet secretary, Fred Matiang'i, noted that "the Head of State acknowledges that the Kenyan Asian's contribution to Kenya has its roots at the dawn of our Nation....This contribution that began with the construction of our nation's first railway line continues to this day."⁵³ Here again, the nation's roots were traced to the railroad.

All three groups (the British railway enthusiasts, the Kenyan political elite, and the Kenyan Asians) shaped public memory about the railway's contribution to the foundation of the nation. It is a curious coincidence of history that their "memory work" was simultaneously directed at the same object. Yet it was only successful because the railway offered a connective structure for the young nation. Kenyan historians largely agree

that the country's history began in 1895 with the proclamation of the East Africa Protectorate and the establishment of boundaries that brought various East African societies together under the umbrella of the nation. The Uganda Railway became a reference point that symbolized this beginning like no other.

When the Kenyan History Gallery at the Nairobi National Museum was planned and discussed in the 2000s, the divergent historical readings of the railway came to the fore again. The key debate, according to one of the script writers of the exhibition, historian Kenneth Ombongi, was the question "Should the railway be seen as a historical mechanism of development or exploitation?"⁵⁴ The designers of the storyline had to negotiate between the two dominant poles, which I have pointed out in this article: the railway as a tool of exploitation, on the one hand, and as bearer of the nation, on the other. According to Ombongi, the makers of the exhibition struggled to balance both narratives. In the final exhibition, a signboard alludes to the nonbenevolent aspects of the railway (its cost in human lives, the resistance of Africans, the exploitation of the country) while the overall framing places the colonial railway at the beginning of "modern Kenya."⁵⁵ Kenyan secondary school "History and Government" textbooks take a similar approach. Refusing to offer a clear interpretation, they present a balance sheet of the railroad's effects.⁵⁶ Thus, the pupil, like the museum visitor, is left to draw his or her own conclusions or to follow the narratives disseminated in the popular media or public debates.

In view of this ambivalent picture, the museum exhibitions of the Uganda Railway support Daniel Brandau and Christian Kehrt's argument that controversies emerge or resurface with new intensity as soon as technology is musealized or advanced to a site of memory. As a "contested site" of historical narratives and public memory, the Nairobi National Museum and the Nairobi Railway Museum leave the final say to the visitor, who must make sense of this particular "ruin" of empire.

Conclusion

The story of the Uganda Railway tells us an interesting story of how postcolonial nations came to terms with their colonial past. The railway has experienced dramatic turns in public memory. From a key symbol of conquest and domination, it has become the symbol of the country's foundation. From something people rejected and fought against, at an unimaginable cost in lives, it has evolved into something that is remembered without pain or horror. Thus, the memory of the Uganda Railway has come full circle, echoing myths about its role in the creation of the country first propagated by British colonialists and railroad engineers at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is no coincidence

that similar arguments have been made in other colonial contexts, such as South Africa and India. The British in India expressed views similar to those of their counterparts in Kenya, where the railway was looked upon as a harbinger of modernization and progress. No wonder historians later declared “No railways, no modern India.”⁵⁷ It was the specific materiality and function of infrastructure that allowed for such an interpretation. With their ability to connect places and diminish distances, railroads bound together territories and hence “transformed and built the imaginary space of the nation.”⁵⁸ This grand narrative has its origin in nineteenth-century Europe. German nationalists, for instance, hailed the railways in the first half of the nineteenth century as the “marriage ties and wedding rings” of new nations.⁵⁹

Infrastructures evoked these narratives all over the world. In nineteenth-century Europe, railroads promised to bring about national unity and economic prosperity. The essence of these narratives was forward-looking. In Kenya, however, the nationalist narrative was invented in hindsight. The story is thus a poignant example of the troubles African nations face in terms of state building and the search for common roots. With new historical experience and changing political agendas, public memory takes new directions and starts to obscure the colonial past.⁶⁰ This also means that the drive for national unity comes at a cost: history is distorted. But that is true for almost all national historiographies. As Ernest Renan famously noted, “getting history wrong is an essential part of becoming a nation.”⁶¹

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Norman Aselmeyer is a lecturer in modern history at the University of Bremen. Email: norman.aselmeyer@uni-bremen.de

Notes

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9. The terms "ameliorist" and "immiserationalist" derive from Robin A. Butlin, *Geographies of Empire: European Empires and Colonies, c. 1880–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 480. See also Ian J. Kerr, ed., *Railways in Modern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5–9.
10. Nitin Sinha, "Railways and the Raj: Travelling through 'Bad Imperialism' and 'Good Nationalism'," *The Wire*, 13 May 2017, <https://thewire.in/history/railways-raj-imperialism-tharoor> (accessed 19 June 2021).
11. The only works I know are Ian J. Kerr, "Representation and Representations of the Railways of Colonial and Post-Colonial South Asia," *Modern Asian Studies* 37, no. 2 (2003): 287–326, and Noel Thomas, ed., *Footprints on the Track: Anglo-Indian Railway Memories* (Chennai: Anglo-Ink, 2014).
12. Christopher Woodward, *In Ruins* (London: Vintage, 2002), 139.
13. *Ibid.*, 203.
14. Kiprop Lagat, "Representations of Nationhood in the Displays of the National Museums of Kenya (NMK): The Nairobi National Museum," *Critical Interventions* 11, no. 1 (2017): 24–39, here 26–33.
15. Frederick Karanja Mirara, "Developing a 21st-Century Museum in Kenya" (paper, ICOM conference, Taipei, Taiwan, November 2006), 6f.; Rosalie Hans and David Mbutia, "National Museums of Kenya: From Inception to the Post-Devolution Era," in *National Museums in Africa: Identity, History and Politics*, ed. R. Silverman, G. Abungu and P. Probst (London: Routledge, 2021), 73–92.

16. See the important work of Lotte Hughes, who participated in the exhibition planning meetings as an external observer. Lotte Hughes, "The Production and Transmission of National History: Some Problems and Challenges," in *Making Heritage, Making Peace: History, Identity and Memory in Contemporary Kenya*, ed. A. E. Coombes, L. Hughes and K. Munene (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 185–226.
17. *Ibid.*, 205.
18. Although it appears in quotation marks, this phrase is in fact an "improved" version of the original, which can be found in Eliot's memoir of his term as commissioner in East Africa ("It is not an uncommon thing for a line to open up a country, but this line has literally created a country"). Charles Eliot, *The East Africa Protectorate* (London: Edward Arnold, 1905), 208.
19. Brian Okoth, "Uhuru Launches Madaraka Express SGR Amid Death Warning to Vandals," *Citizen TV*, 31 May 2017, <https://citizentv.co.ke/news/uhuru-launches-madaraka-express-sgr-amid-death-warning-to-vandals-167127>.
20. This was already the interpretation of Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher. See Ronald Robinson, John Gallagher, and Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 307–378.
21. Ian J. Kerr, "Cultural Dimensions of India's Railways: Representation, Representations, and Sources," in *India's Railway History: A Research Handbook*, ed. J. Hurd and I. J. Kerr (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 97–135, here 109.
22. Satya V. Sood, *Victoria's Tin Dragon: A Railway that Built a Nation* (Cambridge: Vanguard, 2007).
23. Peter Kimani, "One Hundred Years of Chequered History," *The Sunday Standard*, 30 November 2018, <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001304614/the-standard-one-hundred-years-of-chequered-history> (accessed 19 June 2021).
24. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "Foreword," in Neera Kapila, *Race, Rail & Society: Roots of Modern Kenya* (Nairobi: Kenway, 2009), v–vi, here v.
25. See David M. Anderson and Douglas H. Johnson, eds., *Revealing Prophets: Prophecy in East African History* (London: James Currey, 1995).
26. Alfred C. Hollis, *The Nandi: Their Language and Folk-Lore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), 50.
27. The title of Ronald Hardy's (semi-fictional) story of the Uganda Railway was inspired by these prophecies. Ronald Hardy, *The Iron Snake* (London: Collins, 1965).
28. See Albert Thomas Matson, *The Nandi Campaign against the British 1895–1906* (Nairobi: Transafrica, 1974).
29. Sameni ole Kivasis, *Maisha ya Sameni ole Kivasis yaani Justin Lemenye*, ed. Henry Albert Fosbrooke (Nairobi: Eagle Press, 1953), 49.
30. Kenya Land Commission, *Evidence*, vol. 1 (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1933), 192–194.
31. Oginga Odinga, *Not Yet Uhuru: Autobiography* (London: Heinemann, 1967), 105.
32. Parmenas Githendu Mockerie, *An African Speaks for his People* (London: Hogarth Press, 1934), 13f.
33. Ralph D. Grillo, *African Railwaymen: Solidarity and Opposition in an East African Labour Force* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 20.

34. J. Forbes Munro, *Colonial Rule and the Kamba: Social Change in the Kenya Highlands 1889–1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 87; Grillo, African Railwaymen; Bettina Ng'weno, "Growing Old in a New City: Time, the Post-Colony and Making Nairobi Home," *City* 22, no. 1 (2018): 26–42.
35. Tiyambe Zeleza, "Kenya and the Second World War, 1939–1950," in *A Modern History of Kenya, 1895–1980*, ed. William R. Ochieng' (London: Evans Brothers, 1989), 144–172, here 154.
36. Waruhiu Itote, *"Mau Mau" General* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967), 41.
37. Letter of Jomo Kenyatta to East African Railway and Harbours, 19 November 1963, Nairobi Railway Museum Archives.
38. Kenya Mutongi, *Matatu: A History of Popular Transportation in Nairobi* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017).
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40. Miller, *Lunatic Express*, 392, 397.
41. John Brian Hollingsworth, *An Illustrated Guide to Modern Trains* (New York: Arco, 1985), 156.
42. Kenya Railways, *Nairobi Railway Museum: Home to Kenya's Historic Past* (brochure, Nairobi, n.d.).
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51. Neera Kapila, *Race, Rail and Society: Roots of Modern Kenya* (Nairobi: Kenway, 2009), back cover. See also Pheroze Nowrojee, *A Kenyan Journey* (Nairobi: Transafrica, 2014), and Sood, *Victoria's Tin Dragon*.

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57. Cited in Kerr, *Railways*, 7.
58. Jeremy Foster, *Washed with Sun: Landscape and the Making of White South Africa* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), 206.
59. Cited in Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1800–1866: Bürgerwelt und starker Staat* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2017), 192.
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