

Moving Goods in Kapiri Mposhi, Zambia: The Scaffolding of Stability in TAZARA's Dry Port

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RESÜMEE

In den 1970er Jahren wurde die TAZARA mit chinesischer Unterstützung gebaut, um den sambischen Kupfergürtel mit dem Indischen Ozean zu verbinden. Die Linie verbindet Dar es Salaam mit Kapiri Mposhi, zu dieser Zeit eine wenig bekannte Endstation der Eisenbahnlinie. Für Sambier jedoch ist Kapiri Mposhi kein Endpunkt, sondern ein Zentrum.

Dieser Artikel untersucht die Geschichte von Kapiri Mposhi als Eisenbahnstadt aus der Perspektive des Lastentransports. Im TAZARA-Trockenhafen ist der Umschlag abhängig von Teams von Lastenträgern. Für die Träger im Eisenbahnbetrieb von Kapiri Mposhi wurde der Lebensunterhalt allerdings im Laufe der Zeit unzuverlässig. Als Reaktion auf die Unsicherheit gründeten die Träger Vereine, die versuchen, sowohl die soziale Sicherheit ihrer Mitglieder zu gewährleisten als auch die Auswirkungen der schwankenden Warenströme und des ungleichmäßigen Eisenbahnbetriebs auf ihre Arbeit zu lindern. Somit ermöglichen sie das Funktionieren dieses für Mittelfrika entscheidenden Zugangs zu transnationalen Handelsnetzwerken.

Introduction

When the TAZARA railway was built in the 1970s with Chinese development assistance, it was called the “Freedom Railway” because it was intended to liberate landlocked Zambia from its dependency on white-settler-ruled states to the south. On the TAZARA line, which stretches from the Indian Ocean port of Dar es Salaam to the Zambian copperbelt, the primary geography of commodity movement was imagined to be from the interior to the coast, mirroring the patterns of earlier colonial arteries that moved African products into global markets. The terminus at New Kapiri Mposhi station in Zambia, therefore, was mainly envisioned as a collection point for Zambian

mineral resources, especially copper, to be shipped from the mines to the railway, and via TAZARA to the sea.

Kapiri Mposhi was a railway town for Zambia Railways, with a history dating back to the colonial period. When the town was selected as the final station for TAZARA and junction between the two lines, the TAZARA station was called 'New Kapiri Mposhi' station to distinguish it from the smaller ZRL station located nearby.¹

Over the decades since TAZARA's construction the global movement of commodities has developed in unexpected directions. This has in turn affected transport and mobility at New Kapiri Mposhi. In the process, the TAZARA railway station at New Kapiri Mposhi has become a space of transshipment and mobility characterized by flows of goods and frictions of globalization.² I analyze this new space of global exchange through the lens of labour, using the lived experience of TAZARA's railway porters to trace the interconnected histories of work and transshipment at global and local scales. This paper takes the theme of "dock labour" beyond the seaport and into the interior to include not only the dry port at the TAZARA station but also the station platform itself. These are the new spaces for global circulation of goods; transnational and intercultural encounters; and labour innovation. I show that while casualized "dock labour" has been one of the outcomes of neoliberalizing global trends in railway and port economies, TAZARA's railway porters have responded to casualization by developing new social institutions and labour practices. I will argue here that the labour innovation, the concomitant social institutionalization, as well as the networking of Kapiri Mposhi's petty entrepreneurs are indispensable to make global connectedness work. Grafted on a long history of infrastructure and on global currents of liberalization, it is this creative adaptation that merits our attention, and justifies viewing Kapiri Mposhi's dry port as a portal of globalization.³

Porter Labour in Global Commodity Circulation

In the decade of the 1980s, TAZARA's export business was affected by the global collapse in copper prices. Zambia's economy was weakened at the same time that a major source of income for the railway had faltered.⁴ Liberalization policies adopted during the same time period contributed to a shift towards commodity trading along TAZARA, especially in Tanzania where imports were arriving through the port of Dar es Salaam. Through the

1 J. Lunn, *The Political Economy of Primary Railway Construction in the Rhodesias, 1890–1911*, in: *The Journal of African History*, 33 (1992) 2, pp. 239–254.

2 Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Princeton 2005; Frederick Cooper, "What is the Concept of Globalization Good for? An African Historian's Perspective," in: *African Affairs*, 100 (2001) 399, p. 189; Jeanne Pennvenne, *African workers and colonial racism: Mozambican strategies and struggles in Lourenço Marques, 1877–1962*, London 1995.

3 For the idea of 'portal of globalization' and the importance of institutionalization and creative adaptation, see: M. Middell and K. Naumann, *Global history and the spatial turn: from the impact of area studies to the study of critical junctures of globalization*, in: *Journal of Global Studies*, 5 (2010) 1, p. 162.

4 James Ferguson, *Expectations of modernity: myths and meanings of urban life on the Zambian Copperbelt*, Los Angeles and Berkeley 1999.

1990s, as alternative transport routes to the south were opened up, TAZARA managers adopted commercialization measures designed to further commercialize and diversify TAZARA shipments.⁵ By the end of the decade, therefore, TAZARA trains were just as likely to be carrying shipments of manufactured goods into Zambia from Dar es Salaam as they were to be sending copper out. Many of these goods shipments were being carried by small-scale traders including TAZARA employees and their family members who had free passes to travel on the train.

My earlier work on small-scale traders in southern Tanzania demonstrated that, when aggregated, the circulation of small- and medium-scale loads known as 'parcels' on TAZARA made a significant contribution to African lives and livelihoods, especially after economic liberalization.⁶ The patterns of circulation of these kinds of shipments have not been fixed, but are continuously re-orienting in response to a range of local, regional and global conditions. Shipments on TAZARA move in multiple directions and in diverse carriages – not only are containers and copper-bearing flat cars carrying commodities, but passenger luggage wagons are just as likely to be packed with goods.

Over time, the station and railway town of Kapiri Mposhi has come to look less like a terminus and more like a hub in a complex network of eastern, central and southern African exchange routes. Thus New Kapiri Mposhi station is not the "end of the line" but a link, where goods shipments that arrive by train from the Indian Ocean are offloaded onto a diverse assortment of transport vehicles including lorries, buses, vans, pickup trucks, bicycles and pushcarts. The spaces of transshipment at New Kapiri Mposhi station are occupied by shipping and forwarding agents, truck drivers and traders. In their midst are teams of railway porters who do the hard physical labour of moving loads from one form of transport to another.

In the station's dry port, large-scale goods shipments are transferred between road and rail. The dry port was constructed originally in the early 1990s, when the Zambia Railways network was suffering from poor performance. Customers with large shipments from Zambia started hauling by road to New Kapiri Mposhi station, where they offloaded onto TAZARA wagons and then carried to the coast. Shipments from the Tanzanian side, especially sacks of maize and fertilizer, also arrived in the dry port for offloading. These sacks were moved by porter labour, according to TAZARA officials, because they are small and require careful packing onto flatbed trucks. Two cranes, one static and one mobile, were installed in the dry port for moving heavier goods. But over time this mechanization system failed and shippers began to rely even more heavily on manual labour

5 "Reasons for commercialization of TAZARA: Highway transportation and the change in Southern African trade patterns," Reports of Meetings between Tanzania, Zambia and China on Operational Performance 1989/90–1991/92, TAZARA Chinese Expert Team Archives, Dar es Salaam; Jamie Monson, "Remembering Work on the Tazara Railway in Africa and China, 1965–2011: When 'New Men' Grow Old," *African Studies Review*, 56 (2013) 1, pp. 45–64.

6 Jamie Monson, *Africa's Freedom Railway: How a Chinese Development Project Changed Lives and Livelihoods in Tanzania*, Bloomington 2009.

to transship their loads.⁷ Today, therefore, TAZARA's dry port is more likely to be filled with workers than with fork-loaders – teams of porters use their bodies to move sacks of flour, rice or fertilizer from containers to truck beds. The huge cranes that were designed to lift and transfer containers stand immobile in the background.

TAZARA's dry port is located behind high walls beyond the platform and at the end of the switching yard. The work of transshipment there is consequently hidden from view. On the station platform on the other hand, in the midst of passenger traffic and the day-to-day activities of railway operations, the movement of diverse and multi-scaled goods shipments is highly visible. Here on the platform bundles of shoes, stacked cartons of floor and ceiling tiles, gunny sacks of dried fish and many other commodities are offloaded from luggage wagons to be processed by customs agents and sent on their way. The goods that are being offloaded by porters today have travelled through the port of Dar es Salaam from as far away as China and Thailand, often through the wholesale markets of Dubai. From Kapiri Mposhi they will be moved onwards to the Zambian copperbelt, to the Congolese border, to Malawi or to Beitbridge.

I view the station as a portal through the lens of railway work, in particular the work of portage that is critical to the movement of goods across borders and across lines of transit.⁸ Seeing the place from the vantage point of the railway porter allows us to notice continuities with the spaces and structures of transport in pre-colonial and colonial East Africa – from the Nyamwezi caravanserai of nineteenth century trade routes to the Mombasa waterfront.⁹ At the same time, post-colonial transport is shaped by neo-liberal forces of globalization, resulting in casualization of labour and a rise of informality in the social relations of trade and transport.¹⁰ On the colonial waterfront at Mombasa, Frederick Cooper argued, colonial authorities sought to professionalize dock labour in order to stabilize urban disorder and defuse worker struggles. Colonial dockworker stability was instituted through provision of a regular wage, housing, medical care and controlled union activities. At Kapiri Mposhi in the 2000s, it is the porters themselves who are constructing the scaffolding of stability in the dry port, through collective worker associations.

TAZARA's railway porters may occupy a marginal position in the social spaces of work at Kapiri Mposhi station. But they are located at the centre of the logistic operations in Kapiri Mposhi, both physically and economically. They are the carriers of goods shipped by traders who use diverse transport networks and vehicles at small and intermediate scales. They are also the carriers of thousands of sacks of flour, rice and fertilizer that make up the large-scale shipments of multi-national traders, goods that must be moved from

7 Interview with Austin Kaluba, TAZARA Head of Commercial Services for Zambia, New Kapiri Mposhi, August 2014

8 In his work on portage in the nineteenth century, Steve Rockel writes that porters "illustrate multiple conceptions of labor crossings," as not only goods but also workers cross boundaries of space, time, identities through portage. Stephen Rockel, "Slavery and Freedom in Nineteenth Century East Africa: The Case of Waungwana Caravan Porters," in: *African Studies*, 68 (2009) 1, p. 87.

9 Frederick Cooper, *On the African waterfront: urban disorder and the transformation of work in colonial Mombasa*, Yale 1987; Stephen Rockel, *Carriers of Culture: Labor on the Road in Nineteenth Century East Africa*, London 2006.

10 Eileen Moyer, "Popular Cartographies: Youthful Imaginings of the Global in the Streets of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania," in: *City & Society*, 16 (2004) 2, pp. 117-143.

container to flatbed lorry. Porters are “casual” workers in a workspace that is both segmented and differentiated, as were the colonial East African dockworkers. Yet the porters have also organized themselves into associations, with the encouragement of TAZARA authorities, which gives them greater control over their labour power. The porter associations provide a useable structure for organizing the labour of transshipment on the platform and in the dry port, a structure that facilitates contracting between the railway authority, shipping and forwarding agents, traders and transporters. These associations are used by the porters themselves to push back against the precarity of casualization through the pursuit of collective contracts and livelihood security.

The presence of porters carrying headloads in the dry dock of New Kapiri Mposhi station could be viewed as evidence of declension – after all, colonial railways were supposed to have displaced the porter labour of the nineteenth century caravan routes, and post-colonial containerization should have brought the efficiency of logistics into present-day commodity flows. Porterage might therefore be read as a backward form of labour, resulting from a failure of modernization in the transport sector; logistical inefficiencies; or backlogged mechanical maintenance in the yards.

I will argue here that porter labour in the dry port, while showing continuities with the past, is a post-modern profession in a world of rapidly changing markets, flows of goods and capital, and diverse actors. Porter work has many facets and many contradictions. It facilitates the flow of goods in “globalization from below,” as argued by Ribeiro and Matthews,¹¹ because porter labour of aggregating and disaggregating loads allows low barriers to entry for small-scale traders in global commodity chains. At the same time, casualized transshipment labour reduces costs for large-scale shippers who use the dry dock for off-loading port-to-port containers. The stabilization practices of porter associations not only reduce risk for the porters themselves, they also contribute to smooth and regular handling of goods for the railway authority, facilitating load contracting as well as everyday rail and carriage operations. In this sense, we may see that the porter associations formed to address the precarities of railway town casualization may also support and stabilize the very institutions that earn profits from their informal labour conditions. As I historically situate TAZARA locally and globally, I show the ways that railway porters associations serve a combination of local and regional collective needs while facilitating global connectedness.

The TAZARA Railway

The TAZARA railway was constructed between 1970 and 1975 following a two-year survey and design effort. Its primary function was to link the landlocked Zambian copperbelt with the Indian Ocean port city of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. The full 1865-kilometer rail line was built with financing and support from China amounting to over

11 G. Matthews, G. Ribeiro and C. Vega (eds.), *Globalization from Below: The World's Other Economy*, London 2012.

\$400 million in the form of a long-term, interest-free loan. China had agreed to finance and support the railway project in 1967 after several requests for assistance from western donors and from the Soviet Union had been rejected. At the time of construction it was heavily influenced by the politics of the Cold War – not only in terms of competing ideologies of development but also strategically, as it was located on the frontlines of southern African liberation struggles. The deep legacy of global and geopolitical contexts and significance is also reflected in the conjunctures of the operations of the railway.

TAZARA passenger services were inaugurated in 1976, with speeches and celebrations at the New Kapiri Mposhi terminus attended by distinguished regional African leaders and representatives from China. Yet during the first decade of operations there were already serious performance constraints that limited services for both short and long-haul transporters. From the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s the decline of the copper market severely limited revenue. Oil prices raised operating costs at the same time. There was a succession of performance breakdowns during the same period, many of them related to technological malfunctions and management failures. And rural economic growth was stagnating throughout the decade, affecting shipments of agricultural inputs and farm produce. By the end of 1978, only two trains were operating daily and as many as half of the available locomotives were stranded in workshops and out of service.

Offloading and transshipment times at New Kapiri Mposhi were also slow, causing delays in the return of wagons into Tanzania. There were inefficiencies and corruption at the port in Dar es Salaam that caused shipments destined for Zambia, including time-sensitive fertilizers for maize farmers, to be drastically delayed. In October 1978, Kenneth Kaunda announced to “jubilation” that he would reopen routes to the south to allow fertilizers and foodstuffs to enter through Southern Rhodesia. Routes were reopened for a period of time before they were closed again.

This initial period of decline was followed by a short-lived era of optimism. For less than a decade from 1985 to the early 1990s, there were improvements in TAZARA’s performance thanks to infusions of development assistance not only from China but also from a coalition of western donors. TAZARA “bounced back” during this period, showing that projects to rehabilitate everything from the track to the wagon fleet could have a positive effect. Yet through the remainder of the 1990s TAZARA declined again as low traffic levels, management problems, escalating fuel prices and neglected maintenance took their toll. The wars in Eastern Congo contributed to the difficulties of transshipment, as wagons that were forwarded northwards via the Zambia Railways line to Katanga simply did not return, sometimes for years. As a result, shipments to Eastern Congo began increasingly to be offloaded onto road transporters in the New Kapiri Mposhi dry port from the mid-1990s onwards.¹²

During the 1990s there were two parallel developments that had an impact on the railway’s fortunes. One was the opening up of routes to the south as South Africa gained

12 Interview with Lewis Kaluba, New Kapiri Mposhi August 2014.

independence from white settler rule, after Zimbabwe had already done in 1980/1. In response to this new competition, TAZARA authorities decided to focus on commercialization and marketing strategies in an “aggressive campaign”.¹³ Commercialization was launched in 1994 and 1995, through rationalization of management and worker layoffs. The program created two profit and loss centres, one in Tanzania and one in Zambia. The railway was officially re-inaugurated as a commercial enterprise. The commercialization had a direct effect on porter labour at Kapiri Mposhi station. Before the mid-1990s, porters were hired through TAZARA and were salaried employees. Afterwards the porters were casualized along with other workers, but with a difference – they were now hired by the investor shipping the goods, rather than by the railway authority. As one TAZARA official explained, “they have reduced the manpower of the porters. Initially, the people on the platform were TAZARA workers, but now the owner of the goods must employ [their own] porters and take all of the risks.”¹⁴

The second of these developments was the introduction of economic liberalization and structural adjustment policies, beginning in 1985 in Tanzania. With new open-market policies for the agricultural sector in particular, TAZARA was forced into price wars with buses and trucks. With unstable copper prices in the 1990s, as well as conflict in Katanga, the railway was all the more dependent upon a diversified customer base. The commercialization plan called for a new vision of the line that would rationalize management, reduce labour costs and re-imagine the train as a link in regional networks rather than a line that brought copper to the sea. No longer a cold war strategic railway to liberate landlocked mining resources from dependency on the south, TAZARA was reborn as a “market-oriented facility,” wrote one journalist, an infrastructure that was waking up at long last to the realities of regional transport competition.¹⁵

In my first book on the history of TAZARA, I demonstrated the ways that this conjuncture of regional economic liberalization, transport competition with reopened southern routes, and commercialization of the railway's management system contributed to a rise in local traffic in Tanzania. I focused my study on the small-scale traders in the “passenger belt” where the train became an important resource for rural lives and livelihoods. In response to insecurities in formal sectors of employment, and to disruptions in payments of pensions and other entitlements, traders and farmers developed new livelihood strategies that depended upon the multiple forms of mobility provided by the train.¹⁶

In this study of railway porters, I am turning my attention now to the ways the same processes changed the experience and organization of work on the railway and in the station at New Kapiri Mposhi. I show that casualization of the labour force combined with liberalized markets and new global commodity circuits have contributed to the

13 Daily News, Wednesday March 8, 1995, p. 1, “TAZARA to lay-off 2,600.”

14 Commercialization and privatization of African railways took place throughout the continent in the mid-1990s, beginning in 1995. R. Bullock, *The Results of Railway Privatisation in Africa*, Washington D.C. 2005.

15 Daily News, Thursday March 9, 1995, p. 1., “Tazara lay-offs no surprise,” front page editorial without attribution.

16 Many of those who were part of this process were in fact railway employees, either retirees or laid-off workers who decided to stay put along the railway corridor and expand their farming and trading enterprises.

centrality of portage in the dry port and on the platform. At the same time, these forces contribute to instabilities in livelihoods of porters, working conditions that they seek to counteract through forming associations.

Porterage and “Globalization from below”

Transport economists predicted in the 1970s that structural adjustment and market liberalization in Africa would result in rapid containerization and the spread of efficiency in logistics.¹⁷ As state marketing authorities were liberalized in Tanzania in the 1980s and 1990s, reorganization and restructuring of logistics was made possible, allowing potentially for the development of a new integration between production, trade and transport. Older infrastructures based on port-to-port shipment could be replaced with highly integrated multi-modal systems. In his analysis of three case studies, however, Ove Pederson showed that in African markets, especially in rural and regional transport, we don’t see the kind of smooth integration and efficiency in transport that had been expected, for complex reasons that are local, regional and global. Instead of flows we see bumps, frictions and jerks. Pederson’s diagrams of farm-to-port transport illustrate that human powered transport – what he calls headloads – has remained important in the global circulation of African agricultural goods.

I focus here on the aspect of logistics that most directly affects the work of railway porters at Kipiri Mposhi: containerization. Containers have been slow to enter transport chains in African markets despite liberalization. During the 1970s, only high-value imports were containerized, thus there were discounted rates offered for export shipments of bulk commodities from African markets to ensure that containers were not returned empty. In the 1980s containers continued to be used not only for imports but also for export products including bulk grain, coffee, cotton and cocoa. Most containerization, however, took place in ports where goods were transferred from truck to container or vice versa. Part of this was due to customs regulations, which required that loads be unloaded for inspection and then reloaded. But it was also the result of low labour costs at the ports, according to Ove Pederson:

*low labor costs ... make the loading and unloading of containers and trucks much less costly than in the industrialized countries. At the same time, the truck often can carry more goods without the container. Therefore, African countries have generally benefited less from containerization than industrialized countries, and there have been few attempts to integrate shipping and inland transport.*¹⁸

17 Paul Ove Pedersen, The Logistical Revolution and the Changing Structure of Agriculturally Based Commodity Chains in Africa,” in: Niels Fold and Marianne Nylandsted Larsen (eds.), *Globalization and Restructuring of African Commodity Flows*, Uppsala 2008, p. 210-240. Gina Porter, “Transport services and their impact on poverty and growth in rural Sub-Saharan Africa: a review of recent research and future research needs,” in: *Transport Review*, 34 (2014) 1.

18 Pederson, p. 223-4.

The workers who have provided this cheap labour are the porters. It is interesting that Pederson does not explicitly name porters or headloads in his description of the African docks; in his diagrams of logistical flows he locates headloading as a “primary” form of transport only in the rural areas where products are carried from farms to collection points. However, porters’ presence at the ports – including the dry ports – is a key factor in the economy of logistics for African exports and imports, where containers of cocoa, maize and other commodities are moved.

Porters are not simply packing and unpacking single loads or single commodities. Porterage allows traders to bring goods together to form a load for shipment, or to divide up a load that is being disaggregated for onward forwarding. Traders shipping loads at small and medium scales – everything from a consignment of five poultry incubators from Pakistan to a truckload of finishing hardware for a construction site – must be tracked, sorted and moved to the appropriate waiting vehicles. Porter work thus allows for the consolidation and disaggregation of loads as part of a spatialized economy that is local, regional and global. Porterage as a form of logistics labour undergirds “globalization from below” because it contributes to the fragmented, decentred circulation of commodities in the 21st century.¹⁹

The presence of porters in the spaces of transshipment not only facilitates the shipments of bulk products by large-scale commodities traders in East Africa. It is also critical for the pursuit of livelihoods by small or intermediate scale entrepreneurs who are shipping multiple small loads or following segmented paths of shipment. For the small or intermediate trader who is not sending out fleets of trucks or rail cars, the presence of multiple “intermediate transport” options connected by rail and porterage facilitates entry and exit, recombination of loads and other forms of flexibility. But there is also risk in this environment, for traders and for porters alike, at Kapiri Mposhi station. For the small- and medium-scale traders who may have low levels of capital and influence in the port, there is risk to the security of handling and storage of their goods. For the porters, the uneven flows of shipments, irregular timetables of trains, delays in customs and clearing can all contribute to precarity. Associations are one way that they manage the unevenness and insecurity of their engagement. As we will see, associations also play a role in stabilizing operations for the TAZARA authority.

The Lives of Porters

Writing about the nineteenth century caravan trade in East Africa, Stephen Rockel argued “that professional porters were at the cutting edge of African engagement with international capitalism, that they were the prime movers in the economic, social and cultural network building of the period, and that they expressed an alternative East Af-

19 Mathews, Ribeiro and Vega (eds.), *Globalization from Below*.

rican modernity.”²⁰ While the porters of the Nyamwezi caravan trade had very different lives and circumstances from the porters of the Kapiri Mposhi dry port, some of the characteristics of their labour do show similarities. TAZARA’s railway porters view their work as a profession through which they can gain masculine respectability, build wealth and honour, and achieve social mobility. They are “prime movers” of goods and of relationship networks as they forge critical links from the local to the global.

Within the station and the dry port, the labour force of goods shipment is both segmented (i.e. divided into salaried and non-salaried workers) and differentiated by social status. Porters occupy a low level within this stratification, doing work that is unskilled and casual. Those who become porters are often young men who have few other livelihood options, for barriers to entry are very low in portering and the work is physically demanding. Porters work on a casual basis and have no formal security – if they are injured or become ill they are unable to continue working and lose their income. Their position may therefore be seen as socially marginal, a status that is also spatially represented through restrictions on access and mobility within the station complex. Provided they are “at work,” porters may enter into spaces such as the dry port or the station platform. When they are waiting for new contracts, on the other hand, the porters gather outside in front of the station in the shade of a large sculpture of a shovel, erected in honour of the workers who constructed the line in the 1970s. When one approaches the New Kapiri Mposhi station, there is a contradictory juxtaposition of casualized porters waiting for work, in the shadow of an artwork erected to commemorate TAZARA’s first worker generation.

The spaces of the station and the immediate surrounding station complex are marked by spaces of inclusion and exclusion: there are “lines of exclusion” that demarcate where different activities take place and also where specific workers may and may not go. Temporary workers are the most restricted group of workers in the station complex, restricted by physical barriers and security guards, on the one hand, and also by understandings or meanings of space as these are established by authorities. These restrictions have to do with their labour position (i.e. as casual workers rather than railway authority employees, clients or customers of the authority). Even their place of residence has spatial connotations; most of the porters we interviewed reside in an informal settlement walking distance from the station known as “Soweto,” a reference to the township in Johannesburg. The station and the dry dock and the surrounding settlements shape the geographies of everyday mobilities in which porters live and work. These are to a large extent governed by rules established by the railway authority and enforced by security police. Porters move in and out of restricted and unrestricted spaces, in another example of what Rockel called “labor crossing.” They may move into the high-security space of the dry dock for off-loading, then move out of the station past armed guards to their gathering point outside beneath the shovel sculpture. This mobility of the porters may be another way of transcending status or worker segmentation within the station. Porters also aspire to

20 Stephen Rockel, “Slavery and Freedom, p. 89.

social mobilities, as they may move through the accumulation of some capital to combine portage with trading and, ultimately, move into trade more fully and eventually to farming. The associations they form facilitate the accumulation of capital through savings, while to some extent cushioning times of hardship. At the same time, these associations displace risk and contribute to efficiencies for the railway authority.²¹

The casualization of porter labour following the railway's commercial turn transferred the responsibility for moving goods from TAZARA to private clients. The private investor employment of casual porter labour reduced the costs to TAZARA of maintaining a permanent staff of porters, at a time when traffic levels were highly uneven. Thus the TAZARA authority successfully offloaded both the responsibility and risks of transshipment at the same time that they reduced permanent staff. Yet this policy also brought new risks for the station. Casualization meant that the number of unofficial people on the platform – referred to by one station manager as “intruders” – increased as porters, small-scale traders, vehicle drivers and agents all crowded the platform. This created a security problem with increased incidence of theft and damage to goods. The formation of porters' associations helped to alleviate these security problems by creating a more orderly and legible process for transshipment. Associations registered with the government, worked under the supervision of a chairman, and negotiated collectively with traders and agents through a single spokesman.²²

More significantly, the porter associations also brought benefits to members. Mr. Chifwembe was the TAZARA Passenger Services Officer in 1998 when the first group was formed, named Twikatane Association. Twikatane was intended to serve as a mechanism for coordinating contracting and labour activities within the station, on the one hand, and for providing social support for porters and their families on the other. Members of the association pooled a portion of their earnings every month into a shared savings purse or a *chilimba* that they deposited into an account at the town's ZANACO bank. The purpose of the account was to share a percentage of group resources “so that they could eat something” when times were hard, said Mr. Chifwembe, for example when traffic was slow and there was not enough work to go around. They also used the shared funds to pay for burials for family members, contributing towards the costs of buying a coffin and transporting the body.

Twikatane Association used savings to make investments on behalf of the membership, for example they opened a small retail grocery shop in the nearby market. They purchased a minibus as a commercial enterprise and also started a football club. The association helped its members to begin acquiring plots and build permanent houses in the neighbourhoods of Soweto and Riverside near the station where most porters stay. At its most active Twikatane had over forty members, divided into smaller groups that were intended to share the work contracts fairly. They even secured a contract from

21 Railway workers have formed similar clubs and associations in Africa, including football clubs, see Ahmad A. Sikain-ga, “City of Steel and Fire: A Social History of Atbara, Sudan's Railway Town, 1906–1984, London 2002, pp. 77–85.

22 Interview with Mr. Chifwembe, retired passenger services officer, New Kapiri Mposhi station, August 2014.

TAZARA to clean and maintain the station grounds: “at that time the station was very clean,” remembers Mr. Chifwembe. While Twikatane apparently disbanded sometime after Mr. Chifwembe’s retirement in 2005, other groups of porters have continued to form associations over time.

John Kasonde is the chairman of the TAZARA Express Association, one of the groups that has continued to operate at the station following the decline of Twikatane in 2005. He was born in Kasama, Zambia and came to live in Kapiri Mposhi with his father when he was a boy. After his father passed away Kasonde needed to support his family and he came to the TAZARA station to find work as a porter. “I didn’t start lifting heavy things,” he explained in an interview, “I started lifting light things.” Kasonde described a period of apprenticeship in which he learned to lift and carry goods from more experienced porters.²³ He formed the TAZARA Express Association in 2009 together with other porters in order to facilitate contracting with the railway authority, with traders and with clearing and forwarding agents. The members of the association are young men, many of whom had to leave school when family financial circumstances made it difficult for them to pay school fees.

The TAZARA Express Association has a positive reputation on the TAZARA platform and in the dry port, where these young men seek to be collectively known for hard work, careful handling and honesty.²⁴ Being able to keep up this reputation is part of what the Association seeks to achieve in order to secure contracts and retain loyal partners. The Association addresses the needs of the railway authority and its contractual partners by recruiting, training and mobilizing the teams of casual workers. The Association is also a means of providing for professionalization, sustainability and stability for the porters, as it gives its members some measure of control over their own labour.

The association also functions as a social support network for its members, like Twikatane did, in the way of a rotating savings and credit society. When payment is made to the association leader for fulfilling a loading or off-loading contract, a percentage of the wage of each worker is contributed to a central social security fund. This fund is then used to provide support for members who experience hardship, for example illness. Many of the members of the group are single and young men who may be living far from family or other networks that could support them. The association’s social function therefore acts as a form of security that evens out periods of insecurity and creates not only stability for the individual members of the porters’ association, but also for the group as a whole. Providing for the needs of members also means that there is more sustainability and continuity among the porters, and this brings respectability and professional status to individual members and to the group.

23 Apprenticeship in the transport industry has been documented most recently by Jennifer Hart and Joshua Grace, see Jennifer Hart, “Suffer to gain”: citizenship, accumulation, and motor transportation in late-colonial and postcolonial Ghana,” Ph.D. thesis, Indiana University, 2011; Joshua Grace, “Heroes of the Road: Race, Gender and the Politics of Mobility in Twentieth Century Tanzania,” in: *Africa*, 83 (2013) 3, pp. 403-425.

24 Interviews with George Kasonde, leader of TAZARA Express Association, 2011 and 2012. Conversation with Lewis Kaluba, New Kapiri Mposhi, August 2014.

Port and Platform at Kapiri

There are two main spaces at the Kapiri Mposhi station where the porters load and offload goods: the dry port and the passenger platform. The dry port is located some distance from the platform within a walled enclosure, thus not in view of the public. Within this space the porters move the contents of containers onto flat bed trucks, most often carrying sacks of bulk commodities like wheat flour, rice or fertilizer. On days that I have been present in the dry port I have viewed shipments of wheat flour and rice destined for Eastern Congo, and fertilizers being forwarded within Zambia. The porter labour in the dry port is used, as Pederson predicted, to reduce the costs of shipment by shifting loads from containers to trucks. In the dry port following the arrival of a train there are often large trucks, drivers, porters, forwarding agents, shipment agents and TAZARA workers. All of these diverse people in the dry port are actively engaged in getting the goods offloaded from containers and into their onward moving transport. The language of the dry port is Swahili, once again inviting comparisons with the caravan era when, as a German observer noted of the port cities of Dar es Salaam and Tanga, “one is betrayed and swindled if one doesn’t know at least some Swahili.”²⁵ There is a Swahili culture in the dry port in part because it is a meeting point of truck drivers from towns of the East African coast, (in particular the same port cities of Dar es Salaam and Tanga mentioned above) and traders from Eastern Congo also speak Swahili there, as do most of the porters and TAZARA officials.

The dry port brings other benefits to the local community in New Kapiri Mposhi. When sacks of grain are being offloaded from containers and repacked onto lorries, there is naturally some breakage and spillage. The TAZARA authority allows local women to glean from the containers and the yard; grain that they clean by winnowing and then either sell or use at home. The lorry drivers also eat their meals at small local restaurants, stay in guest houses and patronize shops and other establishments, “in this way the whole community benefits from the dry port,” according to Mr. Kaluba.²⁶

Smaller-scale traders do not use the dry port for their shipping, because they may not have aggregated sufficient loads for filling several containers. These traders are found in New Kapiri Mposhi station on the passenger platform. Goods that arrive and depart from the platform are normally consolidated as “parcel” rather than container shipments, and carried in a specially designed luggage wagon. While the trader or agent that has consigned a parcel shipment may accompany his or her load when it is part of a passenger train, it is not necessary. Goods offloaded onto the platform at Kapiri Mposhi may be smaller or less bulky than those found in the dry port – finishing hardware for building construction, for example, or dried fish and agricultural products. Items that are fragile or perishable are normally handled by porters on the platform.

25 Wilhelm Folmer, *Die deutsche Sprache in den deutschen Kolonien*, in: *Koloniale Zeitschrift*, 23, (24 April 1914).

26 Interview with Lewis Kaluba, New Kapiri Mposhi Station, August 2014; Interviews with porters, traders and lorry drivers, 2010–2014, New Kapiri Mposhi Station.

During summer fieldwork from 2011 through 2014, we observed regular shipments of construction materials offloaded onto the platform at Kapiri Mposhi. Boxes of floor tiles, ceramic plumbing fixtures, door and window hardware and other finishing materials had travelled from China to Dubai, from Dubai to Dar es Salaam, and from Dar es Salaam to Kapiri. From the station platform, according to a young man who was preparing to load materials into a hired truck, these materials would be taken to the copperbelt where there was a housing boom. The housing developments were the consequence of expanding settlements around newly re-opened copper mines, many of which were operated by Chinese investors. The Chinese-built train from the era of the Cold War had now become a vehicle for the import of Chinese-made housing materials (via Dubai) that were in turn a response to Chinese mining investment in Zambia.

On the platform and on trains during the last two years we have interviewed traders and shipping agents involved in this trade in Chinese goods marketed through Dubai. We spoke with a young man named Vasco who was moving his shipment of Chinese home building supplies into a truck bound for the copper mines. Vasco is the junior partner in a venture with an older relative who takes care of the buying (in Dubai) and clearing process (in Dar es Salaam); Vasco will now sell these goods to people building new homes on the Copperbelt at Solwezi. The truck driver who has contracted with Vasco to carry these goods is a Tanzanian from Dar es Salaam who drives a circuit all over East Africa. After he drops Vasco's load at Solwezi, he will pick up a shipment of copper there and bring it back to Dar es Salaam. From there it will be transferred to a ship at the port and set sail for China.

Conclusion

Just as portage as a form of "labor crossing" has continuities with porter labour on the caravan routes, labour associations in the railway town also have a long history in Africa. Railway workers from the colonial period onwards have used associations to establish extensive social networks, regional associations, mutual aid institutions and cooperative societies.²⁷ The role of railway worker solidarities in decolonizing struggles across Africa has been well documented. Yet the majority of these associations have been established by salaried workers, in fact historians have argued that the stability of railway workers was a key factor in their development of corporate identity and in their labour militancy. In this study I have tried to highlight another side of labour in the railway town, a side often hidden behind the walls of the dry port or misunderstood as simply one of many casual labour activities in the "informal" transport sector including that of touts and conductors.

27 Ahmad Sikainga, "Organized Labor in Contemporary Sudan: The Story of the Railway Workers of Atbara," in: *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109 (2010) 1; R.D. Grillo, *African railwaymen: solidarity and opposition in an East African labour force*, Cambridge 1973; Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African society: the labor question in French and British Africa*, Cambridge 1996.

I have argued here that the work of railway porters at Kapiri Mposhi in Zambia facilitates the transshipment of goods from rail to road. Their labour reduces costs of long-haul logistics while physically smoothing out the bumps and frictions of port-to-port containerization. Their embodied practice of “hand-carrying” loads of fragile products such as ceramic tiles and bathroom fixtures allows traders such as Vasco to participate in the economy of “globalization from below”. The porters both facilitate this form of globalization and they benefit from it: portering provides for a form of livelihood in a context of much precarity for young men without a strong education background.

Their labour takes place within a space of work – the station platform and the dry port – that is both segmented and differentiated. They are “casual workers” at the lowest end of the work hierarchy; their status is evidenced not just by the kinds of casual work arrangements they endure but also by the physical spaces they can and cannot move in. In response to these working conditions, porters have formed their own associations to do several things: to gain more control over the labour process; to give them a more collective form of negotiation in contracts; to professionalize their work; and to establish a social security function that flattens out the ups and downs of their precariousness.

New practices and organizations are grafted upon a railway infrastructure that has been developed in Kapiri Mposhi over more than a century. The self-organization of porters in this inland port institutionalizes the relative stability and reliability of a ‘parcel-ization’ of global trade connections and hence facilitates East Central African access to world markets, and vice versa. The “institutions and practices for dealing with global connectedness,” including transcultural encounters and the adoption of Swahili as a *lingua franca*, make this trading hub and its idiosyncratic mix of precariousness and security just as much an indispensable ‘portal of globalization’ as containerization or the world’s main seaports are.²⁸

Just as their labour of “hand-carrying” goods is of benefit to traders who may be shipping small loads of fragile items that need to be carried again and again, their sociality practice is also beneficial, because the social security means that they do not need to pilfer or steal; they are not out sick or leaving irregularly to find odd jobs elsewhere. Their associational practice provides stability for themselves and benefits for traders. As this enhances their reputation for honesty and hard work, they are no longer viewed just as ordinary “casual workers” but through their associations they garner respect and are even sought after by clients. Their forms of sociality enable them to pursue aspirations of masculine respectability and providerhood. Yet this very providerhood remains constrained by the precarity and adversity of the railway authority, local and regional economies, agricultural production and mining. If the trains are not running regularly, or only carrying partial loads, porters are out of work.

28 M. Middell and K. Naumann, Global history and the spatial turn: from the impact of area studies to the study of critical junctures of globalization, in: *Journal of Global Studies*, 5 (2010) 1, p. 162.