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Making Men, Making History: remembering railway work in Cold War Afro-Asian solidarity

Des « hommes nouveaux » : mémoires de travailleurs du rail et coopération sino-africaine

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Making Men, Making History: remembering railway work in Cold War Afro-Asian solidarity

Jamie MONSON

During the 1990s I often traveled on the TAZARA railway [Tanzania-Zambia Railway Authority] between Tanzania's coastal city of Dar es Salaam and the southwestern highlands, on the route to Zambia. During the long overnight train journeys I normally booked a sleeping berth in a first or second-class compartment, where I could have extra luggage space and a more comfortable night's sleep. Once aboard the train, however, I often found the women's sleeping cars to be filled with so much luggage that there was barely room to stand.

Seeking refreshment and a place to stretch my legs, I often wandered up to the first-class lounge and bar cars, where I was sure to find a cold beer and someone to talk to. Many of the (mostly) men sitting in the bar were TAZARA workers and retirees, and I had some interesting conversations there about the railway's history, while sharing a cold Kilimanjaro and watching the grasslands of the East African plateau rolling by. In those days, I was doing field research for my study of the role of TAZARA in the livelihoods of its users – the traders and farmers that lived along the railway corridor in southern Tanzania. Spending time in the lounge car became an important part of my research methodology, augmenting oral life histories, observations of landscape change and parcel trade data.¹ As I listened over time to the stories of workers that had built and operated TAZARA, I began to understand the multiple ways that railway work was connected to livelihoods of family and community. This in turn helped me to see the ways that work was gendered, and

¹ Monson 2009.

how the experience and practice of masculinity in railway work changed over time from the days of socialist solidarity between Tanzania, Zambia and China to the era of commercialization and market reform.

For in fact, the crowded women's compartments and the male retirees relaxing in the lounge car were linked to one another – because in the 1990s, entire TAZARA families were able to use free passes to travel on the train. For the entrepreneurial women whose husbands were salaried railway workers, the train was an important resource for carrying out cross-border trade between Tanzania and Zambia. I recall one particular first-class compartment that was stuffed full with gunny-sacks of shoes bought in Dar es Salaam, destined for Zambian buyers. And when we passed hill stations like Mbeya the women could not resist purchasing a few sacks of Irish potatoes, certain to bring a profit in the Zambian markets of Mpika or Kapiiri Mposhi. I often purchased a few sacks myself, so that I could bring a gift to the Zambian families that hosted me.

For the men, having beers in the lounge and sharing stories with old friends was also a part of the railway worker experience. As I chatted over the years with those older workers who had participated in TAZARA's survey and construction (1968-1975), I learned the life trajectories of a generation of railwaymen who had been born at the end of colonialism, began to work in the heyday of African socialism, and were now retiring in the midst of neo-liberal economic restructuring. Here in the lounge car they were free to reminisce about their youthful exploits and to complain about their impending retirements, feeling at home in a space that simultaneously represented the fruits of their labor and the precarity of their future status.

It is no wonder, then, that when free passes were phased out in 2008 it was experienced as a significant loss for TAZARA workers and their families.² The end of free passes was not only a material

² Family passes were phased out during the management term of Henry Chipewo, who recently argued in an online posting that free passes had been reducing passenger train revenues by 85,000,000 Tanzanian shillings per train. Henry Chipewo, posting on news website *Zambian Watchdog*, responding to article "Tazara workers not paid for past 3 months," January 14, 2013.

loss for the women who had been carrying out their trading business on the train; it was also a symbolic loss for the male workers because the passes had amplified the ability of railwaymen to provide for their families and extended communities. This particular loss was one of many that took place in the larger context of neo-liberal reforms, through which railway workers experienced alienation from the normative masculinity of salaried employment and social benefits including old-age pensions.³ Feeling the indignity of layoffs and the delayed payment of pensions in 2010, one retired Zambian worker opined that the railway authority should provide retirees with their own commemorative lounge car on the passenger train, where they could relax together and be acknowledged by grateful passengers for their heroic deeds during TAZARA's construction.⁴

While TAZARA has remained a government enterprise since it was handed over by the Chinese to Tanzania and Zambia in 1976, it has undergone several phases of commercialization and labor restructuring from the early 1980s onwards. This restructuring has been experienced in gendered ways, as the predominantly male railway workers who joined the project in their youth now feel dishonored and disrespected by layoffs and other measures. It is not only as individual workers or through their collective experience as a cohort of railwaymen that they express their concerns. It is also their inability to provide for family and community – at the time that they are becoming elders – that has become a major source of grievance. They have taken these grievances to court, publicly claiming their rights as members of the railway's "construction generation" to be treated with dignity and respect.

When New Men Grow Old

Members of the retiring generation of TAZARA construction workers share with their Chinese counterparts a sense of moral indignation that goes further than the crisis of masculinity as

<http://www.zambianwatchdog.com/tazara-workers-not-paid-for-past-3-months>, accessed May 10, 2013.

³ Yang 2010.

⁴ Interview with Simon Munga and John Chitala, Mpika Zambia, June 24, 2010.

livelihood struggle that has been described for post-socialist reforms more broadly.⁵ As Hurst and O'Brien show in their study of Chinese working class protest, retired pensioners are more likely to engage in public protest than other workers because "unpaid pensions occupy a special place in the minds of many members of the proletariat." Pensioners in China feel that the promise of reciprocity by the state – that in return for "eating bitterness" during their working years they would be cared for in old age – has been broken. One worker described the claim to retirement care as a "sacred right not to have to labor," that included the ability to look after not only oneself but also one's dependents.⁶

Like China's pensioners, the Tanzanian and Zambian workers who built TAZARA in the 1960s and 1970s also protest the failures of their contemporary states to recognize their sacrifices materially. They seek simultaneously to retrieve public recognition and also to make claims to material security through the process of remembering work. The absence of a secure pension for railwaymen who recount their life trajectories as a story of progress from "ordinary worker" to senior staff member can be a source of deep humiliation. One worker in Tanzania was so mortified by his penury at retirement that he left the small town where he had served as stationmaster for several years to move to back to a smaller village in the countryside where his decline in status would be unnoticed.⁷

Going further, these stories convey a sense that the railway technology itself has been ill-used by labor reforms, including the permanent way, the rolling stock and the operating system. Disregard for the older ways of doing things – especially practices that were introduced by the Chinese technicians from the 1970s through the 1980s – has led to a decline in service and safety, as the current generation retires. "People aren't there" to do the work of maintenance and to keep the trains running carefully according to the timetables, lamented one retiree, because "there aren't [qualified] persons coming in to replace us." He described the train, like the

⁵ Yang 2006.

⁶ Hurst & O'Brien 2002: 351.

⁷ Interview with Benedict Mkanyago, Dar es Salaam, August 13, 2010.

retiring workers, as suffering from neglect as it ages alongside the men who created it.

The grievances of the retiring TAZARA workers can be read as similar to those of other groups in Africa that mobilize memory in order to “overcome their sense of loss, insecurity, displacement and deterritorialization” in the postcolonial world.⁸ Like veterans of anti-colonial struggles, they feel that the state has only selectively – even divisively – recognized the sacrifice of railway construction work, for some are perceived as receiving benefits that others do not.⁹ And like workers in the southern African mines, TAZARA retirees feel that the dignity of hard work has been undermined by the dishonor of layoffs and of insecurity in old age.¹⁰

Yet there is also something distinctive about TAZARA worker experience and its contexts of reminiscence. For this railway was not only a post-colonial state-led development project. It was also a socialist project, carried out by workers from three nations at a specific historical moment of ideological commitment to national construction. The TAZARA project was designed to build a railway; it also proposed to build a cohort of African “new industrial men” (and some women) by shaping youth into maturity through hard work.¹¹ These “new men” would be formed through pedagogies of work that emphasized practical training, exhortation and role modeling – pedagogies that were literally drawn from the textbooks of China’s revolutionary industrial experience.¹²

In his memoirs, Zanzibari political leader Ali Sultan Issa described the way he imagined the creation of the “new man” in building East African socialism:

One way of creating a New Man, I believed, was to change the environment. By changing the environment, we could change the mentality of the people. That is one reason why I wanted Zanzibar to industrialize rapidly after the revolution – in order to change the work

⁸ Werbner 1998: 4.

⁹ Werbner & Ranger 1996.

¹⁰ Iliffe 2005: 350; see also Gordon 1977; Harries 1994; Ferguson 1999.

¹¹ Cheng 2009. See also Straker 2009, and Schmidt 2007.

¹² And this Chinese revolutionary approach to “new industrial men” was in turn influenced by Soviet models. Cheng 2009.’

habits of the people. I wanted to build factories and engage in heavy industry not only because we needed to produce tractors and guns but also because an individual cannot remain lazy if he is working on an assembly line – the conveyor belt does not wait.¹³

The “new man” would be instilled with self-discipline, and seek to improve himself through hard work. Collectively, these industrial workers could then be mobilized to build new nations.

Like other national development planners in the late 1960s and 1970s, the architects of the TAZARA construction project argued that East African youth (*vijana* in Kiswahili) were best suited for this kind of industrial training. Project leaders proposed that youth be recruited through the nationalist party leagues in Tanzania and Zambia, as well as through Tanzania’s National Service, because they could be counted on to be “loyal, disciplined and dedicated.”¹⁴ It was not necessary for them to have an education beyond the primary level, and even this requirement could be waived in the case of youths who proved to be “efficient and of good character.”¹⁵

Although the category of “youth” in nationalism was inclusive of men and women, those recruited to participate in the TAZARA project were overwhelmingly male. Evelyn Mwansa was one of two Zambian women who became locomotive drivers; she was trained in 1971 by Chinese instructors in Dar es Salaam. Yet this exception proved the rule: Ms. Mwansa was widely known because of the uniqueness of her experience. She went on to spend several years driving trains in Zambia where she has now retired.¹⁶ African women more often held clerical rather than technical or managerial positions from the beginning of the project; none were sent to China in 1972 for university training.

Becoming a “railway worker” as a youth working on TAZARA was therefore constructed as part of a masculine trajectory, one that was understood to be modern and “civilized” – those workers who

¹³ Burgess 2009: 94.

¹⁴ National Archives of Zambia (NAZ), MFA 1/286/144, “TAZARA Brief Progress Report,” March 16, 1970.

¹⁵ National Archives of Zambia (NAZ), MFA 1/286/144, “TAZARA Brief Progress Report,” March 16, 1970.

¹⁶ Interview with Evelyn Mwansa, Kapiri Mposhi, August 10, 2011.

stayed with the project and became salaried received benefits such as housing and other support for domestic lives and families. One retired worker in Zambia credited his participation in the construction work – including his knowledge of Chinese – as having “built his house” and educated his children. The men who were mobilized as nation-builders in their youth thus matured into a post-colonial context that held both the expectations and promise of male provision for family security and social promotion. Working on the railway was recalled not only as a time of building a train but also building families, as young men matured, married and educated their children.¹⁷ The economic reforms that that were implemented after the 1980s therefore held a specifically gendered meaning for men who had had expected to provide for family beyond their working years into their retirements, through old-age pensions.¹⁸

This was consistent with Tanzania’s approach to national socialism and self-reliance, which imagined youth to be “hard-working nation-builders” who could be mobilized for service on road-building, agriculture and other rural projects.¹⁹ Their expertise in technology and construction could be used for other national development priorities once the railway was completed.

The workers who joined the TAZARA project in the 1970s – both Chinese and African – were aware of their role in making nations and in making history. This message was imparted to them publicly through the use of slogans, worker meetings, official ceremonies and other performances. It was experienced in practice, through the work process itself and especially in the railway training schools and workshops. The workers who participated in the TAZARA project therefore developed historical consciousness in several ways. At the moment of construction, they were participants in a nation-building state development project in which they played a central role; indeed it was their own refashioning as workers that was

¹⁷ This experience echoed expectations of masculinity among colonial railwaymen: Lindsay 1998.

¹⁸ This was true for other technical workers as well in Zambia as well as Tanzania, Ferguson 1998; Giblin 2004.

¹⁹ Brennan 2006: 244; Ivaska 2005: 206-207.

expected to lead to industrial progress and modernization. At the same time, as a cohort of railway workers they developed their own form of historical consciousness through their collective use of memory as a social resource over time. They have deployed this resource in direct engagement with state-level discourses at specific historical moments: both in collective contexts such as labor disputes, as well as in individual grievances such as pension payment.

In a sense, then, the memories of these retired workers provide a glimpse into the formation of historical consciousness for a generation of “new industrial men” who are now growing old. At the time that they were recruited, trained and deployed in East Africa, TAZARA railway workers were acutely aware that they were part of a unique moment of Afro-Asian and pan-African solidarity. It wasn’t just that they were made aware of this role through state level ideological transmission; many workers remember their own enthusiasm for the project at the time. Over the ensuing decades, as they have lived through post-socialist processes of liberalization, these workers have developed powerful narratives of nostalgia about this youthful experience that both match and contest those of the nation. Ironically, TAZARA workers seem to have felt most profoundly neglected and forgotten at precisely that moment when government officials have begun to deploy their memory in celebration of the enduring friendship between China and Africa.²⁰

For in recent years, it is hard to find a speech or newspaper account about contemporary Africa-China relations that does not contain a glowing reference to the TAZARA project and the heroism of the men who built it. Remembering the railway, especially the sacrifices that were made by the railway workers, has become a customary gesture in China-Africa diplomatic relations. For example, Chinese Vice Minister of Commerce, Fu Ziyang, told a press conference on Chinese foreign aid to Africa that he shed tears during

²⁰ In public speeches and policy papers regarding China’s current engagement with African countries, the legacy of the TAZARA project is frequently cited as a founding example of the “enduring friendship” and continuity of relationships between China and Africa. For a summary of this rhetorical practice see Strauss 2009: 777-795.

his visit to TAZARA. “A few days ago,” he told the audience, “when I was paying respect to the Chinese workers who sacrificed their lives for the construction of Tanzania-Zambia Railway at a public cemetery in Tanzania, I could not help bursting into tears.” He went on to acclaim the “tens of thousands of Chinese workers” who “labored side by side with the Tanzanian and Zambian people to build the railway successfully,” purely out of friendship.²¹

Workers, on the other hand, express skepticism towards this public recognition of their foundational contribution to China’s current relationship with African countries.

Stages of Work, Stages of Memory

Like United States autoworkers interviewed by John Bodnar, TAZARA workers frame their memories using narrative structures that reflect not only their personal life course but also larger patterns of change in the institutional and social order.²² These narrative “plot structures” convey meaning by fashioning experience within specific moments or conjunctures of historic significance. For the Studebaker workers interviewed by Bodnar, for example, the early years of the company’s operation in the 1930s were recalled as a time of stability and order, while after WWII the plant was remembered as torn by conflict. Because contexts of remembering – both personal and institutional – are constantly shifting, these narrative “plots” are not fixed but fluid, as they are constantly reconstructed.²³

For the TAZARA project, three broadly defined eras have framed worker memory and historical consciousness. The first is the period of railway construction, lasting roughly from 1968 to 1976. The second is the period of economic reform (in both Africa and China) starting in the mid-1980s, when institutional restructuring led to worker layoffs at

²¹ Vice Minister of Commerce, Fu Ziyang, is addressing the press,” China.com.cn, accessed April 26, 2011.

²² Bodnar 1989: 1201-1202.

²³ Because our oral history methodology involves long-term relationships and multi-year conversations with retired workers, we have been able to witness and document some of the complex ways that memories can shift and change, even when stories are told to the same listeners.

TAZARA. The third period begins in the mid-1990s and was characterized by commercialization policies that affected TAZARA's construction generation just at the time of their retirement.

Construction: Building a Railway, Making History

The TAZARA railway was built between 1970 and 1975, following a two-year survey and design period.²⁴ The full 1865-kilometer rail line was officially opened and handed over by China to Tanzania and Zambia in July 1976, in a formal ceremony at New Kapiri Mposhi. Although precise figures are not known, it is estimated that some 30-40,000 Chinese railway workers were joined by about twice that number of African workers during construction. At the height of the project in 1972, there were 38,000 African workers and 13,500 Chinese at work.

Work on the project was organized through twelve base camps, with centers of operations at Dar es Salaam and Mang'ula in Tanzania. Teams of workers were sent out from the base camps in smaller sub-teams, directed by African foremen and Chinese field assistants. The work gangs varied in size; at one base camp in 1972 there were 64 labor gangs involving some 5,500 workers. Work took place in isolated conditions, as the gangs could be spread out two to three miles apart during the workday. In some critical sections work continued around the clock in 8-hour shifts, with diesel generators providing electric light.

The first section of the rail line, from Dar es Salaam to Mlimba (502 kilometers) was completed within one year, despite the challenges of construction in the unpopulated Selous Game Reserve. The next section, a 158-kilometer climb over the steep escarpment of the Udzungwa Mountains, took a full second year because of the engineering challenges of the steep terrain. It was in this section that the majority of the tunnels, bridges and culverts were constructed. Once the plateau highlands of Mbeya had been reached in 1973 and

²⁴ These are the official construction dates; in fact some construction-related activities began earlier as the survey and design teams established forward bases along the planned railway route; 1975 was the year that the first trials began along the full length of the line.

the rails were laid across the border into Zambia, the remainder of the construction work progressed quickly.²⁵

The construction phase of the TAZARA project required the application of both hard physical labor and also technically sophisticated engineering skills. In the first years of the project, African workers carried out the bulk of the unskilled manual labor while the Chinese workers took on more technical responsibilities. From the beginning, however, the project emphasized training of the African workers so that they would be able to take over and manage the railway after its completion. Worker training was therefore put forward as the key to self-reliance for the African workers and their newly independent countries. One Chinese instructor explained it this way:

After we complete this railway, if they [Tanzanians and Zambians] themselves do not know how to manage it, they will not know how to operate the railway. They will then invite foreign countries, which means the west. Inviting foreigners to operate the railway is equivalent to having westerners hold this railway, specifically, the railway would be held by imperialists as in the past. Under these circumstances, we decided that the Chinese government should let us cultivate their own people. In other words, the management has to be localized, which means that we will help Tanzania and Zambia to cultivate their own talent to manage this railway. Therefore, we will not only build this railway for them but we will make them feel that they are managing the railway themselves.²⁶

The agreements that were signed between the three countries explicitly stated that a primary goal of the project would be the training of an African railway worker cohort. The bulk of this training would take place at the work sites rather than in formal training institutions. There were several reasons for this emphasis on “on the job” technical training. It would allow construction to begin immediately and to progress quickly, in keeping with the TAZARA project’s goal of early completion.²⁷ It also reflected the focus in China at the time on learning through practical lessons instead of in the classroom. In 1969, the tripartite agreement specified that,

²⁵ Monson 2009; Yu 1980.

²⁶ Interview with Yao Pei Ji, Beijing, 2005.

²⁷ Monson 2010.

“training of technical personnel in various fields shall, in the main, be carried out in the practical work of construction of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway and be supplemented with necessary theoretical lectures.”²⁸ Learning through experience was the official Chinese government approach to instruction at that historical moment, remembers one retired teacher: “They believed that practice was the only [training] standard that examines truth.”²⁹

Yet from the beginning there was also a bifurcated structure to the TAZARA training program. While the rank and file workers were trained on the job, a carefully selected group of educated African workers was sent to China for a two-year course of study at Beijing Jiaotong [Communications] University. And engineering instructors from that university also established formal training schools at Mang’ula, Mbeya and Mpika.³⁰ While these three schools had only trained some 1000 or so railway workers in total by the end of the construction period, it was the workers who gained this level of technical education that went on to become the management and operations staff of TAZARA.³¹ A small number of these engineering and management level TAZARA employees returned to China in the 1980s and the 1990s to gain further education including Master’s degrees; some were also sent to Europe and to the United Kingdom.

The Chinese workers also participated in the “hard work” of manual labor during TAZARA’s construction. The memory of Chinese workers’ willingness to join in with Africans in every task – from ditch digging to blasting tunnels – remains one of the most powerful images from TAZARA’s construction. A Zambian worker remembers,

²⁸ National Archives of Zambia (NAZ), MFA 1/286/144, “TAZARA Brief Progress Report,” March 16, 1970.

²⁹ Interview with Yao Pei Ji, Beijing, 2005.

³⁰ While they adjusted their curriculum to meet the revolutionary expectations prevailing in China in the early 1970s, these professors also incorporated much of their earlier curricular material into these courses. Interviews with retired Beijing Jiaotong Daxue professors, 2005; Archives of Beijing Jiaotong Daxue.

³¹ Archives of Mpika Training School, Mpika Zambia; Archives of Beijing Jiaotong Daxue; interviews with retired workers.

We were expecting what we used to see with the Europeans from England or Germany, where someone is the manager: a white manager just sitting in the office ... But they themselves [the Chinese] were engaged in the actual labor work. If it was digging they were there, if you were supposed to dig a foundation for a certain building they were also involved in that. So because of that, the Zambians were happy. They said, these guys they can even do this kind of work, and there was no difference [among different levels of workers].³²

The Chinese dedication to performing manual labor during railway construction was closely connected to the pedagogical focus of the project. The lessons that they hoped to impart to their African “friends” included not only technical know-how but also the “all around skills” of work discipline and character building. Working hard under “bitter conditions” would therefore be the best form of education for the African youth recruits. This was also the form of education that had taken hold in China during the years of the Cultural Revolution; the engineering experts who became leaders of the TAZARA worker training program had themselves been posted out to rural areas of China just before the African project began, and many of the Chinese rank and file workers had participated in the grueling railway building projects of China’s ‘third line defense’ and the Korean War.

The new African “industrial men” that TAZARA’s founders envisioned would therefore be shaped through labor practice: they would gain technical know-how, work discipline and other skills of modern citizenship from their Chinese mentors. The Chinese technicians in turn would serve as role models for emulation; in revolutionary China “to be a model meant not only fulfilling one’s own duty well but also helping others by example.”³³ A slogan that was used at the time of TAZARA was 一対一, 一対红 (one helps one, both become red) meaning that one-on-one assistance would cause both African and Chinese technical partners to become ideologically strengthened.³⁴ Emulation rather than exhortation was emphasized in the mentoring relationships between Chinese and

³² Interview with John Mulenga, Kapiri Mposhi, August 2010.

³³ Cheng 2009: 33.

³⁴ Interview with Li Jin Wen in Tianjin, China, July 2007.

African workers. As one Chinese expert remembers, he was not allowed to expose his own political ideas in the workplace, thus “we really did not have any official way to motivate them [the African workers] except through our own example... Everyone was a “China *rafiki* (Chinese friend, Kiswahili).”³⁵

African workers who participated in the TAZARA project have strong memories of their work experience. They recall specific details of their work practice that highlight the challenging parts of railway work, for example building the tunnels and bridges from Mlimba to Makambako. For the cohort of TAZARA construction workers that is now retiring, their sense of “making history” as railway workers is closely linked to their experience of working under the tutelage of the Chinese experts. The transfer of technical skills through the Chinese method of teaching “hand in hand” or *shou ba shou* is an especially powerful component of their memory of work, and of their capacity as a cohort of workers to operate the railway after handing over. One retired worker remembered a Chinese demonstration of work practice in this way:

The Chinese were teaching us using actions, to the extent that, for example, if we had just arrived there at the workplace, [the Chinese worker] began to work [at first] all by himself. He told us, “you all just rest, the work that you are about to begin here is done like this,” and then he did the work so intensely [*kweli kweli*] that sweat began to pour [from his body]. Then he asked us all, “Okay, friends, have you seen the work?”³⁶

The image of sweat pouring from the body, or even bleeding due to heavy exertion, is a characteristic of the “self-scarifying” heroic labor of the socialist “new man.”³⁷

Technology training was experienced differently for different groups of workers, in ways that belie the retrospective reconstruction of a common or collective experience of the first generation of TAZARA workers. The most significant difference among workers was probably that between Tanzanian and Zambian recruits. In both

³⁵ Interview with retired railway workers at February 7 Factory, Beijing, June 2009.

³⁶ Interview in Chimala.

³⁷ Chen Yihong, p. 28, citing *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, “Russian Communist Youth League.”

countries there was an emphasis on recruitment of youth workers who could then be molded into trained technicians and disciplined citizens. Retired Zambian workers, however, are more ambivalent than Tanzanians about the roles played by modernization strategies and technology transfer during their lives working on TAZARA. Like many of their Zambian contemporaries, they recall the 1960s and 1970s as a time of industrialization and technological advancement, when those with secondary school and vocational educations hoped to find a secure and well-remunerated place within the Zambian mining-industrial economy.³⁸ In their narratives of railway construction they often described themselves as urban youth (or youth destined for modern urban life) who had been sent out to the unfamiliar and backward countryside to build the railway. Those who were sent to China for higher education sometimes described China in similar terms, as representing a backward step in their own modernizing (and capitalist) progress.³⁹

John Mulenga remembers that young Zambian men like himself who were used to the urban life of the copperbelt found it difficult to work in the rustic TAZARA camps. He compared his working conditions unfavorably to those of his high school classmates who he felt had better opportunities:

[TAZARA construction] was in the rural areas, so all the amenities that we used to know where I came from were not there. Like going to cinema clubs, going to watch football on the weekend and all other amenities which were found in the urban areas, they were not there, you have to forget them. Then the issue... the issue also of the railway salary came in, the railway salary [meaning that it was low]. And then those fellow colleagues that you know in school they went on to colleges and universities, but we just continued working [at TAZARA] hoping that after construction we will be happy.⁴⁰

Overall, many of the Zambian recruits for railway training had higher levels of education and technical background than those in Tanzania. And according to their own accounts, the costs for them of staying with TAZARA rather than moving into the mining and industrial

³⁸ Ferguson 1999.

³⁹ Interviews with Moses Mutuna and John Mulenga, Mpika, summer 2011.

⁴⁰ Interview with John Mulenga, Kapiri Mposhi, summer 2011.

sectors in Zambia could be high. Still, retiring Zambian workers feel that they learned valuable skills that could not be easily measured against classroom learning. John Mulenga looked back on his own experience and concluded,

So I learned a lot of skills from the Chinese without having gone to college or university. And most of the Zambians who learned skills from the Chinese perform better than those who come from colleges or universities. Because later on after handing over ... they started recruiting people who didn't participate in the construction [who were degree and diploma holders] ... but when it came to actual work the Zambians who had been in the construction, who learned skills from the Chinese, performed better than those from the universities. Even today those Zambians who participated in the construction are better than those from the universities, they are better in terms of actual performance. Be it in engineering, be it in accountancy, be it in revenue collection whatever ... they are better.⁴¹

Tanzanian workers were recruited in much larger numbers during the first phases of the project, and most of them had only some primary level education. They were recruited from throughout the country through the offices of the TANU party, many of them through the National Service. The greatest percentage of the Tanzanian workers came from the districts along the line of rail in southern Tanzania, particularly from the Southern Highlands. They were more likely than Zambians to spend several years in the company and tutelage of Chinese mentors, from whom they learned Chinese and a diverse array of skills. Those who were later recruited for higher education in China, as well as for more advanced training in workshops in Tanzania and Zambia, were most often workers who had several years of experience on TAZARA and familiarity with multiple sectors of railway construction and operations. Retired workers praised this development of "all around skills", as one commented:

I carried out almost all types of work, especially during the period of constructing the TAZARA railway, because when you do work with the Chinese you are transferred from one kind of work to another. And this was done because they wanted us to have knowledge of many different

⁴¹ Interview with John Mulenga, Kapiri Mposhi, summer 2011.

types of work, and this was a form of assistance to us individually and for the nation as a whole.⁴²

The same worker testified that, “we received a very high level of experience from the Chinese, a level that now surpasses even that which people receive from the universities.”⁴³ Like John Mulenga, Tanzanian retired workers emphasize their years of experience working under the guidance and supervision of the Chinese experts as the asset that divides them from other workers, especially younger workers who received their education from vocational or university institutions. Those who worked for long periods of time, learned Chinese, and had a close interpersonal relationship with a Chinese mentor were most likely to view their technical education and skill levels favorably. Chinese retired workers also emphasized this aspect of training and education, especially the education that took place in the workplace.

Reform and Retrenchment: the 1980s

At the time of handing over TAZARA to the Tanzanian and Zambian governments in 1976, selected African workers were given salaried positions as railway workers and managers. The remaining workers were let go, to return to their former lives or to build new ones. The Chinese instituted a careful selection process for determining which workers would stay on to become salaried, according to worker memories. They recommended workers who showed qualities of good character, hard work and discipline. One worker from the bridge team recalled that

the Chinese really wanted a person who had good manners If you were very arrogant, well then they would just look at you and keep quiet. Now when it came time to reduce the labor force, they would begin to choose those who had discipline. Those who were respectful were the ones who were selected to work [as salaried workers].⁴⁴

Those who were selected for salaried employment were drawn from the group of workers that had received training in the Chinese railway

⁴² Tanzanian worker interviewed by George Ambindwile in Chimala.

⁴³ Tanzanian worker interviewed by George Ambindwile in Chimala.

⁴⁴ Interview with Paschal Kihanza, Iringa, 2010. Interview by Frank Edwards.

workshops and training schools. They were first given an examination that tested them on their railway skills and basic education. As Paschal Kihanza remembers, each worker also had to undergo an interview:

He had an interview, and if he had been educated he would be employed.... He was given an examination. Even if he had studied up to standard seven and he had a certificate, there were additional questions that he was asked, for example 'so, will you really be able to do this work?' Because there was a lot of work to be done: To conduct this railway you needed to have some education. On the train itself you had to have training, you just couldn't just go there on your own. There was a conductor. There was a driver among those who were driving. There was that other person who looks after the wagons, the train guard. Aaah, it was necessary to have had an education.⁴⁵

The workforce that was brought on board as the first cohort of salaried TAZARA employees after the inauguration of the railway in 1976 was therefore made up of laborers who had participated in the construction, then gone through a recruitment and selection process that emphasized education and training as well as personal character. The "construction generation" that formed at this moment in TAZARA's history had several attributes in common. They had carried out the "hard work" of railway building. They had been trained by Chinese railway experts, most of them by this time not only on the job but also in training schools or workshops. And they had passed a test of their qualifications based on both technical and personal preparedness. This moment therefore marked an important moment in worker consciousness, as a selected group of workers passed from the category of casual worker to become a salaried cohort of TAZARA staff members.

It did not take long for the mobilization of this TAZARA worker consciousness to become necessary in defense of railway workers' rights. In 1982, remembers University of Dar es Salaam law professor Issa Shivji, 300 TAZARA employees from Tanzania were made "redundant." They were laid off as part of economic reform policies that identified an "excess labor" problem within the railway operations. Layoffs were needed, the railway authority argued in

⁴⁵ Interview with Paschal Kihanza, Iringa, 2010. Interview by Frank Edwards.

public, for cost reduction since “TAZARA had fallen into making losses through thefts, negligence and indiscipline among workers,” and “the shortage of motive power and spare parts had further aggravated the situation.”⁴⁶ In private, some laid off workers felt at the time that they had been targeted for their class status – many in their group were “field workers, not well educated.” And they suspected that managers may have hoped that they had limited knowledge of their rights as workers.⁴⁷

The group of laid off workers met together and sought assistance from the Legal Aid office at the University of Dar es Salaam, where Professor Shivji agreed to work with them. They took their case to the labor court after the Tanzanian national labor union (JUWATA) refused to support them.⁴⁸ The Permanent Labor Tribunal (PLT) ruled in favor of reinstating 116 of the workers, who were judged to have been unfairly dismissed due to the failure to observe labor laws. This was then appealed to the Tanzanian high court by TAZARA, and appealed again by the workers. In the end the railway authority was forced to reinstate the workers.⁴⁹

The railway workers who had been laid off had all been part of the construction teams. This aspect of their background and experience was held up by Professor Shivji in court: “The workers who were made redundant were almost all the original construction workers,” he remembers. “Those who remained on the job included some who had come later – and TAZARA actually hired new workers to replace those who had been made redundant.” As he presented their case, Shivji argued that this group of workers had been trained by the Chinese through on the job experience: “These workers were ex-primary school people who were trained in skills, who then took over the operation of the railway.” In his case, he argued that their experience and training with the Chinese experts made them a national treasure. The workers

⁴⁶ *Daily News*, Tuesday, January 28, 1986, p. 3, “TAZARA dispute taken to Court of Appeal.”

⁴⁷ Interview with Benedict Mkanyago, Dar es Salaam, August 2010.

⁴⁸ *Uhuru*, Jumamosi, March 1, 1986. p. 5. “JUWATA haikushirikishwa katika kupunguza wafanyakazi TAZARA.”

⁴⁹ *Uhuru*, Jumatatu October 28, 1985, p. 5, “Kesi ya TAZARA: Mahakama kuu yatengua amri za wizara na PTL.”

were well organized throughout the hearings, he remembers, and they became skilled at collecting evidence and participating in the development of their own case.⁵⁰

One of the leaders of this group of workers, Charles Musowela,⁵¹ remembers that he and other workers mobilized themselves during the 1980s layoffs using their consciousness of themselves as members of a unique generation. Under the tutelage of Dr. Shivji, they went on to learn through experience about labor law and workers rights. Armed with this background, they were able to provide advice and support to other aggrieved workers in the years that followed. This knowledge and experience of labor issues, Musowela remembers, was a cause for concern at TAZARA headquarters. A core group of ten worker activists from the 1980s court case were posted afterwards to a remote rural station in Tanzania. They were now viewed as agitators, he explained, who could cause trouble if they were based in the city. As we will see below, their rural posting did not prevent them from taking up future legal actions.

Commercialization and Liberalization in the 1990s

The management turn towards economic reform and liberalization intensified in the decade of the 1990s. During this period TAZARA faced additional economic pressures as southern African states achieved independence and the rail routes from Zambia to the south were opened. In March 1995, the Managing Director of TAZARA announced that the railway would lay off as many as 2,600 workers over the next fourteen months. The press announcement stated:

The TAZARA boss said that a careful multiple redundancy scheme had been worked out, in which some incompetent and unsuitable personnel have been identified.

He said TAZARA would also welcome voluntary retirement offers from those displaced as a result of organizational restructuring and work methods improvements.

⁵⁰ Interview with Issa Shivji, Dar es Salaam, 2007.

⁵¹ A pseudonym.

He, however, refused to disclose if there were plans to reward the retirement volunteers with a “golden handshake” incentive package to enable them to start off well the new life.⁵²

The decision to “streamline” TAZARA operations was the right one to take, according to a newspaper editorial that appeared the following day on the front page of the *Daily News*. The “political” rationale for the railway had now passed with the removal of the white settler regimes that once ruled southern Africa, this writer argued, and the TAZARA leadership needed to change with the times. In a somewhat contradictory way the writer went on to observe, “Worst still, TAZARA running staff have lost all the good qualities the general public used to know and love them for. The poor services of the private firms contracted to run buffet services do not help matters one little bit.”⁵³ Thus even in his support for commercialization and layoffs this writer tipped his hat to an earlier generation of TAZARA workers. Ironically, it was the older generation of railwaymen who were most affected by the changes this writer advocated. Many of them were near retirement and some took early retirement options in the 1990s, only to discover that their pension packages were not forthcoming. There was no golden handshake.

The commercialization package was not only promoted by the western countries that were advising the TAZARA management at the time of economic liberalization. It was also supported by the Chinese Railway Expert Team that had continued to provide support to the railway since 1976. When Chinese Vice Premier Zhu Rongji visited Tanzania in 1995, he stated that the railway’s commercialization would improve performance and that there was no alternative to laying off workers.⁵⁴ In 1996 the railway management took another step and restructured the workforce into two grades. The top grade was for management level workers and the lower grade was for all other salaried workers. This reclassification of the

⁵² *Daily News*, Wednesday March 8, 1995, p. 1, “TAZARA to lay-off 2,600.”

⁵³ *Daily News*, Thursday March 9, 1995, p. 1, “Tazara lay-offs no surprise,” front page editorial without attribution.

⁵⁴ Records of Chinese Railway Expert Team from TAZARA Headquarters in Dar es Salaam.

workforce created a dual system of salaries, benefits and other privileges that came on line just as the construction generation was nearing retirement.

The workers that began to retire in the 1990s were almost all members of the cohort of railwaymen that was hired at the time of the handing over in 1976. They were hired at the same time in their own personal lives and at the same historical moment of TAZARA's inauguration. They feel betrayed by the commercialization measures because they created divisions in the workforce that have excluded them from the material and symbolic recognition of higher salaries, benefits and other privileges. At the moment when they are about to retire, therefore, instead of feeling honored and respected they feel dishonored and betrayed. Many of them in both Tanzania and Zambia have not been paid their pensions, or have received only partial payments. This has meant that they have no means to invest in business or farming enterprises that could sustain them into the next years of their lives.

In the last decade, the worker consciousness of TAZARA's construction generation has been rallied once again – perhaps for the last time – as a retiring cohort of experienced railway workers bring court cases against TAZARA for failures by the railway authority to pay their pensions in full or on time. Workers who retired between 2000 and 2005 had not received their full pensions in 2011, or had only received them piecemeal. Yet their pension funds (now bankrupt) were built through deductions from worker salaries. Some have elected to take their case to court, once again with a collective consciousness of their special place in history. They believe – some citing lessons learned during the 1980s when they turned to Dr. Shivji for his assistance – that their rights and their important role in history can only be fully recognized if they make their cause a legal and national one. “We were all hired at the same time and we have all been given retirement at the same time [but without pensions],” explained one retired worker. “It is a big issue and a national question.”⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Interview with retired worker who wished to remain anonymous, Dar es Salaam, August 2010.

In response to worker claims, the TAZARA management has requested that the governments of Tanzania and Zambia find the resources to settle the pension issue. But this will take time.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, it is not only the loss of financial resources but the symbolism of the issue that is important to the construction generation. One recently retired worker from Zambia expressed his views in this way:

During the period of railway line construction, it was a time of working. We worked according to the guidelines given by three Governments, China, Tanzania and Zambia. We all worked together from the beginning of railway line construction to the end. After the railway construction was over, we thought it would have been proper for the two governments [Tanzania and Zambia] to consider what to do for us when we retire, for example we hoped that they would find settlements and farmland for us where we would live with our families. But the situation is not like that, so it's a very big problem, because what we did during construction was such a significant job indeed, but it turns out that they are not respecting us now. We [retirees] are living as if we had never worked on the railway's construction at all, they treat us as if we did not do a great and noteworthy thing.⁵⁷

Lawsuits and other public actions taken by retiring TAZARA workers over pension payments have emphasized their contribution to nation building at the time of construction. "What makes us sorrowful is that we are not given our rights," explained one Tanzanian retiree. "What would make us very happy would be if [the railway authority and the participating states] would give us our rights because we suffered so much when we built this railway." Another worker declared his deep frustration with government officials who praise the railway in their public statements, yet when it comes to honoring the workers in practice, no recognition is forthcoming. These comments often compare leaders of the past like Julius Nyerere of Tanzania with those in the present, stating bitterness over the faith they placed in promises made in the 1960s and 1970s that they feel have not been honored.

⁵⁶ *East African Business Journal*, cited on railwaysafrica.com; Interview with Conrad Simuchile, July 2010.

⁵⁷ Interview with retired railway worker in Mpika; this interviewee asked that his name not be used for personal reasons. June, 2010.

The grievances brought forward by retiring TAZARA workers have to do with state-level financial and other social security promises. Equally and perhaps even more painful for retiring workers is a feeling that they are no longer valued, whether for the heroic labor of their youth or for the wisdom of experience that they developed over their working lives. Worst of all, retirees feel, the newly hired workers that have come in to replace them over the last decade do not understand the intricacies of operating “their railway,” having been educated in the generic curriculum of vocational institutions rather than through the hands-on, experiential process of mentoring favored by the Chinese. “The train is being operated by very, very young men” who have no experience, explained one retiree. And when elders with experience are hired back as contract workers, he said, they are just treated as casual laborers (*vibarua*). “You come back as an expert and you should be treated as an expert,” he stated, “but now you are just paid as a casual worker, there are no privileges.”

What was “made” when TAZARA was constructed was therefore not only a railway but also a cohort of trained workers and a set of experiences that have continued to be remembered and reconstructed over the course of time. Retired workers and state officials alike call on the legacy of the TAZARA project to meet their discursive needs in the present. Retiring workers made and continue to “make history” through their narration of an ongoing relationship to a specific event in the past. By emphasizing the sacrifices they made as a cohort of young men who participated in a nation-building project, they intentionally implicate the state in their claims for recognition and support in their old age. As one retiring worker explained,

In the year 1976 we were promised ... by Minister of Transportation Job Lusinde that if we did our work well, we would be made into experts [*i.e.* permanent railway staff] after the departure of the Chinese. And on our retirement we would be paid very good money. But now I do not know, the location of this good money itself is something that is impossible to understand (*haiielewekei kabisa*)

The fact that a number of retired workers have already begun to pass away before the pension issue is resolved has caused a whole new discourse of martyrdom to develop among the workers, more

than thirty years after the deaths of the Chinese experts memorialized in the cemetery visited by Mr. Fu Ziyang.

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In a recent editorial in the Tanzanian *Daily News*, the reporter argued that if only the Chinese had been allowed to do more infrastructure development in Tanzania during the last two decades (as they are currently doing in Kenya), not only would the country as a whole be better off but the ruling party would be enormously popular:

The Chinese using old technology in the 1970s, spent five years in building a 1,800 railroad, and traversing across some of the most difficult terrains in the world – from Dar es Salaam to Kapiri Mposhi in Zambia.

Had the same people been given the massive project of handling the central railway line in 2006 from Dar es Salaam to Kigoma and Mwanza, Tanzanians would have been enjoying the most reliable rail transport in the country by the time they were going to polls last year and one does not need to be Goebel in order to appreciate the massive propaganda the project would have provided to the ruling party, CCM during its election campaigns.⁵⁸

The Chinese, this observer suggested, used technology to build TAZARA that may have been outdated when compared with what was available in the rest of the world at the time. Their initiative succeeded, however, because they have a “pragmatic way of handling urgent issues” that has continued to this day. In fact, the technology used to build TAZARA stood up to the abuse of the El Nino flood of 1997, an episode that wiped out the Central Railway Line. The editorial writer also stated in no uncertain terms the ways in which the legacy of Chinese infrastructure assistance would provide an invaluable “propaganda” tool for the government over time – reflecting the actual ways that the TAZARA legacy has been used by states to support their development agendas and their relationship with China.

⁵⁸ Attilio Tagalile, “Tazara Provides Best Practice for Rail Infrastructure,” *Daily News*, May 28, 2011.

States and newspapers and workers – all point to the history and memory of TAZARA in the context of present-day concerns. The technology itself, whether described as “old” or as irreplaceable, plays a strong role in these narratives. The Chinese Railway Experts themselves recall their wariness when western technical assistance and technical experts were brought into the TAZARA system in the mid-1980s, as they worked together for the first time with “blond haired and blue eyed European and American experts.”⁵⁹ Workers from China and Africa who participated in the project recall its significance in technological terms, at a time when pulling together the personnel, the machines, the operations manuals and the training materials was an enormous challenge.

The imperative to train African workers while completing a project of global visibility in the midst of the Cultural Revolution was accompanied by a call to heroic action on the part of the Chinese experts. For the Africans who joined TAZARA in their youth, the experience of working together with the Chinese has become an identifying marker of knowledge and practice for a construction generation. Those who now seek recognition as the heroes and martyrs of the TAZARA project have challenged state memory with their own individual and collective historical consciousness. Their sense of having “made history” was formed at the moment of construction itself, then reconfigured and renarrated over time as Africa, China and the world have undergone the upheavals of economic liberalization. And as China’s role in Africa has shifted the narratives of TAZARA, its heroes and martyrs in the foreground, continue to be told and retold in the public forums of diplomatic speeches, legal actions and newspaper editorials.

⁵⁹ Records of Chinese Railway Expert Team, TAZARA Headquarters, Dar es Salaam. Transcription of CRET internal meeting minutes, March 3, 1987, translation by Liu Haifang.

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