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Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute, Volume 76, Number
1, 2006, pp. 113-130 (Article)

Published by Cambridge University Press



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DEFENDING THE PEOPLE'S RAILWAY IN THE ERA OF LIBERALIZATION: TAZARA IN SOUTHERN TANZANIA

Jamie Monson

During the construction of the TAZARA railway between 1969 and 1974 in Tanzania, the project was hailed as the 'freedom railway' and the 'people's railway'. Those who worked on the railway's construction were encouraged to consider themselves as part of a larger national and regional political liberation project. The Chinese railway management emphasized socialist principles such as international solidarity and brotherhood in order to foster worker discipline. In newly independent Tanzania, the railway construction workers were seen as builders of the nation. During the final years of TAZARA's construction, rural farmers were also tied to the project when they were moved to centralized *ujamaa* village settlements along the railway line. Both farmers and workers were exhorted by the state to see the railway as 'their' railway through the 1970s and early 1980s.

By the mid-1980s, rural communities in Tanzania were beginning to experience the effects of new economic policies based on market liberalization and structural adjustment. Among these effects were changes in the services provided by the TAZARA railway as management sought to make the railway more 'efficient' by cutting costs and increasing revenues. Efficiency was to be achieved in part by reducing the services provided to the smallest railway stations and village-level communities (many of which had become the permanent residences of former TAZARA construction workers). Rumours spread that the railway itself would soon be privatized, with the result that management decisions affecting the communities along the railway line would be further guided by profit-seeking rather than nation-building priorities. Local commentators believed that privatization efforts were driven by the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and the World Bank, institutions that they associated with exploitation by powerful external interests.¹

Community leaders responded to these changes by reviving the same language of exhortation that had been used by the socialist

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¹ There have been ongoing discussions about the privatization of TAZARA between the governments of Tanzania, Zambia and China, but no agreement has yet been made, in part because of concerns raised by China. Among recent news reports on the topic is one by Mwila Nkongwe, 'Tazara scouts for K125billion to strengthen its operations', *The Post*, Lusaka, 21 March 2005.

state during the periods of railway construction and villageization. This time, however, the roles were reversed: villagers used the language of nationalism, freedom and socialist political consciousness to persuade the state to continue to provide them with services. The Freedom Railway was built for the benefit of Tanzanians and Zambians, they argued, not for private profit or for the IMF. Going further, they alluded to the oppression of the colonial and pre-colonial periods, suggesting that liberalization represented a return to slavery. The railway was known as the 'freedom railway' because Tanzanians and Zambians are free, they argued. By shifting the railway's purpose from serving people to serving profit, the IMF and the World Bank were returning the people to the past slavery of foreign domination.

The villagers living in the TAZARA corridor were responding to the transition from socialism to market liberalization that took place throughout the country from the mid-1980s through the 1990s. Tanzanians were not alone in their experience of this transition, of course; most countries of the formerly communist world were also moving towards free-market capitalism during this time period. In their study of Hungary's 'road to capitalism', Michael Burawoy and Janos Lukács cautioned that analysis of this transition tends to follow a 'blackboard' approach to economic change. Eastern European societies are viewed as a 'blackboard' upon which Marxist-Leninist ideology was first written, then wiped clean and replaced with an ideology of free enterprise and market-orientated capitalism (Burawoy and Lukács 1992: ix). While this approach remains widespread, it has several limitations. Because it focuses only on ideology, it obscures the relationship between ideology and lived experience. It also does not allow us to see the effects of policy changes in specific social and historical contexts, because society here is literally a blank slate. This model also presumes that people are actively and willingly embracing 'the market', rather than seeing this transition as a negotiated and possibly incomplete process. And finally, the focus on ideology does not allow us to be attentive to the local meaning of concepts such as 'privatization', 'free markets' and 'democracy', and the ways in which meaning is debated and contested (Verdery 1996: 10–12).

These issues are important ones for understanding the transition to liberalization in the TAZARA railway corridor in southern Tanzania. In many ways, TAZARA is a classic example of a socialist project in East Africa. Built with Chinese development aid during China's Cultural Revolution (1968–75), the project became an international poster-child for East–South cooperation and socialist ideals at the height of the Cold War. Under the policies of *ujamaa* socialism, the railway formed the backbone of the compulsory rural villageization effort known as '*Operation Kando Kando ya Reli*'.² Local populations were

² Kiswahili; literally 'Operation alongside the Railway'.

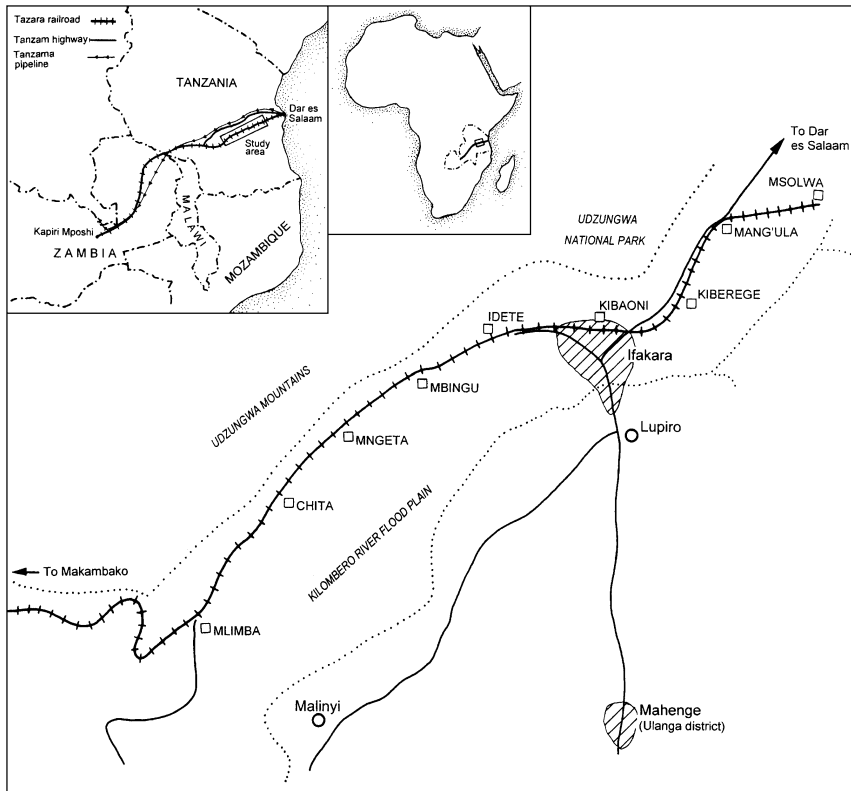


FIGURE 1

moved into concentrated settlements where production and marketing were controlled by state-owned cooperatives. At the village level, rural people were to be provided with government services such as healthcare and education through a centrally organized bureaucratic structure.

TAZARA was not only a socialist project; it was also a project of modernization. The railway would link Zambia's copper mines with the port of Dar es Salaam, reflecting the expectations of industrial modernity that pervaded late-1960s development thinking (Ferguson 1999: 1–39). TAZARA and its villageization counterpart were also part of a state-led rural modernization project that endeavoured to 'make legible' rural economies that were seen as disorderly and inefficient (Scott 1998: 227–9). An idealized rural landscape was imagined for the TAZARA railway corridor, where neatly demarcated collective farms would be laid out in rows alongside planned housing schemes. The state would provide the requisites of modernity: not only the magnificent new railway but also scientific agriculture, mechanization of production and bureaucratic governance. The former construction workers who would resettle in these villages represented an already modernized population,

having served as wage labourers in a highly mechanized international development project.³

In the end, however, rural life in the railway corridor became neither fully socialist nor fully modern. The state lacked the resources and infrastructure needed to effectively transform rural settlement; as a result, the villageization process alongside TAZARA ended up being a 'rushed exercise'.⁴ During villageization, families were bundled into trucks that carried them to new 'settlements' that were more often uncleared forests than tidy landscapes. Most drifted back over time to their former residences in the valleys, where they tended their rice fields and fished in the rivers of the flood plain. The promised services that were to accompany villageization also failed to materialize. Thus, when the people living in the TAZARA corridor looked back with nostalgia on the socialist past, they were not so much remembering experience but rather reminding the state of its promises – promises that in their view had not been kept.

When market liberalization and structural adjustment took hold in the 1980s, the TAZARA corridor began to take on a very different aspect. The villages along the railway that had appeared to be deserted in the 1970s were bustling fifteen years later with entrepreneurs engaged in small-scale trade, market farming and micro-enterprise. This transition, however, was not experienced at the local level as the wiping away of an old ideological structure and its replacement with a 'clean slate' for economic development. Rather, the transition was uneven and negotiated. As they experienced change, rural communities attached new meaning to the railway and to the liberalization process. At the same time, they invoked the memory of the socialist period as they challenged policies which they saw as detrimental to their livelihoods.

The views of community leaders were expressed in letters written from the mid-1980s through the 1990s, addressed to TAZARA administrators and to government representatives.⁵ The letter-writers accused the TAZARA administration of serving the interests of 'the IMF and the World Bank' rather than the needs of local people, which was contrary to the principles that had guided the establishment of the railway. For example, the leader of a local *ad-hoc* committee wrote the following complaint to his parliamentary representative in 1994, when the railway administration was planning to close Mbingu station:

³ This vision of rural modernization is remarkably similar to recommendations made by the German railway surveyor Paul Fuchs, who proposed in 1905 that the German colonial government could develop a southern railway by recruiting Nyamwezi workers who would then be settled alongside the railway as peasant farmers: 'Die wirtschaftliche Erkundung einer ostafrikanischen Südbahn', *Beiheft zum Tropenpflanzer* 6, 4/5.

⁴ CCM Archives, Dodoma, Accession 5, File 100p, 'Vijiji vya Ujamaa Kando Kando ya Reli ya Uhuru', p. 14. I thank Jim Giblin for this reference.

⁵ These letters illustrate the way in which language and memory were utilized by community leaders in negotiation with TAZARA's administration and with government representatives. Individual and community views also emerged in oral interviews conducted during fieldwork carried out in Kilombero District between 1998 and 2002.

We ask that this station at Mbingu be reopened, so that it can continue to provide important service for the citizens as it used to. Because the Freedom Railway 'TAZARA' was built for the benefit of Tanzanians and Zambians, not for the profit of the IMF or to bring profits to private persons.⁶

The letter-writer went on to remind the government that, during villageization, rural people had been moved to live along the railway. 'And that is why', he stated, 'the government announced publicly that citizens who are near to the railway should build there and live alongside the railway, so that they can protect their railway.'

There is no doubt about the ownership of the railway in this letter – it belongs to the 'citizens who are near to the railway'; it is 'their' railway because they were moved into villages next to it. The writer went on to ask: 'We called this railway the "Freedom Railway" because we Tanzanians are free. Now where is this freedom going if we are being returned to slavery?'⁷ This letter-writer's complaint was then taken up by the parliamentary representative for Kilombero District, who wrote to the Minister of Communications and Transport that, 'This railway was built by our Chinese brothers for our benefit and for the benefit of Zambia. Therefore I do not see the reason why some of the stations should be closed due to pressure from the World Bank.'⁸

These letters and others like them raise important questions about the fate of a socialist project – heretofore hailed as a project of 'the people' – during the transition to liberalization. Several significant issues are raised here – about the original purpose of the railway, about private (profit-seeking) versus public ownership and management, and about the role of international financial institutions in decision-making. One of the most important questions raised was about ownership – to whom did the railway belong? Was it the people's railway? If so, were the 'people' the nation (*taifa*) or the *ujamaa* villages that were established along the railway line? If the railway were to be privatized, how would that affect the issue of ownership, both material and symbolic? The letters illustrate the way that local people in the TAZARA corridor used the language of socialism to critique change and to negotiate for control over resources during the liberalization era. In particular, references to the Chinese and to the late Julius Nyerere were used to embody specific meanings. These letters can help to illuminate the experience of socialism and of the transition to free-market capitalism for rural Tanzanians living along the railway corridor.

Katherine Verdery has written that the Cold War was not only a superpower face-off but also 'a form of knowledge and a cognitive

⁶ J. M. Mukama, Chairman of Committee on the Question of Closing Mbingu Station, to Respected MP of Kilombero District, Re: 'Closing of TAZARA station at Mbingu'. 1 August 1994.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Edward A. Mwesiumo, MP Kilombero, Deputy Minister of the Interior and CCM Distribution Clerk, to Nalaila Kiula, MP, Minister of Communications and Transportation, Dar es Salaam, Re: 'Closing of some TAZARA Railway stations in my district'.

organization of the world' (Verdery 1996: 4). This can be seen in the history of TAZARA at a number of levels. Depending on one's position, the railway represented economic independence and 'freedom' for newly independent African states on the one hand, or the 'great steel arm of Red China' thrusting into Central Africa on the other (Nettleton 1974: 1). At the local level, the railway took on additional meanings. During the construction of the railway, workers and villagers were continually reminded of the ideological principles that sustained it. These principles included both Chinese revolutionary ideals and African nationalist ones, bound together by the language of brotherhood and unity. The commitment of China to finance and participate in the construction of TAZARA had been ideological from the beginning.⁹

The Chinese stated that they were the only nation in true solidarity with African countries, and that as fellow members of the Third World they were committed to working together with Africans to combat the forces of imperialism, colonialism and 'superpower hegemonism'. Chinese official commentaries explicitly connected railway development with the struggle against superpower domination:

The development of African communications and transportation is not all plain sailing, but takes place through a struggle against imperialism, the superpowers in particular . . . [The USA] spread fallacies that 'it is too costly and is not worth the while to build railways in Africa', and that 'Africans are too backward to master technology', to prevent the African countries from developing communications and transportation, particularly railways. But these lies, slanders and maneuvers of the enemy were laid bare by the African people with deeds.¹⁰

China expressed this ideology most often using the language of brotherhood and friendship. Friendship, in particular, was a key phrase in Chinese development propaganda in Tanzania during the 1960s and 1970s. The Chinese-built textile mill in Dar es Salaam was called *Urafiki* or Friendship Textile Mill, one of the many 'friendship roads, friendship ports and friendship buildings [that] sprang up all over the continent' (Snow 1988: 166). A volume of poems about TAZARA published in China called the railway the 'Rainbow of Friendship'. In one of many heroic accounts of the railway's construction published in the *People's Daily* in Beijing, a Tanzanian worker reportedly saved the life of his Chinese counterpart. As the Tanzanian left the scene of the accident, 'tears streamed down [his] face, as he walked away chanting chokingly, "rafiki, rafiki! (friend, friend)"'.¹¹ The political and strategic

⁹ In a conference paper, the Chinese scholar He Wenping wrote that most Chinese development projects carried out in the 1970s 'were mainly started from ideological idealism and unconditional internationalism' and that Sino-African relations during that decade 'bore a thick ideological flavor' (He 2002: 5).

¹⁰ 'Africa's progress in transportation, communications reported', North China News Agency (NCNA) broadcast, 1 August 1975.

¹¹ 'They are true friends - stories of Chinese and Tanzanian workers in rescuing each other', *People's Daily*, 18 July 1972: 6. Translation by Gu Yi.

function of Sino–African ‘friendship’ was never far from view, however, for the Chinese character used to refer to friendship in these accounts was *zhanyou*, or ‘comrade-in-arms’. The use of this character made it clear that Tanzanians and Chinese were not simply friendly co-workers labouring side by side in the construction of the railroad, but were at the same time ‘comrades-in-arms’, committed soldiers in the global battle against imperialism, colonialism and hegemonism represented by the USA and the Soviet Union.¹²

At the local level, these themes of friendship and brotherhood were emphasized in official communications between Tanzanian railway workers and their Chinese supervisors. At regular worker meetings in the construction camps, the Chinese combined administrative briefings with appeals to worker solidarity. During a meeting at Makambako base camp, for example, the agenda began with administrative concerns such as medical-care restrictions, payment of salaries and security. Workers were then urged by their supervisors ‘to cooperate among themselves as brothers, to work together as socialist brothers . . . to cooperate and work together as members of one family’. They should also respect their leaders, the supervisors exhorted, and condemn ‘all bad practices’.¹³ Chinese railway workers in particular were expected to follow strict behavioural guidelines to demonstrate the principles of brotherhood and cooperative discipline to their African counterparts. A Chinese supervisor who had been beaten by an insubordinate driver at Mlimba base camp, for example, later forgave the driver publicly at a worker meeting, stating that he had to do so because Tanzanians and Chinese were ‘socialist brothers’ (Sendaro 1987: 231).

The Chinese therefore used the language of friendship, brotherhood and socialist solidarity in the work camps and construction sites during the building of the railway. Tanzanian official rhetoric, while echoing these same themes, also emphasized the importance of building the nation. The majority of the workers who were recruited for construction on the Tanzanian side of the railway were recruited through the offices of the national party, or TANU (Tanganyika African National Union). In keeping with President Julius Nyerere’s interest in fostering national unity, these offices emphasized the importance of having a national railway labour force in order to encourage an atmosphere of national identity and pride in TAZARA. Thus recruitment announcements were distributed to TANU offices throughout the country in 1969–70. It was important to Nyerere’s ideology that TAZARA be seen as a national rather than a regional project, one that would symbolically represent Tanzania’s political liberation and economic independence. In addition to the efforts made throughout the country at TANU offices,

¹² These phrases were used in a speech made by Fang I, Minister of Economic Relations with Foreign Countries, during a state visit to Beijing by seven Tanzanian delegates. Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), translated broadcast from the North China News Agency (NCNA), 17 September 1975; see also NCNA broadcast on 1 August 1975. For a full discussion of Tanzanian–Chinese relations, see Ogunsanwo 1974: 134–41.

¹³ Minutes from Makambako base camp file, TBC/15, cited in Sendaro 1987: 183.

recruitment for the railway also took place through the Tanzanian National Service, or JKT (*Jeshi la Kujenga Taifa*). A group of 7,000 Tanzanian youths were recruited from the JKT in 1970, given a two-week training programme including military drill, and sent out to construction camps between Dar es Salaam and Mlimba (Sendaro 1987: 199–205).

Thus the political rhetoric that surrounded the project emphasized both national identity and international cooperation, and TANU party representatives had a strong presence among the workers. Brotherhood, solidarity, friendship, heroism and bravery were all invoked as ideals representative of the project and of larger Sino–Tanzanian relations. The Chinese workers who perished during the railway's construction were eulogized as 'martyrs' in the Beijing press.¹⁴ The 'West' on the other hand was accused of pursuing capitalistic self-interest, narrowness of vision and alliance with the white-settler regimes of Southern Rhodesia and South Africa. On the day that construction of TAZARA was officially inaugurated, members of the TANU youth league stated in a speech that, 'The capitalists definitely understand the meaning of this railway. This is the reason that they absolutely refused to help to construct it. They pretended to have many important reasons for refusing, but the real reason is that it will destroy their plans for exploitation in Africa.'¹⁵ The 'meaning of the railway' that the capitalists 'definitely understood' was its role as an alternative to exploitative Western forms of development, with their links to settler economies.

Despite this expansive rhetoric of freedom, brotherhood and nation-building, at the time of TAZARA's construction many of the affected villagers at the local level experienced significant hardships. In areas where TAZARA passed through cultivated lands, farmers' fields were appropriated and food crops were destroyed. It proved to be a time-consuming and difficult process to obtain compensation for this lost property from the Tanzanian government. Even four years after construction was completed, frustrated residents continued to pursue unmet claims for damaged or lost crops, trees and other possessions.¹⁶ Far more significant in its impact on local communities was the villageization programme that accompanied TAZARA's construction. Between 1973 and 1975, over 1,300 households were moved, many by force, to newly established villages along the railway line. These rural families were charged by President Nyerere with fulfilling two major responsibilities to the nation: by living close to the railway

¹⁴ For example, in an article published in the *People's Daily*, the Chinese technician Lee Zhongman was referred to as a 'martyr' who 'did not bleed for nothing. His blood watered the trees of friendship between Tanzania, Zambia and China.' 'Our technician Lee Zhongman unfortunately died while building the Tanzanian railroad: the wake and the funeral held in Tanzania', *People's Daily*, 11 January 1971: 6.

¹⁵ TYL/C.50/13/29, 'Speech made by youth at celebration inaugurating construction of Tanzania–Zambia railway', 26 October 1970: 2.

¹⁶ Kilombero District Files, R40/6, August 1978–August 1979, 'Payments of fines by the Freedom Railway (TAZARA)'.

line, they should protect TAZARA from potential acts of sabotage by enemy forces in South Africa and Rhodesia. At the same time, as communal village farmers they should contribute to the nation's agricultural productivity.¹⁷

The villageization effort *Operation Kando Kando ya Reli* was developed specifically for the TAZARA corridor. The national party had grown concerned by the early 1970s that railway construction was proceeding at a faster pace than the country's ability to 'develop the resources that will be transported by this same railway'.¹⁸ The party advised that *ujamaa* villages be launched as quickly as possible along the railway line from Mbeya to the coast. The *Kando Kando ya Reli* villageization project involved four provinces (Mbeya, Iringa, Morogoro and Coast) and seven districts. In Ulanga District, seventeen *ujamaa* villages were planned along the railway. All families living up to twenty-five miles from the railway were to be moved to newly designated plots located near railway stations and other settlements adjacent to TAZARA.

From the beginning, it was clear to the officials of the national party that villageization along the TAZARA railway was going to be problematic. 'This railway', they cautioned, 'passes through some areas that do not have many people, therefore it will be a large effort to persuade people to move into these areas.'¹⁹ They resolved to educate the local population, using both political and economic methods, to persuade them that by living close to TAZARA they would have access to new sources of economic security. In exchange for guarding the railway, the villagers were promised that they would receive improved services from the government, including water, healthcare, education and agricultural support. Yet, in many villages, these services never materialized, leading to criticism and disillusionment. Given the constraints of the terrain and the scattered population, villageization along TAZARA was an almost impossible job, one that by necessity was carried out as a rushed and poorly executed exercise.

Memories of the hardships experienced during and after TAZARA's construction – destruction of crops and property, forced resettlement into villages along the railway, and responsibility for protection of the railway – remain strong among corridor residents up to the present. Rural residents remember this period not only as a time of hardship in and of itself, but also as a time of suffering in relationship to the hopes and promises that accompanied the rhetoric of railway- and nation-building. 'We were asked by Nyerere to move alongside the railway',

¹⁷ In his speech to open the railway in Zambia in 1973, Julius Nyerere called on all citizens of Tanzania and Zambia to take responsibility for guarding TAZARA against sabotage (Nyerere 1973: 237).

¹⁸ CCM Archives, Dodoma, Accession 5, File 100p, '*Ujamaa* villages alongside the Freedom Railway', p. 14. I thank Jim Giblin for this reference.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

remembers one farmer, who recalls having done so in good faith. 'But now', he laments, 'the services have ended up being very poor.'²⁰

The ideology employed by Chinese and Tanzanian officials during the construction of TAZARA is remembered as vividly by local residents as the reality of their lived experience. The principles of liberation and freedom, the themes of brotherhood and solidarity, the exhortations to build the nation – all of these are ideals that were employed during the construction period to legitimize and support the projects of railway-building and villageization. Workers who stayed on along the railway corridor after the construction period recall both the ideology of the construction camps and the ideology of the *ujamaa* village because they experienced them both in succession.²¹ It was this ideology that villagers later employed in their negotiations with the state during the 1980s and 1990s, as they contested the impact of structural adjustment and liberalization on TAZARA services.

Tanzania's economic restructuring began gradually in 1982 with the reintroduction of cooperative marketing and the decentralization of some government controls to the local government level. Two years later, the 1984 budget 'included some of the most audacious economic liberalization so far attempted' in Tanzania.²² In that year, the government withdrew import controls on consumer and producer goods obtained with hard currency and began a gradual devaluation of the Tanzanian shilling. At the same time, internal trade within Tanzania was liberalized to allow a more competitive market for goods and services. In 1986, further policy changes were implemented and an agreement with the IMF was signed in August of that year. But the reform of the agricultural sector was delayed for some years, and crop-marketing was not fully liberalized until 1991 (Booth 1992: 253).

The period of structural adjustment and trade liberalization affected development along the TAZARA railway in three significant ways. The opening-up of markets for both imported and domestic goods provided opportunities for small-scale traders and other entrepreneurs who began to use TAZARA to transport their products. This in turn stimulated farmers to produce more grain for the market. At the same time, the negative effects of liberalization on employment, wages and urban incomes meant that more people were relying on the informal sector to make a living (Tripp 1987). Lastly, maize farming in the highlands of Iringa, Njombe and Mbeya was becoming prohibitively expensive following liberalization because of the steep increases in prices of agricultural inputs such as chemical fertilizers and the removal of

²⁰ Interview with Godfrey Mwakyoma, Mchombe, May 2001. In fact, many villagers were moved by force.

²¹ A demographic survey conducted in Kilombero district in 1988 found that more than one-third of the residents in the study area reported having moved to the railway corridor in search of wage labour, many of them for TAZARA (Mayombo 1990: 85).

²² The role of national-level cooperatives in crop marketing had been replaced by village-level, multi-purpose cooperatives and parastatal authorities during villageization in 1975 (Nindi 1992: 174–6).

government subsidies. While maize producer prices also increased after 1984, they could not keep pace with production and distribution costs. Population density and land shortages were pushing cultivators onto farmland that was increasingly unproductive, at the same time that rising prices placed fertilizers beyond their reach (Booth 1992: 256; Ponte 2002: 75).

In response to all three of these factors, the TAZARA corridor became a target destination for a new wave of economic migrants after the mid-1980s. Seeking relief from increasing pressures on both urban and rural livelihoods, these newcomers sought to benefit from the economic opportunities (small-scale trade and rice farming) still available in the Kilombero valley. Many of these migrants represented populations that had experienced the most precarious economic circumstances – youths and single women, particularly those with limited formal education. After settling along the railway corridor, they took up small-scale trade in consumer and agricultural goods, fishing, timber harvesting and small-scale agriculture. Thus liberalization had a dual effect for these communities: it created economic hardships for some families, who migrated in search of a new livelihood. At the same time, liberalization allowed for an expansion of small-scale trade and informal economic activity that was facilitated by the presence of TAZARA.

During the era of liberalization, therefore, there was an increased demand for TAZARA's services as the local population expanded and small-scale trade multiplied. National census data for the Kilombero valley show that population has increased significantly over time along the railway corridor, particularly in those areas adjacent to employment and trading opportunities and in areas of high agricultural productivity.²³ From 1978 to 2002, there were dramatic increases in population around several of the railway stations in the valley. In Mbingu ward, for example, the population grew from 2,226 in 1978 to 13,610 in 2002. The greatest increase took place from 1988 to 2002, when the population at Mbingu grew by over 210 per cent from 4,396 to 13,610. Away from the railway corridor, growth was much slower, increasing by 15 per cent in Masagati ward and 50 per cent at Mofu over the fourteen-year period.²⁴

Population growth in the TAZARA corridor was accompanied by an increase in trade and passenger activity along the railway line. TAZARA records document that both passenger and local goods traffic increased dramatically between 1985 and 1990, and that demand continued to outstrip service capacity during that period. Passenger traffic along the length of the line had fallen to below 500,000 in the early 1980s, but bounced back after 1986 to 860,000 persons in 1987–88 and had reached 988,000 by 1990. Local goods traffic rose almost 50 per cent between 1985 and 1988, according to TAZARA reports. Ally Nassor

²³ The largest formal employers in the district are the Kilombero Sugar Company and the TAZARA railway.

²⁴ Tanzania National Census, 1978, 1988 and 2002.

Ameir, a rice trader based in Ifakara, observed that the rice trade in the Kilombero valley has changed in important ways since the liberalization of grain markets in the early 1990s:

At the start, it wasn't a big trade; people were only planting for their own use. Now trade is active. After people saw that they could get a market for their goods, and they could get money for their rice, they started to have the desire to grow more rice. Before, during the time of cooperatives, people weren't getting paid for their rice, and trade was low.²⁵

Parcel receipts and oral interviews collected from 1998 to 2003 between Kidatu and Makambako show that much of this rice trade was carried out through small-scale shipments or 'parcels' that moved from station to station within the valley or were exported to urban centres, particularly Dar es Salaam. Parcel receipts from five sample stations in the Kilombero valley show that the railway facilitated a vibrant, diversified small-scale trading economy at the local level. Entrepreneurs took advantage of the agricultural specialization found at different stations along the railway line. They shipped crates of cabbages and tomatoes from the cool highlands of Makambako to the flood plain of Ifakara, returning on the next train with stacks of empty crates and gunny sacks filled with dried fish and rice. From stations at mid-level altitudes, bananas and maize were shipped both up and down the line. Bicycle pedlars travelled on TAZARA carrying packages of wholesale consumer goods from the towns to the villages, distributing such wares as cooking pots, sunglasses and second-hand clothing to the most remote settlements. While receipts data are largely unavailable from the period before 1998, oral interviews make it clear that this trade activity was ongoing from the mid-1980s to 2003.

It was in the midst of this increased passenger traffic and economic activity that the railway management was accused of reducing its services as well as its responsiveness to local communities. In October 1986, the first letter of complaint appears in the district files. TAZARA had made a decision to eliminate passenger services to Chita station, for reasons that are not entirely clear from the records. The clerk of Chita ward wrote in wonderment that the railway administration had completely bypassed the local government officers when they made their decision:

According to the Stationmaster, the question of shutting down transportation for our citizens is something ordinary to you, and can be done without cooperation with the government leaders at the district level or their representatives. This act of swindling and disrespecting citizens in their own country is not good, and it can bring very large problems.²⁶

In 1990, the Kilombero District Commissioner lodged a similar complaint when regional TAZARA officials failed to consult with her

²⁵ Interview with Ally Nassor Ameir, Ifakara, 24 April 2000.

²⁶ Kilombero District Files, R.40/6, 27 October 1986. S. S. Msagama, Secretary for Chita Ward to District Traffic Supervisor, TAZARA, Mlimba.

in her office. Mrs Tumbo had just finished carrying out a laborious community education exercise to improve railway security in her district. 'We received with great sadness the news that you visited Ifakara a few weeks ago without desiring to meet with the leaders of the District from the party or the government', she wrote.²⁷

These documents illustrate the local sense that TAZARA was no longer serving the people, but rather was operating independently from local communities and their government representatives. Underlying these complaints was the perception that this shift was part of liberalization reforms that sidelined community participation in favour of an economic efficiency agenda. In the later 1980s and early 1990s, TAZARA was actively pursuing economic reforms that focused on streamlining services and improving performance. These measures were part of a donor-funded 'recovery plan' for TAZARA that was implemented at a donors conference in Arusha in 1985, just one year before Tanzania's adoption of the IMF-sponsored structural adjustment programme in 1986 (Morna 1988: 45). The total aid package offered to TAZARA amounted to around US\$150 million divided among seven donors (including China), to be implemented between 1987 and 1993. As part of this package of reform initiatives, TAZARA vowed to improve locomotive capacity as well as the performance of the wagon fleet, by reducing turnaround times and other delays along the line (TAZARA 1991).

For the smaller stations in the Kilombero valley, this meant the reduction and even the elimination of services. By 1994, the stations at Kiberege and Mbingu were slated to be closed, and in 1996 it was announced in the news that the express train would no longer stop at the bustling town of Ifakara, headquarters of Kilombero District.²⁸ The specific decision-making processes that led to these closures are often obscure, not only to local communities and their representatives but even in some cases also to local TAZARA staff. In the 'efficiency' climate of the late 1980s and 1990s, local services were the most vulnerable to unpredictable temporary and even permanent closure. TAZARA had already demonstrated a history of short-shrifting passenger services in favour of freight shipments when faced with shortages of locomotive power and wagonload capacity.²⁹

For local communities, there was one reason for this reduction in service: the TAZARA management had become the servant of the IMF and the World Bank at the expense of local people. As one community representative argued:

²⁷ Kilombero District Files, R.40/6, 4 July 1990. E. F. Tumbo to District TAZARA Manager, Re: 'Your Seminars in Kilombero District'.

²⁸ Kilombero District Files, R.40/6, 1 August 1994. J. M. Mukama, Chairman of Committee on the Question of Closing Mbingu Station, to Respected MP of Kilombero District, Re: 'Closing of TAZARA station at Mbingu'.

²⁹ According to Michael Gleave, 'The variation in the number of trains per week in each direction reflects the priority given to freight over passenger traffic when there were too few locomotives available to service total demand' (Gleave 1992: 261).

The step that is being taken by TAZARA management is not to reduce services as some might think, but to squeeze the profits of Tanzanians and to murder [our] citizens. Because the distance from one station to another is thirty-six kilometres. This is not just about the economy of Tanzania. Development is about people, not about things.³⁰

This view is confirmed in a letter to the district from a TAZARA official who agreed that economic factors dominated management decision-making when it came to providing services to smaller stations: 'There is no doubt that to the Authority economic factors override other considerations, and it is the strength of reliable source of income of the villages that paves the way' for management decision-making.³¹

Local people used petitions to their government representatives to voice their concerns about TAZARA management decisions. They appealed to the officials of the state and of the CCM party to intervene on their behalf. This action shows that they correctly perceived that the state and the railway were no longer in close alliance as they had been during construction. In the construction era, the newly independent government of Tanzania was a committed partner in TAZARA, and the railway was closely associated with the identity of Julius Nyerere. Following construction, railway administration was managed by the 'Tanzania-Zambia Railway Authority', made up of representatives from both Tanzania and Zambia, and began to operate independently of local government structures.

The district files show that there were definite tensions between the local government authorities and TAZARA, as illustrated by the complaints of district officers (above) that they were being ignored by visiting TAZARA officials. It is also clear that local people understood the split between TAZARA and the government. Village-level lobbyists who wrote complaints about TAZARA addressed them to their Tanzanian government representatives rather than to TAZARA officials, pressuring the state to intervene on their behalf and thus to mitigate the effects of the profit-seeking behaviour of an efficiency-minded TAZARA. They reminded their government leaders of the founding principles of both the party and the nation, and of the socialist ideals that had accompanied TAZARA's construction. They recalled the sacrifices they had made as Tanzanian citizens when they moved to the villages along the railway corridor, and the promises they had received that they would be guaranteed services in exchange for their dual responsibilities of production and protection. They invoked the names of Julius Nyerere and Zhou Enlai as symbols of this compact and of the socialist principles which they associated with it.

³⁰ Kilombero District Files, R.40/6, 1 August 1994. J. M. Mukama, Chairman of Committee on the Question of Closing Mbingu Station, to Respected MP of Kilombero District, Re: 'Closing of TAZARA station at Mbingu'.

³¹ Kilombero District Files, R.40/6, 3 April 1990. Ally Tajiri, District Traffic Inspector, Mlimba, 'Report on Request for Passenger Halts in Mlimba District for Kilombero District'.

There may have been other forms of protest going on as well in the late 1980s. There were extensive reports of sabotage against the railway in 1989–90, prompting the general manager of TAZARA to write a letter of complaint to the Regional Commissioner in Morogoro. This was followed up by a lengthy letter from the TAZARA police commander in Mlimba to the Kilombero District Commissioner, demanding that village leadership be reminded of the importance of the railway to local economies and livelihoods. The irony of this statement, given the proposals to reduce TAZARA's services, was not lost on the Commissioner, Mrs E. F. Tumbo, who fired back that yes, villagers had been carrying out acts of sabotage, but that TAZARA had brought many problems on itself recently. While not saying so directly, Mrs. Tumbo suggested through her comparison that saboteurs who laid stones on the tracks may have been disgruntled with deficiencies in TAZARA's services, or at least that villagers who may have been motivated to prevent such activities in the past were no longer interested. She wrote:

To begin with, we investigated the problems that take place on our Freedom Railway and we saw that there are mistakes that are made by the citizens, like unfastening nuts, putting stones or logs on the tracks, burning up the bridges, etc. But we also discovered that there are mistakes that are caused by the way the train is being run, for example it makes unauthorized stops in the villages outside of the stations to let people on and off or to load and unload luggage. Because of this and for many other reasons that we have discussed, we have agreed that education needs to take place [about good behaviour] on both sides, both on the side of the villagers and on the side of the workers of TAZARA.³²

Here we see Mrs Tumbo echoing the demands of villagers that TAZARA be made responsive to them by working together with state representatives rather than as an independent body. There is a very clear reference here to the earlier understanding that village protection of the railway would be rewarded by improvement in services. Any improvement in village behaviour, they argued, must therefore be matched by a change for the better from TAZARA: protection against sabotage in exchange for better service. The unstated implication was that the reverse was also true: a decline in service would be met with a rise in incidents of vandalism.

The lobbying of village leaders and the support they received from district and parliamentary leaders ended up being successful in some cases. In the mid-1990s, stations that had been closed at Mbingu and Kiberege were reopened in response to popular pressure. Earlier, a request from the Kilombero District Commissioner, Mrs Tumbo, had prompted a lengthy study by TAZARA's district traffic inspector of the feasibility of adding passenger halt stations at Idete village, Idete prison,

³² Kilombero District Files, R.40/6, 3 November 1989. Mrs. E. F. Tumbo, District Commissioner Kilombero, to TAZARA District Traffic Superintendent, Makambako, Re: 'Seminars in the villages alongside the Freedom Railway to guard against sabotage'.

Chita JKT camp/Ikule village, and Chisano village. Mr Ally Tajiri wrote his report in response to a request from the Kilombero District Commissioner that halts be added in places where villagers walk long distances to and from the stations.³³ He carried out an in-depth study of the settlement patterns and economic activities in the recommended areas, and included this information in his report. He discovered that some of the recommended halt stations had higher population levels than existing stations, and concluded that the addition of new stations was in order.

Mr Tajiri's report echoed the language used in the correspondence from Mrs Tumbo, calling for the provision of services to villagers. 'The time has come', Mr Tajiri wrote, 'for the Authority to avail such services to the villagers who paid heed to the Government's directive to live together for easy provision of vital services, including transportation.' He concluded that TAZARA should 'include building of passenger platforms into the designated areas' in its next budget year.³⁴ The report was received positively by the TAZARA management at the district office and was forwarded to the regional manager in Dar es Salaam.³⁵ The halt stations were finally implemented in 1998, at Signali, Idete, Ikule and Chisano, 'as the people requested'.³⁶

In the end, the railway did provide improved services in the form of halt stations, in response to the requests of the District Commissioner. These requests were made by the local district-level leaders using the rhetoric of socialism, recalling agreements that had been made during TAZARA's construction and subsequent villageization. The rationale that was eventually used by TAZARA to meet these requests was economic however; what Mr Tajiri's report showed was that population and economic activity near the proposed new halt stations were adequate to support enhanced service. And the future of these stations, particularly in an era of economic instability, remains uncertain.

This preliminary look at the transition from socialism to liberalization in Tanzania shows that rural people used the language of socialism to make claims to resources by arguing that the railway belonged to them – to 'the people' – which they defined in various ways depending on the context. TAZARA was built for 'the people' of Tanzania and Zambia, they argued, and later became the railway of 'the people' who lived in the *ujamaa* villages that surrounded the railway stations. TAZARA was also the 'freedom railway' and represented freedom from

³³ Kilombero District Files, R.40/6, 3 April 1990. A. Tajiri, District Traffic Inspector, Mlimba, to District Traffic Superintendent, Mlimba, Re: 'Request for passenger halts in Mlimba District for Kilombero District', p. 1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁵ Kilombero District Files, R.40/6, 17 April 1990. H. B. Jumaa, District Traffic Superintendent, Mlimba, to Regional Manager TAZARA, Dar es Salaam, Re: 'District Commissioner Ifakara request of opening halts along the railway line'.

³⁶ Kilombero District Files, R.40/6, 28 July 1998. A. Saidi, TAZARA Passenger Services, to District Commissioner Kilombero, Re: 'Opening up of the small stations for the shuttle train'.

a form of exploitation associated with Western capitalism, white-settler rule, and international monetary agencies like the IMF and the World Bank. When railway services were being cut in response to efficiency initiatives, rural leaders complained that these principles were being violated – the railway was being taken away from ‘the people’ and being transformed through privatization into a vehicle for exploitation.

Yet the same petitioners who used the memory of socialism to make complaints about the effects of liberalization were themselves beneficiaries of a more open climate for trade and small-scale enterprise in the 1990s. From the letters in the Kilombero District books, we can see how rural people deployed references to ‘freedom’ and to collective ownership as they lobbied for particular services while recognizing that they were not arguing for the dismantling of the entire liberalization structure. In the context of economic transition, they were negotiating for change that served their needs. In the TAZARA corridor, socialism was not wiped off the slate and written over with the words ‘free market’. Rather, rural people used the language of socialism to campaign successfully for the retention of services and structures that they defined as important to them. They used socialist ideals such as ‘familyhood’ and ‘freedom’ to challenge profit-seeking behaviours which they considered to be against their interests. At the same time, the railway services which they sought facilitated their own entry into profit-seeking behaviour as entrepreneurs in the TAZARA corridor.

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ABSTRACT

When the services of the TAZARA railway in Tanzania were threatened with cutbacks in the 1980s and 1990s, rural community leaders wrote petitions of protest to district-level officials. In these petitions, they complained that railway decision-making was being guided by profit-making rather than nation-building priorities in response to pressure from the IMF and the World Bank. The railway had abandoned its original role as a servant of the people, they argued, employing the language of socialism, nationhood and pan-African solidarity that had been utilized by the state during the construction era in the 1970s. Yet the railway services sought by these local communities had facilitated their own entry into profit-seeking behaviour as entrepreneurs in the TAZARA corridor. The transition from socialism to liberalization along the TAZARA railway was therefore a negotiated process in which the meaning of concepts such as 'privatization', 'profit' and 'freedom' were contested.

RÉSUMÉ

Lorsque les services ont été menacés de réduction sur la ligne ferroviaire TAZARA en Tanzanie dans les années 1980 et 1990, les responsables ruraux ont organisé des pétitions pour protester auprès des fonctionnaires de district. Dans ces pétitions, ils se plaignaient de ce que les prises de décision en matière ferroviaire étaient guidées par le profit et non par des priorités de formation de la nation en réponse aux pressions du FMI et de la Banque mondiale. Selon eux, les chemins de fer avaient abandonné leur rôle originel de serviteur du peuple, employant le langage du socialisme, du sentiment national et de la solidarité panafricaine qu'avait utilisé l'État pendant sa période de construction dans les années 1970. Or, ce sont les services ferroviaires sollicités par ces communautés locales qui ont facilité leur propre adoption d'un comportement de recherche du profit en tant qu'entrepreneurs dans le couloir TAZARA. La transition du socialisme vers la libéralisation le long de la voie ferrée TAZARA était par conséquent un processus négocié au sein duquel la signification de concepts tels que «privatisation», «profit» et «liberté» était contestée.