



The Past in Present African Urban Mobility Systems: Towards a Mobilities *Longue Durée*

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Abstract

Building on the notion that mobility plays a critical role in everyday urban life in Africa as elsewhere, this editorial provides an introduction to the special collection ‘The Past in Present African Urban Mobility Systems’. As we introduce the papers in this collection, we argue for an understanding of contemporary urban mobility systems that account for their historical roots. While historians of African transport have provided insights into the origins of mobility systems on the continent, we wish to animate the contemporary experience of those systems, advocating for a mobilities *longue durée*.

Mobility in Everyday Life: Past and Present

Moving within and through any African city can be filled with challenges and opportunities that are mediated by historical and contemporary forces. Whether walking through bustling Nairobi, cycling Bloemfontein, riding a bus rapid transit system in Dar es Salaam, or negotiating the gendered urban landscape of Johannesburg, the experience of life in African cities—as elsewhere—highlights the critical role of mobility in everyday urban life (Jensen, 2009). Since the heralding of the ‘new mobilities paradigm’ (Sheller & Urry, 2006), scholars across the social sciences have contributed toward an understanding of the critical importance of movement and stasis in an urban context. The collective work of mobilities and transport scholars underscores the historical (Pirie, 2008) and political (Cresswell, 2011) aspects of mobility in the sense that urban mobilities both

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produce social relations as they are produced by them. Considering the role of mobility in everyday urban life (Jensen, 2009), these debates are timely for African cities as elsewhere. Taking this challenge forward, and building on the proposition that mobilities are critical in shaping cities and city life, the papers in this collection pay attention to the historical, social, gendered, infrastructural, and relational aspects of mobility, involving a dialectic between movement and stillness in African cities from a long-term perspective.

Across the various disciplinary perspectives, ‘considerably more research is done into contemporary transport conditions, problems and intervention in Africa than is devoted to studying transport and travel in the past’ (Pirie, 2016, p. 129). Based on a review of wide-ranging bibliographies of African transport research (Pirie, 2016, 2018) as well as our own experience in the field, we propose that a further imbalance is that even within historically inspired scholarship on urban transport on the continent, there is a wider preponderance of work that examines and presents insights about the past than that which also analyses the past in relation to the present. This shortcoming is notable given that mobility systems understood as socio-technical configurations comprising elements such as technologies, user practices, policies, regulations, infrastructures, and industries take time to develop (Geels & Kemp, 2007). As such, present configurations are a function of processes that unfolded prior. If mobility systems then ‘do not reflect current ideals, but rather those of the past’ (Emanuel et al., 2020, p. 3), and a lion’s share of research is into contemporaneous conditions, then there is a lot we do not know about African urban mobility. In looking ahead to mobility transitions in the future, it is therefore useful to learn from the past (Schipper et al., 2020).

Urban Mobility Systems in Africa

One set of questions that we do not know enough about is how the various socio-technical elements that comprise the different urban mobility systems—such as para-transit, rail, cycling, and mass transit—were formed. If flexible transport systems such as para-transit modes are one of the most popularly used ways of moving on the continent, it is not surprising that there is an abundance of inquiries (Behrens et al., 2017; Klopp & Cavoli, 2017; Rink, 2022; Schalekamp, 2017; Woolf & Joubert, 2013). Yet, apart from a few such as Mutongi, (2017), Khosa, (1992), and Madugu, (2018), we do not know much about their origins or the weight of history in the contemporary functioning and/or experience of such systems. In addition to the constituent elements which in themselves sustain their dominance, there is little research into reproductive elements such as ways of thinking, social norms, formal regulations, actors and organisations, and materiality of the systems themselves. Taking one of these ways of thinking, while there are numerous studies into public perceptions of various modes of transport and their influence into mobility behaviour these studies do not tell us how such perceptions were formed (Gobind, 2018; Heyns & Luke, 2016; Luke, 2018; Okpala, 1981). Some exceptions include Morgan, (2020), Mutongi, (2006), and Okraku, (2016).

The reproductive elements are of particular interest because they are what sustain urban mobility systems and once they form, become ‘invisible’ and are taken for granted. Knowing what the mechanisms are, is also of normative interest such as in support of change agendas such as calls for mobility justice or low carbon transport.

If the ‘invisible’ reproductive mechanisms are well understood then targeted interventions can be made to dislodge them. In the USA, the mobility historian Peter Norton conducted path breaking work which demonstrated that the origins of the term ‘jaywalking’ was a rhetorical manoeuvre by proponents of the automobile industry to disparage pedestrians for conducting what was then the accepted practice of walking freely in urban roads. In doing so, the automobile industry was able to de-legitimize and persuade policy-makers to develop legislation to make the practice of ‘jaywalking’ illegal (Norton, 2007). In the aftermath of this publication, Norton’s findings have gone on to inspire advocates for safer streets and contributed to efforts to reform laws in several states across the USA that penalised ‘jaywalking’ (Holmes, 2021; Ionescu, 2022). It is some of these gaps in the scholarship that this special collection aims to fill and stimulate further research.

Tracing the Mobilities *Longue Durée*

Collectively, the papers in this special collection help to connect the past and present in African urban mobility systems. Nyamai’s paper (2023, this volume) makes a critical intervention demonstrating that since its colonial origins, Nairobi has been in everyday reality, a ‘walking city’. Yet, in spite of this empirical reality as evident by the millions who ‘foot’ everyday, pedestrian infrastructure needs have largely not been catered for in mobility planning. As a consequence, pedestrians, as the statistics shows, experience very high fatalities. The paper goes further to provide an answer to the puzzle: why is it that even though Nairobi has been and is a walking city, there has been limited infrastructure provision? It shows that since the late nineteenth century to the present (even though it suggests some potential changes), Nairobi has been imagined and planned for by the respective authorities in charge over time, as a motoring city. This way of thinking and planning Nairobi is then a key reproductive ‘engine’ powering on motoring at the expense of the many workers who have to walk the city as their socio-economic situation requires it.

Kaur et al., (2023, this volume) provide insight into the formation of a unique cycling culture in Bloemfontein, South Africa. Taking some of the elements of a socio-technical system, there they find workers cycle on roads without dedicated bicycle paths, unlike those riding bicycles for exercise in the same town, the commuter cyclists ride in ordinary clothes and on cheap bicycles often adapted for utilitarian needs such as carrying goods. To understand why this specific urban mobility practice emerges, Kaur et al. argue the concept and phenomenon of buffering is useful. They suggest we take seriously Rudolf Greyling (RG) street’s historical location within a zone intended as a barrier between ‘black’ and ‘white’ people. Following this, RG street could not but manifest and materialise buffering. As a road not designed to purposefully accommodate cycling, the workers they speak to, have to improvise to shield themselves from road danger. Further, they show that if we are to even understand the rationales for why the workers cycle in spite of the hostile conditions, the concept of buffering is useful. For the workers, cycling buffers them from economic, physical and mental health adversity.

In examining the process of introducing a bus rapid transit system (BRT) in Dar es Salaam, Jacobsen, (2023, this volume) is able to pay close attention to the interplay between the past and present in urban mobility systems. The study then has privileged access to dramas between the BRT and other urban mobility sociotechnical systems and their related technologies, practices, norms, regulations, infrastructures and users—principally the minibus system called the Daladala since it has been the main form public transport in the city. For the BRT to become embedded in Dar es Salaam, preexisting mobility systems and their users have to be disciplined through communication, infrastructures, training and other means. However, this does not always work, with for example lorry drivers recruited to drive BRT buses ignoring a sound that blares when they exceed the expected speed limit. This is because of the influence of incumbent mobility systems. Yet, the BRT is also successful in changing reproductive elements of other ways of moving in the city. Along the BRT corridor, Jacobsen shows that pedestrians who had been used to occupying the bottom rung in the road hierarchy ascend to the top, albeit at particular demarcated spaces. This is made possible by BRT driver regulations, speed bumps and white lines. Jacobsen's paper then vividly brings to the fore the temporal entanglements of the past and present.

It is through everyday practices of moving that mobility systems exist. Parker & Rubin, (2023, this volume) then illuminate how contemporary gendered practices of movement among parents and primary caregivers in the Gauteng City Region (GCR) have been shaped. Shaped not only by the distant historical factors but also by enduring cultural norms, post-apartheid political dynamics and emergent family and community ties in their study sites. In Lenasia and Edenvale, women have smaller mobility footprints than men because of gender roles, expectations and beliefs. There, men travel far because of the influence of modernist and segregated spatial planning which left the two locations with limited opportunities. However, in Denver, the travel distances for men and women are equally lengthy: this is not only due to apartheid spatial planning but also due to contemporary political neglect and gender norms. A key factor that makes Denver unique from their other two study sites is historical household formation. Men in Denver endure long journeys in search of economic opportunities but also to visit children living in separate households with their mothers or other caregivers. In all locations, time has a powerful influence as even when factors such as limited economic opportunities may motivate exit, strong family and community ties that have emerged glue residents there.

The contributions to this special collection demonstrate that urban transport and mobility systems on the African continent are arguably at a crossroads. On the one hand, there has been a recognition that in many contexts, especially in smaller urban settlements, environmentally friendly modes of transport such as walking and cycling are dominant practices in people's daily lives. At the same time, investments in some urban contexts enhance and develop car-dependent mobility systems (Mituallah et al., 2017; Sietchiping et al., 2012) with policymakers at a loss about how to invest in public transit systems. Unlike other urban contexts elsewhere in the world, private car ownership in Africa is low and many residents do not have access to motorized transport.

With an eye toward advancing mobility debates focused on African cities, the papers in this special collection highlight the historical traces that underpin the contemporary experience of moving within and through the African urban setting. They reunite the ‘displaced’ past’ (Gopakumar, 2022) of urban mobility systems while at the same time shedding light on the role of mobilities in shaping the city and citizenship—in the sense of ‘belonging’ in African cities. They call attention to the ways that culture, history, politics and infrastructure mediate how—and indeed if—one moves. The papers in this collection demonstrate our argument that the experience of movement and stillness in African cities is not only shaped in the present, but rather must be understood through the *longue durée* (Braudel & Wallerstein, 2009) of urban mobility systems.

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