Saving the Industry from itself: A case of the Railway industrial heritage in Kenya

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Abstract

Kenya railway represents the earliest direct interaction between Kenya and the industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th century. The railway came to Kenya in 1895 after it had successfully opened up many parts of the world. The industry benefited through direct imports from key English industrial centres like Liverpool, London, Leeds, Ipswich, Birmingham and Yorkshire. In some instances, supplementary products and services were acquired from India through entrepreneurs like Alibhai Mulla Jeevanjee (1856–1936), a renowned Indian merchant, politician and philanthropist who went on to play a large role in the development of modern day Kenya during colonial rule. Industrialization was also experienced in the country in the form of agricultural mechanization in the White Highlands that were occupied by the European farmers. The railway has been a key mode of transport for over 100 years. This entrenches the industry as part of Kenya’s heritage as it has impacted many aspects of the socio-cultural and economic spheres of life up to date. Many generations have been part of the industry since 1895. Whole communities like the Indian settlers sprung out of the industry with many coming as railway builders or ‘coolies’ and later founding or joining the business opportunities created along the railway line. More importantly, the railway facilitated Kenya’s entry into the global market economy. The railway industry is therefore an integral and important component of the Kenyan national heritage.

Kenya railway heritage include old engines, wagons, the railway/trolley tracks, railway signals, clocks, level crossings, buildings and railway towns. It also includes the SS William Mackinnon steamboat which was operating on Lake Victoria and named after Sir William Mackinnon, founder of the Imperial British East Africa Company. Intangible heritage includes the massive adventure tourism it generated, which popularized the railway or the ‘Lunatic Express’ and destination ‘Kenya’. Its unique and ‘pristine’ scenic landscapes, the ghosts of ‘man-eaters’ and its place in oral accounts of many communities add abundantly to this rich intangible heritage.

Nairobi city is literally speaking a product of the railway line. Both tangible and intangible heritage of the railway industry are threatened through blatant negligence, emergent and more profitable modes of transport, including the Standard Railway Gauge (SRG) that is currently under construction, and lack of funds for minimum maintenance of basic infrastructure, like the Railway Museum and its threatened collections. Most of the old Uganda Railway (UR) and Kenya Uganda Railway (KUR) wagons, which are part of this study, are rusty and some of their parts are missing. To a large extent, this heritage is quickly deteriorating and disappearing into the hands of vandals and illegal traders due to the lack of appropriate conservation sensitization and training for the public and heritage professional in charge of this heritage. Old railway towns are most affected by this threat.

This study identifies the industrial heritage associated with the railway and explores the state of conservation of its collection of artefacts and machines, and the risks associated with the preservation of this industrial heritage. The study concludes that industrial heritage is not clearly defined and no legal framework specifically targets this heritage for conservation. The study also establishes that the heritage has only been haphazardly conserved, with no clear vision of management, documentation and preservation, as no resources are specifically allocated to a conservation strategy other than the ‘minimalist approach’ adopted by the Railway Museum. The conclusion highlights that the level of sensitization is low and the public is not informed and/or associated to the conservation needs of this heritage. The study therefore recommends advocacy, sensitization and thorough interventive and preventive conservation practices as the only viable ways of saving the heritage from imminent loss.
The union of steam & iron rails produced the railways, a new form of transport which boomed in the later 19th century, affecting industry & social life. 27th September 1825: The opening of the Stockton and Darlington Railway, the world's first public railway. Rischgitz / Getty Images. History & Culture. European History. Industry & Agriculture. Major Figures & Events. Wars & Battles. Railways were a symbol of change and progress. They also seemed to epitomize popular resentments toward a changing world picture: the depersonalization of workers and passengers, the altering of an established social pattern, and of course, their tendency to mow down anything that what happened to get in their way, be it public opposition, family land, natural beauties, national history, or even unwary pedestrians on its tracks. But public outcry did have a direct impact on railway development, and the popular conception of the railway in Victorian society. 1.2. Progress of the railways c. 183 Tiexi old industrial district is not a single case, but reflects the history and general problems of conserving industrial heritage in China. The case of Tiexi contributes to understanding Chinese industrial heritage in three aspects. First, as to temporal character, there is an excessive concentration ignoring modern and contemporary industrial heritage. The concept of heritage management has arisen in response to the special needs of the heritage industry. Heritage attractions represent irreplaceable resources for the tourism industry so conservation is a vital component of their management. Heritage sites need to have their own unique attributes emphasized and the interpretation and presentation of the attraction must be such as to accommodate