Engine of change: A social history of the car-mechanics sector in the Horn of Africa

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The car is often seen as a symbol of Western technology in Africa, with the concomitant technology, knowledge and skills having been imported from Europe. It is argued here though that Africans did not passively incorporate the motor car into their lives but actively appropriated its use and made this technology their own. The car-mechanics sector in the Horn of Africa was dominated in the twentieth century by Eritrean motor mechanics and drivers, but this was not by chance. Cars and trucks came with the advent of Italian colonization but the peculiarities of the Italian colonial system, characterized by the presence of a large number of artisans, tradesmen and small-scale businessmen, facilitated the transfer of technical know-how. Through this close contact with Italian technical know ledge, a class of small-scale local artisans and businessmen was born. These increasingly specialized Eritreans played an important role in the region’s automobile and transport sectors, displaying an ingenious capacity to adapt European technology to fit the local context, particularly by finding innovative approaches to repairs, modifications and the production of spare and replacement parts. In this case, technology was not only absorbed by the local ‘colonized’ workforce but was also transformed and adapted to meet local African conditions, thereby creating new technological expertise.

Introduction

The history of transfer and transformation of technology in Africa allows us to move away from the simplistic view of a contraposition between
‘tradition’ (indigenous) and ‘modernity’ (endogenous). Technology, which in some cases was introduced in Africa by Europeans, has inevitably been absorbed, transformed and adapted to meet local conditions. Development or progress has been the result of the mixture of transfer and transformation. The general assumption in this chapter is that European technology produced transformations during the colonial period. This transfer was grafted onto a social environment that absorbed external influxes and metabolized them with local heritages. Ultimately, the process resulted in the transformation of the new technology, in this case the motor industry, in the Horn of Africa, with new mechanical technologies and social classes being created.

The automobile sector provides a particularly relevant illustration of this type of dynamic. Undoubtedly cars and trucks represent a type of technology that was developed outside of Africa and reached the continent with the advent of colonialism. However, in terms of the labour market (made up of mechanics, body repairmen, car electricians, carburettor, radiator and tyre repairers, upholsterers and drivers), this technology became locally assimilated into the world of car mechanics in a short space of time. The particular conditions in which automobiles needed to operate in Africa led to considerable innovative techniques needing to be perfected through frequent modifications and adaptations, including the manufacturing of spare parts.

This innovation had a noticeable social impact that went beyond the mere provision of service. Indeed there were groups that, on the basis of this profession, established a regional social mobility that is still apparent today.

Mechanical skills in the Horn of Africa are commonly associated with Eritrean expertise and in many areas Eritrea’s presence in the sector of road transport remains strong. Though less common than in the past, one can still see old Fiat 682 trucks being driven along dusty roads by Eritrean motorists. In hundreds of garages in the Horn of Africa the ‘Eritrean connection’ is readily apparent in the apprenticeship of the mechanics, the ownership of the business or the technical words used for the mechanical tasks that still reflect the Italian influence. The way in which this region can be viewed as a vast market with a specialized workforce in the field of car mechanics reveals the extent to which know-how was successfully transferred and to which the local mechanics were able to adapt their

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1 On the history of motor vehicles in Sub-Saharan Africa, see Gewald et al. (2009).