

## **Heroes of the Road: Race, Gender, and Automobiles in Twentieth-Century Tanzania**

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This paper uses three life histories to examine the intersection of automobility, race, and gender from the 1920s to the 1980s in Tanzania. It follows the lives of three African drivers, one male and two female, as they used motor vehicles to pursue personal development in social environments that circumscribed their movement and access to technology, including roads and automobiles. While acknowledging the social and physical dangers associated with emergent forms of automobility, this paper emphasizes the opportunities that access to roads and motor vehicles provided African men and women. It acknowledges, but seeks to move beyond, discursive approaches to African road and vehicle use to explore the ways technological users subverted and reshaped accepted notions of automobility in colonial and postcolonial Tanzania.

To make this argument, I use one published memoir and two life histories collected in Tanzania in 2009 and 2010. I begin with Tanzania's first African driver, Vincent Njovu, whose memoir describes the driver's ability to navigate sociotechnical hierarchies of early vehicle and road use to establish the respectability of an African driving career. I move into the postcolonial period by exploring the life histories of two female drivers, Bibi Benzi and Hawa Ramadhani. Benzi used her father's vehicles and a family tradition of mechanical knowledge to wedge herself into a profession dominated by men, while Ramadhani used automotive skills learned among nuns in the 1940s to build a reputation as Tanzania's most respected driver. Operating on rural roads and municipal bus routes, these women challenged the masculine nature of Tanzanian automobile use, ignoring accusations of sexual immorality to emphasize the personal development they achieved using roads and vehicles.

Taken together, these three narratives show how drivers confronted and even celebrated the ambiguities associated with motorized travel. From the physical dangers of road transport to the racialized and gendered limitations of automobility, each of these drivers used the perils of road travel to construct heroic narratives of personal achievement. Their lives, while uncharacteristic of most Africans' access to road transport, provide a vantage point for analyzing the experiences and shifting meanings of automobility in twentieth-century Tanzania.