

BOOK REVIEW

Tensions of Transport: Human Portage and Colonial State Formation in German East Africa, 1880s-1914

By Andreas Greiner. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. Pp. xviii + 271. Cloth \$129.00. ISBN: 978-3-030-89469-6.

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The historian Andreas Greiner opens his monograph *Tensions of Transport* with a 1908 flyer by a German lobby group titled, “Caravan and Railway”. With a circulation of over 100,000 copies, the mentioned brochure tells a familiar story of development and progress. It focuses on German East Africa (1891–1918) and includes a telling two-part sketch: the image on the top shows African porters slowly hauling precious goods through the savannah; below, there is a railway undertaking the same journey with ease. While such publications point to colonial fantasies of easily transferring modern technologies, Greiner’s study explores “the conflictual history of portage and caravan transport in German East Africa” (5). Aiming to paint a much more nuanced picture of what contemporaries called the “porter question”, Greiner is ultimately successful in uncovering “the longevity of vernacular concepts, structures, and practices” and in assessing “the power and resilience of their agents” (5).

Each of Greiner’s multi-layered chapters deals with specific aspects of caravan transport. He begins by explaining how German “ambition to extract obedience from their crews” repeatedly clashed with “their own dependence on this labor force” (42). On balance, caravan routes and mobilities formed and defined the German colony. For instance, Herrmann von Wissmann’s expeditionary forces, with some consisting of 1,200 soldiers, went to war against the Yao ruler of Makonde (Machemba) and the ruler of Unyanyembe, Isike, among others. Volunteers such as Ingereza Ng’wana Sweya (Unyanyembe) joined an expedition against the Wahehe “because I wanted money” (45); in other instances, the Germans demanded porters, which then deserted. Greiner thus captures complex interactions and dependencies; he also includes subaltern voices. In his view, German state officials were ultimately more successful in controlling and exploiting porters than previous regimes.

The chapter titled “Facing Established Businesses” deals with policies and regulations of caravan mobility throughout the first decade of German control. The protection of the caravan economy remained a priority for German officials. After all, tons of goods, most notably ivory tusks, flowed to the coast. Greiner describes a delicate balancing act as German officials tried to utilize and influence existing structures. So-called men on the spot, far away from officials in colonial metropolises, had much leeway regarding the implementation of emerging regulations. Plus, merchants directly intervened and shaped colonial policies. On a micro level, porters evaded and resisted evolving frameworks by not utilizing certain routes. In that sense, readers can gain much when Greiner unpacks policies and agencies in the context of the “porter question.”

The integration of portage into colonial capitalism is at the center of the subsequent chapter. Large caravans hauling ivory tusks to the coast dwindled—only to be replaced by an array of goods such as plantation products, beeswax, peanuts, and, most importantly, rubber. Greiner argues that colonial authorities remained reluctant to introduce labor laws; he

also shows that portage “retained an exceptional status within the colonial economy throughout the German era, on both the legal level and in the daily routines of workers” (122). Porters had more agency, especially once compared to those laborers stuck working within the European plantation system or for state-organized transports. At the same time, unregulated spaces within colonial settings could invite exploitation and violence. Either way, according to Greiner, “caravan transport remained a profession not fully incorporated into the colonial system” (145).

The chapter “Managing Mobility” explores German efforts to make traffic controllable. Arguing “that state agents chose channeling mobility over preventing it” (157), Greiner paints a complex picture defined by largely weak state capabilities. German officials employed an array of tools, including an ordinance, newly constructed camps, and border controls. They did all that hoping they could establish the colonial state as a gatekeeper. However, such efforts were inadequate as caravans avoided, evaded, and resisted government oversight and structures.

Chapter 6 engages with colonial quests for new infrastructure. Greiner “argues that the history of infrastructure development in colonial Tanzania must be understood as a history of conflict-laden interaction between established and enforced patterns of mobility, investigating both their contestation and coexistence” (186). He does so by tracing plans to build highways and railways. Again, colonial investments and engineering had to engage with pre-colonial structures and mobilities. An epilogue, which briefly discusses the role of portage during World War I, includes concluding remarks. Here, the author restates broader claims and takeaways while pointing to larger historiographical discussions.

Tensions of Transport constitutes a welcome addition to discussions of infrastructure, labor, and state-making in German East Africa. Based on commendable archival research, Greiner rightfully challenges broader tales of development and progress with a more careful analysis of the sources, including oral histories. Animal traction, which remained on the minds of German colonists throughout their control of German East Africa, could have played a somewhat bigger role in the discussion; a more extensive analysis of the importance of porters and transport networks during the Maji Maji War (1905–1907) might have also strengthened this volume. Overall, however, Greiner’s argument regarding the limits of colonial oversight, along with his emphasis on everyday interactions, makes this an excellent contribution to the existing historiography. In that sense, he is successful when using the “porter question,” and the tensions surrounding it, to explore how German state agents influenced porters and existing transport modes, and how porters impacted the making of German East Africa.