



Uganda Railway

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TOPIC: The Uganda Railway and its Impact on the Peoples of Kenya

THEME: History of of Kenya

DEPARTMENT: Nairobi National Museum



*The Uganda Railway construction officials
Source: Nairobi National Museum*

Lesson Objectives

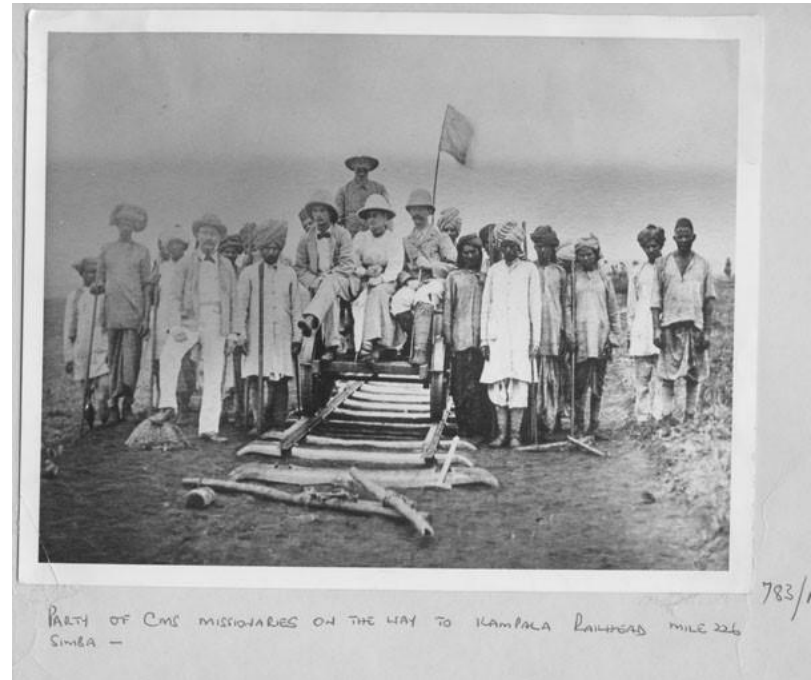
1. The participant shall gain broad knowledge of the history of the Uganda Railway and its significance.
2. Learners will be able to understand the important role that the railway played in the development of the country.
3. They will also appreciate the many difficulties and challenges that the railway builders experienced.

Learning resources

1. Text
2. Video
3. Photo

The Uganda Railway (*The Lunatic line*)

The coming of the white man and the construction of the railway, 'the iron snake', had been foretold by African religious prophets and seers years before it was built. These prophets and seers included Syokimau, Mugo wa Kibiru, Kimnyole arap Turukat, Masaku and Mwenda Mwea. The prophets and seers also forewarned of the many problems and sufferings that this would cause such as interference with their culture, and taking away of their land and cattle. Ludwig Krapf was the first person to suggest a railway be built in East Africa through a letter dated 1845. The Brussels Conference of 1889, to which Britain was a party, determined that the most effective way of fighting slave trade in Africa was among other measures, through the construction of railways which would secure the source of the River Nile.



A party of early Church Missionary Society Missionaries come to the end of the rail road at mile 226. They were on their way to Kampala

Source: Nairobi National Museum

Other reasons for building the railway included stimulating legitimate trade, providing cheap and safe transport, spreading Christianity, and for administration of the protectorate.

The party to carry out the preliminary survey for the Uganda Railway from Mombasa to Lake Victoria arrived in Mombasa on 18th December, 1891. Engineer George Whitehouse who led the construction of the Uganda Railway arrived in Mombasa on 11th December, 1895. A total of 31,983 indentured labourers mainly from Punjab and Gujarat worked on the railway line which reached Port Florence, present day Kisumu, on 19th December, 1901.

The construction of the railway faced stiff opposition in Britain because it was seen as not economically viable. Hostility from local communities would also delay the completion of the work.



Ludwig Krapf
Source: Nairobi National Museum

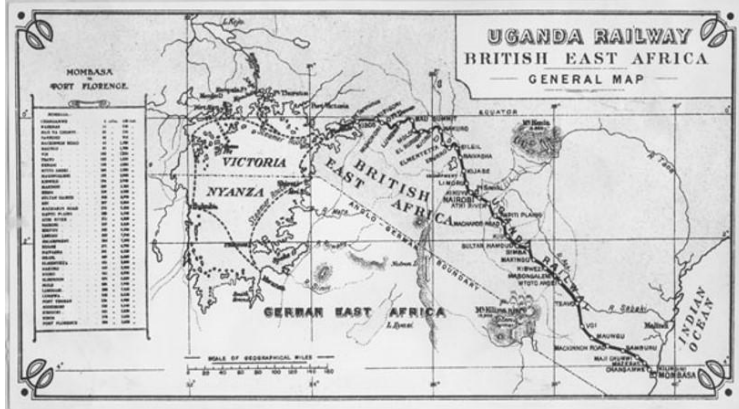


The Uganda Railway construction officials
Source: Nairobi National Museum

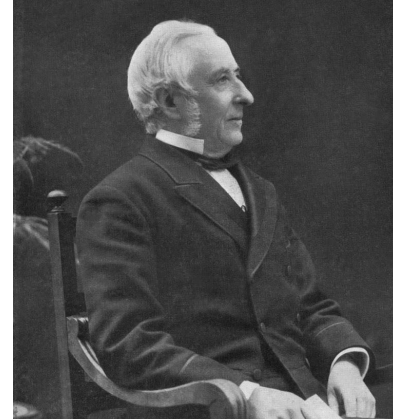
Survey of the Uganda Railway line

Early in 1891, the Imperial British East African Company commissioned Sir Guildford Molesworth to advise the company on the feasibility and probable cost of constructing the Uganda Railway. His report recommended a 3-foot 6-inch gauge track that would cost £2,700 per mile (British Pounds/~1.6 kilometres).

The company used the report to seek government backing for the construction of the line. In November 1891, another survey party led by Captain J.R.L. Macdonald arrived in the country. His team traversed the land and sketched the proposed line using a compass watch, clinometer, aneroid barometer and pedometer. The survey was completed in 10 months with the selected route estimated to be 657 miles (~1,057 kilometres) to the shores of Lake Victoria.



Survey map of the Railway line from Mombasa to Kisumu
Source: Nairobi National Museum



William Mackinnon- Founder of IBEA Co.
Source: Nairobi National Museum

Construction of the Railway

Despite mounting pressure against the railway line in the British Parliament, the treasury issued £3 million and solidified the law to provide for laying of a line in East Africa. George Whitehouse was appointed as the chief engineer of the project and arrived in Mombasa on 11th December, 1895.

The bulk of the work was done by Africans, mainly the Giriama community and runaway slaves, although Indian labour was employed.



Unloading of construction materials at Kilindini port, Mombasa

Source: Nairobi National Museum



Construction workers on site

Source: Nairobi National Museum

By 1896, the construction of a railway track from Mombasa to Lake Victoria was started. It reached Nairobi in 1899, Nakuru in 1900, and Kisumu at the shores of Lake Victoria in 1901.

Indentured labourers from India were brought to work as engineers, skilled, semi-skilled labourers and artisans in the construction. It ran over 560 miles (~901 kilometres) from Mombasa to Kisumu. The ultimate cost of construction was more than £5.3 million of public capital in the day's currency.



Florence Preston driving the last peg at Port Florence in Kisumu. She was wife to R.O. Preston who was the Construction Engineer in charge of plate laying. Florence had accompanied her husband all the way through the construction.

Source: Nairobi National Museum



R.O. Preston

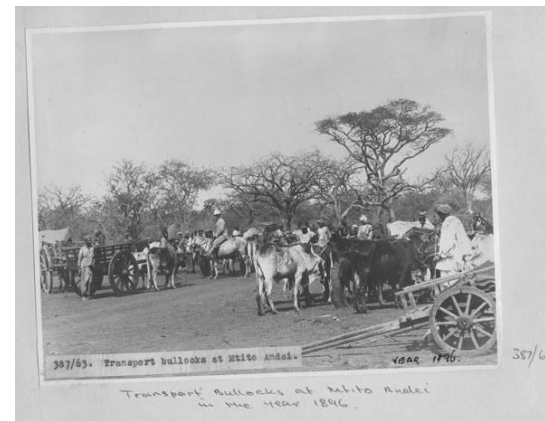
Source: Nairobi National Museum



Railway construction workers building a culvert at Mile 398, Kikuyu
Source: Nairobi National Museum



Nairobi town
Source: Nairobi National Museum



Transport Bullocks at Mtito Andei
Source: Nairobi National Museum



Passenger waiting bay at Kisumu station
Source: Nairobi National Museum



Passengers at Mombasa station
Source: Nairobi National Museum

Challenges faced by railway builders

The Uganda Railway faced numerous challenges before and during its construction. There was a great deal of criticism in the British Parliament with many parliamentarians decrying it as exorbitantly expensive. Physical obstacles like the coast, riverbeds and steep escarpments caused engineering problems.

There was a labour shortage as most Africans were unwilling to carry out the work. Even though Indian labourers were brought, food and water shortage, diseases as well as menace from wild animals claimed the lives of over 2,400 people. These, coupled with hostilities from communities living along the railway line led to it being dubbed the *Lunatic Line*.



The steep inclines paused a major challenge to the contractors. A specially made Engine to carry construction materials down the inclines.

Source: Nairobi National Museum

Man Eaters of Tsavo

By March 1898, construction of the railway had reached the great plains of Tsavo, an area that today hosts Kenya's largest national park. But within a few weeks of construction, the work ground to a halt. The natural balance of the ecosystem had been disturbed for the lions of the Tsavo had found new and easy prey. As hundreds of men lay down at night, they would become easy prey as the lions began their hunt. Railway workers were dragged from their tents by the mighty carnivores as they slept.

The lions became so bold; they even climbed into the carriages and dragged-out unsuspecting sleeping men. No one was safe as everyone feared for their lives, this led to the workers downing their tools. The lions continued to terrorise the workers until they were finally hunted down and shot in December 1898.

Over a hundred lives were cut short by the man-eating lions of Tsavo. Lives were sacrificed for the railway line that served our nation for over a hundred years.



*Charles Henry Ryall, a Superintendent of Police, met his death after being dragged by a man eater lion out of this coach.
Source: Nairobi National Museum*



*Railway construction personnel outside their camp at Maji ya Chumvi
Source: Nairobi National Museum*

Impact of the Uganda Railway

The builders of the Uganda Railway wished to solve the technical question of linking important regions via a stable transport network. This was achieved as the railway fundamentally transformed the land over which it crossed.

Towns and centres along the railway benefited as it gave them the opportunity to trade their valuable goods. Industries could also get raw materials and export finished products. Additionally, the use of Indian labour resulted in a significant Asian community remaining in the country. These Indians worked as 'dukawallas', artisans, traders, clerks and entry level administrators.

By providing a 'modern' means of transport, the railway spurred tourism in the region with notable visitors such as the US President Theodore Roosevelt in 1908. The railway primarily provided a means for Britain to maintain control of the source of the River Nile.



*Uplands Bacon Industry
Source: Nairobi National Museum*



*Loading tea into a train wagon for
transportation to Mombasa
Source: Nairobi National Museum*



*Large scale cash crop farming of
Pineapples in Thika
Source: Nairobi National Museum*



Father Bernard with Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th president of the United States, on his visit to Kenya
Source: Nairobi National Museum



A Church in Kibwezi that served as a hospital for Railway construction labourers
Source: Nairobi National Museum

The Indian Settlers

6,724 of the 31,983 contracted Indian labourers decided to remain in East Africa upon completion of the rail route in 1902. The Railways and Harbours administration retained some Indians to work as signalmen, drivers, stationmasters, maintenance men and office clerks. With the progress of the railway, the existing strong Indian trading and merchant community advanced into the country from the coast.

Indian owned 'dukas', sold assorted household goods to locals. With the arrival of the Europeans, stocks were enlarged to offer a range of merchandise desired by the white man. Other Indians became market gardeners in and around towns. Some settled around Kibos River in Kisumu and grew rice, cotton, linseed, sim-sim and later sugar.



Uganda railway line construction mule transport at the conclusion of work

Source: Nairobi National Museum

Decline of Railway Transport in Kenya

The features that obstructed or led to the decline of rail transport in Kenya include:

1. **Dilapidated infrastructure:** The technological development rendered some rail infrastructure obsolete and not suited to modern traffic operation. Some of the track work or even structures were over a century old. The lack of consideration of future transport capacity in addition to the increased speed during the railway construction led to major issues such as obsolescence and non-functionality.
2. **Reduced connectivity:** The reduced connection on both national and regional levels generated limited share in the transport market. The development of modern road transport, with a more efficient network to many towns reduced railway traffic.
3. **Chronic lack of financial resources** for maintenance and rehabilitation works resulted in the decline in quality of services. As the development and management of railway transportation gained limited support from the government, it faced harsh competition from road transport.

Advantages of railway transport

Advantages of railway transport include:

- Rail transport provides better options in terms of load capacity and hauling of goods over long distances, making it a more cost effective and secure mode of transportation.
- Shipping via train is more environmentally friendly. A single engine can haul many wagons thus causing less pollution to the environment.
- Rail has lower fuel costs compared to road transport, especially when shipping a high volume of freight. Additionally, it has less costs associated with drivers and other transport elements.
- Railways are reliable. They have standardised transit schedules which are not affected by traffic or weather.

The Standard Gauge Railway and future of railway transport in Kenya

Rail transportation is undergoing significant changes in response to the growing demand for fast transportation. Some of these major rail industry trends include the use of drones and smart sensors to inspect railway tracks, digital communication platforms, and automatic train control (ATC).

The Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) is a rail line that connects the city of Mombasa with Nairobi, the country's capital city. The East African Railway Master Plan provides for the Mombasa–Nairobi SGR to link with other SGRs being built in the East African Community.

The operationalization of the SGR has the potential to enhance network efficiency and safety. This facilitates the transport of more goods by rail, reducing the demand on highway capacity. It also provides fuel efficiency and air emission benefits. This will further lead to a reduction of accidents related to human factors.

Some of the opportunities associated with SGR in Kenya are:

1. Reduced transport cost.
2. Reduced travel time between Mombasa and Nairobi, and other destinations served by it.
3. Increase in growth of gross domestic product.
4. Creation of jobs; directly to those working for the railways and indirectly through businesses along the towns that it bypasses