

Budgeted Death and Indentured Labor in British East Africa

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My research focuses on indentured laborers working on the construction of the Uganda Railway, and on how the capitalist mores of the British administration influenced the recruitment and treatment of these laborers. I engage in a study of this through the lens of racial capitalism; positing that capitalism is an ideology, one which in race is inherent, and its logics are necessary to understand in terms of how it creates, reinforces, and exploits racial hierarchies. I build on John Armstrong's work with mythomoteurs and Achilles Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, to explain how death and infrastructure formed a confluence of political economy and ideology for the British Empire. The construction of the railway, I argue, was a capitalist ideological project, one for which the primary goal was to build infrastructure which would allow Kenya to become suitable for British immigrants, imagined as more productive for racial reasons. This goal was promulgated primarily through making the investment as cheap as possible, a sort of colonial austerity that sacrificed the lives of the laborers for cheap construction. The racial hierarchy of the British Empire was used to defray some of these costs, by utilizing indentured laborers as cheap and sacrificial inputs into construction, people whose beings disappear into ledgers that track the costs of their lives and the supply required by their deaths.

The construction of the Uganda Railway was considered of great importance to British bureaucracy, and the legal realities of the empire's rule in India were changed to accommodate a need to import masses of indentured labor to East Africa. That these laborers came from colonized subjects is important, because it allowed the railway administrators to kill and maim

them in the service of its construction. Death and invaliding was a common experience for the workers on the line, including the British engineers, surveyors, and signallers. The differences in how these incidents were treated reflects a racial hierarchy of personhood. Indian laborers were thought of and treated as inputs into construction, requiring a quota of monthly shipments calculated to replace expected losses. That the death and misfortune of these workers was an accepted and calculated part of the railway's construction shows what I believe to be evidence that capitalism as an ideology is not only inherently racial, but inherently genocidal. That the lives those lower in the racial hierarchy are deemed to be a sacrifice for those higher on the racial hierarchy, and that this serves a logic of replacing 'less productive peoples' with 'more productive peoples'. Classifications based on labor capability are inherent to how capitalism articulates race. It thus follows that judgments of for which races death and maiming are acceptable and for which not are judgements on which races should benefit from colonial labor. The railway's purpose in the sense of political economy was not only to enable British exploitation of East Africa, but to further a larger ideological project of genocidal capital accumulation in the hands of white British.

The intervention I make in the field is approaching necropolitics through the lens of both political economy and race. Scholars such as Marina Grzinic have addressed political economy through a necropolitical framing, but take necropolitics away from its original framing in the colonized world. I want to examine how the economic logics of necropolitics inform its racial logics and vice versa. Additionally, the history of the Uganda Railway has not been significantly explored since Charles Miller's 1971 book *The Lunatic Express*, which itself is a lonely follower of the official history of the railway, titled *Permanent Way*. Miller's book is largely written as a

history of the engineers and overseers on the line, and ignores the men who built the railway. It also fails to consider questions of political economy from a perspective that understands capitalism as a particular economic mode, and one which is rooted in race. Particularly poignant to this is that Miller uncritically accepts the racialized views that were projected onto the indentured laborers, portraying them at various times as ‘superstitious coolies’ and lazy malcontents standing in the way of the railway’s progress. It is necessary to make a more critical reading of the sources, particularly with an eye towards questions of ideology and race.

The process of my research so far is still at the stage of evaluating the material I discovered in the archives. The documents I pulled at the National Archives of India represent an unresearched collection, as I am the only scholar whose name is recorded as pulling them, and I know the sources cited by previous books. In addition to this, I am reading the same sources as previous scholars with quite a different eye, attempting to tease out the information hidden behind what they present. As an example, Hill and Miller ask no real questions of the types of cargo that railroad was carrying, or why that cargo included enough ammunition to outfit ten regiments of men. Questions of working conditions and mortality are also novel to readings of these sources, and I am incorporating scholars such as Achille Mbembe in order to interpret these sources.

The grant given by the India China Institute was extremely useful, as without it, I would have been unable to visit India or the UK in order to access their archives. I would like to thank the ICI for giving me the opportunity to access my primary sources, and to enable this research project of mine. I hope to present my finished thesis soon in the Spring of 2025.