

African spaces, narratives and cultures of cycling: where are we now with representation?

Dr Lucy Baker, Aberystwyth University

A few years ago in the Kavango region of Northern Namibia, I interviewed 45 people (men and women of various ages) about their mobility. I was studying the use of second-hand bicycles exported by international NGOs and how the people and places receiving those bicycles were imagined by those working in international development. As part of the research, I interviewed participating local retailers in Namibia and international NGOs collecting and exporting second-hand bicycles.

I am cautious that the narratives I encountered during my research are not representative of all the different ideas circulating about cycling in Africa in relation to development or otherwise. There are differences in how various stakeholders in development are now thinking and talking about how to improve opportunities to cycle for transport or recreation throughout this vast continent. But, by highlighting some of the more limited representations circulating that relate to the promotion of cycling and by raising awareness of how these are resisted on the ground, I hope that we can generate more diverse representations as we encourage people to cycle.

The bicycle as a technical solution to walking in rural places

It [the bicycle] represents mankind's greatest invention: the wheel. And half the people in the world don't have man's greatest invention and they walk everywhere they go. And they wonder why they're not doing well. (NGO interview excerpt)

In contrast, most of the people I interviewed wanted man's greatest invention in its motorised form. But, given that intended beneficiaries of second-hand bicycles could not usually afford a car or motorcycle, the bicycle in this case was being privileged as a technological tool over other forms of mobility (walking, head-portage). While most of the world is discussing the environmental and health benefits of cycling (as opposed to private car use), a certain strand of development has been promoting cycling in places where motorised transport apparently does not exist.

We tend to assume that bikes work best in rural areas where there's no transport and people have to travel further and the bikes can have a greater impact. (NGO interview excerpt)

In the Kavango, where I followed the bikes to, there is a need for more bus services and people are dependent on 'hiking' in shared taxis that are unregulated and with questionable safety particularly for female passengers, but there is transport. There may well be places in Africa and elsewhere with 'no (motorised) transport', but there is a general perception about the spaces in which cycling fits as a development tool. This limited representation does not consider that many urban inhabitants cannot use motorised transport either public or private, because they cannot afford to.

Whilst a rural environment is in theory suitable for the second-hand mountain bikes, most commonly shipped, in reality this environment throughout Africa is incredibly diverse. In Kavango, because of deep sand and thorny plants that carpet the river plains, the space in which bicycles can feasibly be used is limited primarily to paved roads. This was also the case in some areas of Rundu town and Katutura, a former township in Windhoek, built for the forced eviction of the city's Black population from other areas then settled only by White people.

More precisely, there has been a lack of infrastructure for non-motorised transport modes in both rural and urban contexts, which makes cycling unsafe and/or difficult and acts as a barrier to its

uptake. But rather than addressing the problem of a lack of appropriate infrastructure, the rural context is primed as the most appropriate place to focus on by using narratives of danger.

Safety is an issue that we are aware of and I don't think any of the major urban areas in Sierra Leone or Ghana are particularly bike friendly. So that's something that we've shied away from and the primary focus is rural areas. (NGO interview excerpt)

Contrary to this narrative, in the Kavango region, road-building policies were clearly focused on maximising the efficiency of logistics by running straight roads through remote villages without enforcing speed restrictions. The limited opportunity to cycle offered by the hard surface of highways was deemed too unsafe by most residents. The rural emphasis, rather, was serving to fulfil the organisations' need to validate their impact objectives to their funders.

'The missing middle'

The same narratives are a reflection of those cited by development institutions such as the World Bank ([J.T. Transport Ltd, 1996](#); [World Bank, 1993](#)) and academic institutions. That is that the bicycle is a utilitarian device that offers low-cost mobility improvements over head portage and mitigates uneven access to health services, education and employment. As part of IMT interventions, bicycles are considered to be relevant for load-carrying designed for income generation, such as 'trading in crops, beer, and other goods' ([Howe, 1995](#): 25).

A lack of provision for cycling infrastructure also signifies the bicycle's intermediate disposition as governments have oriented transport planning towards automobility. Aware of the bicycle's lowly status among those aspiring for progress, the 'missing middle' characterisation initiated by the World Bank embeds the bicycle's utility as an appropriate transport solution primarily for the rural poor.

The impact of these narratives is that the bicycle's appeal to youth for identity creation, status signalling, play and recreation has not been given as much attention as it deserves. Furthermore, we are left to question today what impact these narratives have on their subjects both rural and urban. And, if such stark differences exist in how we imagine bicycles fitting into different cultures, are they appropriate?

Cultures of cycling among young adults in Namibia

I asked an interviewee in a village near Rundu town, "why have young people swapped to the mountain bike?", she responded:

"It's fashion. For example, they might cycle at high speed with no hands, chatting on their cell phone. That's why they want these modern bikes."

Then she continued,

"Fashion is in the world. That's what everyone is doing in the world. But mostly it's from the West. It's also from watching videos and it's the bikes ridden in competitions."

In contrast to older styles of bicycles that date back to the colonisation of Namibia, the mountain bicycle is a symbolic object used to translocate young Namibian consumers, connecting them with apparently more progressive people and places (Farrugia, 2016). It is a vehicle that mediates global culture and enables young people to create an identity that is separate from the demands of adults and the poverty in which they are situated.

Young men use bicycles to reach their local football pitch following the sound of a whistle that announces the beginning of a match. In these instances, the bicycle is a means for recreational mobility. Few accounts were given of girls' use of bicycles for recreational trips, partly because their play and recreational activities take place close to home (related to gender norms and a fear for their personal security) and partly because of their limited use of bicycles (related to the former). Some men also talked about cycling for exercise and maintaining their health, finding pleasure in doing so.

However, to incorporate the identities they desire into their mobility, these young adults were negotiating forces that were structuring their agency. In much of Kavango region, domestic and familial obligations endure in the absence of alternative infrastructure (a household supply of water and gas fuel for cooking). Young men and boys find ways to adapt their chosen mountain bikes to meet household demands to carry water containers - one on a rack at the rear and one on the top tube of the bicycle in between their arms. An older generation prefers to use stronger traditional single-gear bicycles with welded steel carrying racks, that enable a culture of cycling much like development institutions have promoted.

For young Namibians seeking out the latest trends in bicycle fashions is a significant move away from the heavy single-gear bicycles built for carrying loads of 30kg synonymous locally with working on the farms owned by wealthier White Namibians. A cycling culture that is purely utilitarian is entangled not only with the structuring relationships of their elder generation, but also Namibia's oppressive history of colonialism and its apartheid regime. Moving on from past representations of the bicycle as an 'intermediate form of transport' is, therefore, incredibly significant as we seek to decolonise the mechanisms through which transport and development interventions are designed and carried out. We need to be aware that the narratives and images being generated and circulated while seeking to improve cycling opportunities are sometimes intrinsically linked with previous colonial relationships of power over others.

To rectify this, and to improve the bicycle's appeal, cycling and its culture needs to be recognised as both a utilitarian and conspicuous activity that enables people to perform the subjectivities they desire, which for many young people is in defiance of those encouraged by elder adults and as part of development initiatives. This could be achieved by empowering young consumers in the design process of interventions and through the visual culture and narratives used to represent cycling, which could incorporate and represent multiple mobility needs, desires and identities.

This research is available with open access:

Baker, L., 2021. Rational versus Fashionable: Youth Identity, Play and Agency in Namibian Cycling Mobilities. *Progress in Development Studies*, 21(3), pp.264-279.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/14649934211018519>

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[Constructing sub-Saharan African mobilities through the flow of second-hand objects: Scripting bicycles for Namibian users - ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

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