



Heritage-Tourism Resources of the Franco-Ethiopian Railway in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Perhaps seen as the most spectacular development of the early 20th century Ethiopia, was the introduction of a modern railway transport system. The line was built by the French between 1897-1917 to connect port Jibuti (Djibouti) to Addis Ababa crossing through Dire Dawa. Besides the basic and long-serving transport function, the railway certainly played a vital role in the political, social, economic, and cultural developments of the region in the years that followed. Since recent times however, railway services have become paralyzed and most of the line is now being abandoned. This is mainly due to organizational and management related problems of the managing company and advancement in rail technology which surpasses old rail systems. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that it is repository of history and old rail technology, and this in turn could be an opportunity to boost tourism at major stations. Dire Dawa's station is located almost half-way between Port Jibouti and Addis Ababa and considered the largest of all stations in Ethiopia. The research explores both tangible and intangible elements of this station as railway-heritage tourism resources to be developed in the future. Storytelling, various types of railway technologies and the historical and cultural landscape of the scene created as a result of the introduction of the railway into the area, are found to be vital tourism resources to be developed into visitor appeal. Interviews, site observation and document analysis were carried out exhaustively from January-June, 2018 to gather the required research data which will hopefully boost heritage tourism around railways in Ethiopia.

Keywords: heritage; heritage-tourism; tourism resource, railway heritage.

Introduction

Nowadays as rail technology continues to grow, age-old and historic railways are adapted into tourism attractions (Henderson, 2011; Abhishek, Josephine &Taha, 2014). Preservation of the railway heritage by various bodies adds to the momentum (Njuguna, Wahome & Deisser, 2018; Erkan, 2012). The reasons to preserve such resource may also vary from place to place depending on the objectives set by the conservationists. However, there is widespread use of these resources to revitalize a region 'ravaged by industrialization' (Abhishek, Josephine & Taha, 2014: 116). Thus, in this regard, tourism is at the forefront as an economic strategy to exploit the different attributes that the various resources could offer to tourists. On the other hand, there are segments of tourists who are attracted by the growing railway heritage-tourism niche market. As explained by Orbasli & Woodward (2008), railway heritage can offer a range of tourist experiences from storytelling to re-enactment of rail travel and early technology display. Novelty and nostalgia are also among the motivating factors of travel to railway heritage sites.

The paper deals with the tourism potential of the Dire Dawa's terminus of the Franco-Ethiopian Railway (now Djibouto-Ethiopian) with a thorough investigation of the resources found at the station. This explanatory research would fill the gap observed which exists in the tourism value of the industrial heritage of the country in general, and the railway heritage in particular. The segment



is palpably neglected, in that none of the research conducted so far revolves around the one under study. Furthermore, the research was carried out at a time when the future of the Railway Station and all its facilities and material remained blurred. Therefore, it is assumed that exhibiting the value of this irreplaceable heritage resource would encourage government officials and stakeholders as a whole, to develop a clear-cut management approach thereby avoiding a possible conflict of interest over it. The data was obtained through extensive document analysis supplemented by interview and an extensive and repeated site observation that was conducted from January to June, 2018.

Methodology

The research was designed to employ a descriptive method within a qualitative approach. To collect the necessary and relevant primary and secondary data, the researcher used various data gathering tools including interview, site observation and document analysis. For the interview, the researcher developed semi-structured questions to be conducted with the local community and both former and current officials of the Railway Company. Besides the information obtained through interviews, the researcher made site observations for an extended period of time and maintained field notes. Furthermore, depending on the availability, necessary and reliable information from secondary sources were also reviewed exhaustively in order to supplement the data obtained through the above-mentioned instruments. In this case, data available in the form of recordings, files, photographs and official reports were used. Data collection was started by January 2018 and concluded in June of that same year.

The Franco-Ethiopian Railway¹ and Dire Dawa

The Franco-Ethiopian Railway line, the only network until the introduction of the new Chinese made railway in 2018, was built by the French from 1897-1917 to run a 781Km distance from port Jibuti to Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa. Initially, the project was to link Jibuti with the Nile crossing Harar and Entoto along its three sections of construction (Shiferaw, 1987). However, the Railway was never constructed beyond Addis Ababa as much of the original plan was shelved due to various economic and political machinations. The line from Jibuti to Dire Dawa, 309 kilometres in length, was built between 1897 and 1902 by *The Imperial Railway Company of Ethiopia* (CIE), headquartered in Paris and created by Alfred Ilg and Leon Chafneux following the 1894 concession (Gilmour, 1906). As was in the original plan the line had to cross Harar, however, it failed in this respect due to financial difficulties which frightened the company in its efforts to cross the rough terrain to reach this terminus. Instead, the company secured permission of avoiding the hilly line and settled a major rail station down at the foot plateaux which is today's Dire Dawa. On 24 December 1902, the first train arrived at this terminus from Jibuti thereby signalling the completion of the first section of the project. Subsequently, modern Dire Dawa as a city was founded in the same year, fortunately following the readjustment of the route (Shiferaw, 1987). Globally, it has been observed that early railways were used as an instrument to further the process of penetration for imperialist exploitation (Coulls, 1999). The same is true for the Franco-Ethiopian Railway that the first section once completed. Further progress was held-up until 1909 due to the halting of French imperialist interests. A few months before the line had reached Dire Dawa the Railway Company, its financial deficiency soaring, turned its face to the British capitalists and they soon outweighed the French domination of the company. This resulted in a period of Anglo-French rivalry when an outrageous public opinion in France urged their

¹The Franco-Ethiopian Railway (CFE), now called *Chemin de fer Djibouto-Ethiopi en* (CDE) since March 21, 1981, was formally established following the new concession of 1908 between France and Ethiopia. It replaced the former *Campagne Imperiale des Chemin de fer Ethiopi en* by which the Jibuti-Dire Dawa section of the line was built under its auspices.



government to not losing the “French character of the enterprise” (Pankhurst, nd.:19). As Lennox Gilmour (1906:20) succinctly observed:

...uneasy feelings had been growing in French Colonial circles that the increase of British capital invested in the enterprise was jeopardizing the hopes founded on the exclusively French character of the railway. When it was found that the International Ethiopian Railway Trust and Construction Company, with its registered offices in London...acquired the right to construct the remaining portion of the first section of the line to the foot of the Harar plateau [Dire Dawa], ...a violent outcry was raised that French interests had been betrayed, and that once more rapacious England was seeking to supplant France in an African enterprise initiated by French foresight and founded by French capital.

In response to the growing public demand, the French government and the Railway Company signed a new agreement without the consent of Ethiopia on 6 February 1902 (Pankhurst: nd). This ‘single-handed’ agreement, Pankhurst continues, was about strengthening French dominance in the entire doings of the Company and, in the long run, a threat to sovereign Ethiopia. The move made Emperor Menelik II feel “astonishment and indignation” (Gilmour, 1906, p. 31) leading him to reach a decision to discontinue further progress. Not only this but the entire scenario further caused the Emperor to refuse to attend the 1902 inauguration of the first section of the line at Dire Dawa (Gilmour, 1906; Marcus, 1995). Later in 1905 the Ethiopian government looked for a final solution for the lengthy railway politics and sent a kind of ultimatum to the powers on the issue that it would construct the railway on its own. In the following year, the powers along with Italy, were able to settle their differences after partitioning their respective sphere over sovereign Ethiopia and so agreed over the construction of at least the second part of the railway from Dire Dawa to Addis Ababa (Marcus, 1975). Construction for this section was started in 1909 and after very slow progress, was completed in 1917 (after the death of Emperor Menelik II in 1913) and the railway had since then been a decisive and sole means of reaching the sea until recently.

But for Dire Dawa, immediately after the first section’s completion in 1902, the railway brought more observable development and prosperity to the then barren land which soon changed in leaps and bounds, transforming the pastoralist area into an important urban center in the eastern part of Ethiopia. Administrative buildings and modern villas, which shaped today’s landscape, were built for railway workers around the station. The rail transport dominating the eastern inland import and export; light industries, hotels and restaurants (such as Hotel Bolollakos and Hotel Chemin De Fer), bars, modern schools, market centers and shops of different types were soon followed. Socially, new settlements were intensified where a wave of Arabs, Indians, Greeks and Armenians who were traders flocked into the area and established themselves alongside Ethiopians who also came from all over the country to benefit from the commercial activities developed around it.

Current Condition of the Station and the Company

At the present time, however, as the railway has lost its heyday, the station is in a deplorable state of conservation where the buildings are left gloomy and historic rolling stocks are decaying due to weathering and neglect. Provision of passenger and freight services having been in a constant decline are now found to be at a total standstill. According to my informant², two factors took the

² Ato Ayele WoldeYohannes has been working in CDE for the last 35 years in various positions from technician to top managerial posts. He had served as Representative of the General Manager in Dire Dawa from August 2008 to January 2014, the years where the Company experienced serious bankruptcy.



highest share for the railway to reach at this point. Firstly, the change in organizational and management structure following Jibuti's independence caused a huge shambles. Since 1981, the Railway Company had become a binational property where inconsistencies were beginning to mushroom in the day-to-day operations of the Company. Moreover, the top management constituting both Ethiopians and Djiboutians was much concerned about ensuring national representation in top managerial positions and the prestige of their respective countries rather than striving for optimum performance of the Company. In addition, there were times where the Board of Directors never met for long periods contrary to the treaty which ordered them to convene twice a year³. CDE's tedious and decelerating position in regenerating and updating itself despite unparalleled financial and material supports from various European governments and institutions as an effort to advance came second. The Company dragged itself far behind as a result of seldom monitoring and following-up from the leadership on how these supports could be utilized. For example, in 2007 the European Union donated 50 million euro for a rehabilitation program of the CDE where, due to this, rail transport was completely stopped well-nigh for six years from March 2007. An Italian contractor called CONSTA JOINT agreed to restore 114km of the line including 90 bridges to the Dire Dawa-Dawounlé (towards Jibuti) direction for a due date of three years. However, CONSTA was like a tortoise in its speed and never completed the project even after a six year period and finally terminated the agreement and left the country having restored 27km line and only seven bridges.

Once the hope of completing the rehabilitation had been drained, the Railway leadership in the meantime, at the end of July 2013, decided to resume services. A modest restoration was undertaken by its own human resources to assume both passenger and freight services from Dire Dawa up until Jibuti with three and two trains running per week respectively. Later, in 2014 the old track line in Jibuti (somewhere between Ethiopia's Gililé and Alsabeth) was lifted and replaced by the new Chinese made railway line which is incompatible for the former 1m wide gage. To this end, the workable line is diminished to Ethiopian Gililé (a small town at the Ethiopian border point with Jibuti) from Dire Dawa with a further reduction of train service into twice a week which is only on Tuesday and Saturday⁴.

On the Ethiopian side, the line from Dire Dawa to Addis Ababa is not functional. At Goro some 4km far from Dire Dawa's station, the bridge is broken due to flooding and left with no restoration. At Afdem, the line has overlapped with the new railway (Ibid). These are the major lines and obviously, as observed by the researcher, there are portions of the line in-between where there is a cut off, buried under heaps of soil there and there is no longer easy operation unless it is fully restored.

Regarding passenger and freight wagons, currently Dire Dawa's station owned the largest collection of rail systems that were introduced to the country at different times. There are some trains dating back to the first quarter of the 20th century mainly from France and Switzerland, others to the Italian occupation period and more interestingly, there are also trains introduced from Zimbabwe as a donation to President Mengistu H/Mariam of Ethiopia.

³ In 1983, just two years later after the formation of the CDE, the two governments recruit a consultant called Louis Berger International, INC. to study the then Organizational and Management structure of the Railway. The study went through detailed investigation of each section and strongly recommended for a swift actions to be taken in drawback areas. However, authorities from both sides were less concerned and above all had no goodwill to put the suggestions in place and all the efforts remain naught.

⁴ Ato Abdulaziz Ahmed, who is the incumbent Representative of the General Manager in Dire Dawa since January 2014 and served for an extended period in the Franco-Ethiopian Railway of Dire Dawa station.



What are the Potential Tourism Resources at the Station/the Line?

Having been in existence for over one hundred and ten years, the station is a historic site endowed with both tangible and intangible features to explore and worthwhile tourism resources can be developed into visitor appealing artifacts. These resources are an opportunity for those who wanted to learn more not just about the railways, but also Dire Dawa as a whole through facilitating a diverse set of experiences for visitors. In today's tourism world, where segmentation is a vogue, the Franco-Ethiopian railway in Dire Dawa has a story to tell, a history to learn, reminiscences for the memory and nostalgia to share, and a range of early rail technologies to show which would provide novel experiences for most railway enthusiasts. In addition, apart from its counterparts, the Dire Dawa station has some unique features which would in turn provide the site a competitive edge to brand itself as railway heritage destination. First, this station covers a large portion of the line from Awash to Ethiopia's border point with Jibuti under its control; second, the technical workshop (general metal, wagon, wood and locomotive maintenance workshops with substantial personnel for heavy and light maintenance) including telegraph and telecom centers of the railway are found here. As a result, many Ethiopians perceive the railway to be an exclusive brand which the city deserves. The following section deals with the main tourism resources found at the station or those related to it, but which are nonetheless an integral part of the railway identity.

A. The Story of European Colonial Rivalry

Storytelling becomes an added value in the shaping of tourism products at a tourism destination through creating real connections and unique experiences. The Franco-Ethiopian railway has an interesting story capable of creating a vivid and lasting picture in the minds of audiences. Throughout its construction, the Ethiopian railway underwent much monotonous diplomatic argument resulting from the European colonial conflict of interests. It was after such ups-and-downs that finally the railway was achieved to break the country's age-old tradition of isolation from the outside world. The Powers-Italy, France and Great Britain-had their respective interests in Ethiopia at the expense of its sovereignty. Italy had a robust claim to incorporate Ethiopia under her own colony of Italian East Africa along with Eritrea and Italian Somaliland. France had a desire to control the upper Nile valley from Jibuti. In the meantime, France wanted to maintain a dominant position in the internal affairs of sovereign Ethiopia and foster economic exploitation, thereby alienating Ethiopia from either of the Powers. Whereas Britain once relied on Italy's influence, was then frustrated by France's progress towards the Nile (Gilmour, 1906; Marcus, 1995).

Thus, the Powers began their conspiracy and created a political instrument out of a commercial enterprise established and undertook construction of a railway line. The inter-power rivalry affected the construction of the project in one way or another. Construction work was discontinued for six years due to the February 1902 French resolution, bankruptcy was another devastating episode and, to pay its debt, after completion, the Railway Company collected a transport fare of which was one of the most expensive in this the in the world and there was a very small free allowance (Pankhurst, nd; Boyes, 1906).

Moreover, due to this imperialist friction the first railway company underwent liquidation and interests were then transferred to a new rail company established after a new concession which was granted in 1908 (Pankhurst, nd). According to this agreement, the initial name of the railway company "*Campagnie Imperiale des Chemin de fer Ethiopi en*" was replaced by "*Compagnie du chemin de fer Franco-Ethiopi en de Djibouti   Addis Abeba*" with a further restructuring of its internal administration and board membership. This implies that the originally Ethiopian owned company was now internationalized and became a joint enterprise under persistent follow-up from governments assuming greater interest.



The name Franco-Ethiopian Railway or *Compagnie du chemin de fer Franco-Ethiopi en de Djibouti   Addis Abeba* was the long serving name until it was later renamed to be "*Chemin de fer Djibouto-Ethiopi en*" in 1981 precipitated due to the independence of Jibuti in 1977. Therefore, due to the influence from colonial interests in naming and renaming, structuring and restructuring of the company's structure is indeed an integral part of the story of Ethiopian rail.

B. Railway Technology at the Station

Often dubbed as *Head House*, the station covers a vast area consisting of numerous buildings serving various purposes. An early 20th century ornamental passenger building overlooking the largest square of the city and a veranda for passengers in its rear is the first encounter with the area. On its front side, this elegant building bears the current logo and name of the railway-Djibouto-Ethiopian Railway-written both in Ahmaric and French. Inside it are a ticket counter, waiting room, and staff offices. Further inside to the left of this building, there are huge sheds of the general workshops (ateliers), depots, the different types of trains and coaches, and the rail traffic control center. The compound is generally a repository of outstanding railway technologies and machineries that tourism could benefit from. As is common anywhere, it is worthwhile to establish a museum since museums are considered the best vehicle for the display of the history and technology of railways (Orbasli & Woodward, 2008). Thus, establishment of a museum dedicated for the preservation and display of the heritages and track records of the Franco-Ethiopian railway from its inception to the present day would open up the station's potential tourism resources for tourists motivated by railway romanticism, admiration, and imbued with a spirit of nostalgia.

These above mentioned heritages at the station along with historic documents such as archives of workers files, original letters (including office letters), working timetables, former photographs (CIE-Imperial Railway of Ethiopia, CFE, CDE), official reports, early magazines (e.g. *yebabur dimts*), memoirs, stamps, stocks, coins, workers uniforms, wears and belts could be part and parcel of the railway heritage collections and possibly form out-door and in-door exhibitions. Early locomotives that were operational and which were named after the various districts of the country (shewa, Gojjam, Tigre, etc.) and their successors named by wild animals (Lion, Cheetah, Rhinos, etc.) would also be among the vital components of the collection. Likewise, a detailed inventory of the railway heritage and its surrounding has to be conducted by professionals for a proper conservation of these artifacts and documentation as some of the documents are packed in a small room whereas others are left outside in an uncaring way.

C. Historic and Cultural Urban Landscape

Besides to its transport function, the railway created a quite different form of landscape in the area. First, as mentioned earlier, the introduction of this railway gave birth and development to urban Dire Dawa. Secondly, though Ethiopia was never colonized, the socioeconomic deeds of the Railway Company made Dire Dawa the only city in Ethiopia to be involve in, though slightly, a segregative administrative feature. From its foundation period, settlement was cut into two separate quarters of Kazira and Magala based on residents backgrounds as for Europeans and non-Europeans respectively were concerned. Separated by the dry river of Dechatu, these urban neighborhoods had a different living and working environment and social space at the neighborhood level (Baldet, 1970).

Kazira covers the large tracts of land adjacent to the station and extends from Gende-Dippo to Dechatu. The land was given to the concessionaire based on the 1908 agreement made with the government. The first urban plan in Ethiopia's history was introduced to this section by the French and modern villa houses, best hotels and bars of the time, modern schools, straight-wide roads,



recreational and sport playgrounds and other facilities featured in this village. Trees on both sides of the straits provided adequate shelter from the blazing sun during the daytime. Most importantly, the denizens lived in large villas rounded with a relaxed big yard and architecturally, it was made as appropriately as possible to resist the very hot climate of the area. The residents were Railway officials, government representatives, skilled-labourers of the company and other European businessmen. Simply put, in this period this was the nicer portion of the town where the French (along with other Europeans) used to live during their long years of involvement in the management of the company (Shiferaw, 1987; Pankurst, nd).

Magala, the quarter next to Dechatu proceeding eastward, was resided in by the natives and non-Europeans (mainly Indians and the Yemenis) who came to the area as trade and commerce flourished. The quality drastically fell in this neighborhood and unlike Kezira, the houses were closely congested and connected one another on their sides, the roads are narrow and there are no trees under which to shelter from the burning sun.

This characteristic of settlement pattern persists only towards the end of the 1920s but today this is reflected through the cultural landscape that existed over time. The site is considered as a must-see milieu for first-time visitors of the city. Evening time promenades on the streets of Kezira helped by the fresh air which blew nicely (partly due to the trees covering the area) is considered to be worthwhile experience. However, this has to be incorporated and developed into a product package with a conscious planning by the city's tourism office as it is still a matter of impulse at the moment and not based on careful strategy.

Besides, culturally, "it was also through the railway that ideas and fashions percolated to the country" (Bahru, 2002, 101). Due to the railway, Dire Dawa attracted public attention as a gateway to modern day blessings from Europe and Middle East and for most Ethiopians going and settling there was a dream come true opportunity. The railway has an important and revered position in the cultural history of Dire Dawa where its novelties inspire artists in admiration of the technology in their everyday life of music and other artistic life. For the natives, it has wider and deeper social significance in creating a sense of place and belongingness where the Dire Dawans often identify and relate themselves with the railway site in their mundane conversation just as an epithet.

Conclusion

The Franco-Ethiopian railway had been materialized at a time of colonial predicament and signifies the country's enduring diplomatic efforts to rail travel a reality. Unlike other Railways in Africa, the Ethiopian Railway was built by a politically independent country through a concession system, despite fierce confrontation with colonial interests. It is boldly representative of Ethiopia's external relations of the late 19th century and early 20th century with the European powers.

Above all, this old Railway is an archetype to showcase how the process evolved leading to the first major contact of the country with industrialization which had manifested and what early industrial development in Ethiopia looked like. The introduction of the railway immensely shaped the transport history of the country in the years that followed, for example travel time to reach the sea became a three day affair. The socio-cultural impact was also colossal. All these attributes are what makes the railway a potential heritage tourism resource awaiting the highest stakeholders' attention and for railways to become a center of attraction. Today, the transport function of the railway is on a downward spiral to its complete closure; station buildings and the surrounding environment look like abandoned areas (Kezira village in Dire Dawa is typical example), with tracks being removed and the entire future of the railway remains in a bewildering state despite promises that it will be conserved.



In order to safeguard the railway heritage, a legal framework which would facilitate the identification and protection of this heritage has to be developed. In this regard, for example, the current cultural heritage proclamation of the country has a severe gap since it do not mention railway as a heritage asset and revising this proclamation is required. Following the envisaged revision, the establishment of a museum or other appropriate management approach has to be discussed with stakeholders and it would not be unfortunate if such an opportunity was missed. All the resources of the railway could be explored for use as heritage tourism products if only such efforts can be made. Therefore, the establishment of a repository of the heritage of Franco-Ethiopian railway is an urgent task and in addition to what has been discussed here, a further inventory should be carried out to ascertain potential value to heritage tourism.

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