global dis :connect

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Käte Hamburger Research Centre global dis:connect

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How did motor racing in East Africa, as site of technological co-creation, shape decolonisation and global automobility?

The problem

After World War II, East Africa emerged as a crucial site of global automotive development. Car manufacturers from all over the world used motor racing, particularly motor rallies, to test new models and develop new technologies. The African population there contributed to the development of modern automotive technology, providing infrastructure, know-how and labour. However, as testing and racing grew in scope and importance, the agency and recognition of local actors declined.

Core interest

The project investigates automotive development in East Africa from the late-colonial period to independence, asking how local actors – from mechanics to drivers – engaged in hands-on innovation and how their knowledge shaped global automotive engineering. It examines the local production and transfer of technical expertise and how the conditions of technological development changed over time. Through this techno-historical lens, the project explores the uneven topographies of globalisation in the modern postcolonial world.

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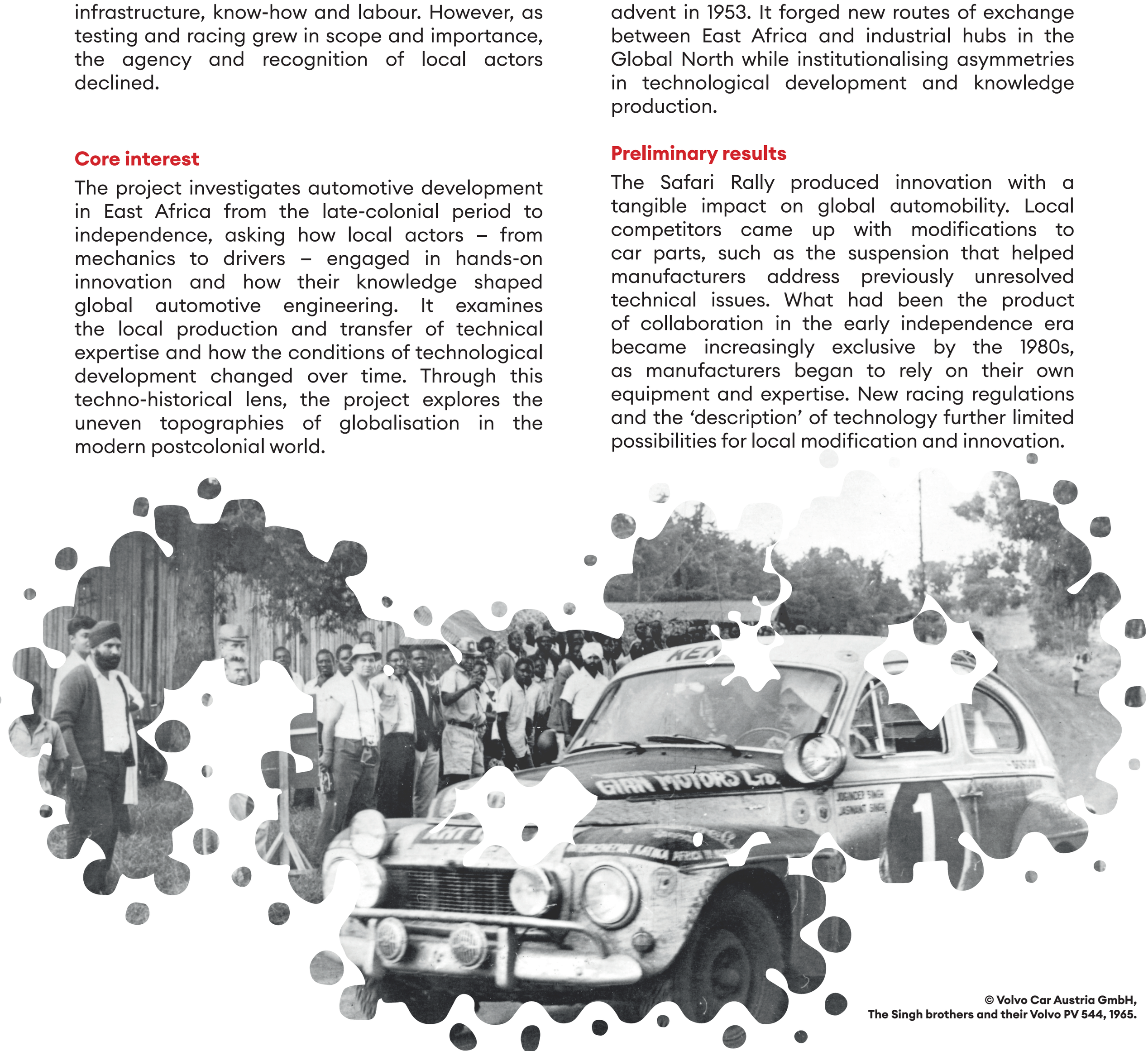
The project conceptualises motor racing as a laboratory of dis:connectivty, encapsulating the duality of connection and disconnection in globalisation processes. The Safari Rally serves as the central case study. Considered the ultimate test for man and machine, the Safari grew into a global spectacle soon after its advent in 1953. It forged new routes of exchange between East Africa and industrial hubs in the Global North while institutionalising asymmetries in technological development and knowledge production.

Preliminary results

The Safari Rally produced innovation with a tangible impact on global automobility. Local competitors came up with modifications to car parts, such as the suspension that helped manufacturers address previously unresolved technical issues. What had been the product of collaboration in the early independence era became increasingly exclusive by the 1980s, as manufacturers began to rely on their own equipment and expertise. New racing regulations and the ‘description’ of technology further limited possibilities for local modification and innovation.



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The Singh brothers and their Volvo PV 544, 1965.