



WORDS CHRISTOPHER DAVEY

# *The Phoenix & the ashes*

In Africa, the bicycle is more than a means of travel: it can help regenerate the local economy, as **Christopher Davey** found out in western Tanzania

**M**any are roadsters made in China or India; some are secondhand machines shipped by charities from Britain.

Whatever their origins, bicycles play a key role in the local economy in western Tanzania. They're used to carry food and drink, passengers and, crucially, fuel; fuel for people like Cesilia Kamila, who has four children and lives near Kasulu, near to Lake Tanganyika and down the road from Burundi.

The moulded lump of clay in Cesilia's kitchen is a new type of cooking stove, which burns fuel twice as efficiently. Before she got it, Cesilia and her children spent five hours a week collecting firewood, with a four-kilometre walk in flip-flops each way. It has two things to do with bicycles.

For one thing, the bicycle is how fuel is delivered in western Tanzania. Cooking needs fuel; firewood is cheapest; and the bike is the most cost-effective way of getting it from A to B. Cesilia burns either firewood or charcoal in her stove. When she uses

charcoal, she inserts a grate so it burns better. That grate is a worn out chainring from a Chinese-made Phoenix bicycle...

## THE CHARCOAL SELLER

Gervas Yusuf also lives near Kasulu. Once or twice a week he rides his Phoenix roadster four hours to a place called Kishoka. It's part of this vast area of miombo woodland – low scrub bush, quivering in hot still air over the dusty ochre-red soils of Africa.

Gervas buys charcoal from the charcoal burners. Their kilns are rudimentary. Felled and chopped-up trees are covered in earth and fired through small holes, and wisps of smoke reek toxic fumes. Grime blackens clothes. Charcoal making methods are pretty destructive. In their wake, the burners leave few mature trees, and Gervas pedals a little bit further every month. He wears flip flops, rolls up his right trouser leg to the knee and keeps a 'panga' (a machete-like tool) wedged into the frame of his bike.

I see dozens of people pushing or riding bicycles loaded with firewood or charcoal,

heading for Kasulu town. Yusuf is among them. He freewheels downhill and pedals on the flat. Uphill is a slow slog, pushing from the back, with a length of sisal rope tied to one side of the handlebars for steering.

'It takes about five hours to go back to Kasulu with my charcoal,' he tells me. He makes 7,000 to 8,000 shillings profit on a sack (about £3.50). He shifts one a day.

## WOOD WORKING

Over 95% of Tanzanians use firewood or charcoal for cooking. Rural families usually cook with firewood, which they collect themselves. Most townspeople cook with charcoal, but in the towns of western Tanzania many also cook with wood. Bicycle operators collect and sell it to households, and also to kiosk owners making chai and food; to brick-makers; and to small-scale farmers 'curing' tobacco.

The bicycle is the way of getting most firewood from Tanzania's depleting forests to where it's needed. Without electricity or bottled gas, there's not a lot of choice. >



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**In the photos**

- 1 Cesilia's fuel-saving stove
- 2 Alfred and Ezekiel, with their wooden bikes
- 3 The grate from Cesilia's stove
- 4 Cosmos on his milk run
- 5 Ganya delivering water with his Avon bicycle
- 6 Gervas, his Phoenix, and a sack of charcoal



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» The government says that half a million hectares of forest is cut for fuel each year.

Not far behind Gervas, flip-flopping in the dust up the hill, two boys and a young man grin as they pass with big, balanced loads. The bicycle frames flex with the weight of the wood. These bikes are repaired and fixed with whatever fits – always for strength.

Any bike is better than no bike. Near Kasulu, I chat to two boys, Alfred and Ezekiel, collecting firewood on bicycles carved from wood. Chopped branches are lashed onto the frames, and their drinking water containers are tied on the top. They loosen up when I tell them I have a son their age, that his name is Dick, and that he has a bicycle – although it would be hard to imagine bicycles more different.

#### MILK AND WATER CARRIERS

There are other pedalling peddlers too. Cosmos comes from Titye village. He doesn't know how far he cycles each day but it takes him three hours to town and three hours back again. That's about 30 to 36 kilometres (each way) to ferry milk to Kasulu.

'I collect milk from different farmers in my village and bring it here to sell,' he says. 'I bring about 65 litres each day.' He leaves the village at 10am and reaches town at about one, sells the milk, and then leaves by three to go home. 'For two days I bring the milk for the owners of the cows, and every third day they give me the milk which I sell for myself.' At 600 shillings per litre, that works out to about £6 per day.

Cosmos has an Avon bicycle – 'baiscali' in Swahili – made in India. 'It's a good bike,' he says. It's a little newer than Gervas's but has some Phoenix parts. 'I don't worry that I keep

repairing it. If it fits, it's okay.'

The tyres are thick. 'They come from Burundi. They are stronger and I like them,' he says. After the first six kilometres on potted tarmac, the journey is on dirt roads.

'Yes, Avon bicycles are best,' says Ganya the water-vendor. I'm back in the regional town of Kigoma, right on the lake and at the end of the railway line from Dar-es-Salaam, checking out the 'urban' cyclists. Ganya collects water and delivers it in two- or three-kilometre trips to homes and kiosks.

Ganya is typical of the water-vending crowd. They are in a different league from

## “THE BIKES ARE REPAIRED AND FIXED WITH WHATEVER FITS”

their rural colleagues, who pedal long distances on their own. These 'baiscali' operators are more sociable, hanging out under the sign to the police station, and having a laugh. Ganya is one of a dozen or more who carry up to 80 litres from the borehole to customers at 2,000 to 2,500 shillings per trip. On a bad day he will only get two or three jobs, but five or six deliveries – earning him about £6 – 'is okay'.

#### THE CYCLE REPAIR MAN

Francis Kyanda runs a 'jua kali' (literally 'hot sun') business under the trees at the side of the road in Kigoma. He repairs tyres and fixes frames, swaps busted bits with less busted bits, and generally does a good trade servicing the cycle sector in this part of town.

'If it fits, it fits,' he tells me.

He's seen it all and has opinions. 'Phoenix bikes are the best; they last longer,' he says. 'You can buy a bicycle for about 140,000 shillings (about £60). The best tyres are Chinese, and the best tubes are from India.'

Francis says the bicycle business is pretty good. 'You can do a one-way trip with bananas to the railway station for 5,500 shillings – that's about seven kilometres.' And the cost to other places 'depends on the distance, the cargo, and how well you argue'. The repair business is better; Francis wears trainers, not flip-flops.

#### BIKES AND RIDERS FOR HIRE

As a big bustling town, Kigoma has more people, more business and more stuff to move around. There are people shifting bags of maize, sorghum or beans. Some have woven carriers holding mangoes and other fruit, and someone else is moving sawn timber – a very wide load that's hazardous on the main road.

Across Africa, cyclists deliver crates of beer to bars and sacks of flour to local shops. You might see a bed being transported on a bike, a goat tied to a wooden frame that's strapped to the carrier, or a cyclist gingerly pedalling a wobbling load of eggs – ten trays of 30 tied on with old pieces of inner tube.

And then there are boda bodas: bicycle taxis. Boda bodas started in the days of Idi Amin for crossing the Uganda-Kenya border, when a quiet and quick, illicit trip could mean good business – or saving a life. The border cyclists knew the back routes and avoided the patrols. Today boda bodas have become part of the scenery and are licensed; they are used throughout Eastern Africa. ☉



**In the photos**  
**7** A Re-Cycle container, bound for Africa  
**8** Ex-Post Office bike  
**9** Any bike beats none  
**10** Firewood en route to Kasulu

## BIKE RECYCLING

**RE~CYCLE** is a small UK organisation that collects old bikes and bicycle parts, and donates them to approved charities in Africa. Since 1998, they've shipped more than 41,000 bikes to 13 different countries. They train local partners in cycle maintenance. These partners then refurbish and distribute the bicycles.

Some of Re~Cycle's bicycles are used by people providing essential local services – from vocational training, youth enterprise development and micro-credit, to environmental education, rural healthcare and agricultural extension.

Other bikes go to individuals, to help them earn a living. Transport and development go hand-in-hand. Simple, affordable transport saves time and back-breaking work.

For more details, see [re-cycle.org](http://re-cycle.org).

### DONATE YOUR OLD BIKE

Throughout the UK, there are community projects and

social enterprises providing education and training opportunities by restoring unwanted bikes. These are sold at a reasonable price, getting more people onto two wheels and helping support the project's finances.

If a project has more bikes than they need, they can pass them on. Re~Cycle acts as a collecting hub for a number of projects:

- **Recyke Y'Bike in Newcastle**
- **Recycle in Sheffield**
- **OWL in Cambridge**

They each periodically send truckloads to Re~Cycle's base in Colchester, ready for shipping to Africa.

So if you've got an old bike or bike parts, don't let them rust away in a landfill site. Donate them!

You can find out more about these and many more projects in CTC's Bike Recycling Directory, which is online at [ctc.org.uk/recycling](http://ctc.org.uk/recycling)

