

State Politics Towards Tourism and Cultural Heritage Development Within the Railway Transport System in Ngaoundere, Cameroon: The Challenges and Way Forward

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ABSTRACT

Original Research Article

Tourism is the act of travelling away from home for leisure, relaxation, business or professional purposes. It is also a social, cultural and economic venture which people undertake outside their usual environment. Cultural tourism is travelling to experience places, artefacts, and activities that authentically represent a people's past and present, (historical sites). Transport plays a key role in providing accessibility to diverse historical, cultural and heritage sites. It permits tourists to reach various destinations, facilitating cultural exchange amongst people from different cultures; enabling them to share ideas and experiences. Railway transport has a significant place in cultural heritage tourism as it provides access to historical sites and landscapes along scenic routes; allowing travellers to experience a region's cultural heritage through the journey. The railway system itself often showcase its historic train carriages, stations and infrastructure as part of the tourist attraction, thus contributing to the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage tourism through immersive travel experience. Railway infrastructure in Cameroon was initially established by the Germans between 1884 and 1916, during their protectorate. Today the railway transport is primarily operated by Camrail, a subsidiary of the Bolere Africa logistics. The Ngaoundere railway station is one of those historic railway infrastructure that promotes cultural heritage tourism in the northern part of Cameroon. The railway line was extended from Yaounde to Ngaoundere, in 1974. That in itself is historical. The magnificent railway station edifice is an embodiment of cultural heritage aesthetic. However, the glowing image of this edifice has been coated by problems of maintenance, insufficient investment, reliability issues and many others. This paper examines the efforts made and challenges faced, in a bid to see how the Ngaoundere railway station can be transformed into a veritable cultural heritage monument. We exploited both primary and secondary sources for our work. We also adopted a chronological and analytic approach to our discussion. From our sources, we concluded that the rail transport network and its station in Ngaoundere (for now) is the most reliable source of mass transportation to the northern regions of Cameroon and beyond. It needs to be valorised, conserved, expanded, promoted and preserved within the ambit of cultural heritage and tourism development.

Keywords: Politics, Tourism, Cultural Heritage, Development, Railway Transport, Challenges, Ngaoundere.

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Introduction

The intersection of railway infrastructure, cultural heritage, and tourism development has emerged as a critical domain in heritage studies, particularly within post-colonial African contexts where transport networks constitute tangible remnants of colonial modernization projects (Divall, 2020). While extensive scholarship examines railway heritage tourism in Europe and Asia (Lisienkova & Lisienkova, 2020; Zoltán & Bulcsú, 2020), limited academic attention has been directed toward evaluating African railway stations as prospective cultural heritage sites. This gap is particularly evident in Cameroon, where despite governmental ambitions to achieve emerging economy status by 2035 through tourism diversification, the heritage potential of colonial-era railway infrastructure remains under-theorized and inadequately integrated into national development frameworks (Biya, 1987; African Development Bank, 2021).

The Ngaoundere railway station, inaugurated in 1974 as the northern terminus of the Trans-Cameroon railway, exemplifies this oversight. As the primary dry port for northern Cameroon and Chad, the station functions simultaneously as a logistical hub, social gathering space, and architectural landmark, yet its potential contribution to sustainable heritage tourism remains unrealized due to inadequate policy articulation, infrastructure deficits, and fragmented stakeholder coordination (Abdoul, 2024). Although recent renovations have enhanced its aesthetic appeal, systematic analysis of its heritage value, tourism capacity, and developmental challenges has not been undertaken.

This study addresses these lacunae by examining state politics toward tourism and cultural heritage development within the railway transport system in Ngaoundere. Specifically, it investigates how governmental policies shape heritage tourism possibilities at this historic station, identifies structural impediments to its development, and proposes sustainable strategies for its conservation and promotion. The research is guided by four principal questions:

- How have state politics and institutional frameworks influenced the station's heritage tourism potential?
- What historical, architectural, and socio-cultural values qualify the Ngaoundere station as a cultural heritage asset?
- What operational, financial, and socio-political challenges constrain its transformation into an international heritage tourism site?
- What evidence-based strategies can enhance its sustainable development while preserving its cultural integrity?

Through a chronological-analytical approach integrating primary field observations with secondary policy analysis, this paper contributes empirical evidence to heritage tourism literature while offering actionable recommendations for

policymakers, heritage managers, and tourism practitioners in comparable post-colonial contexts.

Conceptual Frame

State politics in our study refers to the political activity, processes and power structures within a specific territory or country. It involves government departments or institutions and their actions in making, executing and enforcing government policies and regulations, as well as the broader relationship between the state (the political organisation) and its people (<https://www.bihar.org.uk> ; Biya, 1995)

Tourism is the act of travelling away from home for leisure, business, or other purposes. It involves using services such as transport, accommodation and restaurants. (<https://www.unwto.org>.) Tourism has a complex relationship with cultural heritage. Here, cultural heritage serves as a key attraction for tourists and tourism development. Tourism on its part, can simultaneously provide funding for the preservation and promotion of cultural sites and practices. Tourism generates significant income for local communities, which can be used to fund the conservation and restoration of cultural heritage sites. It also raises awareness about cultural heritage. Tourism sometimes leads to a resurgence of traditional crafts and practices. Tourism fosters pride in cultural traditions of a people, enabling them to appreciate and conserve their cultural heritage for future generations.

There exist a close relationship between tourism and rail way stations. Railway stations act as crucial access points for tourists, providing a vital link between their starting point and tourists destinations, enabling them to reach various locations easily. The railway plays a significant role in the development and accessibility of tourism industries. In some cases, the train journey itself becomes a tourist attraction, with scenic routes and historic railway stations enhancing the travel experience. In the area of tourism, railways as a transport sector play the role of an intermediary sector, creating a link between the tourist (demand) and the destination (supply).

Railway stations serve as central hubs for tourists to access different tourist spots by train, permitting them reach diverse destinations within a region. Well-placed railway stations near touristic landmarks can significantly increase the number of tourist visiting attractions there. Some railway lines are designed with beautiful landscapes in mind, turning the train journey itself into a touristic activity. Certain railway lines and stations are specially marked as tourist attractions of historical significance. A well-connected railway network can stimulate local economies by bringing in more tourists to nearby communities. (Zoltán & Bulcsú, 2020).

Cultural heritage is the embodiment of assets of a group or society that is inherited from past generations. They include artefacts, monuments, a group of buildings and sites, museums that have a diversity of values including symbolic,

historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, scientific and social significance.

(<https://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/cultural-heritage>).

The relationship between tourism and cultural heritage lies within the fact that cultural heritage tourists travel to visit heritage sites associated with the history of certain regions. Revenue from this activity can be transferred to local economies. It can also appropriate cultural heritage for entertainment.

In the case of railway stations, they served as central hubs for communities with diverse origins and cultures, facilitating travel and trade amongst them. They also played a vital role in social interactions and shaping the development of towns. The presence of a railway station in a region is a symbol of progress and prosperity in that area or community. Railway stations are meeting points for many people and cultures. They hold strong collective memories of people, associating them with stories of journeys, reunions and departures. (Lisienkova & Lisienkova, 2020).

Railway stations are milestones to cultural heritage sites. They can be considered as a significant part of cultural heritage given they can reflect the historical, social, and architectural development of a region, thus serving as tangible symbols of a community's progress and interconnectedness. When the design of a station incorporates local aesthetics and is tied to the area's history, it can be preserved and edified as a symbol of historical heritage in the community. Also, when the building of the railway station and its surrounding area become a living piece of the past, it can be preserved and celebrated as part of the community's cultural identity. In fact, historic railway stations are often protected. What then is a railway station in the context of our study?

A railway station is a place on a rail line where trains regularly stop so that passengers can get on or off. A train station apart from being a facility to load or unload passengers and freight, it acts as a community hub through the provision of services like: retail spaces, food courts, waiting areas, ticket booking facilities, information centres; public transportation connections and event spaces. It even serves as a gateway to a city's cultural attraction, depending on its location and design. (<https://en.wikipedia.org>) Shops, cafes, restaurants, and other retail outlets are integrated into the station, providing convenience or pleasure for passengers and generating additional revenue to the population. It connects with local public transport options facilitating easy access to different parts of the city. Large open areas within the station are used for events like exhibitions, concerts, or public gatherings.

The railway station serves as a tourist information centre, providing information about local attractions, travel packages, and transportation options for visitors. On the part of culture, a railway station's architectural design and historical significance transforms such a station to a noble

and popular landmark in a city. In recent years, railway heritage in many countries, has become, a tourist asset, giving a second life to railways, trains and railway buildings. These assets are transformed into tourist attractions that facilitate the rapid development of railway tourism, with countless advantages for the local economy. (<https://www.mdpi.com>).

Railways can be designated as cultural heritage sites, including World Heritage Sites. Railways are among the most important industrial locations worth designation as World Heritage Sites. (Coulls, Divall, & Lee, 1999). To be considered as a cultural heritage site, a railway station must demonstrate significant historical value and architectural merit. It should also reflect important social and economic developments related to the evolution of rail transport, including factors like:

- Being one of the first railway stations built in a region, showcasing pioneering design elements or early engineering techniques.
 - Association with significant historical events or figures connected to railway development.
 - Representing a pivotal point in the social and economic development of a community due to the railway.
 - Distinctive and unique architectural style, including features like grand canopies, ornate facades, intricate ironwork, or innovative structural solutions.
 - Preservation of original materials, design details, and layout with minimal alterations (intact historical fabric).
 - Well-designed integration with the surrounding landscape, including platforms, gardens, and access points. (Landscape integration)
 - Reflecting the role of railways in facilitating trade, industry, and urbanization (economic development).
 - Serving as a central gathering point for a community, contributing to local social life (community impact)
 - Association with local traditions, stories, and cultural identity related to rail travel.
 - The station must at the end meet criteria set by UNESO, emphasizing its outstanding universal value and significance beyond national boundaries. The station must be well- maintained and protected to ensure its historical integrity (preservation). Finally comprehensive documentation of the station's history, architecture, and social context is crucial for heritage designation. (<https://www.waddensea-worldheritage.org/becoming>).
- The extent to which the Camrail railway station in Ngaoundere enhances the development of tourism and cultural heritage is examined within the context of its location, history, economic, social and cultural contributions as well as state politics.

State Politics towards Railway Transport, Tourism and Cultural Heritage

The Cameroon government's policy towards railway transport is focused on modernizing and expanding the existing network and ensuring safety. A new institutional framework is established with increased state involvement through a dedicated state-owned management company. The desire to become an emerging economy by 2035 motivated government to envisage the establishment of regional logistic hubs to enhance activities associated with railway business. Amongst these activities were tourism and cultural heritage development along railway lines and terminuses (ibid).

Hence, to succeed in this, government provided significant investment for infrastructure renewal and established a Five-year Plan (2024-2029) to upgrade and rebuilt existing railway lines to standard. Amongst these were the Douala-Yaounde and Douala-Ngaoundere lines. New investments in locomotives were planned alongside new routes from Limbe to Idenau and Edea-Kribi-Lolabe-Campo. Attention was also focused on projects that enhanced regional trade, notably the Douala-N'Djamena corridor which involved renewing the Belabo-Ngaoundere line and creating an extension to N'Djamena Chad, in a bid to boost activities at Cameroon sea ports (ibid).

In modernising the Belabo-Ngaoundere railway, it was estimated that upon completion, passenger and freight transport will increase immensely thus ushering a potential express train service that will enhance tourism. Also, given that improved connectivity was synonymous to more tourists and passengers moving towards north Cameroon and neighbouring countries, the Ngaoundere railway station presented itself as a potential host that needed special attention. Improvement in railway connectivity led to a new dawn (tourism age) in Adamawa and the northern regions of Cameroon. The town of Ngaoundere became a popular rest stop from the time the building of the railway station was modernised (<https://journals.openedition.org>).

In fact, the station and its harmonious rail lines, symbolised the city's aesthetic and fantasy. It also expressed a bright future for the Trans-Cameroon railway. The terminus in Ngaoundere created the possibility for tourist to have their cars transported by rail from Yaounde to north Cameroon. Ngaoundere eventually became the real starting point for tours of north Cameroon. The construction of the railway terminus (station) presented the town as an ideal place par excellence to welcome tourist in larger numbers (ibid).

The journey by railway to Ngaoundere itself was fascinating. First, it was possible for tourists to have their cars transported on board the same train they were travelling in while they slept comfortably in a couchette. They were reunited with their cars at Ngaoundere, the starting point for tours of north Cameroon. However, the 12 hours journey on the 622-kilometres railway to Ngaoundere could be quite strenuous

and borrowing. For this reason, a small bar was provided in the first class couchette so as to help tourists and other passengers wine time in a more comfortable and relaxed posture (Cameroon Today, 2008:219).

On the part of tourism, government politics in this domain revealed an active role of the state in the promotion of tourism through its ministerial department for tourism and leisure. Here, tourism strategies were developed and investments in tourism infrastructure and digitalisation were envisaged. Key policies included modernising regulations that will improve safety and quality tourism; promoting the country's diversity 'Africa in miniature,' and encouraging both domestic and foreign investment in the tourism sector (ibid).

From tourism, government turned its attention to cultural heritage. State politics towards cultural heritage adopted a proactive approach on preservation, promotion, development and reorganisation of cultures as key levers for national development, social cohesion and tourism. Strong emphasis were laid on the restitution of cultural property. More efforts were employed to promote the country's unique wild life and natural landscape (national parks) to attract tourists. Some of the best parks were situated in north Cameroon. Government policy coopted local communities in the management of protected areas, in accordance with international community based conservation and development principles (Biya, 1987: 97-107). The communities were actively involved in the preservation process of their heritage. The vital role of communities in transmitting traditional knowledge was also recognised and exploited, especially in the development of national languages and culture.

To be able to reconstitute cultural property, government embarked on a systematic inventory of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage sites across the country's diverse ethnic groups (ibid). Hence, pilot inventory projects were launched in all the ten regions of the country with the aim of creating a comprehensive national inventory to enrich Cameroon's list for UNESCO inscription. Cameroon signed two UNESCO conventions to this effect namely, the 1972 World Heritage Convention and the 2003 Convention for the safeguarding of intangible Cultural Heritage (<https://www.unesco.org>). The government actively collaborated with UNESCO to secure international recognition for sites and traditions in the country. For instance, the Diy-Gid-Biy Cultural Landscape, the *Nguon* and *Ngondo* festivals were recognised as intangible heritage (ibid).

In recent times, the Cameroon government pursued a national strategic policy for the return of cultural property illegally exported during the colonial era and currently held in European museums. An inter-ministerial Committee worked to obtain or reach agreements with host countries for the repatriation of these objects.

Cultural heritage was also perceived as a significant vector for sustainable tourism and economic growth. Thus government worked to improve related infrastructure and to develop the sector. Development here required protection and promotion of the country's rich cultural diversity, asserting ownership over its dispersed heritage on the global stage. To this effect, the National Cultural Act No. 10066 of 25 March 2009, took steps to preserve historic buildings that were over fifty (50) years old (<https://www.afd.fr>). It was in the context of this state law that we carried out an investigation on the possibility of developing the edifice (building) of the Ngaoundere railway station (terminus) into a tourism and cultural heritage site.

Location

The Ngaoundere Central Station is the main railway station in Ngaoundere, Cameroon. It is located on the Yaounde-Belabo-Ngaoundere line of the Cameroon-Chad trans-railway route. The station is located in the heart of the city with a unique architecture. (See Fig 1) It is the northern terminus of the Trans- Cameroon Railway, which is an important transportation route for both freight and passengers, thus facilitating the transport of goods and people between Northern and Southern Cameroon.



Fig.1: Ngaoundere Railway Station Architectural Edifice

Source: By the Author, 15 March 2025

History and Background

The Ngaoundere railway station, is the northern terminus of the Trans-Cameroon railway. Plans for the construction of this railway line from Douala to Ngaoundere emerged in the 1950s. In 1958, Société Civile Etudes du Chemin de Fer Douala-Tchad (SEDOT), was formed to oversee the planning and construction of the Douala-Chad railway, which included the line to Ngaoundere. Hence, construction of this line to Ngaoundere started effectively in 1964. The railway line was extended from Yaounde to Ngaoundere on a distance of 622km and was inaugurated on 10 December 1974. (See Fig. 2a.). In 1975, the line was completed to Ngaoundere.



Fig.2a: Inauguration of the Ngaoundere Railway Station

Source: Celebration of the 50th Ngaoundere Architectural Railway Station Golden Jubilee

In 2012, the station was extensively renovated at a cost of around two billion CFA francs. The renovation added 22 benches, 16 lamps, toilet blocks, commercial buildings (See Figs. 2b & c), and the installation of tiles and the construction of offices for the Commissioner of railways. (<https://en.wikipedia.org>). This added aesthetic beauty and development to the architectural edifice of the railway station in Ngaoundere.



Figs.2b. & c: The Long Commercial Buildings of the Ngaoundere Railway Station

Source: By the Author, 15 March 2025

Today the railway is being operated by Camrail, a subsidiary of Bolloré Africa Logistics, since 1999.

The railway station has impacted the socio-economic development of Ngaoundéré since its establishment in 1974 to the present day. The station serves as a discharge point for fresh foods which are then loaded into trucks for transportation to points in the north of Cameroon and in Chad. In fact, the station is a dry port in northern Cameroon and Chad.

The history of the Ngaoundere railway station as presented earlier serves as an important element for the development of tourism and cultural heritage site in the region. This is made possible through showcasing its historical significance and transforming it into a tourist attraction. First, the railway station's role as a symbol of Ngaoundere's past is quite glaring. For more than six decades it has served as a bulwark in connecting the region to the rest of the country and beyond its frontiers.

Secondly, the railway line itself, and the station are conspicuous 'cultural route' potentials (with different functions) available for development. In this way the rail line and its station in Ngaoundere contribute to cultural tourism in the region. The railway station building as of now, has the potential and possibility to be converted into a museum or interpretive centre, displaying artefacts, photographs, and documents related to the history of the railway and its impact on the Adamawa region and beyond.

The presence of the long stretch of the railway line from Yaounde to Ngaoundere permits the organization of train rides along the railway line, with stops at the Ngaoundere station and others. In this way tourists are offered a unique and immersive experience to explore the surrounding areas and learn about the local culture and traditions.

From our observation, the Ngaoundere railway station and other related structures around it merit to be preserved and restored to their original state, ensuring their long-term value as cultural heritage sites. Besides, involving local communities in the development and management of the railway heritage tourism project can ensure that the project is culturally sensitive and sustainable. (Dominique, & Wesley, 2019)

The Economy

At the level of the economy, the Ngaoundere railway station in Cameroon serves as an important hub for economic and commercial activities. It acts as a discharge point for fresh foods and facilitates the transportation of goods to the north of the country and Chad (see fig. 3a below). The station is a key part of the Camrail network, which plays a significant role in Cameroon's economy, particularly in freight transport between Douala and Ngaoundere.

As mentioned earlier, the railway station in Ngaoundere functions as a 'dry port', meaning it serves as a point for goods to be unloaded from trains and then transported by trucks to other locations. This makes the station to be a point of convergence for business men and economic operators of different cultural background and origin. The Belabo-Ngaoundere railway renewal project at completion stands to contribute to a shift from road to rail transport, facilitating passenger and freight movement, reducing emissions, and supporting economic development. The envisaged 800km railroad from Ngaoundere to N'Djamena, Chad at completion stands to improve transportation and boost trans-border trade between Cameroon and Chad. (<https://www.eib.org/en/projects>).

Many businesses have been realised in Ngaoundere and the region at large as a result of the presence of the railway network and station. A potential market in the hotel sector emerges as a result of passenger influx searching for accommodation around the station as they wait for departure or the arrival of their goods.



Fig. 3: Goods Being Transported at the Ngaoundere Railway Station

Source: By the Author, 15 March 2025

Social life around the Ngaoundere railway station

Passenger buildings at the Ngaoundere station are equipped with plasma screens, air-conditioned waiting rooms, shops, bar and restaurant, green spaces, a cash machine, tiled toilets and secure parking. The facelift in 2012, transformed the station into a 'lovers' shopping centre. Day and night, lovers and other strollers, storm the 22 public benches that dot the esplanade, as well as travellers moving down south or up north of the country; they appreciate and admire the changes that have taken place in this terminus of the Cameroon railway. A couple of students, come to picnic or take a breath of fresh air at the station. Potholes and quagmires that littered the forecourt in the past disappeared. Cobblestones were spread over the entire extent of the 5050 square meter esplanade. In fact, the face of 1974, when the terminal was created, gave way to a modern station and it is the image of the entire city of Ngaoundere that has benefited from it. The station is currently considered the most beautiful passenger

station in Cameroon and one of the most beautiful in Africa south of the Sahara. It is a wonderful gift for the city of Ngaoundere (see view in Fig. 3a)



Fig. 3a: View of the Ngaoundere Station in 2012

Source: Internet Publication, November 2012.

The Cultural Scene

Generally Cameroon has an exceptional cultural heritage following its diversity, rich and vibrant cultural material goods. For this reason Cameroon is seen as Africa in miniature. Ngaoundere has a great cultural diversity which manifests itself through religion, its history, its dress mode and the organization of festivals.

The town of Ngaoundere is traditionally organized around a Fulani chieftaincy called *Lamidat*. At its head is a *Lamido* who is the spiritual and traditional leader of his community. Generally, there is a large mosque at the entrance to the *Lamido's* courtyard, a symbol of Islam triumphant. The railway station is host to a magnificent mosque to serve the religious needs of its workers, passengers, tourists and those around the station environment. (See Fig 4).



Fig 4: The Magnificent Mosque at the Ngaoundere Railway Station

Source: By the Author, 15 March 2025

Situated in the heart of an Islamic-Peul cultural background, the station showcases the culture of the Muslim society: the art of living, clothing and socio-cultural organization; artistic

expression, cultural crafts and "court" music. Cultural festivals and occasions around the railway station witness the introduction of instruments of Arab, Hausa and Sahelian origin, thus testifying to the Muslim cultural manifestation and dominance. Examples include: the *algaita*, flutes, giant trumpets or "gagahi", Sahelian percussions ("talking-drums or *kalangou*" and many others. (Ndobitee II, & Halirou, n.d.).

The Islamic-Peul cultural fantasia animated by horse riders on feast days, is often displayed during occasions at the railway station. Dances, festivals and ritual events such as the *Nyem-Nyem* (the annual festival of Galim-Tignere), *MboumFali*, *Gbaya*, *Guidar*, *Massa*, *Toupouri*, *Matakam*, *Mousgoum*, *Moundang*, are always spectacular events and celebrations in northern Cameroon. Their specificities and originality have made them to become 'a must-see event.' The railway station in Ngaoundere is host to many people travelling from all over Cameroon and beyond to witness or participate in these cultural festivals. Hence the railway station becomes a meeting or rallying point for people of different and diverse cultures (see figs 5 a, & b). It creates a conducive atmosphere and opportunity for cultural development (punctuated by diversified attractions) (ibid)



Source: By the Author, 15 March 2025



Source: Author, 12 March 2025

Fig. 5a & b: People from Different cultural Origin at The Ngaoundere Railway station

The Ngaoundere Railway Station as an International Tourism and Cultural Heritage Object (Site)

One of the questions of this work is to investigate whether the Ngaoundere rail station can be upgraded to an international tourism and cultural heritage site. The commonly used interpretation of “cultural heritage objects was given during the creation of the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of the World 12 Cultural Heritage in 1972, which defined cultural heritage as monuments: architectural structures, works of monumental sculpture or painting, elements or structures of archaeological origin, cave paintings, cave habitations that have universal value in terms of history, art or science; groups of buildings and constructions: separately standing or interconnected buildings that, due to their unique architecture or place in the landscape, have universal value in terms of history, art or science.

Analysis of objects like railway stations and buildings in the transport system show that it is possible to evaluate the buildings and identify their usefulness as cultural heritage objects in the transport sector. Prospective studies are centred on the modernization of the transport infrastructure, taking into consideration its ‘intangible value of cultural heritage artefact.’ Basically, the proposed typologies for cultural heritage buildings are based on the architecture and historical developments around it. The functional integrity of the building: services, recreation, production, communication, and aesthetic is also taken into consideration. (Lisienkova1 & Lisienkova, 2020).

An evaluation of the Ngaoundere rail way station reveals that it has an important historical past which edifies the history of the Adamawa Region of Cameroon as a whole. In 2012 this transport infrastructure received a modern face lift which did not only add to its aesthetic beauty and comfort ability but also made it a precious symbol that projected the image of the Adamawa Region. The services at the station act as a source of economic and social potential to the local community whose population is increasingly dependent on the station for livelihood. There are also possibilities for further development and improvement around the Ngaoundere railway station. One of the possibilities is its transformation into an international cultural heritage object or site.

The Ngaoundere Railway Station as a Potential for Sustainable Tourism in Adamawa Region

Travelling by train is one of the most environmentally friendly modes of travel. In 2005, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) adopted a definition of sustainable tourism, which stated that: “sustainable tourism takes full account of current and future economic and social environmental impacts and the needs of tourists, industry, the

environment and host communities” (UNEP, 2005). Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of current tourists and their host areas on the one hand and protects and enhances opportunities of the future (Zoltán, & Bulcsú, 2020).

In the area of tourism, railways play the role of an intermediary sector, creating a link between the tourist and the destination. Railways play an important role in the operation of sustainable tourism and can continuously provide quality services to those involved, thus striking a balance between tourists (tourism industry participants) and the local population. Railways also have significant influence on tourism at international level, especially where the passenger traffic keep increasing on yearly bases.

In today's modern tourism, it is becoming increasingly important to provide diversified access to tourist areas. Sustainable tourism provide an important role for railways. Thus rail transport development has to take into consideration (in terms of tourism) four groups of network namely, international train routes, regional train routes, the railway as a tourist attraction and Motorail trains. In terms of economic, social and environmental sustainability, creating reliable operations, quality services and ensuring continuous visitor experience is the way to develop sustainable tourism. (Remenyik et al., 2021).

Railway developments can improve the accessibility of tourist destinations, thus giving people an opportunity to consider such areas when making a travel decision. From a social point of view, sustainable tourism improves the quality of life and income of tourists, local people and businesses that depend on tourism. From the point of view of tourists and local residents, while the costs of individual transport are increasing dramatically in Ngaoundere, rail ticket prices have not increased, with many social benefits thus making the services offered by rail available to everyone in recent times. (ibid.)

Talking about environmental sustainability and tourism, environmental sustainability means the development of slow tourism. Slow tourism is not only a new concept in tourism but it is a development opportunity and a product-based approach to tourism (ibid). Slow tourism is “a journey in which tourists also explore the area surrounding the destination. During their journey, those on slow journeys interact more with people around them, places, culture, food, cultural/local heritage and the environment. They can arrive by train, car, bus or boat.” (Dickinson, 2010). Slow tourism can be created on the rail route to Ngaoundere thus providing an opportunity to tourist and other travellers to discover the rich culture of the Adamawa Region and enjoy the variety of indigenous cuisine that is readily available to the public.

From the Ngaoundere railway station, there is a possibility to explore or develop new rail routes that can easily connect the Region and Cameroon with its neighbouring countries. For

instance, Ngaoundere in the Adamawa region is at the border with Nigeria on the country's western part. It is possible to extend a rail route from Ngaoundere to the Cameroon border with Nigeria. In 2011, funding for the construction of a standard gauge railway line to Chad was obtained. The construction was to include a line to Moundou and Koutere near the Cameroon border, as well as link to Nyala on the border with Sudan. The Cameroon-Chad railway project feasibility study proposed a route from Ngaoundere, the Regional capital of Adamawa, to the Chadian capital, Djamea. All these are potentials towards establishing or expanding the rail route from Ngaoundere that will eventually stimulate sustainable tourism in the area. Today our wish is to transform the Ngaoundere railway station into an international tourism and cultural heritage site. It is important to know the challenges involved.

Challenges

A number of challenges and potential conflict areas pose as threats to the sustainability and survival of the tourism and heritage project at the Ngaoundere railway station. Insufficient transport infrastructure and funding of the railway line to Ngaoundere in the Adamawa Region are acute or serious threats to sustainable tourism and heritage operations in the station. Despite efforts made by government to increase investment, the needs for developing the tourism industry in the station are greater than available financial resources. Insecurity and safety concerns equally exist. Climate change and long-term conservation of cultural heritage material are pertinent issues that government is still to address squarely ([https:// mintoul.gov.cm](https://mintoul.gov.cm)).

Conflict hubs exist within the structure and services at the Ngaoundere railway terminus. It is also the case with its surrounding environment and neighbours beyond. There exist a daily conflict between trucking companies and freight forwarders for access to freight, which is a central part of the logistic business in Ngaoundere. The management of freight is handled by official bodies such as the *Cameroon's Bureau de Gestion du Fret Terrestre* (BGFT). Disputes over quota agreements with neighbouring countries like Chad exist (Cambridge University Press Assessment, <https://www.cambridge.org>).

Besides, as a key hub in a vital corridor linking Cameroon to Chad, friction points in the logistic chain are amplified. Given that Ngaoundere is an important transshipment point where goods from the railway are transferred to road transport for onward delivery, particularly to Chad, direct competition is created between rail transport system and road transporters at the final leg of the journey which kicks off in Ngaoundere (ibid). For the fact that tourism is more of leisure, pleasure, comfort and relaxation, it is difficult for it to survive in conflict milieu or situations.

On the part of cultural heritage, fear is expressed as to the conflict that may generate over resource allocation and

distribution. The railway station is being modernised and how to accommodate traditional values within modern structures can be quite challenging. The response and attitude of the local community in Ngaoundere is another area to watch closely. The state's development goal in the project may not coincide with the local population's needs or perspectives on heritage. There is a high possibility for the many economic projects and activities in the station to compete with the cultural heritage project over resources, funding, and land. This means that the cultural heritage project must be considered as an important priority in the station else conflict may ensue with other rival structures. (<https://journals.openedition.org>).

Heritage operations focused on tourism sometimes lead to the simplification of cultural heritage potentials. This can cause a conflict with community members who see their traditions being misrepresented or exploited (<https://www.unesco.org>, Crises are affecting Cultural Heritage in Cameroon-UNESCO). The point here is that living heritage in a local community has to do with the visibility of practices and know-how that project their cultural identity and social cohesion. Modern heritage operations sometimes neglect or ignore this aspect thus generating conflict in local communities (ibid). Ngaoundere is not exempted from the vice.

State action in cultural heritage development no matter the community has to watch on pricks. Some communities may see state policy or government action as a move to assert control over their cultural heritage. This can cause resistance or dissension given that community members may feel that the modern state is not abreast with their local realities (<https://www.researchgate.net>).

For some time now, the population of Ngaoundere and the Cameroon Railway Company (Camrail) have experienced difficulties in traveling and transporting goods by train. While a true dry port, the railway station in Ngaoundere lacks the appropriate infrastructure for the storage of fresh food which plays an important role in the tourism and cultural heritage industry. It is about nutrition and restoration in these sectors. In fact the food items are left in the open air, close to other types of goods, regardless of the type or impact. (See Fig 6)



Fig. 6: Food Items in open Air at the Ngaoundere Railway Station

Source: By the Author, 15 March 2025

There is also not enough awareness on the issue of railway heritage in Cameroon. Railway Heritage has social, cultural, economic, political, historic and physical effects on the community. This can be accepted as 'heritage' not only for Cameroon but also for Africa and the whole world.

Frequent derailment of trains have become the order of the day in the Ngaoundere rail route. This impedes seriously on travellers who are left frustrated at the railway station not knowing what to do. Often the Passengers are left under insecurity and are called upon to come for reimbursement of money paid to travel at very short notice (see fig. 7a & b below). No accommodation is provided by Camrail to travellers who have come all the way from Chad and the Far North Region to travel by train. They are abandoned to themselves at the court yard of the Station in Ngaoundere. Such attitudes do not speak well of the railway services at the Ngaoundere station. Travellers affected are embittered and vow never to have anything to do with Camrail in Ngaoundere.

Several factors currently limit the station's potential for development: the ongoing degradation of infrastructure, inadequate urban planning around the station, insufficient supply relative to demand, and a lack of adequate security measures and local community engagement. To optimize its contribution to the city's socio-economic development, stakeholders and those involved with the railway station in Ngaoundere should prioritize the following: increase and improve the quality of services offered by the station; modernize the infrastructure and improve working conditions; invest in development projects related to the railway station.

It is worth mentioning that it is a socially important issue to create a responsible type of railway service to meet the demands of passengers, especially tourists. A responsible tourist actively strives to reduce the harmful effects of his / her travels, while contributing to the wellbeing of the population of the destination, the place and the environment. As a railway task, the need to raise passengers' awareness, to help them make conscious choices and solutions to their travel needs remains an important issue.



Figs. 7a & b: Travellers cued up to collect their money at very short notice and very late in the Evening at the Ngaoundere railway Station

Source: By the Author, 15 March 2025

Way Forward

There is the urgent need to maintain and modernize railway infrastructure in Ngaoundere specifically, and in Cameroon generally, so that the railway can effectively address the challenges of present and future socio-economic development in the country. The rail route constructed by the Germans since 1912 have come of age and out used. They need to be replaced and a two way rail route constructed to Ngaoundere to avoid obstructing the programs of travellers on the bases of train derailment on the route.

The railway line to Ngaoundere has the potential to be used as a 'cultural route' with different functions in each station. These functions will contribute to cultural tourism in the Adamawa Region and beyond. Tourists can have a chance to visit the whole of North Cameroon and also learn about the history of the railway heritage along the route. Cultural tourism here can be a tool for the continuity of the railway heritage and preservation of tangible and intangible heritage artefacts of the villages or communities along the route to Ngaoundere.

Synthesis of Findings

This study has systematically evaluated the Ngaoundere railway station's potential as a heritage tourism site, addressing each research question through empirical analysis. First, state politics, while rhetorically supportive through instruments such as the Five-Year Plan (2024-2029) and National Cultural Act (2009), exhibit implementation gaps characterized by insufficient budgetary allocation and weak inter-agency coordination between the Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Transport, and Camrail (Republic of Cameroon, 2023). Second, the station qualifies as a cultural heritage asset under UNESCO criteria due to its historical significance (1974 terminus inauguration), architectural merit (post-2012 modernization preserving original structural elements), and



socio-economic impact as a community hub (Coulls et al., 1999). Third, challenges—including infrastructure degradation, safety deficits, and conflicting freight-passenger priorities—directly impede tourism development by degrading visitor experience and compromising cultural authenticity. Finally, sustainable transformation requires integrated strategies addressing infrastructure modernization, stakeholder collaboration, and community-based heritage governance.

Strategic Recommendations

To optimize the station's heritage tourism potential, we propose a three-pillar framework:

Infrastructure Modernization: Immediate rehabilitation of the Belabo-Ngaoundere line to double-track standard, installation of refrigerated storage facilities, and implementation of digital passenger information systems. Estimates suggest a 340 billion CFA franc investment would reduce derailments by 70% and increase passenger capacity by 45% (African Development Bank, 2021).

Heritage Governance: Establish a multi-stakeholder Heritage Management Committee comprising state representatives, Camrail management, Lamido authorities, and community delegates. This body would supervise heritage interpretation programs, oversee festival curation, and ensure revenue-sharing mechanisms benefit local populations (Dominique & Wesley, 2019).

Sustainable Tourism Development: Develop a "Northern Cameroon Heritage Rail Route" linking Ngaoundere to regional attractions (Waza National Park, Rhumsiki Peak) with scheduled cultural stops, guided by principles of slow tourism that prioritize environmental sustainability and community benefit (Dickinson, 2010).

Conclusion

The Ngaoundere railway station embodies Cameroon's post-colonial modernization legacy while holding untapped potential as a sustainable heritage tourism catalyst. Realizing these potential demands moving beyond descriptive policy rhetoric toward actionable governance reforms that reconcile commercial imperatives with cultural preservation imperatives. As African nations increasingly leverage industrial heritage for tourism-led development, the Ngaoundere case offers critical insights into the structural and political conditions necessary for successful railway heritage transformation.

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