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Hostage to Cloth: European Explorers in East Africa, 1850-1890

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This essay is part of a larger research project on the imports of Asian textiles to East Africa, from early modern times to the present. If scholars have long analyzed and quantified the exports from East Africa¹ – the spices, slaves and ivory that left its shores for overseas markets – more recently their attention has come to focus squarely on the goods that flowed into the continent from the Indian Ocean (Prestholdt 1998, 2008, Machado 2009, Clarence-Smith n.d.). And cloth – together with other body ornaments such as beads and brass wire – was consistently the major import. Recent literature underscores that it was not a matter of Africans gratefully accepting whatever trinkets or industrial surplus foreign traders wished to unload. Rather, consumers had precise desires that merchants had to be satisfied for exchanges to occur. This essay explores how these practices and logics likewise guided encounters with European explorers who, from ca. 1850, came seeking religious conversion, scientific knowledge or personal glory. As one adventurer observed, “travelers wanted an easy passage” but “the native chiefs desired cloth” (Speke 1863:38). A re-reading of explorer narratives highlights the vital importance of cloth in these encounters, and the power of chiefs (and their subjects) to steer them before 1890.

East Africa: dark only to Europe

Prior to 1830, foreign merchants little ventured into the interior of East Africa. Arab and Indian traders, brought to the shores of East Africa by favorable monsoon winds from at least the 10th century, mostly restricted their activities to the coasts, trading and settling on small offshore islands that afforded security. Mixing with local populations, they contributed to the formation of the Swahili civilization. The Portuguese, who came from 1498, seeking a sea route to India, followed the same pattern. At first sacking Arab port towns, they then seized and inhabited them. Portuguese excursions inland were largely focused on the banks of the Zambezi and Shire Rivers of present-day Mozambique. From Mogadishu to Mozambique, it was African traders who managed and conducted the outflow of inland goods. Responding to the growing and changing demands of international trade, they gathered and ferried gold, ivory, slaves, grain, aromatics, and other stuffs to the coast – and to Portuguese posts in the Zambezi (Alpers 1975, Rockel 2006). Responding to their own economic and social needs and desires, these caravans from the interior came to favor partners and ports capable of supplying the types of cloth and other goods they sought, shifting their routes accordingly.

From the late eighteenth century, various factors pushed and pulled foreign merchants to increasingly leave the comforts and safety of East Africa’s coasts and venture inland. In the first instance, Omani forces ejected the Portuguese from their East African port holdings north of Mozambique, setting up shop and rule in their stead. The rise to power of the merchant-ruler Busaidi sultanate in Oman, and its backing with Indian capital, stimulated trade, especially following the transfer of the Omani court from Muscat to Zanzibar in 1832. A concomitant rise in the demand for slaves in the French colonial

¹ In this essay “East Africa” refers in an expansive way to the eastern half of sub-Saharan Africa, from Mogadishu to northern Mozambique, inland to the western shores of Lake Tanganyika as this area was, in the second half of the nineteenth century, largely a single integrated trading space.

plantations of the Mascarene Islands, and for ivory in markets worldwide, further fed a regional economic boom. Favorable terms of trade – falling base prices for manufactured goods and growing world prices for Africa’s raw materials – increased profit margins for foreign merchants (Sheriff 1987:104). Growing wealth and trade further attracted French, American and – to a much lesser degree – British merchants, eager to obtain materials for their growing home markets and industries, and to find markets for their own manufactured goods.

In the context of this swelling demand and competition, abetted by the intentional fiscal policy of the Busaidi court (Sheriff 1987:125), Arab and Swahili merchants on the coast increasingly originated trading parties to the interior. By the 1770s they had reached Lake Nyasa and perhaps crossed Mozambique to reach the Atlantic coast of Angola. By the 1850s, they were regularly traveling across a vast Arab commercial empire, to use the term of Sheriff, stretching across present day Tanzania to Uganda in the northwest, eastern Congo in the West and Northern Zambia to the southwest, with dhows crossing Lake Tanganyika to trade on its western shores (Sheriff 1987: 170). Some were political refugees from the Busaidi takeover; some were impoverished or indebted small-scale traders forced into high-risk ventures; some such as Tippu Tip became incredibly wealthy, commanding caravans of 1,000 strong by the 1870s. Along the major arteries, especially from Zanzibar to Lake Tanganyika, several score settled in market towns, notably Tabora and Ujiji, where they tended shops, lived on prosperous estates, and where could be found all “the comforts and luxuries from the coast” (Burton 1860:424).

It was into this centuries-old world of sophisticated trade and trading networks that came Europe’s explorers of the nineteenth century. Rather than traders, scientists or government agents, however, missionaries were the first Europeans to penetrate the interior. Johann Ludwig Krapf and Johannes Rebmann, German nationals working for the Anglican Church Missionary Society, based near Mombasa, in 1846 sent the first reports on Kilimanjaro and Mt. Kenya. From 1850 came a string of explorations – many sponsored by London’s Royal Geographic Society – beginning with Richard Francis Burton who with John Hanning Speke undertook from 1856-58 a journey from Zanzibar to Lake Tanganyika, with Speke continuing to Lake Victoria. Returning in 1858 with James Grant to definitively determine the source of the Nile, Speke reached Lake Albert. To the south, British missionary David Livingstone and then the German explorer K.K. von der Decken attained Lake Nyasa from 1859. In the 1860s and 70s many others crisscrossed these paths, most famously the Welsh-American Henry Morton Stanley, a *New York Herald* journalist and adventurer, who undertook three greatly publicized journeys from Zanzibar: to Lake Tanganyika in search of Livingstone (1871, published 1872), to trace the course of the Congo River (1874-77, published 1878) and to the southern Sudan (1886-88, published 1891). Stanley also worked for the Belgian-led International African Society. Directed by King Leopold II and colonial in intent, the Society sponsored several expeditions. At the same time, missionary presence expanded and solidified, with the French White Father’s establishing residences in the Lake Regions from 1878.

Western audiences have been socialized to think of nineteenth century European explorers of East Africa as solitary white knights, leading a few trusty natives into unknown terrain. As recently as 2004, a History Channel reality series, “Expedition Africa: Stanley & Livingstone,” attempted to recreate these journeys, by following the adventures of four Americans equipped with little more than compasses and rucksacks. The nineteenth century reality was quite different. European explorers were to a great degree dependent on Africans (Swahili and other) and Omani Arabs. Burton was first informed of East Africa’s great inland lakes by Arab traders he met in Harar. Before setting out from Zanzibar, Europeans

invariably solicited information and advice from Arab (and Indian) merchants. Their dependency increased a thousand fold once they left the coast. Although Livingstone traveled with a small group, Burton and Stanley employed up to 600 men, carrying 8 tons and spread along half a mile. Most were porters, but a critical group was composed of guide-interpreters, who numbered up to 9 per caravan. Guides chose the path and negotiated the encounters with the many rulers and ethnic groups through whose territory the caravan passed, Stanley paying the great Arab merchant Tippu Tip (and others) to help steer his 1870s expedition to map the Congo River. Instead of hacking through African wilderness, Europeans were guided along well-worn paths, some deemed “highways” by the 1880s.

Nevertheless, European travelers did not have an easy time of it. Many – including Burton, Speke and Livingstone – spent a good part of the trip too ill to move, laid up in a stifling tent, or carried in a hammock at the end of the caravan. Even when fit, rather than *lead*, they were more often than not *led* by the agendas of local chiefs and their guides and porters. Reading their journals today one is struck by their stark and anxious confessions of powerlessness and failure. The journals make clear too that much of their hard luck was due to cloth. “Our progress was repeatedly hindered and occasionally stopped by the ever-increasing and turbulent force of savages who pressed upon our flanks, clamouring for a division of our goods...’Ngubo!’ [cloth] was their sole cry...” (Johnston 1886:288). The remainder of this essay focuses on the cloth they were compelled to carry, how it served them, and how they ultimately had to serve it. As with the physical paths, they were obliged to follow the trading customs laid down by the thousands of African and Arab travelers who had preceded them over many centuries.

Cotton Sheeting for Goods and Services

Fueling East Africa’s booming international trade was not only external world demand for ivory, spices and slaves, but also local demand for woven cloth. From at least the 10th century, East African consumers aspired to own cotton cloth from Gujarat and Kutch in Northwest India. Rectangular lengths about 2m long were worn as waist and shoulder wrappers by men and women, and as female head coverings in some places; cloth was also tailored into tunics for the Muslim men and women largely concentrated on the coasts. By the time European explorers arrived in 1850, the primacy of Indian cottons was waning due to industrial competition from the West. East African consumers still preferred – indeed insisted on – the original Indian indigo-dyed cotton sheeting known as *kaniki*. However, for white, undyed sheeting – the bulk of imports – consumers by far and wide demanded cotton sheeting made in the United States and known eponymously as “merikani.” An imitation of Indian cottons developed in the mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, to appeal to East African markets, *merikani* developed a loyal following from the late 1830s, above all for its durability.² Its strength was likely due to the high – and high quality – content of American-grown cotton which withstood washing, unlike its British counterpart which African consumers of any means shunned (Prestholdt 2008:74-77). Bending to this local desire, merchants of all nationalities – Indian, Arab, Swahili, British, American, German – traded in these American “domestics.”

Beyond its use value as dress, cotton sheeting also had immense exchange value. Specie (coins) was not recognized as a medium of payment beyond Zanzibar. Rather, most groups of East Africa demanded cloth, beads or brasswire in exchange for their local products ... and services. Although Europe’s explorers were not seeking to engage in commercial trade, nevertheless they were required to carry and distribute vast amounts of cloth to access labor, food and knowledge.

² See Prestholdt 2008 on how the demand for *merikani* shaped the industrial destinies of both the U.S. and the India.

Feeding hundreds of porters and guides required much cloth, creating a major expense – and logistical nightmare – for caravan leaders. Custom dictated that each man receive regular allotments of cloth which he himself bartered in local markets or households for provisions, known as *posho* (Becker 1887 I:77; Rockel). To feed 100 men for one year, upon the advice of Sheikh Hasi of Zanzibar, in 1871 Stanley (1874:22) purchased 14,600 yards of varied cloths (8,000 yards *merikani*, 4,000 yards *kaniki* and 2,600 assorted “colored cloths”). Speke (1863:9) distributed 15 lbs of cloth per day for 165 men, or 2 yards per man for 18 days. In the 1880s, the Belgian Becker (1887:77) gave 2 yards (1 *shouka*) per man for 4 days. These varying figures reflect the impossibility of predetermining rates, due to inflation, local conditions, changing labor supplies, tastes and food:cloth ratios. In times of war or drought – when porters could wander for days in search of provisions – or in areas saturated with cloth, grain vendors might reject ordinary sheeting, or accept only finer textiles (Livingstone 1875:66; Speke 49). Conversely, in regions where food was abundant and cloth scarce, “a strip of cotton from an inch to two inches in breadth ... brought a day’s rations for two men” (Thompson 1881:274). Because porters could carry only ¼ of the cloth needed for provisions, supplies had to be replenished at inland markets, such as Tabora and Ujiji, where explorers found to their chagrin, cloth prices were 2 to 4 times higher than at Zanzibar.

Paying porters’ wages likewise greatly strained European budgets and patience and constrained their movements. Burton (1860:432) admitted it was a “major bone of contention.” Porters usually preferred to receive wages in cloth, taking some in advance, and the remainder at completion of the journey, or journey segment. For long expeditions, periodic provisions of new clothing were also expected. If Europeans considered the terms of employment and wages fixed, porters continually re-negotiated them as the group moved further into the interior and European dependency grew. In nearly every caravan, demands for more and better cloth led to frequent strikes and desertion. Typical was the experience of Cameron, a group of whose men deserted in mass in 1872 when they were given such “villainous cloth that they considered themselves cheated,” helping themselves to a load of better stuffs as they left (Cameron 1877:77). Many explorers’ journal entries consist in little more than anxious notations about the numbers of cloth “melting away,” and the numbers of porters absconding.

Cotton cloth was required to obtain a myriad other goods and services on the road: information from local informants, canoe-hire to ford rivers, gifts to placate nature spirits and to obtain women’s sexual services, the payment of fines for any local misdeeds of caravan members, as well as medical care and housing for sick porters left behind.

Needless to say, procuring and transporting all this cloth was a major logistical challenge. Expeditions invariably began in Zanzibar, the area’s political and commercial capital. There, Europeans spent weeks hiring porters and purchasing the all-necessary supplies in the warehouses of Indian wholesalers. The selection of cloths, beads and brasswire “were considerations of vital moment, and demanded a good deal of careful study... each tribe must have its own particular class of cotton, and its own chosen tint, colour, and size among beads. The absence of the required article at any particular point, might mean nothing less than disaster and failure to the expedition, as the people will have nothing but the cloth or bead that happens to be in fashion” (Thompson 1881:34). For advice in the “art of choosing cloth,” as Burton termed it, they turned to experienced Arab caravan traders such as Sheikh Hashid (*ibid.*; Stanley 1878:21; von Hohnel 1894:12). Next, articles had to be “inspected, assorted, arranged, and numbered separately” (Stanley 1878:31). Packing the cloth required great skill and foresight. It had to be made into

bundles of 55 to 65 pounds – or porters would refuse to carry it – consisting in assorted cloth types so only one bundle need be opened at a time, compressed by beating, and wrapped in waterproof mat coverings. Bearing cloth was a sought-after role: 1) bundle weights diminished progressively 2) stops to unload it were frequent, and 3) it conferred prestige, “the order [of caravan procession] being — tents first and foremost, then wire, cloth, and beads, the miscellaneous gear, such as boxes and cooking utensils, bringing up the rear” (Cameron 1877:65); a slave entrusted with bearing cloth and beads “suddenly becomes a great man” (Burton 1860:517). Far from marching at the front as leaders, Europeans habitually came toward the end of the procession.

Adding to time and expense, as Prestholdt (1998) has noted, white sheeting had sometimes to be manually modified to meet the requirements of local consumers. Some groups – pastoral peoples such as the Masai notably – would accept it only as piece goods: cut into body wrapper-sized lengths, and finished with a fringe achieved by fraying the warp ends. Consumers might further demand the addition of red stripes, or that the fringe be fixed with a transverse selvage, a sort of woven end band whose making required the use of a braid loom. Beads too had to be repackaged to appeal to local consumers. Caravans might stop for weeks at a time to effect these modifications, with all porters and guides pressed into service.

Opening cloth bundles required careful thought and strategy. If unpacked in public view, they were likely to advertise the wealth of the outfit, inspire villagers’ envy, and invite pilfering by them or porters. Europeans struggled to open as few bundles as possible, and within the confines of a tent or hut. Airing out damp cloth was always a risky business. For by far the biggest demands for cloth came from figures with the powers to extract them.

Hongo: Cloth as Political Gift

For travelers to even begin trading for food and services, cloth outlays of a different sort altogether were required. Local rulers required an exchange of gifts before they allowed entry into their territories. The established custom was for the ruler to provide a welcome gift of hospitality in the form of food (livestock), while the caravan leader offered cloth and assorted goods. The latter prestation, known in Swahili as *hongo*, was dubbed as “tribute,” “tax,” or even extortion by Europeans because it was obligatory, its terms dictated by the chief who, if dissatisfied, would refuse the caravan rights to enter, to trade for food, or even to take its leave. *Hongo* typically consisted partly in monochrome sheeting (*merikani* or *kaniki*) but, more importantly, in “coloured cloths.”

What were “coloured cloths”? Burton tells us they were known locally as “cloths with names.” Other authors variously referred to them as “table-cloths,” or “pretty cloths.” Generally they were piece goods, that is, made not as continuous yardage, but as individual body wrappers. East Africans recognized, named and sought out about a dozen specific kinds, which included the most prestigious and costly of all textile imports. Only one was of European origin: British scarlet broadcloth, the brilliant monochrome red, lightweight woolen cloth that was in high demand in much of Africa and Asia. All other types of “coloured cloths” were patterned and originated in India and Oman. The variety best-known today, the *kanga*, or *lesso*, a boldly printed or resist-dyed cotton, while extremely popular on the coasts, appears to have been little desired – and so little-carried – inland. Rather, the majority of “coloured cloths” in the caravan trade were striped and/or chequered piece goods. Composed of two panels joined along the length, they were named for their striping patterns, and priced according to quality (“fine and coarse”)

and to fiber content: all cotton, with a few stripes in silk, or – more rarely – in all silk. The most costly and luxurious incorporated gold threads, which might be woven onto the ends of cloth in Zanzibar. The subset classified as “superior” or “first rate” were almost exclusively Omani-made (Fee forthcoming).

Speke (1863:64, 65) reported that the *hongo* generally consisted in four yards *merikani* and one coloured cloth but, as with *posho*, rarely was it a fixed amount. More often, leaders negotiated it case-by-base, based on the size of the caravan, their power at that point in time, and on their own social and political needs. Political organization in east central Africa varied from kings ruling over vast territories, as in Uganda, to the decentralized clans of the Masai. Caravans could not simply give larger or smaller quantities of cloth, however. Rulers had specific and individual tastes in coloured cloths. Forewarned of this, caravan leaders went to considerable effort in Zanzibar to purchase and carry the correct types.

Yet fashions and the political climate were continually changing and pleasing chiefs was difficult at best. From 1840, the major artery of the ivory trail passed through the territory of so-called independent tribes, most notoriously the Ugogo. There, a multitude of chiefs and subchiefs controlled small territories, perhaps only 5 miles in radius. For this reason, crossing this region was the most time-consuming and expensive of the route. The etiquette and process was typically thus: approaching the village, the caravan halted outside. The ruler had drums beaten to call in his rural subjects, the sounds and swelling numbers of people serving to intimidate the caravan. Until the drums were beaten again – to announce that the terms of the tribute/gift had been agreed upon – the caravan was held hostage, unable to travel through the territory without risk of attack. Emissaries of the ruler would eventually appear to escort the guides to make an initial offering to the ruler. This was usually rejected and disparaged as rubbish, not befitting a leader of his stature, followed by precise demands for more and better cloths and protracted negotiations. Thus it was that in passing through the “independent area” in 1872, Cameron (1877:98) “altogether paid as tribute seventy-seven colored cloths, more than two hundred doti [800 yards] of common cloth, a coil of wire, and three pounds of beads. This at Zanzibar prices would amount to five hundred dollars, and in Ugogo represented nearly double that amount...” In the 1880s, it was advised to plan for gifting 4000 yards of *merikani* and coloured cloth for the entire passage of a caravan of 28 from Zanzibar to Ujiji (Becker 1887, II:221, 470). The increase in foreign traffic through East Africa only served to increase demands. Stanley (1891:443) blamed missionaries and Arab traders for having turned the trail to Lake Victoria into a “highway” by the 1880s. Missionaries he particularly castigated for inflating *hongo* by naively paying out 1200 yards to a single chief where 20 years previously he had paid closer to 200 yards.

Most European caravan leaders tried to resist paying *hongo*, but at their peril. Stalling and haggling only served to worsen the situation. After days of inactivity, all the while having to feed hundreds of porters, they inevitably had to capitulate and pay out many times what they had originally intended. As but one instance, Stanley (1872:144) and his Arab merchant traveling companions, Sheik Hamid and Sheik Thani, together initially offered to the ruler (sultan) of Mvumi of Ugogo 16 yards of *merikani*, *kaniki* and two coloured cloths. After four rounds of negotiation, they finally ceded 184 yards, only for the sultan to complain that their measurements were short, and the cloth from the Arabs of such “miserable quality” that he must receive an additional 24 yards. A decade later, also at Mvumi, the Belgian Becker (1887, I:138), having initially offered 12 yards of Omani-made “coloured cloths” and 8 yards of *merikani* two days later finally paid out 27 piece goods, plus 60 yards of sheeting, in addition to beads, wire and gunpowder. Once a ruler’s own gift was settled, he would invariably make new demands of cloth for his wives, children, and perhaps headmen. Seeking a piece of the pie, emissaries and

intermediaries asked for cloth too. By this time, the European might discover that his porters, guides and interpreters had deserted, stealing their loads of cloth as they departed. Finding such to be the case after his protracted dealings with chief Lumresi, Speke (1863:149) confessed in his journal that he “cried like a child.”

Circumventing altogether the village of a powerful ruler proved impossible. Well-informed of caravans in the area, he would dispatch village men or private militias to attack recalcitrant travelers. Knowing they were easy targets, guides and porters did everything in their power to steer reluctant caravan leaders to important chiefs, by disregarding orders, threatening mutiny and, as a last resort, desertion. And so it was that Grant found himself attacked, plundered and entirely abandoned by all his men and their loads when he refused to stop at chief Myonga’s (Speke 1863:160). So, too, porters might manipulate a caravan leader into entering villages where they had advantageous trade or kin ties, for they too traded goods, cloth among them, as they moved.

Arab merchants it appears, with more experience, and seeking long-term relations and a peaceful trading climate, offered *hongo* with little discussion. A Uhehe chief reported to Joseph Thompson (1881:216) that “the Arab traders come up from the coast with small caravans of six, seven, or eight bales of cloth to buy ivory. They make me (the chief) a present of nearly half of these ...”

Controlling Cloth: Local Politics

Beads and wire – used also to fashion personal adornment – were usually part of the *hongo*, but invariably the negotiations broke down over the cloth. Why cloth? we might wonder. This was the poignant question that Annette Weiner asked in her seminal essay of 1989, which helped inspire a new generation of textiles scholars and studies.

Firstly, as so many other places in the world, East Africa was, before Europeans ever arrived, “cloth mad” to use the term of Leedom Lefferts (1996). Gifts of cloth – made of leather, locally woven raffia or cotton, or imported Asian fabrics – were essential to creating and maintaining social relations, for bridewealth, burial, blood price, and paying fines. In demanding cloth for their exchanges with foreign merchants, East Africans were thus demanding a product of great cultural and social value. Secondly, was cloth’s highly visible use value as dress. We know that rulers might immediately dress in the cloth given them by a foreign caravan leader, and then again at ceremonial occasions. Doing so, in the first instance, demonstrated to followers their power over local trade and traders. In the words of one leader, he wore the cloth to “show to his contemporaries what a magnanimous man his white visitor had been” (Speke 1863:145). In Ugogo, “contemporaries” meant especially fellow and rival rulers. Cloth in coastal Swahili society, Prestholdt has noted (1998:9), represented “instruments for maintaining or challenging status,” and this held true for inland East Africa as well. In the nineteenth century East Africa was experiencing the strongest sociopolitical change on the continent, due to the wealth and arms brought by the ivory trade; it was a time of violence and dislocations, as rulers and their private militias jockeyed for power and influence (Waters 2009). As part of their power building, leaders not only squeezed the maximum high prestige cloths from caravans, but attempted to one-up or usurp those intended for rivals.

Rulers made it a point to learn what cloth a European caravan had offered other chiefs before arriving in their village, and shrewdly calculated what cloths it might be carrying for transactions further on. They would insist on receiving the best they knew the group to possess. This is forcefully illustrated in the

journals of British explorer Speke who knew untold grief for lack of an adequate number of *déolé* (also spelled *deoli*, *dewli*, *dueli*), an Indian-made cloth trimmed with gold. The chief of Sorombo rejected “with impetuosity” one cloth after another, insisting he “would have a *déolé* or nothing at all.” In the next village, now ill with fever, Speke was literally made prisoner by chief Lumresi until he reluctantly gave first one, and then a second *déolé*. And then Speke must cede the even more expensive cloth which Lumresi surmised Speke must be carrying for King Rumanika on the other side of Lake Tanganyika, for, as he said, no one ever visited Rumanika without taking one. His lies and pleads to no avail, Speke had to relent. “I hoped, now I had given it, he would beat the drums. The scoundrel only laughed as he wrapped my beautiful silk over his great broad shoulders and said ‘yes, this will complete our present of friendship; now then ... I must have exactly double all you have given.’”

So, too, cloth fed into rulers’ building of client networks. Not only did they redistribute cloth to immediate kin, but also to subchiefs and followers. Indeed, retaining the caravans for as long as possible in the village through protracted *hongo* negotiations appears to have been partly motivated by chiefly largesse: by so doing, his subjects profited from captive guests in need of provisions and services.

Finally, the exchange value of the cloth cannot be forgotten or underestimated. Stanley (1872:144) observed in 1871, “Altogether the sultaniship of a district in Ugogo must be very remunerative, besides being a delightful sinecure.” In one day he observed the sultan to receive 188 yards of *merikani*, *kaniki* and “coloured cloths,” and 28 yards of first rate cloths, “making a total of \$49.25 a most handsome revenue for a Mgogo chief.” Rulers seem to have used these cloth gifts to finance their own caravans and militias. If until 1840 the trading of guns and gunpowder in East Africa was forbidden by the sultan of Zanzibar, arms became a way of life. They were used increasingly to hunt elephants for ivory and to fuel wars that produced slaves. Trading cloth for guns, chiefs formed private militias and further intimidated passing caravans (Stanley 1891:156). Yet the tide was already turning definitively as European interest in the area shifted from free trade to territorial colonialism and the Scramble for Africa began in earnest. Already by 1885 Germany had landed troops in today’s Tanzania, while Belgian forces were advancing from the southwest, its major military confrontation with Congo Arabs in 1892 resulting in the latter’s defeat and King Leopold’s establishment of his colonial Congo Free State, its products no longer drained toward Zanzibar, but toward the Atlantic.

Conclusion

“It will be useless to recount the next day's proceedings. We certainly had to give, give, give, until we had barely a cloth left, or an article of any description” (Thompson 1881:161). One hundred years of European colonial rule in East Africa, and the lionizing of early explorers such as Stanley and Burton, have contributed to the anachronistic notion of a Dark Continent of bush and jungle tamed by Europeans who singlehandedly “opened” the interior, demi-gods who extracted awe and obedience from all they met. In reality, they found themselves at the mercy of kings, chiefs and their own porters and guides. To extract knowledge, achieve personal glory, spread their religion or, occasionally, attempt to better human existence, they paid a large price, in sweat, blood, tears and cloth.

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