



AFRICA IN MOVIMENTO / AFRICA ON THE MOVE

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TITLE: PRE-COLONIAL AND COLONIAL INTERIOR TRADE AND PRODUCTION DYNAMICS IN NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN EAST AFRICA

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ABSTRACT: Dependency theorists argue that during the pre-colonial era foreign capitalists universally undermined African productive development by introducing competition for local products, while diverting African energy to extractive activities (Rodney, 1972; Alpers, 1975; Sheriff, 1987; Inikori, 2009). However, the story is far more complex than such theories suggest. Focusing on east Africa, I argue that the reach and scale of foreign trade varied between areas with different coast-interior geographies, producing different consequences for local demand and production of cloth over time and across space.

Using qualitative and quantitative sources, this paper traces the evolution of cotton cloth imports into east Africa and considers the impact that rising imports of foreign cotton cloth had on ongoing developments of local cloth production, focusing primarily on the experiences of the interior. A comparative scheme considers the role of geography in affecting local demand, consumption, and production of cotton cloth in the northern and southern sections of east Africa during the pre-colonial (including early modern) and colonial eras.

The variability of coast-interior geographies and trade histories in east Africa makes a north-south regional comparison crucial for understanding the development and effects of pre-colonial and colonial-era cotton cloth import trade on the eastern coast of Africa and its associated hinterlands and far interior spaces. While the geography of northern east Africa helped protect the northern interior from a large influx of foreign imports up to the early colonial period, the geography of southern east Africa allowed for increasing extensions of foreign trade to the southern interior by the early modern period. Contrary to the assertions of dependency theorists, the long history of cloth imports into the southern interior may have encouraged local cloth production into the colonial period. Southern east African producers adapted to foreign trade as it increased gradually over time, enlarging overall consumer demand and stimulating production developments through competition with foreign varieties, transfers of production methods from abroad, and the import of intermediate inputs. The more isolated northern producers did not enjoy the benefits of gradually increasing trade and were quickly overwhelmed as imports began to rapidly flood the northern interior with the introduction of railroads during the colonial period.

Furthermore, relative to the north, the southern interior possessed the lion's share of internationally demanded exports (primarily gold, ivory, and slaves). It was necessary that foreign traders (and producers) meet the specific, evolving demands of southern east African consumers if they were to obtain highly sought exports from the area (Machado, 2005; Alpers, 1975). Consequently, contrary to the tenets of dependency theory, southern east Africans exercised a great deal of agency in shaping the composition of foreign imports, thus affecting production and international trade patterns of importers of southern east African goods (especially India, Britain, and the United States) (Presthodt, 2008).

It appears that dependency theorists were incorrect to assume that early modern and pre-colonial foreign trade universally undermined African cloth production. Instead, geography and the timing of foreign cotton cloth imports produced different outcomes in different places. Furthermore, southern east Africans possessed far more agency in international trade than dependency theorists have assumed.



AUTHOR'S ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Katharine Frederick is a PhD candidate studying African Economic History at Wageningen University and Research Centre (WUR) in the Netherlands. She obtained an MA in Modern History from Utrecht University in 2013 and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 2010. Her current research focuses on the growth of cotton cloth imports into east and west Africa during the precolonial and colonial periods and the subsequent impact on local textile production.