Imperial Parasitism: British Explorers and African Empires[*]

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The exploration of Africa in the nineteenth century is usually seen as setting the stage for European imperial expansion across the continent. British explorers in particular are presented as men who helped make empire, blazing the trails that would be followed by conquering armies and mapping the terrain that would be claimed as colonial territories. But whose empire did they advance? The answer to this question seems so self-evident that it is rarely asked. After all, most British explorers saw themselves as the agents of British interests. Moreover, the British Empire did in fact become the primary beneficiary of the 'scramble' for African territory by the end of the century. But a close examination of the contexts in which explorers undertook their expeditions shows that their contributions to British imperialism were not as direct and determinative as we have been led to believe.[1] The most effective means of accessing much of the African interior came by way of routes controlled by several gateway states, and these states only permitted explorers to access these routes when it furthered their own political and economic interests in the region. Although these gateway states' ambitions and achievements have since been submerged under the meta-narrative of the European scramble for Africa, they made bids for empires in Africa that would be echoed by Britain and other European imperial powers. The benefits

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[1] The titles of several important books on British exploration demonstrate this association between exploration and empire: Robert A. Stafford, *Scientist of Empire: Sir Roderick Murchison, Scientific Exploration and Victorian Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); James L. Newman, *Imperial Footprints: Henry Morton Stanley's African Journeys* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2004); Felix Driver, *Geographic Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

that British exploration brought to the British Empire need to be reconceived as a consequence of its parasitic dependence on the ambitions of these gateway states.

British explorers confronted a complex and highly contested political terrain in Africa. Indigenous and other non-western polities did much to shape the terms under which expeditions were conducted, as well as to determine their outcomes. Most viable routes to the interior were controlled by Arab or black African states, whose cooperation was essential to any expedition that sought to set out from their shores. These states supplied much of the geographical expertise, political leverage, and logistical support that explorers relied on for their success and indeed their very survival. As they ventured into the African interior, explorers encountered a complex mosaic of polities whose allegiances and rivalries, shaped to varying degrees by ethnic, economic, and religious factors, made safe passage difficult. Their ability to move through this fractious and ever shifting political landscape had far less to do with their affiliations to Britain and its empire than with the assistance they received from the gateway states and their agents, who sought to exert their own imperial influence on the interior. To ask 'whose empire?', then, is to acknowledge that British exploration of Africa occurred against the backdrop of the intertwined ambitions of various empires, which both colluded and collided with one another.

The argument I will advance here diverges in an important respect from Ronald Robinson's well-known thesis about the role of indigenous collaborators in European imperial expansion.[2] That thesis, which characterized certain members of colonized communities as active agents and beneficiaries of colonial rule, was premised on the understanding that the European colonizers held the balance of power in the relationship with these indigenous collaborators, however tentative or fragile that power may have seemed at the time. What distinguishes the circumstances examined in this paper is that the balance of power rested with the indigenous gateway states, not the explorers or the European governments they represented. Insofar as there was a collaborative relationship between the explorers and gateway states, the explorers were more often the collaborators, acting as agents of these indigenous states' interests.

The inspiration for this analysis derives in large part from a new wave of comparative studies of empires. This research is eroding the exceptionalist claims that have long been made on behalf of the British and other western empires. At the heart of these

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[2] Ronald Robinson, "Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration," in Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe, eds., *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism* (London: Longman, 1972): 117-141.

claims is the conviction that such empires were uniquely modern.[3] Recent work has shown instead that they often built on the institutional foundations of the older empires they replaced, and that contemporaneous non-western empires often adopted similar strategies of rule.[4] Ann Laura Stoler and Carole McGranahan, among others, have pointed to 'the portability of practices and ideas… across imperial systems'.[5] As a result of this comparative research on empires, it has become increasingly difficult to sustain the long-standing distinction between 'modern' western empires and 'pre-modern' non-western ones. Furthermore, modernity itself has been exposed as such an elusive and problematic term that its value as an analytic category is open to question.[6] Its significance for our understanding of western empires may have less to do with any innovative practices they introduced than it does with the ideological poses they adopted. What is required, then, is a reconsideration of the associations that historians have conventionally drawn between European expeditions into Africa, European empires, and their exceptionalist claims to modernity.

Most of the literature on African exploration, both in its popular and academic guises, has minimized the role that non-European actors, institutions, and interests may have played in the character and outcome of expeditions. Until recently, the few historians who did devote attention to the role of non-Europeans in the European exploration of Africa regarded them as subordinates to and agents of European-driven enterprises, a view consistent with the collaborative model advanced by Robinson.[7] To be sure, historians of Africa have been

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[3] One of the most important recent works to offer this line of interpretation is David B. Abernethy, *The Dynamics of Global Dominance: European Overseas Empires 1415-1980* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

[4] See, for example, Michael Adas, "Imperialism and Colonialism in Comparative Perspective, *International History Review*, 20, 2 (June 1998): 371-388; Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen, eds., *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); Dina Khoury and Dane Kennedy, guest editors, "Comparing Empires," in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 27, 2 (2007): 233-344; Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan, and Peter C. Perdue, eds., *Imperial Formations* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007); John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire Since 1405* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008); Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[5] Stoler and McGranahan, "Introduction: Refiguring Imperial Terrains," in *Imperial Formations*, p. 6.

[6] Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), ch. 5.

[7] Donald Simpson, *Dark Companions: The African Contribution to the European Exploration of East Africa* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976).

tracing for some time the trading interests and political influence that various African, Arab, and other non-European parties established across parts of the continent.[8] Surprisingly little notice, however, has been given to the ways they interacted with and imposed their own will on European efforts to explore these same regions.

British explorers became entangled in the agendas of non-European parties because these parties controlled most viable points of entry to the African interior and, hence, often set the terms of their admission. Suitable sites for launching expeditions were far fewer than might be supposed. The logistics of such operations necessitated a staging ground that could be counted on to provide a secure and reliable source of supplies, trading goods, modes of transportation, knowledgeable guides, and more. These requirements tended to be found at the coastal or riverine termini of established trade routes to the interior. Suitable sites were often controlled by non-European states and traders, who had their own interests to protect and promote.

Three states that proved particularly important to British exploration in Africa were Tripoli (now Libya), Egypt, and Zanzibar, each of which was ruled for a significant portion of the nineteenth century by new, dynamic, and expansionist Muslim regimes. Tripoli was transformed by Yusuf Karamanli, who seized the throne in 1795 and temporarily revived his state's naval presence in the Mediterranean, then projected its power across the Sahara. Muhammad Ali took control of Egypt in 1805, asserting its autonomy from Ottoman overlords, expanding its rule into Arabia and the Sudan, and establishing a dynasty that lasted until the Urabi revolution and British invasion of the early 1880s. The Omani ruler Seyyid Said moved his capital from Muscat to Zanzibar in the 1830s, founding a vigorous trading state that extended its sway into the East African interior and retained its independence until 1890. Taken together, these states served as the staging grounds for most of the major British expeditions into West, East, and Central Africa: only the continent's southern triangle was explored by parties that set out from mainly British-controlled territories. The implications that these non-British points of entry carry for our understanding of British exploration and empire will be examined here.

The first region to attract the systematic attention of British explorers was the interior of West Africa. British and other European merchants had established a profitable presence along the West African coast as a result of the slave trade, but indigenous states and a deadly disease environment limited their access to the interior. By the end of the eighteenth century, economic interests, scientific curiosity, and geopolitical rivalry with France had created

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[8] An excellent recent example is Stephen J. Rockel, *Carriers of Culture: Labor on the Road in Nineteenth-Century East Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006).

stronger incentives for the British to explore the region. Their coastal settlements, however, were poor staging grounds for such endeavours. Mungo Park's miraculous journey from the mouth of the Gambia River along a slave caravan corridor to the banks of the upper Niger River in 1795-7 stirred hopes about that route's feasibility, but Parks and his entire party of 50 men died during a second attempt in 1805. The British sent an even larger expeditionary force on much the same route at the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars, but the obstructionist tactics of a local ruler prevented it from penetrating more than a few hundred miles into the interior. Nor did the trade factories along the Guinea Coast provide viable points of entry. The African states and merchants that supplied slaves to European traders sought to safeguard their own political and economic interests by keeping Europeans sequestered on the coast, and their suspicions of the British were heightened when Parliament voted to end the slave trade in 1807. According to the would-be explorer Henry Nicholls, a leading African trader in Calabar warned him that 'if I came from Wilberforce [the Parliamentary leader of the British campaign to abolish the slave trade] they would kill me'.[9] Nicholls succumbed instead to fever. His fate was a common one. Malaria and yellow fever posed the other major barrier to expeditions setting out from the West African coast. Even large, well-equipped river-bound expeditions failed to overcome the problem of disease. The Royal Navy's expedition up the Congo River in 1816-7 disintegrated when most of the crew died of yellow fever, and disease defeated several attempts to journey up the Niger River, killing forty of the forty-nine European participants in Macgregor Laird's privately financed expedition of 1832-3 and fifty-five of the 159 Europeans in the government-sponsored Niger Expedition of 1841-2.[10] Only a few especially hardy (and lucky) British explorers, such as the Lander brothers, succeeded in penetrating the interior of West Africa from its coast.

North Africa proved a far more stable launching pad for expeditions into the region. Disease presented less of a threat to outsiders and the Sahara desert, for all its challenges, had been traversed by transhumant tribes and trade caravans for centuries. One of the shortest routes to the savannah region where the kingdom of Bornu and the Hausa states held sway had its northern terminus in Tripoli on the Barbary Coast. This Muslim maritime state had been one of the main promoters and havens of the privateers that plagued the Christian west with coastal raids, the capture of vessels, and the ransom of hostages, but its predations were brought to an end by European and American navies in the early nineteenth

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[9] Robin Hallett, ed., *Records of the African Association 1788-1831* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1964), p. 194.

[10] Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Actions, 1780-1850* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), pp. 165-6, 296, 303.

century. As a result, Tripoli's ambitious pasha, Yusuf Karamanli, turned to commercial and political opportunities in the interior, asserting tributary claims to the crucial network of oases in Fezzan, exerting influence over the traders who controlled the routes across that part of the Sahara, and establishing Tripoli's presence as a political force to be reckoned with among the states further south.[11] It was therefore able to provide explorers with the escorts and assurance of safe passage that they so obviously lacked when setting out from the Gambia, the Gulf of Guinea, or elsewhere along the West African coast.

The earliest attempts by the British to launch expeditions into the African interior from Tripoli were no less star-crossed than the efforts they made from Gambia and the Guinea Coast, but their prospects improved as Tripoli began to project its own power into the Sahara. In 1788, the African Association recruited a long-time English resident of North Africa, Simon Lucas, to cross the Sahara from Tripoli, but reports of warfare along the caravan route convinced him that the undertaking was too risky. Friedrich Hornemann, another explorer sponsored by the African Association, retreated for a time to the safety of Tripoli when his efforts to reach West Africa from Cairo in 1798 stalled in Fezzan. He launched his second attempt from Tripoli in 1800, but died of dysentery during the journey. When the Napoleonic Wars came to an end, Tripoli became the point of departure for several Colonial Office-sponsored expeditions. The first ended prematurely with the death of one of the two explorers. The second, however, was a huge success. In 1822-5, Dixon Denham and Hugh Clapperton reached Bornu and the Hausa states. Traveling under the protection of Yusuf Karamanli, Denham claimed that the route from Tripoli to Bornu was no more dangerous than the one from London to Edinburgh.[12] Soon thereafter, Alexander Laing set off from Tripoli in search of Timbuktu, the holy grail of West African explorers, and became the first European to enter that fabled city in 1826. The loss of Fezzan to Arab and Berber rebels in 1831 and the civil war that followed Yusuf Karamanli's fall from power in 1832 closed the route from Tripoli for a time, but the Ottomans reopened it in 1835. One beneficiary was Heinrich Barth, a German scientist who joined a British-sponsored expedition that set out from Tripoli for the interior in 1850. While James Richardson, the original leader of the expedition, soon died, Barth survived and travelled across much of

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[11] See Kola Folayan, *Tripoli During the Reign of Yusuf Pash Qaramanli* (Ile-Ife, Nigeria: University of Ife Press, 1979), ch. 4.

[12] Major Dixon Denham and Captain Hugh Clapperton, *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries in Northern and Central Africa…* (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard & Co., 1826), p. x.

West Africa over the next five years, returning to Europe to publish the most detailed and informed account of the region ever written by an explorer.[13]

Why did Yusuf Karamanli permit the British to launch these expeditions from Tripoli's shores? He was able to advance his own imperial ambitions. He extracted a fee of £25,000 (equivalent to approximately £1,500,000 in today's currency) from the British government in exchange for allowing the Denham and Clapperton expedition to enter the interior. The British consul who negotiated the deal explained to his superiors that the money would be used to help Karamanli conquer the interior states of Bornu and Sudan, which would in turn 'enable Him to relinquish the Slave Trade'.[14] Karamanli did indeed have aims of conquest, but he had no intention of relinquishing the trade in slaves. He used the British funds to finance an army that accompanied Denham and Clapperton across the Sahara and raid local communities, sending captives as slave labourers for the fields of Fezzan and to North African slave markets. Tripoli conducted this operation under the pretence of protecting the explorers from the very peoples who were its targets.[15] When Alexander Laing arrived in Tripoli in 1825 to launch his expedition in search of Timbuktu, Karamanli prevented him from setting out until the British consul-general paid 8,000 Spanish dollars, supplemented by a second 'Secret Present' of 1,000 dollars.[16] In return for these payments, Laing received a letter of credit and a promise of safe passage across the Sahara. This was useful so far as it went, but Karamanli's influence did not extend into the vicinity of Timbuktu, where Laing was eventually murdered.[17]

Tripoli's imperial ambitions were reasserted under the Ottomans, who regained control of Fezzan in 1842, stationed garrisons at other oases, and sent an expedition to conquer the territory of Tibesti in 1859. The aim was to protect the trans-Saharan caravan routes and preempt French expansionist ambitions—one among many examples of the

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[13] Heinrich Barth, *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa, Being a Journal of an Expedition Undertaken Under the Auspices of H.B.M.'s Government in the Years 1849-1855*, 3 vols., London: Frank Cass, 1965 [1857].

[14] E. W. Bovill, "Introduction," *Missions to the Niger, Vol. II: The Bornu Mission 1822-25*, part 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 10.

[15] Bovill, "Introduction," p. 9, fn. 3.

[16] "The Letters of Major Alexander Gordon Laing, 1824-26," in *Missions to the Niger: Vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 225. The Spanish dollar was the standard medium of exchange in Tripoli and much of the Mediterranean at this time.

[17] Although Tripoli's British consul was convinced that a prominent government minister had conspired with the French consul to murder Laing, his son-in-law. Folayan, *Tripoli*, pp. 149-50.

enduring interactions between Western and non-Western imperialism.[18] This projection of power was advantageous to travelers, who often obtained a written promise of safe passage from authorities in Tripoli. The weight of that promise—known in Islamic discourse as *aman*—was generally respected by the Muslim states in the sub-Saharan savannah region.[19] The *aman* permitted Heinrich Barth to travel through the region with relative freedom and safety. At one point in his travels he was arrested in the emirate of Massina on suspicion of spying for the British, but Islamic legal authorities ruled that he had entered the *dar al-Islam* as a protected non-Muslim and could not be detained nor have his property confiscated.[20] He was freed and permitted to continue on his way. Thus, even in those regions where Tripoli did not wield direct political power, it did carry influence as an important partner in the economic and religious system that bound the region together. British and other European explorers were the beneficiaries of that system: indeed, their very survival often depended on it.

Egypt provided a second important entry point to the African interior for European explorers. The beys who ruled Egypt prior to its invasion by Napoleon in 1798 had granted letters of protection to several British travelers seeking entry to the West African interior, though the route from Tripoli proved shorter and safer.[21] A more attractive destination for expeditions originating in Cairo was up the Nile to Sudan and Ethiopia. In the aftermath of the French withdraw from Egypt, Muhammed Ali came to power and launched a concerted campaign to modernize and westernize the country, giving an Islamic register to the transformative designs that Napoleon had initiated with his abortive occupation. Muhammed Ali's policies provided an opportunity for British explorers to probe the lands south and east of Egypt. The most famous and successful of these explorers was Jean-Louis Burckhardt, whose travels from 1812 to 1816 under the sponsorship of the African Association took him up the Nile nearly as far as Khartoum, then overland to the Red Sea, followed by visits to Mecca and Medina and a voyage along the coast to Suez. Several

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[18] Lisa Anderson, "Nineteenth-Century Reform in Ottoman Libya," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 16, 3 (August 1984), pp. 328-335.

[19] Muhammad S. Umar, "Islamic Discourses on European Visitors to Sokoto Caliphate in the Nineteenth Century," *Studia Islamica*, 95 (2002): 135-159.

[20] Letter by Ahmad al-Bakayi ibn Sayyid Muhammed to Amir Ahmad, item 19 in Library of Congress exhibit, "Ancient Manuscripts from the Desert Libraries of Timbuktu," www.loc.gov/exhibits/mali/mali-exhibit.htm, accessed April 21, 2008.

[21] Hallett, *Records*, p. 57.

Britons ventured up the Nile into unfamiliar territory during the following decade and a half, though few of them survived to tell the tale.

The determinative context for these and subsequent expeditions by British explorers was the systematic campaign of imperial expansion conducted by Muhammed Ali and his successors.[22] Egypt won control over the Red Sea's littoral zone, wrestled Mecca and Medina from the Wahhabis (who had previously driven out the Ottomans), and even invaded greater Syria, though it was pushed back when Britain and several other European states intervened on the Ottomans' behalf. Its most successful and lasting effort to establish an empire, however, occurred along the upper Nile. Muhammed Ali conquered much of northern Sudan in 1821 and Egyptian forces soon pushed further southward, establishing a base at Khartoum that became the political and economic capital of their Sudanese domain. Eve Troutt Powell has aptly characterized Egyptian claims to Sudan 'a different shade of colonialism.'[23] Egyptian forces conducted campaigns to enslave indigenous inhabitants (who were impressed into the Egyptian army and put to work on plantations and in other enterprises), expropriate their cattle, and obtain ivory, gold, and other natural resources. By the 1840s Egypt's reach extended as far south on the White Nile as Gondokoro, the front line for an increasingly profitable ivory and slave trade.[24] This imperial enterprise elicited a mixed reaction from the British. Although troubled by reports of slave raiding, the British became convinced that in other respects the Egyptians were bringing the benefits of civilization into a savage land.

Egyptian expansion southward proved useful to Europeans eager to trace the source of the White Nile and gain access to the Great Lakes region of Africa. When in 1863 John Hanning Speke and James Grant left the shores of Lake Victoria to follow the Nile north to Cairo, the route they took to Gondokoro had been pioneered at least in part by Egyptian traders. At Gondokoro, they encountered Samuel Baker and his Hungarian mistress Florence, who were using the station as a staging ground for their own push in the other direction. Baker carried a royal mandate or *firman* from the khedive that permitted him to

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[22] See Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim, "The Egyptian Empire, 1805-1885," in *The Cambridge History of Egypt. Vol. 2: Modern Egypt, From 1517 to the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. M. W. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 198-216.

[23] Eve M. Troutt Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Mastery of the Sudan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

[24] See Scopas Sekwat Poggo, "Zande Resistance to Foreign Penetration in the Southern Sudan, 1860-1890," in *White Nile, Black Blood: War, Leadership, Ethnicity From Khartoum to Kampala*, ed. Jay Spaulding and Stephanie Beswick (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2000): 263-278.

call on assistance from Egyptian agents. From Gondokoro he and his party accompanied an Arab trade caravan much of the way south to Lake Albert. Although Baker often complained about the caravan's delays and detours, he relied on it for logistics and security. His party's survival became far more precarious once it set out on its own, becoming virtual prisoners of the king of Bunyoro for a time.[25]

The lesson Baker drew from his experience was that 'the only means of commencing the civilization of Central African races… [is] by *annexing* to Egypt the equatorial Nile Basin.'[26] Ismail Pasha, Egypt's ruler at the time, shared those sentiments, and in 1869 he appointed Baker as governor-general of his newly proclaimed province of Equatoria. Accepting the post ostensibly in order to suppress the slave trade, Baker understood that his main task was to impose Egyptian imperial rule on the peoples of the upper Nile. He had been granted 'despotic powers,' he stated, in order 'to subdue to our authority the countries situated to the south of Gondokoro… to open to navigation the great lakes of the equator… [and] to establish a chain of military stations and commercial depots… throughout Central Africa'.[27] He arrived with an armada of nearly sixty vessels, over 1,600 Egyptian and Sudanese soldiers, and two artillery batteries. He proceeded to conduct a brutal military campaign against the native population, justifying it as promoting progress and civilization. Although his efforts to impose Egyptian authority on the peoples of the region met with limited success, this famed British explorer was a willing agent of a non-European state's imperial ambitions.[28] The fact that Egypt's imperial designs on southern Sudan and the Lakes region preceded those of the European powers suggests that in this part of the continent at least, the 'Scramble for Africa' was neither an unprecedented rupture with the past nor an entirely European initiative.

While British explorers benefited in many respects from Egyptian imperialism, they also found that it made their attempts to gain access to certain territories much more difficult. The Ethiopian explorer Mansfield Parkyns was blocked by African authorities from

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[25] See Samuel W. Baker, *The Albert Nyanza, the Great Basin of the Nile and Explorations of the Nile Sources* (London: Macmillan, 1866).

[26] Samuel Baker to Roderick Murchison, March 8, 1867, M6a, Russell E. Train Africana Collection, Joseph Cullman Library, National Museum of Natural History, Washington, D.C.

[27] Samuel W. Baker, *Ismailia: A Narrative of the Expedition to Central Africa for the Suppression of the Slave Trade*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1874), I, pp. 7-8.

[28] The fullest account of Baker's campaign of conquest is provided by Alice Moore-Harell, *Egypt's African Empire: Samuel Baker, Charles Gordon, and the Creation of Equatoria* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010).

venturing into the Sahara west of Sudan because he was suspected of spying on behalf of the Egyptians.[29] Similar suspicions forced Richard Burton to abandon his disguise as an Arab trader during his expedition to the Ethiopian city-state of Harar, which feared Egyptian more than European expansion.[30] And the principal reason why the ruler of Bunyoro detained Baker and his party was that he suspected them of being agents of Egyptian imperial designs on his kingdom. As it happened, this is exactly what Baker became. Time and again, explorers seeking to move beyond Egypt's imperial frontiers found that their passage was obstructed by peoples fearful that they were acting as the outliers of Egyptian expansionist ambitions.

A third important gateway for British and other European explorers was Zanzibar, which proved to be a far more commonly travelled and convenient avenue of entry to the Lakes region than Egypt. Like Tripoli, Zanzibar was a Muslim maritime state that provided an entrepôt for the exchange of goods between overseas traders and inhabitants of the interior. Like Egypt, it was a modernizing state of surprisingly cosmopolitan character. And like both, it was aggressively expansionist in its ambitions. In the 1830s the Omani ruler Seyyid Said shifted his capital to the island of Zanzibar, making it the principal trading port along the East African coast. Ships from around the world unloaded cloth, beads, brass coil, and furniture for domestic markets and loaded ivory, copal, hides, cloves, and slaves for overseas markets.[31] Zanzibar's dominion soon stretched along the coast from Mogadishu in the north to Cape Delgado in the south. Its influence also extended hundreds of miles inland. Arab agents of Zanzibar established trading stations at Tabora, Ujiji, and elsewhere in the interior, where they sought not only to expand commercial opportunities but to exert political influence. The sultan, in turn, bolstered their interests against the Nyamwezi and other African competitors, even dispatching his army into the hinterland to defend the Arab traders on several occasions. One indication of how far his authority extended can be seen in his government's response to the murder of a German explorer on the northern shore of Lake Nyasaland in 1859. Zanzibari pressure forced the local chief to hand over the perpetrators, who were sent to the capital, tried, and executed.[32] Zanzibar, in brief, held

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[29] Donald Cumming, *The Gentleman Savage: The Life of Mansfield Parkyns 1823-1894* (London: Century, 1987), p. 128.

[30] Dane Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man: Richard Burton and the Victorian World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 87-88.

[31] See Jeremy Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), chs. 3 & 4.

[32] Simpson, *Dark Companions*, p. 24.

sway over what its leading historian, Abdul Sheriff, has referred to as a 'commercial empire' that stretched from Uganda in the north-east to eastern Zaire in the west and northern Zambia in the south-west.[33] Although Zanzibar's seaborne capabilities would become increasingly circumscribed by Britain and other European powers, those powers' prospects for sending explorers into the interior were dependent on the approval and assistance of Zanzibar's government and its agents.

The first British explorers to use Zanzibar as the staging ground for their expedition were Richard Burton and John Hanning Speke, who famously returned from their arduous 1857-9 journey to report the existence of Lakes Tanganyika and Victoria.   The sultan appointed their caravan leader and supplied them with eight of his soldiers to protect the expedition. He also granted the explorers letters of safe passage and access to credit from traders in the interior. The caravan flew the red flag of Zanzibar, not the British Union Jack.[34] As it marched into the interior, it followed what Burton referred to as the 'Arab line of traffic', the main caravan route that carried ivory and other goods from the interior to Zanzibar.[35] When Speke returned to East Africa in 1860, determined to prove that Lake Victoria was the source of the Nile, he turned once again to Zanzibar and its traders for logistical support. He and his companion, James Grant, followed the standard caravan route west to Tabora, then took another route pioneered by Arab traders to Lake Victoria. Several decades later, Henry Morton Stanley would sneer at the explorers who had preceded him in the region for following what he termed the 'Arab parcel post,' but he did much the same on his 1871-2 expedition in search of Livingstone and again during the initial portion of his trans-African journey of 1874-7.[36] So too did Verney Lovett Cameron and various other explorers whose expeditions originated in Zanzibar.

What did Zanzibar hope to gain from permitting this steady stream of explorers to pass through its profitable trading hinterland? No one seems to have asked this question. It is simply assumed that Zanzibar acted at the behest of the British because it was pressured to do so. But this assumption both exaggerates the influence that Britain wielded over Zanzibar and underestimates the authority Zanzibar wielded over the interior, at least until the final decade or two of the nineteenth century. Zanzibar permitted British explorers to set out from its shores and provided them with assistance because it benefited from the

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[33] Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar* (Oxford: James Currey, 1987), p. 172.

[34] Simpson, *Dark Companions*, p. 14.

[35] Richard F. Burton, *Zanzibar: City, Island, and Coast*, 2 vols. (London: Tinsley Bros., 1872), II, p. 292.

[36] Quoted in Tim Jeal, *Stanley: The Impossible Life of Africa's Greatest Explorer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 226.

relationship. One of those benefits was the infusion of capital into the local economy as explorers hired porters and purchased supplies, trade goods, and other necessities. It cost Burton and Speke about £2,500 to outfit their expedition and hire a crew in 1857; by the early 1870s Cameron had to spend some £11,000, a sum that shocked his Royal Geographical Society backers. Beyond this, Zanzibar's rulers and merchants recognized that the British shared their interest in opening new regions of the interior to trade. This was a task that explorers were well trained to carry out, taking notes and collecting samples of plants and minerals that might be profitably exploited in the territories through which they passed. The sultan of Zanzibar actually hired the explorer Joseph Thomson in 1882 to prospect the Ruvuma and Lugenda rivers for coal or other valuable mineral deposits. (At about the same time Richard Burton was leading a gold-prospecting expedition into the Midian region of Arabia on behalf of the khedive of Egypt.)

Perhaps the most striking examples of the relationship that was forged between explorers and Zanzibar occurred during the trans-African expeditions of Cameron and Stanley. Once the two men reached the region west of Lake Tanganyika, they turned for assistance to Tippu Tip (Hamid ibn Muhammad), an ambitious Zanzibari trader who had begun to push the frontiers of Zanzibar's trading empire into this territory. Tip provided them with porters and protection, while they in turn provided him with information about routes and trading opportunities that lay further west. Stanley's discovery that the Lualaba River flowed into the Congo, for example, made it possible for Tip to move into the region. By the early 1880s Tippu Tip had established effective control over the upper reaches of the Congo, making it 'a vital component of the Zanzibar system'.[37] 'I am a subject of the Sultan Seyyid Barghash,' declared Tip, 'and the country… over which I rule, both it and I are under the authority of Seyyid.'[38] As an agent of the sultan's state, Tip extracted ivory, slaves, and other resources from the Congo basin and sent them back to markets in Zanzibar. Although the British government objected to the slave trade and pressured Zanzibar to stop it, the explorers who set out from this gateway state into the African interior were complicit in its expansion.

The only part of Africa where the British had an effective point of access to the interior was in the far south, where Cape Town and other settlements along the coast served

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[37] Norman Robert Bennett, *Arab versus European: Diplomacy and War in Nineteenth-Century East Central Africa* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1986), p. 116.

[38] Hami ibn Muhammad, *Maisha Ya Hamed bin Muhammed el Murjebi Yaani Tippu Tip* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1966), p. 109. Tip also reports that he kept in constant communication with the sultan (p. 117).

as gateways northward. Yet the existence of a large and expanding British and Boer settler presence in the region paradoxically meant that there was less impetus for formal expeditions than elsewhere. Much of the exploration of the southern frontier was carried out by cattle herders, petty traders, prospectors, and big game hunters, each probing for new opportunities to make a profit. Even here, however, indigenous African polities played some role in determining the course and character of British exploration and expansion. The most famous explorer of southern Africa was David Livingstone, drawn there by his work as a Christian missionary. His first great expedition across the continent was made possible because he won the support of Sekeletu, the chief of the Kololo people, who provided him with guides and porters. What accounted for this act of generosity is seldom explained, but it is worth taking seriously the claim made by one of Livingstone's most recent biographers: that Livingstone was actually 'leading an African expedition, as an African leader under the authority of Sekeletu.' As Livingstone himself acknowledged, Sekeletu hoped that the expedition would forge routes to new markets for the ivory he hoped to export, though he was less forthcoming about the guns Sekeletu also wanted to purchase with his profits.[39]

Viewed through a Eurocentric lens that anticipates the scramble for Africa and interprets probes of the continent by explorers as portents of that upheaval, the aims and initiatives of Zanzibar, Egypt, and Tripoli might seem insignificant since they appear in that context as little more than the unwitting accomplices—and victims—of British imperial ambitions. This perspective, I have argued, seriously underestimates the enterprise of these states and misinterprets their stance towards British and other European explorers. These three gateway states shared several characteristics that often caused them to regard expeditions organized by outsiders as opportunities to advance their own interests. Each was a relatively autonomous and dynamic Muslim state, seeking opportunities for economic development, expansion of territorial boundaries, and influence over neighbouring peoples. Each promoted the production and export of agricultural commodities (cotton, cloves, and so on) and the targeting of African hinterlands for slaves, ivory, cattle, and other commodities. And each embraced a strikingly cosmopolitan strategy to achieve those ends, drawing on the talents and resources of individuals of varied ethnic origins and cultural identities. The sultans of Zanzibar, for example, relied on an Indian firm to oversee its customs and finances and encouraged American and European governments and merchants to establish an active presence on their island capital. The khedives of Egypt were equally welcoming to

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[39] Andrew C. Ross, *David Livingstone: Mission and Empire* (London: Hambledon and London, 2002), p. 98; David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*, new ed. (London: John Murray, 1899), pp. 253, 344.

foreign bankers and traders, and employed Italians, Frenchmen, and other Europeans in many capacities, including service as officers in Egyptian armies and leaders of Egyptian expeditions.[40] It was entirely within the character of these regimes to recruit individuals of any background whose talents were likely to advance their commercial and political interests. To assume that the British explorers of Africa acted as the inexorable agents of Britain's imperial designs is to lose sight of the influence these gateway states exerted over the character and outcome of their expeditions. It also ignores some explorers' susceptibility to the professional inducements offered by these states, which were able to persuade British subjects such as Samuel Baker and Joseph Thomson to serve more than one master.

The most distinctive characteristic of British explorers through most of the nineteenth century was their weakness and vulnerability to the depredations of local rulers and peoples. From Mungo Park onward, it became a common refrain for explorers to lament the various occasions when they were subjected to extortion, detention, assault, and more, all of which highlighted their powerlessness. There was little if anything that the British Empire could do to protect them or punish their persecutors. Often the only polities that possessed the political muscle to smooth their passage through the interior were the gateway states, and even their power had its limits. Once explorers passed beyond their spheres of influence, they either had to buy their way out of trouble or persuade those who controlled their fate that cooperation could bring benefits through privileged access to arms or other resources. Speke used this strategy to win the cooperation of Mutesa, the powerful and ambitious *kabaka* of Buganda, as did other explorers in negotiations with African rulers elsewhere across the continent. But it remained the case that local rulers, not explorers, usually held the upper hand in these negotiations. The balance of power only began to change in the late nineteenth century as Henry Morton Stanley and other explorers were able to organize much larger, more heavily armed expeditions that resorted more readily to violence to push their way through territories where indigenous peoples were resistant to their presence.[41] These expeditions marked the real transition from exploration to empire-building by Britain and other European states.

What significance does this analysis of the exploration of Africa hold for our broader understanding of empires? First, it demonstrates that British explorers in Africa should not be regarded simply as agents of British imperial interests. They were enmeshed, however unwittingly, in the expansionist designs of non-European gateway states as well. As a

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[40] Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism*, p. 43.

[41] See Newman, *Imperial Footprints*, and Felix Driver, "Henry Morton Stanley and His Critics: Geography, Exploration and Empire," *Past & Present*, 133 (November 1991): 134-66.

corollary, this analysis suggests that whatever imperial designs the British government may have had toward the African continent, it was unable to act upon its intentions at will. The struggle to project power into Africa was a more complex and collusive process than the standard historiography appreciates, a process that merged British interests with and in some instances subordinated them to the interests of non-European states and peoples. Tripoli, Egypt, and Zanzibar may have been different kinds of empires from those established by the British and their European rivals, but they were empires nonetheless. And the fact that they were active in Africa at the same time as Britain and other European powers raises larger questions about how we draw historical distinctions between 'modern' European empires and 'pre-modern' non-European empires. These cases suggest that such distinctions are underwritten by an unsustainable teleology. They need to be re-examined and replaced by a more nuanced understanding of the complex and often reciprocal relationships that arose between empires. Another way to put it is to say that we need to de-center our understanding of empire, replacing the notion of a closed bilateral circuit between a single imperial metropole and its colonial periphery with a much more open, multilateral system that entailed interactions across a number of imperial circuits.[42] This, in turn, requires us to rethink the exclusive relationship that has been asserted between the British Empire in particular (and western empires more generally) and the rise of modernity.

Finally, we might make betters sense of certain recent and current events in Africa by being more aware of the past interactions between these colluding and contending empires. Consider, for example, the post-colonial merger of Tanganyika and Zanzibar in 1964, which reconstituted much of the sultan of Zanzibar's commercial empire and created what has been to date the remarkably stable country of Tanzania. Or consider the failure of the Arab Muslim dominated Sudanese state to reconcile the alienated and oppressed populations of Darfur in the west and Bar al-Ghazal in the south to its rule, a failure that led directly to the creation in 2010 of Africa's newest state, South Sudan. Or, finally, consider the recent crisis in Mali. While commentators might attribute its immediate causes to an Al Qaeda affiliate's terrorist ambitions or a decrepit Malian government's dependency on the French who once ruled the country, its problems can be traced back further than that—to ethnic tensions and competition for resources that originated at least in part in Tripoli's prior ambitions in the region, which reverberate in the illicit arms and ex-militiamen from Libya that helped to precipitate the crisis. Although Britain, France, the United States, and other Western countries continue to exert considerable influence in these regions, they are in some

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[42] See Durba Ghosh and Dane Kennedy, "Introduction," to *Decentring Empire: Britain, India and the Transcolonial World*, ed. by Ghosh and Kennedy (Hydrabad: Orient Longman, 2006): 1-15.

respects mere bystanders to processes driven by other agents and agendas, much as they were in the nineteenth century.