


Cross-Border Appropriations and Colonial Cooperation. A Trans-Imperial Approach to a Collection from Lake Malawi

Maik Tusch 

Abstract: On 28th October 1896, the Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover received an ethnographic collection consisting of 164 objects from the shores of lake Malawi as a gift by Captain Theodor Berndt. Half of the collection is attributed to German East Africa, today's Tanzania, the other half to British Central Africa, today's Malawi. Theodor Berndt was captain of the *Hermann von Wissmann*, a German gunboat on nowadays Lake Malawi, then Lake Nyasa, and deputy commander of the German colonial station Langenburg. Little was known about the objects' provenance and many questions arose, among them why and how a German colonial officer could appropriate half of his collection from a foreign colony. Research following up on this trans-imperial background revealed intense cross-border interactions between the German and British colonial administrations and a high degree of cooperation against the local African population around the lake, involving logistic and personnel support of colonial wars and military strikes to please the European counterpart. While it cannot be proven that the collection originates from these interactions, the historical context enables approaching the collection's provenance towards a tendency that many of the objects may have been brought into Berndt's possession by violent means.

Keywords: Lake Malawi; trans-imperial cooperation; Tanzania; provenance; colonial contexts

Trans-imperial history is a relatively young field of historiography. In their 2018 article, Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé call for a trans-imperial turn in empire studies, equivalent to historiographic turns in the past like the spatial turn, postcolonial turn etc.¹ The authors state that history of empires has so far largely been written as a kind of extended version of the history of the respective nation states. In order to overcome this mostly Eurocentric view on imperial history, trans-imperial approaches can provide new perspectives and insights by discussing “imperial competition, cooperation and connectivity not as separate phenomena but as entangled processes.”² One might add that the perception of colonialism and imperialism, not

only as global phenomena but also as a joint enterprise of capitalist societies, strongly require to make these “three c’s” visible.³ Furthermore, the description of colonial empires as monolithic, separated blocks seems highly artificial. “Colonized individuals and communities were never tied to their ‘natural environment’, as colonial propaganda had it, nor were the colonizers tied to their nation and their national identity”, as it is stated by the Editorial Team of the *Transimperial History Blog* that presents contributions from trans-imperial history writing.⁴

Focusing on the transfer of cultural assets, provenance research on collections from colonial contexts can only provide a clear perspective if it is able to incorporate multiple views. As a precondition,

1 Daniel Hedinger / Nadin Heé: Transimperial History – Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition, in: *Journal of Modern European History* 16 (2018), No. 4, 429-452, here: 429.

2 Hedinger / Heé 2018 (see FN 1), 430.

3 Hedinger / Heé 2018 (see FN 1), 441.

4 <https://www.transimperialhistory.com/about/>, <30.01.2024>.

it is often necessary to make competition, cooperation and connectivity between colonial empires visible, and thus to show how and why certain transfers happened. For instance, reviewing the history of the restitution of the Benin Bronzes from Germany to Nigeria would be a rather unsatisfying attempt if it was only to be seen within the framework of the British Empire. It would neglect the role of international art dealers, scholars and museum personal, especially from Germany, and not least of Nigerian citizens and their international supporters in their call for the return of the bronzes.⁵ Proof of the trans-imperial competition, cooperation and connectivity in this case can be witnessed on the platform Digital Benin.⁶

While the case of the Benin Bronzes is by now a well-documented one, covering extensive research on the historical background of the looting of the royal palace of Edo in 1897, the cultural background of the objects taken from the palace as well as single case studies showing how certain parts of the former royal collection ended up in museums in the Western hemisphere, this is not the case for the majority of collections from colonial contexts. Provenance researchers are frequently confronted with the task of investigating the origin of a collection of which nearly nothing is known so far. These cases require extensive research on the biography of the persons involved (as long as their names are known) and serious efforts to understand the cultural significance of the objects. Furthermore, some cases may entail the need to examine the historical background in-depth. It is fair to say that in general the circumstances of the appropriations examined are not always obvious and, in some cases, they will never be identified beyond doubt.

This paper seeks to examine the provenance of an ethnographic collection by using a trans-imperial history approach. The case presented here evolved around a collection that was gifted to the Provincial Museum Hanover, today's Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover, in 1896. The person behind it was a German colonial officer who claimed the collection to originate half in a German, half

in a British colony. The article presents the current state of ongoing research. However, it should be pointed out right from the beginning that no definite conclusions can be drawn regarding the collection's provenance. The sources available never mention any object. Hence, these preliminary results represent an analytical approach based on the course of events. Further steps will be taken, especially concerning research on the cultural significance of the cultural assets to potential source communities.

It seems plausible that certain military actions presented in this article involved looting and at least some of the objects kept today in the Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover could be products of it. But strictly speaking, this is only a thesis and it will likely remain one. From an academic point of view, this might seem unsatisfactory and one could ask if the task of finding out more about the collection's provenance has been fulfilled at all. In strict terms, the answer would probably be no. The primary aim of provenance research is to reconstruct and document processes of change of physical custody, and yet it often encompasses much more. Accepting that no clear evidence can be found does not mean that one would give up the task. An understanding of the circumstances as well as a sound historical contextualization of a collection's provenance is necessary, especially when it comes to potential contexts of injustice. In many or perhaps most cases, such a context can neither be confirmed beyond doubt nor be ruled out completely. But 'in dubio pro reo' is not a principle that can be applied with reference to collections from colonial contexts. At least it does not stop there. As Dan Hicks puts it, "Each stolen object, insofar as it is an unfinished event, is also some form of outstanding debt".⁷ When taking the proclamation of the "Framework Principles for dealing with collections from colonial contexts" seriously, i.e. entering into a "dialogue in a spirit of partnership, understanding and reconciliation with the societies

5 Barbara Plankensteiner: Die Kunst und Geschichte des Königreichs Benin, in: Barbara Plankensteiner (ed.): Benin. Geraubte Geschichte, Hamburg 2022, 19-62, here: 57-59; Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona: Hintergrundgeschichte zur Restitution von Benin-Kunstwerken, in: *ibid.*, 210-222, here: 217-219.

6 <https://digitalbenin.org/>, <31.01.2024>.

7 Dan Hicks: Necrography. Death-Writing in the Colonial Museum, in: *British Art Studies* 19 (February 2021), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-19/conversation>.

affected by colonialism,”⁸ this should apply to ‘potentially stolen’ objects as well, since these form the majority of collections from colonial contexts.

Hanover, 26th October 1896

The Provincial Museum Hanover was founded in 1852, bringing together collections from natural history, archaeology and fine art. The ethnographic collection was administered by the Department of Archaeology as a sub-collection until 1954 and had been numerically insignificant in the first decades of its existence. This changed after the establishment of German colonies in Africa and Oceania in the 1880s. The collection rose from 1.500 numbers⁹ in 1884 to around 5.000 in 1919.¹⁰ The museum was keen to enlarge its colonial collections. In 1894, the museum director Jacobus Reimers (1850-1914) wrote a letter to prominent citizens of Hanover known to live or do business in the colonies, asking them to donate ethnographic objects to the Provincial Museum.¹¹ Some responded positively and fulfilled Reimer’s wish. The majority of new entries into the collection, however, was due to private donators who approached the museum on their own initiative.

Especially the museum’s collections from East Africa experienced a significant growth in the years 1895 and 1896. Among them was a convolute of 165 numbers entering the inventory on 26th October 1896. The inventory book notes: “Donation by Captain in the flotilla of the Imperial German Government for East Africa, Mr. Th. Berndt from Hanover.”¹² All objects are assigned cultural attributions, an information that can only have come

from the donator himself, as the museum staff had no expertise whatsoever concerning cultural assets from Africa.

Additionally, the Historical Society for Lower Saxony announces in the annual report of its executive committee in 1897 the reception of a “select collection of ethnographic objects from Lake Nyasa”, i.e. the same collection.¹³ Lake Nyasa, today Lake Malawi, marks the border between Tanzania in the northeast, Mozambique in the southeast and Malawi in the west.¹⁴ The borders were drawn in the colonial era and remained unchanged until today, Tanzania (without Zanzibar) being ruled by Imperial Germany as “German East Africa”, Mozambique by Portugal as “Portuguese East Africa” and Malawi by Great Britain, first as the “British Central Africa Protectorate”, later as “Nyasaland”. According to the cultural attributions of the objects given in the museum’s inventory book, they mostly originate from various groups living at the shores or at least close to Lake Malawi, either on the German controlled side or on British claimed territory. This leads to the question how a German naval officer could appropriate objects in a territory controlled by a rivalling colonial empire.

The Donor: Theodor Berndt

“Captain Th. Berndt” is to be identified as Theodor Berndt (1860-unknown), who was born in Coburg, but moved to Hanover several times in his life where members of his family lived.¹⁵ He first travelled to Africa as a ship’s officer in 1889 where he joined the so-called “Wissmann-Truppe”.¹⁶ These troops, named after their commander Hermann von Wissmann (1853-1905), formed the cadre of the later German Colonial Forces (“Schutztruppe”) for East Africa. When the German East Africa Company, a private enterprise which had previously been striving to acquire land in East Africa, tried to impose taxes on the coastal populations of nowadays Tanzania in 1888, an uprising broke out,

8 Framework Principles for dealing with collections from colonial contexts agreed by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, the Federal Foreign Office Minister of State for International Cultural Policy, the Cultural Affairs Ministers of the Länder and the municipal umbrella organisations, 13 March 2019, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2210152/b2731f8b59210c77c68177cdcd3d03de/190412-stm-m-sammlungs-gut-kolonial-kontext-en-data.pdf>, <14.11.2024>.

9 Several objects were often grouped together under one number, hence the term “numbers” instead of “objects.”

10 Claudia Andratschke: Provenienzforschung in ethnografischen Sammlungen, in: Alexis von Poser / Bianca Baumann (eds.): Heikles Erbe. Koloniale Spuren bis in die Gegenwart, Dresden 2016, 304-311, here: 307.

11 Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover, Department of Ethnology, Archive, VK II.1.4., No. 96.

12 Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover, Department of Ethnology, Registration, Inventory, ET 3085-3249. Translated by the author.

13 Zeitschrift des Historischen Vereins für Niedersachsen, zugleich Organ des Vereins für Geschichte und Alterthümer der Herzogthümer Bremen und Verden und des Landes Hadeln 62 (1897), 510-514, here: 511. Translated by the author.

14 “Niassa” is a Yao word meaning “lake”. The term “Lake Nyasa” is therefore a duplication, see <https://www.niassa.gov.mz/por/A-Provincia/Limites-Geograficos>, <07.02.2024>.

15 Stadtarchiv Hannover (hereinafter StadtAH), 1.HR.03.5, Nr. 2458.

16 Deutsche Kolonialzeitung, 5th August 1889, 242.

sweeping away almost the entire German presence on the East African mainland. In order to restore control, Wissmann was given the task to form an “expedition” which should reconquer the coastline. He then built up a military force, consisting of German officers and African soldiers.¹⁷

Berndt first served on the unarmed steamer “München”,¹⁸ bought in February 1889 for the “Wissmann-Truppe”, and later used by the Imperial German East African Government.¹⁹ Captain of the ship was Max Prager (dates of birth and death unknown), who will be of relevance later on.²⁰ There are no hints that parts of the collection in Hanover would originate from this period. However, we do know that Berndt already started to bring objects into his possession around this time since the Übersee-Museum Bremen keeps seven spears attributed to the Masai in its collection, which were given to the museum by an intermediary but have been appropriated by Berndt at the time.²¹ When the fighting ended in mid-1890 and German colonial rule was re-established, traces of Berndt in Africa disappear. It seems likely that he returned to Germany and re-joined the Imperial German Navy (“Kaiserliche Marine”) as not all officers joined the newly formed “Schutztruppe.”

According to the sources available, Berndt appears again in East Africa in 1893 as captain of a ship deployed on Lake Malawi. Since most cultural assets given to the Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover by Berndt are linked to groups inhabiting the shores of Lake Malawi, it is probable that the ship played a crucial role in the appropriation of these objects. The research presented here is based on the ship’s role and its significance for all parties involved, these were: local African groups, Swahili traders from the coast, and the German and British colonial administrations around the lake.

The Ship: The *Hermann von Wissmann*

The ship referred to here is the *Hermann von Wissmann*, an armed steamer cruising on Lake Malawi. It was named after said Hermann von Wissmann who had previously been in charge of the brutal conquest of the East African coastline. Having accomplished his objective in 1890, Wissmann was now determined to push further inland and eliminate all local powers that had not yet submitted to German colonial rule and could potentially challenge it. One of these powers was coastal traders who regularly led caravans into the interior, purchasing mainly ivory and slaves which they then resold at the East African coast.²² Some of these traders acquired considerable wealth and power like the famous Tippu Tip (1837/38-1905).²³ Regulating and controlling this trade was thus crucial to the establishment of colonial rule. As a lever to achieve this, Wissmann sought to increase control of the African Great Lakes, mainly Lake Victoria, Lake Tanganyika and Lake Malawi, since these represented inland trading hubs. The most effective way to achieve this seemed the deployment of armed ships on the lakes.

As comprehensible as this plan might seem from Wissmann’s point of view, it would have required the construction of gunboats suited for the lakes which then would have to be transported to the desired destination. This would have been a costly enterprise, which the Imperial German government was not prepared to finance. However, should Wissmann manage to collect the necessary funds with private support, the German Empire would be willing to run the ships at the state’s expense. As a result of these considerations, the German “Anti-Slavery-Lottery Committee” was founded. Its purpose was to set up a lottery the profits of which would be intended to combat the slave trade.²⁴ Wissmann and his supporters thus played

17 John Iliffe: A Modern History of Tanganyika, Cambridge et al. 1987, 95.

18 Anonymous, in: Deutsches Kolonialblatt I (1890), 225.

19 Erich Gröner: Die deutschen Kriegsschiffe 1815-1945, vol. 7, Koblenz 1990, 219.

20 Rochus Schmidt: Wissmanns kulturelle und Pionierarbeit im zentralafrikanischen Seengebiet; der Dampfer „Hermann von Wissmann“ auf dem Nyassa; Bekämpfung der Sklavenräuber, in: Alexander Becker et al. (eds.): Hermann von Wissmann. Deutschlands größter Afrikaner, zweite vermehrte und verbesserte Auflage, Berlin 1907, 387-421, here: 390.

21 Bettina von Briskorn: Zur Sammlungsgeschichte afrikanischer Ethnographica im Übersee-Museum Bremen 1841-1945, Bremen 2000, 200.

22 Iliffe 1987 (see FN 17), 98-99; Johannes Fabian: Out of Our Minds. Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa, London / Los Angeles 2000, 35.

23 See the autobiography: Hamed bin Muhammed al Murjebi / Wilfred Howell Whiteley: Maisha ya Hamed bin Muhammed al Murjebi yaani Tippu Tip, kwa maneo yake mwenyewe, Kampala et al. 1974.

24 Manuel Köppen: Die Reichweite der Zivilisation. September 1893: Die Hermann von Wissmann kreuzt auf dem Nyassasee, in: Alexander Honold / Klaus Scherpe (eds.): Mit Deutschland um die Welt. Eine Kulturgeschichte des Fremden in der Kolonialzeit, Stuttgart 2004, 163-172, here: 165.

the same card as Bismarck had done in 1888 when the German Reichstag was to be convinced to approve funds for the “Wissmann-Truppe”. Labelling an opponent as ‘slave trader’ was most often sufficient to mobilize considerable support in German society or parliament.²⁵ The profits were indeed high enough to finance the construction of the ship and to transport it to Lake Victoria. The outbreak of the war against the Hehe in 1890 though prevented the envisaged expedition. The only lake accessible was Lake Malawi which was then chosen as new destination. As the ship’s first captain Max Prager was chosen, who wrote a detailed account of the undertaking.²⁶

The expedition started in Chinde at the Mozambiquan coast and followed first the Zambezi and then the Shire river to Lake Malawi. This was the point when German-British connections around the ship began to unfold. It is fair to say that without British support the ship would never have reached the lake. In the end, the colonial government of British Central Africa provided boats to pull the German ships transporting the dismantled *Hermann von Wissmann* through the river Shire’s rapids. The British did not act out of sympathy for the Germans. In exchange for their efforts, two of the expedition’s lighters were to be given to British Central Africa after the final construction of the *Hermann von Wissmann* as well as the yet to be built wharf where the ship would be put together.²⁷ The Germans did their best to win British support, for instance coming to commissioner Harry Johnston’s (1858-1927) aid in February 1893, when his camp was besieged by the Yao leader Liwonde (dates of birth and death unknown) and his men.²⁸ On 12th June 1893, the steamer was finally set afloat.²⁹ Its base-to-be had already been set: the German colonial station of Langenburg at the north-eastern shore of Lake Malawi on the Parumbira peninsula. It was founded by members of the expedition in 1893 and named after the first president of the German Colonial Society, Hermann

Fahrplan

für den Dampfer des Kaiserlich deutschen Gouvernements „Hermann von Wissmann“ auf dem Nyassa.
Kapitän Prager.

1. Abfahrt von Station Langenburg:

11. Februar, 11. März, 8. April, 6. Mai, 3. Juni, 1. Juli, 29. Juli, 26. August, 13. September,
21. Oktober, 18. November, 16. Dezember, 13. Januar.

2. Abfahrt von Fort Johnston:

Jedezeit 14 Tage nach der Abfahrt von der Station Langenburg.

Fahrtreise

für Europäer pro Person:

für Farbigte pro Kopf:

	Langenburg	Karonga	Zephal	Musilali	Mankara	Ufuma	Katatale	Fort Maquire	Vinginhoma	Mankarai	Fort Johnston	Langenburg	Karonga	Zephal	Musilali	Mankara	Ufuma	Katatale	Fort Maquire	Vinginhoma	Mankarai	Fort Johnston
Langenburg	45	75	75	120	120	150	180	210	210	255		1	1	1	2	3	4	4	5	5	7	7
Karonga	45	75	75	120	120	150	180	210	210	255	1	1	1	2	3	4	4	5	5	7	7	
Zephal	75	75	45	45	45	45	75	105	135	135	180	1	1	1	2	3	3	4	4	5	5	
Musilali	75	75	45	45	45	45	75	105	135	135	180	1	1	1	2	3	3	4	4	5	5	
Mankara	120	120	45	45	45	45	60	90	90	135	3	2	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	3	3	
Ufuma	120	120	45	45	45	45	60	90	90	135	3	2	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	3	3	
Katatale	150	150	75	75	45	45	45	60	90	105	4	3	2	2	1	1	1	2	2	3	3	
Fort Maquire	180	180	105	105	60	60	45	45	45	75	4	4	3	3	2	2	1	2	2	3	3	
Vinginhoma	210	210	135	135	90	90	60	45	45	45	5	5	4	4	3	3	2	2	2	3	3	
Mankarai	210	210	135	135	90	90	60	45	45	45	5	5	4	4	3	3	2	2	2	3	3	
Fort Johnston	255	255	180	180	135	135	105	75	45	45	4	4	4	4	3	3	2	2	2	3	3	

Nachtpreise

für Güter pro Tonne:

	Langenburg	Karonga	Zephal	Musilali	Mankara	Ufuma	Katatale	Fort Maquire	Vinginhoma	Mankarai	Fort Johnston
Langenburg	30	45	45	75	75	105	105	120	120	150	
Karonga	30	45	45	75	75	105	105	120	120	150	105
Zephal	45	45	30	30	30	60	60	75	75	105	105
Musilali	45	45	30	30	30	60	60	75	75	105	105
Mankara	75	75	30	30	30	30	30	45	45	75	75
Ufuma	75	75	30	30	30	30	30	45	45	75	75
Katatale	105	105	60	60	30	30	30	30	30	45	45
Fort Maquire	105	105	60	60	30	30	30	30	30	45	45
Vinginhoma	120	120	75	75	45	45	30	30	30	30	30
Mankarai	120	120	75	75	45	45	30	30	30	30	30
Fort Johnston	150	150	105	105	75	75	45	45	30	30	30

Die Preise verstehen sich in Rupien.

Die Fahrpreise für Europäer sind mit Verpflegung ohne Getränke. 15 Rupien = 1 £ englisch.
Die Tonne rechnet zu 1000 Kilogramm bzw. 40 Kubikfuß englisch. Die Berechnung nach Maß
oder Gewicht bleibt der Wahl des Kapitäns überlassen. Minimalfracht: 5 Rupien.

Jeder Europäer hat 50 Kilogramm Freigez. d.
Als Zahlungsmittel gelten nur deutsche und indische Regierungsrupien, Goldgeld und Wechsel
auf das Kaiserliche Gouvernement von Deutsch-Ostafrika.

Der Kaiserliche Gouverneur.

gg. v. Schele.

Figure 1: Tour schedule of the *Hermann von Wissmann*, in: Deutsches Kolonialblatt V (1894), 244.

zu Hohenlohe-Langenburg (1832-1913).³⁰ The suitability of the place had been judged by Harry Johnston already before, who had planned to build a British harbor at Parumbira. However, this was made impossible by the Anglo-German Treaty of 1890 setting the border between the two colonial empires.³¹ Until 1894 a schedule was developed upon which the *Hermann von Wissmann* operated. The ship toured the lake in monthly intervals docking in places both in German and British claimed areas, mostly lying in British Central Africa though (see figure 1).³²

The impact the steamer had in terms of logistical, economical and especially power-political aspects was remarkable and widely recognized. Governor Friedrich von Schele (1847-1904) wrote after his return from an expedition to the lake that any influence the

25 Iliffe 1987 (see FN 17), 95.

26 Max Prager: Die deutsche Dampfer-Expedition zum Nyassa-See, Kiel 1901.

27 Köppen 2004 (see FN 24), 168.

28 Harry Johnston: British Central Africa. An Attempt to Give Some Account of a Portion of the Territories under British Influence North of the Zambezi, New York 1897, 117.

29 Prager 1901 (see FN 26), 321-322.

30 Beschreibung der Station Langenburg von der Firma Miller & Sohn, Berlin, 25th April 1896, in: Bundesarchiv Berlin (hereinafter BArch) R 1001/1037, 31. Langenburg was later known as “Alt-Langenburg”, while the German station was moved to “Neu-Langenburg” further inland.

31 Johnston 1897 (see FN 28), 94.

32 Anonymous: Fahrplan für den Dampfer des Kaiserlich deutschen Gouvernements „Hermann von Wissmann“ auf dem Nyassa, in: Deutsches Kolonialblatt V (1894), 244.

German station Langenburg possessed in the area was only due to the *Hermann von Wissmann*, which led African leaders even from far remote areas to send embassies to the station.³³ The ship's first captain, Max Prager, noted with pride that not only was the "Wissmann" the biggest ship on the lake but also the fastest and thus superior to all British ships.³⁴ This sentiment seemed to be shared by the British. Commissioner Johnston was well aware of the "Wissmann's" capability, especially in comparison to the ships he had at his disposal. On 18th October 1895, he wrote to Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Robert Gascoyne-Cecil (1830-1903) complaining about the inadequate character of British ships on Lake Malawi using the German steamer as an argument:

*"The fine German steamer, the 'Hermann von Wissmann', plies on the Lake in all weathers and has no need to concern herself with its storms, as she is perfectly safe. [...] I think seeing also the activity of the Germans in this part of Africa it would be a pity that the English government should no longer have its flag flying on Lake Nyasa."*³⁵

Michael Pesek argues that the colonial state had to rely on staging its power using symbolic or material violence in order to hide its insufficient presence in the colonized country. The colonial state could only show presence where its representatives appeared in person. Colonial stations, such as the Bomas in German East Africa, were thus islands of colonial rule in a vast territory only to be crossed by military expeditions.³⁶ This was especially true for the early years of colonial rule. For the case at hand, the *Herrmann von Wissmann* functioned as a kind of mobile station or Boma showing the presence of the German colonial state to all inhabitants of Lake Malawi's shores, which included the British counterpart.

33 Friedrich von Schele: Bericht über die Expedition des Gouverneurs von Deutsch-Ostafrika in das Gebiet des Rufidji und Ulanga, am Nyassasee und in das Hinterland von Kilwa, in: *Deutsches Kolonialblatt* V (1894), 229.

34 Prager 1901 (see FN 26), 336.

35 Harry Johnston to Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, Zomba, 18th October 1895, in: The National Archives, London (hereinafter TNA), FO 2/89, 318, 319.

36 Michael Pesek: Die Grenzen des kolonialen Staates in Deutsch-Ostafrika 1890-1914, in: Alain Chatriot / Dieter Gosewinkel (eds.): *Figurationen des Staates in Deutschland und Frankreich 1870-1945 / Les figures de l'État en Allemagne et en France*, Munich 2006, 117-140.

The Connection: Berndt, the "Wissmann", and the Collection

In February 1894, Theodor Berndt replaced Max Prager as captain of the *Hermann von Wissmann*.³⁷ Although the background of this appointment is not known, it seems likely that Berndt's acquaintance with Prager played a role. Besides his duties as captain of the ship, Berndt became acting commander of Langenburg as well.³⁸ The collection he donated to the Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover was registered in the museum's inventory on 26th October 1896. Appropriations of the cultural assets must hence have taken place within this period of roughly two and a half years.

The collection is linked to different groups living around the lake. The role the *Hermann von Wissmann* must have played in the transfer of physical custody is obvious when bearing in mind the state of infrastructure in the 1890s. Travelling within the country was only possible for well-equipped caravans. This meant first and foremost engaging porters and providing supplies – a time-consuming and often dangerous enterprise. Since railroads were not constructed yet, most distances around Lake Malawi were covered by ship. For instance, the above-mentioned expedition to the lake Governor von Schele undertook in 1893/94, around 400 men plus cargo, was transported around the shores by the steamer.³⁹ It is therefore to be assumed that only cultural assets attributed to groups living close to Langenburg or further inland were not appropriated by Berndt performing his duties on the ship. This is the case for two spears and a large strip of linen fabric linked to the Hehe⁴⁰ (see figure 2) and 24 objects coming from "Kondeland", a term used by the Germans referring to the Kipengere Range and its surrounding area.⁴¹ The latter objects are three cups, two made of wood, the other made

37 Paul Fromm: [No title], in: *Deutsches Kolonialblatt* V (1894), 306.

38 Kaiserlicher Gouverneur von Deutsch-Ostafrika Friedrich von Schele to Reichskanzler Chlodwig zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst, Dar es Salaam, 27th April 1895, in: BArch R 1001/1037, 1.

39 Friedrich von Schele: Bericht über die Expedition des Gouverneurs von Deutsch-Ostafrika in das Gebiet des Rufidji und Ulanga, am Nyassasee und in das Hinterland von Kilwa, in: *Deutsches Kolonialblatt* V (1894), 230.

40 Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover, Department of Ethnology, Registration, Inventory, ET 3109-3111.

41 Art. "Konde", in: Heinrich Schnee (ed.): *Deutsches Koloniallexikon*, vol. II, H-O, Leipzig 1920, 350-351.

of raffia, a robe made of tree bark, two iron tooth-picks, four metal rings, a shield covered with fur, twelve spears and a dignitary staff.⁴² Concerning the first group of objects, a connection to the war against the Hehe (1890-1898) is very likely, although a direct involvement of the naval officer Berndt can be ruled out. The campaign against Uhehe in October 1894 was conducted by land forces who split up after the conquest of the Hehe Capital Kalenga. The 6th company received the order to march to Langenburg and to stay there for a while.⁴³ Most likely, they brought spoils of war with them which could form the source of the three objects linked to the Hehe and given to the museum in Hanover. The second convolute might have been appropriated in the course of expeditions frequenting the area which Berndt led in his role as acting commander of Langenburg.⁴⁴



Figure 2: Spear, Hehe, before 1896, wood, iron and brass, 138 × 3,8 cm; Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover, ET 3109.

The majority of the collection can thus in one way or another be linked to Berndt's service on the steamer. Approaching the collection's provenance means therefore reconstructing the *Hermann von Wissmann's* activities on Lake Malawi. As the monthly schedule shows, the ship toured the lake regularly, making stops at all places where Europeans were known to live, transporting passengers, goods and delivering mail.⁴⁵ It is entirely possible

and, in many cases, likely that Berndt bought objects at these places. Large quantities of the collection are however attributed to groups known to be fierce enemies of the British colonial administration and engaged in bitter fights for supremacy: the Yao in today's Southern Malawi and the Ngoni in Central and Northern Malawi. Given these circumstances and keeping in mind the German involvement in military operations of the British Central African administration against the Yao already during the expedition that brought the steamer to Lake Malawi, it seems probable that many cultural assets have been acquired by violent means. Two incidents of trans-imperial cooperation and connectivity might shed some more light on possible appropriations.

Mbamba Bay, 30th August 1895

On 17th January 1896, Adolf Marschall von Bieberstein (1842-1912), German State Secretary for Foreign Affairs, received a letter from the British ambassador to Germany, Sir Frank Lascelles (1841-1920), in which the British government expressed its gratitude for Captain Berndt taking action against lakeshore people in German claimed territory. A group of men from the *Pioneer*, a ship of the British Central Africa administration, had landed at Mbamba Bay,⁴⁶ a place close to the border to Portuguese East Africa, and had thereupon been attacked by the residents:

*"Sir H. Johnston reports that Captain Berndt, the Acting German Administrator, as soon as the incident was brought to his notice, proceeded to the spot, severely punished the parties implicated in the attack and established a German station then."*⁴⁷

The German Foreign Office was caught by surprise. As they had no prior knowledge to this attack, an enquiry was sent to the colonial administration in Dar es Salaam. On 27th February 1896, the Foreign

42 Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover, Department of Ethnology, Registration, Inventory, ET 3085-3108.

43 Friedrich von Schele: Ueber den bisherigen Verlauf des Feldzuges gegen die Wahehe, in: *Deutsches Kolonialblatt* VI (1895), 43.

44 One of these expeditions is described by Berndt: Theodor Berndt: Ueber einen Zug durch das Wakondegebiet, in: *Deutsches Kolonialblatt* VII (1896), 372.

45 Prager 1901 (see FN 26), 411.

46 In German sources, the place is written "Mpamba Bay", while British sources refer to it as "Mbamba Bay". Today, the latter version may be regarded as established in both languages.

47 Frank Lascelles to Baron von Marschall, Berlin, 17th January 1896, in: BArch R 1001/1037, 22.

Office finally received the desired information.⁴⁸ The report forwarded by the colonial government was written by Berndt and dated from 23rd October 1895.⁴⁹ The British administration on the other hand had already been informed by Berndt on 9th September 1895, who made the events known to its own government not until 15th October 1895.⁵⁰ This does not only attest to the better communication network of the British Empire in contrast to the German Empire, but it makes also clear that the German officials in Langenburg paid a lot more attention to satisfy their British counterparts than to inform their own government. In fact, Berlin only learned about the incident because Harry Johnston specifically recommended to express satisfaction towards the German government.

Combining the relevant sources preserved in British and German archives allows for a reconstruction of the attack on Mbamba Bay. According to Harry Johnston, the *Pioneer* was caught by a storm and looking for shelter at Mbamba Bay. A few crew members around the ship's doctor disembarked but were then attacked by the Wampoto who inhabited the place. They managed to capture one of the doctor's servants, referred to as "the boy".⁵¹ The British pursued them, got hold of the servant and left the place, heading for Langenburg where they told Theodor Berndt what had happened.⁵² Following Berndt's report to Dar es Salaam, the *Pioneer* reached Langenburg on 28th August 1895 and made the incident known to him. Here, the story begins to differ in detail. The captured "boy" is not mentioned, instead Berndt writes about a crew member of the *Pioneer* bringing the doctor to the shore. This man, a "British subject", would have been attacked upon his return to the ship and robbed of his clothes. Furthermore, he

would have specifically asked the *Pioneer's* captain for retribution against the Wampoto "for this insult of the British flag", who then turned to Langenburg to realize his demand.⁵³

Berndt took 165 men in total on the *Hermann von Wissmann* and set off for Mbamba Bay, which the ship reached on 30th August 1895. He disembarked to enter into negotiations with the Africans, as he reports it. He also states the residents of Mbamba Bay would have turned against Europeans who had attempted to land at the place before. According to Berndt, the inhabitants of Mbamba Bay were not willing to negotiate whereupon he ordered his men to occupy the village. He does not tell what he intended to negotiate about or what his demands were. Instead, he claims that the residents would have attacked his men and a fight commenced. The villagers then retreated to caves nearby and Berndt's party burned down the place. During the night, negotiations were opened. Berndt 'allowed' his opponents to resettle at the place but obliged them to erect a German base and provide it with food. Furthermore, he ordered a tribute of 46 goats from which three were to be given to the crew-member of the *Pioneer* as a compensation for the alleged attack.⁵⁴

Regarding casualties, the reports again differ. In his letter to the British colonial administration from 9th September 1895, Berndt mentions three dead villagers,⁵⁵ whereas in his report for Dar es Salaam from 23rd October, he refers to just one man killed in the fight.⁵⁶ It can only be speculated why Berndt reported different figures, but it seems certain that he wanted to present himself as a determined partner, ready to take drastic action and with high respect for his British counterparts. He writes: "Sir, as you will observe by the above statement, I have brought punishment upon the offenders as quickly and energetically as possible. I trust that this revenge for the insult of the British flag will give you satisfaction."⁵⁷

48 Auswärtiges Amt to Hermann von Wissmann, Berlin, 30th January 1896, in: BArch R 1001/1037, 24; Herrmann von Wissmann to Reichskanzler Chlodwig zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst, Dar es Salaam, 27th February 1896, in: BArch R 1001/1037, 25.

49 Theodor Berndt: Bericht an das Kaiserliche Gouvernement, Langenburg, 23rd October 1895, in: BArch R 1001/1037, 26, 27.

50 Theodor Berndt to Capt. P. Cullen, R. N. R., Senior Naval Officer, Fort Johnston, 9th September 1895, in: TNA, FO 2/89, 303; Harry Johnston to Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, Zomba, 15th October 1895, in: TNA, FO 2/89, 305.

51 Probably an underage African. It was common among many Europeans in Africa to employ young Africans as servants, often freed slaves. Fabian 2000 (see FN 22), 31.

52 Harry Johnston to Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, Zomba, 15th October 1895, in: TNA, FO 2/89, 305.

53 Theodor Berndt: Bericht an das Kaiserliche Gouvernement, Langenburg, 23rd October 1895, in: BArch R 1001/1037, 26.

54 Theodor Berndt: Bericht an das Kaiserliche Gouvernement, Langenburg, 23rd October 1895, in: BArch R 1001/1037, 26, 27.

55 Theodor Berndt to Capt. P. Cullen, R. N. R., Senior Naval Officer, Fort Johnston, 9th September 1895, in: TNA, FO 2/89, 303.

56 Theodor Berndt: Bericht an das Kaiserliche Gouvernement, Langenburg, 23rd October 1895, in: BArch R 1001/1037, 26.

57 Theodor Berndt to Capt. P. Cullen, R. N. R., Senior Naval Officer, Fort Johnston, 9th September 1895, in: TNA, FO 2/89, 303.

The case of Mbamba Bay accounts for an exemplary degree of cooperation and connectivity between the two colonial empires, directed against the lake-side population. The Germans, eager to please and impress the British, were ready to turn against local people living on German claimed territory without hearing them out before attacking them. The fact that both governments, the German and the British, showed themselves satisfied with the destruction of the village and the killing of several of its inhabitants as compensation for either the stealing of a man's clothes or the capturing of a doctor's servant indicates that acts of colonial violence involving the other colonial power and directed against the lakeshore African population were perceived to be adequate.

The attack on Mbamba Bay also has implications for the examined cultural assets. Acts like this may be classified as so-called 'punitive expeditions' or 'punitive actions' which regularly resulted in destruction and killing but also in plunder.⁵⁸ There is evidence that plunder has taken place in this case as well. First, there is the cultural attribution given to the villagers by Harry Johnston, who refers to them as "Wa-Mpoto".⁵⁹ Ten of the cultural assets given by Berndt to the Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover are also linked to this group: a bow, three arrows, two throwing arrows, a bag made of cat fur, a necklace made of beetle shells, a bracelet made of dried berries, beetle shells used as snuff tins and an amulet made of beetle shells and beads (see figure 3).⁶⁰ The context of appropriation is not stated within the documentary preserved at the museum and neither does Berndt mention, at least not directly, to have taken objects from the village. One passage in his letter to the British colonial administration could indicate that plunder did happen though: "Further, the people lost much of their movable property [...]"⁶¹ This property could naturally have fallen victim to the flames as well. Nonetheless, it seems likely that

plunder occurred. While it cannot be proven that the ten objects attributed to the Wampoto were brought into Berndt's custody as a result of the attack on Mbamba Bay, the possibility must still be taken into account.

The example of Mbamba Bay illustrates the possible appropriation of parts of the collection in German East Africa by acts of violence. As revealing as this might seem, it is by no means surprising when seen in the light of the regularly occurring military expeditions to crush resistance against colonial rule. Appropriations of cultural assets could have happened as 'bycatch' in this context. The surprising fact in this example is the British involvement, hence the trans-imperial dimension. It seems conceivable that trans-imperial cooperation and connectivity could offer a possible explanation for further appropriations at the other side of the colonial border, too. As has been shown, German military involvement in the British claimed sphere of influence had already been a factor during the expedition that brought the *Hermann von Wissmann* to Lake Malawi when the Germans supported British colonial forces against the Yao. Cultural assets attributed to the Yao are also part of the collection handed over by Berndt, but he had not been part of the expedition. According to him, these objects originated from British Central Africa and not from the Yao living in German East Africa. The objects in question are two musical instruments, a pipe, four knives, two wooden clubs, two axes, a sword, four



Figure 3: Amulet and jewelry, Mpoto, before 1896, beetle shell and glass bead cords, 10 × 13 × 4 cm, Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover, ET 1320.

58 See for instance, Eva Künkler: *Koloniale Gewalt und der Raub kultureller Objekte und menschlicher Überreste. Eine systematische Übersicht zu Militärgewalt und sogenannten Strafexpeditionen in deutschen Kolonialgebieten in Afrika (1884-1919)*, Magdeburg 2022, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25360/01-2022-00001>.

59 Harry Johnston to Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, Zomba, 15th October 1895, in: TNA, FO 2/89, 305.

60 Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover, Department of Ethnology, Registration, Inventory, ET 3112-3122.

61 Theodor Berndt to Capt. P. Cullen, R. N. R., Senior Naval Officer, Fort Johnston, 9th September 1895, in: TNA, FO 2/89, 303.

arm rings made of metal, two snuff tins made of beads in the shape of beetles, one made of horn and finally an amulet made of claws of a sea eagle.⁶² By now, the circumstances of the acquisitions are not yet known and further research has to be conducted. The following example of the Second Karonga War in 1895 shows that German military involvement in British Central Africa continued after Berndt's appointment as captain of the *Hermann von Wissmann*, hence indicating possible approaches to further parts of the collection.

Karonga, December 1895

The Karonga Wars took place in today's Northern Malawi around the town of Karonga, the first war between 1887 and 1889, the second in late 1895. The two opposing parties were the British African Lakes Company (ALC) and later the British colonial administration and their allies, the Ngonde of Northern Malawi, facing Swahili traders under the leadership of Mlozi (died 1895), originally from the coast but by then established in the area, and the Henga-Kamanga. The conflict first became known as "Arab Wars", labelling Swahili traders and especially slave traders as "Arab" who were identified as the main enemy in Africa by British society. Since Arabs were not involved, the term is actually misleading.⁶³ The same pattern can be found in Germany where the war of resistance of the East African coastal population from 1888 to 1890 was long known as "Arab uprising".⁶⁴ So both Imperial Germany and the British Empire were experiencing their own 'Arab War' roughly at the same time. In what was to become British Central Africa, the British and Ngonde forced a peace treaty in 1889 with limitations especially concerning slave raiding and settlement questions.⁶⁵ In 1895, the fighting resumed during a brief campaign conducted

by British colonial forces under Johnston which saw the latter victorious.

The reasons for the conflict have long been disputed. The narrative established in the colonial era saw the Swahili as the aggressors, plotting with the Henga-Kamanga to take control of the land and sell the Ngonde as slaves.⁶⁶ Owen Kalinga has offered a more plausible explanation. According to him, the conflict arose due to a combination of commercial rivalry between the ALC and the Swahili and local politics involving the Ngonde and Henga-Kamanga. Before the arrival of both the Europeans and the Swahili in today's Northern Malawi, the Ngonde lived in constant conflict with the Nyakyusa in what was later to become German East Africa. Forming the inferior part in this confrontation, the Ngonde convinced the Henga-Kamanga, who had a fierce reputation as warlike people, to settle in between them and the Nyakyusa in order to act like a buffer. The same logic applied to the establishment of the Swahili's trading post at Mbande in the early 1880s whose arrival was thus welcomed by the Ngonde. This fragile equilibrium of power was turned upside-down by the arrival of the ALC in 1884. At first, the British traders maintained friendly relationships with all parties present. However, their presence ensured cordial relations between the Ngonde and the Nyakyusa, which were former enemies, by establishing tight trading networks binding both to the ALC. With their hostilities having come to an end, the Henga-Kamanga were no longer needed in the eyes of the Ngonde and seen more and more as a disturbing factor. On the other hand, the Swahili soon feared to be driven out of the local trade.⁶⁷

Between 1887 and 1889, the Germans had not played any major role in the conflict. Admittedly, the situation in Northern Malawi was closely observed by the authorities at Langenburg starting very soon after the station's establishment. The annual report of Langenburg for 1894/95 proudly presents the German successes in curbing the slave trade and expresses regret about the British failure: "Against the notorious slave traders in the northern part of the English territory next to no measures have been undertaken so far,

62 Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover, Department of Ethnology, Registration, Inventory, ET 3177-3196.

63 Owen Kalinga: The Karonga War. Commercial Rivalry and Politics of Survival, in: The Journal of African History 21 (1980), No. 2, 209-218, here: 209.

64 See for instance Rochus Schmidt: Geschichte des Araberaufstandes in Ost-Afrika, Seine Entstehung, seine Niederwerfung und seine Folgen. Frankfurt a. O. 1892; Art. "Araberaufstand", in: Heinrich Schnee (ed.): Deutsches Koloniallexikon, vol. I., A-G, Leipzig 1920, 68-71.

65 P. T. Terry: The Arab War on Lake Nyasa 1887-1895, Part II (An Account of the Campaign against the Slaver Mlozi), in: The Society of Malawi Journal 18 (1965), No. 2, 13-52, here: 40.

66 P. T. Terry: The Arab War on Lake Nyasa 1887-1895, Part I, in: The Nyasaland Journal 18 (1965), No. 1, 55-77, here: 56.

67 Kalinga 1980 (see FN 63), 211-216.

probably out of consideration for the trade.”⁶⁸ A purely humanitarian reason for this regret can be ruled out. It was rather self-interest that motivated the German authorities who claimed that their territory had been affected by slave raids conducted by the Swahili as well.⁶⁹ Furthermore, Johnston reports that the trade route between Lake Tanganyika and Lake Malawi had effectively been closed by Mlozi’s men in mid-1885,⁷⁰ thus also affecting German interests.

By autumn 1895, it had become clear that the strong position Britain found itself in after the peace treaty of 1889 was no longer existent. On the contrary, Johnston had to admit towards London that “The Arabs are at present masters of the Noth [sic!] Nyasa District and only do not make war on us because we do not attempt to interfere with their slave-trade”.⁷¹ So he, like the Germans, saw a necessity to take action against the Swahili. But until then, the Yao were seen as an immediate threat to British rule, and not Mlozi and his allies. The major Yao leaders were surprisingly quickly defeated so that Johnston wrote to London on 15th November 1895 stating his intention to attack the Swahili and Henga-Kamanga, since he now had a well-equipped and combat-proven force at his disposal for another month, before the rainy season would start.⁷²

Time was probably the most important factor to calculate with. Conducting a military campaign during the rainy season was practically impossible, so it was crucial to reach all goals set within one month. The main problem was that Johnston and his soldiers were in Zomba, the protectorate’s capital, in the South of Lake Malawi but had yet to get to the most northern district of British Central Africa. As stated before, transport and logistics remained a big issue until railroads were constructed. In 1895, the only option to reach the northern end of the protectorate within this short amount of time was by ship. British concerns

about their naval forces on the lake have already been mentioned above. It was in this situation that the trans-imperial factor started to play in again. According to both British and German sources, Theodor Berndt had urged Johnston to take action against the Swahili traders.⁷³ Johnston now took advantage of Berndt’s pressing and asked the captain to provide the *Hermann von Wissmann* as a troop carrier for the British forces:

*“I had an interview with her [the Hermann von Wissmann’s, M.T.] Commander, Captain Berndt, and relying on him as a man of honour, communicated my plans to him, and asked whether I could hire the German steamer to carry them out. He at once assented and proposed terms which were generous financially as they provided merely for the working expenses of the steamer. I may say here that my plans were kept absolutely secret by Captain Berndt, and that no hint reached the Arabs as to our intentions.”*⁷⁴

The British paid a daily fee of 15 pound sterling and had the ship at their complete disposal from 25th November onwards. After the successful campaign, the “Wissmann” was expected to ship the troops back to the lake’s south end again.⁷⁵ There is no detailed report on the process of this cooperation. It can be assumed that the steamer’s crew handled the ship but did not participate in the fighting. At least, this would have been mentioned. At first glance, a direct connection of the Karon-ga War to the cultural assets in question does not seem obvious. Neither are there objects attributed to the Swahili nor to the Henga-Kamanga. What arouses suspicion though, are 40 objects attributed to the Ngoni: ten ivory rings, 13 pieces of ear jewelry made of wood or ivory, a blowing horn, two spears and 14 arm rings made of elephant sole (see figure 4). Especially the objects related to elephants are highly prestigious and valuable also considering the importance of elephant hunting

68 Arnold von Eltz: Jahresbericht der Station Langenburg 1894/95, undated, in: BArch R 1001/1037, 4. Translated by the author.

69 Anonymous: Strafexpeditionen gegen Sklavenhändler in Britisch-Nyassaland, in: Deutsches Kolonialblatt VII (1896), 163-164.

70 Harry Johnston to Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, Zomba, 15th November 1895, in: TNA, FO 2/89, 414.

71 Harry Johnston to Sir Clement Hill, Foreign Office, Zomba, 5th October 1895, in: TNA, FO 2/89, 269.

72 Harry Johnston to Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, Zomba, 15th November 1895, in: TNA, FO 2/89, 410.

73 Harry Johnston to Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, Zomba, 15th November 1895, in: TNA, FO 2/89, 415; Anonymous: Strafexpeditionen gegen Sklavenhändler in Britisch-Nyassaland, in: Deutsches Kolonialblatt VII (1896), 163-164.

74 Johnston 1897 (see FN 28), 137.

75 Harry Johnston to Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, Zomba, 15th November 1895, in: TNA, FO 2/89, 415.

and its relation to power building.⁷⁶ The Ngoni, like the Yao, had found themselves in fierce confrontations with the British until then.

The term “Ngoni”, as being used in Germany as well as in Britain at the time, can be misleading. It is commonly referred to a group originally from Southern Africa migrating northwards during the Mfecane under the leadership of their ruler Zwangendaba (c. 1785-1848), in the course of the migration conquering various people and eventually establishing themselves in today’s Malawi and Tanzania.⁷⁷ The Ngoni conquests led to the mass integration of young women and men into their ranks. In consequence, the Ngoni did not form a homogenous group defined by a common identity. Among the people integrated into the Ngoni forces were the Henga-Kamanga. They had split from the Ngoni around 1879 and settled down in the North of what was to become the British Central Africa Protectorate in 1891.⁷⁸ Nonetheless, these experiences shaped them profoundly. “The Henga may have revolted from the Ngoni but nevertheless remained Ngoni in spirit and culture”, as Kalinga argues.⁷⁹ It thus seems possible that Theodor Berndt identified the Henga-Kamanga as Ngoni and attributed the above mentioned cultural assets to them. Ngoni lived both in British and German claimed territory, as did the Yao. However, it is clear that Berndt is referring to those living in today’s Malawi, as he localizes them in British Central Africa and calls them “Angoni”,⁸⁰ a term exclusively used for Ngoni in British territory at the time.⁸¹

In that case, the question remains how he might have appropriated the objects as it seems unlikely that the Germans were involved in the fighting. A possible explanation is furnished by a certain practice of looting applied during the First Karonga War. The commander of the ALC forces, Frederick Lugard (1858-1945), experienced some trouble in keeping up the discipline among his African



Figure 4: Ivory bracelet, Ngoni, before 1896, 9,8 × 8 × 1,1 cm, Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover, ET 3138.

auxiliaries, mostly comprised of Lakeside Tonga. To maintain control, he ordered that all loot was to be divided among the combatants after battle. He did not interdict looting, on the contrary: those who stopped looting because of the newly introduced order were to be shot.⁸² Although there is no mention of this practice in the Second Karonga War, it is conceivable that it was conducted again since it represented a common and long-established military behavior, by far not only in the British Empire’s colonial wars. Infamous examples are, for instance, the so-called prize agents during the Indian Rebellion of 1857 whose job it was to plunder by official order,⁸³ or the auctions of loot during the “Boxer War” (1900/01) at the British Legations in Peking.⁸⁴ If conducted in the Second Karonga War of 1895 as well, the German crew of the *Hermann von Wissmann* might have received parts of the loot.

76 See Brian Morris: The Ivory Trade and Chiefdoms in Pre-Colonial Malawi, in: The Society of Malawi Journal 59 (2006), No. 2, 6-23.

77 Christoph Marx: Südafrika. Geschichte und Gegenwart, Stuttgart 2012, 94-95.

78 Kalinga 1980 (see FN 63), 211.

79 Kalinga 1980 (see FN 63), 213.

80 Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover, Department of Ethnology, Registration, Inventory, ET 3123-3163.

81 Art. “Wangoni”, in: Heinrich Schnee (ed.): Deutsches Koloniallexikon, vol. III., P-Z, Leipzig 1920, 669-671.

82 Terry 1965 (see FN 65), 18.

83 1859: Prize Agents Extracting Treasure, commented by Felicity Bodenstein, in: Translocations. Ikonographie: A Collection of Commented Image Sources on Cultural Heritage Relocations since Antiquity, <http://transliconog.hypotheses.org/kommentierte-bilder-2/1859-prize-agents-extracting-treasure>, <16.05.2018>.

84 1900: The Auction of Loot in Peking during the Boxer Rebellion, commented by Christine Howald, in: Translocations. Ikonographie: A Collection of Commented Image Sources on Cultural Heritage Relocations Since antiquity, <https://transliconog.hypotheses.org/kommentierte-bilder-2/1900-the-auction-of-loot-in-pekking-during-the-boxer-rebellion>, <08.07.2019>. On aspects of looting during the “Boxer War”, also see Thomas Weißbrich: From Spoils of War to Gifts of State. Chinese ‘Boxer Flags’ and German Conceptions of History, 1900 to 1955, in: *transfer – Zeitschrift für Provenienzforschung und Sammlungsgeschichte / Journal for Provenance Research and the History of Collection* 1 (2022), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48640/tf.2022.1.91514>, 67-83.

The Second Karonga War did not remain the only case where the *Hermann von Wissmann* proved its usefulness to the British in suppressing African resistance. Shortly after the swift victory over Mlozi, the German steamer transported British troops southwards, dropping them at Kota Kota from where they marched west, attacking the Chewa leader Mwasi at Kasungu.⁸⁵ However, no objects of the collection could yet be linked to this attack.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The findings presented offer possible explanations how certain parts of the collection may have been appropriated by Theodor Berndt. He has likely profited from trans-imperial cooperation and connectivity to accumulate cultural assets from a wide range of people living around Lake Malawi. The period examined here was marked by colonial states in-the-making, that is to say that colonial rule was not yet widely accepted among the inhabitants of Lake Malawi's shores and that power resources of the young colonial administrations were limited. Since this applied to both the district of Langenburg in German East Africa as well as to the British Central Africa Protectorate, trans-imperial cooperation presented an opportunity to compensate for this weakness. The two main cases presented here show how the two colonial empires combined their resources to tackle African resistance. The German attack on Mbamba Bay, whether asked for by the British or not, clarifies the overall aim to establish European supremacy regardless of colonial borders and imperial jurisdictions. According to this logic, an attack on a British subject was to be seen as equal to an attack on a German subject.

The collection given by Berndt to the museum in Hanover reflects this trans-imperial history. It is a vivid example for colonialism in Africa as a joint European enterprise. Without the cooperation of the European competitor, early colonial rule around Lake Malawi could have possibly been challenged by African resistance. Without this cooperation, Captain Theodor Berndt on his part could not have appropriated large parts of his collection. The objects are therefore a reminder that


for some cases a wider frame of analysis must be applied when approaching the provenance of collections from colonial contexts.

There is no proof that the cultural assets in question were indeed looted from Karonga or Mbamba Bay. However, the suspicion is sufficient and cannot be ignored. Therefore, the collection should be regarded as a potential product of colonial violence, many objects could have been forcefully taken from their original owners and contexts. In this sense, the collection is symbolically charged and reflects not only trans-imperial cooperation and connectivity to suppress the local African population around Lake Malawi but also trans-imperial resistance by African players against any form of European colonial domination.

One of the next steps concerning the collection is to deal with 'the outstanding debt' by entering into discussion with representatives of the relevant source communities. Their points of view will enrich the debate and shape the future of the collection. This will also broaden the by now rather Eurocentric perspective on the object's provenance. Oral traditions as well as archival resources can provide further information. Connections to Tanzania have already been established, outreach to Malawi should follow. Further research will be conducted, focusing for instance on individual parts of the collections, such as the Yao and Nyakyusa objects, and their cultural background. In the end, an extensive discussion incorporating multiple perspectives shall bring transparency and will lead to an agreement on the future handling of the collection.

⁸⁵ See David Stuart-Mogg: The Mwasi [Mwase] Expedition, in: The Society of Malawi Journal 74 (2021), No. 1, 37-51.

ORCID®

Maik Tusch 

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4891-4652>

List of picture credits and copyrights

Figure 1: Public Domain

Figures 2-4: © Lower Saxony State Museum Hannover. Photograph: Ute Thiessen

Reference

Maik Tusch: Cross-Border Appropriations and Colonial Cooperation. A Trans-Imperial Approach to a Collection from Lake Malawi, in: *transfer – Zeitschrift für Provenienzforschung und Sammlungsgeschichte / Journal for Provenance Research and the History of Collection* 3 (2024), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48640/tf.2024.1.108907>, 205-218.