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Diplomatic Gift in East Africa at the End of the 19th Century: Modalities and Issues of a Gift-Exchange Between the British Consulate in Zanzibar and a Chagga Chief in 1883

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Introduction

Dated December 1883, a letter, which was found in the Zanzibar National Archives (ZNA), proves evidence of a gift-exchange between the British Consulate in Zanzibar and the Chagga chief Rindi of Moshi (also known as “Mandara” or “Mandala” by the Europeans), in the region of Kilimanjaro. In this letter, the British vice-consul at Mombasa evoked the postponement of a despatch of gifts to Moshi, due to the rain and to road dangers. This despatch would be finally sent during the spring of 1884, according to some other letters found in the British records of the ZNA.

This unheard anecdote enlightens the political relationships that could exist between a chiefdom of the interior of Africa and a European power in a pre-colonial context. In the 1880s, the British (and, to some extent, the Western world) was getting increasingly familiar with Mount Kilimanjaro and its area due to several expeditions that had been led since 1848; the area was also well known to the ivory and slave traders of the coast, since one of the caravan-roads leading to Lake Victoria and the interior of East Africa ran through what was called the “country of Chagga”, on the southern side of the Kilimanjaro. However, no political relation with the Swahili coast, the Sultanate of Zanzibar or any European institution such as the British Consulate in Zanzibar had yet been attested during this period, and no ties of vassalage between the Chagga chiefdoms and any other powers (on the coast or in the interior) seemed to have existed. It was only from 1885, with the simultaneous attempt by the British, the Germans and the Zanzibaris to seize the district of Kilimanjaro that the Chagga chiefdoms began to be submitted by treaties to different powers (leading in the end to the colonisation of the entire area by the German Empire).

Apart from the letter mentioned above, other papers found in the British Consular and Agency Records of the ZNA document the beginnings of a diplomatic relationship between the Chagga chiefdom of Moshi and the British Consulate in Zanzibar, in 1883 – that is to say, before any imperial power endeavoured any colonial move. This corpus includes several letters dated from 1883 and 1884 written either by Sir Goodridge, the British vice-consul at Mombasa to the Consulate in Zanzibar or by Sir John Kirk, the British consul-general at Zanzibar, to the Foreign Office

in London. Through these letters, we can follow the progress of the gifts’ despatch to Rindi and understand which consequences the British hoped it would have. Another interesting source to document this despatch is the consular book account for the year 1884, where all the items that were offered to the Chagga chief are listed. Last but not least, these documents also evoke in an allusive way that these gifts were, in fact, a response to a first gift offered by Rindi.¹

Thus, these documents testify to the existence of at least one gift-exchange between a Chagga polity and the British Consulate in 1883-1884. This exchange might be far from innocuous: anthropological works have indeed proven the symbolic significance of intercultural gift-exchanges as a transcultural media of social relationships (Malinowski 1922; Mauss 1923-1924). According to the Maussian gift-theory, a gift-exchange is driven by the three principles of giving, receiving and reciprocating. By giving, the donor suggests the initiation of a new relationship, and by accepting the gift and answering to it by another gift, the recipient signifies that he agrees to develop this relationship. In this case study, the donor and the recipient were two polities, which gives a diplomatic significance to this gift-exchange. Moreover, the nature of the gifts exchanged matters: by precious and luxurious gifts are signs of the importance partners give to the relationship being initiated. Once again, in this case, Rindi offered “ivory”, and the British answered by sending several manufactured items, such as weapons (including Snider rifles, which were used by the British Indian Army at the end of the 19th century), cloths or fabrics and other valuable articles.² From both sides, the gifts that were offered referred to the culture and environment of the donor at its best: on the one hand, the tropical forest-belt of Kilimanjaro, under which laid the chiefdom of Moshi, being an elephant country, ivory was one of the most valuable products of the area and its trade had enriched the Chagga chiefdoms; on the other hand, prized fabrics from India and valued weapons epitomised Great Britain’s industrial and imperial power.

The development of a new diplomatic relationship through this gift-exchange was important for both sides: why? Why initiating

¹ This study-case was led after fieldwork in the Zanzibar National Archives in summer 2018: most of the material found there was used in this paper. This fieldwork was conducted with the help of several grants awarded by IFRA Nairobi, the responsible laboratory (IHMC) and doctoral school (ED 540), to whom I am deeply grateful.

² Account of the “Return Presents sent to King Mandala of Chagga”, 1884 (ZNA, AA9/7)

the move of giving, and why answering positively to this move by receiving the gift and reciprocating it? Elucidating the interests at stake behind this exchange can give insight into the geopolitical momentum of the East African history at the end of the 19th century. Yet, this reflection should not be led without questioning the gift-giving practices as they were used and understood both by the Chagga chief and the British Consulate: indeed, we should not use sociological and anthropological theories of “the gift” to explain historical practices as if, as Gadi Algazi puts it, “some complete theory of the gift lied ready for historians to apply”, but rather try to analyse the historical contexts that brought out those specific cultural practices and their meanings (Algazi, Groebner and Jussen 2003). The gift Rindi sent might not have the same signification or the same motive as the one sent in return by the British Consulate, neither the signification the British thought it had. Admittedly, this paper solely relies on British documentation, which makes it more difficult to clarify Rindi’s expectations. While being aware of these limits, analysing this gift-exchange by speculating on its motives and observing its consequences can still give us some insights into East African political history and the way in which new relationships could be set up and shaped between two polities in East Africa in a pre-colonial context.

Rindi as the first donor of the gift-exchange: a clue of the Chagga chiefdoms’ rivalries in the 1880s?

According to the sources, Rindi initiated a gift to the British through two intermediaries, Adi bin Hamad and Hadiji Hatili, both identified as Chaggas.³ No precise dating of the consignment of the Chagga gift could be found, but we know it was not the first time that Rindi took the initiative to make contact with Europeans: in March 1878, he had sent a letter to the Church Missionary Society based in Frere Town, on the coast near Mombasa, asking the missionaries to send him a copy of the Bible.⁴ So, in the late 1870s and early 1880s, Rindi was willing to develop a relationship with the Europeans who had settled on the coast. Even earlier interactions had occurred with Europeans when the explorers Karl Klaus Von der Decken (1861-1863), Charles New (1871-1874) and Joseph Thomson (1883) visited Moshi. Thus, if ever the Swahili traders passing through Moshi had not told Rindi that Europeans were settling on the coast, Von der Decken, New and Thomson’s visits could not be unnoticed. In the same vein, European knowledge about Moshi resulted mostly from these exploratory expeditions and thanks to the information given by the Swahili traders.

How should we understand Rindi’s gift to the British Consulate on the coast? Was it driven by the desire to set up a diplomatic relation? Was Rindi expecting an answer? Gift-giving practices seem to have existed in East Africa during the pre-colonial period: such exchanges have indeed been documented between Swahili populations, or between the Sultans of Zanzibar and Western merchant-consuls (LaViolette 2008: 37; Meier and Purpura 2017). They might have prevailed in the interior as well, and more especially in the region of Kilimanjaro: anthropological studies have shown that the Chaggas were giving gifts to their chiefs to

obtain their favours (Moore and Puritt 1977: 32). Furthermore, Joseph Thomson wrote in his travel account that Rindi had been very disappointed by the fact that the British explorer had not first come with gifts and had then offered gifts that the chief judged inappropriate. As for Charles New, he did not offer Rindi any proper present when they met and was then plundered by him – mischief that we could interpret as Rindi’s willingness to get the fitting reward he thought a Chagga chief should get (New 1873: 285-286; Thomson 1885). On that basis, gift-giving practices also seem to have a symbolic significance for Rindi.

These elements about Rindi’s reaction to European explorers may lead us to assume that sending ivory to the British Consulate might have had a diplomatic motive. An hypothesis that could be suggested is that Rindi might have been willing to make a new alliance with Western powers. Anthropological studies on the Chagga showed that the different Chagga chiefdoms had rivalled with each other during the 19th century for the control of the trade in the Kilimanjaro area to warrant their security and their prosperity: aside from raiding each other and competing to attract caravans and carve out the biggest portion of the slave and ivory trades, chiefs were sending emissaries to the coastal towns to forge new alliances; keeping a Swahili at one’s court had long been a prestigious brand, and Rindi had already sent a tusk to the Sultan of Zanzibar; but now that the Europeans were known to have settled on the coast, adding some of them into one’s network of relationships would make the chiefdom even more prominent, impressive and respected (Stahl 1964; Moore and Puritt 1977; Clack 2009).⁵

This may explain also why Rindi (who, unlike the others, had been in contact with Europeans) had, in 1878, called for a copy of the Bible and missionaries; and when in 1883 he sent ivory to the British Consulate, it could be argued that he was looking for a new ally, and even hoping for some Western weapons in exchange.

The gifts to Rindi of Moshi: a tool for the empowerment of the British in East Africa?

If Rindi’s motives cannot be elucidated for certain, our sources are more loquacious about British reaction. Without any doubt, the British interpreted the Chagga gift as requiring a counter-gift; one may suggest that this understanding had been influenced by the diplomatic gift-giving practices that the British were used to in Europe and that had been of common practice between Europeans and non-Europeans in the Americas, Asia and Western Africa since the 16th century.

However, the British could have ignored Rindi’s gift. So, why did they answer with some of the most valuable items they could send? This should be considered in the context of the growing influence of the British power in East Africa at the end of the 19th century, through the intermediate of the British Consulate in Zanzibar.

Established in 1841, the British Consulate became, during the second part of the 19th century, a full-fledged actor in East Africa, gradually playing a significant role in the Sultanate of Zanzibar’s

³ Goodridge, vice-consul at Mombasa to Kirk, consul-general at Zanzibar, December 29th, 1883 (ZNA, AA2/38).

⁴ “Invitation from the King of Chagga”, *The Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record*, July 1878, pp. 448-449.

⁵ Later in the 1880s, during the Anglo-German scramble for East Africa, Rindi was also contacted by the Germans, and tried to benefit from German rivalry with the British.

policy. Best embodied at that time by the administrator and consul-general Sir John Kirk, the British Consulate interfered a lot in Zanzibar political issues. For instance, it actively fought the slave trade – a source of considerable enrichment for Zanzibar – and convinced the Sultanate to take several anti-slave trade measures, such as the banishment of all slave caravans on land in 1876. However, despite this treaty, the slave trade was still going on illegally, and one of the main actions of the British in East Africa was to try stopping the clandestine traders offshore and ashore. Moreover, the British Consulate was growing an essential knowledge and contact network on the East African coast. Indeed, at the end of the 19th century, this diplomatic institution played an active role in the European expeditions into the interior as a mediator between the explorers and the African polities: setting up new relations with new communities of the interior was a way to nurture and strengthen its network (Coupland 1939; Cooper 1977; Bennett 1978; Bennett 1986; Glassman 1995; Wilkinson 2015).

The gifts sent to Rindi can be understood through this double prism. Firstly, the valuable manufactured articles were a means of seducing him and making a new ally for future explorations. The numerous letters written by Sir John Kirk in the spring of 1884 show that he hoped that this gift-exchange would benefit to an expedition Harry Johnston was about to lead to Kilimanjaro⁶ – and thereafter, Johnston repeatedly told that it had helped him to gain the favours of the chief of Moshi (Johnston 1886). Secondly, the fight against slavery might have driven the fostering of such relationships. Indeed, the country of Chagga was renowned for playing its part in the slave trade (Cooper 1977: 127).⁷ Developing a diplomatic relationship could be seen as the first step to stop the flow of slaves coming from the hinterland. If this assumption were correct, it would mean that the Consulate was acting more and more independently from the Sultanate, even interfering into the Sultanate's prerogatives while trying to stop the slave trade on the hinterland. All in all, reciprocating Rindi's gifts can be seen as part of British attempts to extend an informal empire over East Africa.

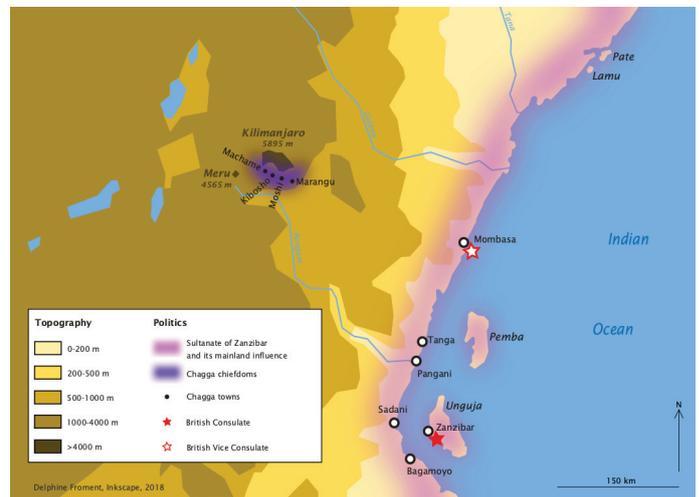
Long-term consequences of this gift-exchange

Finally, though Rindi's motives might not have been elucidated, and wrongly understood by the British, they still had important consequences on the British's representations of the Chagga and the European practices during the explorations.

Firstly, as soon as spring 1884, when Harry Johnston went to Moshi, he took with him many valuable gifts in order to make sure he pleased Rindi – a precaution neither New nor Thomson had taken before, and which contributed to the success of Johnston's visit to Moshi; so, the chief/Consul gift-exchange had influenced Johnston (Johnston 1886: 106). Secondly, and more importantly, by being the first and only Chagga chief to initiate a relationship with the British Consulate, Rindi managed to appear as the most important chief of the area. Indeed, since no other had interacted with the British, the latter began to think that there was only one "king" of the Chagga and that this king was Rindi – Europeans

⁶ Kirk to the Foreign Office, May 5th, 1884 (ZNA, AA1/36).

⁷Moreover, in 1878, a British agent of the Consulate in Zanzibar, Frederick Holmwood, called for the special attention of the Royal Geographical Society to the importance of this region as a field of exploration, because he had identified it as a transit area for the slave trade: "Report of the African Fund Committee to the Council, May 1878", *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, vol.22, n°6, 1877-1878, p. 470.



Picture 1: Location map of the 'Country of Chagga' and the East-African coast with Zanzibar archipelago @D.Froment

always refer to Rindi as the "King of Chagga" in our corpus. Thus, gift-exchange strengthened Rindi's position as the first interlocutor of the Europeans who visited the Kilimanjaro area: in the spring of 1884, Kirk told Johnston that he had "only to conciliate this personage in order to be able to range free and undisturbed over the whole Kilimanjaro" (Johnston 1886: 94). Although Johnston would have come back from his expedition announcing that he was actually only one of many Chagga chiefs, Rindi had become notorious enough to set himself and Moshi as a landmark in the Kilimanjaro area from the European viewpoint: in the 1880s, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) established its station in his domain, the German East African Company sent him a representative in order to incorporate Kilimanjaro in their territories, and Hans Meyer started each of his journeys to Kilimanjaro from Moshi (Meyer 1890: 78). Of course, Moshi might have benefited from a good position on the caravan-roads, making it easier for the foreigners to reach the town, but Rindi's relations with the Europeans certainly contributed to increasing its importance in the area.

Furthermore, the misunderstanding of Rindi's status in Chagga region led to a simplification of the geopolitics of the area and confirmed the European representation of a unified "country of Chagga", of which the missionaries of the CMS had asserted the existence back in the 1840s when they arrived on the East African coast: for Europeans, the Chaggas were more likely to have a political identity, since they had a single king to rule them all. In this way, Rindi's move encouraged the Europeans to think of a "Chagga identity" (Bender 2013).

Conclusion

The gift sent by Rindi was a windfall for the British Consulate, who seized the occasion to make a new ally, using the gift-giving practice as a tool for extending its contact network and informal empire in East Africa. However, the British were certainly not the only ones who used an extended contact network in order to empower themselves in East Africa, since the Chagga chief was the actual initiator of the exchange, for purposes that might

Private manuscript

Return Present sent King Mandala of Chagga
1854

April 15	Paid Jairam Sewji for Agent Mombasa	367
	Paid at Mombasa	51	8	..
	Liability on return of presents			
June 2	Paid Jairam Sewji for Agent Mombasa	174	6	6
	<i>Prescuti</i>			
	1 box 6 th gun			
	1 box 3 rd gun			
	3 pieces of lead			
	200 lbs powder			
	1 Snider rifle			
	300 Snider cartridges			
	1 gold cloth pillow			
	1 piece Kimboko			
	1 piece scarlet velvet			
	packing the above		10	
	Freight to Mombasa			
Dec 20	Oversey gun		30	
	Clock		20	
	Chain Billingshield		100	
	present		30	

W

Picture 1: List of the gifts sent by the British Consulate of Zanzibar to Rindi, the Chagga chief of Moshi (Zanzibar National Archives, AA9/7) Photography @D.Froment

be more difficult to clarify because of the lack of sources, but might as well be driven by a willingness of empowerment through making a new and prestigious ally. Yet, if this gift-exchange tended to materialise an official diplomatic relation between Chaggas and Europeans, we should not overestimate its role in this evolution. It was part of a broader process of exploration of the Kilimanjaro area: since it had already been visited several times, Moshi was already slowly growing as a Chagga landmark in the area in the Western minds. However, it is clear that this gift-exchange encouraged the British to see Rindi as an indispensable interlocutor, increasing the importance of Moshi in the geopolitics of the area – such importance that would be held under the German rule. Therefore, this gift-exchange is not a turning point in the representations the Europeans had of the Chaggas, but rather a confirmation of them.

Finally, and apart from the question of the consequences of this gift-exchange, the question of its modalities are also quite interesting: they point out that in this pre-colonial context, both actors, British and Chaggas, were important in the establishment of diplomatic relationships; and, what is more, that the Chagga chief was the one who initiated this interaction.

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Biography

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