Introduction
Lakes, Oceans, and Littorals in History

Mohammed bin Khalfan el-Barwani arrived on the shores of Lake Tanganyika sometime between the end of 1876 and early 1879. He was born in c.1855 in Lindi on the East African coast into a family with kinship ties to Oman. He was educated in Zanzibar, he was a member of the Qadiriyya Brotherhood, and he was soon to negotiate his entry into the most influential commercial network in nineteenth-century East Africa. This commercial network was funded by a Kachchhi firm, the most prominent representative of which in eastern Africa was a member of the Omani sultan of Zanzibar’s court. As Mohammed’s prominence grew on the shores of Lake Tanganyika, he earned the nickname Rumaliza, which translates as ‘The Terminator’ or ‘The Finisher’. His rise is synonymous with several well-known phenomena in nineteenth-century East African history, including increasing levels of militarism in politics; increasing influence of traders emanating from East Africa’s coast and islands (coastal traders) over interior regions’ affairs; and East Africa’s Great Lakes region’s integration with the world economy. Yet, a deeper reflection on Rumaliza’s commercial, religious, and kinship associations reveals a history with additional layers and contexts. Rumaliza’s arrival on the shores of Lake Tanganyika at the end of the 1870s was part of a broader trend that began in the early part of the nineteenth century in which phenomena traditionally associated with littoral regions of the wider Indian Ocean World (IW) entered East Africa’s Great Lakes region for the first time.

At the time of Rumaliza’s arrival on Lake Tanganyika’s shores, ‘a great immigration’ in the opposite direction was taking place. This was a migration of populations referred to as ‘Manyema’, a heterogeneous body of people from the present-day eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). It began sometime during the 1860s but had historical precedent in migrations that traversed Lake Tanganyika in a west–east direction in the deeper past. Some nineteenth-century immigrant Manyema arrived as traders, but most were forced to migrate either in captivity or because their villages and fields had been destroyed by predatory raiders and elephant hunters. As they arrived in what is now mainland Tanzania, many were ostracised for being *shenzi* (Swahili: barbarians, savages; sing. *mshenzi*; pl. *washenzi*), and they were frequently accused of being cannibals. Some made a living through waged porterage; others did so through bondage to prominent traders, including Rumaliza. Both these paths had the potential to enhance their status and to acquire them kinship, knowledge of Islam, and access to credit networks that stretched across the western IOW. As traders such as Rumaliza brought phenomena native to littoral regions of the IOW to East Africa’s Great Lakes region, Manyema and other inland populations entered structures associated with the wider IOW from the opposite direction.

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The IOW is defined here as a macro-region spanning eastern Africa, the Middle East and South, Southeast, and East Asia. The idea of the regions around the Indian Ocean comprising a distinct ‘world’ has grown in popularity since the 1980s, most notably in more recent years through the works of Michael Pearson and Gwyn Campbell. This work, inspired by that of Fernand Braudel on the ‘Mediterranean world’, argues that the regions around the IOW were bound by a ‘deep structure’, which has underpinned historical contexts, continuities, and changes over the longue durée. For these IOW scholars, this ‘deep structure’ is the Indian Ocean monsoon system, which is the basis for agriculture and, until the coming of steam in the mid-nineteenth century, travel around the IOW. Thus, the productive bases and the physical lines of trade around the ocean were indelibly shaped by the monsoon system. Moreover, trade begat exchanges of cultures over time, and thus historians have also discussed cultural connections that pervade the IOW, such as through histories of Islam, urban cosmopolitanism, and patterns of bondage. Lake Tanganyika lies towards the western edge of this system. The agricultural base in the regions around it is dependent on monsoon rains, and seasonal changes in the direction of wind affect sail-powered travel across it. The nineteenth century represents the first time that the physical lines of connection expressed in trade and culture reached there directly, too. This book is about how these physical lines of connection developed and the roles that littoral and inland populations around Lake Tanganyika had in shaping them.

The Ivory Trade in IOW and Global Contexts

The core historical development leading to the encounter between traders such as Rumaliza and populations such as the Manyema was the expansion of the global ivory trade. The ivory trade emanating from

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East Africa is an ancient one. The earliest known text that refers to equatorial regions, dated sometime around the middle of the first century CE, identified the region as an ivory exporter.\(^\text{10}\) Even so, East Africa was probably peripheral to the oceanic ivory trading during these times, as carvers in South Asia, in the Middle East, and around the Mediterranean preferred the harder ivory of Asian elephants.\(^\text{11}\) Demand for the softer East African ivory fluctuated thereafter, but consistent demand outside East Africa probably developed from the sixteenth century onwards, when bangles made out of the cross-section of an elephant’s tusk became fashionable in marriage ceremonies among South Asian women.\(^\text{12}\) The tusks of African elephants were preferred to those of Asian elephants for this purpose as, being generally larger, their cross sections could more reliably be carved into adequate bangles. By the nineteenth century, South Asians were carving East African ivory into a range of everyday objects, including toys, models, chess and draughts pieces, puppets, and boxes.\(^\text{13}\) The economies of whole towns in present-day north-western India, most notably Surat, were built on the working of East African ivory.\(^\text{14}\) Consequently, during the nineteenth century, Gujaratis and Kachchhis, mediated through business connections in Oman, Zanzibar, and mainland coastal East Africa, became the principal financiers of ivory caravans heading into East Africa’s deep interior (see Figure I.1).

Nineteenth-century South Asians, though, were not merely responding to demand for East African ivory in India. Indeed, they were principally supplying demand in industrialising Europe and North America. The first American patent for an industrial ivory-working machine was signed in 1799. Several more followed – for the manufacture of piano keys, billiard balls, combs, and cutlery and cane handles, among other


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Just as in north-western India, whole towns emerged that were dependent on ivory working, most notably Ivoryton, Connecticut and others in New England. Again, the softer, larger East African ivory was demanded more than South Asian ivory in this context. It was less liable to splitting during the industrial process, and larger tusks were especially needed for the manufacture of billiard balls, which were cut from the tusks’ core. Growing demand in the industrialising West inflated the price of East African ivory on the world market. Its value in Zanzibar increased by a factor of around 4.5 between 1820 and 1870. Representatives of American firms attempted to take control of the trade from Zanzibar, but Gujarati and Kachchhi businessmen and their Omani...

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political allies largely thwarted them. The British, meanwhile, found it more efficient for most of the nineteenth century to buy the majority of their East African ivory from colonial centres in India, especially Bombay (Mumbai). They sought to harness and shape IOW networks rather than replace them. Thus, the growing global capitalist economy of the nineteenth century entered the interior of East Africa through the mediation of IOW networks and not directly from the North Atlantic.

The growing value of the ivory trade enabled South Asian firms to fund ever more ambitious commercial expeditions into the East African interior. They were aided in this context by the Omani sultan, who moved his capital to Zanzibar in the early 1830s (Zanzibar and Oman had distinct sultanates from 1856 onwards). Subsequently, Omani and other coastal East African traders expanded pre-existing caravan routes heading from the coast into the interior. A ‘northern route’ departing Mombasa and Pangani in the direction of Kilimanjaro and thence to the Serengeti was an important ivory route throughout the nineteenth century, though it was largely the reserve of small-scale trading parties. Additionally, a southern route departed the coast from Kilwa and surrounding towns and headed in the direction of Lake Malawi. Kilwa’s long history of maritime connections with the wider IOW may have contributed to the prominence of this route in the early nineteenth century. However, the proportion of ivory being shipped to Zanzibar from Kilwa decreased markedly as the century wore on, and its key export from the deep interior later became people for enslavement. Instead, the ‘core’ commercial routes that exported ivory came to be those that departed the coast at Saadani, Mbwamaji, and especially Bagamoyo. Having departed from these towns, Omani and other coastal East African traders established themselves in towns across mainland East Africa, including around Lake Tanganyika. The most prominent towns in the wider region were Tabora (where coastal traders settled in c.1850), Rubaga (Buganda, in present-day Kampala; c.1855), Ujiji (c.1860), Nyangwe (c.1865), Kasongo (c.1865), and Kisangani (known to Europeans at the time as

Stanley Falls; c.1885) – the last of these being on the northern bend of the Congo River, over 2,000 kilometres from the East African coast (see Figure I.2).

The expansion of the global ivory trade brought many inland East Africans into direct and sustained contact with trans-IOW commercial networks and the broader world economy for the first time. Many among them became crucial to how the ivory trade functioned. For much of the nineteenth century, traders who came to be known as ‘Nyamwezi’, from present-day west-central Tanzania, were the principal traders bringing ivory to the East African coast and islands.\(^22\) They and other inland East Africans were also the principal porters, elephant hunters, and suppliers


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Figure I.2 Map of the major East African commercial centres and regions in the nineteenth century. Drawn by the author.
of provisions to passing caravans throughout the century. Additionally, the ivory trade acted as a stimulant for a ‘revolution’ in political and military affairs. New states emerged under the leadership of Mirambo and Nyungu ya Mawe, both of whom sought to militarily control and direct the ivory trade in parts of present-day western Tanzania. Meanwhile, older states, such as Buganda, reformed themselves and became increasingly interested in long-distance trade. In short, the ivory trade became a key feature of political and economic life in East Africa and connected inland East Africans to broader structures that traversed the western IOW, which themselves were becoming increasingly integrated with the growing global capitalist economy.

This represents the context for this history of Lake Tanganyika in c.1830–90. This book is an investigation of how people from the Indian Ocean littoral and East Africa’s deep interior encountered each other within Lake Tanganyika’s distinctive lacustrine environment. It seeks to explore the answers to several questions: how did Rumaliza and his contemporaries, with their Islamic beliefs, their urban cultures, and their kinship and commercial connections across maritime regions of the western IOW, perceive the people they encountered in the East African interior? At the same time, how did inland East Africans from around the Great Lakes region, such as the Manyema, who were primarily rural and had local belief systems and networks, perceive the new arrivals from the Indian Ocean littoral? Moreover, how did the encounters between these ostensibly distinct peoples affect their respective belief systems, commercial networks, material cultures, and institutions? The Lake Tanganyika case study and the IOW context add additional layers to these questions: how did the lacustrine environment affect encounters between diverse populations in East Africa’s interior? And how did nineteenth-century encounters in East Africa’s deep interior affect structures whose origins lay in littoral regions of the IOW? What emerges from these discussions is


a history of cultural exchange and interaction, processes which were particularly robust within Lake Tanganyika’s distinct environmental context. Cultural forms emanating from the wider IOW and East Africa’s Great Lakes region took on new forms and influences as peoples from these regions encountered each other in large numbers for the first time. As will be seen, this had significant consequences for the history of the wider IOW.

Lake Tanganyika as ‘Meeting Place’

Lake Tanganyika lies almost at the centre of the African continent, about 1,000 kilometres west of the Indian Ocean at its closest point. It is Africa’s deepest and most voluminous lake, and it is second in the world in both categories only to Lake Baikal in Russia. Early nineteenth-century populations living on its western and eastern shores looking north and south viewed it as ‘endless’, in the manner of someone looking over an ocean.26 However, despite its size and oceanic connotations, it has received little historical attention, at least compared to Lakes Victoria and Malawi, and especially compared to surrounding terrestrial zones.27 In this sense, Lake Tanganyika has yet to be ‘written into’ history.28 This belies its importance during the nineteenth century as a distinctive environmental and commercial zone that linked the furthest reaches of ivory trading networks.29 Nineteenth-century Europeans, meanwhile, saw Lake Tanganyika as so important that they considered it a potential...

source of the Nile – a Victorian-era obsession. One such ‘explorer’, Richard Burton, who arrived at the lake in 1858, translated the word, ‘Tanganyika’, as ‘meeting-place’. While the accuracy of this translation is dubious, it encapsulates much about Lake Tanganyika’s nineteenth-century history and its connections with the wider IOW. The lacustrine environment, Lake Tanganyika’s distinctive shape, and its position in relation to ivory networks attracted traders, caravan workers, refugees, and religious entrepreneurs to the lakeshore, where they encountered an established mix of farmers, fishermen, and other traders. Thus, the lakeshore was a ‘meeting place’ for a wide variety of actors.

The idea of Lake Tanganyika as a ‘meeting place’ builds on broader understandings of large lakes, seas, and oceans in history. A significant contribution in this context comes from Fernand Braudel, his peers in the ‘second generation’ of the Annales movement, and several scholars of Mediterranean history who have been inspired by their perspectives. Braudel argued that people living in coastal regions experienced different ‘rhythms’ of life to those inhabiting terrestrial regions. In J. R. McNeill’s terms, the shoreline environment represents an ‘ecological niche’ that has provoked distinct forms of individual and cultural adaptation. Thus, while the sea may divide terrestrial zones, its shoreline links its peoples, expressed in shared cultures and in physical lines of connection made through commerce and kinship. Nevertheless, such zones have also been noted for their diversity. They have rarely been governed by one ruler (Ancient Rome’s hold over much of the Mediterranean is largely an aberration) and they have experienced a range of different influences from their hinterlands. Port towns have often been observed as the locations in which such influences meet. They have attracted people to facilitate others’ crossings to opposite

34 McNeill, Mountains of the Mediterranean, 3.