1) From Muskets to Nokias: Technology, Consumption and Social Change in Central Africa from Pre-Colonial Times to the Present

Firearms and mobile phones are fitting examples of the kind of foreign technological innovations that Central African peoples have appropriated and absorbed within their social structures over the course of the past three centuries of their history. Taken together, the individual research projects that make up ‘From Muskets to Nokias’ amount to an attempt to rewrite the history of the Zambian and Congolese copperbelts and their hinterlands through the lenses of technology and consumption, and their relations to social organization. The principal contention of ‘From Musket to Nokias’ is that by portraying rural Africans as mere pawns in the impersonal clash between capital and organized labour, materialist interpretations of the region’s history have obfuscated the full range of social experiences of Central African peoples. Set in a much deeper chronological framework than has hitherto been the case, ‘From Muskets to Nokias’ moves away from a teleological narrative of oppression and exploitation with a view to reinstating the African in the position of independent economic agent. Adopting an explicitly social historical perspective, all the members of the proposed research team will seek to understand the changing dynamics of African engagement with the products of industrial technology and the impact of the transformation of consumption patterns upon the region’s social structures and related notions of wealth.

2) Chief Applicant’s Personal Particulars

Prof. dr. Robert J. Ross, Chair, Southern African History, University of Leiden

3) Co-applicants

Dr. Giacomo Macola, Lecturer, History department, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

Dr. Jan-Bart Gewald, Senior Researcher, African Studies Centre, University of Leiden

5) Institutional Settings

Faculty of Arts, Leiden University; CNWS.

The project will liaise with the following institutions and ongoing research programmes:

- Centre for African Studies, University of Cambridge, UK
- The NWO-funded ‘Ice in Africa’ Project, specifically the component ‘The Social History of the Motorcar in Zambia’; African Studies Centre, Leiden
- ‘Connections and Transformations’ research group at the African Studies Centre, Leiden
History Departments of the University of Zambia (Lusaka), University of Malawi (Chancellor College, Zomba), Catholic University of Malawi (Limbe) and University of Lubumbashi (Democratic Republic of Congo)

Network for Historical Research in Zambia

6) Period of Funding

The project will run for 5 years, from September 2008 to September 2013.

7) Composition of the Research Team

Chief Applicant

Prof. dr. Robert J. Ross, Chair, Southern African History, Leiden University

Co-applicants

Dr. Giacomo Macola
Dr. Jan-Bart Gewald

Other Researchers

Mary Davies, CNWS, Leiden University
Dr. Walima Kalusa, University of Zambia
Prof. Donatien Dibwe dia Mwemba, University of Lubumbashi
Dr. Etoile Kasenga

External Collaborators and Advisers

Prof. Patrick Harries, Centre for African Studies, University of Basel
Dr. John McCracken, formerly of the History Department, University of Stirling
Professor Ian Phimister, History Department, University of Sheffield
Emeritus Professor Andrew D. Roberts, History Department, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
Professor Megan Vaughan, King’s College, University of Cambridge
Professor Bizeck J. Phiri, Dean of Humanities and the Social Sciences, University of Zambia
Professor James Ferguson, Department of Anthropology, Stanford University
Menno Welling, Dean of Humanities, Catholic University of Malawi, Limbe

8) Structure of the Proposed Research

A) A Social History of Firearms in Central Africa to the Early Twentieth Century.
Dr. Giacomo Macola
9) Description of the Proposed Research

9.1) Introduction

The proposed research programme focuses on the Congolese and Zambian copperbelts and their hinterlands, in Africa’s southern savannah.¹ A common political culture – first brought out by Vansina and revolving around the widespread recognition of the institutions of chieftainship and kingship as unifying principles of hierarchy and organization – informed the pre-colonial past of the area from the early eighteenth century.² In our perspective, however, socio-economic considerations are no less important than geo-political ones in the definition of the study area: from the beginning of the 20th century, if not earlier, the region can be conceived of as a unit, defined and integrated by the socio-economic networks centring on the Congolese and Zambian copperbelts.

The research projects which make up ‘From Muskets to Nokias’ aim to offer a new reading of the history of the region through the lenses of technology and consumption, and their changing relations to social organization. The programme’s basic intellectual premise is that the introduction of industrial technology to the copperbelts of Zambia and the Congo brought about a number of radical and inter-related socio-economic transformations, most of which were a direct consequence of the unprecedented levels of wealth creation, circulation and consumption made possible by technological innovation itself. While the social and cultural consequences of the introduction of industrial

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¹ The macro-region comprised between the Zambezi and Congo rivers and roughly corresponding to present-day Democratic Republic of Congo, Zambia, Malawi and the inland territories of Angola, Mozambique and Tanzania.
² Vansina 1966; Reefe 1983.
technology in Europe and South Africa have received careful historical attention, the analysis of the trajectories of industrial technology and consumption in Central Africa has remained the exclusive preserve of colonial social anthropologists, for most of whom history was of little consequence, and of materialist historians, for whom the only historical process worth exploring was the structural opposition of labour and capital. We contend that this historiographical deficit has obfuscated the full range of social experiences of Central African peoples both before and during colonialism, and that this skewed perspective on the Central African past militates against coming to an adequate understanding of the region in the present.

9.2) General Aims and Objectives

By researching the modalities and consequences of the local appropriation of externally-introduced technological innovation in Central Africa, the programme will result in an innovative and deeper understanding of the region’s past and present.

All the six individual projects contained within the programme’s overall framework endeavour to illuminate interrelated aspects of the reconfiguration of autochthonous patterns of consumption and social relationships as a result of the gradual and historically-determined introduction of industrial technology in the study area.

All the researches that constitute the programme will provide material for a substantial number of publications and papers and for a collective, synthesising volume. The latter will be specifically informed by the effort to determine the extent to which the region’s history over the past three centuries has been shaped and unified by common experiences in dealing with the social consequences of the introduction of industrial technology.

9.3) Scientific and Theoretical Background

While seeking to rectify a glaring historiographical deficit, the proposed series of studies will gain in originality and profundity from their being firmly rooted in a deeper chronological framework than has hitherto been the case. To start with, the programme will test the view that, contrary to what is commonly assumed, Central African peoples did not have to wait until the imposition of colonial rule at the end of the 19th century to make their first experiences of the transformative potential of industrial technology. Their initial acquaintance with the latter came in the form of European products, imported through long-distance trade routes between the interior and the coastal entrepôts of Angola, Mozambique and Tanzania and bartered with local commodities (mainly, though not exclusively, ivory and slaves).

Our working hypothesis is that even though such industrially-manufactured goods as firearms and cloth were far from unknown in Central Africa from 1700 onwards, their circulation remained largely restricted to members of the ruling elites and their clients. It is reasonable to assume that it was precisely their relative scarcity – coupled with Central

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Africa’s deeply entrenched ‘political economy of rights over people’—that made foreign goods an essential component of the redistributive networks that kings and chiefs controlled and manipulated so as to maximise political loyalty and dependent labour.⁵

The imposition of European rule and the ensuing, gradual abolition of slavery led to the disruption of long-distance trading networks and the reorientation of the Central African economic system. The socio-economic integration of Central Africa was subsequently enhanced by the inception of industrial mining in southern Katanga and in the Zambian Copperbelt in the first quarter of the 20⁰ century. In contrast to the earlier period, when the Central African economic system was geared towards supplying the long-distance trade towards the coasts, the new foci of socio-economic growth and activity, the mining centres, were located in the heart of the continent. Industrial technology made possible the growth of new urban centres, hotbeds for the development of new forms of wealth and social interaction.

We are convinced that subsuming the regional trajectories of technology and consumption under the blanket category of ‘capitalist exploitation’ has precluded a full exploration of crucial colonial social dynamics. Instead of confining the analysis to structural factors—as did much of the historiography informed by the then fashionable ‘dependency theory’⁶—the studies that make up the core of ‘From Muskets to Nokias’ will strive to return human agency to the socio-economic networks that came to revolve around the Congolese and Northern Rhodesian copperbelts. The project, in other words, wants to understand ‘social action in terms of motives and intentions’, which, as Harries noted,⁷ ‘is not incompatible with causal explanations linked to impersonal forces.’

The dynamics of colonial labour migrancy—the pet subject of materialist historians and the most significant trait d’union between the rural and the industrial spheres at the macro-regional level—will be central to all the projects contained within ‘From Muskets to Nokias’. The programme’s working hypothesis is that, when placed in the historical context sketched above, labour migration was not just the precipitate of the systemic alliance between capitalist interests and the colonial state, but it also represented an endogenous response to the pre-colonial political elites’ increasing inability to service their patronage networks. With local authorities cut off from their traditional supplies of foreign goods, labour migration is likely to have provided former clients with the opportunity to gain independent access to the products of industrial technology. We are, in other words, inclined to view labour migrants as would-be consumers of industrial technology—rather than, always and necessarily, as proletarians in the making.⁸ By investigating the effects of the introduction of western technology in the countrysides of Central Africa, we expect to be able to move away from a teleological narrative of oppression and exploitation and to reinstate Africans in the position of independent (if undeniably disadvantaged) economic agents. Our aim will be to study the relationship

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⁵ Miller 1988: chapters 2 and 3; Gray and Birmingham 1970: 11-12, 19; Macola 2002: 133-142.
⁶ See, e.g., Van Onselen 1976; Palmer and Parsons 1977.
between the spread of market relations and new forms of consumption, on the one hand, and the endurance of time-honoured notions of ‘wealth-in-people’ and investments in social relationships, on the other.

The extent to which the social salience of patron-client relationships was lessened by involvement in the colonial economy will be explored alongside the internal transformation of these same vertical networks and the range of exchanges upon which they rested. With the rural and urban economies being brought in closer contact with each other, and the movement of goods, people and ideas accelerating to a previously unimaginable extent, old hierarchies and principles of social organization are likely to have been challenged by juniors and outsiders for whom wage labour provided the opportunity to gain access to exotic goods and markers of respectability. While competing in one field of social interactions, young male labour migrants and rural-based patriarchs appear to have formed an uneasy alliance against female claims and assertiveness. In this ideologically charged context, notions of ethnicity, ‘customary law’, masculinity and wealth were both debated and redefined. These debates have continued to the present day and constitute one of the most energetic forms of African engagement with ‘modernity’.

The following, in sum, are the working hypotheses that will be tested against the available historical evidence by the projects comprised within ‘From Muskets to Nokias’:

I. the origins of Central Africa’s engagement with the products of industrial technology are to be sought in the era of the pre-colonial long-distance trade;
II. the reorientation of the Central African economic system after the imposition of colonial rule at the end of the nineteenth century was enhanced in the first quarter of the 20th century by the growth of new socio-economic networks revolving around the industrial mining complexes of southern Katanga and the Zambian Copperbelt;
III. a better understanding of the pervasiveness of labour migrancy in the colonial period might be achieved by pointing to the pre-colonial elites’ growing inability to service their pre-existing patronage networks;
IV. labour migrants are to be seen less as proletarians in the making than as aspiring rural consumers and redistributors of manufactured goods;
V. labour migrancy might have threatened long-established politico-economic notions of ‘wealth-in-people’ and/or brought about a renegotiation of the nature and social composition of patron-client relationships; and
VI. the consequences of this process affected every sphere of Central African social life and continue to shape the destiny of the region in the present.

9.4) Research Methodology

Drawing on – but distinguishing themselves from – the synchronic approach of Central Africa’s social anthropology, all the projects that constitute ‘From Muskets to Nokias’

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9 Burke 1996.
10 Guyer 1995.
will adopt an historical perspective and a method of analysis involving the active interplay between written archival and oral sources. Although archives, both in Europe and Africa, will appear to be primarily concerned with the economic and legislative aspects of technology and consumption, a store of information relating to social dynamics will be found ‘in-between-the-lines’. A comparable approach was adopted by Harries (1994) in his work on labour migration from Mozambique to South Africa in the 19th and early 20th century. Oral interviews will be carried out in urban and rural settings with direct protagonists of the events, their descendants or otherwise knowledgeable informants. In this respect, our research methodology will be akin to that of the Isaacmans (2004).

The analysis, in the six individual projects, of the manner in which externally introduced technological innovation was appropriated to reshape autochthonous patterns of consumption and social relationships will allow us to move away from a mere description of ‘technology in society’, to a fuller appreciation of the symbiotic interaction and mutual dependence that exists between people and technology. Accepting that technology acts in a symbiotic relationship which transforms human society, the development of technologies, as well as the ways in which they are incorporated and adapted, are to be analysed as socio-historical processes and cultural practices.

9.5) Scientific Importance and Innovation

By placing social agency and motives at the centre of human experience, and by investigating a broader range of social processes than did materialist historians, the programme will offer a comprehensive and original reading of Central Africa’s history. ‘From Musket to Nokias’ will not just ‘liberate’ African individuals and societies from the shackles of class; it will also emancipate them from the parochialism of colonially-imposed national boundaries. Since most of the dynamics that we propose to study can hardly be circumscribed within the borders of one specific contemporary state, only the adoption of an innovative regional, trans-national approach holds out the promise of coming to an adequate understanding of the area’s past and present.

9.6) Activities Leading to the Conception of the Programme

‘From Musket to Nokias’ builds upon – and has emerged from – work already undertaken both individually and during substantial collaborative ventures. These include:

- Jointly organised conference held in Lusaka in August 2005 and resulting in One Zambia, Many Histories (Leiden, forthcoming [2007]), a volume edited by the co-applicants and prefaced by the principal applicant.
- Jointly organised workshop (‘Central African Routes and Transport’), to be held in Leiden in October 2007.
- Establishment and running of the Network for Historical Research in Zambia.
- Monographs, articles, reviews and working papers dealing with Central African history and based on both archival and oral research.

9.7) Nature, Amount and Availability of Primary Source Material

The projects will rely on extensive and accessible archival holdings in both Central Africa and Europe. In addition, the return of peace and the rule of law to the region makes it possible once more to envisage the completion of lengthy periods of fieldwork with a view to collecting oral data, an essential methodological component of the entire programme.

9.8) Coherence between the Various Sub-Projects and the Added Value of Cooperation

Given the vast geographical and chronological swathe of the programme, only a series of closely interrelated individual projects will be able to effectively address the complexities and specificities of the dynamics under study. Besides the adoption of a common geographical and intellectual framework, the acceptance of a shared research methodology and agenda will go a long way towards enhancing the cohesiveness of the programme’s six individual projects. On a different level, the staging of yearly workshops (to be held, successively, in Leiden, Solwezi and Lubumbashi) and of a final synthesising conference will constitute the principal practical means through which coordination will be achieved and consolidated.

Because of their thematic consistency, the individual projects will enable us to form a chronologically deep, sophisticated and comprehensive picture of the socio-economic revolution engendered by the advent of industrial technology in central Africa. The first post-doc (Firearms) will have a primarily pre-colonial focus, charting the origins of central African people’s engagement with the products of industrial technology and laying the foundations for the programme’s more contemporary-focused studies. The second post-doc (Motor-car) will take the story one step forward by explicitly analysing the linkages that existed between transport, technology and labour in early colonial central Africa.

At the epistemological centre of ‘From Muskets to Nokias’ are the social histories of three specific rural localities integrated into the socio-economic networks revolving around the Zambian and Congolese copperbelts throughout the colonial era. Chronologically and geographically these three projects (Rumphi, Mwinilunga, Bunkeya) are situated at the very heart of the programme. Thematically, they will be particularly concerned with the dynamics of labour migration, paying special attention to the socio-

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12 A comprehensive listing of the public and private archives in which it is proposed to work is to be found in (9.10) below.
The programme’s second PhD (Mwinilunga) will add a contemporary dimension to ‘From Musket to Nokias’ by examining the history and anthropology of consumption and social stratification in present-day north-western Zambia, where a unique opportunity to study the effects of industrialisation on socio-economic relations is provided by the current revival and rapid growth of the Kansanshi copper mine, near the frontier town of Solwezi.

9.9) Individual Projects

A) A Social History of Firearms in Central Africa to the Early Twentieth Century.
   Dr. Giacomo Macola

The principal aim of this study, the chronological focus of which is mainly pre-colonial, is to explore the origins of Central Africa’s engagement with the products of industrial technology and to provide a framework within which to locate the more contemporary-focused studies that make up the bulk of ‘From Muskets to Nokias’.

The project is predicated on the assumption that firearms tell us more about a given society than its purely military dimension. Indeed, its novelty in the context of African historiography stems from the attempt to employ the historical trajectory of one specific technological item – firearms – as an entry point into the study of broader economic, political and cultural processes that are still greatly relevant to our understanding of contemporary Central Africa.

The proposed research will investigate the modalities and chronology of the long-distance trade between the interior of the continent and the coastal entrepôts from the eighteenth century onwards. Particular emphasis will be placed on the efforts on the part of the rulers of centralized polities to retain a significant measure of control over the acquisition and distribution of the new technology, and to chart the divergent outcomes of these attempts at monopoly. The study will also contribute to a better understanding of the relationships between the introduction of firearms and the transformation of warfare; the non-military economic applications of firearms; and the effects of firearms on such key cultural determinants of African behaviour as notions of honour and masculinity. The final sections of the proposed research will attempt to examine the role of firearms in the early colonial political economy and, particularly, in labour migration.

The study will rely on early colonial administrative records and, especially, published and unpublished records of such literate observers as European explorers, traders, missionaries and big-game hunters. Equally important will be the evidence provided by the following (and, in European terms, somewhat unconventional) sources.

- Published and unpublished oral traditions, praise-names, praise-poems and songs, as recorded by colonial administrators and missionaries between the end of the
nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. These are especially crucial to unpack the cultural significance and symbolism of firearms.
- Early grammars and dictionaries of autochthonous languages, for much can be inferred from the name or names with which firearms were known in Central Africa at the beginning of the colonial period.
- Records of ethnographical museums where sizeable collections of firearms are to be found and described historically.

B) The Social History of the Motorcar in Zambia.
Dr. Jan-Bart Gewald

[Urry] suggests that … [we] abandon … [our] ideas of the car as a thing, a simple object of production and consumption, and look at it as a system of interlocking social and technical practices that has reconfigured civil society.

(Gartman 2004, 169)

The aim of this project is to write a social history documenting the far-reaching transformation of Zambian societies brought about by the introduction of the motor-vehicle. Not unlike firearms, the analysis of the historical trajectory of the motorcar provides privileged insights into the study of broader regional processes – particularly, into the linkages that exist between technology, labour and consumption. To a degree, the motorcar in the twentieth century can be seen as having replaced firearms as the epitome of technological development and a prime example of external innovation that is appropriated for internal purposes. The introduction of the motor-vehicle in the course of the twentieth century transformed the routes of trade and transport throughout Central Africa and facilitated the growth of the copper mines on the Congolese and Zambian copperbelts.

Twentieth-century Zambia provides an ideal terrain for the study of the interaction between human society, technology and consumption. At the beginning of the century, the deadly tsetse fly meant that all goods were transported by human power; societies were geared towards this aim (Gann 1958). All this changed with the introduction of motor-vehicles. Research conducted elsewhere suggests that the introduction of motorcars radically transformed, not only northern European and American societies, but African societies too (Gewald 2002). Although Zambia lies at the origin and very heart of African urban sociology, the manner in which the introduction of the motor-vehicle revolutionized social, cultural, and economic relations within and between Zambian societies remains to be adequately researched (Schumaker 2001).

Zambia’s twentieth-century macro economy has experienced booms and intermittent periods of stagnation. The development from the 1920s onwards of what were the world’s richest known copper reserves led to the rapid urbanisation of the country (Ferguson 1999), a truly epochal transformation that may not have been possible without the presence of the motor-vehicle (Powdermaker 1960). At independence in 1964, Zambia was the most urbanised country on the African continent, invested heavily in the development of a social welfare state and had a comparatively large car-owning middle-
class. Drop in copper demand and the oil crisis of the early 1970s brought the boom to an end and the country entered into a long recession the effects of which are still deeply felt. The interaction between people and technology in relation to fluctuating economic conditions is wryly illustrated by a Zambian, who noted: ‘Car owning remains a dream. A decade ago, young men in gainful employment were able to buy cars of all models. That era is gone, gone never to return again.’ (Ferguson 1999, 1)

By researching the archival, oral and published source material available in Europe and southern Africa, a social history can be written which will provide an answer to the following question: how and in what manner did the day to day life of the people of Zambia change with the introduction of the motor-vehicle in the twentieth century?

C) A Social History of Rumphi District, Northern Malawi.
D) A Social History of a Mwinilunga District, North-Western Zambia.
E) A Social History of Bunkeya, Katanga, Democratic Republic of Congo.
F) A Social History of Consumption in Ndola, Zambia

At the epistemological centre of ‘From Muskets to Nokias’ are the social histories of three specific rural localities integrated into the socio-economic networks revolving around the Zambian and Congolese copperbelts throughout the colonial era. Chronologically and geographically, these three projects are situated at the very heart of the programme. Operating in close cooperation with one another, and drawing on the results of Post-docs (A) and (B), the three projects will test the validity of the programme’s general working hypotheses by examining the colonial social histories of specific rural districts. In-depth studies of this nature will enable us to produce an empirically-grounded and comparative regional overview of the social transformation brought about by industrialisation in the Congolese and Zambian Copperbelts.

Modelled to some extent on Harries’s unrivalled study (1994) of labour migrancy from southern Mozambique to South Africa between the nineteenth and the twentieth century, the three projects will focus on the socio-cultural changes engendered by the incorporation of their respective study areas into the colonial labour market and related modifications of consumption patterns. Special emphasis will be placed on the resulting transformation of political, generational, gender and class relationships. All the projects will, in the words of Mary Davies’ own proposal, seek ‘to overcome the view that trade and economic changes were solely destructive forces’ and explore instead the new range of opportunities and, of course, inequalities ushered in by labour migration.

The choice of the three research sites is partly determined by their possessing a rich anthropological and ethno-historical literature that will supplement the original material collected by the researchers in colonial archives and through oral interviews. PhD (C) will be completed in conjunction with two ongoing projects being conducted by African researchers currently employed by the University in Zambia (UNZA) and the University of Lubumbashi (UNILU), in the DRC. It is envisaged that these African academics will
travel to the Netherlands and within Central Africa to participate in the programme’s yearly workshops and final conference.

G) *From Muskets to Nokias: Technology, Consumption and Social Change in Central Africa.*
Collective synthesising volume, edited and introduced by Prof. Robert Ross, CNWS, Leiden University (travel and replacement costs)

Besides a number of jointly-written articles, the collaborative output of ‘From Musket to Nokias’ will consist of an edited collection with a synthesising introduction. The volume will be a direct result of the international conference in which the five-year-long research will culminate.

9.10) Appendix: Bibliography and Figures

*Published Works*


GANN, L. H., 1958. *The birth of a plural society : The Development of Northern Rhodesia under the British South Africa Company1894-1914*, (Manchester)


**Archives**

In Europe: National Archives of the UK, Kew, UK; Rhodes House, Oxford, UK; Archive of the Royal Geographical Society, London, UK; Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Lisbon,
Fig. 1. Painting completed in 2001 by the Zambian artist Stephen Kappata (1936-2007). Entitled ‘People used to walk long distances to seek employment’, this representation of migrant labour to the Copperbelt clearly illustrates the importance of this experience in popular memory and the manner in which it continues to inform historical consciousness and society in the present. For many communities in Central Africa, Kappata implies, participation in the migrant labour system acted as a rite of passage. Note the two young boys and adolescent accompanying the bearded adult men.