

Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization.* Jeremy Presholdt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. 288 pp.

Reviewed by Karen Tranberg Hansen

The enticing title of this book gives no hint of its regional focus or time scope, namely coastal East Africa during the second half of the 19th century. *Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization* draws on Jeremy Presholdt's doctoral research into the history of consumer dynamics in societies along the East African coast. He argues that African consumer desires played an important, but not well understood, role in global integration during a period of dramatically increasing regional and transoceanic interaction. In effect, before the onset of full-blown colonialism, demands for imported goods were more often driven by local desires than by manufacturers' assumptions about consumer needs. East Africa's deep histories of global connections were shaped by complex economic reciprocities that were unsettled by colonial intervention.

The chapters offer vignettes demonstrating, first, the importance of African consumer demands to British trade, and second, the confusion such desires provoked on the eve of colonial rule for European observers. Chapter 1 focuses on the small island of Nzwani in the Mozambique Channel where the ruling elite eagerly appropriated symbols of Englishness in a process of cultural domestication. British agents in various Indian Ocean locations spent large sums to facilitate African claims to sameness through appeals to global interconnection. Presholdt calls such claims similitude and describes them as a strategy pursued by people at the political margins to influence the perceptions and policies of more powerful agents. Chapter 2 takes us to Mombassa where an expanding economy and access to credit through firms in Zanzibar enabled some previously excluded people to pursue public consumption. Presholdt effectively makes use of the poetry of an important Swahili composer, Muyaka bin Haji, and the dictionary project of Johan Ludwig Krapf, of the London Missionary Society, to provide insights into the cultural environments of mid-19th century Mombassa from a male perspective. His reading suggests that residents of Mombassa looked not so much for actual objects in their consumption practices as they sought an imagined condition of respectability, wealth, and taste that objects signified.

Chapter 3 turns to commodities, proposing that the international terms of trade were often in East Africa's favor during the 19th century. The desire for particular types of printed cloth affected production of textiles both in Salem, Massachusetts, and Bombay, India, where manufacturers had to cater to rapidly changing East African tastes. Trade goods sometimes had to be refinished or remade in Zanzibar, other coastal cities, inland, or on the caravan trail in order to appeal to local consumers. Chapter 4 explores how goods from foreign places affected Zanzibar at a time when new cosmopolitanisms influenced people's ways of seeing and understanding their place in a rapidly changing world. By the 1860s, vessels from all over the world stopped in Zanzibar, carrying a wide variety of goods. Most of the imported goods were destined for public display rather than for utilitarian purposes.

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Chapter 5 focuses on slavery in Zanzibar, a major slave port, where by the 1850s the majority of the population was either enslaved or recently freed. Presholdt's concern is with urban slaves and their symbolic uses and rhetorical value to slave owners and antislavery activists alike. Describing symbolic subjection, the process of making people into symbols, he suggests that both British antislavery groups and imperial interests took up the notion of slaves as blank slates on which the interests of others were written. This approach depicted a childlike East Africa exploited by Arab despots and desperately in need of imperial protection and tutelage. Meanwhile, slaves dressed and named themselves, seeking to become economically independent of their owners, own slaves of their own, and claim a different identity from that imposed on them by their owners.

The liveliest part of the book is perhaps chapter 6 about image making. Here, Presholdt uses stories and images of East Africa that, from the 1860s onward, attracted avid Anglophone attention with accounts of the horrors of the slave trade and new "discoveries" in the interior. Such perceptions of East Africa reveal a vast gap between the kind of East African cosmopolitanism Presholdt identified in previous chapters and the difference/otherness Westerners expected to find in Zanzibar. Westerners had a hard time when they encountered their own material culture among people who were not subject to European rule and who gave their own meanings to objects manufactured in the West. Confronted with this confounding situation, Westerners viewed Africans as semi-civilized people with hybrid cultures that implied degeneration. The notion of semi-civilization was also linked to taxonomies connecting race, geography, and character that wrote Zanzibar out of modernity and justified colonial possession of East Africa as humanitarian intervention. Throughout these chapters, Presholdt reminds us that such reactions to African cultural and material traditions are very much alive through popular depictions of Africa in the West today.

Domesticating the World is wide-ranging and so are its goals. As the chapters unfold, each using different evidentiary bases, Presholdt pieces together a suggestive account of the importance of consumption for coastal East Africa's connections with the wider world during the second half of the 19th century at a brief historical moment when local demand shaped external reactions. There is no doubt that his work will stimulate new research into alternative genealogies of globalization. Yet the book has less to do with material culture and the world of goods than the title implies. This may be due to Presholdt's preoccupation with the sign value of things rather than the materiality and agency of objects. There are some conspicuous omissions of scholarly works whose inclusion would make Presholdt's claim about diverse genealogies of globalization less unique than he asserts. Among them are Marion Johnson's extensive scholarly work on the cloth trade between West Africa and Great Britain (e.g. Johnson 1974), Phyllis Martin's work on the changing commercial relations of the external trade on the Loango Coast covering a period that extends into the second half of the 19th century (Martin 1972) as well as her work on consumption in colonial Brazzaville (Martin 1995), and my own work into the international secondhand clothing trade and Zambia that at heart is a study of the domestication of objects and the effects of local consumption on a much larger market (Hansen 2000).

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Karen Tranberg Hansen is a Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Northwestern University. Her research focuses on economic anthropology, consumption, and material culture studies, including dress and fashion, and gender relations in contemporary Africa. She is the author of Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia (University of Chicago Press, 2000) and (in collaboration with Anne Line Dalsgaard, Katherine V. Gough, Ulla Ambrosius Madsen, Karen Valentin, and Norbert Wildermuth) Youth and the City in the Global South (Indiana University, 2008), and is co-editor with Mariken Vaa of Informality Reconsidered: Perspectives from Urban Africa (Nordic Africa Institute, 2004).