

THE LIFE OF TIPPU TIP

Tippu Tip: Ivory, Slavery, and Discovery in the Scramble for Africa.

By Stuart Laing.

Surbiton, UK: Medina Publishing, 2017. Pp. 196. £25 (ISBN: 9781911487050).

doi:10.1017/S0021853719000070

Key Words: Eastern Africa, Equatorial Africa, biography, trade, slave trade.

While the Arab explorer Hamed bin Muhammad el-Murjebi, also known as Tippu Tip, is of great importance to nineteenth century East African history, he has been largely overshadowed by European explorers like David Livingstone and Henry Stanley. There are numerous biographies of both Livingstone and Stanley, while Tippu Tip has yet to receive a scholarly English-language treatment worthy of his complex and significant life. Born in Zanzibar to parents of Omani and African origin, Tippu Tip ended his life as one of the richest men in East Africa, a major player in the international ivory trade, and a lightning rod for controversy. Tippu Tip wrote a memoir in Kiswahili of his travels in East Africa; it served as the basis for Heinrich Brode's German language biography published in 1905 (later translated into English). A 1975 biography of Tippu Tip, by Leda Farrant, was unfortunately marred by errors of fact and interpretation.¹

This new book from British diplomat and Cambridge University historian Stuart Laing is a handsome and welcome addition to this still slim corpus of English-language works on Tippu Tip's life. There is much here to praise. On the whole Laing writes in a breezy, accessible style, and there is an abundance of informative sidebars that present historical context, as well as excellent maps and glossy illustrations. This study is based largely on Tippu Tip's autobiography, complemented by information and commentary from other major travel accounts, letters, and reports from European explorers in East Africa. While there is not a great deal about this book that will be new for historians of East Africa, it is an eminently readable work of synthesis. Laing is to be particularly commended for bringing the French-language historiography on Tippu Tip by François Bontinck and François Renault to an English language audience.²

Laing does not shy away from the controversies of Tippu Tip's life. As Laing shows, Tippu Tip gained repute among coastal Muslims as a visionary political leader, but he became notorious in European circles for his role in the East African slave trade and he consequently emerged as an international symbol of the 'perfidy' of Arab slave traders. Violence was also a major part of Tippu Tip's success. Laing's biography suggests that Tippu Tip's use of force most often took place around trading disputes, especially when his trading partners refused to abide by the terms of their agreements. While Laing condemns Tippu Tip for his use of slave labor and for his failure to restrain the violence of

1 H. Brode, *Tippu Tip: The Story of His Career in Zanzibar and Central Africa*, trans. H. Havelock (Zanzibar, 2000); L. Farrant, *Tippu Tip and the East African Slave Trade* (London, 1975).

2 *L'autobiographie de Hamed Ben Mohammed El-Murjebi Tippu Tip, ca. 1840-1905*, F. Bontinck (ed.), (Brussels, 1974); F. Renault, *Tippo Tip: un potentat arabe en Afrique centrale au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1987).

his associates, Laing argues that Tippu Tip's primary occupation was ivory merchant rather than slave trader.

In spite of its virtues, the book has several significant errors of interpretation, most of which come in the last chapter of the book. Here, Laing argues that in eastern Congo, Tippu Tip was not interested in claiming or exercising sovereignty, and that the Arab towns and plantations 'were colonies, but not colonies that had aspirations to regional or national administration or statehood' (283). This characterization may have been true initially, but the assertion is contradicted by Tippu Tip's own words and actions after 1884, when he repeatedly claimed the region for the sultan of Zanzibar. John Kirk, the British consul in Zanzibar, and James Jameson, a member of the ill-fated Emin Pasha Relief Expedition, both confirm that Tippu Tip's goal was to bring the region under control on behalf of the Busaidi sultan in Zanzibar.³

More problematic is Laing's attempt to sketch a generalized schematic of 'African', 'Arab', and 'European' models of political authority in eastern Congo. Laing argues that Tippu Tip and the Arabs of East Africa, including the sultan of Zanzibar himself, were primarily interested in the personal loyalty of family networks, rather than control over territory. Laing contrasts this orientation with Eastern Congo's precolonial structures of chiefly control over villages, as well as with the European colonial state's exercise of sovereignty over territory. Yet Jan Vansina demonstrated nearly four decades ago that secret societies called *bwami*, as well as various cults of healing, linked the diverse peoples of eastern Congo across ethnic and village lines, and that these linkages also served as conduits for authority.⁴ Laing tends to oversimplify nineteenth century chiefly authority in the Congo as circumscribed by the territorial boundaries of small settlements.

This approach has consequences for interpreting Eastern Congo's turbulent history. Vansina argues that extra-territorial traditions of authority in the region were significantly disrupted in the nineteenth century by the arrival of the coastal traders. As Laing notes, Tippu Tip tended to see eastern Congo as a disordered, anarchic, and uncivilized land, trapped in endemic warfare, with little to no social ties beyond the village level (284). Although Laing is conscious of how Tippu Tip's own racism might have blinded him to the social complexity of the region, as well as to the role of the Arabs in causing the warfare, the book's interpretation of Congolese political institutions ignores Tippu Tip's own role in their destruction and breakdown. By casting Congolese actors as only interested in local village authority, Laing's interpretation arguably relies too much on Tippu Tip's autobiographical narrative, and tends to confirm its own jaundiced view of Congolese primitiveness. Laing's book thus misses an important opportunity to show how a constructed myth of African savagery shaped the attitudes of both coastal Muslims and Europeans towards the society of nineteenth century eastern Congo.

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3 Zanzibar National Archives, AA 10/1, Kirk to Granville, 28 Oct. 1884; D.K. Bimanyu, 'The Waungwana of Eastern Zaire, 1880–1900' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1976), 130.

4 J. Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison, WI, 1990), 194.