

Introduction – Material Culture and Commerce in Precolonial Africa

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These four articles deal with the theme of material culture and commerce in precolonial African history.¹ The unifying concept – of examining forms or practices of African material culture in broad regional contexts – is richly and variously in evidence in each of these articles. Sources range from language, documents, and travelers' accounts to material culture and archaeological excavations. We see when and why culture changes, and that people change it selectively. New and novel forms of cultural expression are created through dynamic commercial relations, while older, well established cultural forms are changed, revised, or enriched by trade. Especially valuable and rewarding is the manner in which comparing and analyzing a range of historical sources for material culture leads each author to reconsider widely accepted views in precolonial African history.

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¹ The studies presented in this section were initially presented together at the annual meeting of the African Studies Association held in Indianapolis, 20–23 November 2014. Andrea Felber Seligman spearheaded the idea of putting together this panel, and asked me to chair it. Andrea deserves all the credit for developing the panel.

Exposing how regional African histories fit into global economic frameworks extends our understanding of African cultural history across social and geographical boundaries and more deeply in time.

Peter Mark grapples with a major methodological problem that has hindered our historical understanding of the justly famous Luso-African ivories. These beautiful carved ivory objects, many of them now in museum collections, are at best poorly documented, a situation that has led to disagreements over who made them and when. By marshaling written Portuguese archival sources and accounts from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Mark uncovers evidence that is contemporaneous to the ivories and is able to expose misunderstandings of previous scholars about the historical geography, ethnohistories, and patterns of Euro-African trade on the Guinea coast. Equally important are the problems and confusions he identifies in the misapplication of art historical method. By raising these questions he charts a new way forward to resolving the crucially important issue of the ivories' provenance, and, by extension, of the artists' identity.

Matthew Pawlowicz initially set himself the task of placing the East African town of Mikindani into a regional context and tracking it over the *longue durée*. His analysis begins with a survey of what nineteenth-century historical accounts and the scholarly literature have to say about the town, a necessary prelude before presenting the striking results of his archaeological work. Pawlowicz enriches our understanding of the Swahili coast and of the dynamic by which its towns were shaped by centuries of Indian Ocean trade. By excavating not only the town but also the surrounding settlements in the region, he offers an historical chronology that differs dramatically from the ones we associate with more prominent and well-known Swahili towns. Mikindani does not show the same steady and continuous growth; rather, it underwent a break between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries. During this time the townspeople set their sights away from the Indian Ocean and toward the interior, reorienting themselves to take part in the inter-regional trade of provisions and other goods. Pawlowicz thus provides us with an important missing link between the coast and its hinterland countrysides.

Andrea Felber Seligman focuses on an unusual item of material culture in the interior of East Africa in order to understand how peoples there were influenced by Indian Ocean trade. She tracks an element of body ornament, the lip-plug, and the words for it in Bantu languages, using historical linguistics methodology to determine the speech communities who have a shared history of using this item. Portuguese written accounts from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries provide her with evidence of the ways Europeans exoticized Africans they observed, but she prefers instead to pursue questions about how people like the Macua users of lip-plugs saw themselves. Those same Portuguese accounts contain specific details about the various materials that went into the making of

lip-plugs, revealing that they could be made of local sources from the natural environment, but also of items from regional and inter-regional trade. She demonstrates the long shared history of this particular body ornament and shows how new materials offered variety and imbued the wearers with prestige.

Ray Silverman revisits research he carried out over thirty years ago, to reconceptualize the trans-Saharan trade during its heyday in the eleventh through sixteenth centuries. His focus is on a small but crucially important *corpus* of metalware originating in Egypt and England and made probably in the fourteenth or fifteenth century. At some time these receptacles made their way across the Sahara, and eventually, into the hands of people in what is now Ghana. There they became “mythic” objects associated with ritual and historical memory. Silverman’s earlier research on these objects centered on documenting them *in situ*, with photographs, oral traditions, and oral history testimonies. References to specific rulers in the engraved inscriptions on at least two of the vessels, which Silverman correlates with contemporaneous written accounts, enables him to date the metalwork. A German archaeological project unearthed a similar brass bowl in northern Nigeria in 1992, dating it to the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. Taking all of this together, Silverman opens up new and compelling questions about how these objects traveled and above all what their varying and changing meanings were for the Ghanaians who treasured them.