

Chapter Four

Furniture and Furnishings: Transnational Production and Consumption Networks in

East Africa

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Images of ‘colonial style’ are everywhere around us: from the Ralph Lauren Safari and Cape Lodge Home Collection of Spring 2008 to popular coffee-table books and frequent evocations in blogs, interior design publications and fashion magazines (Foley 1993; Beddow and Burns 2002; Jordan 2000, 2007; Algotsson 2000; Fraser et al. 2007; Reiter and von Schaewen 2007; Jafferji and Pitcher 2003). The popular image of ‘colonial style’ today – as produced by publishers usually based in the United States or Europe – evokes sentiments of exoticism, romance, virility, mystery and nostalgia. Sometimes, it is a fanciful composition of elements from Africa, India and the Far East, a compendium of ‘otherness’ embodied in home furnishings. More often than not, these reawakened colonial fantasies of ‘Safari Style’ and ‘Swahili Chic’ are meant to be located in Africa, and East Africa in particular.

‘Colonial style’ furnishings have a long history which stretches back to the Age of Empire, particularly from the 1850s onward. This was a period of increased mobility and transoceanic connections between far-flung empires and European metropolises, networks facilitated by the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 used by travelling people and travelling goods, including furniture and furnishings. Many historians now see this age as the beginning of modern globalization (Stearns 2010; Magee and Thompson 2010; Dejung and Petersson 2013; Conrad 2010; Huber 2013), an age in which millions of Europeans made their homes in the Empire, at the same time as images and ideologies of empire made their way ‘home’ (Hall and Rose 2006; Cooper and Stoler 1997; Mackenzie 1986).

As much as a ‘colonial style’ today calls forth dreams of the exotic ‘other’, during colonial times themselves, the colonial home was often seen as an idealised version of the European self. Whether implicitly or explicitly, contemporary advice books and manuals proposed the home to be a building block of ‘Britishness’. Consider the idealised home which Mary Aline Buxton sketches out in her account of a Kenyan interior in the 1920s:

The outside, whitewashed and thatched, was as picturesque as any cottage in an old village in England, and inside it was even better. On the floor were Persian rugs, the deep window-seat was gay with a most attractive cretonne. In the centre of the room was a lovely old gate-legged table and Jacobean chairs. Some carnations in a cut-glass vase lit up the dark Welsh dresser. On the low mantelshelf was some rare old china. Near the door, on a seventeenth-century chest, a bowl of big dark violets scented whole room. The simple artistic room carried my thoughts miles away, till they were abruptly brought back to Kenya by a native in a long white *khanzu* who came in with a shovel of burning charcoal... (Buxton 1927: 178-9).

The outside appearance and the interior furnishings of the home Buxton visits seem to be copied directly out of a picturesque English village. In fact, the author suggests that the home indeed has the ability to mentally transport its inhabitants back ‘home’ to England, were it not for the abrupt intrusion of the African domestic servant onto the scene.

Buxton, like many of her contemporaries, seems obsessed with staking out Britishness in an unfamiliar world. This was all the more important in an environment carefully constructed to underline the racial ‘rule of difference’ (Hall 2002; Stoler 2002; Kennedy 1987). As the doyenne of African home-making manuals, Emily Bradley, declares well into the later stages of empire: ‘Your home is a microcosm of the world in which you live, and your attitude to the whole race will be determined, or at least affected, by your contact with it at first hand.’ (Bradley 1950: 67). In this sense the ideal home in Africa was not wholly

unlike the ideal suggested in advice books for Britons travelling to India, where, as Thomas Metcalf has remarked, bungalows were ‘islands of Englishness’ (Metcalf 1995: 178; Steele and Gardiner 1904). And yet, as Robin Jones has also found in the South Asian context, there is a danger of taking this advice too literally (Jones 2007: 15).

Both the images of the colonial home propagated through advice books of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as the image of the colonial home circulating in popular culture today are more dream than reality. The disjunction between ideal and real homes has been the subject of diverse recent histories of home, including Amanda Vickery’s work on eighteenth-century London houses (Vickery 2008) or Jane Hamlett’s work on Victorian homes in England (Hamlett 2010). Several studies of colonial homes and architecture particularly in South Asia also draw a distinction between desired representations of (colonial) power in domestic spaces and the realities of everyday life (Jones 2007; Chattopadhyay 2000, 2002, 2005; Glover 2004; also Lawrence 2012).

But we need to look in more detail at the material culture of the home in what was a crucial hub of Empire, colonial East Africa, in order to see why there was such a discrepancy. How was it resolved? What impact did colonialism really have on the home, both economically and culturally? What role did indigenous people play in the construction of the colonial home? We can only begin to uncover these issues if we use sources which approximate the reality of lived experience in the home, if, for example, we consider colonial home furnishings, the cornerstone of ‘colonial style’, not just as ornament but, using the framework of material culture studies, as active objects interacting meaningfully with people in the processes of production, circulation and consumption (cf. Appadurai 1986). This chapter therefore goes back to the construction and furnishing of colonial homes in British East Africa and situates these homes within the globalising context of the time in order to deconstruct a mythical colonial style, a myth propagated as zealously in the twenty-first

century as in the nineteenth. It uses archival material, memoirs, often read against the grain, and a growing database of information garnered from former colonial families themselves (www.beyondthebungalow.com).

East Africa was one of the most active arenas of empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. British possessions included Kenya Colony (under Company rule from 1888, declared a Protectorate from 1895 and a Colony from 1920), the Uganda Protectorate (from 1894-5) and Tanganyika Territory, a mandate taken over from Germany after the end of the First World War. By 1947 British East Africa encompassed 750,649 square miles and a population of 14.8 million (Kirk-Greene 2006: 3-4). It was governed according to 'indirect rule', meaning that a small number of Europeans ruled a much larger indigenous population through a local elite. Britons in East Africa included missionaries, civil servants and settlers. The latter were mostly members of the upper and middle classes who settled above all in the Kenyan highlands between 1907 and 1909; numbers rose again particularly with the Soldier Settlement Scheme after the First World War (Kennedy 1987: 6, 42). Civil servants, also mostly from the middle classes, stayed for a tour of duty from two to four years at a time, returning 'home' to Britain for leave intermittently. Missionaries included thirteen British societies, foremost of which was the Church Missionary Society (CMS), who were active in Kenya since 1844, and Uganda and to a lesser extent Tanganyika since 1876. By the mid-1920s, 359 missionaries working for British societies were living and working in these three territories, 202 of whom were CMS missionaries, who came largely from middle-class backgrounds (Beach and Fahs 1925: 90; Keen, n.d.). In 1901, there were a total of 528 whites living in the East African Protectorate and 1,220,000 'coloured' people (British Foreign and Commonwealth Office 1901-2: R1-R2); by 1931 there were 16,812 'Europeans', 57,135 'Asiatics' and 2,966,993 'natives', and numbers continued to rise (British Foreign and Commonwealth Office 1931: 242-3). Although the furnishing of their

homes displayed some differences, for all of these diverse groups, the home was a key site for the production of empire, its furnishings a symbol of refinement and civilisation in what was still seen as the ‘dark continent’.

In spite of the relatively wealthy background of many Europeans who chose to come to East Africa, their homes were fairly simple structures by European standards. With the exception of the rare mansion built by renowned architects Ernest George & Yates in the interwar period, most houses were made out of either local or inexpensive imported material. Along the coast, settlers and sojourners often rented or built dwellings made of coral rag and lime in the local Arab-inspired *tembe* style. Further inland, the railway and military built houses made of wood and corrugated iron which were eventually improved and standardised. Moving towards the interior, though, most Europeans lived in ‘wattle-and-daub’, mud-and-thatch or mud-and-bamboo houses with a compacted earth or cowdung floor, homes which drew on local building traditions. In British East Africa this was called a *banda* and consisted of a round or rectangular framework of poles onto which a double layer of sticks were tied with strips of green bark. This would then be plastered with mud and decked out with a roof made of grass or dry banana bark [Fig. 1]. Eventually access to more hardwearing material such as cement improved, but the basic structure remained the same.

The plan drew on a proven model: the bungalow, a product from another realm of the British Empire, India. Seventeenth-century Bengali peasant huts, made with thatched roofs and extensive verandas, were relatively inexpensive to build and provided effective shelter from the elements. Their design was thus adapted by the British East India Company and exported across the empire, becoming, in the words of Anthony King, a ‘global’ phenomenon (King 1995; Desai, Desai and Lang 2012). Knowledge of the relatively easily built bungalow model thus greatly facilitated home design for ordinary British settlers in East Africa. But of course the exterior architecture was only the starting point for the development of a particular

colonial style in East Africa. Much of this style was determined by the furniture and furnishings in the interior or on the veranda—these included three types of items: objects imported directly from Europe, non-European objects from the wider Indian Ocean World, and European-looking objects produced locally. This chapter will trace the object histories of these furnishings as they travel from Europe to the Indian Ocean, are purchased from regional markets, produced by Asian and African craftsmen and consumed by European and non-European elites.

Travelling Objects

Items such as beds, china, linen and plate were all recommended and usually actually brought out from Britain, though they could also increasingly be bought in urban centres such as Nairobi (Gurdon 1919: 115). Transporting larger items such as furniture from Europe was an expensive undertaking, however. Not only shipping costs, but also railway charges and/or porter fees for moving heavier items inland had to be considered, and porters could only be tasked with carrying up to 25 kg each. This created a situation whereby the wealth of a household could be read off of the number of larger items which had been imported from Britain. Certainly among civil servants, the number of things of European manufacture was directly linked to rank: as we can see from the *Notes for Officers Appointed to East Africa* from 1914, heads of departments and other high-ranking officials received six chairs; junior officials only two [Table 1: Notes for Officers].

In addition to items furnished by the British government or more treasured smaller items brought from home, such as clocks, books, table linens or paintings, settlers and sojourners could try to purchase furniture through a growing second-hand market. There were however certain items which were usually considered worth buying in Europe. These

included the versatile folding chair—useful not only for the decks of shipping liners, but also for verandas and even living rooms. Camp furniture was also multifunctional and a smart choice to furnish the ‘first home’. Both could be bought in Army and Navy stores (Cohen 2006: 53) as well as specialist tropical outfitters. Together with makeshift furniture made out of packing crates, these sorts of furnishings embodied the ideals of what many expatriates considered an unmistakably British quality of ‘making do’, inventiveness in adverse circumstances (Lawrence 2012: 108), and sometimes also a certain sense of understatement.

Another popular chair imported to Africa was the Thonet model, designed using revolutionary wood-bending techniques in the mid-1830s by Michael Thonet and perfected and mass-produced by his sons from the 1860s onwards. Thonet was a company set up by a German in Austria, but the company did have offices in London. Thonet and his competitors produced some of the first chairs for a mass market and their enterprise was booming all throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their 1912 catalogue featured over 12,000 different pieces of furniture, and in 1913 their factories were producing 1.8 million articles of furniture per year, mostly chairs, the most famous being the least expensive No. 14 and later No. 18 (Wilk 1980: 43, 70, 75). These were also the most popular models amongst Europeans going overseas. The advantages of the Thonet chair to colonialists was that it could be taken apart into six pieces and later reassembled (the very early days of flat-packed furniture), and that it was light, thus reducing shipping costs. It was also held together by screws rather than glue, the latter being an attractive food for insects.

Thonet’s overseas exports amounted to almost thirty percent of their total sales by 1913 (Wilk 1980: 75). Most of these items went to the United States, Brazil and Argentina, but many also found their way to East Africa. In contrast to Europe, where the less expensive models were initially only meant for public spaces such as cafés (Wilk 1980: 33), in Africa they were deemed appropriate for the home long before they were included in the interior

designs of the likes of Mies van der Rohe in the 1920s and 1930s. Sir Harry Johnston's dining room in Entebbe, Uganda, which combined the traditional white tablecloth with the common café chair, was thus inadvertently avant-garde. [Fig. 2]

The Thonet chair and its numerous copies were made with an eye to a globalizing market and a pan-European clientele, but there were also other furnishings industries which were even more particularly tailored to colonialists and travellers going overseas. These included well-known names in the colonies, for example, Tilley lamps (Kirk-Greene 2006: 57) and Dover stoves, originally manufactured in Dover, New Jersey but essential items for expatriates into the mid-twentieth century.¹ Piano and harmonium manufacturers also offered portable designs (cf. Lawrence 2012: 115) which were of particular value to missionaries seeking to underscore their Christian message with song. Others, such as civil servant Alexander Gilchrist Gibb, were able to buy a piano 'by private treaty' from a captain in the King's African Rifles, allowing him to play the 1920s hit *Coal Black Mammy* in his Dar es Salaam residence loud enough for all the neighbourhood to hear (Gilchrist Gibb 1936: 34).

Furnishings brought from Europe were expensive in terms of their commodity value, determined in part by transport costs, but also because of their rarity and the difficulties involved in replacing them. Sets of objects were valued in particular for their completeness, in Jean Baudrillard's terms, each one being prized in its relationship to a system 'on the basis of which the subject seeks to piece together his world, his personal microcosm' (Baudrillard 1994: 7). The value of a teacup in this context, then, lies not merely in its utility, but in its ability to be possessed, and some members of the expatriate community appear to have been passionate, if not obsessive, collectors and keepers of a complete set of porcelain. Baudrillard's ideal type is the male collector, but in the colonial home, women seem to have been particularly concerned with their own and their neighbours' ability to produce the complete set at social occasions. Consider the following extract from Miss E.M. Furley's

journal during her stay in Uganda which was included in a Church Missionary Society publication in 1895:

In the evening, by special request, we all went over to the Mission-house to dinner. I should think the annals of Kibwezi never knew such a dinner party. For twenty Europeans to sit down to a meal together at one table, so far in the interior of Africa, is most unusual. How they managed to supply us with cups, saucers, plates, &c., was an astonishment. (Furley 1895: 187)

Completeness was not just a source of wonder but also of envy: in her memoirs of life in Kenya, Mary Aline Buxton laments own dingy appearance at a dinner party, but:

I did not recover from feeling as dispirited as the Queen of Sheba before Solomon's glory until soup was on the table. Then, to my joy, I noticed my host drinking his portion of soup out of an enamel mug – there were not enough plates to go round! That put me on my feet again, with the glad memory of my own “dozen of each” sitting as yet unscathed in the pantry cupboards (Buxton 1927: 16).

Again, here we see Baudrillard's theory at work, as an object—in this case, a soup bowl—‘acquires its exceptional value *by dint of being absent* [original emphasis]’ (Baudrillard 1994: 13). Unbeknownst to many colonial homeowners, at least in urban areas, the ‘dozen of each’ was often assembled through a system of borrowing amongst domestic servants (Gilchrist Gibb, 156-7), further usurping the ideal of personal ownership which underpins the collector's very sense of self, according to Baudrillard.

Porcelain itself, however, was not new to East Africa, nor exclusive to Europeans. Archaeologists have dated its first probable use in Swahili culture to somewhere between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries (Zhao 2012: 64). Rather than being used as tableware, however, porcelain objects such as plates were displayed by wealthy ‘cosmopolitans’ as ornaments in special plaster wall niches in the home. This practice continued amongst the

Zanzibar elite into the nineteenth century and, indeed, also formed part of a culture of collecting and Baudrillardian object systems, as Jeremy Presthold argues (Presthold 2008: 96-7; Zhao 2012). What made European porcelain unique amongst the expatriate community, then, was its origin and to some extent its form, both of which reminded one of 'home', but above all its use. The use of porcelain to distance the body from food remained a symbol of European refinement and culture.

Local Global Markets

Another option for obtaining home furnishings was to buy 'local', which meant tapping in to this very Indian Ocean trade system which had been flourishing since the seventh century (LaViolette 2008, Presthold 2008, Sheriff 2010, Moorthy and Jamal 2010, Machado 2014, Ghosh and Muecke 2007, Chandra 1987, Chaudhuri 1990). Buying local made above all economic sense, as expatriates had to pay an import duty of five per cent, in addition to harbour dues, on all foreign goods (e.g., goods from Europe); from 1904-5 this was raised to ten per cent (British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1901-1931). Furnishings obtainable in coastal East Africa as well as South Asian *dukas*, or shops, dotted along the way inland included things like Persian carpets, a favourite for colonial homes despite discouragement from advice books because they could potentially harbour insects.

Another popular home furnishing item among expatriates were small wooden octagonal tables. A surviving example, now housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum, was made in Hoshiarpur in Punjab, India around 1880 from hisham wood and inlaid with ivory and ebony. The design, according to museum researchers, originated in Turkey but flourished in India as it was produced increasingly for a European market for oriental furnishings. European retailers included the renowned department store Liberty.² In Britain, these sorts of

tables were used to decorate ‘cozy corners’ and add to the allure of having a room, often the men’s smoking room, in an ‘oriental’ or ‘Moorish’ style (Girouard 1978: 297; Neiswander 2008). Appropriating one of the most recognisable signs of Islamic art and architecture, the octagon, these tables were part of a larger Orientalist craze in the art and cultural world (Said 1987; Nochlin 1989). Deborah Cohen interprets these furnishings as part of a wider trend to invest the home with a sense of individuality (Cohen 2006: 126-130), but, unlike previous fads for luxury goods produced in India and China and imitated in Britain (Berg 2004), these sorts of furnishings were actually made available to large portions of the middle-class population. Not just in Britain, but also in the United States, housewives were urged to emulate this fashion to demonstrate their ‘cosmopolitanism’ (Hoganson 2002, Schuyler Matthews 1894).

In East Africa itself, the inclusion of octagonal tables in European rooms was usually much more limited and practically motivated than in the interiors promoted for fashionable European and American parlours. Rarely do we see a full-blown orientalist fantasy. Much more likely is the subtle punctuation of a European-looking interior by an octagonal table; for example, consider the living room of the head of the Public Works Department in the East Africa Protectorate, William Macgregor Ross, in his family home in Nairobi around 1916 [Fig. 3]. The table here appears to be simpler than its counterpart in the V&A, entirely made of wood but with intricate carving along the sides. Similar types can be found circulating in auction houses today; these are usually made of teak and some can even be taken apart by removing the top and folding the side panels together. Particularly for civil servants such as the Macgregor Ross family, this potential for mobility, if not always fulfilled (William Macgregor Ross stayed in East Africa for over twenty years), was no doubt also an attractive feature, and may have been designed by Indian joiners to suit this very purpose. There thus appears to have been a multidirectional movement of certain types of orientalist furnishings

between Europe, Asia, the Middle East and the United States between the 1870s and early 1900s, so perhaps it is no surprise that many also ended up in East African colonial homes. Were British expatriates also trying to recreate orientalist fantasies in their drawing rooms? Or were they simply attracted to the fact that they could obtain such objects at a much lower price than in Europe?

To answer these questions it is perhaps useful to investigate another non-Western type of furnishing in colonial homes in East Africa: Arab or Zanzibar chests. In contrast to what their name suggests, these chests were not usually made in Zanzibar and were not made by Arabs, but instead imported from Persia, or Surat and Bombay in India to cater to the European market (Huxley 1985: 6). They were, however, historically imported to Arabia and indeed arrived in Zanzibar via Arab traders' dhows, which explains their name (Adie 1949: 104). Commonly made of teak, the chests are covered with brass studs and plates, and are complete with all the trappings of imaginative 'treasure chests' including lock-and-key drawers, partitions, a padlock, and sometimes even a secret compartment (Adie 1949: 104). During the British colonial period, one could find antique chests which had been refashioned, but might also fall prey to a market of imitations. A real chest, however, was deemed a good investment not least because of its usefulness (Adie 1949: 106-7).

Zanzibar chests also fuelled the colonial imagination, as the following passage from Elspeth Huxley's memoirs suggests:

[N]ow and again you could find one that had been used for its proper purpose, to stow the clothing and possessions of the sailors. My father had managed to find one such and had bought it for me as a wedding present. It was a Lamu chest, smaller and simpler than the Zanzibar ones and more roughly carpentered. Sometimes I wish I could tell of its experiences, of the creaking dhows in which it had traversed the Indian ocean, of the ports at which its crew had whiled away the furnace days,

drinking endless cups of sweet thick coffee poured from those tall, thin, swan-necked pitchers of the Arab world, while waiting for the monsoon to blow their vessel back to Lamu. (Huxley 1985: 6-7)

Huxley's chest is not merely a wooden box; it is an object of memory, both real and imagined. It evokes all the symbols of the Indian Ocean World: dhows, heat, ports, sailors, coffee, monsoon winds. Her description also reveals a certain quest to find an 'authentic' chest, one which had indeed been used by sailors rather than one which had been made explicitly for an expatriate or tourist market. These were the opportunities which living in East Africa afforded the discerning buyer, a chance to try their hand at connoisseurship, and to possess an 'original'.

In a detailed study of Arab chests, Sheila Unwin, herself a British expatriate, presents a typology based on origin, and suggests that they are actually an amalgam of European and Eastern (Indian/Arab) influences from the fifteenth century onwards. Some were brought over by Arab traders from India to the Gulf area and afterwards many were manufactured in the Gulf itself, where people stored their most valued possessions in the chests; some were painted red and given as dowry chests. They stem not only from traditional furniture-making centres on the Malabar coast but as far afield as Gujarat, which Unwin suggests is because they were essentially a trade item, one which could be modified, adapted and ornamented in different ways to please different audiences (Unwin 2006: 60). Chests were indeed also used by sailors in dhows but these were not likely to be highly decorated (Unwin 2006: 22); therefore it is unlikely that Huxley would indeed have been attracted to an 'original' chest. Decorated ones, however, were among the possessions of the Sultan of Zanzibar, and one in particular is still displayed in the museum on the island, a chest which belonged to the Sultan's sister, Sayyida Salme, Princess of Zanzibar and Oman (Unwin 2006: 117).

Sayyida Salme, born in 1844, fell in love with the German merchant Rudolf Heinrich Ruete and eloped with him to Germany, where she died in 1924 under the name of Emily Ruete. In 1888 she first published her memoirs in German, which were received with great curiosity and fascination by the German public and translated into English in 1907. While describing her surroundings growing up in Zanzibar, Ruete also mentions Arab chests:

In the gentlemen's rooms the walls are decorated with trophies of valuable weapons from Arabia, Persia, and Turkey, with which every Arab embellishes his abode in the measure of his rank and riches.... Wardrobes, cupboards, and the like are unfamiliar furniture, but you find a sort of chest with two or three drawers and a secret place besides for money and jewellery. These coffers – several of them to each room – are large and massive, and studded with hundreds of small brass-headed nails by way of ornaments. (Said Ruete 1907: 24-5)

Ruete, someone who quite literally crossed both Arab and European upper-class societies, may well have helped the popularity of Arab chests amongst the European colonial elite. Her daughter, Antonie, also wrote a popular book on homemaking in the tropics; her advice, however, only extends to kitchen furnishings (Brandeis 1907).

By 1922, Zanzibar chests were once again given as wedding presents, for example as a gift to Princess Mary from the East African Women's League.³ Their utility was thus paramount, but no doubt their romantic qualities also played a role in this choice. I have interviewed several families active in the former British colonies who now keep these Zanzibar chests in their homes as family heirlooms [Fig. 4]. Similarly, several examples of teakwood octagonal tables can still be found in auction houses, perhaps a trace of a European design trend, but also a material legacy of empire left by expatriates returning to Britain.

In their association with Zanzibar and other Indian Ocean ports, these chests touched upon what Sarah Longair has described as quintessentially exotic: 'the word itself epitomised

mysterious otherness' (Longair 2015: 41-2). A large part of this romance was the notion of cross-oceanic trade. The Indian Ocean World system, regulated by the monsoon winds blowing alternately from north-east and south-west depending on the season, had been used for trade for hundreds of years before Europeans arrived. Indian, Goan, Arab and, eventually in the fifteenth century, Portuguese merchants all exchanged goods in coastal hubs such as Zanzibar. Along the Indian Ocean, trade was governed by dhows long before it was governed by steamships, and, as Erik Gilbert has shown, the two continued in uneasy coexistence under the colonial regime (Gilbert 2004). From the coast, trading routes extended inland which had traditionally been used by Arab traders for the slave trade. Once the Uganda railway was built in the late nineteenth century this route was increasingly used by South Asians (Oonk 2013: 83). They set up small shops called *dukas*, both admired and detested by the expatriate community for their ability to undercut the competition.

As the travel guide author Linda Leigh wrote in 1901:

The Indians' industry is a tropical marvel. These little shops are open very early in the morning, long before most of us are awake. Their store of baskets filled with oddment and their exhibits of fancy soaps and mirrors, knives and glasses, cottons, fabrics and ribbons, fruits and vegetables are displayed, and line the narrow streets. They do not leave their shops to others but sit hour after hour cross-legged in the open front, sheltered from the sun. (Leigh 1901: 6)

South Asians were also making a mark on the furniture trade. Around 1900 two major furniture dealers on Zanzibar's Main Street were Navroji Metha & Co and Rustomjje Nowroji Talati (Leigh 1901: 43-4). Coastal hubs were the place to order furniture from Bombay (Younghusband 1910: 219-21) or, as was more frequently the case, to buy furniture which was made by Asian craftsmen, or *fundis*, in East Africa itself. Anne Dundas, wife of the District Commissioner of Moshi in Tanzania in the 1920s, for example, mentions

furniture ‘picked up from an Indian bazaar’ in Tanga (Dundas 1924: 51-2). But in a colonial world steeped in unequal power relations based on race, how could it have been acceptable to bring Asian-made furniture into British households?

Production and Labour

According to Blue Book statistics collected and published annually by the British government, furniture imports to British East Africa between 1902 and 1916 appear at first glance to come overwhelmingly from Britain. However, around 1910 imports from India and Burma increased, followed by a sharp decline (British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1901-1916). This may have to do with one of several developments: the growth of competitive exports from Germany, a saturation of the market and the increasing success of a second-hand trade, and the growth of a native industry. The authors of the 1912 *Handbook of British East Africa* attribute this change exclusively to the latter (Ward and Milligan 1912: 203). This ‘native industry’ was to a great extent in the hands of Indian migrants to East Africa.

Customers included, for example, the Powys-Cobbs of Kerenget, a settler family living in the ‘white highlands’. As Dorothy Powys-Cobb remembers:

After the house was built the Indian in charge of the Saw Mill began to make furniture. Daddy had taken out a lot of Chippendale furniture patterns and using this, they made some good chairs. A bit heavier than real Chippendale, but quite good. The seats were leather from our own beasts. I still have two arm chairs and two singles. The Indian “fundees” were very good craftsmen.⁴

The Indian *fundi* working on the Powys Cobb estate, who unfortunately remains unnamed in the Powys Cobb papers, eventually started his own sawmill and employed several Kavirondo in his service.⁵

Asian craftsmen were popular because they were adept at copying European styles. According to Lady Cranworth, Indian carpenters are ‘cheap and excellent at imitation, but there their merits end. For anything of decent workmanship and which has any last in it, it is always best and cheapest in the long run to go to British workmen’ (Gurdon 1919: 116). But British workmen in East Africa were few and far between. According to statistics cited by Robert Gregory, by 1948 there was not a single European cabinetmaker in Kenya (Gregory 1993: 165). Many South Asians arrived as indentured labourers working on the railways between 1896 and 1922, but some who had been resident in the Persian Gulf had already accompanied Sultan Seyyid Said when he moved the capital of the sultanate from Oman to Zanzibar in 1832 (Oonk 2013: 76-8). By 1922, 40,000 South Asians had migrated to East Africa, a combination of skilled workers, usually recruited from Bombay, and unskilled ones usually coming from Karachi (Gregory 1993: 159-60). South Asians were employed by the Public Works Department and other government agencies in Kenya and Uganda, but they were also over time self-employed. Because they were considered more reliable and more skilled than Africans, South Asians were paid higher wages, and this caused considerable resentment particularly among the Kenyan settler community (Gregory 1993: 172-3).

In 1922, the Devonshire Declaration set the primary goal of the colonial administration as the ‘development’ of Africans in the British colonies and protectorates, which came to the detriment of Asian businessmen. Asian immigration was halted, and the European and African Trade Organisation of 1923 campaigned against Asian businesses, organising boycotts, which ultimately failed, however (Gregory 1993: 172). In Uganda, the Public Works Department had already replaced Asian carpenters, masons and blacksmiths

with Africans as early as 1910 (Gregory 1993: 173). The increasing animosity towards Asian workers among some sectors of white society can be seen in an advertisement which appeared in an East African newspaper in 1911, promoting 'European' labour: 'Jas K. Watson, Builder & Contractor. First Class European Supervision Guaranteed...Executed by European Labour'.⁶ This was not unlike the situation in Australia in the late nineteenth century, where, as Tracey Avery points out, a British hegemony on furniture-making for settlers was disturbed by less expensive Chinese manufacture of European-looking furniture. In Australia, European-made furniture was eventually distinguishable from non-European-made items through obvious branding (Avery 2007: 81-5); this, to my knowledge, did not occur in East Africa.

Informal training through apprenticeships in Asian businesses thus remained among the foremost sources of European skills transfer to indigenous Africans in the construction and carpentry industry at least into the 1940s. The other major sources were missionary work and, eventually, government initiatives. In 1900 an industrial mission run by the Church Missionary Society was opened at Mengo under the direction of K E Borup. Boys between 14 and 20 were accepted as apprentices and regularly indentured by agreement 'for training in handicrafts of civilised nations'. This included building as well as printing work (*Gleaner* 27,7 (1900): 107). Generally the CMS credo was that Biblical teaching came before industry, but this attitude changed over time with the increasing success of industrial missions. Alexander Mackay, Scottish master builder, engineer and teacher working for the CMS in Uganda noted, 'We must have houses and furniture if we are to live like civilised beings, and show the Natives how to use their hands and heads' (letter from Mackay, 22 Jan 1883, quoted in *Gleaner* 17,6 (1890): 83).

As Keletso Atkins (Atkins 1988) has shown in her work on 'kafir time' in the South African context, producing new material goods of course also entailed a new way of life for

trainees. Borup was above all struck by the slow pace of work and the seeming inability of workers to judge a product's value in European terms. 'They are slow workers, and they do not seem to grasp the idea that the time consumed in finishing a given piece of work is a factor in determining its value. That we have to teach them, as well as to do their work rightly' (Borup 1902: 138). By 1920, the school at Maseno, Kenya, which was providing industrial training to 51 young men, received a government grant of £130; this did not cover all expenses but they were still able to make a half-year profit of £70 by selling objects made in the workshops (White 1920). Buyers from a similar school in Kako, Uganda, included above all government officials (*Gleaner* 47,3 (1920):60).

This industrial work soon shifted focus to include an increasing number of indigenous crafts in institutions which may be seen as the precursors to Makerere College in Uganda. Kyagwe Central School, Mukono opened in Nov 1909 by T F Victor Buxton 'with a view to fostering and encouraging industrial work, and also of keeping alive and improving native handicrafts so much in danger of dying out.' The original departments of instruction included blacksmithing, pottery making, carpentry, bark-cloth making, rope-walk, weaving, sewing-class, basket-making and mat-making (*Gleaner* 38,8 (1911):122). Here we see an effort to preserve indigenous skills which became central to British-led domestic education in East Africa until well into the transition to independence (cf. Schilling 2014). The products featured in arts and crafts exhibitions such as in Hoima in 1912, an exhibition which included tables, chairs, baskets, writing tables, window shutters and carved bowls (*Gleaner* 39,12 (1912): 202) – and a European audience which incorporated these into their homes. So as we see from Mrs Millington's home [Fig. 1], not only orientalist items but also African products, such as the basket hanging on the left of the *banda* wall, made their way into European expatriate homes. Rather than being used for their original purposes, however, they were redeployed and used as decorative elements.

By 1914 the Public Works Department employed both missionary-trained Africans and South Asian *fundis* in their workshops. [Fig 5] They produced standardised furniture which was into the 1940s, according to one expatriate, ‘instantly recognisable. The entitlement was: 2 khaki coloured armchairs and a sofa, a bookcase, a desk, a dining table and 6-8 chairs, a glass-fronted sideboard, beds, and bedside tables’ (Tugendhat 2011: 65-6). The furniture would be passed from one family to the next, not always matching, prone to wear and tear. Perhaps because of its lack of individuality, women like Anne Dundas thought it was best covered up entirely with fabric [Fig 6]. Covering up no doubt had its practical applications, but there is no denying that this was also a way of covering over and making invisible the ‘native’ hands which had constructed the furniture.

In any case, as Mary Buxton, cited earlier, admires the gate-legged table and Jacobean chairs, Welsh dresser, rare old china and a seventeenth-century chest, we have to wonder. It may well be that this family had quite literally imported the fashion for antiques and historicity to East Africa. But it could just as well have been that these were copies, completely acceptable in Britain at the time after all (Thornton 1984: 358), and even more so in Africa, where there was a sizeable labour force on hand who could copy European designs and manufacture them for a fraction of their original price.

Consuming Elites

Furnishings—imported from Europe, bought in an Indian Ocean port, or manufactured locally—thus contributed to the development of a colonial style, a style which became the marker of an elite, whether European or African. This elite was governed by career more than class, a career in which it was important to display a certain level of interaction with the ‘other’. The degree to which other ‘hands’, that is, non-European manufacturers, were visibly

acknowledged or actively incorporated in the home, for example, reflects this career division. In East Africa from around 1914, settlers, missionaries and civil servants all came largely from a similar middle or upper-class background. Yet it was above all civil servants and especially colonial administrators who openly displayed indigenous artefacts and furnishings in the home. Missionary homes, sparsely furnished in accordance with Christian ideals of thrift and modesty, generally displayed the fewest visibly non-European adornments, although in practice most of their European-looking furniture would have been made by Africans working in missionary workshops.

The patterns of this elite were not just British, but pan-European. Consider the drawing room of Kurt Freiherr von Schleinitz and his family in Dar es Salaam [Fig. 7]. Von Schleinitz was the group commander and eventually lieutenant- colonel of the German army in East Africa between 1907 and 1914. His home furnishings included a Chinese vase, Chinese wall scrolls, Bombay blackwood chairs, African cloth, a Persian carpet and, in the very centre of the photograph, an octagonal wood table. All of these accoutrements point to the location of this home at the heart of the Indian Ocean trade network and in inhabitants who embrace this alterity as part of a global identity.

At the same time, the East African elite increasingly incorporated European furnishings into their domestic consumption patterns. King Daudi Kasagama, King of Toro in Uganda (1891-1928), continued to live in an indigenous-built home, but also made use of European-style chairs (*Gleaner* 28,5 (1901): 77). King Daudi Chwa II of the Baganda (1896-1939), who was raised exclusively by Christian regents, received visitors ‘in the approved style in a comfortable sitting-room tastefully furnished, with carpets, curtains, English lamps and pictures, conspicuous among the latter being handsome portraits of King Edward VII and our Queen’ (Hattersley 1908: 7). The missionary Charles Hattersley includes a photograph of Daudi Chwa and his regents in front of his palace [Fig. 8], all apart from the king, or *kabaka*,

sitting in chairs of European manufacture; we also see two Thonet models in the background. Above hangs a gas lamp, possibly manufactured by Tilley or another European company catering to the colonial market. Below the *kabaka*'s throne lies a Persian carpet, a tradition which had already been in use by Daudi Chwa's father, King Mwangi II. (*Gleaner* 6 (1894): 90). Mwangi indeed courted Arab traders at the same as he negotiated with British missionaries and political representatives. In the 1890s Baganda emissaries travelled to Zanzibar to trade with the Sultan, encouraging Arab traders to cross Lake Victoria and bring their wares to the Baganda (Walker 1893: 37-9).

The Baganda ruling elite, then, like the European expatriate community, selectively used elements of 'other' design, at least in representative semi-domestic spaces. A kind of colonial connoisseurship, this incorporation of the foreign stood for knowledge and skills transfer, but also extensive travel. In 1880 three of King Mtesa's envoys, Namkaddi, Kataruba and Sawaddu, paid a visit to Queen Victoria; in the early twentieth century both King Daudi Chwa and the prime minister, or *katikiro*, Apolo Kagwa visited England and toured the centres of the furniture industry in Buckinghamshire. Amongst these circles, gifts, for example a chair given to King Mukasa in 1888 by CMS missionaries, also became part of the inventory of the home. The result was an identity which was truly global in scope, an identity not unlike the 'imperial careering' identity which also characterised British administrators in Zanzibar (Longair 2015).

Importantly, though, this identity, as displayed through home furnishings, was characterised not by straightforward European imposition and African adoption of 'other' materials in their original context. John and Jean Comaroff have already alluded to this art of 'bricolage' in their study of the Tswana in South Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 303). What is significant, following Appadurai's concept of an object's 'social life', is the ability to divert objects from their usual commodity path and thus change their value (Appadurai 1986:

22-9). Objects which were obviously ‘other’ were never used for their original purpose, but appropriated for another function, usually for display. The regent Zakaria Kisingiri used his European chair as a symbol of authority in public meetings; Mrs Millington used a grain basket as a wall adornment. This process of recontextualisation is not unlike how Nicholas Thomas analyses objects traded and consumed in the Pacific in the first half of the nineteenth century. Thomas urges us to consider the appropriation of European goods as a selective process, one in which indigenous peoples, in his case Pacific Islanders, exert a great deal of agency. In Thomas’s case study of muskets traded in the Southern Marquesas, for example, he claims that ‘what begins as a commodity is transformed, not exactly into a gift, but into a historicized artefact, the sign of a former owner and his works’ (Thomas 1991: 100). The islanders appropriate the ‘new’ European muskets, by making them familiar, literally inscribing them with the same inlaid shell decoration they traditionally used to decorate indigenous iron axes. Following Thomas’s angle, what characterizes the colonial style—both for Europeans and Africans—is not merely the possession of foreign objects themselves, but the ability to recontextualise them in a way that gives them a powerful new, yet ‘readable’ meaning. This may occur through physical adaptation, but also through a different use or arrangement.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown in what ways an understanding of furniture and furnishings in the Age of Empire needs to be embedded within pre-colonial and pre-modern trade networks, and within both Western and non-Western manufacturing processes and consumption trends. But we cannot forget that colonialism also changed global relationships. What difference did empire make? What was unique about the colonial home?

Colonialism undeniably impacted the economic relationships underpinning the furnishings of the colonial home. In their study of empire markets, Andrew Thompson and Gary Magee argue that the success of British businesses in the dominions was not because the colonial market was a so-called ‘soft market’ but because British exporters exploited a particularly ‘patriotic sentiment’ among colonial buyers; and indeed that they had to do so because they were not otherwise sheltered from the competition (Magee and Thompson 2003). Looking back at the graph of furniture imports to East Africa, we see again that most imports come from Britain. But in the material culture of the home, we also see to what extent East Africa was an ‘Indian frontier’ not only initially (Kennedy 1987: 11), but it continued to be part of a pre-colonial network reaching across the Indian Ocean. Home designers certainly drew on items manufactured in Britain, but we also continually see settlers and sojourners breaking through what Thompson and Magee have called the ‘British World economy’ (Magee and Thompson 2010: 117-69) in favour of an even more diverse one (cf. Avery 2007: 79-80).

Culturally, colonialism facilitated the development of a colonial style, both real and imagined. As part of this new style, furniture and furnishings were never a direct replica of British trends, but moderated to suit new circumstances. This holds true for East Africa, but also for other realms of empire, as Robin Jones, Swati Chattopadhyay, Dianne Lawrence and Tracy Avery have found (Jones 2007; Lawrence 2012; Chattopadhyay 2002; Avery 2007). All of this resulted in a potential for hybridity, a hybridity which is remarkably similar to the spatial and material hybridity of colonial homes in India, and, as John Potvin has recently argued, also for Oriental interiors in Europe (Potvin 2015: 5-6)—and of course in some cases even involves the same furniture. Scholars of India have labelled this ‘problematic’ (Lawrence 2012: 83), ‘unsettling’ (Jones 2007: 26), or producing ‘anxiety’ (Glover 2004: 61)—in the words of Swati Chattopadhyay, ‘underwritten by a deep anxiety of loss and lack of

control'. She argues that this brought forth 'a new set of values about material culture' emphasising cleanliness and order (Chattopadhyay 2002: 244). But this, again, as in the African case, is assuming that people followed household guides.

Hybridity in the case of East Africa, however, seems to be much less unsettling; in fact, it is something which is celebrated as part of a distinguished colonial identity. Civil servants, settlers and missionaries were all, to different degrees, at ease with hybridity in the home in East Africa. Recent critics of the concept of hybridity claim it ignores the essential inequality in colonial power relations (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2013: 135-9). In this case we also have to remember that hybridity for Europeans in this region was a conscious choice which often had to do with career as well as class; all Europeans may thus be considered part of an elite. For most Africans, whose access to European goods was limited by economic circumstances, the potential for furnishing a hybrid colonial home was dictated by a lack of choice. Yet that does not take away from the fact that there was a certain entanglement of people and things in the making of the colonial home in East Africa.

Perhaps a more appropriate term to describe this colonial style than 'hybrid', then, is as a 'diverted cosmopolitanism'. 'Cosmopolitanism' is a term that has gained particular valence in recent historiography (Neiswander 2008; Sluga and Horne 2010; Gestrich and Beerbühl 2011) and which has been used by historians researching pre-colonial trade in the region (LaViolette 2008; Presthold 2008); it therefore acknowledges a certain degree of continuity with these trends in the colonial era (cf. Van der Veer 2002). But the addition of 'diverted' acknowledges the power relations inherent in the colonial encounter. The power to divert commodities from their intended path, whether exerted by European, African or Asian, old or new elites, is at the heart of the colonial encounter. It is why there was less anxiety about incorporating 'otherness' in the home: because it could be covered, inscribed, juxtaposed—rarely used in exactly the same way as intended by the original makers—at least

not until those original makers started to cater explicitly to the colonial market. Diverted cosmopolitanism allowed Europeans to play upon colonial fantasies nurtured at home with furnishings produced by Africans and Asians for a much smaller price. But it also allowed East Africans to accept the material culture of Europe piecemeal, as one of many non-African influences in the region.

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