

**CART V**  
**Muskets to Nokias:**  
**Towards a History of Consumption,**  
**Migration, and Power in Central Africa,**  
**1500 – 1973**

Beginning in 2005, the research programme, *From Muskets to Nokias: Technology, Consumption and Social Change in Central Africa from Pre-Colonial Times to the Present* (Leiden University and the African Studies Centre, Leiden), has hosted and facilitated the four Central African Research Themes (CART) conferences held in the Netherlands and Zambia. The conferences highlighted research being carried out by researchers associated with the programme, and provided a forum within which researchers could debate and discuss their findings and ongoing research intentions. Seven years on, the programme is drawing to a close and will be hosting a final conference in Leiden on 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> November 2013, in which the many and varied research endeavours of researchers associated with the programme will be presented and an attempt will be made to provide a preliminary synthesis of the programme's findings.

The research projects which made up and were associated with the 'From Muskets to Nokias' programme aimed 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 was 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. The programme argued that the analysis of the trajectories of industrial technology and consumption in Central Africa 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.<sup>1</sup> This historiographical deficit, it was argued, obfuscated the full range of social experiences of Central African peoples both before and during colonialism, and militated against an adequate understanding of the region in the present.

At the core of the programme was its use of a longer chronological framework than had generally been the case. Contrary to what was commonly assumed, Central African peoples did not have to wait until the imposition of colonial rule at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to make their first experiences of the transformative potential of industrial technology. Rather, 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 between the interior and the coastal entrepôts of Angola, Mozambique and Tanzania. However, 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 was precisely their relative scarcity – coupled with Central 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.<sup>2</sup>

The imposition of European rule and the ensuing, gradual abolition of the slave trade and slavery led to the disruption of long-distance trading networks and the reorientation of the Central African economic system. The programme assumed that the reorientation of the Central African economic system after the imposition of colonial rule at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was enhanced in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the growth of new socio-economic networks revolving around the industrial mining complexes of southern Katanga and the Zambian Copperbelt. 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

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Perrings 1979; Parpart 1983; Higginson 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Miller 1988: chapters 2 and 3; Gray and Birmingham 1970: 11-12, 19; Macola 2002: 133-142; Gordon 2009: 915 – 938.

new urban centres, hotbeds for the development of new forms of wealth and social interaction.

The programme argued that the blanket category, ‘capitalist exploitation’, was insufficient to explain the consequences of this transformation. Instead of confining the analysis to structural factors – as did much of the historiography informed by the then fashionable ‘dependency theory’<sup>3</sup> – the studies in ‘From Muskets to Nokias’ strove to return human agency to the socio-economic networks that centred on the Congolese and Northern Rhodesian copperbelts.

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 – were central to all the projects contained within ‘From Muskets to Nokias’. The programme’s working hypothesis was 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, as it provided former clients with the opportunity to gain independent access to the products of industrial technology. The programme viewed labour migrants as would-be consumers of industrial technology – rather than, always and necessarily, as proletarians in the making.<sup>4</sup> By investigating the effects of the introduction of western technology into the countrysides of Central Africa, the programme sought 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. ‘Muskets to Nokias’ sought to study the relationship between the spread of market relations and new forms of consumption,<sup>5</sup> on the one hand, and the endurance of time-honoured notions of ‘wealth-in-people’ and investments in social relationships, on the other.<sup>6</sup>

The extent to which the social salience of patron-client relationships was lessened by involvement in the colonial economy was explored alongside the internal

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Van Onselen 1976; Palmer and Parsons 1977.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Perrings 1979; Parpart 1983; Higginson 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Burke 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Guyer 1995.

transformation of these same vertical networks and the range of exchanges upon which they rested.<sup>7</sup> 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 were challenged by juniors and outsiders for whom wage labour provided the opportunity to gain access to exotic goods, and consequently prestige and power.<sup>8</sup> The programme investigated the proposition that labour migrancy 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. In this ideologically charged context, notions of ethnicity, ‘customary law’, masculinity and wealth were continually debated and redefined.<sup>9</sup> These debates have continued to the present day and constitute one of the most energetic forms of African engagement with ‘modernity’. The researchers associated with the programme believe that 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.

The organisers invite those associated with the ‘Muskets to Nokias’ programme, to attend and present papers at the final CART conference that are in keeping with the research programme as outlined above. In particular we would welcome papers that deal with the topics of consumption, migration, and power as situated within the ambit of the research scope of the Muskets to Nokias programme.

For example, on the issue of consumption, we would appreciate papers that would track the “life course” of a single commodity (for example, the three legged pot, firearms or clothing): how was it introduced into the area, how did its use and meaning develop or change over time and how was the commodity appropriated by its users?

Migration: - A theoretical essay on labour migration. Since the Ferguson/Macmillan

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<sup>7</sup> Macola, Pesa, Gewalt, Davies.

<sup>8</sup> See in this regard the contributions to *The Objects of Life in Central Africa* edited by Hinfelaar, Peas and Ross, Forthcoming.

<sup>9</sup> Vail 1989; Chanock 1985; Moore and Vaughan 1994.

debate historians and anthropologists have produced a lot of case studies of groups or areas and their migration trajectories; from these studies, could we now aggregate some general findings, for example about rural-urban ties, remittances or goods as a motivating force behind labour migration? We also welcome in-depth studies of a particular area or a set of individuals, what can we learn from migration trajectories? Why was labour migration attractive?

Power: - Contributions on the development of power relationships and hierarchies in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Central Africa are welcomed. How did warlords, chiefs, colonial officers and other 'Big Men' develop and project their power? How did this change over time? Did goods and the distribution of goods among followers influence the exercise of power in society? Did goods underline or challenge existing hierarchies?

In addition to the researchers associated with the Muskets to Nokias Programme, a selection will be made of further participants, on the basis of submitted abstracts.

**Abstracts of no more than 800 words are to be sent to the organisers by 15<sup>th</sup> June 2013. [cartvleiden@gmail.com](mailto:cartvleiden@gmail.com)**

Participants will be notified of their participation by 1<sup>st</sup> July 2013.

Travel and accommodation fares will be covered for selected participants.

As with the previous CART conferences, a selection will be made of the papers presented, for publication in an edited volume.

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