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Citation

Deutsch, J. -G. (2003). Absence of evidence is no proof: slave resistance under German colonial rule in East Africa. In G. J. Abbink, M. E. de Bruijn, & K. van Walraven (Eds.), *Rethinking resistance: revolt and violence in African history* (pp. 170-187). Leiden: Brill. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12918>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Absence of evidence is no proof: Slave resistance under German colonial rule in East Africa

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The chapter examines the lack of evidence regarding slave resistance in German East Africa and the related question of whether the colonial stereotype of the 'docile slave' is true. It starts with a brief surmise of the history of slavery and an analysis of slave actions in the period concerned (1890-1914). The labour history of population movements in Unyamwezi in central Tanzania is taken as a case study. The chapter concludes that the colonial stereotype of the submissive slave is highly misleading. The social heterogeneity of servility prevented slaves from taking concerted militant action. However, it should be acknowledged that this diversity was the result of protracted everyday struggles by individual slaves for a better life in their places of residence.

Introduction

This chapter examines the issue of slave resistance in East Africa in the early colonial period. There is tentative evidence of concerted slave action in pre-colonial times¹ but so far historians of the early colonial period have not come up with any archival documentation concerning slave militancy, let alone full-scale slave revolt. Oral historical sources seem to be absent on this topic as

¹ J. Glassman, *Feasts and Riot. Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856-1888* (London, 1995), 109, 111-13.

well.² There may have been ‘Feasts and Riots’ in early colonial East Africa³ but these were neither exclusively nor predominantly slave riots, although slaves very likely took part in them. Could it be that the colonial stereotype of the ‘docile slave’ was fairly accurate? This is the central question addressed in this chapter.

The chapter is divided into four sections: the first briefly recounts the history of slavery in German East Africa, the second part examines the evidence regarding slave militancy and the colonial impact, the third section discusses the role of slave resistance in the development of the colonial economy by taking Unyamwezi as a case study and the chapter ends with a brief conclusion.

Slavery under German colonial rule

Slavery in the region was legally abolished in Tanganyika by the British in 1922. Until then slaves could be freely bought and sold, inherited, taken as concubines or put up as sureties for credit. In contrast to the policy pursued by other colonial powers in Africa, the German colonial authorities officially recognized the legal status of slaves.⁴

Slavery was not, however, a colonial or a German invention. In the late nineteenth century, slavery was the most widespread form of labour recruitment, generating the surplus on which many pre-colonial empires and their rulers and traders thrived, albeit at terrible cost to human life.⁵ This was the outcome of a development which had started much earlier in the century when, owing to the expansion of commerce and agricultural production, local slave populations began to increase rapidly. In Unyamwezi, this process was related to a growth in the caravan trade that provided the wealth to import large numbers of slaves into the area, as well as the need to do so. The coast

² Cf. for example, M. Wright, *Strategies of Slaves & Women. Life-Stories from East/Central Africa* (London & New York, 1993).

³ Glassman, *Feasts and Riots*, 146-74.

⁴ See J.G. Deutsch, ‘Slavery under German Colonial Rule in East Africa, c. 1860-1914’, *Habilitationsschrift*, Humboldt University (Berlin 2001), 110-84. Also S. Miers & M.A. Klein, ‘Introduction’, in S. Miers & M.A. Klein (eds), *Slavery and Colonial Rule in Africa* (London, 1999), 1-15.

⁵ For more details on the nineteenth-century slave trade, see E.A. Alpers, *The East African Slave Trade* (Nairobi, 1967) and A.H.M. Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices & Ivory in Zanzibar. Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770-1873* (London, 1987). For an overview, see A. Wirz, *Sklaverei und Kapitalistisches Weltsystem* (Frankfurt am Main, 1984).



Map 7.1 Slave populations resident in German East Africa, c. 1900

experienced a similar increase in local slave populations, mainly due to the development of clove plantations on the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba, which necessitated the import of foodstuffs from the mainland that were produced by small-scale farmers and a growing number of plantation slaves, particularly in areas located along northern parts of the coast.

At the turn of the century, the colonial authorities believed that the number of slaves resident in Tanganyika exceeded 400,000 or roughly 10 to 15 per cent of the entire population.⁶ In some areas, such as in coastal towns, they constituted up to 70 per cent of the urban population.⁷ Slaves could be found almost everywhere in Tanganyika but the majority lived in Unyamwezi in central Tanganyika (over 200,000) and in areas adjacent to the coast in eastern Tanzania (over 100,000). The geographical extent of these regions was imprecise at the time but there can be little doubt that slavery permeated all aspects of the societies resident there.

These figures have their own problems. Apart from practical statistical considerations, their reliability hinges on the definition of what the colonial administration actually meant by the term 'slave'. The German colonial authorities employed a judicial classificatory system. According to the relevant decrees, a slave was a person owned by another person. This definition formed the basis for all sorts of colonial regulations, for example compensation payments, or the 'freeing' of slaves by official certification and the enforcement of involuntary labour contracts.

Several studies have shown that – as far as East Africa was concerned – ownership represented only one aspect of the relationship between slaves and their owners.⁸ Colonial classificatory systems are particularly unsatisfactory when it comes to understanding African social realities in the early colonial period. This has some bearing on the question of whether there was concerted slave action at that time. It could be argued that the general paucity of detailed historical data for this period coupled with a heavily skewed colonial classificatory system explains why there is no evidence of slave militancy in the colonial archives. There was determined slave action but it was not recognized as such by the colonial administration and nothing is known about it. Absence of evidence, as the argument goes, is no proof.

⁶ Bundesarchiv, Abteilungen Berlin, Reichskolonialamt (BAB RKoLA) 7382/27: 42-93, 'Berichte der einzelnen Verwaltungsstellen in Deutsch-Ostafrika über die Sklaverei', n.d. (c. 1900).

⁷ A. Leue, 'Bagamoyo', Beiträge zur Kolonialpolitik und Kolonialwirtschaft, 1900/1901, 11-31.

⁸ See F.L. Cooper, 'The Problem of Slavery in African Studies', *Journal of African History*, 20, 1 (1979) 103-25.

Struggles without a class

There is more to this peculiar absence of evidence. As already indicated, the colonial definition of a slave is reductionist in the extreme. Slaves were peasants, sharecroppers, pawns, squatters, traders, artisans, day labourers, caravan porters, trusted advisers, religious leaders and destitute beggars. In fact, in late nineteenth-century East Africa, slaves could be found in almost any profession, strata or social position.⁹

Some slaves on the coast called themselves *Waungwana* (free born) to obscure their humble origins, others called themselves *Waswahili* in order to underline their aspirations of participating in coastal society on an equal footing. Slaves were mothers and fathers who succeeded in marrying off their children, thereby gaining access to intricate networks of kinship relationships by which they were socially defined – families whose freeborn members had little reason to advertise the lowly status of their new in-laws. It was not uncommon for female slaves to become wives of freeborn husbands and their children were regarded as free, i.e. as having the same rights and obligations as other children in the household. Some male slaves became the husbands of freeborn women, often widows whose first husbands had died, or divorcees who had been abandoned by their previous husband's family.

On the coast, slaves were owned by the rich but also by the poor, the pious and the bigots, and sometimes even by other slaves. Most lived in the countryside but the largest numbers of slaves relative to the freeborn population were found in the coastal towns and chiefly residences in the interior. Slaves took part in various aspects of social life, gaining entry for instance to religious groups, frequently Muslim brotherhoods, whose leaders preached the equality of all believers before God.

The social position of slaves differed as much between societies as they varied within them. Beyond their precarious marginal social position, female and male slaves residing in Unyamwezi in central Tanzania, for example, and those living on the coast had little in common. They were divided by religion, kinship ideas, language and culture, work and pastimes. Professional life, family relationships and religious affiliations were contested social terrains – honour as much as personal autonomy had to be earned and was not infrequently denied – but the defining feature of slavery in East Africa was the heterogeneity of the slaves' social, political and economic position.

⁹ This and the following paragraphs are based on Deutsch, 'Slavery', 15-56; Glassman, *Feasts and Riots*, 79-111 and F.L. Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven, 1977), 23-149.

In short, while slaves were persons owned by other persons, they were not just that. Except perhaps for a few small areas dominated by commercial plantation agriculture, slaves (as well as their owners) did not constitute a class in any meaningful historical sense because they had so little in common which is – after all – the basis for concerted social or political action. Slaves, like those who believed themselves to be free, had multiple social identities and their slave status was not the dominant feature of everyday interaction. Rather than constituting a class, slaves perceived themselves as semi-autonomous clients, wives, tenants or distant kin – social positions that they anxiously sought to defend.¹⁰ Thus the absence of evidence regarding slave revolts or slave resistance in colonial archives arguably reflects the social heterogeneity of servility in East Africa. If slave resistance was a class struggle, then it was one without a class.

Slave resistance

The social heterogeneity that defined slavery in East Africa was not a given historical phenomenon. It evolved from the long struggle by slaves to better their lives in the societies into which they had been born or brought. From the moment of purchase or capture, slaves strove constantly to improve their social and living conditions and to reduce their marginal position in society.¹¹ They tried as far as possible to evade the demands of their owners for their time, efforts and reverence. The most famous example of slave militancy in the nineteenth century comes from a coastal village called Makorora near the town of Pangani.¹² Owing to the harsh treatment they had received from their owners, a group of plantation slaves – men, women, and children – fled the sugar estates in the Pangani Valley in 1873 and established a *watoro* (runaway) community. According to oral history sources, their owners made several attempts to recapture the slaves but their forces, numbering several thousand mercenaries, were unable to overcome the heavy fortifications of Makorora, which was stalwartly defended by its slave inhabitants. In the end, the slave owners were forced to give up their plans and Makorora was left alone. However, such

¹⁰ See Glassman, *Feasts and Riots*, 106-14 and also his earlier article 'The Bondsman's New Clothes. The Contradictory Consciousness of Slave Resistance on the Swahili Coast', *Journal of African History*, 32, 2 (1991) 277-312.

¹¹ See I. Kopytoff & S. Miers, 'Introduction. African "Slavery" as an Institution of Marginality', in S. Miers & I. Kopytoff (eds), *Slavery in Africa. Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison, 1977), 3-81.

¹² Glassman, *Feasts and Riots*, 109f.

examples are rare. Far more often, slaves endeavoured to improve their lowly position within the confines of their social situation. The historian Marcia Wright collected several female slave biographies that underline precisely this point.¹³ The life stories of Narvimba, Msatulwa Mwachitete and Chisi-Ndjurisiye-Sichyajunga showed how slave women employed several strategies to improve their lot: by attaching themselves to powerful patrons, by finding suitable new 'husbands' or by repeated flight.¹⁴ Even if they could not leave, they tried to withhold as much of their labour and honour as possible from their owners. The 'insolent, lazy slave' about whom African slave owners later so frequently complained to the German colonial administration was thus not merely a figment of the imagination¹⁵ but more often than not an accurate, if somewhat biased, description of a social practice with a long history.¹⁶

The struggle between owners and slaves was highly uneven and there were in fact many struggles within the bigger struggle. First of all, not all slaves took an active part in it. There were slaves who for whatever reason – such as loyalty to their owners – did not want to change their lives or lowly social position. Slavery in East Africa was characterized, as elsewhere, not only by resistance and contestation but also by accommodation and acquiescence. Secondly, and more fundamentally, slave owners and slaves competed for wealth, honour and power in the historical setting of a particular locality. The outcome of these conflicts depended on the material and ideological resources available to the individual or collective contestants at a given moment in time in that particular locality and these, as argued above, varied greatly between and within societies according to the age, gender and descent of the slave, his or her skills and upbringing, the profession of the owner, and the local political set-up. Thus, while slaves struggled in a piecemeal fashion for a better life, their individual successes and the ensuing heterogenization of slavery precluded concerted militant action against slave owners.

As has been observed in many African societies, slaves and especially those brought to their owner's localities by force to occupy the very margins of society forged social ties over time and acquired protective rights of various

¹³ Wright, *Strategies*, 21-121.

¹⁴ Ibid. 163-65. See also E.A. Alpers, 'The Story of Swema. Female Vulnerability in Nineteenth Century East Africa', in C.C. Robertson and M.A. Klein (eds), *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison, 1983), 185-219.

¹⁵ For a description of slave beatings by district officials, see BAB RKolA 1004/97: 8, 'Bericht des Bezirksamts Bagamoyo', 14 September 1897.

¹⁶ For a much more sophisticated elaboration of this argument, see J.C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven & London, 1990).

descriptions, sometimes even a measure of honour. By gradually becoming 'insiders', their social marginality was slowly reduced.¹⁷

Demarginalization was arguably a precondition for the permanent subordination of slaves. The host societies had not (yet) developed a state apparatus capable of controlling the movement of people, and the only way to keep slaves in their place was to offer them an existence that seemed more promising than the alternative, namely, flight. In the second half of the nineteenth century, runaway slaves formed communities on the fringes of the societies from which they had escaped, far enough away not to be militarily defeated but near enough to participate in markets that satisfied certain needs, particularly arms and ammunition, and often in exchange for slaves.¹⁸ Desertion was an ever-present option for slaves especially for those, in particular young men, who had not yet formed a firm attachment to their places of residence.

Flight was a risky undertaking in nineteenth-century East Africa. Fugitive slaves were often re-enslaved so that their oppression continued. As one acute observer noted, slaves would usually run away 'only...when the slave knows of some place to which he can go with reasonable chance of escaping recapture'.¹⁹ There was no guarantee of personal safety in the hinterland,²⁰ especially in the nineteenth century, as, for instance, a group of children found out to their peril when they were caught by slave traders and kidnappers and sold abroad.²¹ Consequently, comparatively few slaves dared to run away.

The colonial impact

Conquest and the establishment of colonial rule had little immediate impact on the character of slavery in East Africa. Despite the anti-slavery rhetoric at home, neither the colonial administration nor the missionary societies in Tanganyika were prepared to undertake measures which would effectively weaken or even eradicate slavery because it was perceived to be one of the

¹⁷ For this argument, see Kopytoff & Miers, 'Introduction', 3-81.

¹⁸ Glassman, *Feasts and Riots*, 111-13.

¹⁹ S.T. Pruen, *The Arab and the African. Experiences in Eastern Equatorial Africa during a Residence of Three Years* (London, 1891), 236.

²⁰ S. Feierman, 'A Century of Ironies in East Africa (c. 1780-1890)', in P. Curtin, S. Feierman, S. Thompson & J. Vansina (eds), *African History. From Earliest Times to Independence* (London, 1995), 352-76.

²¹ C. Velten, 'Sitten und Gebräuche der Suaheli', *Mittheilungen des Seminars für orientalische Sprachen. Afrikanische Studien I* (Berlin, 1898), 76.

main pillars of colonial rule.²² This policy was justified on the grounds that, on the whole, owners were supposedly treating their slaves extremely well. Consequently, the colonial authorities described the attitude of slaves as ‘docile’, almost like animals that, when properly fed and fairly treated, are by and large satisfied with their condition.²³ This obviously served the interests of colonial propaganda and reflected the preference of both slave owners and the administration to maintain the status quo.

In any case, since all Africans were seen as colonial subjects with strictly limited rights, it did not matter to the administration whether those who were called upon to provide free labour for the building and maintenance of roads, agricultural projects, plantations or the district offices were of servile or freeborn origin or status. As far as local society was concerned, slavery mattered a great deal but in their external interaction with the colonial administration, slaves and their owners were treated more or less as equals, that is, as colonial subjects. It is reasonable to assume that slaves took part in anti-colonial resistance movements, notably the Maji Maji Uprising of 1905-7 but they probably did so as millenarian believers and not as slaves. So far, no missionary or administrative evidence has come to light that specifically refers to *slaves* taking part in the war. Rather, the colonial government put the blame on *slave owners* who were accused of having joined the Maji Maji movement for fear the government would eventually get rid of the ‘evil institution’ and forcefully liberate slaves.²⁴

Instead of outlawing slavery, the colonial authorities embarked on a policy of obfuscation that left core issues deliberately unclear, such as whether district officers were officially required to return fugitive slaves to their rightful owners. The consequence was, as it was put at the time, that ‘nobody knew what the score [was]’²⁵ because administrative practices varied greatly between the districts and over time. The colonial government gradually suppressed wholesale slave raiding and commercial slave trading in the areas under its

²² Deutsch, ‘Slavery’, 110-83.

²³ See for instance, F. Weidner, *Die Haussklaverei in Ostafrika* (Jena, 1915).

²⁴ See for instance, Reichstag Anlagen, 11. Legislaturperiode, 2. Session, 1905/1906, Nr. 194, G. A. von Götzen: Denkschrift über die Ursachen des Aufstandes in Ostafrika, 1905. This was most likely a deliberate strategy to deflect criticism from the government. Internal government reports explicitly stated that there was no proof of either slave or owner participation. See BAB RKoLA 726:91, G. von Winterfeld, ‘Bericht der zur Erforschung der Ursachen des Aufstandes eingesetzten Kommission’, 4. December 1905.

²⁵ See A. Leue ‘Die Sklaverei in Ostafrika’, *Beiträge zur Kolonialpolitik und Kolonialwirtschaft*, 1900/1901, 608 [translation by the author]. For a similar view, see BAB RKoLA 1004/97: 8, ‘Bericht des Bezirksamts Bagamoyo’, 14 September 1897.

control, particularly the kind of warlordism that had previously guaranteed owners a steady supply of cheap captives. It thus became increasingly difficult for owners to replace any slaves lost through flight or natural death. However, direct government intervention was limited in effect and, as far as the relationship between slaves and their owners was concerned, of secondary importance only.

The development of the colonial economy in German East Africa was of far greater consequence in this respect because it strengthened the bargaining position of slaves *vis-à-vis* their owners.²⁶ By forcing open roads and markets, the colonial administration inadvertently removed major obstacles which had previously kept slaves in their place. Flight became a viable alternative to merely seeking a better life in the slave-holding society. Huge numbers of slaves took up paid work with European employers without their owners' consent, particularly after the turn of the century when wage employment rapidly increased. Unyamwezi in particular experienced a tremendous population loss as tens of thousands of people, including slaves, left for the coastal plantations.

During the 1890s and again after 1904, German plantations experienced severe shortages of labour, a pattern which did not change until the outbreak of the First World War.²⁷ The shortages resulted from the rapid growth of the industry itself, especially of the sisal plantations in Tanga District in the late 1900s and early 1910s. The number of people employed on European plantations in German East Africa between 1900 and 1914 is an indication of this expansion. In 1902, German plantation companies employed about 5,000 people²⁸ and just eleven years later, in 1913, they employed over 92,000 people. The railway companies, particularly those involved in the construction of the central line to Lake Tanganyika, also employed large number of workers, with an increase in numbers from 6,000 in 1906 to a peak of about 25,000 in 1910/11.²⁹ All in all, some 172,000 people or roughly 20 per cent of the total African labour force were believed to be in paid employment in 1913, about 140,000 of whom worked for German or other European employers, mainly in

²⁶ Deutsch, 'Slavery', 232-54.

²⁷ C. Pfrank, *Die Landarbeiterfrage in Deutsch-Ostafrika* (Berlin, 1919), 25.

²⁸ BAB RKolA 6475/13: 62-5, 'Denkschrift über die Entwicklung der deutschen Schutzgebiete in Afrika und der Südsee 1901/1902. Anlage VII. Nachweis über die in Deutsch-Ostafrika vorhandenen Plantagen und deren Stand am 1. Januar 1902', n.d. [1902].

²⁹ J. Koponen, *Development for Exploitation. German Colonial Policies in Mainland Tanzania, 1884-1914* (Helsinki & Hamburg, 1995), 609.

private companies, the government, the railways and the missions.³⁰ In comparison, the number of people employed by Africans in the caravan trade in 1913 was estimated to have been about 15,000.³¹

Unyamwezi: A case study

In the early 1890s, the plantation companies had already tried to persuade *Wanyamwezi* caravan porters to work on the plantations. Around this time they were still coming in their tens of thousands to the northern coast and particularly to Bagamoyo, which was then the centre of both the colonial administration and European commerce.³² However, the independent ‘workers of African trade’ were not keen on becoming dependent wage labourers on the plantations, at least not at this early stage.³³ Consequently, in the mid-1890s the plantation companies sent labour recruiters into the interior, especially to Unyamwezi in central Tanganyika, to the southern coast, and even to northern Mozambique.³⁴ These early attempts at private labour recruitment did not enjoy great success.³⁵ A series of scandals occurred involving false declarations of advances, headhunting by recruiters, the deception of labourers, and fraud.³⁶

Despite these inauspicious beginnings, more and more labourers came to the coast from Unyamwezi around the turn of the century, and some stayed there permanently.³⁷ They maintained contact with their areas of origin and persuaded others – neighbours, friends and others – to migrate to the coast. This is why some plantations employed large numbers of workers from the same areas in Unyamwezi.³⁸ In the 1900s, migrants from Unyamwezi

³⁰ J. Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge, 1979), 157.

³¹ Pfrank, *Landarbeiterfrage*, 31.

³² For the development of the caravan trade in the German period, see Iliffe, *Modern History*, 129.

³³ Pfrank, *Landarbeiterfrage*, 25-27. The phrase ‘workers of African trade’ refers to the title of the ground-breaking volume on portage in West Africa by C. Coquery-Vidrovitch & P. Lovejoy (eds), *The Workers of African Trade* (Beverly Hills, 1985).

³⁴ Iliffe, *Modern History*, 160. See also Pfrank, *Landarbeiterfrage*, 11.

³⁵ Pfrank, *Landarbeiterfrage*, 112.

³⁶ Pfrank, *Landarbeiterfrage*, 25-27. See also F.P. Nolan, ‘Christianity in Unyamwezi, 1878-1928’, PhD thesis, University of Cambridge (1977), 217.

³⁷ The following paragraphs are largely based on Pfrank, *Landarbeiterfrage*, 113-15, Iliffe, *Modern History*, 151-63 and Koponen, *Development*, 348-53.

³⁸ Hpt. Charisius, ‘Aus dem Bezirk Tabora’, *Deutsches Kolonialblatt*, 18 (1907), 461.

dominated the coastal labour market. According to Iliffe, more than a quarter of Dar es Salaam's 23,000 inhabitants in 1905 were believed to be *Wanyamwezi*.³⁹

In the early 1900s labour recruitment became more formalized.⁴⁰ It involved the signing of two contracts, one between the labour recruiters and the companies concerning the supply of labour, and one between the companies and the workers in question. The latter was the all-important labour contract, specifying wages, the length of contract and the type of work labourers were expected to do. The contract between recruiters and companies usually contained the number of labourers the recruiter was to bring to the plantation, the kind of work contract labourers were to sign, the advance payment recruiters were to receive for their services and the fee to be paid to the recruiter by the companies for each labourer delivered. According to one source, these fees could be up to 60 rupees for each labourer delivered to the company although 20 rupees per labourer was the more common sum.⁴¹ Because there were so many recruiters – in 1913 over a thousand in Tabora District alone⁴² – competition was fierce.⁴³

Later migration patterns from Unyamwezi changed. From about 1907 onwards, fewer and fewer migrant labourers left Unyamwezi to work on the coast.⁴⁴ Instead they went to work for construction companies that were building the central railway line between Lake Tanganyika and the coast. Construction began in 1905 and in the first two years, the companies involved employed mainly migrant labourers but also tax defaulters and war captives (1,500) from the Maji Maji Uprising.⁴⁵ The Dar es Salaam to Morogoro section of the line was completed in 1907 and then it took five years for the line to be extended to Tabora (1912) and another two years to reach Kigoma on Lake Tanganyika.⁴⁶ From about 1908 on, growing numbers of *Wanyamwezi* labourers began to work on the railway line. In 1913, the construction companies

³⁹ Iliffe, *Modern History*, 161.

⁴⁰ T. Sunseri, 'Dispersing the Fields. Railway Labour and Rural Change in Early Colonial Tanzania', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 32, 3 (1998) 564. See also by the same author, *Vilimani. Labor Migration and Rural Change in Early Colonial Tanzania* (Portsmouth, 2002), 165-92.

⁴¹ R. Tetzlaff, *Koloniale Entwicklung und Ausbeutung. Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte Deutsch-Ostafrikas 1885-1914* (Berlin, 1970), 244.

⁴² Iliffe, *Modern History*, 160.

⁴³ For more details on recruitment practices, see Sunseri, 'Dispersing', 564.

⁴⁴ Iliffe, *Modern History*, 159.

⁴⁵ Tetzlaff, *Koloniale Entwicklung*, 88.

⁴⁶ For more detailed information on the construction of the central railway, see Tetzlaff, *Koloniale Entwicklung*, 81-100, Iliffe, *Modern History*, 135-8 and Koponen, *Development*, 297-314.

employed over 16,000 people, the majority of whom were believed to have come from Tabora District. The building of the railway line caused a dramatic decline in the caravan trade between Tabora and the coast. By 1912, less than a hundred porters had arrived in Bagamoyo from the interior, whereas only ten years earlier tens of thousands had done so each year.⁴⁷

The move of Unyamwezi migrant labourers into paid employment was accompanied by a massive decline in the resident population of some parts of Tabora District.⁴⁸ In the 1900s, labourers, especially men, were often absent for years. Villages that had teemed with people in the 1890s were almost deserted as only the aged, and women and children remained.⁴⁹ According to the missionary Van der Burgt who had been working in Unyamwezi since 1892, the population declined by over 50 per cent in some places between 1890 and 1912.⁵⁰ An official report from Tabora claimed that in 1912/13 only ten out of every hundred taxpayers in the district were able-bodied men.⁵¹ The issue raised enormous political interest and criticism, even in the Reichstag.⁵²

The involvement of *Wanyamwezi* labourers in the plantation economy of the northern coastal districts and subsequently in the construction of the central railway line cannot solely be explained by the trickery of labour recruiters, the application of forced labour policies or taxation. Although force was not totally absent, on the whole the colonial administration did not use coercive means – taxation or the labour card system – to induce *Wanyamwezi* labourers to take jobs on the plantations or the railways.⁵³ Moreover, although labour recruiters often tried to lure people into wage labour employment with all kinds of false promises and material inducements, the actual work contract still had to be signed by the labourers themselves, and in the case of railway employees in the presence of district officials. All the available evidence suggests that this was

⁴⁷ Iliffe, *Modern History*, 137.

⁴⁸ A. Seibt, 'Fragebogen-Beantwortung für ganz Unyamwezi durch Missionar A. Seibt, in Urambo stationiert [Januar 1910]', in A. Gottberg, *Unyamwesi. Quellensammlung und Geschichte* (Berlin, 1971), 176.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ J.M.M. van der Burgt, 'Zur Entvölkerungsfrage Unjamwesis und Usumbwas', *Koloniale Rundschau* (1913), 706.

⁵¹ This report was cited by Gustav Noske, a member of the Social Democratic Party, in a Reichstag debate in 1913. See Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Reichstages [abbreviated as RT] 1912/14, 7 March 1913: 4349.

⁵² RT 1912/14, 7 March 1913: 4344-50.

⁵³ Koponen, *Development*, 352.

done voluntarily in the great majority of cases.⁵⁴ It raises the question of what motivated people to seek wage labour employment in such large numbers.⁵⁵

Any analysis which exclusively focuses on external factors to explain the large-scale migration of Unyamwezi labourers to the coast and to the railway construction sites fails to take into account the agency of those who were most directly concerned with this process, the labourers themselves.⁵⁶ Admittedly, evidence on this issue is exceedingly scarce but it appears that in the early 1890s some chiefs sold their subjects to labour recruiters and travelling traders for a small fee, probably to recoup the losses sustained during the rinderpest epidemic of 1891.⁵⁷ Many labourers never came back to their previous places of residence, preferring instead to remain on the coast or move to Tabora Town where better income opportunities were available.⁵⁸ Fearing the permanent loss of their subjects, which was after all the basis of their power and prestige, some chiefs introduced a new custom.⁵⁹ According to the most detailed contemporary document on this issue, these chiefs decreed that their serfs (*Hörige*) were not allowed to leave the villages and hamlets without the explicit permission of their chief. This permission could be acquired by the payment of a lump sum – a ransom – whereby the prospective migrant was relieved forever of his or her supposed duty to pay tribute to the chief.⁶⁰

It appears that in the late 1890s and early 1900s some Unyamwezi chiefs permitted their subjects to travel to the coast, presumably after receiving a small monetary inducement from labour recruiters.⁶¹ However, realizing that the migrants were not going to return, the fee was subsequently raised by the chiefs to approximate their putative future tribute payments or labour service, i.e. his or her commercial value. Thus, on the point of departure to the coast, some supposedly free chiefly subjects (serfs) seem to have become commercial slaves. Archival evidence points to widespread buying and selling of persons in Unyamwezi, regardless of whether they were supposed to be free or commercial slaves. In 1900, the Tabora district officer informed the colonial

⁵⁴ Sunseri, 'Dispersing', 563.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 565.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 574.

⁵⁷ Nolan, 'Christianity', 148, 170. For more details on Nyamwezi chiefship, see W. Blohm, *Die Nyamwezi*, 2 vols (Hamburg, 1931-1933) and F. Bösch, *Les Banyamwezi. Peuple de l'Afrique Orientale* (Münster, 1930). For the history of the area in general, see A.D. Roberts, 'The Nyamwezi', in A.D. Roberts (ed.), *Tanzania before 1900* (Nairobi, 1968), 117-50.

⁵⁸ Charisius, 'Tabora', 459.

⁵⁹ RKolA 1007: 65, 'Aufzeichnung des Bezirksamtmann Löhr', 31 May 1916.

⁶⁰ Ibid. For a similar description, see Nolan, 'Christianity', 148.

⁶¹ Sunseri, 'Dispersing', 563.

government in Dar es Salaam that 'only well-to-do owners sold their slaves, as the poorer ones were afraid of losing their only labourers'.⁶² Ten years later, the widely respected district judge, Karstedt, observed that hundreds of people were being sold in Tabora District each year.⁶³

The power of the chiefs to sell slaves was limited. The Tabora district officer, Puder, reported in 1898 that 'owners treat their slaves well, for fear they might run away'.⁶⁴ The reason for this development was that labour recruiters paid advances to anyone who wished to work on the coast, irrespective of the status of the person involved.⁶⁵ By the turn of the century, flight had become a matter of choice and the authority of slave owners and chiefs consequently declined.⁶⁶ According to Koponen, this development occurred in the first half of the 1900s. He relates that when the former district officer of Tanga, Meyer, visited Unyamwezi in 1906, he found that 'some 90 percent of those who had gone to European farms had done so without the order of their chiefs and not seldom against it. The people sent by the chiefs were their slaves in most cases.'⁶⁷ Meyer also stated that Nyamwezi workers on the coast generally belonged to the lower classes.⁶⁸ Thus, it appears that labour recruitment gave slaves an opportunity to leave their owners. It also enabled the subjects of the chiefs to escape from their rapacious rulers.⁶⁹

When the railway companies arrived in the area in 1907, the process was already well advanced. According to one observer, by that time the chiefs and slave owners were no longer able to extract labour or tribute from their slaves and/or subjects.⁷⁰ The latter were free to move and this arguably explains why they were able to set off in such large numbers to the construction sites or leave the villages for smaller, more autonomous settlements of family units. It also explains why slave ransoming prices in Unyamwezi rose in the late colonial

⁶² BAB RKoLA 7382/27: 89, 'Berichte der einzelnen Verwaltungsstellen in Deutsch-Ostafrika über die Sklaverei', Station Tabora, Berichterstatter: Hauptmann Puder, n.d. [1900]. [translation by the author]

⁶³ F.O. Karstedt, 'Zur Sklavenfrage in Deutsch-Ostafrika', *Koloniale Rundschau* (1913), 619f.

⁶⁴ BAB RKoLA 7382/27: 89, 'Berichte der einzelnen Verwaltungsstellen in Deutsch-Ostafrika über die Sklaverei', Station Tabora, Berichterstatter: Hauptmann Puder, n.d. [1900] (translation by the author).

⁶⁵ Charisius, 'Tabora', 459.

⁶⁶ RKoLA 1007: 65, 'Aufzeichnung des Bezirksamtman Löhr', 31 May 1916.

⁶⁷ Meyer, quoted in Koponen, *Development*, 352.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ For a similar view, see Nolan, 'Christianity', 154.

⁷⁰ Seibt, 'Fragebogen-Beantwortung', 206

period: there were fewer slaves to be ransomed.⁷¹ This argument is supported by circumstantial evidence. Seibt, a missionary who worked in Unyamwezi, reported in 1910 that slaves who had once been forced to live in the same village as their owner could now freely choose their place of residence.⁷² Löbner, another missionary, observed that by 1910 a significant sector of the slave population had been absorbed into the general population.⁷³

The available evidence does not allow a distinction between the actions of those who were regarded as slaves and those who were assumed to be free but were subject to the whims of Unyamwezi chiefs. Sources are also silent about who was actually regarded as a chief. Were they 'sultans' appointed by the government as administrative agents and tax collectors, village heads who ruled over only a limited number of people or merely commercial slave owners who had acquired slaves in the 1880s to relieve labour shortages in their extended households?⁷⁴

It is reasonable to assume that a significant number of the estimated 100,000 to 200,000 *Wanyamwezi* who left their villages to work in the wage labour economy between 1900 and 1914 were slaves who were trying to improve their lives through migration.⁷⁵ Clearly, new kinds of employment opportunities opened up for both the free and the slaves. However, as constraints on them diminished, the 'unfree' probably responded more quickly to these opportunities than the free, since on the whole they had less to lose.⁷⁶

The account above suggests that in the early colonial period the slaves and the free in Unyamwezi began to merge imperceptibly, as both groups applied the same strategies to make use of the wider opportunities available through the imposition of colonial rule and the development of the colonial economy. It became increasingly impossible for many observers – both local and foreign – to tell the two groups apart.⁷⁷

It thus appears that while German colonial rule provided the means to destroy the power of the slave owner in Unyamwezi, namely wage labour employment and a minimum degree of personal security, it was left to the

⁷¹ Nolan, 'Christianity', 267.

⁷² Seibt, 'Fragebogen-Beantwortung', 187.

⁷³ M.H. Löbner, 'Fragebogen-Beantwortung für ganz Wanyamwezi durch Missionar M. H. Löbner, stationiert bei Tabora [Usoke, March 1910]', in A. Gottberg, *Unyamwesi. Quellensammlung und Geschichte* (Berlin, 1971), 129. See also by the same author 'Zur Entvölkerungsfrage Unyamwezis', *Koloniale Rundschau*, 1914, 267-70.

⁷⁴ R.G. Abrahams, *The Peoples of Greater Unyamwezi, Tanzania. Nyamwezi, Sukuma, Sumbwa, Kimbu, Konongo* (London, 1967), 45f.

⁷⁵ For these estimates, see Tetzlaff, *Koloniale Entwicklung*, 252, 287.

⁷⁶ See Wright, *Strategies*, 42.

⁷⁷ Nolan, 'Christianity', 154.

slaves to commit the deed themselves. In other words, the runaway slaves of the late nineteenth century became the labour migrants of the early twentieth century. Labour migration helped to bring slavery in Unyamwezi to an end.

Conclusion

In this chapter it was argued that the social heterogeneity of servility in East Africa prevented slaves from taking concerted militant action. At the same time this very diversity was the result of protracted individual everyday struggles by slaves for a better life, be it to ensure physical survival or to obtain a measure of honour and autonomy or partial independence in their different places of residence. The colonial stereotype of the 'docile slave' is thus highly misleading.

Moreover, slave resistance can be said to have brought slavery in East Africa to an end. Yet, slaves did not militantly challenge or seek to reform slavery through concerted action but when they had the opportunity, they completely rejected their personal subjugation. In the pre-colonial nineteenth century, this rejection generally took the form of flight. By the early colonial period flight was no longer required since migration would fulfil a similar purpose. But, because of the number of people involved, these seemingly isolated and personal strategies of advancement had a major social and political impact on the societies concerned as well as on the region as whole. Without the need for a formal organization or concerted action, by leaving their places of residence in large numbers slaves ultimately undermined the evil institution. Slavery in East Africa persisted throughout the German colonial period but the number of slaves who were prepared to accept their marginal social position, their dependence and exploitation declined dramatically.

The migrant slaves became (temporary) wage earners on European-owned plantations and urban informal-sector workers, hoping to and often succeeding in ultimately joining the ranks of the free independent peasantry. It is strange that those who have written so much about 'resistance to capitalist encroachment' by the peasantry and about the 'development of exploitation' in East Africa seem to have overlooked the social origins of those who made early colonial capitalism work.

The history of the end of slavery has wider implications for the study of resistance in Africa and elsewhere. There is a danger of romanticizing resistance, of reading legitimate current concerns about the marginal social position of various social, political and ethnic groups and their apparent lack of political leadership, ideology and militancy backwards into (African) history. The fact that there was no Spartacus leading the servile masses of East Africa

into freedom does not mean that slaves did not struggle for a better life. It is all too easy to overlook the fact that marginalized people are able to confront effectively social, political and economic hegemony and that they can do so in their everyday lives without being represented by a formal organization, taking part in concerted militant actions or subscribing to an overarching political ideology. Although the colonial subordination of a large part of the world brought untold misery and suffering to most of its inhabitants, this should not prevent historians from critically appreciating the motives of those marginal groups who apparently wholeheartedly embraced it.