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### Trading Lives for White Gold

When one mentions the ivory trade, what comes most readily to mind? For good reason, it is likely the horrific images of the many slaughtered elephants that helped to fuel it. Used often for knife handles, combs, piano keys, billiard balls, and a whole host of other purposes (“How We Get Our Ivory”) ivory ranked among some of the greatest scourges on the environment of Africa. We all know that for every ivory tusk produced an elephant life was lost. But what of the people who participated in the trade? What fate befell the Africans who were either forced or convinced into perpetuating it? Though environmental history certainly pays great attention to the devastation wrought on nature, this field as well as the public eye tends to neglect not only the impacts on people, but the resulting connections between those impacts and the environment. As we will see, the ivory trade of East Africa – from the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 20th – led to fundamentally intertwined, devastating environmental and human impacts.

Because the ivory trade began at different times in different places and changed quite drastically with the onset of colonialism, a complete analysis of the environmental and social impacts of the trade must include a focus on the trade before colonialism as well as during it. Authors Brian Morris, Derek Wilson, and Peter Ayerst provide a rough though sufficient pre colonial timeline to assess. According to Morris, the ivory trade in East Africa began its most prominent development at the end of the 18th century (Morris 8). Combine this with Wilson and Ayerst’s assertion that the majority of the African continent was colonized and divided between

European powers by 1890 (Wilson and Ayerst 102) and we have indeed a rough but useful estimate of the time period within which the pre colonial ivory trade was most prominent in Eastern Africa. Now, we can begin to examine the environmental and human effects as well as the important ways in which they interact.

### **Human and Environmental Impacts of the Trade Before Colonialism**

One cannot deny that the amount of ivory transported from East Africa was immense, and the statistics backing that claim are both varying and staggering. According to data recorded from trades of Captain Theodore Canot, a prominent trader in ivory, a single caravan could procure more than 600 pounds of elephant tusks (Mayer 90). The Yao people of East Africa, a tribe which played prominently in the ivory trade, alone transported around 400 to 500 bares of ivory to Mozambique every single year (De Melo e Castro 215). And on a larger scale, it is estimated that, even before colonialism, around 5,000 pounds of ivory made its way to Western countries like the United States per year (“Ivory Trade of Aden”). Of course, a dead elephant preceded every piece of ivory procured, and thus it is clear that major exploitation of elephant populations was already a prominent feature of African commerce well before the colonial period (Machado 207). According to newspaper articles published in England towards the end of the 18th century, a single ivory manufactory could directly result in the slaughter of more than one thousand and two hundred of these creatures per year (“The Supply of Ivory”). Though Edward Moore, arguably the largest ivory trader in Africa at the turn of the 20th century, notes that it is quite difficult to accurately estimate the precise total of elephants killed (Moore 214) he provides a startling estimate: 40,000 to 100,000 per year prior to 1900 (Moore 213). This frightening statistic goes a long way in explaining how an elephant population once estimated to

be 26 million individuals strong (Larson) now rests at around 415,000 today (International Union for Conservation of Nature).

Such an immense slaughter constitutes a very important environmental impact in and of itself, but that impact extends further when one considers that elephants are keystone species, or species upon which a particular ecosystem depends (Kelly 42). Herds of elephants shape local landscapes by opening up thick brush and forest, which create opportunities not just for varying species of plants (Walker 164) but for humans as well. It is here that the first major intersection between environmental and human impact emerges. Elephant movement and migration patterns played a vital role in maintaining savannah grasslands, which were favorable to human pastoralism (Kelly 42). Understandably, then, their removal had an incredible impact both on the local vegetation patterns of Eastern Africa (O'Neill) as well as the pastoralists in that area who relied on the savannah grasslands for their livelihoods. Further, the increased exploitation created ideal conditions for the tsetse fly and sleeping sickness, leading to epidemics that affected both humans and their livestock (Kelly 42). And finally, the declining elephant populations also meant that tribes who may have used the elephant as a form of locomotion could no longer do so ("The Supply of Ivory"). As we will see, many of these impacts continued into the colonial period, but even before then they demonstrated an important message: when one removes the elephant, the life of the land and its people vanishes as well.

So, the myriad environmental impacts, which extend far beyond the limited real estate dedicated to them within this paper, also impacted humans. But beyond the examples provided exists a long list of direct human impacts, many of which also had roundabout effects on the environment. Indeed, for every change the trade brought to the environment, it would bring five more to the people living within it. This is largely because the East African people were many

times active and willing participants in the trade themselves. From the locals who traveled along the Zambezi River to provide tusks to Vaniya merchants (Machado 183) to the semi-nomadic hunter gatherers around the nyika who hunted ivory for exchange on the coasts (Thorbahn IX) East Africans were not mere victims of the ivory trade, but directly tied to it.

Thus, in the pre colonial period the ivory trade did bring with it a certain amount of economic development. Prior to the involvement of non-African traders, elephant tusks and the ivory contained within them had very little value (Moore 15). But after the arrival of Arabs and Europeans, ivory acted as a source of wealth for the Africans who controlled local trade (Somerville 12). As discussed later, this wealth had a major impact on social structures within East Africa. Regardless, though Africans often received goods that did not equal the value of ivory in the markets of India, Europe, and America (Alpers 266) that ivory still became a staple item in East African trade in the 18th century (Morris 9) and can even be thought of as a primary driver of economic development in areas such as Mozambique (Alpers 143). It can be reasonably speculated, again following the lines of the intersections between environmental and social impact, that this economic development also changed the ways in which the people of East Africa viewed their environment. Suddenly, elephants and their ivory tusks became products, tools to accrue power and economic development. This “development,” however, was certainly never equitable (Reid 46) and, even if it can be considered a benefit, it is most certainly where the benefits of the ivory trade for the African people end.

One of the worst impacts of the ivory trade on the people of Africa before colonialism was an increase in intertribal conflict. Arab and European traders, in an effort to encourage Africans to kill more elephants, often sold muzzle-loading rifles to the locals (Wilson and Ayerst 148). At the same time, a “new economy based on fierce capitalist competition” (Wilson and

Ayerst 61) pitted local tribes against each other in the fight for additional ivory profits. This deadly combination resulted in conflicts that simultaneously destroyed land and took human lives. It even impacted groups that once coexisted relatively peacefully, as evidenced by the example of the Yao and Bisa (Alpers 243), two groups whose livelihoods came to depend upon the tusks they hunted. Conflict also arose between local Africans and European traders, such as the period of endemic warfare in the 19th century that occurred between the Makua in Tanzania and the Portuguese (Alpers 106). Threats from Europeans to burn houses and destroy villages when trades were not upheld also occurred (Hardwick 131). Needless to say, wherever elephant tusks hit the ground, human conflict and resulting environmental destruction was quick to follow.

Before colonialism, the ivory trade also caused a major shift away from subsistence living practices among East Africans. Though ivory itself was useless to them, they were happy to provide it for Europeans that would pay with guns, cloth, and other useful items (Wilson and Ayerst 41). Suddenly, hunting for ivory became a substantial source of income for local people (Somerville 96). This effect was most pronounced in ivory trading ports such as Zanzibar, where most if not all of the labor was diverted from subsistence production to hunting for ivory and, in many cases, slaves (Sheriff 3). Ever increasing demand from traders and their markets abroad encouraged tribes such as the Laingulu of Southern Kenya to focus entirely on the killing of elephants for the sake of their tusks alone (Wilson and Ayersk 146). Thus the ivory trade drastically changed the manner in which East Africans interacted with their environments. As more ivory was consumed internationally, more Africans transformed their landscapes not through pastoralism and shifting cultivation, but through hunting.

As ivory hunting became more pronounced, population dynamics also began to shift. Tribal men spent months or years as ivory porters out on the hunt (Wilson and Ayerst 61) and

populations in certain tribes – as evidenced in the case of the Nyamwezi (Sheriff 4) – suffered as a result. Without strong populations of young men, tribal homelands were left undefended during times of need (Wilson and Ayerst 61). This labor migration from the ivory trade led to weakened rural communities (Reid 214) not only because it robbed them of their most virile defenders, but because it shifted production away from subsistence in the village and towards economic development in other areas of East Africa. This also had the effect of concentrating physical development in specific trading ports – like Zanzibar – where land was once again transformed to meet the needs of the market economy. Unfortunately, much of the ensuing economic development would never reach the communities from which the people who produced it often hailed.

Perhaps most devastatingly, the ivory trade also came with a concomitant increase in the operations of East Africa's slave trade. John Frederick Walker, in his book *Ivory's Ghosts*, includes a startling picture of slavery attributed to Alfred J. Swann in 1882, ““As they filed past we noticed many chained together by the neck. Others had their necks fastened into the forks of poles about six feet long, the ends of which were supported by the men who preceded them...The women, who were as numerous as the men, carried babies on their backs in addition to a tusk of ivory on their heads”” (Swann 48). The trend could be seen across East Africa, with slaves used not only for agricultural labor, as soldiers, and in the household, but for the transport of ivory as well (Walker 119). As ivory traders earned more from their trade they could afford to purchase more slaves, which allowed them to expand their operations and their environmentally and socially destructive consequences. As the ivory trade progressed through the 19th century, ivory portage became a more prestigious activity (Walker 119) and slave usage tapered off, but nonetheless the ivory trade was still responsible for a marked increase in its usage.

The aforementioned social impacts have clear ties to the environment, but the ivory trade did bring some changes that resided mostly if not entirely within the human realm. A primary example of this is the creation of new systems of social organization. Among the Yao people, elephant hunting was directly tied to the creation of political structures within villages and chiefdoms (Alpers 17). As hunting increased, organized guilds emerged to make it more efficient and the hunt eventually became synonymous with territorial expansion and regional hegemony (Somerville 17). This impact extended even to the spiritual. New rituals, especially among the Yao people, were created to promote a successful hunt (Morris 17). These changes in social and political structure had the potential to be positive, but they mostly only contributed to increasing divisiveness among the people of East Africa (Alpers XVIII). And though control of the ivory trade brought power to some, it often only put that power and subsequent wealth in the hands of an already wealthy few (Alpers 266).

Other examples of changes residing primarily in the human realm are the gender stratification of certain tribes as well as the subversion of the African economy. In groups such as the Mang'ana, planting and cultivating existed as a shared responsibility between men and women (Alpers 24). When the ivory trade arrived, however, hunting became exclusively a man's job, serving to further divide the genders and their subsequent roles. There is an argument to be made that, in some tribes, the absence of men may have brought about a certain level of empowerment for women (Reid 214) but whether the separation served an ultimate benefit is still debated. Not debated, however, is the idea that the emergence of a global ivory economy resulted in the ultimate subordination of African economies and the movement of decision making power to areas outside of Africa (Alpers 265). As Africans increasingly depended on international trading economies, their own local economies and structures became heavily diminished.

Considering the aforementioned connections between the pre colonial ivory trade's impacts on humans and the environment, these "purely human" changes may very well have resulted in additional environmental impacts themselves. For example, new social structures that emerged to make hunting more efficient may have increased the pace at which environmental degradation occurred. Unfortunately, concrete evidence to support such claims is lacking.

### **Human and Environmental Impacts of the Trade During Colonialism**

Many of the intertwined human and environmental effects of the ivory trade continued during colonial rule. For example, the rate at which elephants were slaughtered in East Africa did not change quickly, with newspapers at the beginning of the colonial period estimating that 65,000 elephants were still being killed yearly (Somerville 26). With elephant populations continuing to dwindle, the ensuing environmental degradation and the impacts it had on humans continued to occur.

It was only when European hunters, concerned about the longevity of sport hunting, became adamant about protecting elephant populations that changes were instituted. In the early and mid 20th century, government-wide conservation policies as well as national parks in Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya gained traction. In 1900, colonial administrators signed on to the first major agreement meant to protect African wildlife, dubbed the Convention for the Preservation of Animals, Birds, and Fish in Africa (Walker 160). Throughout East Africa, the colonial government outlawed the hunting of female elephants as well as any elephant with tusks weighing under ten pounds (Walker 159). But whether these efforts changed the impacts that the ivory trade had on humans and the environment relies entirely upon whether they were effective in the first place. And, unfortunately, that question is a tough one to answer.



On the one hand, much of the ivory trade literature focuses on the failure of colonial administrations to diminish the negative impacts of the trade. Departments of Game and Preservation, established in Kenya and Tanzania respectively, had insufficient funds (Kelly 112) and insufficient staff numbers (Ofcansky 15) to carry out their full range of duties. Thus, despite efforts of these governments to counteract it, the ivory trade continued to be an incredibly lucrative – and thus incredibly environmentally destructive – business (“Illegal Ivory Trade”). That trend extends to the rest of East Africa as, despite efforts to track and regulate trade, “illegal” traders found many ways to circumvent those efforts (Moore 230) and in some areas a European hunter, “...still enjoyed a freedom limited only by the supply of elephant and the extent of his own stamina” (Wilson and Ayerst 103). Were it only for these accounts, the environmental impact and the connected human impacts of the ivory trade would seem exactly the same as they had been before colonialism. But other sources argue, as Wilson and Ayerst do in their book *White Gold*, that by the 1920s colonial rule did in fact curtail the activities of African and European hunters (Wilson and Ayerst 135). According to Moore, ivory was very well controlled in the British portions of East Africa, and governmental policies were carried out with, “reasonably satisfactory results” (Moore 227). Perhaps, then, these efforts were more effective than they first appeared.

Regardless, these new policies did bring some environmental and social benefits. For example, it can be reasonably assumed that, at least in some cases, they helped to stabilize the rate at which elephant populations declined. Additionally, a select number of local Africans made profits by acting as guides for European sport hunters, helping them to find and kill elephants as well as other species for the fun of the colonizers (Wilson and Ayerst 110). Additionally, the colonial administration brought an end to the legal slave trade and its close ties

to the ivory industry (Moore 231). While it did not bring an end to slavery as a whole, and it is highly likely that slaves continued to be used for the transport of ivory, it did end the explicit support for the industry that had for a long while been propped up by the ivory trade.

But for every social or environmental change colonialism brought to an end, it would introduce an entirely new one in its place. After all, at the time of colonial rule the understanding of ecology was quite limited (Wilson and Ayerst 145) and this meant that the protected and preserved areas set aside by the colonial governments often had unintended consequences. According to Walker, “Game managers discovered that if elephants are confined to a park, their increasing numbers can turn a lush environment into a desert” (Walker 164). As elephant populations increased within the small boundaries of national parks and protected areas, they consumed all edible plant life in those areas (Wilson and Ayerst 144) leaving little for the rest of the fauna. This also resulted in, for local tribes living just outside the boundaries of national parks, an increase in crop destruction by wandering elephants that had no desire to stay within the human-defined boundaries. Thus, in some cases, colonial rule shifted the story of ivory trade environmental degradation from a problem of too few elephants to a problem, perhaps, of too many in too small a space.

Indeed, the interconnected nature of human and environmental impacts runs quite deep in regards to the introduction of colonial conservation practices. In the early 1900s, colonialism brought in tougher regulation on hunting (Somerville 86) which may have eased the burden on the environment, but also devastated human communities. Across East Africa, local and indigenous communities were progressively excluded from hunting on lands they had used for centuries (Somerville 27), cutting them off both from a necessary source of sustenance as well as the market activities they had previously participated in. Colonial administrators and sport

hunters often vilified East African hunting practices as poaching while at the same time promoting white game hunting as legitimate (Kelly 23) and they justified this treatment through the assertion that local Africans were ultimately responsible for the destruction of game (Somerville 58).

In some cases, hunting in East Africa was not outright banned, but the complex system of licensing and registration had a similar effect (Somerville 74). In German-controlled East Africa, the licensing system was nearly completely prohibitive for native hunting. Not only did they have to pay the colonial government to hunt wildlife on their land, but they had to pay prices upwards of ten times the amounts that certain European hunters did (“The African Ivory Trade”). As a result, the colonial government, and by extension the ivory trade itself, not only robbed locals of subsistence, but their autonomy as well. Even an act as simple as protecting crops from wildlife, another human-environment interaction, was contested. As Walker notes, “Indigenous Africans were rarely allowed to take matters into their own hands; they had to seek help from the authorities, or once again find themselves poaching” (Walker 160). Because of the restrictions, East Africans could no longer control the damage inflicted by elephants and other wildlife on the crops they now had to grow to survive (Reid 214). And further, these policies were often poorly clarified, with definitions of “vermin” that could be killed to protect crops changing dramatically across the decades of colonial rule (Kelly 112). Undoubtedly, these environmentally-focused policies severely hurt the lives of local Africans.

But the impact did not stop there. As was the case internationally, the creation of national parks in East Africa – partly products of the desire to protect ivory stocks – also led to major physical displacement of East Africans. Indigenous hunters not only became public enemy number one (Somerville 86) but lost their homes and their farmlands as well (Somerville 58).

Tribes such as the Liangulu of southern Kenya, who had lived off of migrating elephants that traveled through their region, could no longer do so as a result of the protected areas (Wilson and Ayerst 145). They were often simply ordered out of reserves and parks (Somerville 86), the homes they had cultivated for centuries. Little or no compensation was offered for their removal, and they were often forced onto far inferior lands than the ones they had previously inhabited. All of course, for the sake of the coveted ivory tusk. From the perspective of the colonial government, "...elephants could always be shot and entire settlements relocated" (Walker 163).

So, though undoubtedly the ivory trade ravaged elephant populations and ecosystems alongside them, it also heavily impacted humans. From an increase in intertribal conflict, to a forced shift from subsistence to hunting, to population loss, unequal social structures, a brutal slave trade, gender stratification, and the myriad other travesties wrought upon the people of Africa, a discussion of the impacts of the ivory trade cannot be limited solely to declining elephant populations. One could even go so far as to say that these environmental and social impacts cannot truly be separated, for they intertwine and compound upon each other in unexpected ways. And for all the changes colonialism brought with it, it could not uproot, no, it even strengthened, the injustices of a trade so lucrative it could not be left alone. Today, though the prominence of the trade as well as its legality have certainly diminished, it nonetheless continues. And while we should worry for the elephants and the ecosystems that continue to suffer under its illegal regime, we should also fear for the people who are both perpetrators and victims of it. Wherever ivory untimely hits the ground, human lives are sure to follow. And what, one may ask, was all of the suffering, all of the displacement, all of the injustice, even for, in the end? All for piano keys, knife handles, combs, billiard balls. All for that white gold, that elephant

tusk, that brief basking in isolated, unfair, and ephemeral economic success. All for nothing, it would seem.

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