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Firearms and the History of Technology in Africa

THE POLICE post in Bunkeya, Mwami Msiri's old imperial capital in the present Territoire de Lubudi of southern Katanga, Democratic Republic of the Congo ("DR Congo"), is a shabby—if colorful—place. On a pleasant day early in August 2011, Robert Ross, Pierre Kalenga, and I entered it to announce our presence in town for a brief stint of research. The plan was to bring to an end our dealings with the local representatives of the Agence Nationale des Renseignements (or "ANR," somewhat optimistically described to me as "the Congolese FBI") as soon as diplomacy and politeness made it possible. In the event, something caught our attention and made us stay longer than we envisaged: a heap of rusty firearms occupying a sizeable portion of the floor surface of the tiny room into which we had been ushered. The guns in question comprised a dizzying variety of models, though percussion-lock muzzle-loaders were the most numerous. What all of these firearms had in common, however, was that they had been manufactured locally, using gun scraps, home-made pieces, and industrial parts. Upon inquiry, we discovered that the guns—commonly going under the obviously onomatopoeic name of "*poupous*"—had been subject to precautionary confiscation from local residents in the spring of 1997, when Laurent D. Kabila's forces had entered the town during the campaign that would shortly thereafter result in the overthrow of long-serving dictator Mobutu Sese Seko.

"Surely they don't work now?" I asked.

"No, but many of them were already useless back in 1997," was the reply of one of the two officers.

FIGURE 0.1. Homemade poupous, Bunkeya, DR Congo. Photograph by the author, August 2011.

"Why keep them, then?" I inquired, rather unimaginatively.

"Who knows? Most villagers have them. It's part of being a man . . . a *père de famille*."

At one level, of course, Bunkeya's poupous—accessible tools of self-protection in a country where threats of violence and predation have often been part and parcel of the daily lives of ordinary people—encapsulate

the troubled postcolonial history of the Congo. At another, they illustrate the historical relation between the Yeke of Katanga and hunting, an activity with which the poupous have been closely associated from the early decades of the twentieth century. Once central to the workings of Msiri's warlord state and the livelihoods of the people of the district, hunting continues to play a marginal, seasonal role in the domestic economy of some Yeke households.

But, as the final remark of the ANR officer suggests, there is more to guns than meets the eye, and their social role in southern Katanga—and, as I will argue, elsewhere—cannot be reduced to their military and economic functions. Although regional specialists have been slow to acknowledge the phenomenon, a "surplus of meaning" has clearly been inscribed upon this technological artifact.[1] Besides working as defensive and hunting tools, Bunkeya's poupous have also been endowed with a host of less predictable symbolic attributes. As adumbrated by my informant, in some contexts homemade guns were and are probably less valued as operating weapons than as markers of masculinity and signs of patriarchal status and self-reliance. The reasons why one bundle of cultural meanings prevailed over several different possible combinations are eminently historical. That is, they become accessible to historians only when they are appraised in the light of the specific experiences and worldviews of the people concerned and the changes they underwent across different historical frameworks. In the case of the Yeke, the story would have to begin with their emergence as a gun-rich, conquering elite in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the time of Katanga's direct incorporation into the long-distance trades in ivory and slaves.

Novelists have long sensed that the power of objects extends well beyond their immediate service functions. Thus, Joseph Bridau, one of the *Comédie humaine*'s characters, lamented the passing of the golden age of French aristocracy in the following terms: "The fan of the grande dame is broken. . . . The fan is now used only for fanning. Once a thing is nothing more than what it is, it's too useful to serve the cause of luxury."[2] More than a hundred and fifty years later, historians of technology and material culture have come round to Balzac's intuition, and the view is now widely shared that artifacts are polysemous; that is, they embody different meanings and fulfill several purposes, both simultaneously and diachronically. In this respect, Katangese guns are not at all unique. But their physical attributes are less easily reducible

to a mere manifestation of the human tendency to endow objects and technologies with symbolic significance. Notwithstanding the disparaging assessment of the automatic rifle–carrying ANR officer, when the poupous first made their appearance in Bunkeya in the early twentieth century, they represented a triumphant marriage of local inventiveness and high user demand. The craftsmanship and eclecticism that they exhibit demand our attention, for they speak of long-drawn-out, locally rooted processes of technological engagement and domestication. These processes lie at the heart of this book, which approaches the trajectory of firearms in central Africa from a culturally sensitive perspective that embraces both the practical applications of guns and the set of values and meanings that they have been taken to encompass.

Focusing as it does on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the early history of central Africa's entanglements with gun technology—the exercise is mired in complexity. Given the nature and limitations of the available source material, the holistic treatment of firearms that I advocate will sometimes remain more of an ideal towards which to strive than a tangible realization. But the current "foreshortening of African history" recently decried by Richard Reid makes the effort worthwhile.[3] This book, then, is driven by a double ambition, seeking both to make a stand against the increasing marginalization of African precolonial history in the academy and to take up David Edgerton's call to shift the study of technology away from its "historically familiar surroundings."[4] My two overarching aims, in fact, are closely interlaced, for one key strategy to rekindle scholarly interest in precolonial history is to establish a dialogue with theories and concepts originating from other disciplines and historical fields. It is to a quick discussion of these literatures that the next two sections of this introduction are dedicated.

SOCIETY AND TECHNOLOGY

There used to be a time in which the relation between technology and society was understood in simple unidirectional terms: technological progress was the work of exceptional individuals, who deployed their genius and scientific prowess to invent the artifacts that mechanically transformed society and drove it forward, towards ever-increasing levels of well-being and/or mastery over previously unharnessed forces of nature. In this reading, technological evolution possessed a kind of inner, implacable logic. The great contribution of "social construction of technology" (SCOT) approaches has been to complicate this linear

model of development and to hand back to users of technology their historical role. Beginning with the work of Trevor Pinch and Wiebe Bijker, whose "manifesto" first appeared in the mid-1980s,[5] SCOT theorists showed that technologies were invariably the outcomes of compromises—compromises that called into question the inventors' ostensible isolation from society and politics and that highlighted the inanity of any attempt to distinguish "between a world of engineering on the one hand and a world of the social on the other."[6] In so doing, they began to bring to the fore what they termed the "interpretative flexibility" of technology: the fact that a given technological artifact is open to more than one understanding and that its applications, far from always being the predetermined outcome of the intentions of inventors, are often also the result of the choices and predilections of users. What SCOT illuminated, then, was the agency of users in shaping technological innovation—and, therefore, producers' strategies—by attributing both predictable and unanticipated functions to specific artifacts. The histories of technologies, in sum, reveal that the latter have frequently been "employed in ways quite different from those for which they were originally intended."[7]

However, as pointed out by Ronald Kline and, again, Pinch in a famous intervention, the SCOT paradigm did suffer from some "important weaknesses" in its early formulation.[8] Constructivist students of technology reconceptualized the inventor/user nexus, but did not quite explode it. As agents of technological change, users were rightly conceived of as belonging to "social groups," but only rarely did SCOT theorists engage with these same groups' internal composition and the dynamics of power that underlay them. The focus of this scholarship—as Gabrielle Hecht remarked—remained squarely on the "construction of technology," rather than "on the construction of culture or politics."[9] This atrophied picture of social relations (what Pinch and Bijker themselves referred to in passing as the "wider sociopolitical milieu"[10]) was accompanied by a narrow focus on the functional—as opposed to the symbolic—properties of technologies.[11]

It is at this level that consumption studies, an important branch of "material culture studies" in the UK,[12] have proved especially useful in shifting the field forward. By locating consumers in much broader networks of relations than did early constructivist students of technology, sociologists and anthropologists, in particular, have articulated "the importance of the sign value rather than the utility value of things."[13]

Objects, in this perspective, are "socially and culturally salient entities," which "change in defiance of their material stability" and which are endowed with expressive and symbolic attributes.[14] To put it differently, they provide a means of communication, an idiom through which to convey a variety of aims relating to individual and collective identities. The meanings conferred to commodities by consumers "express cultural categories and principles, cultivate ideals, create and sustain lifestyles, construct notions of the self, and create (and survive) social change."[15] Material things, students of consumption have established, are embedded in human social relations, which they help forge, consolidate, and even subvert.

This concern for the "material constitution of sociality" has shaped the recent work of historians of material culture and their important debate about the origins and workings of modern consumer society.[16] The power of things to construct identities and signify status is central to much of this scholarship—as attested, for instance, by Deborah Cohen's influential study of the interiors of middle-class homes in nineteenth-century Britain.[17] In Cohen's expert hands, the story of Victorian domestic possessions is the story of their transformation from signs of sinful worldliness to means of individual self-expression in the face of the homogenizing pressures of mass society.

Within science and technology studies, a marriage of sorts between the findings of SCOT and anthropological approaches to consumption has been effected by analyses that adopt so-called "domestication" perspectives. As deployed by Anne Laegran (and, before her, by Merete Lie and Knut Sørensen), the category of "domestication" serves to capture the essence of the process through which

> individual users, as well as collectives, negotiate the values and symbols of the technology while integrating it into the cultural setting. . . . Through domestication, technology changes as well as the user and, in the next step, the culture. More than within other constructivist theories on technology and users . . . the domestication perspective enables a thorough analysis of the users without relating directly to the design and manufacturing of the technology. It allows for redefinitions of practice and meanings even after the construction of the technology is closed from the producers' and designers' points of view.[18]

Rather than stressing the "closure mechanisms" through which the meanings of technologies are "stabilized" once and for all,[19] domestication

approaches foreground a continuing process of user reinterpretation and re-innovation, and the coexistence of alternative understandings of a given artifact—over and above the hegemonic codes that might originally have been loaded into any such artifact by producers, advertisers, or any others likely to overdetermine meaning.

As shown by Jeremy Prestholdt, domestication perspectives are especially useful in examining situations of cross-cultural consumption.[20] Decoupling users from inventors and designers, domestication perspectives make it possible to study appropriation as a creative act in itself. This is a powerful tool in exploring the life of any object, but especially so when looking at how ostensibly peripheral societies use externally introduced technologies—such as firearms—for their own purposes, and imbue them with functions and meanings that do not always replicate those for which the objects in question had first been devised in their original, usually Western settings.

David Howes, who reads cross-cultural consumption through the lens of "creolization," articulates an essential dimension of the phenomenon.

> When one takes a closer look at the meanings and uses given to specific imported goods within specific "local contexts" or "realities," one often finds that the goods have been transformed, at least in part, in accordance with the values of the receiving culture. . . . What the concept of creolization highlights . . . is that goods always have to be contextualized (given meaning, inserted into particular social relationships) to be utilized, and there is no guarantee that the intention of the producer will be recognized, much less respected, by the consumer from another culture.[21]

Owing something to Marshall Sahlins's seminal *Islands of History* and its stress on "existing understandings of the cultural order,"[22] Howes's key intuition is not only that processes of functional remaking and symbolic reinscription do take place, but also that such processes of recontextualization are shaped by local sociocultural conditions and political interests—conditions and interests that the dynamics of appropriation themselves might subtly transform. In this sense, "domestication" and "creolization" are coterminous categories, for each emphasizes the contingent dimension of technology transfer and consumption, and the extent to which the latter activities are interwoven with preexisting circumstances and resources.[23]

The history of technology in Africa has scarcely received the attention it deserves. Writing in 1983, Ralph Austen and Daniel Headrick bemoaned "the neglect of Africa by general historians of technology."[24] The situation over the past thirty years has not changed a great deal, as even a cursory glance at such specialist journals as *Technology and Culture* and *History and Technology* reveals. As a result, the field has until recently been almost completely unaffected by the paradigm shifts summarized above.

On the African continent, despite vivid displays of grassroots inventiveness and eclecticism in the sphere of everyday technology, technological determinism—the notion, that is, that society is the passive recipient of innovation, by which it is "determined"—has enjoyed a much longer lifespan than elsewhere. It is not coincidental that the most influential book on technology in Africa is still Headrick's *Tools of Empire*,[25] which remains standard reading in most undergraduate courses on imperialism and the history of science and technology.[26] In *Tools of Empire*, European imperial expansion in Africa and Asia in the nineteenth century is presented as the simple, automatic result of innovations in the fields of transport, armament, and medicine affecting, with unprecedented impact, non-Western societies. The manner in which colonial (or soon-to-be-colonial) subjects received, engaged with, appropriated, and sometimes subverted these same technologies falls outside the author's argument. Headrick's more recent work has remained, by and large, faithful to this original interpretative scheme: his latest *tour de force*—a catalogue of inventions, from early modern shipbuilding to twentieth-century air control—is revealingly entitled *Power over Peoples*.[27]

Studies of the co-construction of technology and society in Africa are not completely absent. The impetuous spread of new communication technologies, especially mobile telephony, over the past decade or so has given rise to a significant literature.[28] Only rarely, however, has this scholarship adopted a more than tokenistic historical perspective. Although there are happy exceptions to the rule—Brian Larkin's historically informed account of media consumption in Kano, Northern Nigeria, for instance, or the emphasis placed on processes of African appropriation in a recent collection devoted to the history of the motor vehicle[29]—the points stand that students of past technological change

have given African users short shrift and that the latter's deep history of engagement with externally introduced artifacts remains poorly researched and understood. Writing about a large swathe of the colonial world in the twentieth century, David Arnold has recently pointed to our ignorance as to "what indigenes, rather than colonizers, made of new technologies" and how these same technologies "were locally received and adapted."[30] Valid as they are for the colonial period, Arnold's remarks are even more cogent in respect to precolonial Africa, to which the bulk of this book is dedicated.

Altogether more impressive have been the achievements of anthropologically oriented Africanist historians who have studied processes of commoditization without presenting the spread of consumer goods as the reprehensible indication of "global homogenization" and the erosion of "cultural differences."[31] Rather, the agency of Africans in forging the practices of their daily lives has been central to a scholarship that—in the words of Timothy Burke—has sought to foreground the collective and individual "acts of will and imagination, engagement and disinterest" that underlie the consumption of commodities.[32] In challenging dominant understandings of modern globalization as a purely Western-driven initiative, for instance, Prestholdt has illuminated the nonutilitarian dimensions of Zanzibari consumerism in the second half of the nineteenth century and the extent to which "global symbols," such as Western manufactures, were deployed in accordance with local norms and "in the service of local image-making practices."[33]

A number of social histories of such widespread consumer goods as imported alcohol and clothing have reached compatible conclusions and provided important insights into the "orientational functions" of consumption in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Africa and the workings of the cross-cultural domestication that accompanied it.[34] Dmitri van den Bersselaar's *The King of Drinks* is a good case in point.[35] This excellent social history of Dutch gin in West Africa is especially commendable for casting the spotlight both on African initiative and the chronological dimension of processes of commodity appropriation by southern Ghanaian and Nigerian consumers from the nineteenth century onwards. It was West African consumers—much more than foreign producers and advertisers and colonial policy makers—who were responsible for the paradoxical post–World War I metamorphosis of Dutch gin from "a mass consumer commodity, an iconic consumption item of modernity," to "a good with restricted, ritual circulation, an

aspect of African 'traditional' culture, its use bound up with ritual and the authority of those who claim[ed] the sanction of custom."[36] The new local meaning bestowed upon gin may have appeared "wrong" in the eyes of European producers (who nonetheless benefited from it). In reality, it made perfect sense in the context of the commodity's increasing rarity *and* such preexisting cultural parameters as Akan color symbolism and notions of purity.[37] In other words, gin—like every other imported commodity—was always "likely to be incorporated into African consumptive patterns in ways that [made] sense in the context of existing yet continually changing world views, rather than according to the intended uses of the foreign producers."[38]

The history of clothes has revealed similar findings. In an important essay, Jean Comaroff describes, *inter alia*, the "host of imaginative possibilities" that the missionary-promoted spread of European apparel opened up for Tswana chiefs and, to a lesser extent, commoners from the early decades of the nineteenth century. The consumption of imported clothing throughout much of the century was infused with "local signs and values" and was shaped by indigenous social hierarchies and political interests. Particularly indicative of this "promiscuous syncretism" was the case of the Bakwena ruler, Sechele, who in 1860 commissioned a Western-style suit to be made out of leopard skin. Here, contrary to what even some of his own subjects assumed, the chief was not merely giving in to mimicry and emulation of encroaching Europeans. On the contrary, by combining the autochthonous symbolism of the leopard skin with the prestige-enhancing attributes of European dress, he was making an "effort to mediate the two exclusive systems of authority at war in his world, striving perhaps to fashion a power greater than the sum of its parts."[39] More generally, the centrality of "local circumstances" and "local fields of power" in the remaking of Western-style dress and the values inscribed in them is one of the main threads of *Fashioning Africa*, a fascinating collection whose editor, Jean Allman, reminds us that "the meanings of one particular item of clothing can be, and often are, completely transformed when moved across time and space. . . . While Western-style dress may have been 'foreign' in origin, its gendered, social, and political meanings were constructed locally. . . . In short, fashion may be a language spoken everywhere, but it is never a universal language."[40]

While highlighting the multiple possible outcomes of domestication/creolization processes, all of these various histories of externally introduced

consumer goods in Africa point to the centrality of preexisting social, political, and economic structures in orienting patterns of engagement with a given commodity or technology as it moves across cultural contexts. As will be seen, my reading of the history of firearms in precolonial and early colonial central Africa takes this insight to heart.

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF FIREARMS IN AFRICA

The history of technology in Africa—as the previous section has begun to argue—is both comparatively undeveloped and still largely steeped in obsolete paradigms. Firearms represent only a partial exception to the general rule, for while much *has* been written about this "proverbial old chestnut,"[41] historians have rarely gone beyond describing the "role" of guns in warfare and seeking to assess the extent to which their introduction "impacted" on African societies, primarily by bringing about changes in military tactics and organization.[42] Early scholarly attention to firearms (aptly illustrated by two special issues of the *Journal of African History* devoted to the subject in 1971[43]) must be placed in the context of a more general preoccupation with the modalities of the Euro-African encounter at the end of the nineteenth century, a key concern of the first generations of professional historians of Africa. Whatever the reasons behind this early flurry of interest in firearms, the literature it spawned showed, in the words of Bill Storey, "little awareness of the dynamic relationship between society and technology."[44] This literature's deterministic underpinnings are both indisputable and understandable. Their survival into the present, however, is hardly justifiable, given the intellectual advances summarized so far. As pointed out by a perceptive scholar, the long shadow of technological determinism accounts for a deep-seated inability to think of African firearms as anything other than military or hunting tools.[45] As some recent outstanding work demonstrates, the study of African warfare (and, indeed, hunting) remains critically important,[46] but one of this book's central contentions is that only when less predictable patterns of gun usage are taken into account does it become possible to do justice to the full panoply of African understandings of guns in the precolonial and early colonial period.

Meanwhile, disregard for the social construction of technology and the role of African users as agents of re-innovation also accounts for the traction still enjoyed by arguments that either downplay the overall significance of imported weapons on account of their technical

shortcomings (see chapter 2 for a fuller discussion), or, at best, state the impossibility of generalization—based on the fact, for example, that "guns were important in particular places at particular times . . . but equally there are times when the scholarly pursuit of the gun is at best a red herring."[47] Richard Reid is certainly correct in implying that guns elicited varied reactions in eastern and central Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century; what remains to be fully explained are the reasons why the outcomes of processes of technological engagement could diverge so dramatically.

Some efforts towards the adoption of constructivist perspectives in the study of guns in Africa have recently been carried out, although these, too, have suffered from a number of limitations that the present work seeks to overcome. In *Guns, Race, and Power in Colonial South Africa*, Storey sets out to extend the analysis of firearms beyond the confines of military history and to "examine the ways in which technology, politics, and society are mutually constituted." Unlike all the studies that preceded it, *Guns, Race, and Power in Colonial South Africa* rightly refuses to attribute "agency to guns," even as it teases out their "importance . . . for social and political change."[48] Yet Storey is principally concerned with interracial relations in a colonial context, and the book's overarching theme is the analysis of the extent to which successive debates about gun ownership and trade contributed to define notions of citizenship and hierarchies of race and power on the imperial frontier. Thus, while both the utility and sign value of guns to settler communities are explored in great depth, readers learn rather less about the ways in which Africans—both within and outside the Cape Colony—domesticated the new technology. Scattered here and there are indications that Africans—no less than settlers—attributed complex cultural meanings to firearms and deployed them for a variety of internal purposes. Storey, for instance, mentions in passing that Africans in the Transkei regarded firearms as insignia of masculinity and that the Sotho resisted disarmament because, by the 1870s, "guns had become linked to the authority of the chiefs."[49] But these insights are not systematically developed. Drawing mainly on official sources and settler newspapers, *Guns, Race, and Power in Colonial South Africa* cannot convey a full appreciation of the complexities of African socio-cultural structures. Because of this, the history of African-owned guns presented by Storey is still primarily a history of their service functions. The same is true of Jeff Ramsay's article-length study, which merely

hints at the "significance of firearms as symbolic markers as well as material instruments" in nineteenth-century Botswana.[50]

A more rounded treatment of the subject could have been expected of Clapperton Mavhunga, whose history of Gonarezhou National Park, in southeastern Zimbabwe, over the past hundred and fifty years is explicitly presented as an attempt to "work at the intersection of Science and Technology Studies . . . and African Studies" by charting the "interactions of people, technology and nature."[51] However, despite a more "Afro-centric" focus than Storey's book, Mavhunga's work remains, at heart, an environmental history only occasionally lifted by constructivist perspectives. Mavhunga is certainly not unaware of the dialectical relationships between technology and gender identities,[52] but, even here, cultural issues are only tangentially addressed. While making the critical point that, "in the face of local village mobile workshops," "the European's instruments" sometimes "acquired uses neither the European designers nor the hunters had bargained for,"[53] Mavhunga's discussion of firearms hardly moves beyond the material aspects of technology transfer and the use value of imported weapons. This limiting approach is also characteristic of Mavhunga's earlier work.[54]

Although imperfectly executed, Mavhunga's central argument—that the study of precolonial Africa has something to offer to science and technology studies—remains valid nonetheless. I maintain that a focus on one specific technological artifact—in this case, firearms—can go some way towards winning the same argument. In many respects, guns in precolonial central Africa work for me as the bicycle does for David Arnold and Erich DeWald in the context of colonial India and Vietnam: as a comparatively accessible and originally exogenous technology whose rapid—though not universal—spread enables one "to observe the wide variety of social uses and cultural understandings to which it gave rise."[55] By the nineteenth century, as will be argued below and in chapter 1, the interior of central Africa encompassed an array of political and cultural systems. This heterogeneity offers ample scope for comparison and makes it possible to illuminate the extent to which different societies responded differently to the same kind of technology, a point that an exclusive focus on relatively homogeneous—if, of course, highly stratified—Western societies tends to obfuscate. Following from this is the emphasis on technological *disengagement* in the third part of the book. The rejection of a given technology is one aspect of "the agency of potential users" that has

"remained largely unexplored in domestication approaches."[56] One of this book's objectives is to show that acts of willful resistance were no less socioculturally determined than strategies of adoption.

As with any subject of historical inquiry, the trajectory of firearms could have been tackled from a variety of standpoints. It is therefore important to spell out at the outset what this book does *not* set out to do. The dynamics of the global arms trade—the subject of some well-researched recent works[57]—fall outside the scope of this book, which is more concerned with the African endpoints of such international small arms transfer systems as came to full fruition in the nineteenth century. Related to this is the fact that this book does not seek to present a comprehensive quantitative analysis (though, when available, quantitative data are interspersed in the narrative). This is, first, because patchy import records from the relevant coastal entry points in Portuguese and Zanzibari hands do not embrace the entire firearms trade, much of which took the form of smuggling.[58] It is thus unlikely that significantly more precise figures will ever be arrived at than the nineteenth-century estimates already in circulation (to which reference will be made in due course). Second, even if complete and reliable import statistics were available, they would not cast any light on the distribution of firearms in the interior, for which we must rather rely on the eyewitness accounts of literate observers (about which more will be said below). But the most important reason for not embarking on a quantitative study is that raw numbers are a poor indicator of patterns of domestication. What really matters to me are the uses to which central African actors put their guns, and such uses—be they practical or symbolic, conventional or innovative, consistent or inconsistent with the intentions of producers and traders—cannot be inferred from numbers alone. Once more, I find myself in agreement with Arnold and DeWald. Commenting on the comparatively small number of bicycles imported into colonial India and Vietnam, they explain that "the importance of the bicycle can best be measured less in terms of 'global diffusion' . . . than of the way in which it became implicated in the lifestyles and work regimes of a significant section of the population, and was caught up in issues of race, class, and gender, and of national identity and colonial state power."[59] *Mutatis mutandis*, I am making the same point with regards to precolonial central Africa.

More controversially, perhaps, this book is only tangentially concerned with the realm of the supernatural. Partly, this is in reaction to

the once liberating but now increasingly formulaic tendency to portray Africans as "viscerally" religious beings, either "empowered or oppressed," but never left unaffected, by "invisible forces."[60] It is also a result of my contention that spiritual appraisals of guns, though not infrequent, were not the key factor influencing central Africa's terms of engagement with the new technology in the precolonial and early colonial eras. These factors, I argue, are instead to be located in a much broader understanding of social structures—one which, of course, encompasses religious manifestations but is by no means confined to them. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Lozi monarchs bolstered their newly regained position and asserted the modernity and worthiness of the social order they dominated by centralizing the gun trade of the upper Zambezi floodplain into their own hands and by inserting firearms into royal symbolism. At precisely the same time, the Yeke of warlord Msiri put them at the service of an unprecedented, market-driven system of economic spoliation in southern Katanga. And while Chokwe and Luvale hunters were incorporating them into their societies as irreplaceable markers of masculinity and individually owned tools for the production of human and animal capital, guns were willfully resisted in eastern Zambia and Malawi by Ngoni fighters bent on scaling their regimental organization through the display of heroic honor in hand-to-hand combat. In North-Western Zambia, meanwhile, kiKaonde-speakers had begun to employ them as a polyvalent currency as well. To be sure, all of these disparate "worldly" uses and understandings of firearms, and the attested proficiency of Central African gun-menders—a central theme of the chapters included in part two of this book and one which is also briefly touched upon in important essays by Joseph Miller, Jean-Luc Vellut, and Maria Emilia Madeira Santos[61]—do not rule out the possibility that some Africans at least appealed to supernatural forces to account for the ultimate functioning of firearms and to enhance their lethality (for one artifact showing evidence of such an appeal, see chapter 2, figure 2.2). Nor do these worldly uses and understandings mean that guns were not deployed, just like other weapons, in religious ceremonies intended to obtain the blessing of ancestors—not least in the context of ritually empowered activities, such as hunting and warfare.[62] But they certainly suggest that exoticizing readings of the relationship between Africans and firearms do not tell the full story, or even the most important part of it. A stress on invisible entities and forces, moreover, runs the unintended risk of

driving a wedge between technology and human initiative—which is precisely what this book sets out to avoid.

My refusal to analyze technology as an independent variable—and, more generally, to attribute "agency" (whether "primary" or, as per Alfred Gell, "secondary") to material things—may be questioned by scholars such as Nicole Boivin, who has recently argued that the very physicality of objects or technologies, their "materiality," grants them the power to "act as agents independently of people."[63] My sense is that, no matter how sophisticated, attempts inspired by Actor Network Theory to overcome socially constructivist positions invariably end up reintroducing forms of technological determinism—or even evolutionism!—through the back door. While I make no apology for clinging to the essence of what Boivin belittles as "humanistic and idealistic thought," I am also readily prepared to concede the well-taken point, that the emphasis on the processes through which society conditions technology has sometimes led us to lose sight of the equally "urgent task of understanding how technology concurrently shapes society."[64] This book seeks to avoid this pitfall by examining both the ways in which firearms were incorporated into existing sociocultural relationships and the ways in which such acts of vernacularization rebounded on, and led to change within, the same sociocultural settings. Thus, to use Ann Stahl's terminology, this book is not a "history of a material," but a "material history"—a history, that is, built on the premise that "bodily engagement with material worlds" is both an effect and a cause of the "social and ideational realm."[65] The simplest possible way of summarizing my philosophical standpoint is that while I am loath to efface the ontological difference between objects and people—or between technologies and social relations—I am willing to accept that these domains transform one another. While being fitted into contexts, technological objects contribute to the formation of the same contexts.[66]

The history of European hunting and its interactions with African practices and ecological knowledge in the age of empire has already been expertly told with reference to a number of localities.[67] The same is true of the relationship between gun ownership and settler identities in specific colonial contexts.[68] Neither of these two subjects (for the study of which abundant sources could have been mobilized) is thus central to my purposes. My interest, once again, lies in guns in African hands, and in how guns changed—and were changed by—different African societies in the late precolonial period and beyond.

The final caveat to be introduced at this stage is that this book is not a technical compendium. Gun enthusiasts and encyclopedists should steer well clear of it. Granted, an understanding of the technical properties of successive models (and perhaps even a modicum of what Otto Sibum calls "gestural," or experiential, "knowledge"[69]) is necessary meaningfully to write about them, but firearms as collectable objects, sporting tools, or aesthetic products are of no intrinsic interest to me. Guns, in my reading, are no more (and no less!) than a useful prism through which to examine some of the most significant and abiding aspects of the history of central Africa in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. One of my most sincere hopes is that my efforts, circumscribed and provisional as they are, might still go some way towards revitalizing engagement with a region of the continent and a period of its history that, despite having lain very close to the heart of the Africanist canon only a few decades ago, have lately suffered from serious scholarly neglect.

DEFINITIONS AND OVERVIEW

Drawing on a range of theoretical concepts originating from outside the field of African studies, this book offers the first detailed history of firearms in central Africa between the early nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Intended as an exploration of the intersections between technology, society, politics, and culture, it adopts a comparative perspective to chart, and account for, different user and potential user reactions to the same externally introduced technology.

All of the case studies presented in this volume belong to what might be loosely called the interior of central Africa—or, more precisely, the central portion of the southern savanna, the vast stretch of open grasslands and woodlands lying between the Congo basin rainforest and the Zambezi River, to the north and south, respectively, Lakes Tanganyika and Malawi, in the east, and the upper Zambezi and upper Kasai Rivers, in the west.[70] Over the past millennium, this macro-region of central Africa has been characterized by a blend of unity and diversity, and the interplay of continuity and transformation. Prevailing ecological conditions dictated the basic parameters of historical development for the Bantu-speaking colonists who made the area their home. Defining structural forces included the overall sparseness of population and the scarcity of the natural resources at its disposal. From the standpoint of Fernand Braudel's "geo-history," then, the central savanna should be

viewed as the site of a centuries-long, unspectacular struggle on the part of farmers, fisherfolk, and, less commonly, cattle keepers to make the most of their harsh environment.

Social and economic "trends" more relevant to the subject and chronological framework of this book also reveal significant underlying commonalities in the historical experience of the peoples of the central savanna. By c. 1700, large-scale, centralizing kingdoms were being formed in comparatively favorable ecological locales, distinguishable from surrounding districts by the availability of either fertile alluvial soils or locally and regionally tradable resources, or both. By this stage, however, centers of dynastic power still resembled relatively isolated islands in a sea of micro-polities shaped by the "equalising pressure" of predominantly matrilineal descent rules and the fissiparous tendencies of village life.[71] At first, the significance of external commercial influences—of which firearms would eventually become a most fundamental by-product—was limited; when and where it did take place, historical change was still primarily the result of the playing out of endogenous forces. In the nineteenth century, however, the trade in such tropical commodities as ivory and slaves became more and more important to the political economy of the region. By the middle decades of the same century the central savanna had turned into a veritable commercial crossroads: the meeting point of two converging frontiers of long-distance trade anchored in the seaports of present-day Angola, on the one hand, and Tanzania and Mozambique, on the other. The compressed time frame within which the bulk of the central savanna came to be incorporated into global exchange networks is an additional reason for treating it as a discrete historical unit in the late precolonial period.

Within the broad framework of this shared historical experience, however, internal diversity remained salient. Indeed, it became sharper, because the peoples of the savanna responded differently to the challenges and opportunities ushered in by the advance of merchant capital. The nineteenth century in east-central Africa was no doubt traumatic, and the notion of "military revolution" has recently been deployed to describe the increasingly violent and militarized nature of politics in this era of long-distance trade.[72] Still, preexisting hierarchies and patterns of governance were not uniformly obliterated by the rise of "new men" and their openly predatory and entrepreneurial political formations.[73] Meanwhile, not all militarized new states owed their

raison d'être to involvement in global commerce, and there remained numerous clusters of decentralized authority that avoided incorporation into expansive states—regardless of whether the latter were the heirs of time-honored political traditions or the products of new economic circumstances. Even at the height of international trade and political turmoil, the lives of a large number of central African peoples continued to be organized around small-scale sociopolitical structures.

My reliance on the category of "gun society" also calls for a brief introductory commentary. In this volume, the expression is used in the most general and loose possible sense: a gun society is one in which firearms are put to momentous productive, military, and/or other symbolic uses, over a sustained period of time and by a politically or numerically significant portion of the population. To be sure, a more analytically precise, Marxist-influenced definition could have been adopted, with gun societies being described as societies in which the majority of the available guns are utilized as tools of production—that is to say, as hunting implements or military weapons destined to secure both human and material booty. In the event, however, since one of the book's key objectives is precisely to foreground the variety of socio-cultural—as opposed to narrowly military or economic—uses attributed to guns in the central African interior, a less restrictive definition was deemed more appropriate.[74]

The central savanna's diversity-in-unity opens up an exciting range of comparative possibilities for the historian interested in investigating conflicting local responses to the same kind of imported technology. This book thus contrasts such gun societies as existed on the upper Zambezi—the border area between present-day Zambia and Angola—and in Katanga, southern DR Congo, in the nineteenth century with communities—primarily the Ngoni of eastern Zambia and Malawi—characterized instead by processes of technological disengagement. Critical as it is, however, the dichotomy between adoption and rejection does not exhaust the history of firearms in the central savanna, for gun societies differed from one another in numerous important respects. The case studies presented in the second part of the book serve to underscore this point. Besides boasting sufficiently detailed sources, the upper Zambezi and Katanga regions comprised a range of political and cultural systems: from ancient monarchical societies to "stateless" ones, passing through new market-oriented warlord polities. These disparities were reflected in different patterns of gun domestication, for

different were the configurations of preexisting sociopolitical interests with which the new technology interacted.

Chapter 1, a broad survey of the political and economic history of the central savanna in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, works as an overture. Aimed at the nonspecialist reader, it is intended to enable him/her to negotiate his/her way around the more specific stories of technological engagement—and disengagement—that follow it. It provides a sense of the workings of power and international trade in the macro-region with which the book is concerned, foregrounds the diversity-in-unity that characterized it, and introduces the theme of firearms and the various functions that they could be made to perform.

Chapters 2 and 3 chart the emergence of gun societies on the upper Zambezi and in parts of Katanga in the nineteenth century. Their principal contention is that firearms mattered more to the late precolonial history of these areas than existing studies are prepared to concede. The argument, however, is not couched in simple quantitative terms, not least because such an approach sidesteps the difficult question of the technical weaknesses of the hardware of violence that global trade was then making available to inland societies. Rather, in keeping with the book's theoretical framework, the two chapters contend that the diffusion and popularity of muskets in the two areas can best be understood by examining, first, the ways in which central African peoples learned to minimize the deficiencies of imported weapons, using them profitably for both economic and military purposes, and, second, the acts of domestication through which they infused the new technology with local meanings that were sometimes at variance with those that it had originally been assigned in the contexts of its production. This heterogeneous process of technological consumption, it will be shown, was in every instance informed by the social and political circumstances in which the imported technology was received.

Looking ahead, chapter 5 serves as a counterpoint to the book's second and third chapters. It discusses precolonial military conservatism among the Ngoni of Zambia and Malawi, who resisted the adoption of firearms for war purposes, as they regarded the new technology as corrupting and emasculating. Sociocultural opposition, here, had to do with the fact that firearms threatened hegemonic notions of masculinity and honor constructed around *combat à l'arme blanche*. In so doing, they also threatened to foreclose the opportunities for individual advancement inbuilt in Ngoni polities and their age-grade regimental systems.

The paradoxical outcomes of the imposition of colonial rule from the end of the nineteenth century are described in chapters 4 and 6. Gun laws in British Northern Rhodesia came eventually to be regarded as essential "pacification" tools, serving to symbolize the curtailment of African citizenship rights on which the edifice of European domination was predicated. They thus spelled the end of the gun-centered systems of social relationships that had dominated the upper Zambezi region throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. The case of the Yeke of southern Katanga was different, mainly on account of their close alliance with the Congo Free State and its armed forces during the conquest and initial exploitation of the area in the 1890s. The irony is that, in southern Katanga, where early colonial rule was violent and pervasive, African-owned guns ended up retaining a more central—though by no means unaltered—role than they did in comparatively lightly administered North-Western Rhodesia. Conversely, in both Malawi and, especially, eastern Zambia, the arrival of the Europeans, the military defeat they inflicted on the lightly armed Ngoni, and the enforced end of the latter's raiding economy brought about a marked (and, once more, paradoxical) ideological realignment. Local honor discourses and the military technologies around which they revolved impressed British policy makers, who construed the Ngoni of Zambia as a "martial race," partly on account of their enthusiasm for edged weapons and close combat. This led to large-scale recruitment of Ngoni into colonial paramilitary police forces. Under the new circumstances, the gun became everything it had not been in the precolonial context, gradually replacing the assegai as the central symbol of Ngoni masculinity and major vehicle for individual improvement.

The conclusion draws together these various themes and explores their contemporary relevance.

SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

This book draws mainly on nineteenth-century travelogues, written records of oral tradition and literature, linguistic evidence, and early colonial material. As a commercial watershed and arena of sustained political and cultural exchanges, the central savanna attracted a considerable number of literate witnesses over the course of the nineteenth century. Their published and unpublished accounts vary in quality, often depending on the motives of the authors concerned. Thus, whereas full ethnographic descriptions are sometimes available (the works of

such explorers as Antonio Gamitto, David Livingstone, and Henrique de Carvalho spring to mind in this context), other accounts—especially those of traders drawn to the region for primarily economic purposes—are more sketchy and less conducive to in-depth historical treatment.

These limitations, of course, are to be expected and form part of the daily staple of every historian. More intractable are the problems posed by the increasingly racialized context out of which the reports of nineteenth-century witnesses emerged. As documented by an extensive literature,[75] "Orientalist" biases permeate these sources, not least when they address the subject of non-Western warfare and its tools. Richard Reid has thus shown that on the eve of, and during, the "Scramble for Africa," African violence was often depicted as senseless, the result of savage passion rather than cold calculation.[76] These Victorian fantasies, of course, worked towards legitimizing the resort to extreme violence on the part of the Europeans themselves. In the context of the present discussion, however, the key point to be retained is that students of firearms must be fully alive to the extent to which many nineteenth-century Western observers felt inclined to belittle African life and ways of waging war, in general, and African marksmanship and knowledge of guns, in particular. The limited attention such observers devoted to matters of tactics is partly a consequence of this intellectual proclivity, and it explains this book's inability to offer more than perfunctory treatment of actual military maneuvers.[77]

To be sure, then, the historian of African firearms must come to grips with the sway of pervasive racially infused stereotypes in the available written sources. What needs to be avoided at all costs, however, is to throw away the baby with the bathwater. While accepting that Western travelogues are, to an extent, "discourses" that cannot be taken at face value, I, like Roy Bridges, maintain that text is not everything and that "the depiction of the 'Other' is, whatever the distortions, in some way related to what they were actually like."[78] Once more, the argument has been made most forcefully by Reid. European and other non-African observers of precolonial life and its conflicts "often reached the wrong overall conclusions . . . owing to the frameworks in which they were doing the business of observing and then writing . . . But they absorbed an enormous amount of what was going on around them, and understood a great deal more than they have frequently been given credit for."[79] Their accounts, moreover, never completely silenced African voices—just like their heroic descriptions of "lonely" itineraries

though "uncharted wildernesses" never fully disguised their practical reliance on African intermediaries, skills, and manpower.[80] Much of the information that travelers recorded was derived from Africans. Though often rendered "virtually invisible," the African informant remains inscribed in the record, "his presence felt in much of the data and interpretation that frequently [was] posited as the author's own. Indeed, in the very texts that are held to be the clearest expressions of European prejudice, written by the harbingers of a new imperial order, we can also, if we listen carefully enough, hear a multitude of African voices."[81]

In sum, for all of the "racial, cultural and political shortcomings" of their authors,[82] the nineteenth-century accounts of traders, explorers, missionaries, and hunters continue to offer significant opportunities to the historian of late precolonial Africa. Their value to students of socio-economic change, in general, and technology, in particular, emerges with special clarity when these sources are weighed against oral ones. As pointed out by William Clarence-Smith several years ago, the key problem with the traditions of high political offices is their selectivity, which, in turn, is the direct effect of their "serving to reproduce the superstructures of a given society." Because of this, oral traditions—Clarence-Smith's neo-Annalist critique contended—hardly lent themselves to writing anything other than elite political history in the narrowest possible sense.[83] Although Jan Vansina was no doubt correct in replying that Clarence-Smith had overlooked the multiplicity of oral forms subsumed under the category of "oral tradition,"[84] the core of Clarence-Smith's argument holds more than a grain of truth: if political traditions were all there was, historians interested in precolonial social and economic dynamics would find themselves in a very tight corner indeed. Their task, moreover, is not made any easier by the realization that only limited trust can be placed in focused oral interviews centering on a period at several generations remove from the present. The few interviews that I carried out with renowned community historians in southern Katanga and eastern Zambia suggest that significant local historical knowledge continues to exist—especially, perhaps, about the modalities of the colonial encounter at the end of the nineteenth century. In only a handful of cases, however, was such knowledge independent of locally available published accounts and did it extend to the specific subject of this work.[85] Western travelogues allow the historian in some part to overcome such stringencies.

So, in theory at least, does historical linguistics (to which Vansina himself eventually turned his attention from the 1980s). Insofar as they embody evidence about the past, words are documents in their own right. The problem with our topic is that, not infrequently, guns were given onomatopoeic names (such as the *poupous* of Swahili-speaking southern Congo with which this introduction began) or drily descriptive ones (often semantically related to words for "fire," "noise," "smoke," or similar qualities). For obvious reasons, words of this type are scarcely conducive to historical treatment. Still, the vocabulary of gun societies does permit us to draw useful inferences. A particularly rich lexicon about firearms, for instance, is a sure indication of profound and intimate technological engagement, on the origin and nature of which some of the words in question might cast a specific light. Songs—as shown by numerous specialists[86]—are another important resource for the historian of precolonial central Africa, in general, and the student of firearms, in particular. Though published and unpublished collections of songs do not cover all the localities and societies I am interested in, the songs I do draw upon provide important windows into local cultural identities and economic practices, and the extent to which guns came to be entangled in both.[87]

Early missionary sources (mainly those produced by the Free Church of Scotland, active around Lake Malawi from the mid-1870s, the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society, whose representatives first visited the upper Zambezi in the late 1870s, and the Plymouth Brethren, in Katanga since 1886) and official and unofficial colonial records (from the terrifyingly explicit personal papers of Congo Free State official Clément "Nkulukulu" Brasseur to the more anodyne reports of the British administration in Northern Rhodesia) have been employed primarily to investigate aspects of the colonial encounter, the formulation and implementation of gun control laws, and early patterns of colonial police recruitment. When compiled by perceptive, ethnographically minded observers, however, these sources also illuminate at least some of the workings of the processes of technological domestication during the decades that preceded their authors' arrival on the central African scene.

Finally, of course, there is the information that can be extracted from surviving precolonial and early colonial guns themselves. Some of these weapons have remained in local hands. Others are preserved in both African and European museums. A few specimens appear in

the photographs included in the book. As the relevant captions clarify, whenever possible, I availed myself of the opportunity to draw on expert technical knowledge and advice to "read" such material evidence.

In sum, the trajectory of firearms in central Africa in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was variegated and multistranded. So, too, must be the sources that permit us to study it.