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A political ecology of beef in colonial Tanzania and the global periphery, 1864–1961

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Abstract

British colonial policy makers in East Africa from the 1930s to about 1960 drew on a model of pastoral industrialization that had its origins in the Chaco savannas of Paraguay earlier in the century. Based on the political ecology of a particular sector of beef processing – meat extract and corned beef – most famously represented by Liebig's Extract of Meat Company (Lemco), it was hoped that this company's ability to consume tens of thousands of marginal 'scrub' or 'famine' cattle as the raw material for its products would ease pressures on African land that contributed to desertification and soil erosion. Following World War II, colonial policy experts, especially veterinarians, enticed Lemco to Tanganyika in advance of a planned destocking campaign designed to develop cattle, cattle owners, and pastures along modern ranching lines, in large part owing to perceptions of a world meat shortage. The failure to modernize the cattle environment in the late colonial period and beyond stemmed largely from Lemco's structural reliance on unimproved cattle that were most suited to arid grasslands of global peripheries.
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Industrial beef production in colonial Tanzania began in 1950, with the opening of the Tangombe factory in Dar es Salaam.[1] Tangombe was the main slaughterhouse of Tanganyika Packers Limited (TPL), a division of Liebig's Extract of Meat Company (Lemco), which held a 49% share in the new company in partnership with the Tanganyika Government.[2] More a marriage of convenience than a manifestation of state control, TPL was the latest expansion of Lemco's global corned beef and meat extract empire, which had opened its first factory in Fray Bentos, Uruguay in 1864.[3] From the 1930s through the 1950s, British colonial policy makers and 'experts', foremost among them veterinarians, believed that the entry of Lemco into Tanganyika would transform and improve African pastoral landscapes, cattle, and cattle-keeping peoples, creating a 'revolution in the native economy'.[4] They saw Lemco as a panacea for a host of ills, including eroded grasslands and agricultural land; emergent desertification; environments infested with tsetse flies, ticks, and myriad livestock diseases; minimally productive cattle; and African cattle keepers insufficiently engaged with colonial markets and an internationalizing economy. By providing a market for tens of thousands of cattle annually, Lemco would stimulate a modern ranching economy while freeing up pasture for agricultural expansion and diversification. Industrial beef production in turn would improve the health of tens of thousands of Tanganyikan plantation and industrial workers by increasing meat in the diet – a hallmark of modern societies – and respond to the growing visibility of malnutrition and protein deficiency among colonial peoples.[5] Moreover, Lemco would ease post-World War II consumer meat shortages in Britain and the world. By substituting

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[1] Tangombe was an acronym for 'Tanganyika *ng'ombe*' – Tanganyikan cattle. In 1964 independent Tanganyika and Zanzibar formed the United Republic of Tanzania.

[2] Memorandum and Articles of Association of Tanganyika Packers Limited, Incorporated 6 November 1947, Tanzania National Archives [hereafter TNA] 36841.

[3] Wie Liebig's Fleischextrakt gemacht wird, Bundesarchiv-Berlin [hereafter BAB] R1001/1703, 125–126; M. Finlay, Quackery and cookery: Justus von Liebig's extract of meat and the theory of nutrition in the Victorian Age, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 66 (1992) 404–418; H.-J. Teuteberg, *Die Rolle des Fleischextrakts für die Ernährungswissenschaften und den Aufstieg der Suppenindustrie*, Stuttgart, 1990, 12–14; Liebig's Extract of Meat Co. Ltd Annual Reports, No. E. 3710, 'Prospectus', 1862. Unilever Archives, Port Sunlight, U.K. [hereafter UA].

[4] File minutes by W.B.L. Monson, 7 February 1946, British National Archives, Kew [hereafter BNA], CO 852/573/4. Governors of Tanganyika and directors of the Veterinary Department from 1934, as well as key members of the Africa section of the Colonial Office, saw the entry of Lemco as key to rural modernization. Among them were Governors Winfred Jackson, William Battershill, and Edward Twining.

[5] J. Ruxin, The United Nations protein advisory group, in: D.F. Smith, J. Phillips (Eds), *Food, Science, Policy and Regulation in the Twentieth Century: International and Comparative Perspectives*, London, 2000, 152–166.

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commodities largely produced in dollar zones, and by potentially penetrating American markets, the Tangombe factory would help to ease British dependence on American products. As one of the biggest industrial employers in Tanganyika in the 1950s, Lemco also marked a break with the pre-World War II past when industrial production was dominated by the metropole. Lemco would therefore demonstrate the benefits of colonial rule to Africans at a time of nationalism in Tanganyika, hopefully delaying the push for independence for the foreseeable future.

Lemco's arrival in Tanganyika represented the intersection of two lines of colonial thinking about the development of the indigenous cattle economy. One sought to build on Western success in upgrading cattle and pastures for a commercial and industrialized beef industry, drawing on models well established in Europe, the United States, and the Plate River nations of Uruguay and Argentina. The best known and most successful model of modern industrial beef production was pioneered in Chicago, where the centralization of the packing houses following the Civil War sparked the transformation of Western prairies and Midwestern feedlots, stimulated the introduction of pure-bred and cross-bred cattle, altered consumer tastes by introducing fatty beef on a wide scale, and created myriad industrial and consumer uses for cattle beyond meat, tallow and hide.[6]

As American beef production catered to its own burgeoning domestic market after 1900, focusing on refrigerated beef, Argentina and Uruguay stepped in to act as a beef frontier for British and other European consumers. The technological transformation of the lower Plate River mirrored the Chicago model, and largely relied on its meat packers for technology and capital.[7] All the tools of the 'Euro-American' ranching complex followed, including purebred cattle, fencing, windmills, fodder grasses that replaced natural pasture, railway and steamship linkages, modern factories, and eventually local consumers who became voracious eaters of high-grade beef.

A second model of commercial beef production, most associated with Liebig's Extract of Meat Company, originated in the dry, hot, tropical and sub-tropical *Chaco* and *Cerrado* savannas straddling the Uruguay, Paraña, and Paraguay Rivers of the upper River Plate basin. After 1864 Lemco entered this region to make use of hundreds of thousands of marginal, semi-feral *Criollo* cattle, descended from Iberian stock imported during the sixteenth century, which fed mainly on indigenous scrub grasslands. Rounded up by *vaquero* 'cowboys' and driven long distances to Lemco's *estancia* holding grounds to recover weight, they then entered the industrial plants in Fray Bentos, Uruguay, later Colón, Argentina, and eventually Zeballos Cue, Paraguay, where they were boiled down to make meat extract, a thick beef paste used to provision armies, hospitals, and pantries as a tea, soup or stew base. Shortly after the turn of the century, the products derived from marginal cattle expanded to include corned beef, and gradually came to dominate the beef factories of the South American dry savannas. Both meat extract and corned beef relied minimally on cattle upgrading and pasture improvement. Indeed, the investments in fodder grasses, infrastructure, and pedigreed cattle characteristic of the Chicago model that drove prices upward threatened the profitability of this global niche industry. When this happened, it pushed meat extract companies like Lemco to other parts of the region or world, where cattle costs were low, particularly to the arid savannas of southern and eastern Africa. Unlike 'Chicago' beef, Lemco's was an industry that could still profit from drought-stricken cattle trekked over long distances under treacherous conditions.

From the interwar years of British colonial rule in East Africa, the 'meat extract/corned beef' model of commercialized cattle guided colonial thinking, in part superseding, in part co-existing uneasily with an emergent 'high modernist' or 'developmentalist' strain of colonial social and economic planning, which had faith in the role of scientific experts – veterinarians, ecologists, entomologists and sociologists – to foster a commercial ranching economy as a natural evolution of 'meat extract pastoralism'.[8] If the ranching model had succeeded, Tanzanian cattle would have been transformed into high-grade beef producers, savannas would have become irrigated pastures growing fodder grasses, largely free of livestock diseases and their wildlife hosts, and African cattle keepers would have become primarily oriented to breeding beef for the market, with minimal regard for the cultural and subsistence value of cattle. Tanzania – today Africa's second largest cattle economy – would have become a major supplier of chilled or frozen beef for the world market. None of this has happened. Instead, the 'industrialization of cattle' that took place in Tanzania from the 1930s to independence in 1961 (and beyond) was based on corned beef and meat extract, a sector that had limited potential to transform cattle and pastures – indeed, which only survived by relying on low-cost cattle of the global periphery. If modern ranching was a sector that mustered the most advanced technological, organizational and scientific knowledge to develop the pastoral landscape, the Lemco model, in contrast, was decidedly 'low modernist', stopping short of bringing to bear unbridled state power, the best science, and sweeping social and landscape engineering, instead seeking to achieve more realizable goals that recognized the limitations posed by the East African environment.

The tension between these competing models of 'cattle industrialization', from the 1920s to the end of colonial rule, was key to debates about emergent African desertification and soil erosion, which were usually blamed on the overabundance of livestock on inadequate land.[9] British colonial rulers believed that African cattle keepers refused to sell adequate numbers of cattle regularly enough to keep herds at sustainable levels. They responded to this problem by forcing Africans to cull annual quotas of livestock in order to

[6] W. Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, New York, 1991, 207–259; J. Rifkin, *Beyond Beef: The Rise and Fall of the Cattle Culture*, New York, 1992, 113–123.

[7] J. Crossley and R. Greenhill, The River Plate beef trade, in: D.C.M. Platt (Ed.) *Business Imperialism 1840–1930*, Oxford, 1977, 284–334.

[8] Recent studies of development paradigms in colonial Africa have rightly stressed continuities with pre-World War II economic initiatives, while making clear that the war, coupled with post-war European economic malaise, added urgency and power to new far-reaching projects. J.M. Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert: Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism*, Athens, OH, 2007; H. Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870–1959*, Chicago, 2011, 69–113. James Scott defines 'high modernism' as the 'aspiration to the administrative ordering of nature and society' carried out by 'engineers, planners, technocrats, high-level administrators, architects, scientists, and visionaries'. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven, 1988, 88.

[9] D. Anderson, Depression, dust bowl, demography, and drought: the colonial state and soil conservation in East Africa during the 1930s, *African Affairs* 83 (1984) 321–343; W. Beinart, *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa: Settlers, Livestock, and the Environment*, Oxford, 2003; J. McCracken, Conservation and resistance in colonial Malawi: the 'dead north' revisited, in: W. Beinart, J. McGregor (Eds), *Social History and African Environments*, Oxford, 2003, 155–174; J. Swift, Desertification: narratives, winners and losers, in: M. Leach, R. Mearns (Eds), *The Lie of the Land: Challenging the Received Wisdom on the African Environment*, Oxford, 1996, 73–90; D. Hodgson, *Once Intrepid Warriors: Gender, Ethnicity, and the Cultural Politics of Maasai Development*, Bloomington, 2001; R. Waller, 'Clean' and 'dirty': cattle disease control policy in colonial Kenya, 1900–1940, *Journal of African History* 45 (2004) 45–80; D. Anderson, *Eroding the Commons: The Politics of Ecology in Baringo, Kenya 1890–1963*, Oxford, 2002; R. Schuknecht, *British Colonial Development Policy after the Second World War: The Case of Sukumaland, Tanganyika*, Berlin, 2008.

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