THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF HAMED BIN MUHAMED EL MURJEBI, 'TIPPU TIP'

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One of the most notable prose works in Swahili of the late nineteenth century is the autobiography of Hamed bin Muyhammed el Murjebi, widely known as Tippu Tip. Translated into English by W.H. Whitely and reprinted several times since its first publication as a bilingual text in 1958, it stands as both a fascinating historical document and the self-portrait of a most remarkable man.[1].

Tippu Tip was the most famous of the Arab traders in pre-colonial Central and East Africa at a time when the history of these areas was profoundly influenced by the export slave-trade, trade in firearms and trade in goods, especially ivory. From his own account, Tippu Tip's own interest centred chiefly on ivory; slave-trading as such is rarely mentioned in the autobiography, although slaves form part of Tippu's caravans, together with 'waungwana' or freemen. Tippu's mother was herself the daughter of a slave, bought by his grandfather as a concubine. Firearms gradually assume increasing importance throughout the autobiography as Tippu Tip's activities bring him into contact with emissaries of King Leopold II and the Sultan of Zanzibar, both of whom sought to make use of his undoubted gifts of organization and leadership to promote their own interests in the Congo basin. At the same time, the African interior was being penetrated, chiefly by European exoplorers. Tippu Tip's encounters with Livingston, Stanley,

1.-The edition used for this article is the bilingual text with glossary and sketch-maps of Tippu's trading routes, published by the East African Literature Bureau in Kampala, Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam in 1974. It was first published as a supplement to the east African Swahili Committee Journals nº 29\2. January 1958 and nº29\1. January 1959.

The text translated by Whitely is that originally collected by H. Brode and published by him in the *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalsche Sprache*. It was later expanded by Brode into a biography which appeared in English entitled 'Tippoo Tib', London, 1907. The present text is the only version of the autobiography extant. According to Whitely, other manuscripts are believed to exist, one at least being in the possession of Sh.Mohammed Nasoro Lemky of Zanzibar, a grandson of Tippu. Requests to him for cooperation in the editing of the autobiography had, at the time of Whitely's publication, unfortunately met with no response.

Cameron and and Wissman are among the liveliest episodes of the autobiography, which gives a vivid account of the expansion of Arab trading activity in Tanganyka and the Congo. In a short article such as this it is possible only to touch briefly on two significant areas; first, Tippu Tip's own achievements and characters; second, his relations with the Europeans with whom he had dealings. For the interpretations of both, I shall keep close to the English translation of the Swahili text in an attempt to demonstrate how Tippu Tip's own presentation of the facts reveals certain aspects of himself, as well as accounts of African exploration in the late nineteenth century.[2]

But first of all, a word about the text itself. It was dictated, not actually written, by Tippu Tip, and falls therefore somewhere between the two poles of spoken and written discourse. Adapting Gregory's terms to describe the continuum between the two extremes, we might label it as 'spoken to be written', a variety for which Gregory's classifications makes no provision.[3] This perhaps unusual combination of modes, together with the fact that Tippu Tip was primarily a man of action, has made for a plain style of narration with no embellishments; as Whitely puts it, Tippu "neither wasted not minced his words" [4]. This very fact, however, serves to highlight those events or details which the author obviously considers important and which are given a certain prominence in the text. Of the devices used for this purpose some, such as direct speech, impart a good deal of verisimilitude to the narrative, while others, such as the minute specification of the value of ivory and other goods, provide interest of a documentary kind.

Tippu Tip's autobiographical text is an account of the expeditions he made over a period of about fifty years, until his final trip to Zanzibar, where he died in 1905 at the age of sixty-eight. The text is divided, presumably by the editor, into 183 numbered sections which for the most part consist of one paragraph each but sometimes considerably more. Long episodes can cover several paragraphs.

Hamed bin Muhammed started to go on local trips with his brothers and uncles at the age of twelve, trading in gum-copal, a tropical resin used to prepare a fine varnish. This trade they carried on for only a year, and at the age of eighteeen Tippu was initiated into the ivory trade by his father. This

2.-Standard accounts of exploration of the Congo and Tanganica areas, together with biographical entries on Livingstone, Stanley, Cameron and Tippu Tip himself, have been limited, for the purposes of this article, to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1978, vols. 1:206\7; 3: 1095; 6: 118; 7: 1043;11: 176; 13: 540; 17: 582; 19: 114 and 1128.

3.-M. Gregory, 'Aspects of varieties differentiation', *Journal of Linguistics*, 1967, pp. 177-198.

4.-Whitely, op. cit. Introduction.

would be about 1855. By the late 1860s Tippu was leading expeditions of four thousand men and had amassed vast quantities of ivory.(We can only deplore the ravages that the Arab traders encouraged among the elephant population.) His business acumen and his independence in taking his own decisions were evident when he was still a youth.

He tells how, after crossing lake Tanganyika in a dug-out, they arrived at Urua to find that the large tusks were expensive while the small were extremely cheap." Everyone was buying the large tusks, so I decided to go for the small, and collected a great number. " Once in Zanzibar, he goes on to add, in his characteristically laconic way, a few sections further on, " I was lucky. It was the small tusks which were fetching a good price."

His trading acumen enabled him to take risks. He relates his " first major decision", that of borrowing 4000-7000 dollars of goods to trade on sea-trips along the Mrima coast. Shortly afterwards, they decided to go up-country, his brother taking a small quantity of goods - some 5000 dollars'worth " as an experiment ", whereas Tippu was by this time borrowing 30.000 dollars worth of goods from wealthy Indians and Banyans in Zanzibar.

'Goods' in the earliest sections of the autobiography meant beads and bangles, to be exchanges for ivory in a trading system based on barter. Later, the more sophisticated peoples demanded bales of cloth with which to make clothes, together with spices, soap and gunpowder. The rate of exchange of these goods in different places and at different times is specified thoughout the autobiography. The standard measure is the frasila (=35 lbs.); one frasila of ivory was fetching 50 to 55 dollars in Zanzibar in Tippu's early trading years. On this, the Arab traders were taxed at the rate of 9 dollars per frasila. At Urori, Tippu's father's village, one frasila of beads was exchanged at this time for the same weight of ivory; 12 to 15 pieces of cloth for one frasila of ivory; spice measure for measure, and one box of soap per frasila of ivory; 15 libs. of powder was worth a frasila of ivory. He also tells of one area, on Lake Mweru, where people meet to trade, not in ivory, but in 'viramba', strips of raffia cloth which are exchanged for fish.

Tippu's qualities of independence and acumen were aligned to a sense of responsibility, which had manifested itself from the very earliest expeditons, when Tippu had insisted on taking care of the goods rather than leaving them in the hands of a stranger from the Mrima coast. Later we see his sense of responsibility centring on the people in his charge: porters, slaves, fighting men and family all come within the scope of his attention. He personally sees to it that they have food, clothing and wages, all specified exactly - food for a porter for six days, plus ten dollars down at the start of an expediton. He obvioulsy expected parallel loyalty from his men and was ruthless with deserters. On one occasion when his porters fled he rounded up hostages from their relatives in the villages and bound them in chains. To get

chains, he first had to buy strips of metal, then have them made up into chains by a Banyan craftsman. For this exploit he earned himself the name 'kinkugwa' - 'the leopard', a nickname he must have retained for some years until it was replaced by that of 'Tippu Tip'. This later name he acquired during an early campaign against Samu, a chief known for his cruelty and treachery and who accepted Tippu's gifts while laying a trap under the pretence of offering ivory. Like many of the tribes at this time Samu's men had no knowledge of gunpowder, and their bows and arrows stood no chance against Tippu's guns. According to the locals, "This man's guns went 'tip, tip' in a manner too terrible to listen to". The nickname 'Tippu Tip' stuck and has gone down in history, but it was not the last he was to acquire. Later in life people called him 'Mkangwanzara', that is, 'he who fears nothing'. Tippu's comment on this is characteristic: "Perhaps I would be afraid of famine, but certainly not of war."

War figures in the autobiography. Conflict was rife among the various tribes in the pre-colonial period as the chiefs vied with each other for power. The death of a chief would result in tribal disputes for the chieftancy among the sons and nephews, while the defeat of a chief, such as Samu, would call for revenge, one conflict thus inevitably triggering off another. The gratuitous killings and maimings carried out by some of the chiefs are noted with abhorence by Tippu, who treated the vanquished with magnanimity - and continued trading with them - and whose own rare declarations of war were either a response to the killing of his own relatives or to a request for help from beseiged people. One declaration of war he issued was the result of a dispute over an elephant. According to Tippu's account, an elephant passed near their camp and Tippu's men shot it. The tusks yielded 180 frasila of ivory. The territory, however, was not subject to Tippu, and with the result that the local chief Mkasiwa claimed the elephant as his. " So a remarkable dispute developed ", relates Tippu, " and war became inevitable" But on the day Mkasiwa decided to attack, war broke out elsewhere, so the dispute was suspended since Mkasiwa needed Tippu's help against the attacking third party.

The recounting of this episode is typical of Hamed's narrative style. Events are almost always related in chronological sequence. He does not, for instance, adopt as his point of departure for the episode the notion of a dispute, which arose because of one elephant which they had killed. Instead, he links up with the previous stage of the expedition and carries on from there, step by step: " Having arrived at Ituru, we stayed there for fifteen days and during our stay an elephant passed." This method might make for a certain monotony, were it not for the liveliness of Hamed's use of both indirect and direct speech. The exchanges between himself and Mkasiwa are told in indirect speech, an example of which is worth giving in full:

Chief Mkasiwa and the Wai Said bin Salum el Lemki sent word that we were to bring the tusks in because it had been killed in the village and was their property. I replied that the tusks were ours, and that we were not giving them up. So a remarkable dispute developed. No progress was made and war became inevitable. They insisted on our giving them up, and I insited on our retaining them. My father said they were not leaving us, so did Nyaso [5] Chief Mkasiwa and Wali bin Salum decided on war. We were ready for them.

The expeditions from the East African coast into the interior in search of ivory and copper led Tippu into territory which was potentially hostile. If attacked, he fought back and invariably won. In this way, as well as amassing great wealth through what amounted to a monopoly on elephant-hunting, he had began to establish for himself a rather loosely organised state in the eastern and central Congo basin. By 1884 the authority claimed by Tippu covered a vast area which stretched from Lake Mweru in the south to above the Stanley falls in the north, bounded to the east by Lake Tanganyika. He has no property in Zanzibar in the early years, but refers to 'a wife who had plenty'. His own home he established at Kasongo, two hours journey east of the river Congo, towards Lake Tanganyika. His father's home was at Tabora, in territory later subject to the rival chief Mirambo. (As on many other occasions, Tippu was to come to an agreement with Mirambo, which scandalised his neighbours.) His method of ruling his kingdom was either to reaffirm existing chiefs or to replace them by his own regents.

Throughout the autobiography we see Tippu consulting with his kinsmen about the course of action to be taken, attempts by his kinsmen and others to dissuade him from dangerous projects, and Tippu invariably deciding to go nevertheless. Direct speech is frequently used in the expression of these consultations, as when Tippu declares "I am not leaving here until I have completely crushed the people of Samu and they bring peace", or again, in answer to the accusation that he is mad to go into the interior with a European, "Maybe I am mad, and you that are sensible, keep to your own affairs "

It was on the occasion of the cleaning-up operation during the last stages of the war with Samu that Tippu's men made contact with an Englishman, "a big fellow, by name of Livingstone, his first name David. He and the ten members of his party had almost been killed and a number of the locals came with him. Some of my men brought him to camp while others carried on the war against Samu... until peace was agreed upon." Livingstone, who had started out as a missionary and then became an explorer, was convinced that the slave trade could only be eradicated by

5.-Nyaso was Tippu's mother.

opening up Africa to normal trade. He had already made one expedition during which he had discovered the Victoria Falls and had returned to England as a hero. Back in Africa in 1866 he had begun a dramatic quest for the sources of the Nile, suffering untold hardships, and when Tippu's men found him he "has neither goods nor rations". Tippu took him in and gave him guides to go to Lake Mweru, and later fitted him out to go on another expediton to the chief Cazembe's territory, sending letters on ahead with his kinsmen that Livingstone was to be treated with all respect.

There is no evidence in the autobiography of any closer contact between Tippu and Livingstone, as there was between Tippu and Stanley. Henry Morton Stanley was a Welshman by birth who had become a newspaper reporter in the United States. Following on the uncertainties regarding Livingstone's safety, and the rumours of his death, Stanley was sent by his newspaper to locate and rescue Livingstone. The historic meeting took place in 1871. Stanley found Livingstone at Ujiji, ill and short of food, and greeted him with the famous words "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" Later they went on to explore Lake Tanganyika together, proving that the Rusizi River could not be the souce of the Nile, as some geographers had suggested. Stanley returned to Zanzibar in 1972, leaving Livingstone to pursue his exploration of the River Luluaba, which he hoped might be the source of the Nile, while suspecting it would more likely be that of the Congo, a fact which Stanley and Cameron were later to confirm.

After Livingstone's death, Stanley continued Livingstone's work of exploration on several expeditons between 1874 and to 1877, furthering knowledge of the interior of the Congo region and of the course of the Congo river. He was received by Queen Victoria and presented with a gold snuffbox.

As a person, however, Stanley earned himself considerable unpopularity in Britain at the time because of his harsh, humourless character and his aggressive methods during the expeditions, which tends to result in numerous casualties. Some of the criticism on the part of members of the Royal Geographical Society may now appear unjust, motivated, perhaps, in part, by envy of Stanley's huge American funding. Certainly, however, he does not show up in a good light in Tippu Tip's account. The dealings with Stanley occupy almost the whole of the latter half of the autobiography, when Tippu becomes involved with the Belgian takeover of what was to be the Congo Free State.

Their first meeting must have taken place when Stanley had set out from Zanzibar after Livingstone's death. In one of the liveliest episodes of the autobiography, Tippu relates how Stanley appeared one afternoon and was made welcome and given a house. The following morning he showed Tippu and his men a new kind of gun, apparently a repeater able to fire fifteeen rounds ("We were amazed", comments Tippu.) But when Tippu

asked to try it Stanley demands a fee of 20 to 30 dollars for firing it once. Two days later, Tippu agreed, against the advice of his people, to accompany Stanley into the unknown interior, not, he insisted, for the 7, 000 dollars fee offered by Stanley, but out of good will. Stanley, impressed by Tippu's stocks of ivory seems to gave taken him at his word for, once back in Europe two and half years later, "not even greetings did he send". Of the promised money, he offered Tippu 3, 000 dollars, for services rendered together with a photograph of himself, "That's what he gave me" says Tippu in disgust, "a photograph."

The journey through the forest to reach the Congo must have been maddeninggly slow for Stanley. One could not see the sun for the height of the trees, and the mud made walking difficult, particularly for those who were carrying the boats." Stanley was in despair, he said to me, 'What do you suggest? How many days is it to the Congo?" Tippu answered that they had never been, but that in six or seven days they should be there. They did arrive, and Tippu accompanied Stanley part of the way down to the Congo, until they reached its confluence with the tributary river Kasuku. During the ensuing four months, Tippu obtained sufficient boats from the local tribes for Stanley and his loads, which included a donkey and, according to the autobiographical account, Stanley then decided that he could dispense with Tippu's guidance, although he expected Tippu's men to continue. They flatly refused, however, to penetrate any further into the interior without Tippu. Also their contract had expired six months previously. Tippu resorted to what we should now call role play, he and Stanley enacting a scene of threats and recriminations, before the porters were coerced to continue. Even so, they crept back by night complaining that Stanley was mean, " counted everything out" and would not give them any clothes; again Tippu resorted to a trick, and got Stanley to give him clothes, which he then gave to the men. Stanley was so overjoyed at their agreeing to continue that he promised Tippu a gold watch set with diamonds when he got back to Europe. The watch was never forthcoming. Instead Stanley gave Tippu a puppy.

Stanley sailed down the Congo, reaching the lake he called 'Stanley Pool' and the falls and cartaracts he named 'The Livingstone Falls' after his great predecesor. Tippu waited a month, as instructed, but when no word came from Stanley, he left. The above account, one must point out, differs in one detail (which Tippu would have considered important for his reputation) from that of Dorothy Middleton's Encyclopaedia Britannica entry on Stanley.[6]. In it she states that "because of the extreme difficulties and danger of the journey, the Arabs turned back at the limit of their trading area."

6.-*Encyclopeadia Britannica*, 1978, *(Macropaedia)*vol. 17:582.

On a later expedition, after returning from a visit to England Stanley held Tippu responsible for the killing of an officer, Major Barttelot. Again, Tippu recounts the episode as in a chronological sequence of events. According to his men, for Tippu was absent at the time, the Major provoked the tribesmen's anger by prohibiting their dances, and by taking up a spear against the wife of one Senga, who shot him. Senga was executed, not before insisting that he had not been put up to it. Stanley's accusation weighed heavily on Tippu for some time, however, until he was officially absolved from responsibility by the European authorites. Again, the Encyclopaedia Britannica version is rather different, and much more general. D. Middleton claims that Stanley blamed the officers for the disaster, and there was great controversy in England over the fate of the rear guard of Stanley's expedition.[7]

Tippu's gifts of leadership and organization were recognised by the Sultan Barghash of Zanzibar, who planned to make him Wali (governor) over a large area of the Congo Basin south of Stanley Falls. Tippu at first declined, saying that his own kingdom of Manjyema was larger than Tabora, but eventually he was persuaded to accept and was supplied with guns and troops by the Sultan in an attempt to hold Arab authority in the area against the claims of the Belgians. Tippu had already been approached by a deputy of Leopold II but had refused to collaborate at the time, since he considered himself a subject of Seyyid Barghash, saying "I said to him, 'I can do nothing except on the authority of my ruler' and left." Some time later - how long is not clear, since Tippu gives no dates throughout his autobiography - Seyyid Barghash, no doubt bowing to the inevitable, summoned him to Zanzibar and informed him that he was no longer interested in holding the hinterland. In Tippu's own words "I realised that all was up."

Soon afterwards, Leopold II's claim to the Congo Basin was recognised by other European nations; Tippu must have decided that it was useless to oppose the Belgians, and signed an agreement making him Wali of the Stanley Falls District in the Congo Free State. As we near the end of the autobiography, we see how increasingly impossible a position it was; he was expected to keep other Arab traders in the region under control, without being supplied with the necessary means to do so. His apparent moderation in urging Arab leaders to desist from tearing down the Belgian flag and from attacking Europeans was useless. At the same time, many Arabs blamed him for selling out to the Europeans. They were certainly scandalised at his

7.-This was an expedition led by Stanley to rescue Emin Pasha, who had been isolated in difficult territory. When Satnley arrived, after a hazardous journey through the forest, he was astonished to find that Emin Pasha had no wish to be rescued. Tippu recounts the initial phase of the episode, mistakenly using the term 'capture' instead of 'rescue' or 'relive'.

ability to get on well with people who were 'Unbelievers'. In April 1890 Tippu left Stanley Falls for the last time, and made his way towards the coast. He adds a description of the activity and availability of all kinds of goods at Stanley Falls at the time, a picture which contrasts strongly with that given by Conrad in *Heart of the Darkness*. Writing only a few years later, Conrad is alarmed by the uncongeniality of the climate and the lowering of the moral standads which this induces. [8]

Tippu's life spans the period in which the vast geographical area of Central Africa, previously unknown to Europeans, was explored, mapped and finally colonized. His autobiography gives us a fascinating glimpse of the political and commercial activity in this area during this period, as well as revealing insights into his own character and that of others he met. Names abound in Tippu's narrative, and it is imposible to even mention those of all the Europeans, Africans and Arabs he had dealings with. He was the most celebrated trader of his time and potentate of the interior; as such he was sought out by every European explorer who needed men, boats and supplies to make an expedition. He seems to have got on well with everyone, he counted many Europeans among his friends and was treated by all with great respect. His comment on the Belgians is typical:

> With all the Belgians who came and the company I was on the best of terms; they accorded me great respect and carried out my instructions. For my part I fell in with their requirements, so that between us there was complete agreement and unanimity of purpose.

For descriptions of these people, however, we look in vain, and rarely is Tippu carried away by emotion, the only occasions being the anger at Stanley's accusations and the disappointment at his neglect to fulfil his promises, for Tippu considered Stanley a great friend, obviously more so than Lieutenant L.V. Cameron, whom he had also escorted on a major expedition into the interior. [9] Yet though terse, Tippu's account is not without human interest. References to the joy of his father and brothers on his return, to the death of a favourite personal servant, a young man who literally threw himself on the enemy's spears after his wife had been killed by

8.-This observation is made in a footnote by Whitely, p.133.

9.Here, too, Tippu's account differs from that of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry on Cameron's expedition, (op. cit. *Micropaedia*) vol. 3: 1095) which states that Cameron accepted Tippu Tip's offer to escort him, rather than pay others by taking slaves. Tippu says he was `persuaded' to accompany Cameron, who had not been granted permission by the Nyangwe people to follow the Congo. Much of this episode is told in dialogue form, with Cameron urging Tippu to leave what he was doing in order to accompany him, and Tippu agreeing, to the horrified exclamations of the locals at his dropping everything for a European

an enemy arrow, and to other brief but telling episodes give us tantalising insights into the life of these people. W. H. Whitely's careful translation and bilingual editon makes available to both English and Swahili reading publics a notable piece of autobiographical writing which, previously inaccessible, is of undoubted socio-historical interest, while at the same time providing us with an intringuing self-portrait of a man who was a natural leader.