

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Spilling Millet: The East African Post and Studied Bureaucratic Knowledge

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Abstract

This essay is a study in bureaucratic knowledge production using the example of the postal system in German East Africa. There is a great deal of historical literature that focuses on bureaucratic-knowledge-as-power: bureaucracies produced information that was used to quantify and, ultimately, to control populations both in the metropole and the colony. In this piece I want to emphasize another kind of bureaucratic knowledge production: namely, information about the bureaucratic system that was created through bureaucratic practice — what I call “studied bureaucratic knowledge.” Beyond understanding German attempts to translate (linguistically, administratively, and culturally) one understanding of bureaucracy, the historian who pays attention to the users of colonial bureaucratic structures can uncover bureaucratic knowledge created by those who encountered those structures in their daily lives — and how that information in turned shaped their use of the bureaucratic system.

Keywords: East Africa; Tanzania; intellectual history; colonial administration; history of science; colonial intermediaries

There is a Swahili proverb that reads: “*Penye kuku wengi usimwage mtama*.”¹ Literally translated “where there are many chickens, do not spill millet,” the proverb’s lesson is to be careful of what you say in front of people, who will eat up news like opportunistic chickens do spilled grain. In 1910, Carl Velten, a German linguist who taught Swahili at Berlin’s Seminar for Oriental Languages, published a *Suaheli-Sprachführer für Postbeamte* (*Swahili Phrasebook for Postal Clerks*). The book provided potential colonial postal officials with examples of the Swahili they might hear and use in their daily work, alongside German translations. The first section of the volume is a straightforward German-Swahili glossary. Comparatively multifaceted, the second half includes exemplary conversations and model notices; poetry and letters; and a series of short essays written by two of Velten’s Swahili teaching assistants — Muhammadi bin Akida and Mwinjuma Lamiri.² In one of these essays, the authors deployed a modified version of the aforementioned proverb to describe how some East Africans initially regarded the post office: “*walipo kuku wengi, mtu haifai kumwaga mchele*” (“where there are lots of chickens, a person would do well not to spill rice”).³ The essay-writers interpreted the proverb as a caution against

¹ Alternatively: “*Penye kuku wengi hapamwagwi mtama*.” Albert Scheven, *Swahili Proverbs: Nia zikiwa moja, kilicho mbali huja* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), 447.

² In some sources spelled Laamiri, I will use the spelling found in the *Phrasebook*.

³ Carl Velten, *Suaheli-Sprachführer für Postbeamte* (Berlin: Self Published, 1910), 94. All translations from the German and Swahili are my own.



Figure 1. Map of German East Africa from 1914 including Central and Usambara Rail Lines, *Deutsches Kolonialblatt* 25, no. 23 (December 1914), 849.

using the post because, in light of everything moving through the busy office, one’s message would certainly be lost in the shuffle — it would be swallowed up by busy chickens.

I begin with this dual interpretation of the proverb because it highlights a strain of knowledge production not normally associated with bureaucracy and bureaucrats: information created in the process of running a bureaucratic system, that builds into powerful knowledge about that very system — what I call, for reasons outlined below, “studied bureaucratic knowledge.” Bureaucracy and knowledge are not, I admit, new bedfellows. The knowledge produced by bureaucracies has long been recognized as a source of state power: the organizational ability to create a synoptic view of formerly scattered, now standardized and consolidated information increased the “legibility” of the populace to the state, imbuing that state with the power to (attempt to) shape the lives of the perhaps-imagined but now-quantified populace.⁴ As Bruno Latour put it, the power of bureaucracy stems from its ability to draw disparate information together, “until a few men consider millions as if they were in the

⁴See for instance Peter Becker and William Clark, “Introduction,” in *Little Tools of Knowledge: Historical Essays on Academic and Bureaucratic Practices*, eds. Peter Becker and William Clark (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 1–28; James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); and Patrick Carroll, *Science, Culture, and Modern State Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

palms of their hands.”⁵ This kind of power-through-knowledge has been traced particularly clearly in colonial settings, where bureaucrats attempted to quantify and categorize indigenous populations, creating information to order their bureaucratic systems.⁶ More recently, historians have begun paying careful attention to praxis, stressing “bureaucratic routines as knowledge producing processes.”⁷ I start from this well-developed collective premise — that knowledge production is central to bureaucratic power — but shift the emphasis to examine knowledge *about* bureaucratic systems, produced by bureaucratic practice. The literature on bureaucracy, especially colonial bureaucracy, focuses largely on the creators of bureaucratic structures; I argue that we must also pay attention to the users of those structures, whose interactions with the system did much to define its power and limits.⁸ The term “bureaucratic knowledge,” that is, can be used to describe two distinct things: in one sense, it is information collected by officials about the population being governed — knowledge deployed to impose order and control. The bureaucratic knowledge I try to uncover here is, in contrast, information about bureaucracy that could be observed by those who encountered its structures in their daily lives — and how that information in turned shaped their use of the bureaucratic system. I refer to this as studied bureaucratic knowledge, for it had be learned, often through close observation and at times with deliberate intention.

This essay focuses on studied bureaucratic knowledge in German East Africa. For if nineteenth-century Prussia, and later Germany, have been described by some historians and social scientists as the bureaucratic state *par excellence*, then, it seems to me, we must examine its influence in the colonies as well as the metropole, paying particular attention not just to German attempts to translate — linguistically, administratively, and culturally — one understanding of bureaucracy, but also the ways East Africans interpreted it on the ground, and how these interpretations found their way back into German bureaucratic practice.⁹ This is what makes the Velten phrasebook so fascinating and why I will return to it: it preserves traces of what those translations may have looked like, from both the German and the Swahili linguistic side.

To explore these ideas, I use the case study of the colonial postal system. Why the post? First, its growth required infrastructure big (railroads and shipping lines) and small (envelopes and stamps) — material elements that the historian can trace. Bundled into the postal structure, moreover, were the telegraph and telephone services.¹⁰ This meant that post offices were filled with words, making them a particularly compelling site to study quotidian translations of bureaucracy.

Second, according to Hermann Glaser and Thomas Werner, by the early nineteenth century postal networks facilitated new kinds of governmentality.¹¹ This included imperial governance: post offices, per Bernhard Siegert, acted as “network hookups for the colonial empires.”¹² Indeed, this is why the

⁵Bruno Latour, “Drawing Things Together,” in *Representation in Scientific Practice*, eds. Michael Lynch and Steve Woolgar, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 55.

⁶See, e.g., Helen Tilley and Robert Gordon, eds., *Ordering Africa: Anthropology, European Imperialism, and the Politics of Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

⁷Sebastian Felten and Christine von Oertzen, “Bureaucracy as Knowledge,” *Journal for the History of Knowledge* 1, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.5334/jhk.18>.

⁸My thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting this formulation.

⁹For histories of the Prussian bureaucracy, see: Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia 1600–1947* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 312–44; John Gillis, *The Prussian Bureaucracy in Crisis, 1840–1860: Origins of an Administrative Ethos* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971); and Hans Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy and Autocracy: The Prussian Experience, 1660–1815* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958).

¹⁰This had been the case in Germany since at least 1876: Hermann Glaser and Thomas Werner, *Die Post in Ihrer Zeit: Eine Kulturgeschichte Menschlicher Kommunikation* (Heidelberg: R.V. Decker’s Verlag, 1990), 283.

¹¹Glaser and Werner, *Die Post*, 38.

¹²Bernhard Siegert, *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*, Kevin Repp, trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 140.

architects of the German colonial empire considered the postal system crucial to the endeavor: communication both with the metropole and within and between colonial territories was a *sine qua non* for the consolidation of military and administrative control over far-flung territories, the post an “indispensable and energetic helper in the work.”¹³ At the same time, as Pedro Monaville argued for the Belgian Congo, the politics of the post “remained ambivalent throughout the whole colonial period,” facilitating at once colonial domination and potentially subversive connections between the colonized and with interlocutors abroad.¹⁴ And yet, Monaville insisted, “what occasioned politics was the domestication of postal routines, not militant letters.”¹⁵ That incorporation and appropriation of postal praxis, in this case by East African postal patrons, is also central to this study.

And finally, the post office was among the more publicly accessible of the bureaucratic structures put in place by the German colonial regime, open to any user, so long as he or she followed the regulations and could afford to pay. And its infrastructures were apparent on the landscape even to those who never entered a post office. In this piece, I trace the accumulation of studied bureaucratic knowledge by following three groups of East Africans through their interactions with the post: beginning outside of the post office with postal observers, the piece then moves inside with postal customers, and concludes with a look at the postal employees seated at their desks.

Standing outside: postal observers

In her examination of the widespread genre of vampire stories that circulated in colonial-era East Africa, Luise White insisted that such narratives — including rumor and gossip — are “the very stuff of history,” and that training careful attention on them expands the study of historical epistemology.¹⁶ But rather than trying to pinpoint their “rationality,” White argued that the reality of widely shared stories rests in their very circulation; in their shaping of peoples’ actions and explanations about the world; and in the ways in which new technologies are intercalated with existing practices and procedures. Inspired by White, in this section I examine a small collection of stories that circulated among East African observers of the post and telegraph, as they appeared in the *Phrasebook*. These observations reveal a mixture of understanding and uncertainty, suspicion and enthusiasm, old and new.

In March 1909, Muhammadi bin Akida and Mwinjuma Lamiri began their two-year contracts as Swahili teaching assistants at the Seminar for Oriental Languages in Berlin. Bin Akida was a thirty-year-old teacher from Kilwa, and Lamiri a twenty-four-year old clerk from Tanga, both cities with longstanding connections to the cultural and linguistic continuum of the Swahili coast.¹⁷ They were among a succession of East Africans who assisted German professors in teaching pronunciation and offered extracurricular speaking practice for students.¹⁸ Carl Velten relied on these teaching

¹³W. Schmidt and H. Werner, *Geschichte der Detuschen Post in den Kolonien und im Ausland*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: Konkordia-Verlag Reinhold Rudolph, 1942), 6. I hesitated to cite this volume, as it is baldly racist and pro-colonial, including an epigraph from Adolf Hitler. Its detailed coverage of the growth of the postal system, however, makes it a valuable source. I hope to have used its information for purposes that would displease its authors.

¹⁴Pedro Monaville, *Students of the World: Global 1968 and Decolonization in the Congo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 25.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁶Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 55.

¹⁷Correspondence pertaining to their contracts can be found in the Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz (GStA), Berlin, I. HA Rep. 76, Va. Sekt. 2, Tit. X, Nr. 124, Adhibendum N, Bd.6. There is evident confusion about Lamiri’s name in this correspondence, with some writers referring to him as “Mwinjuma Tongoni.” See also Ludger Wimmelbucker, *Mtoro bin Mwinnyi Bakari: Swahili Lecturer and Author in Germany* (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota, 2009), 50. Though I do not have many details about their upbringing or professional training, one memo in the above-mentioned file notes that Lamiri was of “better background,” perhaps indicating the writer’s identification of him as a Swahili coastal dweller of Arab descent.

¹⁸Sara Pugach, *Africa in Translation: A History of Colonial Linguistics in Germany and Beyond, 1814–1945* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 148–49.

assistants for his own publications, including the essays written by bin Akida and Lamiri which appeared in the 1910 *Phrasebook*.¹⁹ The three essays, written in Swahili and translated into German, described pre-German methods of sending messages, the coming of the postal system to German East Africa, and the reception of the telegraph and telephone. The essays emphasized a transformation from a former state of “*ujinga*” (“ignorance”) to an enthusiastic embrace of these technologies.²⁰ But they also recorded a diversely-articulated set of observations about the post, the telegraph, and the telephone, expressed in an idiom quite apart from the narrative of German-led technological progress. Such stories reflect the studied bureaucratic knowledge collected by those who observed postal infrastructures, and hint at the ways in which observers’ hesitant engagement shaped those very infrastructures.

According to the essayists, “every day people had a new opinion” about the workings of the telegraph and telephone.²¹ One theory described a telegraph constructed by “*mashetani wawili*” (“two demons”) posted in different cities, supernaturally shuttling voices back and forth; another postulated that an insect (“*mdudu*”) was inserted into the cable to carry messages.²² Others rejected this idea, pointing out that insects can neither be controlled nor understand words. Perhaps, some observers posited, words were simply carried by the wind? Or maybe the postal clerk writes one’s message on a piece of paper, attaches it to an underground cable, and then “shakes the wire with force,” alerting the postal official on the other end that he should pull the wire with its message to the receiving station.²³

Such stories, which were reportedly “argued [about] for many months,” reveal much more than the “ignorance” attributed them by bin Akida and Lamiri. Rather, they incorporate these new technologies into existing explanatory frameworks. As Steven Feierman wrote in his work on “peasant intellectuals” among the Shambaa in northeastern Tanzania, inherited discourses are continually and actively made meaningful for the current moment, deliberately chosen and “[shaped] anew to explain current problems.”²⁴ In a similar way, East Africans observing and engaging with the postal service incorporated its material elements and their operation into existing discourses, including cosmological (demons), pathological (insects), and meteorological (wind). They also incorporated the post into existing understandings and methods of message sending and mobility — for long-distance communication was certainly nothing new in the region. Stephen Rockel’s research on the caravan trade, for instance, detailed a sophisticated system of movement involving coastal capital, inland professional porters, and networks of roadside communities — each demonstrating specialized knowledges and recognized expertise.²⁵ By the mid-nineteenth century, tens of thousands of people moved along these routes every year. The system of long-distance trade between coast and interior, moreover, built upon “well-trodden” regional networks established by the mid-eighteenth century, serviced by professional porters from the Yao, Nyamwezi, Kimbu, and Sumbwa communities.²⁶ These existing infrastructures and practices, what Andreas Greiner referred to as “vernacular infrastructure,” patterned the interventions of the early German colonial state: when Germany committed itself to consolidating control of its colonial territories in the 1890s and early 1900s, it “did not simply replace pre-existing structures but most often had to engage, coexist, and even compete with them.”²⁷ The first military posts

¹⁹See Wimmelbücker, *Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari*, 36 and 43–44.

²⁰Velten, *Suaheli-Sprachführer*, 94.

²¹*Ibid.*, 92.

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Ibid.*, 92–93.

²⁴Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 3.

²⁵Stephen Rockel, *Carriers of Culture: Labor on the Road in Nineteenth-Century East Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006).

²⁶Rockel, *Carriers*, 36.

²⁷Andreas Greiner, “Colonial Schemes and African Realities: Vernacular Infrastructure and the Limits of Road Building in German East Africa,” *The Journal of African History* 63, no. 3 (2022): 329. For a similar history about the dhow trade from

were built beside the paths of trade caravans, and later administrative stations were founded in communities which had long served the trade.²⁸ Even after the fitful starts of roadbuilding and railway construction, the latter gaining momentum after the Maji Maji War of 1905–7, caravan porters continued to travel known routes in their thousands, combining stretches of travel by rail, government road, and known footpaths.²⁹

Vernacular infrastructure also included modes of long-distance communication: bin Akida and Lamiri wrote about “*desturi za zamani za kupeleka barua*” (“former customs of sending letters”), which included messengers traveling the same footpaths as the caravan porters. In the case of a death, for instance, the bereaved went to the *baraza* (a village meeting place) looking for a fleetfooted young person who could carry letters of notice to scattered relatives.³⁰ For non-urgent communication, a letter-writer simply waited until someone from the village was going in the direction of the letter’s intended recipient; if in a hurry, the composer went to the roadside to seek a passerby going in the right direction, sometimes paying for the letter to be carried.³¹

The stories told about the post, telegraph, and telephone, then, were not simply supernatural explanations for unexplainable technological wonders; the storytellers introduced invisible messengers (demons, insects, underground wires) into the operation of the technology in order to incorporate it into their already complex and well-understood systems of communication. And rather than naïveté, people brought an experimental attitude to postal services. Bin Akida and Lamiri described one man, for instance, who sent a money order of five rupees to his brother, simultaneously dispatching a letter asking the brother to report if and when he received the money. After enough cases of successful receipt, the essayists insisted, “the reputation of the post grew, so that now there is no one who does not send his money with it.”³²

Besides explanations about how the post, telegraph, and telephone operated, observers also speculated about the purpose of these infrastructural interventions. Because even as users embraced the advantages of post and telegraph for the sending of their news and valuables, it seems that among some observers skepticism remained — particularly for those who did not partake of postal or telegraphic exchange, but who encountered its infrastructures in their daily lives. Some observers, for instance, interpreted the erection of telegraph poles as the marking of boundaries, insisting that “the Europeans are making the borders, sticking the poles in their land, so that they do not lose it.”³³ And, indeed, one could convincingly argue that the construction of the postal network *was* a kind of border-drawing — an attempt to consolidate colonial administration and mark territory as under German control (no matter, or perhaps in light of, the fact that armed resistance continued through the turn of the twentieth century). Other stories reflected an awareness that the colonial regime was, in a sense, always listening: officials gathered information about colonial subjects, and the telegraph in particular was a tool of military intelligence, reporting on the activities of potential and actual resistance movements. One finds in the correspondence of German postal officials during the Maji Maji War, for example, a constant concern to keep telegraph connections intact, and the roundabout ways in which mail was delivered to stations cut off from the coast.³⁴

Zanzibar, see Erik Gilbert, *Dhows and the Colonial Economy of Zanzibar, 1860–1970* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005).

²⁸ Greiner, “Colonial Schemes,” 336.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 344 and 347. For East African travelers using the railway, see Christiane Reichart-Burikukiye, “The Railway in Colonial East Africa: Colonial Iconography and African Appropriation of a New Technology,” in *Landscape, Environment and Technology in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, eds. Toyin Falola and Emily Brownell (New York: Routledge, 2012), 62–83.

³⁰ Velten, *Suaheli-Sprachführer*, 88.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 88–89.

³² *Ibid.*, 90.

³³ *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁴ See, e.g., Bundesarchiv Lichterfelde (BArch), Berlin, R 4701/16271.

One group of observers who seldom used the services of the post but encountered its infrastructures were women, and bin Akida and Lamiri related a combined sense of skepticism and danger from female observers of the telegraph:

And women who travel down the road that passes the telegraph say words like this to their children: my child, I advise you in the region of the Europeans, this path of the telegraph has many dangers. First: plug your ears with cloth, like your mother does, because the telegraph has many wondrous spirits, and if you get this spirit in your ears, you will never hear again. Second: here where we go, do not speak loudly, speak quietly, because if you speak loudly, the telegraph will hear your words, and if it hears it will take every word that we say and send it to the district official at the boma [fort]. And if you laugh, it will send the news to the boma and we will be penalized for nothing. Third: my child, do not touch the telegraph pole at all, because every pole is poisoned; if you touch the pole, you must know you will leave this world. Do not even approach it, my child, we request peace here on the path.³⁵

This passage depicts observers ruminating on the telegraph's purpose: to listen in on conversations and report back to the boma. And the final warning, the poisonous poles, distilled a fundamental message: no matter how it worked or why it was erected, the telegraph — representing the region of the Europeans — was dangerous to life and limb.

Bin Akida and Lamiri included several examples of spying telegraph wires, stories which hearken to the opening proverb advising the listener to be careful about dropping grain around hungry chickens. Perhaps, despite the interpretation offered by bin Akida and Lamiri, the Swahili-speakers who used it actually meant what they said: be wary about using the services of the post office, not simply because it was a busy place, but because one should be sparing of the information made available to the colonial state. Concrete evidence for this hesitation is difficult to find; by the turn of the twentieth century, after more than a decade of German incursion and concomitant resistance, it was clear to many East Africans that military and administrative control went hand-in-hand, and that the infrastructures for these spheres overlapped. In his discussion of German colonial road construction, Greiner cited interviews conducted for the Maji Maji Research Project, a collection of oral histories carried out by scholars at the University of Dar es Salaam in 1968. According to some interlocutors, "opposition to road works was not only the result of unfree labour demands but also because of the alleged purpose of colonial highways ... 'Generally the clearance of roads was understood to make German government effective — more chainings, more beatings, more portage and everything hateful. So that they hated clearing roads.'"³⁶ While interviews conducted in the 1960s naturally contained the hindsight of the proceeding decades of colonial rule, independence struggles, and decolonization, the explicit link between infrastructure and colonial incursion lines up well with the skepticism expressed by some of the postal observers in the *Phrasebook's* essays. And while the essayists painted the stories of demons and insects, spying wires and poisonous poles as remnants of ignorance and superstition — a state to be overcome by German infrastructural intervention — a close reading reveals observers integrating these technologies into existing practices and understandings, or reflecting justified concerns about their purpose. It was knowledge won through the study of bureaucratic infrastructure, in this case produced by the observations of those standing, as it were, outside of the post office. In their essays, bin Akida and Lamiri insisted that this skepticism had been surmounted, that "today if you go to the post office, you can barely find a place, the way that people are so pleased with it."³⁷ What, then, was the experience of these customers inside the post offices, and what kinds of studied bureaucratic knowledge might have been created in those spaces?

³⁵Velten, *Suaheli-Sprachführer*, 93.

³⁶Greiner, "Colonial Schemes," 342.

³⁷Velten, *Suaheli-Sprachführer*, 90.

Inside the post office: postal customers

Most of the post offices in German East Africa were classified as *Postagenturen* (postal substations), with Dar es Salaam the first to be named a *Postamt* (a postal bureau) in 1892.³⁸ In 1899 there were a total of twenty-three post offices in the territory; before the outbreak of the First World War that number had risen to fifty-one.³⁹ The stations ranged from tiny, isolated outposts to bustling urban centers of business.

For the German colonial regime, the installation of postal and telegraph services was part-and-parcel with efforts to consolidate military and administrative control. Such lines of communication were also considered crucial for trade, particularly for German firms or settlers who desired contact with home and international markets. This means that the main users of postal services were Germans or other Europeans. Bin Akida and Lamiri also noted that the South Asian community contained early customers.⁴⁰ And yet the existence of a Swahili-language phrasebook indicates that postal officials also served the Swahili-speaking population, which by the turn of the twentieth century would have included not only urban coastal dwellers but also communities which had long been connected to the coast via the caravan trade. Indeed, German colonial rule itself facilitated the use of the language in more quarters, including government schools and offices.⁴¹ There are also other indications, such as Swahili translations of postal regulations in the files of Heinrich Schnee, governor of German East Africa from 1912 until 1919, that point to Swahili-speaking users of the post.⁴²

The *Gespräche* (“Conversations”) section of the *Phrasebook* reveals some information about postal customers. These were exemplary conversations — in part based upon notes from current postal officials, in part invented by Velten and his teaching assistants — that were meant to prepare potential employees for the kinds of situations and corresponding language they might encounter in their daily work. The scenes covered everything from the process of unloading steamship deliveries, to mail distribution, to serving customers. Many of the customer names mentioned in the text point to Muslim individuals who likely were counted among the “Swahili” or “Arab” population within German racial categorizations: names like Muhamadi bin Ali, Abdallah bin Osmani, and Abdallah bin Saleh. One excerpt, describing the postal procedure on the day of a ship’s arrival, described how, “Indians, Swahili, Arabs, Banyans stand waiting for their letters.”⁴³ These racial categories were inflected by the tension between fluidity and classification present in both coastal and German racial thought at the turn of the twentieth century. But there is no doubt that the population of people using postal services would have had the ability to pay for long-distance communication, and in some cases to send significant amounts of money via the post.⁴⁴

There was, however, another constituency that appeared in post offices across German East Africa: the servants of European merchants and settlers, there to complete the postal business of their employers. There is little biographical information about these men; in one scene a servant named Hamisi offered that he was a Bondei, an ethnic group from Usambara in northeastern Tanzania.⁴⁵ Underneath the layers of racist depiction — these men are, for instance, uniformly referred to as “boys,” no matter their age — the phrasebook’s conversation section is filled with examples of them engaging with postal bureaucracy. They handed over packages with accompanying documents;

³⁸ Anne Brüggemann, *Der unterbrochene Draht: Die Deutsche Post in Ostafrika — Historische Fotografien* (Heidelberg: R.v. Decker’s Verlag, 1989), 21.

³⁹ Schmidt and Werner, *Geschichte*, 262 and 291–2.

⁴⁰ Velten, *Suaheli-Sprachführer*, 89.

⁴¹ For more on the expanded use of Standard Swahili in particular, see Morgan Robinson, *A Language For the World: The Standardization of Swahili* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2022).

⁴² GStA VI. HA, NI Schnee, H., No. 62: 2. *Schriftstücke in Suaheli*.

⁴³ Velten, *Suaheli-Sprachführer*, 73–74.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Velten, *Suaheli-Sprachführer*, 72–73.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

moved between customs and post office collecting stamps; carried the account books of their employers; and purchased postage stamps and money orders.⁴⁶ One scene depicts two servants leaving the post office together, one telling the other: “Jusuf, imagine it, yesterday I received a postcard from Bagamoyo!”⁴⁷ An indication, if only a faint one, that these men, too, used the services of the post.

What would customers have learned about German colonial bureaucracy through such interactions? One lesson was the centrality of written documentation to any kind of official business: telegrams written down; money orders and other paperwork filled out and signed; and postal receipts read. For customers who couldn't write, a Swahili-speaking postal worker would be called to assist. One telegram writer was chastised, first, for his poor handwriting and then, upon rewriting his message, for crossing out a word, an apparently “forbidden” practice.⁴⁸ This necessity for complete, properly-formatted documentation could be both a stumbling block and a useful tool for those who knew how to use it. The papers of Schnee, for instance, are filled with written testaments, borrower's notes, bills of sale, and receipts of all kinds, written in Swahili.⁴⁹ Many users of the post would have been familiar with the written legal structure of Islam and pivoted to direct their claims toward the colonial state, capitalizing on the German propensity for paperwork to stake their title to property, debt repayment, land, and people.⁵⁰

But the procedures of the German postal system incorporated more than simple rules and regulations for the delivery of mail. They were also a set of customs and practices — the post had particular “*desturi*,” the Swahili word meaning customs or traditions. For German colonial officials, the post office was a place to exercise a bureaucratic “civilizing mission,” spaces regulated, à la Steven Shapin, by “stone and social convention.”⁵¹ This more encompassing understanding of postal bureaucracy emerges from one of the model announcements included in the *Phrasebook*. The notice, written in both Swahili and German, reads:

It is not proper to make noise or argue in the post office. Whoever comes to the counter first, positions himself at the front. Whoever comes subsequently, situates himself behind. It is custom, if a European comes, that the European is let to pass to the counter first. Whoever has money to bring, takes a board from the crew member and counts his money, as is custom. When he then gives his money order to the postal official, he will be able to tally the money quickly and easily, because the counter official has lots of work and you may not exacerbate the work. It is also not custom for a person to deliver his mailings right before closing, because the letters might be left behind, if the steamer's time of departure must be unexpectedly changed. One who knows this but does it anyway, of him it is said: he does not know the *desturi*.⁵²

The use of the Swahili term, even in the German version, seems pointed. To do these things, the passage implies, was more than just to break the rules of the post office — it was to display shameful ignorance of widely-known customs.

The study and documentation of East African “customs and traditions” had long interested Velten: in 1903 he published a volume on the *Sitten und Gebräuche der Suaheli* (*Customs and Traditions of*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 42, 65, 67–68.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., GStA VI. HA, NI Schnee, H., No. 61: 1. *Schriftstücke in Suaheli*.

⁵⁰ Some of these documents were written in Arabic-script Swahili, another indication that petitioners may have seen the German insistence on written documentation as an extension of existing Islamic written legal structures.

⁵¹ Steven Shapin, “The House of Experiment in Seventeenth-Century England,” *Isis* 79, no. 3 (1988): 383.

⁵² Velten, *Suaheli-Sprachführer*, 79–80.

the Swahili) in both German and Swahili.⁵³ The Swahili version of the text was meant to expand the basis of literature for language study by those living in or going to East Africa; the German version aimed to give non-Swahili-readers “a means ... to truly understand from the outset our black wards in their traditions and thereby be able to handle them.”⁵⁴ The goals of Velten’s ethnographic study were largely practical: to give colonial officials and other Germans in East Africa information that would supposedly ease their interactions with — and, ultimately, facilitate control of — the residents of the territory. It is a classic example of colonial knowledge production, of the type traced by historians across eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century colonial spaces. As Bernard Cohn wrote of British efforts to learn, categorize, and translate information about India: the “knowledge of the history and practices of Indian states was seen as the most valuable form of knowledge on which to build the colonial state.”⁵⁵ Velten’s study of East African *desturi*, translated into *Sitten und Gebräuche*, was just such an artifact of colonial knowledge production.

But if the postal system was a cultural complex with its own customs and conventions — *desturi* intended to replace users’ existing practices — then it could be studied by outsiders just like any other cultural constellation. And while the majority of the governed in any colonial regime were kept deliberately apart from the bureaucratic system (through separate legal, police, financial, and education structures), those who were able to observe colonial bureaucracy up close learned its ins and outs, its customs and practices, and its power. The interactions that customers had with the postal system, for instance, reinforced the centrality of written documentation to administrative functioning, and in some places infused daily life with the rhythms of mail arrivals and departures. And for those East Africans working in post offices, information about bureaucratic inner-workings was even closer to hand.

Seated across the desk: postal employees

The ideal turn-of-the-century bureaucracy was a system of impersonal efficiency and inflexible hierarchy, “a firmly ordered system of super- and subordination” built on files created and collected.⁵⁶ In the 1910s, Max Weber emphasized its rule-based nature, which fixed the jurisdiction and authority of bureaucrats.⁵⁷ But while the rules of any bureaucratic system “are more or less stable, more or less exhaustive, and [can] be learned,” Weber conceded that the “theory of modern public administration ... does not entitle the bureau to regulate the matter by commands given for each case, but only to regulate the matter abstractly.”⁵⁸ And to apply abstract principles to specific cases demands a degree of interpretation and decision-making by the bureaucrat. Indeed, the preparatory handbooks for German postal officials, such as the *Katechismus der Deutschen Reichspost* and Velten’s *Phrasebook*, lay out necessary knowledge in the form of what Lorraine Daston has described as “thick rules.”⁵⁹ These were not exhaustive lists of procedures or regulations. Such guidelines, rather, “alerted practitioners to the details they must heed and the latitude needed to adjust the rule to the case at hand.... To enumerate all such cases would be impossible and also pointless; it was enough to flag their existence and model a few solutions. Experience would take care of the rest.”⁶⁰ Experience, that

⁵³ Carl Velten, *Sitten und Gebräuche der Suaheli nebst einem Anhang über Rechtsgewohnheiten der Suaheli* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1903). The Swahili title, produced by the same publisher, is *Desturi za Wasuaheli na khabari za desturi za sheria za Wasuaheli*.

⁵⁴ Velten, *Sitten und Gebräuche*, vii and *Desturi*, vi.

⁵⁵ Cohn, *Colonialism*, 5.

⁵⁶ Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 67.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 68–69.

⁵⁹ W. Lenz, *Katechismus der Deutschen Reichspost: Ein Handbuch für den Post- und Telegraphen-Verkehr* (Leipzig: J.J. Weber, 1882).

⁶⁰ Lorraine Daston, *Rules: A Short History of What We Live By* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 67–69.

is, would produce the knowledge needed for the bureaucrat to apply the abstract rule to the specific situation. It was always a balance between fixity and flexibility, for German and East African postal employees alike. And the thick, situational interactions of daily postal business were shaped by multiple forces, including the ideals of German bureaucratic organization; the existing forms of bureaucracy in eastern Africa; and the challenges inherent in administrating a territory double the size of metropolitan Germany.⁶¹ Within this matrix, the East African employees of the colonial postal service played a crucial intermediary role.⁶² They also learned a great deal about the functioning of the system which depended upon their work.

What was the nature of the system into which East African bureaucrats were slotted? It was, at one level, a racialized style of colonial autocracy, where employees were divided not only between *Beamte* (“officials,” or “clerks”) and *Unterbeamte* (“sub-officials,” or “assistant clerks”), but where hierarchies between white and non-white employees were carefully maintained. East Africa was not, however, a bureaucratic blank slate. For decades prior to the arrival of the first German officials, the Zanzibari sultanate had been administering its island and mainland territories through a system of officials and representatives: *maliwali* (sing. *liwali*, governors) and *qadi* (Islamic judges) appointed by the Sultan interfaced with *majumbe* (sing. *jumbe*, village headmen) and *maakida* (sing. *akida*, magistrates) to collect taxes, keep order, and represent the Sultan’s interests from Pate in the north to Kilwa in the south.⁶³ By the mid-nineteenth century, then, there existed a class of elite, coastal bureaucrats experienced (if sometimes more and sometimes less successful) in administering populations of different religious, ethnic, economic, and social backgrounds. The German colonial regime essentially adopted this structure, at first relying on these coastal bureaucrats, and eventually inserting the office of the *akida* into a civil service career path that ended with the position of *liwali*.⁶⁴ These “local roots” influenced administrative structure even after the turn of the century, when the growing civil service began to include non-Muslim men from the interior who had been trained at German government schools.⁶⁵ As John Iliffe has argued, the systems of bureaucratic administration that emerged after the Maji Maji War were not simply the result of German officials “recruiting and training an administrative cadre of the type to which they were accustomed,” but rather stemmed from the converging interests of the colonial administration and a growing class of “men with western skills, anxious to reorganise their societies to face alien rule more effectively.”⁶⁶ In myriad ways, then, East Africans — from Zanzibari *akidas* to secondary-school graduates — influenced the shape of German colonial bureaucracy.

Preceding and parallel to the administrative ladder was the colonial military structure, with the boma at its center and filled out with East African, though rarely local, recruits known as *askari*.⁶⁷ These stations were, as Michael Pesek phased it, “islands of authority” for the first decades of German

⁶¹ Aude Chanson, “German East Africa: A Territory and People in World War I,” in *Small Nations and Colonial Peripheries in World War I*, eds. Gearóid Barry, Enrico Dal Lago, and Róisín Healy (Boston: Brill, 2016), 281.

⁶² For more on intermediaries, see, for instance, Benjamin Lawrance, Emily Osborn, and Richard Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); Ralph Austen, “Colonialism from the Middle: African Clerks as Historical Actors and Discursive Subjects,” *History in Africa* 38 (2011): 21–33; and Moses Ochonou, *Colonialism by Proxy: Hausa Imperial Agents and Middle Belt Consciousness in Nigeria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

⁶³ See Randall Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent: Cultural change and Traditional Islam on the East African Coast, 800–1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 97–124 and 125–44; and Jonathon Glassman, *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856–1888* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995), 158–61.

⁶⁴ Fabian Krautwald, “The Bearers of News: Print and Power in German East Africa,” *The Journal of African History* 62, no. 1 (2021): 11.

⁶⁵ Marcia Wright, “Local Roots of Policy in German East Africa,” *The Journal of African History* 9, no. 4 (1968): 621–30.

⁶⁶ John Iliffe, *Tanganyika under German Rule, 1905–1912* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 185 and 209.

⁶⁷ On the multiple roles played by *askari* see Michelle Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2014).

occupation.⁶⁸ Even after the halting transition from military to civilian rule, officials practiced a kind of peripatetic administration, lending an uneven quality to colonial control, vacillating between violent outburst, strict regulation, and absence.⁶⁹ But while the colonial regime in German East Africa may have been marked by its inability to exert even military and administrative control, scholars of bureaucracy have demonstrated that no bureaucratic system hovers above society, making and implementing decrees at will. Bureaucracies everywhere are, Shmuel Eisenstadt argued, inextricably intertwined with the societies around them. Numerous factors — from internal divisions, to competition for resources, to the level of reliance of the bureaucratic office on external parties — converge to shape bureaucratic systems and their influence on society.⁷⁰ “Thus from its inception,” Eisenstadt insisted, “a bureaucratic organization is in a state of constant interaction with its environment and has to develop different ways of maintaining a dynamic equilibrium in this environment.”⁷¹ In East Africa, evidence of this equilibrium-seeking can be found, for example, in the German adoption of the *shauri* as a tool of administration. A Swahili word meaning “counsel” or “advice,” *shauri* meetings were regular practice between trade caravans and roadside communities, a symbolic and logistical mode of negotiation and relationship-building.⁷² The German colonial administration adopted the *shauri* early on as a forum for public deliberation as well as judicial proceedings, building dedicated *Schaurihütten* (“shauri huts”), summoning individuals using a *Schaurizettel* (“shauri note”), and recording decisions in a *Schauribuch* (“shauri book”).⁷³ And while the German colonial interpretation of the *shauri* often differed from that of East African participants, the concession to this (mis)translation of German authority into existing terms and practices is indicative of the power of such practices to shape colonial administration.⁷⁴

Where that shaping information came from is a fundamental question. Pesek argued that German travelers encountered the *shauri* on the caravan trails, observing the “bricolage of cultural practices of different origins,” from Muslim representatives of the Sultan, to Indian firms organizing passage for European newcomers, to professionalized Nyamwezi and Yao porters, and the roadside communities with which they interacted.⁷⁵ Figures like Hermann von Wissmann, a participant in early expeditions and the territory’s first colonial governor, then incorporated the *shauri* into military and administrative practice.

German postal bureaucrats likewise leaned on the knowledge of their East African subordinates. According to one postal history, many of the initial clerical recruits came from among the Goan and Parsi communities of the coast, while the “simple work at the post stations” was accomplished by “Swahili, as well as half-Arabs, Comorians, etc.”⁷⁶ As the postal service expanded into the early years of the twentieth century, it incorporated graduates of the government schools established in places like Tanga, Dar es Salaam, and Bagamoyo, students who came from a slightly broader swath of the population.⁷⁷ Contemporary descriptions of East African sub-officials were unreservedly racist; they

⁶⁸Michael Pesek, *Koloniale Herrschaft in Deutsch-Ostafrika: Expeditionen, Militär und Verwaltung seit 1880* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus Verlag, 2005), 190.

⁶⁹See Pesek, *Koloniale Herrschaft*, 20–21; as well as Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries*, 188–93.

⁷⁰S. N. Eisenstadt, “Bureaucracy, Bureaucratization, and Debureaucratization,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (1959): 302–20.

⁷¹Eisenstadt, “Bureaucracy,” 308.

⁷²Michael Pesek, “Cued Speeches: The Emergence of Shauri as Colonial Praxis in German East Africa, 1850–1903,” *History in Africa* 33 (2006): 395–412.

⁷³Jan-Georg Deutsch, “Celebrating power in everyday life: the administration of law and the public sphere in colonial Tanzania, 1890–1914,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2002): 96 and 99–100; and Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries*, 186.

⁷⁴See Pesek, “Cued Speeches,” 405–7 and Deutsch, “Celebrating Power,” 101.

⁷⁵Pesek, “Cued Speeches,” 388–89.

⁷⁶Schmidt and Werner, *Geschichte*, 260.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 273. See also Krautwald, “Bearers of News”; and Arie van der Ploeg, “Education in Colonial Africa: The German Experience,” *Comparative Education Review* 21, no. 1 (1977): 99–104.

also reveal that these men did the bulk of the postal work. They labored inside and outside the post office, work encompassing rowing to meet steamships; carrying heavy mail sacks; customer service; inspecting telegraph lines; and carrying letters far and wide.

One type of knowledge essential to the functioning of the colonial postal system was information about people: in the absence of standardized addresses, the transmission of letters and packages, or the connection of phone calls, all depended upon knowledge about the human landscape of a given town. Many of the example conversations in the *Phrasebook* demonstrate subordinate officials supplying the personal knowledge necessary for the accomplishment of postal business. In one example, the akida Muhamadi bin Ulenge is called to the post office in Tanga, where the following scene ensues:

*Ich bin gekommen, Herr, du hast mich gerufen.
Nimekuja, bwana, umenita.
I have come, Sir, you called me.*

*Bist du der Muhamadi bin Ulenge?
Wewe ndiwe Muhamadi bin Ulenge?
Are you Muhamadi bin Ulenge?*

*Ja, ich bin der Muhamadi bin Ulenge.
Naam, mimi Muhamadi bin Ulenge.
Yes, I am Muhamadi bin Ulenge.*

*Kennst du den Mashukura bin Mbwana?
Unamjua Mashukura bin Mbwana?
Do you know Mashukura bin Mbwana?*

*Ich kenne ihn genau, Herr.
Namjua sana, bwana.
I know him well, Sir.*

*Wo wohnt er?
Anakaa wapi?
Where does he live?*

*Er wohnt hier in Tanga, aber jetzt ist er nicht da, vorgestern ist er nach Pangani gegangen.
Anakaa hapa Tanga, lakini sasa hayuko, juzi amekwenda Pangani.
He lives here in Tanga, but he is not here now, the day before yesterday he went to Pangani.*

*Schön, er hat Geld an dich geschickt, 100 Rupie.
Bassi, ameleta feza kwako rupia mia.
Well, he sent you money, 100 rupees.*

*Post-Juma, komm her, kennst du diesen?
Juma posta, njoo, unamjua huyu?
Post-Juma, come here, do you know this man?*

*O, Herr, diesen kenne ich sehr gut, er ist ein angesehener Mann, er ist ein Mann aus Tanga selbst gebürtig, Herr, und er ist seit langer Zeit am Bezirksamt tätig.
O, bwana, huyu namjua sana, mtu huyu maarufu, ndiye mtu wa Tanga hassa, bwana, na kazi yake anafanya Bezirksamt siku nyingi.*

O, Sir, I know this man well, he is a reputable man, he is Tanga-born, Sir, and has for some time been employed at the district office.

Gut, unterschreibe diesen Schein, dann wirst du dein Geld erhalten.

Vema, tia mkono wako sasa katika kartasi hii, ikisha utapata feza yako.

Good, sign this certificate, then you will receive your money.⁷⁸

The scene contains three characters: Muhamadi bin Ulenge, an akida at the Tanga district office; a German postal official; and “Post-Juma,” a sub-official in the post office.⁷⁹ The German official begins by establishing Muhamadi bin Ulenge’s identity and querying his familiarity with Mashukura bin Mbwana, the man who sent him one hundred rupees. Although bin Ulenge supplied the desired information about bin Mbwana (“he lives here in Tanga, but he is not here now, the day before yesterday he went to Pangani”), the German official sought to verify his identity again, this time asking the sub-official if he knew the man. Only when “Post-Juma” answers in the affirmative, even commending bin Ulenge’s reputation (“he is a reputable man”), does the German official give the akida his money. As this scene indicates, the postal infrastructure was only as good as the knowledge of its bureaucrats — knowledge that often came to German officials from the indigenous sub-officials, who facilitated the post’s connection to the rest of the populace.

In this way, East Africans working within the German postal system were classic intermediary figures: clerks, interpreters, and other civil servants who straddled cultures, often put in the role of interpreting the one for the other, both linguistically and culturally. There is a great deal of literature about such intermediary figures in colonial African settings, work that pushes beyond the dichotomy of African employees of the colonial state as either “collaborators” or “resistors,” demonstrating instead the ways in which intermediaries “influenced colonial rule because they shaped the interactions of subject populations with European officials.”⁸⁰ This role required significant mastery of bureaucratic practice — it was something that had to be learned. The potential power of clerks, in other words, did not simply stem from an ability to speak multiple languages, but also from their capacity to understand and, albeit in a limited way, manipulate bureaucratic systems — it sprang from their studied bureaucratic knowledge.⁸¹ This was as true in the relatively short-lived bureaucracy of German East Africa as it was in the more fully-developed systems of French and British colonial territories, the focus of the bulk of the historical literature on intermediaries. And the German colonial regime relied on these figures just as much as their French and British counterparts. There was an economy of information at work, and knowledge could be operationalized in multiple directions. Take the example of the postal system: at one level, East African postal workers supplied information that expedited the delivery of letters. Their knowledge also helped meet the German desire to categorize colonial subjects in order to more effectively rule. But the indigenous sub-officials did not only feed information into the German colonial knowledge-production-machine: they also learned a great deal about that machine and the people running it. Let me offer an example from the German postal archives.

Following the First World War, when Germany was forced to dismantle its colonial holdings, the Reich Postal Ministry created an office — the *Abwicklungsstelle*, or Liquidation Office — to deal with outstanding debts and backpay for postal workers who had stayed on duty during the war. Most of the cases brought to the attention of the office concerned German companies or individuals requesting

⁷⁸Velten, *Suaheli-Sprachführer*, 63. The German and Swahili are from the original, the English translation is my own.

⁷⁹“Juma” was a common East African name: an equivalent invented name in English might be something like “Postal John.”

⁸⁰Benjamin Lawrance, Emily Osborn, and Richard Roberts, “Introduction: African Intermediaries and the ‘Bargain’ of Collaboration,” in Lawrance, Osborn, and Richards, *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks*, 4.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 23.

compensation. But a part of the work also included sorting out what was owed to the indigenous personnel who had worked in East African post offices.⁸²

In March 1924, former colonial post director Wilhelm Rothe, who had been given charge of the Liquidation Office, compiled a list of thirty-eight individuals who were owed back pay. The list was necessarily incomplete, based upon documents that had made it out of the colony, and Rothe admitted that “the actual amount of the outstanding wages is roughly at least double so high” as the 3,884.17 rupees indicated.⁸³ A year later, the Foreign Office compiled a new list consisting of forty-three individuals owed a total of 4,340.30 rupees. “It surely needs no further debate,” the cover letter to this list noted, “that out of the resources made available, the indigenous employees of the colonial postal administration, who still during the war belonged to the military postal service, must also be compensated.”⁸⁴ The indigenous personnel, that is, were as equally entitled to compensation for wartime service as were their German counterparts.

Though the bulk of the Liquidation Office’s work was completed by 1925, the Foreign Office continued to field occasional claims. In February 1926 that office wrote to Rothe, reporting that 214 marks of remaining pay had been transferred to Muhamadi bin Juma, a telegraphist who had worked at the post office in Mwanza. Bin Juma in fact appeared in the *Phrasebook*, in a reprinted letter written in 1909. In the letter bin Juma sent greetings to “Takadiri and Ramazani and everyone at the post office in Dar es Salaam,” an indication that he began his career on the coast before arriving at the Lake Victoria station.⁸⁵ His letter described the new quarters rented for him and his co-worker, as well as the work they did, which included digging trenches to extend the telegraph cable to the newly-built postal building near the lakeside jetty. Recently, bin Juma reported, the telegraph connection between Tabora and Kilimatinde (west of Dodoma) had been broken, meaning that for many days they could not send or receive messages from Kilimatinde, let alone from Dar es Salaam. “We are exasperated,” he wrote, “because so much work has been delayed” by these “very many difficulties.”⁸⁶

Beyond backpay for his work, bin Juma also asserted entitlement to a further 150 rupees — money he insisted that he had deposited with his then-boss, field telegraph secretary Robert Schmidt. Schmidt had been killed during the war, making bin Juma’s claim difficult to verify. The Foreign Office requested Rothe’s assistance in the investigation of Schmidt’s estate, to see if he could find any paperwork attesting to the keeping of bin Juma’s money.⁸⁷ The request triggered an investigation by the Foreign Bureau of the Reich Postal Ministry, which found no relevant records in its own files except a submission dated January 1920 from Robert Schmidt’s brother, Otto, asserting that most of his brother’s papers had been lost during the war. The Foreign Bureau then contacted the post office in Dresden, where Otto Schmidt lived, to request that they contact him, to ascertain whether evidence of bin Juma’s deposit could be found in any of his brother’s remaining files.⁸⁸ Otto himself wrote to the post office in Dresden, explaining: “The East African pages out of the papers of my deceased brother I sent at the time to the Liquidation Office. In my hands is found only a private notebook with few diary-like entries, out of which does not emerge, that Muhamadi bin Juma deposited 150 rupees.”⁸⁹ Otto was loath to send the notebook itself to the ministry, it being “the last memento of

⁸²For the politics of former *askari* including their claims for back-pay and/or restitution, see Michelle Moyd, “Radical potentials, conservative realities: African veterans of the German colonial army in post-World War I Tanganyika,” *First World War Studies* 10, no. 1 (2019): 88–107. Fabian Krautwald discussed compensation claims made by merchants and former-*askari* and their role in memory-making in Krautwald, “Branches of Memory: Colonialism and the Making of the Historical Imagination in Namibia and Tanzania, 1914–1969” (PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 2022), 279–99. For the role of German records in such claims see Reginald Elias Kirey, *Memories of German Colonialism in Tanzania* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2023), 77–78.

⁸³BArch R4701/16348, “*Beglaubigte Abschrift*” compiled by Rothe, stamped by *Reichspostministerium* 20 Mar. 1924.

⁸⁴BArch R4701/16348, Letter from *Auswärtiges Amt* with related memos and list, 6 Feb. 1925.

⁸⁵Velten, *Suaheli-Sprachführer*, 102.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*

⁸⁷BArch R4701/16348, Letter from *Auswärtiges Amt* to Rothe, 2 Feb. 1926.

⁸⁸BArch R4701/16348, Letter from *Auslandsbüro I des Reichspostministeriums* to OPD Dresden, 5 Feb. 1926.

⁸⁹BArch R4701/16348, Letter from Otto Schmidt, 9 Feb. 1926.

my brother,” but in the end he complied with the request to make it available for inspection. The postal director in Dresden reported back to the Reich Postal Ministry on February 10 that nothing in the notebook indicated that Muhamadi bin Juma had left any money with Robert Schmidt, and it was sent back to Otto; less than two weeks after the investigation had started, news reached the Foreign Office that no evidence of bin Juma’s deposit had been found. And with that, the case was closed.

Muhamadi bin Juma’s appeal for compensation was unsuccessful; his request was buried by paperwork, or, more accurately, by the lack thereof. Without written evidence that he had deposited money with his former boss, the claim was considered unsubstantiated and perhaps even untruthful. The reliance on written documentation, and the strict adherence to procedure, no doubt hurt bin Juma’s appeal. But both were also essential conditions for his ability to bring the case to the attention of the postal administration in the first place. Through the procedures of the Liquidation Office, bin Juma had already received a degree of compensation for his work; and through the levers of the Foreign Office and the Reich Postal Ministry, he was able to appeal for the entire amount he believed he was owed. In the colonial setting, bureaucratic rights were both unequally applied and knowledge of them was kept deliberately concentrated. But figures like Muhamadi bin Juma, who worked within the bureaucratic system and were drilled in its processes and idiosyncrasies from their first day on the job, learned a great deal about how it functioned. This was studied bureaucratic knowledge, created in the course of daily activities. It was knowledge available to indigenous personnel, in contradistinction to the knowledge that would be produced about them and their communities through bureaucratic procedures like surveys and censuses. And it was knowledge that, in some limited cases, could be deployed to make claims within the bureaucratic system, to insist upon a modicum of equal consideration as a part of that system.

This is certainly not to argue that bureaucracy, and in particular colonial bureaucracies, were forces of democratization. As Weber described, bureaucracies enact a “*leveling of the governed* in opposition to the ruling and bureaucratically articulated group, which in its turn may occupy a quite autocratic position, both in fact and in form.”⁹⁰ And while the German colonial bureaucracy in East Africa was, as Juhani Koponen put it, “scarcely ... a highly efficient bureaucracy singled out by its superior knowledge and guided by instrumental rationality à la Weber,” the administrative and military structures were also “the only institutions which covered the country as a whole and monitored events in all parts of it.”⁹¹ Bureaucratic structures, then, were both potentially powerful tools of oppression and potential learning opportunities for intermediaries.

Conclusion

“*Vyote uvionavyo vinaelea vimeundwa.*” (“Everything that you see floating was created.”) Ali Hassan Mwinyi, the second president of Tanzania, used this Swahili proverb to introduce the memoirs of Rajabu Yusuf, a fifty-three year veteran of the East African postal service.⁹² A distinct human failing, Mwinyi reflected, is the tendency to take for granted the things that we use every day.⁹³ The postal system is one of those structures that fades into the background of society’s consciousness, and Mwinyi sought to remind readers that the post was created — and kept running — by effort, not inertia. Civil servants like Yusuf, the former president concluded, preserve important forms of knowledge:

⁹⁰Weber, *On Charisma*, 73. Italics in original.

⁹¹Juhani Koponen, *Development for Exploitation: German Colonial Policies in Mainland Tanzania, 1884–1914*, 2nd ed. (Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 1995), 138 and 142.

⁹²Alternatively “*Ukiona vyaelea jua vimeundwa.*”

⁹³Rajabu Yusuf, *Miaka 53 ya Utumishi katika Posta na Simu Afrika, 1941–1993* (Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 2005), vii.

information borne as a camel carries its burden, “knowing that he has carried a truly heavy load.”⁹⁴

The literature on colonial-era intermediaries has demonstrated how figures like Yusuf, and Muhamadi bin Juma, straddled worlds, making their way in difficult situations, often tugged between competing interests. Intermediaries shaped the knowledge available to colonial officials at the same time as they reformulated social and economic structures in their home communities. This was an exercise of “agency in tight corners,” as John Lonsdale phrased it.⁹⁵ Some of these intermediaries, too, developed anticolonial, proto-nationalist, ideals. That those working closest to the colonial administration would undermine it is perhaps not surprising: Frederick Cooper among others has demonstrated how universalizing discourses surrounding notions of citizenship and modernity were deployed by, for example, labor organizations to assert entitlement to certain rights from the colonial state — and eventually for its ouster.⁹⁶ But what I hope to have made clear in this piece is that it was not only at the level of discourse that, in this case, East Africans manipulated bureaucratic structures and made claims against colonial systems. It was often, rather, at the level of practice that useful knowledge about colonial bureaucracies was produced: this was studied bureaucratic knowledge, accumulated through observation and engagement with the system.⁹⁷ One can follow the gatherers of studied bureaucratic knowledge from outside the post office, where observers folded the post into existing forms of communication, or cautioned against its potential dangers; to inside the postal lobbies where customers imbibed the rhythms of opening hours and mail delivery, adopting the written forms of the post for their own communicative purposes; to the desks of postal employees, the closest observers of all, who not only shaped the information available to German postal officials, but also learned how to effectively make claims against bureaucratic systems. The archival traces of this kind of knowledge production — information created *through* bureaucratic practice *about* bureaucratic systems — suggest that bureaucracy must be studied as more than an information-collecting machine. It was also a political, cultural, and intellectual complex that was subject to examination and interpretation by a wide variety of people, including observers, customers, and employees, from Berlin to Dar es Salaam to Lake Victoria and back again.

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⁹⁴*Ibid.*, viii.

⁹⁵John Lonsdale, “Agency in Tight Corners: Narrative and Initiative in African History,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (2000): 5–16.

⁹⁶See among his many publications Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁹⁷An argument that Moyd extends to the *askari* of the German military and police force in East Africa, the *Schutztruppe*. See Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries*, 29.

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