Misplaced Pride: British Anti-Slavery Rhetoric, Continental Contradictions, and the Livingstone, Burton, and Stanley Illustrations

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Throughout the nineteenth century, the continent of Africa saw an unprecedented amount of European influence and interaction. Economic activities across the continent fueled the rapid expansion and technological development of European nations, such as Great Britain. Missionaries crossed harsh terrains on cultural and religious campaigns, pushing European social norms of monogamy and Christianity. Elsewhere, political powers rose, and borders were redrawn as different countries scrambled for influence and control over nations. Throughout this era of fervent social interactions and cultural clashes, some Europeans began to take issue with the violence of the African continent, pointing to export slavery as its main catalyst and driver.[1] This sentiment gained popularity as the century progressed, eventually leading to a series of British-led emancipation campaigns. Starting with the abolishment of the oceanic slave trade in 1807, the legal use of slavery began to slowly decline under the British, eventually leading to the complete Emancipation Act of 1833, granting all slaves of the British Empire their freedom.[2] Consequently, Victorians maintained a strong moral aversion towards slavery of the African interior, even after the abolishing of slavery throughout the British Empire and its territories. As a result, abolitionists began to push for the termination of more than just foreign export-based slavery but called for continent-wide abolition. This new moral agenda was adopted by politicians, foreign explorers, and general members of society, leading to new social movements and interest-based group coalitions.[3] All of this raises an important question – why were the British still so concerned with African humanity and slavery?

This curious concept of how internal African abolition became such an important moral undertaking for the British is not a new concern for scholars of the period. By examining cultural history, Linda Colley has highlighted how transatlantic abolition heightened British superiority and self-satisfaction within European politics, pushing further calls for internal

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[1] Hannah-Rose Murray, *Advocates of Freedom: African American Transatlantic Abolitionism in the British Isles* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 2. 9

[2] Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 8.

[3] Huzzey, *Freedom Burning,* 12.

abolition.[4] Hannah-Rose Murray has investigated how testimonies by formerly enslaved individuals developed into performances on the British stage, driving societal intrigue.[5] Others such as Richard Huzzey have leaned on the analysis of language in Victorian political speeches and publications to argue that anti-slavery became a political ideology of its own.[6] However, few have turned to contemporary illustrations to unpack anti-slavery sentiments in Victorian England and, more importantly, how these images drove abolition within the African interior.

Throughout the mid- to late nineteenth century, illustrations of African slavery began to penetrate the minds of influential Victorian decision-makers in Africa and back home. This process was driven by the sensationalized expeditions of famous explorers David Livingstone, Henry Stanley, and Richard Burton. Throughout their travels, these men produced a plethora of images capturing their encounters with slavery throughout the African continent. In combination with their written personal reflections, these primary sources serve as important clues in the plight to uncover how images influenced nineteenth century British abolition agendas and actions. Through analyzing these images and the social climate that contextualized their creation, the effectiveness of expedition illustrations as anti-slavery propaganda becomes evident.

To form this argument, it is useful to first chronicle the advent of abolition-oriented social movements in Great Britain and the ways in which nineteenth century ideas about African slavery influenced the production of propaganda campaigns, particularly the tensions between British and African concepts of slavery and? ownership. Next, a summary of the key expeditions by Livingstone, Stanley, and Burton will provide context on how expedition illustrations became so popular and thus influential. Finally, a visual analysis of multiple primary sources will be juxtaposed against the aforementioned arguments of prominent abolitionist scholars. Ultimately, this synthesis will demonstrate that visual culture created by mid to late nineteenth century British explorers served as effective propaganda for internal abolition in Africa given the contemporary pride in British emancipation efforts, the celebrity of Livingstone, Stanley, and Burton, as well as the artists use of compositional devices to depict slavery as perpetrated and perpetuated by Africans themselves.

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[4] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (London: Yale University Press, 2005), 8.

[5] Murray, *Advocates of Freedom*, 82.

[6] Richard Huzzey, "The Slave Trade and Victorian Humanity," *Victorian Review* 40, no.1 (2014): 43.

British Abolition – Chronology and Social Movements

> *"Slavery was a sin. From that sin we have cleansed ourselves. But the mere fact of doing so has not freed us from our difficulties. Nor was it to be expected that it should. The discontinuance of sin is always the commencement of a struggle."[7]*

By the mid-nineteenth century, slavery had been abolished within the British empire, yet enthusiasm for foreign anti-slavery campaigns did not subside in Victorian England.[8] Scholars such as Richard Huzzey have argued that anti-slavery sentiment was embedded in Victorian culture by the end of the century[9]. Thus, looking at this social consciousness of British Victorian society is important to understand the resulting on the ground campaigns and legal actions against slavery within Africa. Similarly, understanding how this British understanding varied from the African actualities of abolition is also useful when looking at propaganda. To holistically capture the possible motivations behind foreign anti-slavery movements in Great Britain, a historiography of this sentiment, the most prominent activist groups, and their most successful campaigns are discussed and compared to the contemporary actualities of slavery within the continent.

Prior to early abolition efforts of the nineteenth century, there was an existing social affinity for abolition within the British Empire, however, these efforts failed to coalesce or form a common agenda.[10] Indeed, as coined by Huzzey, it was "the era of anti-slavery pluralism,"[11] during which many Brits had difficulty agreeing on how best to implement their shared moral ideology through the legislature. Leading into the 1820s, groups started to get together and discuss their various opinions, methods, and ideas about how slavery ought to be abolished.[12] Campaigners began to further divide themselves as politics entered the equation, pushing the conversation beyond shared moral ideology. One of the earliest examples of coalescence was the 1823 formation of The Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions.[13] The group was an integral force in driving the Emancipation Act of 1833 but seemed to dissolve following this success.[14] However, scholars such as Huzzey argue that by the 1830s, the anti-slavery movement in Great

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[7] Huzzey, *Freedom Burning*, 18.
[8] Huzzey, *Freedom Burning*, 5.
[9] Huzzey, *Freedom Burning*, 6.
[10] Huzzey, *Freedom Burning*, 9.
[11] Huzzey, *Freedom Burning*, 7.
[12] Huzzey, *Freedom Burning*, 7.
[13] Huzzey, *Freedom Burning*, 10.
[14] Huzzey, *Freedom Burning*, 12.

Britain had become more than just a self-centered moral agenda – it was now a shared political ideology.[15] As a result, the group decided to regroup and reorganize their efforts by taking on foreign abolition campaigns. The successor organization, the British Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS), was founded in 1839 and was a major driver in the push for continent-wide emancipation in Africa.[16] This new society was particularly frustrated with parliamentary delays in taking action against attacking foreign slavery.[17] While BFASS failed to have any true impact on the ground in Africa, its ability to provide the British government with information about foreign slavery remained influential. Other groups lobbying for the foreign abolitionist agenda were also active during this period, including the Anti-Slavery Society of 1832 and the British and Foreign Society for the Universal Abolition of Negro Slavery and the Slave Trade of 1834.[18] It is important to mention these groups, given their role in pushing Victorian Great Britain towards the nation that contemporary Western press called "the leading anti-slavery nation of the world."[19] This idea is also important to keep in mind when analyzing visual culture of the period. The ways in which the British saw themselves in relation to African slavery is a common theme within the pieces to be examined. These popular movements show that British pride in emancipation clearly penetrated the minds of many individuals beyond politicians and legislators. To that end, some remaining questions arise. What external factors were motivating the formation of this political agenda apart from moral convictions? Was Great Britain really achieving the foreign anti-slavery successes they were congratulating themselves for? In the case of African slavery, many have argued that British abolitionism efforts did more harm than good.

Inspired by the work of BFASS and other societies, the British campaign to emancipate all of Africa took off at different moments across time and place. Evidently, abolishing slavery across an entire continent took an immense amount of effort and dedication on the part of colonial powers. Even more important however, is the fact that British pride in the success of African abolitionism was widely misplaced as early as 1807 when the Atlantic Slave Trade was abolished. This argument, as made by several scholars such as Gordon and Adu-Boahen. By tracing the histories of various countries and regions, these authors have

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[15] Huzzey, *The Slave Trade and Victorian Humanity*, 43.
[16] Huzzey, *Freedom Burning*, 9.
[17] Huzzey, *Freedom Burning*, 10.
[18] Huzzey, *Freedom Burning*, 10.
[19] Huzzey, *Freedom Burning*, 20.

demonstrated that British political and commercial activity upheld and intensified African slavery long after even the earliest abolition attempts. The majority of this chaos was caused by the pivot in British trade towards what were deemed more "legitimate goods" for exchange and export.[20] Legitimate goods were considered to be physical material items such as ivory, beeswax, rubber or foodstuff, with the intensification of these industries often intended to replace economic activity associated with the maritime slave trade.[21] The growing demand for legitimate goods in Europe would, in turn, intensify African slavery due to labour demands. This contemporary consciousness was succinctly summarized by Brantlinger: "In the past, Africans had learned to trade in human lives; in the future, they must learn to produce something other than slaves."[22] For the case of the South-Central African Interior, Gordon has supported this claim by illustrating how the abolition of the coastal slave trade perpetuated indebtedness and the exchange of human beings, causing slavery to paradoxically skyrocket in the continent's interior.[23]

A West Coast focus was adopted by Adu-Boahen, who presented British abolitionist expectations as quite disparate from their reality, notably in terms of how conspicuously women began to acquire slaves throughout the mid-nineteenth century.[24] It should be noted that some of these negative effects were the result of multiple colonial powers imposing their cultural or economic influence, not just the British. However, given the popular abolitionist campaign adopted by the British both before and after their withdrawal from the maritime slave trade, their actions are most important to examine when looking at their imagery of slavery as expressed through expedition propaganda. When combined, the influence of British abolition politics and commercial trade played a significant role in perpetuating the growth of subsistence household slavery and resource extraction-based slavery within Africa. As a result, slaves became more commercialized as merchandise and profitable as multifunctional assets. Auxiliary effects of abolition also increased slave labour, including heightened political uncertainty leading to state dissolution and warlord violence due to the availability and

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[20] David M. Gordon, "The Abolition of the Slave Trade and the Transformation of the South-Central African Interior during the Nineteenth Century," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2009): 920.

[21] Gordon, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 920.

[22] Patrick Brantlinger, "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 166.

[23] Gordon, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 915–17.

[24] Kwabena Adu-Boahen, "Abolition, Economic Transition, Gender and Slavery: The Expansion of Women's Slaveholding in Ghana, 1807-1874," *A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 31, no.1 (2010): 117-119.

necessity of guns.[25] In turn, this demonstrates how African governments and societies were highly intelligent entities, moving in tandem with regional and global commerce as opposed to archaic tribes stuck in the past, and trapped in tradition. In conclusion, British abolitionists failed to recognize the shortfalls of their progress made within the continent of Africa during the nineteenth century. This period also saw a huge association of abolitionism with British nationalism, as demonstrated by the formation of foreign anti-slavery societies. After reviewing the actualities of internal African slavery, the British pride in their abolitionist agenda is contradictory. However, the formation of this cultural ideology was not dependent on the accounts and stories of colonial administrators actually stationed with the country. Other external influences had a greater effect on the formation of foreign anti-slavery rhetoric, notably the ingestion of contemporary media, depicting sensationalized encounters with the African continent.

In the decades leading up to the famous British expeditions and their images, scholars have identified that the most consumed media about Africa can be considered anti-slavery propaganda.[26] This popular media, often in the form of books, art, poetry, and performance, would have been accessible to various individuals across social classes, highlighting the dominant themes in entertainment of the time.[27] The nature of this propaganda can be characterized according to two separate periods of art and literary history that overlapped with the famous expeditions of Livingstone et al.: the Romantic and Victorian movements. On one hand, Victorian visual manifestations of African slavery were often extremely intense and graphic, painting both the oceanic slave trade and internalized slavery as barbarically inhuman.[28] Sensationalized news articles and novels depicting African cannibals and savages with sawed-down teeth also circulated to the masses, shocking Victorians.[29] On the other hand, romantic poems such as those by William Wordsworth and William Blake were more idyllic and played on archetypes such as the "noble savage," painting Africans as innocent and naïve tribesmen.[30] Both of these motifs changed after the end of the American Civil War in 1865. Once slavery was abolished in North America, exploitation of black bodies was

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[25] Gordon, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 917.
[26] Brantlinger, *Victorians and Africans*, 166.
[27] Brantlinger, *Victorians and Africans*, 170.
[28] Brantlinger, *Victorians and Africans*, 170.
[29] Brantlinger, *Victorians and Africans*, 175.
[30] Brantlinger, *Victorians and Africans*, 170.

considered to be isolated to Africa.[31] Literature or images depicting slavery soon became synonymous with that depicting Africa, leading the British public to soon view all portrayals of slavery as "a direct extension of African savagery."[32] This great overhaul in popular consciousness and opinion towards African slavery from 1820 leading into the period after 1865 would greatly influence how expedition imagery was interpreted and used as propaganda.

Livingstone, Stanley, and Burton

> *"The name of Livingstone was sufficient to attract an assembly larger than any room in London could hold"[33]*

Over the course of the 1850s, a series of expeditions by well-known explorers led to a great public interest in the continent and its culture.[34] David Livingstone is known as one of the most popular explorers of the Victorian period, and perhaps of all time. After joining the London Missionary Society in 1838, Livingstone became fascinated with the prospects of travelling abroad, and eventually ended up in South Africa in 1841.[35] He would go on to live in various regions across the continent over the course of nearly twenty-three years, journeying upwards into the central African interior.[36] Notably, Livingstone's 1852 expedition from South Africa up to the Zambezi River was a momentous undertaking, earning him the acclaim of being the first European explorer to accomplish a transcontinental exploration of Africa and the gold medal of the Royal Geographical Society.[37] His celebrity became truly apparent following his return to Britain in 1856, upon which he was prompted to publish a book documenting his travel.[38] Enthusiastic to carry on the great tradition of missionary writing, Livingstone published *Missionary Travels* in 1857.[39] The book was a sensation, and the dozens of illustrations of the continent provided Victorians with a seldom-seen glimpse of the African interior. Notably, Livingstone documented the persistence of slavery within the continent, as seen in images such as *Gang of captives met at Mbame's on their way to Tette* (Figure 1). As will be

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[31] Brantlinger, *Victorians and Africans*, 175.

[32] Brantlinger, *Victorians and Africans*, 175.

[33] John M. Mackenzie, "David Livingstone – Prophet or Patron Saint of Imperialism in Africa: Myths and Misconceptions," *Scottish Geographical Journal* 129, no. 3 (2013): 278.

[34] Brantlinger, *Victorians and Africans*, 175.

[35] Justin D. Livingstone, "Livingstone's Life and Expeditions," Adrian S. Wisnicki and Megan Wards, eds. *Livingstone Online: University of Maryland Libraries*, (2015): 2.

[36] Livingstone, *Livingstone's Life and Expeditions*, 2.

[37] Livingstone, *Livingstone's Life and Expeditions*, 3.

[38] Livingstone, *Livingstone's Life and Expeditions*, 3.

[39] Livingstone, *Livingstone's Life and Expeditions*, 3.

discussed further, these images would serve as both reflections and modifications of contemporary British abolitionist rhetoric.

Popular explorer Sir Richard Burton would also go on to become a notable purveyor of interpretations of African slavery through the dissemination of expedition illustrations throughout the 1850s and 1860s. Burton began his first expedition in Eastern Africa, near Somalia, in 1854.[40] He would explore the Great Lakes of Central Africa, continuing the trend among European explorers of finding the source of the Nile River.[41] Burton would publish his own sensationalized piece of literature, titled *Lake Regions of Equatorial Africa* in 1860, three years after Victorians got an appetite for adventure from Livingstone.[42] This piece of literature was also rich in illustrations, including those of slavery within the continent. A decade later, in 1871, explorer Henry Morton Stanley travelled to the country of Zanzibar, famously meeting up with Livingstone in Tanzania to continue exploring the Nile River.[43] Stanley would continue the work of Burton on mapping and documenting the Great Lakes and also publish a series of books chronicling his travels.[44] Notably, *How I Found Livingstone,* and *Through the Dark Continent* both reflect his attitudes towards African people (and slavery) through illustrations and literary descriptions. Considering the Victorian social consciousness towards African slavery, examining these images as anti-slavery propaganda is a compelling undertaking.

Visual Analysis and Final Discussion

This paper examines three illustrations from the infamous expeditions of Livingstone, Burton, and Stanley for their content and composition as a key aspect of this analysis. These observations will then be supported by introducing secondary images, excerpts from their respective travelogues, and comments by scholars of British foreign abolition. The synthesis of the elements produces a more complete picture of how expedition illustrations were critical pieces of abolitionist propaganda, reflecting anti-slavery rhetoric in Europe, and contradicting the realities of slavery's decline in the continent.

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[40] Baker, J.N.L, "Sir Richard Burton and the Nile Sources," *The English Historical Review* 59, no. 233, (1944): 49.

[41] Baker, *Sir Richard Burton and the Nile Sources*, 49.

[42] Baker, *Sir Richard Burton and the Nile Sources*, 51.

[43] Felix Driver, "Henry Morton Stanley and His Critics: Geography, Exploration and Empire," *Past & Present*, no. 133 (1991): 134.

[44] Driver, *Henry Morton Stanley and His Critics*, 134.

To begin, Livingstone's 1857 book *Missionary Travels* served as a catalyst for the export of African slavery illustrations back to Europe.
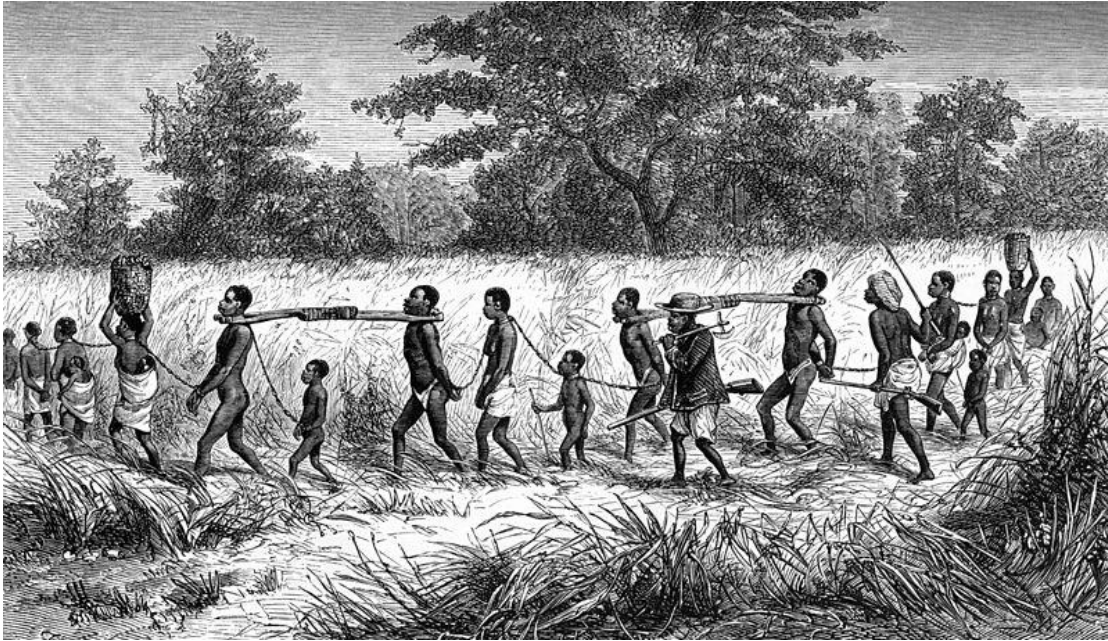

Figure 1. Livingstone, David. "Gang of captives met at Mbame's on their way to Tette.", etching, Harvard University Libraries, In *Missionary Travels and Researches in Africa* by David Livingstone, 344, London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1857.

Figure 1 depicts Livingstone's account of a slave party he intercepted while travelling in East Central Africa. The image shows multiple men, women, and children, chained by the feet and neck, heaving their tired bodies along. A slave trader is seen peering over the crowd with a rifle in one hand and a cane in the other, raised and ready to strike. Apart from his aggressive body language, the slave trader appears to blend into the crowd of figures. This can be interpreted as a visual depiction of how the brutalities of African slavery were executed by Africans. This conclusion is even more compelling when the paragraph accompanying this illustration is integrated. As Livingstone writes:

> We resolved to run all risks, and put a stop, if possible, to the slave-trade, which had now followed on the footsteps of our discoveries ... the slave party cam wending their way round the hill and into the valley, on the side of which the village stood... but the instant the fellows caught a glimpse of the English, they darted off like mad into the forest .... The captives knelt down, and, in their way of expressing thanks, clapped their hands with great energy.[45]

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[45] David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*, London: John Murray, Albemarle Street. (1857), 355-357.

Thus, Livingstone served as a witness to African slavery as an extension of their inherent brutality that the British sought to mediate through abolition. This image was incredibly powerful and influential. Livingstone's preceding description of how he freed the slaves from their wooden yolks would stay in his readers' minds and even reappeared on a 1923 book cover recounting his travels (Figure 2). In turn, this image demonstrates the "intellectual baggage"[46] of ideas about African slavery that European explorers brought with them on their expeditions, informed by both the social consciousness of the time and the lack of attention to how abolition perpetuated slavery.
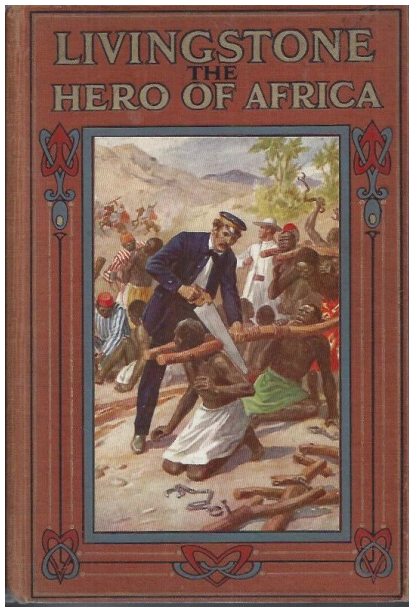

Figure 2. Dawson, R.B. Cover Image for *Livingstone the Hero of Africa*, London: Seeley, Service & Co, 1923.

Sir Richard Burton's 1860 text, *Lake Regions of Equatorial Africa,* contains similar imagery of porters and slaves, both visual and literary. Figure 3 shows Burton's depiction of an ivory porter, representing the majority of slaves and traders with whom he describes

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[46] Leila Koivunen, *Visualizing Africa in Nineteenth Century British Travel Accounts*, (London: Taylor and Francis, 2008), 21.

interacting. The scale of the figure is very large when compared to the natural background,

Figure 3. Burton, Richard. "The Ivory Porter", watercolour, Princeton University Library, In *The Lake Regions of Central Africa: A Picture of Exploration* by Richard Burton, 341, London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860.

demonstrating the porter's dominance within the landscape. In the section following this image, he states "They [slave porters] work with a will, carrying uncomplainingly huge tusks, some so heavy that they must be lashed to a pole between two men ... their shoulders are often raw with the weight, their feet are sore, and they walk half or wholly naked."[47] Burton contrasts this image of a half-dressed slave carrying a massive tusk with his description of slave traders in a later section.

> The assertion may startle the reader's preconceived opinions concerning the savage state of Central Africa and the wretched condition of the slave-races, negroid and negro; but it is not less true that the African is in these regions superior in comforts, better dressed, fed, and lodged, and less worked than the unhappy ryot of British India. His condition, where the slave-trade is slack, may, indeed, be compared advantageously with that of the peasantry in some of the richest of European countries.[48]

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[47] Richard Burton, *The Lake Regions of Central Africa: A Picture of Exploration*, (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860), 341.
[48] Burton, *The Lake Regions of Central Africa*, 461.

This passage is a powerful example of how these documents sought to separate the African slavery from Europeans. Burton shows the reader a porter, dominating the landscape yet still looking barely dressed. He contrasts this image with the wealth enjoyed by the slave traders, and cleverly compares their status to that of the European peasants or the British Indians.

In doing so, Burton distinguishes the colonial powers experience in the continent from that of the slave traders. However, as scholars such as Gordon show, the colonial powers were the largest driver of slave usage in the production of goods such as ivory. Thus, this image is another example of how expedition illustrations served as anti-slavery propaganda depicting Africans as their own enemy in the plight for abolition.

The expeditions of Henry Stanley were also documented using similar imagery (Figure 4). This depiction of a group of slaves arriving at the village in which Stanley was residing paints a compelling picture. Stanley occupies a powerful role within the scene, stationed to the left of the centre and gesturing towards the men in bondage, describing their state to the two other men in his company. In his writing, Stanley expresses his disdain for African slavery. "And if my disclosures regarding the terrible Ujijian slavery should lead to the suppression of the East Coast slave trade, I shall regard that as a greater matter by far than the discovery of all the Nile sources together. Now that you have done with domestic slavery for over, lend us powerful aid towards this great object. This fine country is blighted, as with a curse from above."[49] This passage combined with the image clearly outlines how Stanley felt as though the British were moral observers of slavery, not participants. The "curse from above" section is particularly ironic, given that the main driver behind slavery in the African interior was

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[49] Stanley, Henry M. *The Life, Labours, and Perilous Adventures and Discoveries of Dr. Livingstone, nearly thirty years a missionary explorer in the wilds of Africa with a thrilling count of his resurrection.* Toronto: Maclear & Co. (1873), Accessed through the University of Alberta.

British coastal abolition, not an omnipotent force. This image and text serve as

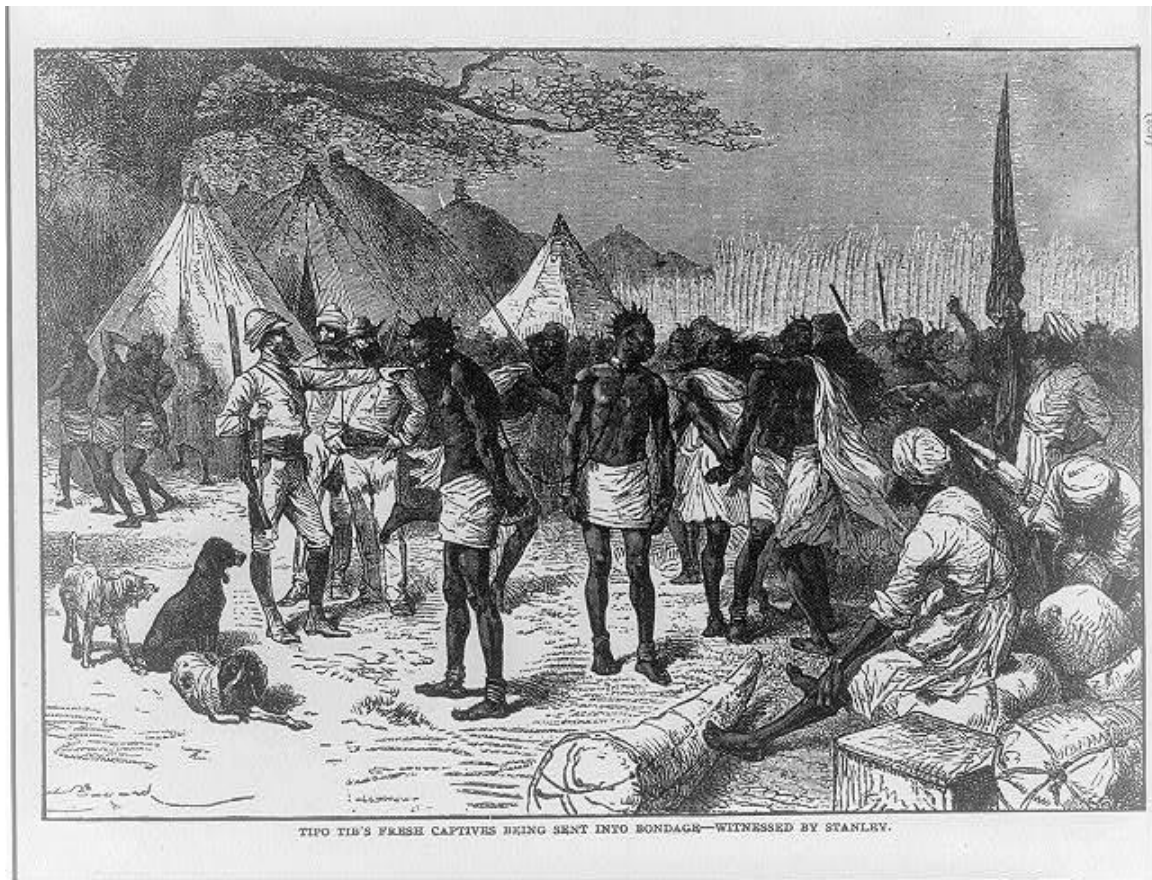TIPO TIB'S FRESH CAPTIVES BEING SENT INTO BONDAGE—WITNESSED BY STANLEY.

Figure 4. Reproduction of a wood engraving from *Heroes of the Dark Continent: and How Stanley found Livingstone* by James W. Buel, 1890, c1899, p. 489.

effective anti-slavery propaganda, given they describe the evil of slavery within the continent while simultaneously applauding their own aversion and removal from the process after abolishing domestic slavery within the colonies.

Conclusion

Illustrations coming from British-led expeditions both reflected and informed misplaced colonial ideas about the success and necessity of abolition within the continent. Of the same token, these images and excerpts from the texts show that African slavery was considered to be a fight between the British forces who sought emancipation and the Africans who were more or less 'doing this to themselves.' As summarized by scholars such as Gordon and Brantlinger, colonial emancipation often had negative auxiliary effects on slavery that remain undocumented in Western archives. This is due primarily to the ideological nature of anti-slavery rhetoric amongst the Victorians who preferred representing their personal heroism as

opposed to documenting the actualities within the continent. Given the celebrity of figures such as Livingstone, Burton, and Stanley, they were understandably considered to be trusted sources in representing Britain's plight against foreign slavery. However, this research demonstrates the disparity between their depictions of African slavery as an act of savagery going against the work of the British and the continental actualities of abolition increasing slave labour. This all speaks to the broader issue of colonial archives as convoluted and often misrepresentative chronicles of African slavery. As a result, it is essential to approach these sources with hesitancy and examine abolition through the unique African historical context. By doing so, a more representative history of African slavery can be crafted that exists outside of Victorian social consciousness or expeditionary heroism.

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