amad bin Muḥammad al-Murjabī (c. 1832–1905), more commonly known as Tippu Tip, was a (in)famous slave trader from the Swahili coast who worked along a broad stretch of land reaching into what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Between 1884 and 1889 he developed a friendship with Herbert Ward, an English artist and adventurer working in the service of King Leopold II of Belgium. In 1889, Tippu Tip and Ward encountered each other for the last time before Ward’s return to England. Upon Ward’s request, Tippu Tip removed his wooden clogs, a special type known as mtawanda (sg. mitawanda) and gave them to Ward as a parting “souvenir” (Ward 1927: 108). To mark the occasion, Tippu Tip wrote a short inscription in Arabic on each stating “I have made a gift of this sandal to my friend Mister Ward of the English government” (Figs. 1–2).1

In this moment of exchange, these sandals meant two different things, in addition to the various other meanings they had carried throughout their lifetime. To Tippu Tip, these sandals reflected his status as a wealthy, freeborn individual capable of giving a luxury item to a friend. Tippu Tip is frequently noted for his generosity and “gentleman-like” manners throughout Herbert Ward’s Five Years with the Congo Cannibals (1969, especially pp. 164–85) and his edited journals A Valiant Gentleman: Being the Biography of Herbert Ward, Artist and Man of Action (1927, especially pp. 106–109), where it would seem that he took great pride in his ability to host and to share wealth.2 To Ward, the clogs represented a cultural memento from his time spent in the Stanley Falls district in the Belgian Congo, where Tippu Tip acted as governor between 1887 and roughly 1890. For Tippu Tip, clog sandals were emblematic of his high status and generosity, and for Ward they were ethnographic artifacts which he maintained in his collection until the 1920s, when he gifted them to the Smithsonian Institution at the suggestion of his American wife, Sarita Ward (Page and Bennet 1972: 188).

It is both the object of this exchange as well as the process by which meanings become attached to mobile objects that will be the focus of this investigation. These meanings are entangled in complex networks of visual, linguistic, economic, and geographic associations. The meanings of mitawanda are shaped not only through exchanges like that between Herbert Ward and Tippu Tip, but also by Indian Ocean trade networks, gendered practices of dress and display, racial violence, and religious authority, to name but a few. These complex associations point to questions about the history and significance of this type of sandal, their use and display on the Swahili coast, and how the circulation of objects becomes an important component of structuring social, cultural, and economic relationships. How these sandals circulate and create meaning are thus implicated in larger dialogues that question disciplinary boundaries and long-standing art historical frameworks such as formal analysis.

As this study works against any singular reading of these sandals, so too it transcends any fixed temporal or geographic space. While I am primarily occupied with coastal east Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I read into and against practices of bodily adornment in the Arabian Peninsula, South Asia, and further inland in east Africa. Moreover, in order to better understand the complex history of mitawanda, I explore similar forms dating as early as 200 BCE and as recently as the present day. Of course, this should not imply that these examples represent a continuous narrative. Instead, I will demonstrate how any telling of the history and use of this type of sandal on the coast necessitates a discussion of the nature of mobility and the fluid meanings attached to mobile objects such as mitawanda. In doing so, I raise the questions: How is the meaning or status of objects constructed among the peoples on the Swahili coast? In what ways does object mobility collapse or solidify temporalities and geographies? Through...
an investigation of the history, social functions, and circulation of these sandals, this study aims to unseat the notion of fixed meanings within homogeneous cultural units. The mobility of mitawanda implies a fluidity of meaning that speaks to their status as transcultural, entangled objects.

ENTANGLED HISTORIES OF MITAWANDA

The history of mitawanda is incredibly difficult to trace, but it seems likely that they were popularized in east Africa between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were periods of increasing trade and patronage under the Omani Mazru’i sultans administering from Mombasa.
(ca. 1698–1837) and later the Omani Būsaʿīdi sultans administering from Zanzibar (ca. 1832–1964). Some of the earliest examples can be found in photographic portraits of the ruling elite such as the Būsaʿīdi princess Sayyida Salme (Fig. 3). The Būsaʿīdi sultans were particularly adept at appropriating and adapting the artistic and architectural forms of former rulers of the Swahili coast.

3 Portrait of Princess Sayyida Salme
Zanzibar; c. 1856–1880
Photo: Leiden University Libraries, Loan Collection
Oriental Institute
For instance, Prita Meier has demonstrated how Sultan Barghash (r. 1870–1888) reused spaces and forms associated with Mwana Mwema Fatuma, a Zanzibari queen who ruled in the seventeenth century, in order to assert his own authority within Zanzibar Stone Town (Meier 2016: 128–30), while at the same time wrestling with the encroaching influence of the British and their assaults on his sovereignty.

The importance of footwear, and particularly wooden sandals, on the Swahili coast certainly precedes the Būsa’īdī Sultanate. British administrator Alfred Claude Hollis recorded an oral history of Vumba territories on the border between Kenya and Tanzania in which wooden sandals featured importantly in investiture rights in the eighteenth century. He claimed that when a new ruler was agreed upon by the patrician elite, that ruler then “had the right to wear wooden sandals instead of leather ones and [was] styled Diwan” (Hollis 1900: 279). It seems possible, though speculative, that Būsa’īdī commissions of mitawanda exist as part of a continued artistic tradition preceding the establishment of Būsa’īdī rule in east Africa.

This type of sandal is characterized by a platform sole to which is attached a post and knob, which would be gripped between the first and second toes. This shape can vary from a simple rectangle, to hourglass, to stylized fish, or various other forms. Typically, the primary medium is wood, to which decoration might be added with carving, painting, ivory inlay, or applied metals like silver. The mitawanda featured in a nineteenth-century portrait of the Būsa’īdī princess Sayyida Salme (Fig. 3) are made of a thin, hourglass-shaped sole, a lathe-cut post and knob, and two scalloped platforms connected beneath the heel and pad of each shoe. The laborious and expensive process of hand-making and decorating these objects suggests the high value attached to such
adornments, which exceeded their practical function. *Mitawanda* such as those made for Sultan Fumo Omari (r. 1890–1894) are carefully chip-carved with repeat saw tooth, triangle, and square designs that complement the rectilinear form of the sandal (Fig. 4). The designs and techniques used in Fumo Omari’s sandals are markedly different from those found in a silver-plated pair of *mitawanda* now held at the Bata Shoe Museum (Fig. 5). Similar to Sayyida Salme’s sandals, this pair features thin, hourglass-shaped soles, what appear to be lathe-cut posts and knobs, and scalloped platforms at the heel and pad of each shoe. However, here the entire sandal has been covered with thin sheets of repoussé silver, as well as delicate silver bells attached along the rim of each sandal’s sole. The sole is further embellished by vegetal and geometric interlace in low relief. Clearly, there was incredible variety in how *mitawanda* were made and consumed.

The example of the *mitawanda* at the Bata Shoe Museum is particularly intriguing, because the record of these sandals largely obscures a connection to east Africa in favor of an Indian attribution. On the website, they are labeled not as *mitawanda* but as *paduka*, the Sanskrit word for this type of sandal, and it is noted that they were made in Gujarat, in northwest India, but acquired in Zanzibar. This attribution is based on formal, stylistic analysis. The vegetal patterns on the soles are interpreted as having “Gujarati influence.”3 Even if this attribution could be determined with certainty, it erases the social history of these objects once they arrived in east Africa in favor of an “original” meaning as *paduka*.

This is not to say that connections between *mitawanda* and *paduka* did not exist. The forms of both types share obvious similarities: a platform sole to which is attached a post and knob that would be gripped between the first and second toes. Additionally, jewelry and modes of dress were circulating widely across the Indian Ocean in the early modern and modern periods. Protective amulets circulated between east Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and western India in the forms of *sumt* necklaces and port-Qur’ans; men’s tunics were fashioned in India and central Asia before being shipped to the port cities of Lamu and Zanzibar for local consumption; and silver bracelets and anklets were made in various locales and transported across the Indian Ocean with such frequency that it is next to impossible to trace styles or techniques to a particular region. For instance, two sets of silver anklets are attributed to different locales, one to the Swahili coast (Fig. 6) and the other to Oman (Fig. 7). But despite the distance between purported production
sites, both sets share remarkable similarities. Both employ broad, flattened hinges secured by pins. These hinges are embellished with horizontal registers of floral and geometric motifs in the Swahili example, and geometric motifs in the Omani pair. The hinges are connected to the rest of the anklet by perpendicular bands decorated with pearl motifs, chain motifs, and diagonal stripes. The remainder of each anklet has more organic decoration: the Swahili example includes abstracted plant motifs, while the Omani anklets employ large lozenge and diamond shapes inscribed with dots and lines. Clearly, styles and techniques (and even artisans) were moving freely across the Indian Ocean, historic exchanges that are particularly well established and evidenced by the nineteenth century. The mitawanda form was a similarly mobile one, which was especially popular in east Africa and South Asia.

In India, the use and meaning of paduka differs from their function on the Swahili coast. The long history of this type of sandal begins around 200 BCE, when it was and remains associated with the divine (see Balakrishnan 2016: 175–208; Jain-Neubauer 2000; The Hindu 2006), and with the god Vishnu and his avatars Krishna and Rama in particular. They can be worn by devotees or become devotional objects in their own right (Jain-Neubauer 2000: 90). A particularly sumptuous example held at the Bata Shoe Museum (Fig. 8) is made of wood with elaborate brass inlay detailing a stylized fish form likely intended as an incarnation of the god Vishnu (Balakrishnan 2016: 181).

In east Africa, however, the sandals were seen as the exclusive right of wealthy, upper-class individuals and thus became markers of status. They feature prominently in photographed portraits of wealthy Swahili women and men, such as Princess Sayyida Salme; the few pairs that have personal histories attached to them are associated with famous merchants such as Tippu Tip or members of the ruling class such as Sultan Fumo Omari; the brief discussions

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6 Pair of wedding anklets
Swahili coast, 19th–20th century
Silver; (l) 7.6 cm x 12.7 cm x 11.4 cm; (r) 7.6 cm x 12.4 cm x 11.1 cm
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, from the Robert and Nancy Nooter Collection, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, Object# 2003.19.1–2
Photo: Travis Fullerton, © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts
of them in primary and secondary sources suggest that they were worn exclusively by wealthy, freeborn individuals (although there are conflicting accounts of this as I will discuss later on).

The history of mitawanda is further complicated by linguistic references. Tippu Tip’s inscription refers to these sandals by the Arabic term qabqāb (pl. qabāqīb), as opposed to the Swahili designation mitawanda. The term qabqāb is also used to refer to a type of sandal popular in the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa, greater Syria, and Turkey at least as early as the Mamlūk period (1250–1517 CE). Doris Behrens-Abouseif notes that one of the eleven daughters of Sultan al-Nāsir Muḥammad of Egypt (r. 1293–1294, 1299–1309, 1310–1341) purchased what must have been an extremely lavish pair of qabqāb for the exorbitant sum of 40,000 dirhams or 2,000 dinars (Behrens-Abouseif 2007: 48). While these fourteenth-century sandals no longer survive, similar if less lavish clog sandals were being used in the Middle East between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries.

Few sources exist on the Middle Eastern qabqāb. Behrens-Abouseif briefly defines them as “bath footwear” (2007: 48), which is a use still associated with this type of sandal today. However, similar to the Swahili coast, more functional qabqāb were more simplistic and had minimal decoration (Fig. 9). These more practical shoes exist in dramatic contrast to what must have been an incredibly ornate pair commissioned by al-Nāsir Muḥammad’s daughter, or other elaborate commissions from the early modern and modern periods. A nineteenth-century pair of qabqāb recently up for auction (Fig. 10) consists of a wooden sole which has been elevated high off the ground by two wooden boards receding in width from their bases to the point where they are attached at the heel and pad of the soles. The sandal would be attached to the foot by an arched strap embellished with pierced and hammered silver sheet metal and attached to either side of the pad of the sole. These wooden sandals have been further decorated with inlaid mother-of-pearl arranged in various patterns. While the form remains distinct, these qabqāb share a number of similarities with the mitawanda at the Bata Shoe Museum: the use of wood as the primary construction material, the elevated sole, and the use of silver sheet metal.

In this example, the form far supersedes any functional necessity in a bathhouse. In fact, the added metal plating would have been particularly ill suited to that humid environment. Two online sources state that embellished qabqāb were worn by women on their wedding days (Meem Magazine 2017, Souriat 2015). Souriat indicates that women would wear qabqāb to increase their height.
and appearance for the ceremony. Similarly, *Meem Magazine* states that women’s clog sandals were embellished with silver and gold during wedding ceremonies. Given that the sandals commissioned by al-Nāṣir Muḥammad’s daughter were purchased with money from her trousseau, it seems likely that the *qabqāb* discussed by Behrens-Abouseif were in fact used for her wedding rather than as “bath footwear.”

The history of *mitawanda* is thus interconnected with types of sandals produced and used across the Indian Ocean (and even into the Mediterranean), each of which has its own complex histories. These connections with the Middle East and South Asia informed their uses and meanings on the Swahili coast. Whether east African consumers were explicitly aware of how *paduka* or *qabqāb* were used in South Asia and the Middle East or not, these visual, linguistic, and mercantile connections to distant locales played an important role in how east African merchants and rulers situated themselves locally and translocally. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the majority Muslim populations on the Swahili coast were increasingly preoccupied with the enforcement of class boundaries through visual markers of status, a role that mercantile commodities such as these sandals were uniquely qualified to fill.

**MITAWANDA AS MERCANTILE COMMODITIES**

Much work has been devoted to the history and origins of the peoples on the Swahili coast, which I do not want to repeat here, but it is important to note that trade has been, and in many ways remains a defining feature of the region and is an important component of the economy. A survey of most major works addressing this region would readily confirm this assertion: James de Vere Allen (1993) notes that the steady trade networks between the Arabian Peninsula and east Africa were important for the formation of such a heterogeneous environment on the coast, while John Middleton (2004) emphasizes the interconnection between Arab, Indian, and Swahili merchants crossing the Indian Ocean. This is not to understate the practices of violence and exclusion that often accompanied these interactions as a result of racial tensions and imperial authority attached to individuals claiming Arab, Iranian, or Indian descent, but rather to emphasize that trade played a crucial role in how residents of the Swahili coast defined themselves and enforced class boundaries.

Tied to the annual monsoon winds, periods of trade would bring in the latest fashions and commodities from the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, India, Southeast Asia, and China. These high trade.
seasons were eagerly anticipated by wealthy coastal families such as the ruling Būsaʿīdī sultans in Zanzibar. Indeed, Sultan Saʿīd's youngest daughter Sayyida Salme published detailed ethnographic memoirs on her time as princess in Zanzibar in which she notes that “The day for the yearly distribution of [foreign goods]... was impatiently looked forward to; it signified to us the beginning of a new season of fashion, and the style and quality of our finery for a whole year depended upon the contents of the ships lying in our ports” (Ruete 1998: 59).

This preference for imported goods was generally limited to merchant families and the ruling elite, as the expense of such goods would immediately price out the enslaved and lower classes. This was further enforced by “sumptuary laws meant to patrol the lines between enslaved and free-born peoples” (Meier 2009: 18). Mitawanda are often implicated in enforcing this dividing line, and it is frequently argued that “footgear was [altogether] forbidden to Swahili slaves” (Curnow 2014: 74), who are often pictured barefoot in late nineteenth and early twentieth century photography (Fig. 11). In contrast, photographs of wealthy merchants and the ruling elite never featured men or women without shoes. A mid-nineteenth-century portrait of Princess Sayyida Salme (Fig. 3) portrays her seated on an imported velvet-upholstered chair dressed in extravagant finery, including what appears to be an imported silk tunic, various necklaces including a lavish sumt necklace most likely brought in from Oman, a headdress to which is attached various earrings, and most notably mitawanda. She is posed with her right foot resting on one of the sandals and her left leg crossed atop her right. The left sandal sitting idly beneath her foot appears at first glance to be situated appropriately, until one considers the fact that it would be incredibly difficult to put this sandal back on from where it is located in the portrait. Indeed, Sayyida Salme would have to keep her legs crossed, balancing on her right foot while attempting to stand to put her left foot into the sandal. Clearly, these sandals were carefully situated props that feature prominently in the portrait as markers of Sayyida Salme’s status.

Apart from their role in this carefully managed portrait, these shoes must also have been worn in important meetings and in public. As Tippu Tip’s exchange with Herbert Ward indicates, he was wearing the sandals at the time they met, removing “the sandals from his own feet” (Page and Bennett 1972: 188) to give to Ward. In their discussion of these sandals, Melvin Page and Patrick Bennett note that there is little wear in the soles and treads, but there are clear indications of wear around the toe grip and along the edges, which suggest that they were worn on more than one occasion. Similarly, another pair of mitawanda (Fig. 12) shows obvious signs of regular use. The heels of both sandals are significantly worn down, and the lightly etched pattern on the sole is faded at the heel and pad of the foot, indicating a certain amount of use over time. In comparison, more elaborately decorated mitawanda such as those of Sultan Fumo Omari (Fig. 4) or the silver-plated
pair held at the Bata Shoe Museum (Fig. 5) show little if any indication that they were worn outside of the limited context of portrait photography. This suggests that there were at least two types of mitawanda, those specifically intended for display and those that have less decoration but were more functional. Both of these types reflected similar ideas of status already discussed, where the more decorative sandals were valued for their reproducibility in photography, and the more functional sandals were marked by the performance of wealth in public.

It is notable that this distinction between more functional and more decorative mitawanda was often a gendered one. Similar to European and American fashion trends, men’s footwear was frequently lower-heeled and less ornate than that of women. Of course, this division between men’s and women’s fashion was not absolute and exceptions such as Sultan Fumo Omari’s elaborate sandals do exist. However, of the numerous photographic portraits featuring mitawanda surveyed during my research, few of them were of men. Portraits of wealthy men from the Swahili coast typically included thong sandals or close-toed shoes. In contrast, women’s sandals were often taller and more elaborately decorated with silver appliqué or painting. The height and added decorative materials resulted in the shoes being more delicate and harder to wear. The difficulties of walking in shoes by gripping a toe peg would have been exacerbated by the additional height of women’s

![Sandals (qabqab)](image)

Turkey, 19th century
Wood, mother-of-pearl, silver; 34.5 cm x 23 cm x 22 cm each
Photo: courtesy of Michael Backman Ltd, London
mitwanda. It is perhaps ironic, then, that such highly traded and mobile commodities in turn limited women’s mobility.

While footwear is generally considered to have been the exclusive right of the upper class, it was common for attendants to be dressed in finery provided by their owners. Enslaved attendants functioned as an extension of oneself when appearing in public, and the ability to adorn one’s servants reflected the wealth and generosity of the patron. And it is here that the line between enslaved and freeborn becomes more precarious. Although sources argue, as noted, that enslaved individuals were prohibited from wearing any form of footwear, this distinction seems not to have been enforced when wealthy men and women went outside their homes accompanied by an entourage of attendants. In noting the practice of how “Arab” women call on their friends, Sayyida Salme states that upon entering the friend’s home, “The shoes are slipped off before entering the room, and this custom is followed from the sovereign down to the slave” (Ruete 1998: 121). Similarly, John Middleton notes that “One duty of male slaves was to accompany their male owners in the streets, dressed in formal clothing with turban and sword and so to act as an aspect of the owner’s public personality; on ordinary occasions, however, male slaves wore only black loincloths, without sandals” (Middleton 2004: 75–76). Both of these assertions indicate that attendants must have worn some form of footwear when accompanying their owners in public. Thus, in these instances, status must have been marked more in the nature of how individuals interacted and the degree of adornment rather than by clear-cut symbols such as the absence or presence of footwear.
Nevertheless, when photographed individually or in contrast with their owners, enslaved and recently manumitted individuals were always portrayed barefoot. And these same individuals were not permitted to wear footgear outside of the context of their owner's entourage.

**MOBILITY AND MEANING**

Having established that *mitawanda* functioned as status symbols for the merchant and ruling classes, the question remains, how did they come to reflect this status? A number of recent studies have looked at the relationship between port cities and the Indian Ocean, and several more specifically dealing with the politics of display on the Swahili coast, discussions which shed light upon these sandals. Important among these studies are Prita Meier’s “Objects on the Edge” (2009) and “Chinese Porcelain and Muslim Port Cities” (2015). In “Objects on the Edge,” Meier elucidates “how objects are deployed by East Africans to create an Afro-Indian Ocean mercantile aesthetic” (2009: 9). She argues that objects brought in from the Indian Ocean give material presence to mercantile power and to unity with the broader Islamic *umma* with whom the Swahili were connected by the Indian Ocean. “An ‘exotic’ rarity [thus] signified cultural sophistication” through allusions to Islam, wealth, mobility, and trade (Meier 2009: 13).

In “Chinese Porcelain and Muslim Port Cities,” Meier expands on these topics with a study of the acquisition and display of glazed ceramics in Swahili port cities. In this instance, the multiplication of ceramics compiled in dramatic wall displays perpetually reinforced the status and authority of the owner. The origins of these objects mattered little in comparison to how they arrived on the coast via the Indian Ocean, a fact that is further reinforced by the lack of distinction made between glazed ceramics from Iran, those from Europe, and porcelain from China (Meier 2015: 702–17).

The line between architectural and bodily adornment in coastal east Africa was a fine one. Under Sultan Barghash, “the difference between people and things became less clear” (Meier 2016: 120). *Wapambe*, or heavily adorned enslaved women, functioned as *tableaux vivant* in public (Meier 2016: 120). The amassing of wealth on bodies in the forms of bracelets, necklaces, imported fabrics, and footwear materially and physically expanded the presence of slave owners in public. Later generations capitalized on the legibility of bodily adornment to contest the rigid social and economic boundaries of the nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century, formerly enslaved women, in particular, adopted practices such as veiling from the patrician elite in order to express their new status as free individuals and as respectable Muslims (Fair 2001: 18, 67–74, 85–96). However, twentieth-century “reformulations” of patrician status markers did not entirely obscure the potency of bodily adornment as a segregating tool. The interconnection of veiling and respectability suggests that women who did not veil were still considered less respectable, less Muslim. These twentieth-century appropriations of dress functioned less as reforms of a rigid economic system and more as a literal and figurative buying into the mercantile, capitalist economy of Zanzibar.

In Zanzibar and other port cities on the Swahili coast, objects brought in through trade were imbued with power and privilege that locally produced items rarely obtained, although exceptions do exist. The few local products that achieved such prestige made clear reference to trade or port cities elsewhere on the Indian Ocean. Examples of this include the elaborate doorframes affixed to the whitewashed stone homes of merchant families on the coast. Though of local origin, the doors often bore Arabic calligraphy, which is conceived of as both local and foreign on the coast because of its associations with the Arabian Peninsula and with Islam. Exceptional examples of these doorframes might include...
a modern home replete with electric lighting and electric ceiling fans,’ making clear reference to emerging global technologies of the late nineteenth century. These objects were not just commodities, but aspects of imagined, idealized, distant ports. Through these objects, Swahili merchants could aesthetically situate themselves and claim a deeper connection to “foreign” territories.

Mitawanda similarly embodied a mercantile aesthetic, connected as they were to distant cities in Egypt, Syria, the Arabian Peninsula, and South Asia. Visual, linguistic, and material referents combined to imbue these sandals and their wearers with an aura of “foreignness” exclusive to free-born merchants and rulers on the Swahili coast. These connections reinforced the global economic influence and Islamic religious authority of those who commissioned and wore clog sandals. This mercantile aesthetic triumphed by figures such as Tippu Tip challenges traditional notions of place and culture put forth by area studies, which has emphasized the study of sub-Saharan Africa as a bounded unit independent of the Middle East or South Asia.

Geography and mobility have become significant frameworks of analysis in recent years, where practices of displacement “emerge as constitutive of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension” (Clifford 1997: 3). James Clifford’s Routes (1997), Fred Myers’s The Empire of Things (2004), and Claudia Swan’s “Exotica on the Move” (2015) call into question the framing of culture as homogeneous and bound by place. The movement of objects and forms across physical or symbolic borders becomes a space of rhetorical contestation where objects reflect and produce cultural values that may or may not connect with their former functions. Rather than a no-man’s land, the border thus becomes a site of cultural production where the movement of objects, people, and ideas both construct and deconstruct cultural identities.

Oceanic studies have similarly broken down traditional boundaries of analysis marked by area studies. The Indian Ocean in particular has benefitted from this new wave of interest in the last two decades, where India and east Africa have been brought in closer dialogue with studies such as Sugata Bose’s A Hundred Horizons (2006) or Isabel Hofmeyr’s “Universalizing the Indian Ocean” (2010). In his work, Bose notes that “the issue of spatial boundaries helps us theorize and place in historical context the Indian Ocean as an interregional arena of political, economic, and cultural interaction” (2006: 6). Bose and other scholars of the Indian Ocean importantly highlight the flexible boundaries of the Indian Ocean that were not subordinate to contemporary nation-states, but instead functioned as a space of continual intercultural contact. However, it is important to also highlight the specific ways in which objects function in transitional spaces, precisely because such functions are complex and multivalent. This is especially important when considering the violence performed through many objects, as the uses of mitawanda demonstrate. Bose’s study presents an elite view of mobility and cultural contact that emphasizes consumption at the expense of processes of exclusion.

At the crux of my argument has been an aesthetic impulse to distinguish between enslaved peoples and those who trafficked in humans, such as Tippu Tip and Herbert Ward. The enforcement of class boundaries through modes of dress occurred alongside increasingly stark ethnic divisions between “Arab” and “African” populations and the rapid growth of the slave trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Their parallel history with the slave trade is still evident in how they are regarded on the Swahili coast. Families maintain old pairs of mitawanda or purchase new ones in order to assert their free-born lineage (see Meier 2016: 170–75). The segregating powers enacted through the display of mitawanda continue to assert class and ethnic boundaries today.

In the context of these sandals, I would also like to elaborate on Bose’s understanding of temporality and geography to consider how space and time expanded and contracted with the movement of objects and ideas. The ability to plot the trajectory of Tippu Tip and Herbert Ward’s sandals from Zanzibar to the Democratic Republic of the Congo to England to the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries tells little of the complex meanings attached to them when they arrived in these locations. The past, present, and future of a pair of mitawanda could be obscured in the moment of exchange when it meant various things to different people at the same time. In one very real sense, mitawanda made present the distant ports of cities across the Indian Ocean, and in another they furthered the divide between the Swahili coast and elsewhere because such sandals took on diverse meanings in each context. Further still, these sandals enforced a stark divide within Swahili coast communities between free-born and enslaved populations. There were explicit temporalities attached to these divisions. Urban, patrician modes of dress were associated with “modernity,” while modes of dress used by enslaved peoples or those living farther inland in Africa were perceived as “backward” by many coastal residents (Fair 2001: 84). Thus, we can see the Indian Ocean as a space beyond finite boundaries and fixed temporalities and rather as a transitional space that contracts and expands the folds of time and space based on who is accessing it and when.

The nature of object mobility calls into question not only geography and temporality, but also the reliability of formal, stylistic analysis. In ”Hybridity and Its Discontents” (2003), Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn have more broadly considered the role of visual culture in determining an object’s meaning. They argue that object or architectural hybridity is considered through visual markers of exchange rather than by craftsmanship or materials, and that this emphasis on visual hybridity obscures deeper histories and modes of contact. Mitawanda should be considered in light of this argument, where the ability to visually compare mitawanda, qabqāb, or paduka tells little of the more ingrained relations associated with trade and the Indian Ocean I have discussed. This is not to say that formal analysis cannot play an important role when discussing object histories, as I have highlighted in my discussion of the portrait of Princess Sayyida Salme. However, a purely formal analysis of object types often subsumes discussions of mitawanda under the label of paduka as it has for a number of objects held in Western collections today.

The example of the mitawanda held at the Bata Shoe Museum (Fig. 5) demonstrates the limits of formal analysis when discussing mobile objects. Although these sandals were acquired in Zanzibar, they are labeled as “Indian silver slippers” likely brought to “Africa by a Gujarati person or visitor.” Their history as mitawanda has been obscured by an interlinking of style and form with the place of origin. This academic practice ignores the contextual construction of meaning. The claim that this pair of mitawanda were made in Gujarat obfuscates the complex, multidirectional nature of exchange on the Indian Ocean in which east African artists and merchants were active participants.
CONCLUSIONS

Returning to the gifting of Tippu Tip’s sandals to Herbert Ward, we see the important role played by cultural context and individual associations in shaping the meaning of objects. These contexts and associations could exist simultaneously where Tippu Tip and Herbert Ward at once experienced these sandals very differently. As noted, Tippu Tip was gifting a luxury commodity to a foreign acquaintance, and Ward was receiving a cultural memento. Mitawanda are particularly exacting examples of how meaning is shaped through complex negotiations of form, geography, and time.

These sandals existed within multiple colonial frameworks, carrying histories of Belgian, British, and Omani colonialism in eastern and central Africa. Their provenance can be traced through the Belgian colonial mission in what was the Congo Free State to a major figure in the Indian Ocean slave trade, known for the violence of his raids in western Tanzania, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Tippu Tip’s celebration of wealth and status came at the expense of freedom for many individuals.

Finally, these sandals call into question the significance of discussions on “origins.” The intercultural space of the Indian Ocean became a mode through which Swahili merchants and the ruling elite envisioned their status, both local and translocal. Objects such as mitawanda that alluded to or arrived by Indian Ocean trade allowed for the solidification of class boundaries as well as the affirmation of connections to distant centers of trade and Islamic religious knowledge. Through these sandals, geography, temporality, and form can be seen as contested epistemologies that challenge the notion of fixed meanings and homogeneous, bounded cultural units. And thus, the ways that mitawanda circulated and produced meaning broadly calls into question the nature of area studies and the emphasis of art history on singular, originary meanings attached to forms and styles.

Notes
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1 Transliteration: “ṣad ḥidayyatu ḥudha qaḥṣab li-ṣāliḥbi mista wād dawlat al-īnqilīz.” For this and all other Arabic transliterations in this article, I relied on the transliteration system set forth by the International Journal of Middle East Studies.

2 Such gestures of generosity affirm status on the Swahili coast, as discussed in Fleisher 2010: 195–217.

3 Email with Collections Manager Suzanne Peterson, Bata Shoe Museum, November 16, 2018.

4 Of course, the bias of preservation favors the elite over the everyday.

5 See for instance Riello 2006: 38–41, in which he highlights that men often wore more functional shoes such as boots, which were more suitable for outdoor activities.

6 What type of footwear they wore is unclear, though given the prestige associated with mitawanda it seems unlikely that attendants would have been permitted to wear such finery.

7 National Museums of Kenya, Object ID E556-049. For a brief reference to and an image of this door lintel in publication, see Allen 1971: 7 and Meier and Purpura 2018: 176–77.

8 Email with Collections Manager Suzanne Peterson, Bata Shoe Museum, November 16, 2018.

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