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Deposited on: 16 February 2015
The Livingstone collection held at National Museums Scotland (NMS) is a small eclectic assemblage from central southern Africa. The objects include a stone mill for grinding corn, the jaw of a hippopotamus, rocks and minerals including coal and gold, as well as a hunters net woven from local baobab fibre. This diversity, one could argue, reveals no clear strategy for collecting based on either typology or category. Nevertheless, research into any one of these objects reveals insights into Dr David Livingstone’s (1813–1873) engagements with the people he met, as well as his interests, which extended from ethnography to geology and natural sciences.

This hand weaving loom (Figure 1), collected by Livingstone in Malawi, links his upbringing in Scotland to his subsequent life in Africa, as well as his particular vision for the continent’s future, involving the three ‘Cs’: Christianity, Commerce and Civilisation. It also resonates strongly with the revival of traditions of craft production in Malawi today.

Livingstone, most often described as a missionary explorer, travelled throughout south and central Africa between 1841 and 1873, driven by a vision that Christianity and legitimate commerce could improve the quality of life for Africans and end the slave trade in central Africa. Livingstone made three journeys through Malawi, and many Malawians today regard Livingstone with great respect and affection for his efforts to end the slave trade there. Concerned by the need for Africa to cultivate products that Europe wanted to buy, in order that legitimate European commerce could penetrate Africa, Livingstone saw the potential for an economy based on cotton to displace the trade in slaves via east African ports. As he observed on his travels in southern Malawi:

*The Lake people grow abundance of cotton for their own consumption, and can sell it for a penny a pound, or even less. Water-carriage exists by the Shire and Zambesi all the way to England…and it seems feasible that a legitimate and thriving trade might, in short time, take the place of the present unlawful traffic.* (Livingstone and Livingstone 2005, 114)

This potential was supported by John Kirk, botanist to the Livingstone Zambesi Expedition (1858–1864), who, reporting to the Royal Geographical Society, described in great detail the cultivation and use of native cotton in the region.

Figure 1. The Livingstone collection fixed single-heddle ground loom (NMS A.762.2). Courtesy of National Museums Scotland.
where the loom was collected. He concluded that cotton seemed to be the crop best suited for these parts, and the people “an industrious race, already extensively engaged in the growth of cotton” (Kirk 1861-2, 27). Similarly, Livingstone observed that the expedition “scarcely entered a village in the upper and lower Shire Valleys without finding a number of men cleaning, spinning and weaving”. As the expedition proceeded further north up the Shire River, Kirk reported that every village had large plantations of cotton of superior quality which “the natives grow for the manufacture of cloths”, and Livingstone described the indigenous cotton, *tonje cadja*, as feeling like wool in the hand and producing a stronger cloth than from the *tonje manga*, non-native cotton which had been introduced into the region (although he does not specify its origin) (*ibid.*, 27; Livingstone and Livingstone 2005, 102).

The status of cloth production at that time is evident from Kirk’s observation that “all engage in it from the chief to the poor people” (Kirk 1861-2, 28). It seems the region was largely self-sufficient in production and use, as Kirk notes that “they have never had the opportunity of selling cotton, but would readily enter into its growth on a large scale if they knew that it would be purchased in exchange for cloth and beads” (*ibid.*, 28). Here Kirk is referring to the much-desired imported European cloth which was common trading currency between Europeans and local chiefs elsewhere.

Perhaps Livingstone acquired the loom in exchange for such cloth? Livingstone travelled with large quantities of imported cloth, noting its exchange value for local goods, hospitality and services (Livingstone and Livingstone 2005, 45, 156). However, for all the recorded detail regarding cotton cultivation and weaving techniques from the expedition, including commissioning an engraving in *Narrative of an Expedition*, there is no mention of the acquisition of the loom (*ibid.*, 102).

The loom is an object which initially reveals little of its potential. It has the appearance of a bundle of sticks of roughly equal size entwined with lengths of cotton threads. But in the hands of a skilled weaver it was once a means for the expression of creativity and the production of income. It is an example of the type of fixed single-heddle ground loom used throughout south-eastern and central southern Africa. The design is such that both narrow and wide cloth could be produced, with minor adjustments to the frame and warp beams which are stretched out and fixed to the ground, (Davison & Harries 1980). Weaving was labour-intensive, as Livingstone observes, “all the processes being painfully slow” (Livingstone and Livingstone 2005, 103). However, the loom was practical in that it could be dismantled and rolled up with the length of cloth “in situ” when not in use and repositioned when time allowed for the weaver to return to the task.

The loom was acquired by Livingstone with a piece of cloth in production: a coarse, durable cotton fabric, strong enough to be used for a hammock or awning. This loom was part of one of at least three separately recorded acquisitions from Livingstone. The Museum’s Annual Reports produced in 1862 document receipt of the loom with other objects: “From Dr Livingstone also, we have received some curious illustrations of the manufactures of the natives of the banks of the
Zambesi and other districts of Africa”\(^{15}\)… “African hand mill for grinding corn; loom and web from the Manganja [sic] country; iron bracelet from Mpemba, Manganja country; specimen of Manganja copper wire. Presented by the Rev. Dr Livingstone”.\(^{16}\) The Mang’anja people were settled across northern Mozambique and southern Malawi, and were well established in the Shire valley region where Livingstone had documented the extent of cotton production and use.

It has been suggested that Livingstone was not particularly drawn to material culture and was not a collector by nature (Cannizzo 1996, 141). However, the collection that Livingstone sent to the Museum suggests that he was aware of the aim of George Wilson, the Museum’s first Director until his death in 1859, to collect technologies from non-industrial nations. Wilson had noted in his Annual Report for 1856 that “a correspondence accordingly has been opened with agents in different quarters of the globe…” where “intelligent men interested in the Museum have engaged to send examples of native manufactures of those countries” (1858, 161). Livingstone was one of these men, and also had a personal connection with Wilson. They had first met in 1838, in the chemistry laboratory of Thomas Graham at University College London, whilst he was a student and Wilson a demonstrator. The objects Livingstone sent to the museum were evidence of local resources, technologies and the potential for commercial enterprise, as outlined earlier, one of the key motivations for his exploration.

Livingstone would also have had a particular and personal interest in the production of cotton and African weaving technology, coming as he did from a background dominated by the cotton weaving industry on the banks of the River Clyde. From the age of ten until he joined the London Missionary Society in 1838, he worked in Blantyre Mill, first as a “piecer”, tying together the broken threads between the spinning jennies, and later as a cotton spinner. It was here that Livingstone developed physically, spiritually and intellectually into the man who would spend over thirty years of his life in Africa (Mullen 2012, 15-31).

Whilst investigation into the history of the loom revealed these fascinating connections with Livingstone, a further unexpected link between the loom and contemporary weaving practice in Southern Malawi was recently uncovered. Although the Shire River region continues to be known as the cotton-growing centre of Malawi, many of the traditional uses of local cloth for currency and tribute, together with local clothing customs, changed dramatically with European colonisation. By the mid-1930s, the weaving skills in this region, which Livingstone had been so enthusiastic about fostering and developing, had largely died out. Concerns over this decline led to a heritage project, initiated by Museums of Malawi with the Mlambe Foundation in the Netherlands, which sought to change the situation, drawing on the knowledge and skills of the last remaining hand weaver in the area. At the newly built Tisunge! Heritage Centre in the Shire River Valley, cotton weaving skills were reintroduced to the region. It was a project which

16 ibid; p.182.
aimed to ensure that traditional technologies were not completely lost, and was designed to promote tourism and generate local income. During NMS fieldwork in southern Malawi, samples of contemporary cotton weaving and spinning and weaving equipment were acquired for NMS collections, whilst observation of the weaving process led to further understanding of the technological aspects of the Livingstone loom. It is interesting that this recent revival again identified cotton hand weaving with commercial interest, resonating with Livingstone's earlier observations in the region. However, despite the aspirations for the centre as a tourist destination, it is currently closed due to lack of funding.

Like many museums with ethnographic collections, objects associated with missionaries entered the museum in Edinburgh during the late 19th and early 20th century in large numbers, collected within a framework shaped by the dissemination of Christianity and the expansion of the colonial enterprise. Prominent amongst these missionaries was David Livingstone, and the subsequent Scottish missionary engagement with Africa was in large part inspired by him. This loom collected by Livingstone, in many ways an unprepossessing object, nevertheless has the capacity to weave together past and present, to connect people and places, and to add to an understanding of African technologies and cultural practices. The dynamic potential of such missionary collected objects is revealed here through the resonances this object evokes between historic events that formed part of the missionary encounter, and contemporary efforts to develop and preserve threatened cultural practices.