The Global Repercussions of Consumerism

This article discusses the great influence that East African consumers in the nineteenth century had in shaping the global economy. Essentially, these consumers, who were previously viewed as less dominant in trade dealings, actually functioned as the main drive behind and determiners of the trade. The Africans living on the East coast would only accept very specific types of goods and the goods had to be made in a very specific manner. Additionally, preferences generally varied between tribes. Traders who came into the region without regard for these explicit and diverse preferences risked returning home with little to no profit. In certain areas, merchants were not even allowed passage unless they carried with them appropriate goods for trade and tribute to the local rulers. Specifically, the article discusses the cases of Bombay and Salem and the trade experiences of each in East Africa. Beginning with Salem, the article discusses the extreme popularity of Salem-produced cotton textiles in East African ports. These cotton merekani cloths were so popular that they were initially considered an elite fashion item, which could not be replicated by other manufactures, such as the British. However, with the American Civil War and the inflation that came with, the Americans eventually lost their hold on East African textile sales to outside nations, such as Bombay, who were able to produce a similar replica cloth and sell it for much lower prices. Once Bombay became a major player in East Africa, they were able to introduce additional goods and the African ports, with all they had to offer in return, came to dictate a significant amount of Bombay production. While this article specifically targets the global relationship
regarding three main areas, the overall message speaks towards the implications of
dominant and dictating trading groups and the ways in which they are perceived, both by
outsiders and by themselves.

Questions:

1. (Given my recent research regarding the opium trade) If British merchants had been unable to force their way into the East African trade as a result of American competitors, might they have introduced opium into Africa as well? The situation seems very similar, with the British wanting goods from a particular nation yet having nothing to trade in return. Were teas and silks that much more valuable than cloves and ivory?

2. Given the time period, did Americans view East Africans differently than the West Africans they were enslaving? It seems somewhat strange to me that they valued the East African commodities so greatly and felt forced to meet their demands, yet they viewed African slaves as far less than equals. Was the acquisition of East African goods so important that it was never considered? Most of the article seems centered around the ways in which these societies placed themselves on a global level and the East Africans were clearly in the dominant position in the cases discussed. How did American merchants view this situation?