From one perspective, Livingstone’s 1870 Field Diary embodies a first-hand chronicle of the arrival of Arab traders in Manyema and the forays of these traders into new regions to the west and north.

The chronicle includes Livingstone’s eye-witness testimony of the damage done by the traders, as when he reports having “passed through nine villages destroyed by the worthies who did not wish me to see more of their work” (1870a:[26]).

There are also multiple, often detailed narratives collected from the traders themselves of violence committed locally in, for instance, villages such as Mamohela and Kasongo as well as further afield in Legaland (1870i:XXIX-XXXI, 1870k:LXXIV, 1870d:{23}-{24}).

The violence described in the 1870 Field Diary bears an eerie ring of familiarity in the context of marketplace massacre Livingstone himself would experience in July 1871 in Nyangwe: “these three then fired into a mass of men who collected [-] one killed two another three & so on” (1870k:LXXIV; cf. 1871f:CXLVI ff.).

In fact, in the last sentence of the diary, Livingstone makes reference to Dugumbe, whose followers were the main instigator of the Nyangwe marked massacre, and looks forward to his imminent arrival in Nyangwe, little suspecting what will soon happen: “I hope to go tomorrow towards the sokoni or great market of this region” (1871e:CI).

As might be expected, the violence that continuously surrounds Livingstone makes a significant impact on his mental well-being and, as a result, on his representations in the diary.

At times, he attempts to separate the Arab traders and their followers and places the blame squarely on the pettiness of the latter: “The nine villages and a 100 men killed by Katomba’s slaves at Nasangwa were all about a string of beads fastened to a powder horn which a [M]anyema man tried in vain to steal” (1870e:X).

At times, Livingstone lumps the different traders together, differentiating only by degree: “The traders from Ujiji are simply marauders, and their people worse than themselves thirst for blood more than for ivory - Each longs to be able to tell a tale of blood, and Manyema are an easy prey” (1871e:XCVII).

He also underscores his inability to reconcile the kindness of the Arabs towards him and their conduct in nonetheless taking “their share of the spoil[s]” collected by their followers (1866-72:[653]).

The complexity of the events on the ground thus puts Livingstone in a complicated situation.

Throughout the span of the 1870 Field Diary, he gains repeat, first-hand experience of the impact of the Arab traders on the local populations in Manyema.

He also observes how the local populations play into this violence, by attempting to use the Arab traders for local conflicts (e.g., 1870g:{29}) or by themselves beginning to imitate the violence of the traders (e.g., 1870k:LXXIV, 1870i:XXVII).

Finally, Livingstone, a devout Christian, finds that he simply cannot make sense of the contrast between his own work as a missionary – however nominal at this stage in his career – and the failure of the Arabs and their followers to harbor any similar such ambitions in terms of spreading Islam (1870k:LXXIV, 1871e:C-CI).

Rather, on the last page of the 1870 Field Diary he writes that in East Africa the traders have “propagated nothing but syphilis and the domestic bug” (1871e:CI).

These circumstances engender some of the most vituperative language in the 1870 Field Diary.

In reflecting on the conduct of the Arab traders in Central Africa, Livingstone in turn assails the falsehood of the traders with whom he is personally acquainted, some of the foundational ideas of Islam, its holiest city to which he ascribes the spread of cholera across East Africa and into Central Africa, and, finally, the founder of the religion himself (1871e:LXXIX, LXXXI-LXXXIII, XCVIII).

One example of Livingstone’s language suffices to convey the whole: “[The cholera at Zanzibar] we get from Mecca filth - nothing was done to prevent the place being made a perfect cesspool of animals guts & ordure of men” (1871e:LXXIX; cf. 1874,2:96-98, where Waller has preserved only some of the relevant passages).

Further examples can be consulted via the images and transcriptions of the original manuscripts available through our critical edition.

We have chosen to publish the passages in keeping with our commitment to dealing with our historical materials honestly, including in those instances when they do not conform to our own ideas or to positions we would want the materials to take.

In the present case, from the vantage of 2017, the passages in question make for painful reading.

It’s tempting to take the stance that such representations “invariably reflected the ideas of difference prevalent in [explorers’] own society at the time they wrote their travel narratives” (Kennedy 2013:202) or to read the passages against the Central African historical contexts set out throughout this essay.

However, it’s also not easy to dismiss the passages so summarily given Livingstone’s his ability – in other cases – to think beyond the racial ideas of his times in terms of many of the African populations he encountered.