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African Economic History: A View from the Continent

Patrick Manning

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, in his extensive survey of 19th century African economic life, sets an impressive standard for historical synthesis. The volume, published by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), is a credit to that Dakar-based organization: it is well researched and written, with an excellent bibliography, and well produced down to the imaginative cover illustration.¹

The book is a synthesis, encompassing the whole of the African continent and addressing a wide range of economic historical issues. Its emphasis on a continental frame tends to counter the trend, in recent years, toward analytical separation of sub-Saharan Africa from the north of the continent. Similarly, its focus on linkage—among the many topics, regions, and interpretations within the author's purview—serves to balance the wave of local and monographic studies which have predominated in the past two decades. The book is well organized, and the concluding sections to each chapter recapitulate Zeleza's arguments unmistakably.

The emphasis on connections among topics and regions adds to the coherence of the volume, but the author stops short, probably wisely, of structuring it into a unitary interpretation of African economic history. Instead, he offers a recurring emphasis on "a domestic motor of economic change." That is, he seeks to highlight the significance of domestic innovation, evolution and contradiction, even during the 19th century, when global economic forces exerted a powerful transformative influence on African economies.

To navigate the range of regions and debates, and to give emphasis to the variety in African economic life, Zeleza proceeds topically. Beginning with environmental and demographic change, he proceeds through agricultural production, mining and manu-

facturing, domestic and regional trade, and concludes with a section on international trade and imperialism. Within these rubrics he provides topical and regional sections surveying the literature.

Remarkably, within such a cross-sectional organization he is able to convey a sense of change over time. He presents not so much an overall narrative, but an assemblage of many smaller narratives (and debates), which reveal the dynamism in African economic life. As a continental synthesis, the book invites comparison to another successful volume, John Iliffe's *The African Poor*.²

Zeleza seeks to give prime emphasis to production rather than trade. This approach, reinforcing an argument of some earlier scholars, still runs counter to the dominance of commercial studies in African economic history: Zeleza underscores his point by putting chapters on trade at the end of the book.³ This seems to help in conveying a chronological sense: the early sections on demography and environment provide thematic and chronological background to the later sections on trade and imperial conquest.

He gives excellent, critical summaries of books and controversies. He is judgmental but rarely dismissive.⁴ For some topics, such as slavery and women's labor, Zeleza presents material with continental breadth: the section on demographic change gives a thoughtful, continent-wide analysis of numerous recent studies.⁵ More often, as with trade and imperialism, he develops his argument in regional sections: in a section on debt imperialism in North Africa, Zeleza skillfully shows the relevance of an older and thinner literature, centering on Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, to more recent discussions of imperialism.⁶

The text focuses on the 19th century, yet renders permeable the boundaries of that century: his analysis of environment, demography, land use and com-

merce links the 19th century to earlier times, while his treatment of other aspects of commerce and of colonial rule shows ties to 20th century issues. The extensive bibliography is a fine resource in itself, reflecting both the author's wide reading and the accomplishments of this relatively new but in some ways thriving field.

The limitations on the bibliography reflect the limitations on the linguistic and methodological breadth of the author. That is, broad and well-organized as this survey is, it has two major limitations. First, Zeleza consulted only materials in English, and left some significant omissions in English-language literature on areas that fell under French, Belgian or Portuguese rule. The decision is in one sense understandable but in another sense perplexing, since CODESRIA was set up precisely to facilitate contacts between English- and French-speaking academics in Africa.⁷

The omission of French-language materials and Francophone areas affects not only the issue of inclusiveness, but also the logic of regional analysis. Especially for West Africa, where modern Anglophone and Francophone nations alternate geographically, the relative absence of materials on Francophone countries means that there is less regional analysis. That is, Zeleza's analysis gives lots of examples of economic history within territories, and of the generalization of such results at the continental level, but tends to skip over the linkages among contiguous territories. The point is perhaps made more clearly by considering the best counter-example: in Part IV, Zeleza emphasizes North African trade with West Africa and East Africa, and in so doing provides his strongest statement of the benefits of studying the continent as a whole.⁸

More difficult to remedy is a second problem: Zeleza, in common with most economic historians of Africa, avoids both the terminology and the theory of economists. He declines to focus on the neoclassical preoccupation with markets, the dependency-theory emphasis on the world system, or Marxian concern for modes of production. He is not innocent of these frameworks (as his earlier work indicates), but he decided for the purposes of this volume to emphasize empirical summary. Paraphrasing Wole Soyinka, Zeleza attempts to escape "the tyranny of grand theory" by focusing his presentation on historiography and empirical detail. In escaping the tyranny of theory he also escapes the opportunity to focus on economic logic and to connect African experiences to those on other continents. This approach highlights the richness, detail and contingency of African economic life, yet leaves it outside the debates on the modern world

economy. As I will argue below, however, the issue is not open and shut: Zeleza's avoidance of the terrain of economic theory permits him to advance in multi-disciplinary analysis.

The author notes, in his conclusion, three purposes of his analysis: to show that internal developments "constituted the motor that drove African history forward"; to give prime focus to production rather than exchange; and to emphasize that the two categories of major external influence on Africa, slave trade and European colonization, were "sequentially and structurally linked."⁹

He has had at least partial success in conveying this analytical agenda. First, I think he succeeds in showing the importance of African dynamics in affecting economic outcomes, but I think he focuses too much on external initiatives—colonial policy and the world market—to carry out his promise to demonstrate "a domestic motor of economic change." Second, the author must swim upstream in his effort to give prime emphasis to production, because the literature remains dominated by studies of trade and administration. His chapter on handicrafts and industrialization comes closest to conveying the primacy of productive patterns in African economic history.¹⁰ Third, his argument on the links among external influences, while illustrated at several points, is not drawn out fully.

The magnitude and the quality of the book itself, and the additional distinction accorded it as winner of the 1995 Noma Prize for the best book published in Africa, encourage me to extend this commentary to two further issues which Zeleza's book raises. These are, first, the prospects for scholarly books published in Africa and, second, the scope, direction and audience of the field of economic history in Africa.

We are well aware of the shortage of books published in Africa and the shortage of books in African libraries. While the term "book famine" has taken on stereotypical dimensions, portraying the continent as passive victim, the issues behind the term remain relevant. African libraries have been unable to purchase books from abroad, as rising prices and falling exchange rates have tended to isolate African economies. Domestic publishers have been restricted by narrow markets, by the difficulties of entering international transactions from African bases, and by lack of interest and regard for African authors from overseas.

African scholarly publishing was "mal partie," if I may borrow a phrase from René Dumont.¹¹ African-based scholars gained a first foothold in the 1950s and 1960s. But rather than advance to leadership in

African Studies during the 1970s and 1980s, they were constrained by heavy loads, university closings, by other economic and political restrictions, and perhaps also by disregard from the international scholarly community. It is worth quoting Jan Vansina's recollection:

Around 1970 many observers, myself included, believed that soon the mass of historians of Africa would be Africans working at universities on the continent itself. They would set the agenda and lead future developments in the field. But it did not happen. The numbers did increase, but tropical African universities were prevented from taking over the expected leadership role.¹²

The bibliographical results, after a quarter century, are in many ways distressing. The American Historical Association *Guide to the Historical Literature*, published in 1995 and including the books thought best for summarizing the content of African history, includes a really surprisingly small number of books by Africans or authors of African descent.¹³ This reflects both the small proportion of books on African history published by black authors, and the ranking of those books by leaders in the field.

At the same time, intellectual work on the continent has continued, and books have continued to be published. These books, some of them gems, add to the foundation for what one can hope will be a flowering of scholarly life in Africa.¹⁴ The existence of the Noma Prize has helped to highlight this trend in publication, and the wide acclaim for Zeleza's *Modern Economic History* comes in part because it is understood to be part of a movement of scholarly publication, not an isolated achievement.

CODESRIA has been central to the broader movement of scholarly publication in Africa. It is a remarkable organization of scholars, with working groups at several points of the continent. Now with external funding from Ford and Rockefeller, it is able to expand work initiated on a shoestring in earlier years: periodic regional and continental meetings to set research agendas, support for graduate study in Africa, and support for scholarly publication. The Dakar office holds copies of theses written by CODESRIA-supported scholars throughout the continent.

While CODESRIA has done much to facilitate and highlight scholarly work in Africa, other institutions can help as well. Let me mention two. First, the Chicago-based Center for Research Libraries will copy doctoral theses written at universities in Africa and elsewhere, and circulate them to users at member institutions.¹⁵ Second, the Internet provides great hope for scholars based in Africa. The initial cost of

hardware for connection to the Internet is considerable—perhaps US\$60,000 to set up an Internet node—but costs of maintenance are small, and the number of people who can use each node is limited only by access to connected computers. Some African countries lack Internet connections; other countries have connections, but have not opened them to historians. But historians should persist: the Internet provides instant communication to people elsewhere in Africa and around the world by electronic mail, plus access to library data bases, to quantitative and other historical data. These will provide scholars in Africa with a far more equitable basis for communication with each other and with scholars elsewhere, and will make up in part for the shortage of books.

The second major issue which Zeleza's book raises is that of the scope, direction and audience of the field of economic history in Africa. In my view, the field of African economic history has developed a substantial literature in the past quarter century, but has carried out its work without a distinctive methodology, and has worked in isolation from other fields of study. We may then ask, to whom should economic historians of Africa be speaking? To each other? To economists specializing in contemporary Africa? To economic historians of other regions? And what sort of theory and methodology should they utilize?

From the 1960s, the rise of New Economic History transformed the historical study of economic life. This approach—which triumphed especially in North America—centered on quantitative analysis and formal testing of hypotheses based on neoclassical economic theory. The *Journal of Economic History* and the Economic History Association (US) became the standard-bearers of cliometrics. Economic historians came to be employed in departments of economics rather than in departments of history. The recent award of Nobel Prizes in economics to Robert William Fogel and Douglass C. North confirms the prestige and the dominance of this side of the field.

Institutional and descriptive work has continued to play a role in economic history, but only gains wide attention when it is linked firmly to the new core of the field. So it is that questions of underdevelopment and world-systems—the major theses and debates such as those around the work of Andre Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein—gained little attention in this economic history literature, and appeared instead in journals of sociology and history.

African issues have played almost no role in the debates among practitioners of New Economic History. Among the reasons for the exclusion of Africa from consideration are the shortage of easily available

quantitative data on Africa and the relatively small contribution of African economies to the total level of global trade, tax revenue, and industrial output.¹⁶ Another set of reasons is that scholars working on Africa have chosen, for reasons good and bad, not to address the neoclassical framework nor economic theory more generally.¹⁷ In some cases this choice reflected simple ignorance of theory, an *a priori* decision that it did not matter. In other cases the choice reflected a decision that working up basic data must come first, and fancy analysis can come later. In still others, it follows upon a conclusion that the neoclassical framework, no matter how applied, does not address the range of issues determining economic change in Africa.

Another sort of isolation of African economic history centers on the continent itself. Economic history and economic policy are largely cut off from one another. (This reality interacts with the assumption by economists, including many of African birth, that the continent has no economic history worth study). The 20th century problem in economic history is that of linking economic history to the period since 1960. The years since 1960 have remained the preserve of economists, who, in turn, rarely include the years before 1960 in their analysis. This problem of disciplinary bias is compounded by the relative lack, in many countries, of economic documents on recent years, and their inconsistency in format with those of the colonial era.¹⁸

The main periodical addressing the economic history of Africa, *African Economic History*, reflects the isolation of economic historical studies of Africa from both the neoclassically-oriented "mainstream" of economic history and the neoclassically-oriented studies of African "development" since independence. While the journal has been sustained valiantly by dedicated editors, one must note that most of the editors and most of the authors give no evidence of having formal training in any of the several theoretical traditions in economic thought. It is an empirical annual for amateurs, disconnected from other formal study of economic life; it remains unlisted in the *Journal of Economic Literature*.

Zeleza's volume has not reversed the isolation of African economic history—as shown by the slowness of both economic and historical journals to review it.¹⁹ But he seems to have staked out two directions which may be important in determining the character of the field: his continental focus and his multidisciplinary approach.

The continental focus represents a middle position between the monographic studies of localities and a

global focus emphasizing world-wide economic forces. To the Africanists who have conducted the local and regional studies on which he draws, Zeleza emphasizes inclusion of their results into a continental perspective. To the neoclassical economic historians, whose approach offers a global perspective relying heavily on diffusionist logic (sometimes implying that only the great financial and industrial centers have importance), Zeleza emphasizes the peculiarities of African conditions and the "domestic motor of economic change."

The multidisciplinary approach represents an alternative to neoclassical specialization. Beyond prices and quantities, Zeleza has focused on the economic significance of gender, environment and other complexities in life. Seen in this way, Zeleza's *Modern Economic History* is not an empiricist response from the periphery to the theoretical strength of the center, but an expression of a more inclusive methodology. The point, in this case, is not so much to explore one framework to its limits, but to explore a number of frameworks in significant depth, and link their assumptions and their results. Such an interdisciplinary approach—the strength of African studies—may provide a basis for consolidating the work of economic historians of Africa. It may then provide a basis for linking the colonial and national periods in African economic history. This understanding of Zeleza's approach suggests that his work might fruitfully be compared with that of Sara Berry.²⁰

In the projected Volume 2 of this study, on the 20th century, Zeleza will have to face explicitly these questions on the scope and method of African economic history. We will see what he does in the way of linking colonial and national periods, and in establishing the significance of long-term economic trends in Africa. We will see whether he chooses to focus on a dialogue among Africans and Africanists, and to what degree he seeks to engage economic historians of other areas.

While waiting, we may explore his interpretation of the 19th century at our leisure. Zeleza's mastery of the literature is impressive, as are his skills of synthesis and argument, and his ability to draw together materials from several disciplines. For an audience of Africanists, this is an excellent general statement of the issues and evidence in African economic history. At this level, the first volume is an unqualified success.

Notes

1. Tiyaambe Zeleza, *A Modern Economic History of Africa. Volume 1: The 19th Century* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1993), Pp. vii, 501. Caseback (ISBN 2-86978-026-5); \$30.00/£21.50 paperback (ISBN 2-86978-027-3). This essay draws in part on my review of this book, published in *Journal of African History*, and on my presentation at

- the African Studies Association, Orlando, November 1995.
2. John Iliffe, *The African Poor: A History* (Cambridge, 1987).
 3. A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London, 1973), 27-50; Patrick Manning, *Slavery, Colonialism and Economic Growth in Dahomey, 1640-1960* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 85-113.
 4. Zeleza reserves his toughest critique for Ralph Austen, whose volume is perhaps most directly parallel to his own. Austen, *African Economic History* (London and Portsmouth, 1987).
 5. Zeleza, *Modern Economic History*, pp. 54-83.
 6. *Ibid.*, pp. 343-54, 359-69.
 7. One could extend this reasoning to sources in Portuguese and other languages. In addition, as Zeleza himself noted in commentary at the Orlando meeting, we must also consider materials written in languages of the African continent, and audiences using those languages.
 8. Zeleza, *Modern Economic History*, pp. 266-73.
 9. *Ibid.*, pp. 423-6.
 10. *Ibid.*, pp. 201-16.
 11. René Dumont, *L'Afrique noire est mal partie* (Paris, 1966); translated into English, not quite precisely, as *False Start in Africa*.
 12. Jan Vansina, *Living with Africa* (Madison, 1994), p. 201. Vansina continues: "With the exception of a few countries, especially ones rich in oil, standards of living deteriorated in tropical Africa after 1970. Only in Nigeria, Kenya, Senegal, and the Ivory Coast did universities continue to flourish for a while. But even there the deteriorating economic situation stunted further growth during the eighties and made the life of historians and history departments increasingly difficult."
 13. By my count, in the list of 950 books and articles on Sub-Saharan Africa, only about 15 percent of the authors are of African birth (including all South Africans) or of African ancestry. Mary Beth Norton, ed., *The American Historical Association's Guide to Historical Literature*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (New York, 1995).
 14. Guy Ossito Midiohouan, *Du bon usage de la francophonie* (Porto-Novo: Ed. CNPMS, 1994).
 15. Membership in CRL is expensive, so that only a few major research libraries share in this privilege, but the benefits of membership are considerable, including access to the Cooperative Africana Microform Project. One could imagine a project to arrange for CRL membership for certain libraries in Africa.
 16. This latter point may shade, in some cases, into disregard for Africa.
 17. While Marxian terminology and the underdevelopment paradigm became popular for a time in the 1970s and 1980s among economic historians of Africa, there never developed a sustained discussion, in the literature on African economic history, relying on detailed knowledge or application of the Marxian theoretical framework.
 18. South Africa, because of its longer recognition as a national unit, has a consistent set of economic statistics from the beginning of this century. My modest effort at linking colonial and post-colonial statistics (for Cameroon) has the side-effect of showing that government expenditures have grown steadily as a portion of total output from the turn of the 20th century to the recent past. Patrick Manning, "African Economic Growth and the Public Sector: Lessons from Historical Statistics of Cameroon," *African Economic History*, 19, (1990-91), pp. 135-170.
 19. The book appeared in 1993. As of the beginning of 1996 only one review had appeared (in the *Journal of African History* by this author), and one other was known to be in press (in *Africa* by Ralph Austen).
 20. Sara Berry, perhaps the most theoretically skilled of the economic historians of Africa, has nonetheless been led by the needs of explaining the problems of African economic life to an approach which is interdisciplinary and, at base, ethnographic. Her research has been very local, but her literature reviews are broad indeed. In addition, she is an economic historian who works on the period after 1960. Sara S. Berry, *Fathers Work for their Sons* (Berkeley, 1990); Berry, "The Food Crisis and Agrarian Change in Africa," *African Studies Review* 27, 2 (1984), pp. 59-112.

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