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## Moving Forward in African Economic History: Bridging the Gap Between Methods and Sources

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## AFRICAN ECONOMIC HISTORY WORKING PAPER SERIES

No. 1/2012

### Moving Forward in African Economic History: Bridging the Gap Between Methods and Sources.

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# Moving Forward in African Economic History: Bridging the Gaps in Methods and Sources.

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**Abstract:** The field of African economic history is in resurgence. This paper reviews recent and on-going research contributions and notes strengths in their wide methodological, conceptual and topical variety. In these strengths there is also a challenge: different methodological approaches may also result in divisions, particularly on the quantitative versus qualitative axis. The African Economic History Network has recently been formed to bridge the gap between methods and sources and to facilitate intellectual exchanges among the widest possible range of scholars working on Sub-Saharan economic history. This paper outlines current research projects and calls for future research as well as suggesting promising lines of enquiry in the discipline.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the recent resurgence of research in the economic history of Sub-Saharan Africa and thereby mark the formation of the African Economic History Network (AEHN).<sup>19</sup> The last decade has seen a greater number of new scholars enter the field since the 1970s. Some were inspired by the existing economic historiography of Africa. Probably more of them responded to the opportunities presented by new history itself, as in the opportunities to write the ever-longer history of post-colonial economies, and to link it with the history of the colonial period, often using newly opened archives. Still more scholars, especially from economics, were attracted by

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<sup>19</sup> The African Economic History Network is funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, Sweden. The statutory meeting took place during the first African Economic History Network Workshop held at Lund University, 16 December 2011. The first meeting was hosted by Erik Green and attended by Gareth Austin, Johan Fourie, Ewout Frankema, Ellen Hillbom, Joseph Inikori, Morten Jerven, Alexander Moradi, and Chibuike Uche. The second meeting and workshop will take place at Stellenbosch, 7 July 2012. The participants would like to thank our funders, and our hosts, Erik Green and Ellen Hillbom at Lund University for making this first meeting possible.

the prospect of applying quantitative techniques more technically sophisticated than those used by their predecessors. Both for newcomers to the field, and for longer-serving participants, this is perhaps the most exciting time to be working on African economic history since the heady decades of the pioneer generation, from the mid-1950s to the early 1980s. The most eye-catching and controversial innovations have been made in methods, but there have also been new sources, and new uses of already existing data, and important arguments made about the substance of African economic history: matters of interpretation and explanation. This paper outlines these trends, and emphasises the need for methodological, conceptual and topical variety as research proceeds. The newly formed African Economic History Network exists to facilitate intellectual exchanges among the widest possible range of scholars working on Sub-Saharan economic history, thereby reducing what Hopkins called ‘the persistence of imperfections in the market for knowledge’ (Hopkins 1987:122; cf. Hopkins 1986:1473), and ultimately promoting new and better-informed projects for future studies.

This essay does three things. First, it sets out to describe the challenge that lies in the recent declaration of a ‘New African Economic History’. In doing so it seeks to revise the somewhat unfortunate division between ‘old’ and ‘new’ pursuits in the discipline, and to map out some of the potential paths for practitioners of both ‘new’ and ‘old’ methods in the history of economic development in Africa. Second, the essay presents some of the ongoing research and data collection carried out by members of the newly founded African Economic History Network and beyond. Finally, the essay calls for research that offers new ways of interpreting long-term economic development in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Africa. The essay evaluates the potential opportunities for updating the database for African economic development. It looks for ways of drawing on interdisciplinary work to shed new light on old questions and reflects on the inherent difficulties and perils of quantifying economic development in Sub-Saharan Africa.

## 1. Beyond ‘Old’ and ‘New’ African Economic History

While Sub-Saharan Africa has never seemed much more than a peripheral specialisation within the discipline of economic history, the economic dimension of the African past was a central theme in the development of African history as a continuous, professional research stream, from the appearance of Dike’s seminal monograph (1956) to at least the end of the 1970s. Landmark works included Hill (1963/1997), Grey and Birmingham (1970), Coquery-Vidrovitch (1969), Arrighi (1970), Hopkins (1973), Curtin (1975), and Cooper’s survey of 1981. While the economic history of Sub-Saharan Africa fell into relative neglect during the 1980s, both within African historiography and the discipline of economic history, there were important contributions.

Significant contributions during the 1980s and 1990s came from Law, Lovejoy and Manning on West Africa, and by Mandala and Mosley on southern and eastern Africa (Manning 1982; Law 1992, 1995; Lovejoy 1986; Mandala 1990; Mosley 1983). This generation greatly expanded research on the history of slavery within (especially West) Africa (e.g. Terray 1982 and the work by Lovejoy, whose papers were later collected in Lovejoy 2006) and there was more systematic attention devoted to the gender dimension (e.g. Martin 1988; Vaughan 1987). New output continued to appear throughout the 1980s and 1990s, but it was small in volume compared to the heyday of the 1970s. The dearth in research was reflected in the lack of new syntheses covering the field as a whole (Hopkins 2009:156). Research on the development of capitalism in South Africa was an exception to this rule. Inspired by the critique of the more abstract Marxist history writing of the 1970s and the call for history from below, a number of historians in the 1980s conducted fairly empirical, detailed research on issues like the rise and fall of the peasantry, agricultural growth and stratification, capital formation and more (Beinart and Trapido (eds.) 1986). Important publications in later years include Austen's (1987) and Cooper's (2002) comprehensive and insightful writings on African economic history and Iliffe's demographic interpretation of Africa's long-term history (1995).

The last decade, particularly the last five years or so, has seen African economic history invigorated by new and innovative studies of Africa's long-term development, particularly from the work of economists. It was A. G. Hopkins who coined the phrase 'New African Economic History' as the title of a review article published in the *Journal of African History*. When Hopkins used the term he was referring to the long-term cross country regression approach to African economic history. The purpose of his article was to introduce historians to some of the new work done by economists using quantitative methods with the aim of illuminating Africa's long-run development problems (Hopkins 2009). In particular Hopkins highlighted the 'reversal of fortune' thesis as an explanation for current income differentials,<sup>20</sup> and the use of 'ethno linguistic fractionalization' measures to capture weak, perverse or dysfunctional institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa. These were suggested as arguments and findings with which historians and economic historians should and could engage.

In response to Hopkins' declaration of a 'New African Economic History', James Fenske produced another review of the literature with a particular and different emphasis. He associated 'new' not with the arguments, but with the methods used to investigate the cause and effects of historical economic change (2010). Fenske also claimed that scholarly contributions to the discipline should be judged by their methods and not by the ideas they put forward (2011). In a contribution to this debate, Morten Jerven searched for a middle ground, acknowledging that there is considerable scope for conflict when the disciplines of history and economics intersect in the study of the African past, because "historians' and 'economists' differ in the types of questions they are interested in, how evidence is dealt with, and the role of theory and models – or to put it simply: there are important

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<sup>20</sup> The 'reversal of fortunes'-hypothesis was also the basis for a review article by Gareth Austin (2008). Austin's article engages the work of Nunn (2008) and Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson (2001, 2002) directly, while Hopkins was discussing a wider range of 'new' literature.

methodological differences between economists and historians.”(Jerven 2011c).<sup>21</sup>

The founding members of the African Economic History Network and co-authors of this essay appreciate both the potential fruits and conflicts that may arise from engaging with brave new and old arguments that shed light on the African economic past. As called for by Hopkins, the network is committed to search for consensus on the scope of what may be a common enterprise for scholars of African Economic History (Hopkins 2011). A common research agenda must appreciate interdisciplinary methods. This means that there are equally valuable yet different ways of ‘coming to know’ something about African economic or social change. The most ‘robust’ way of asserting knowledge regarding phenomena is not always related to the econometric sophistication of the method applied, but must be judged carefully with regard to the quality of the underlying data that is used to generate the results and the nature of the question at hand. Some questions and issues call for generating large cross-country tables or specific micro studies that may tease out quantifiable effects and causes. Other issues are better approached through careful archival work, source criticism and the subjective judgement and interpretation of the researcher.<sup>22</sup>

It is clear that the study of African economic development over the long term has been invigorated by the adoption of a broader approach in the search for, and mobilisation of, quantitative evidence. These big ideas have, by and large, been put forward by economists using different econometric techniques. Even so, the lack of reliable and consistent data over time is the most fundamental challenge for the practice of African economic history. The paucity of reliable time series data on African economic development complicates the evaluation of the economic importance of key historical events, such as the slave trades and the colonial impact, as compared to ‘initial conditions’ of geography.<sup>23</sup> When considering the relative importance of types of ‘legacy’, a lack of comparable evidence further impairs our ability to assess the impact of different paths of development taken since independence. This has been shown with regards to the large errors attached to GDP per capita growth rates (Jerven 2010b) and has also been found when attempting to build consistent series on poverty (Bowden et al. 2008). In the search for root causes of underdevelopment there has been a tendency to ignore the analysis of divergence (particularly if they were temporary) in economic performances within Sub-Saharan Africa. Again, lack of data has meant that much research in the 1970s and 1980s, especially within political economy, was quite abstract and sometimes tended to confuse policy intentions with outcomes (see, for example, Arrighi 1970 and

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<sup>21</sup> For a classic statement of the debate see Fogel and Elton (1983).

<sup>22</sup> Of course, one does not preclude the other; careful archival work may be complemented by sophisticated econometric techniques. For a more recent essay on economics, history and causation, see Morck and Yong (2011).

<sup>23</sup> It is of course important to note that geography should not be solely considered as an ‘initial condition’, because resources condition changes partly because of human responses to them. Similarly, as Austin (2008) has argued, the fact that Africa exported slaves was not entirely exogenous – it was a response to the resources and techniques available, as well as to overseas demand. It should be noted, however, that there are differing views on the latter point (Inikori 1992: 44-53; 2002: 381-394; Eltis 2000: 139-149).

Green 2007 for a critique).

The African Economic History Network therefore endeavours to remedy the lack of reliable and consistent data over time by drawing on individual skills and knowledge of primary and secondary sources. This kind of work does not exclusively focus on the collection of data for the assembly of datasets. Mapping the current availability of datasets and evaluating the reliability and usefulness of these is fundamental to this kind of work.

Attaining reliable and valid data through experiments, natural or randomized, is very much in vogue across the social sciences, and also in the scholarship on African economic development. It is the nature of historical investigation that these methods are not applicable to all questions. Precision in answering questions like ‘how large was the population’ or ‘how important was the subsistence economy’ or ‘how did an institution – like private property rights – influence choice of production technique’, must sometimes be tempered by an appreciation of the limits of quantification. The answer is not always that ‘any (quantitative) data is better than none’ – often one relies on very few observations of questionable provenance, and care must be taken when considering the quality of the evidence – be it qualitative, quantitative, oral or any other. Economists and historians interpreting the African past largely rely on data mediated through state collection apparatuses or through the eyes of external observers.<sup>24</sup>

Only very occasionally can the process of going from scanty observations to a time series of numbers be retrospectively observed. In the words of Pius Okigbo, the Nigerian economist commissioned by the Nigerian federal government to prepare the national accounts for 1950–57, “it is impossible to overstate the arbitrariness of the process of ‘quantification’” (1962: 65). When preparing the estimates of agricultural production he had very few and unreliable observations from agricultural officers’ subjective reports, which varied in detail: “[a]n occasional officer ventures a guess at the total acreage and yield since the previous year. Others guess at the percentage changes in acreage and yield since the previous year. Most restrict themselves to such remarks as ‘average’, ‘no change’, ‘1952 plus’, ‘1954 minus’, or even ‘very poor’” (ibid: 63). Based on these data, Okigbo prepared a time series for 1950-1957.

The difficulties of appropriately quantifying the African past are related to the widespread popular perception and scholarly assumption that the African continent is persistently economically stagnant. There are therefore some important and intriguing choices to be made by economic historians of Africa, where they might have to carefully consider the historical accuracy of the evidence used. Such demands of the evidence must be weighed against the increasing demand of the current literature to quantify the African past, and the potential that without any data, experiences of African economies will be marginalised in these meta-narratives. The main purpose of the African Economic History Network is to respond to, and aim to satisfy, the demand for new data from this new interest in the

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<sup>24</sup> A similar point is made by Cooper and Packard (1997: 26).



discipline. The following section documents some of the research projects undertaken by members of the network and offers different perspectives on how to meet some of the challenges discussed above.

## 2. New Research in African Economic History: Methods and Sources

Economic growth or development can be measured by conventional methods like historical national accounts or external trade data, but these may carry different types of biases and measurement problems. In response, different proxies have been suggested like data on wages or heights, or observing changes in assets. Another route is to gauge development through documented or informal institutional change, like property rights in land and labour. Change in these factor markets can be observed through price observations, or can be analysed by studying the responses of agents such as governments, firms or individuals, when they are faced with changing economic opportunities and incentives. The African Economic History Network includes all of these different approaches.

### a) Historical National Accounts

Until recently, most development and growth economists took 1960 as the starting point for Africa because data on national income or Gross Domestic Product are only available back to 1960. This neglect of earlier periods is increasingly seen as a limitation, because it does not allow for an analysis of the historical roots of poverty and of persistently slow growth (Jerven 2010c, 2011e). The sources needed for the creation of long-term datasets on African economies exist, but valuable colonial-era data remain underutilised.

Morten Jerven is working on creating historical national accounts for a selection of African economies (current day names: Botswana, the Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe). Time series datasets on imports, exports (quantities and values), government expenditures and revenues, wages, prices and a set of quantitative indicators (pupils enrolled, km of road, KWh consumed etc.) have been collected for all of these countries.

The theoretical framework for constructing the national accounts is quite straightforward. The indicators will be created using two of three conventional methods in national accounting: (1) the Expenditure Method:  $Y = C + I + G + (X - M)$ ; (2) the Output Method:  $Y = \sum \text{Sectoral Value Added}$ . Existing base level estimates from the immediate post-colonial period are used. Jerven's earlier

research on the post-colonial data has shown that these GDP levels are quite malleable (2010a),<sup>25</sup> and there has been no attempt to re-estimate levels. Rather, physical proxies are used to calculate change in each of the sub-sectors and multiply these with existing sector output and expenditure shares. Some preliminary estimates are already forthcoming on Nigeria and Ghana (Jerven 2011f and Jerven 2011g).

The wealth of South African colonial data, for example, allows for the measurement of such early colonial estimates of GDP. Fourie and Van Zanden (2012) show that the incomes of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Cape were high in comparison to GDP per capita estimates of England and Holland at the time, and they link these estimates with (tentative) estimates of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this manner an indicator of economic growth from the colonial to the post-colonial period can be provided. The potential of this extension of the datasets on economic growth is that it may shift the focus from the root causes of African underdevelopment towards evaluating the comparative expansion of colonial and post-colonial economies in Africa. These measures cannot be readily interpreted as increases in living standards, but does more specifically document, and express in an aggregate manner, the extent to which there was formal or recorded market growth. The growth indicators capture the capacity of the state to tax and spend and the average citizen's ability to export and import, and to participate in the formal economy and the world economy. To gauge how this affected living standards it is necessary to complement these time series with other data, notably those of anthropometrics and real wages.

#### b) Anthropometrics

Anthropometry provides one of the best tools to assess nutrition and health status. While it is obvious that nutrition and health influence body weight, it is less well-known that body stature serves equally well as a gauge of nutritional and health status. The physical development of children is enhanced by a healthy environment, including high-quality nutrition in sufficient quantities. Chronic malnutrition, in contrast, stunts bodily growth. Consequently, malnourished children are shorter (Habicht et al. 1974; WHO Working Group 1986). Shorter children in turn end up as shorter adults. Heights and weights are indicators of general well-being, because nutrition and health are important dimensions of well being, and human development. More often than not, changes in height do correspond with changes in wages and GDP (Baten 2000; Moradi 2010).

There are several advantages to anthropometric measures: they are applicable across different social groups; they measure outcomes rather than inputs; they do not reflect particular cultural – that is Western – values; heights and weights are easy to compute and understand; and comparisons can be made across space and time.

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<sup>25</sup> For country studies of Botswana, Kenya and Tanzania, see Jerven 2010d, 2011b and 2011d.

Anthropometric history – the study of heights of historical populations – is an important branch in economic history, which has been thriving for 30 years (for overviews, see Komlos and Baten 2004; Steckel 2009). Africa has been largely omitted from this research. Key challenges include the finding of sources that report the background of individuals and allow for large sample sizes.

Alexander Moradi, in cooperation with Denis Cogneau (Paris School of Economics) and Laurent Heyberger (Université de Technologie Belfort-Montbéliard), is gathering height and weight data of 150,000 men from French military records in order to comprehensively map economic well-being across Africa. The database will add to the emerging anthropometric history of Africa. So far findings from Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire and Kenya have pointed to improvements in living standards associated with the cash crop expansion originating in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Moradi 2009; Cogneau & Rouanet 2011). Whether the upward trend in height extends to other countries as well remains to be seen. More research is needed to explore the impact of other causes, including investments into infrastructure and institutions.

#### c) Prices, Wages and Wealth

Systematic collection and analysis of price data is too rarely found in the literature on pre-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa, thereby limiting our understanding of the continent's economic history. Some price data has been collected already (Curtin 1975; Hogendorn and Johnson 1986; Law 1992; Terray 1982; Lovejoy and Richardson 2006; Austin 2005). According to Joseph Inikori, reliable domestic price data, combined with information on long-term changes in the commodity composition of imports into western Africa, and age- and gender-specific prices of captives exported could help answer several questions relating to the impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade on long-term socio-economic development in pre-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa. More than that, Inikori believes reliable domestic price series will be invaluable to our general understanding of the long-run development process in pre-colonial Africa. Despite the commonly held belief among scholars that such data is simply unavailable, in some coastal areas the private records of European traders and trading companies provide sufficient data for the development of a reliable price series. This requires immensely time-consuming and labour-intensive research but Inikori believes it can be done through collaboration. Currently working on British records, he posits that similar data can be extracted from the French, Portuguese and Dutch trade records.

Furthermore, systematic collection of colonial prices and wages held promise for the study of relative trends in African living standard. African welfare analysis, predominantly based on unreliable GDP estimates, remains largely confined to the post-1950s. The work of rare pioneers such as Birmingham (1960) was taken much further by Bowden, Chiripanura and Mosley (2008), in their comparison of the evolution of real wages in a sample of settler and non-settler colonies. Ewout Frankema and

Marlous van Waijenburg (2011) seek to address this issue through a project aimed at extending real wage data collection and analysis much more widely across time and space. Real wage data from sources including wage and price reports from colonial blue books and sessional papers, in addition to price data from trade statistics and cost of living surveys, form the basis of this undertaking. Preliminary findings indicate that in British colonies wages were above subsistence level and that they rose significantly over time. The authors also uncover a considerable wage gap between West (higher) and East Africa, and explain this variation in terms of the large variation in colonial labour market institutions in both regions.

The availability of quantitative sources for the 18<sup>th</sup> century Dutch Cape Colony in modern-day South Africa has allowed for fresh interpretations of the received wisdom that the Cape was a poor, backward economy. De Zwart (2011) and Du Plessis and Du Plessis (2012) (for example) use prices and wages paid to the Dutch East India Company employees to show that real wages increased over the period, equalling those of the citizens of England and Holland at the time. Fourie (2012) confirms these results by investigating probate records. He finds that Cape settlers owned, on average, more assets than the average citizen in the regions where most of these settlers originated from, and also in comparison to other settler societies, like those in North America (Fourie and Uys 2012).

#### d) Population and labour

Pre-1950s population data for Sub-Saharan Africa presents one of the biggest empirical challenges for scholars of African economic history. Population data is crucial to the production of accurate national accounts and estimates of per capita exports, tax revenue and education spending and more. Jerven and Frankema seek to address this deficiency by developing a country-level population series from 1850 onwards. One of the key issues arising is that of the disconnection between colonial and post-colonial censuses, and the paucity of pre-colonial population counts. While it is firmly established that population densities in Sub-Saharan Africa (with a few notable exceptions) were relatively low, the historical growth rates and the absolute sizes of colonial and pre-colonial populations are still unsettled. Recently, Manning (in Ittmann, Cordell and Maddox 2010) argued that the pre-colonial population may have been as high as 150 million in the year 1850, as compared to 100 million as indicated in most datasets. The Africanist participants in the Global Collaboration on the History of Labour Relations (based at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam) are also engaged in critical re-examination of earlier census data.

As part of a larger demographic history project, Cilliers and Fourie (2012) use South African genealogical data to map demographic trends of European settlers in South Africa over three centuries. Such new evidence begins to position African economic history within the broader development literature of the demographic transition, marriage patterns and intergenerational

mobility.

Also key to the development of an accurate economic history of Africa is an understanding of labour relations in rural areas. Without this understanding it is difficult to interpret wage data. A starting point and context is provided in major studies by social historians, such as Fall (1993) and Brown (2003). Erik Green uses micro cases to modify the demographic interpretation of farming systems in Africa. Using budgets for individual African farms in Malawi in the 1950s, he shows that the indirect and direct costs of labour were comparatively high even in densely populated areas (2011). Green proposes that the high cost of labour is caused by imbalances in labour allocation between farm and off-farm work. He also argues that there are reasons to question the assumed correlation between increased commercial production and the use of wage labour on African farms; his study on the Lilongwe Land Development Program shows that increased production of cash crops led to a decline of wage labour (2010).

Green's work on labour relations also provides new insight into possible misconceptions regarding the role of slavery in colonial South Africa. His research on labour relations in the Cape suggests that the role of slavery may have been exaggerated which could bias existing accounts of the productivity of this settler economy. In contrast, Fourie (forthcoming) argues that slaves permeated Cape colonial society. Farmers acquired slaves as a substitute for investment in physical capital, realising economies of scope on Cape farms. This use of slaves yielded high short-term living standards, but at the cost of a stagnant long-term trend. Slavery also influenced the institutions imposed by the settlers, as described by Engerman and Sokoloff (2011), resulting in high and persistent South African inequality (Fourie and Von Fintel 2011).

#### e) Institutions

Austin's 2005 book on Asante, Ghana, attempted to test the rational-choice theory of the determinants of institutional change for the case of property and markets in labour, land and capital in Ghana, from an increasing use of slaves in the nineteenth century to successively better contracts for cocoa-farm labourers during much of the twentieth. He found that the theory has little use in explaining the timing of legal reforms such as the prohibition of slavery, but does much to explain the outcomes on the ground, such as the timing and social asymmetry of the transition to free labour (Austin 2005). Since then he has explored the interaction of states, slavery and markets over a longer period (c.1500-present) and for West Africa as a whole (Austin 2007, 2009a, 2009b, forthcoming 2012a, forthcoming 2013).

Inikori has much expanded the West Africa side of his analysis of the Atlantic economy in the age of the slave trade (Inikori, 2002). He has argued that markets within West Africa were expanding before the Atlantic slave trade became sufficiently disruptive to halt the process, and the expansion resumed

only with abolition and the transition to “legitimate” commerce in the early nineteenth century (Inikori 2007, 2009). Meanwhile, Austin reviewed, revised and ultimately re-asserted the argument that factor endowments are the major influence upon choice of technique and institution (Austin 2008a). Fenske has provided an important case-study, with skillful use of the primary sources (Fenske 2011b). Having already argued that we can identify characteristic patterns of choice, which over the long term define ‘paths’ of development (Austin 2008a), follow-up papers by Austin expand the argument with reference to the post-colonial period, and suggest that factor ratios may have changed (largely as a result of African reactions to the earlier ratios) in ways that make it possible to contemplate the possibilities for a growth of labour-intensive manufacturing in Africa (Austin 2010; Austin in Sugihara, forthcoming, 2013).

There is also new ongoing research into African farmers. In East Africa, Makana has revived the once lively field of Kenyan agrarian history (Makana 2007, 2009, 2010). Carswell provided an intriguing perspective on the era of agricultural exports under colonial rule when she showed that, in a district of Uganda, food crops for markets within the region continued to be the farmers’ preferred “cash crop” (Carswell 2007). Among the Meru of Tanzania, Hillbom has investigated endogenous agricultural intensification driven primarily by population growth and the increased scarcity of agricultural resources. Her work includes studies on the construction and management of communally owned irrigation furrows, the expansion of the dairy sector as well as market institutions (Hillbom 2011, forthcoming 2012b, forthcoming 2012c). Case studies of export agriculture in West Africa, from ‘legitimate commerce’ to independence, have become uncommon, but a good example of one was provided by Swindell and Jeng (2006). Austin offers a new framework for examining the growth of export agriculture in tropical Africa in general, seeking to supersede the much criticised “rent-for-surplus” approach (Austin forthcoming 2012b).

Along with a group of researchers at the Department of Economic History at Lund University, Ellen Hillbom and Erik Green are also conducting research into the ways in which the development of economic and social institutions have led to divergent economic structures among countries. The research project will begin by covering Ghana and Zimbabwe, in addition to a selection of case studies in Asia and Latin America. The project takes its point of departure in the recently developed approach of Milanovic et al. (2007) of measuring inequality through the creation of social tables, possible extraction frontier and extraction ratios not only for analysing inequality in Africa *per se* but also for the mechanism of long-term growth and the institutional frameworks of inequality and resource transfers.

f) The fiscal state, education and the public services

Ewout Frankema is pursuing two research projects that aim to increase our understanding of the development of the African fiscal state. The first project explores the relationship between colonial fiscal development and long-term processes of state formation from the colonial to post-colonial period. This research draws on government revenue and expenditure data from colonial statistical reports as well as subnational and national public finance data from government reports (Frankema 2010, 2011). The relationship between colonial efforts to secure revenues and the creation of state institutions in the colonial era is also found in Frederick Cooper's (2002) concept of "the gate-keeping state". Cooper traces contemporary African states' failure to achieve economic development back to the formation of a minimalistic colonial state, required by colonial policies to use its own fiscal ability to cover its expenditures. Consequently, it had as its primary aspiration to control its borders, taxing exports and imports. Frankema's project also links up with the extensive work of Leigh Gardner (2012) on the comparative development of colonial fiscal states in British Africa. Gardner also cooperates in a comparative project on colonial extraction and economic development in the Belgian Congo and the Netherlands Indies, where fiscal institutions and educational systems get ample attention (Buelens and Frankema 2012).

The role of education in African development is receiving renewed attention. Frankema (2012) investigates why school enrolment rates differ so greatly across countries and regions by uncovering the colonial roots of formal education in Africa. The research for this second project is based on missionary accounts for case-study analyses and school enrolment data from colonial education departments for comparative assessments (*ibid.*). Frankema builds on an expanding literature about the role of missionary schooling in Africa. Gallego and Woodberry (2010) show convincingly that Protestant missionary activity during colonial times have a greater impact on schooling outcomes today than Catholic missionary activity. In contrast, Nunn (2010) shows that both denominations had positive, long-term effects, but that the Protestants primarily affected the education of females, while the Catholics had a more pronounced impact on the education of males. Fourie, Ross and Viljoen (2012) show that there were large differences even within Protestant missionary societies active in southern Africa, even when resident characteristics such as age, gender and length of stay are controlled for. Cogneau and Moradi (2011) investigated the impact made by the colonisers. Differences in education outcomes are still significant today. Estimating differences in literacy rates at the Ghana-Togo border, they traced back the divergence in education to the anti-missionary education policies of the French administration. Huillery is undertaking work on the French colonial institutions (2011).

## f) Business History

Understanding the ways in which agents make decisions is fraught with informational challenges. How does one distinguish between the official and actual position of an agent? This is the issue that Uche seeks to address through his research on the behaviour of businesses and banks in Africa. He rightly points out that the official reason is not always the real reason. Research based on unpublished materials can shed light on internal relations within an organization or business, and can provide a clearer picture of the actual reasons behind a given position. Unfortunately he is confronted with weak availability when it comes to reliable reports.

As the archival records of governments and firms have gradually expanded through and beyond the colonial period, business historians have been increasingly able to examine the decision-making processes that helped to construct market power in colonial West Africa (Olukoju 2001-2; Austin and Uche 2007), and the strategies adopted by British firms to cope with the advent of independence (Decker 2010, 2007). Uche has documented the role of oil interests in British policy towards the Biafran succession and the Nigerian Civil War, and he has gone on to examine the subsequent relations between British oil companies and the Nigerian and British governments (Uche 2008). His recent work has examined indigenous enterprise in Nigeria, both in the context of the indigenous banking movement during the colonial period (Uche 2010), and the state's efforts at promoting indigenization in the 1970s (Uche forthcoming). Meanwhile Handely (2008), using four country case-studies, has offered something of an overview of business-government relations. Afrifa-Taylor has contributed with an economic history of the Ashanti Goldfields Corporation (2006).

Outside the archives, Forrest (1994) has demonstrated the potential of interviews and local publications as a means of examining the histories of entrepreneurs and firms. Also working on Nigeria, Marwah (2011) has shown that it is possible to use the records of firms and the reports of industry associations to construct datasets that supplement the national income accounts.

At a more general level, Uche has hypothesised that one lesson of history for foreign operators themselves would be the appreciation of the need to document less in their own secret internal memos. This would particularly be the case in sensitive operations when private reasons for their actions differ greatly from the public reasons. If this is the case, future archives may be less revealing and useful than they have been in the past (Uche 2000).



#### g) Pre-colonial Economic History: How to Remedy the Recent Neglect?

The work done by Lovejoy and Richardson (2004) on the use of pawns to provide confidence to creditors in the context of the Atlantic slave trade, shows that careful work on pre-colonial African economic history can make valuable contributions to micro economic history. In the 1960s the pre-colonial was the principal period researched, but, during the last 30 years, it has been sorely neglected (Reid 2011), except for the aforementioned new work on the external slave trades, and some on internal slavery. Among the more respectable reasons for this is the virtual end of the opportunity to obtain new oral testimonies from people with memories of that era (Ethiopia apart). Meanwhile, institutional pressures within universities have reduced the time available to learn the range of languages needed to take full advantage of the available written sources, whether in European or Arabic script. This general problem may have specific consequences for the writing of pre-colonial history in Africa. It may have reduced the extent to which new scholars are able to make use of written sources to analyse the pre-colonial period, which have proven so fruitful in the past.

On the other hand, many European texts from the late pre-colonial period have been made more widely accessible than ever before. This is partly made possible by new information technology. Some pre-colonial era books are now available online (e.g., those available through [archives.org](http://archives.org) and [gallica.bnf.fr](http://gallica.bnf.fr)), while Cambridge University Press has a whole series of such texts available through printing on demand. Meanwhile the steady trickle of new critical editions (i.e. with the scholarly apparatus of a carefully researched introduction and numerous footnotes by the editor) of European writings from the pre-colonial era has continued, e.g. Lovejoy and Bruce Lockhart (2005), Winsnes (2007).

As for archives, it seems that important Portuguese sources, going back well before the nineteenth century, remain underutilized for economic history. The work that has been done since 2000 includes Reid's examination of markets and production in the kingdom of Buganda (Reid 2002), as well as contributions by others noted below. The stream of studies of pre-colonial slavery has continued and is extending to include eastern Africa (Médard and Doyle 2007; Fernyhough 2010).

#### h) Political Economy of Growth Since Independence

Eight years ago, Ellis called for historians to write "the history of contemporary Africa", which partly reflects that 1960 is becoming a more distant part of the past (2002).<sup>26</sup> So, if there ever was an

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<sup>26</sup> For a recent survey see Cooper (2008). By now major post-1940 and post-1960 histories have been written by historians (like Cooper (2002) and Nugent (2004)), whereas earlier post-colonial histories tended to be written by journalists (like Meredith 2006).

informal division of labour between the disciplines whereby economists studied the post-1960 period, while historians were mainly occupied with the pre-1960 period,<sup>27</sup> it has firmly come to an end. The present debate on the opportunities for future economic development in Africa is often deficient in the knowledge and ability required to analyse processes of long-term change that are the roots of current obstacles to development. By extending their research African economic historians could not only significantly contribute to an understanding of the past, but also influence a policy agenda for the future of the continent.

Economic historians of Africa have a rich literature on the political economy of growth to engage with here. Economists and political scientists have emphasized the detrimental effect of ‘anti-growth’ policy syndromes such as distributional coalitions and civil wars, for African economic performance (see Ndulu et al. 2009, and the work of Bates 2008). Mkandawire (2001) has written a powerful critique of the idea that African states are necessarily incapable of being ‘developmental’, and argues that there is a case of miswritten economic histories of post-colonial Africa.<sup>28</sup> Keeping this in mind, Hillbom has warned against uncritically using the developmental state theory inspired by the Asian experience to characterise African growth miracles such as Botswana (Hillbom 2012a), which she argues is a case of economic growth and social development, but not economic development (Hillbom 2008). There is an opportunity for economic historians to contribute to the debate on the existence of ‘patrimonial’ states in Sub-Saharan Africa. The work of political scientists has pointed out the importance of geography and powerful elites (Herbst 2000; Boone 1992) in the formation of Sub-Saharan states. So far, economists have focussed more on explaining the origins and persistence of such institutions. There is work to be done in historicizing these state formation trajectories. Ray argues that in order to analyse causes of divergence “it will be of great importance to build a useful taxonomy of institutional performance (and reactions to such a performance) depending on who has control” (2010: 56-57). To build such a taxonomy requires collaborative work by historians, political scientists and scholars from other disciplines.

Ellis has made the point that writing the history of post-colonial Africa may be hampered by the poor state of the archive and recordkeeping (2002). Uche has made the point that lack of record keeping at home has led to reliance on foreign archives. Jerven has made a similar point that the growth and income evidence, and in particular recordkeeping were weakened during the economic decline of the 1980s (Jerven 2010b, 2011a). In consequence, building such a database for the post-colonial period may be a challenging, but rewarding undertaking.

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<sup>27</sup> This is a very crude generalization, and the list of exceptions is very long, some of which have been mentioned here.

<sup>28</sup> This may be substantiated for Ivory Coast, under Houphoet-Boigny (Bassett 2001).

### 3. Concluding Remarks: Challenges and Opportunities in studying Long-Term Economic Change in Africa:

This list of current promising topics of on-going data collection and revisiting of historical interpretations is not exhaustive. This is in itself a testament to the vigour and promise of the current enterprise. AEHN calls for research that offers ways of interpreting long-term economic development in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Africa. We also welcome research of a historiographical nature, focussing on the disentangling of causal mechanisms of economic development and social change. Innovative approaches to existing empirical data or new research that uncovers new sources of data are particularly welcome. Some particular gaps in our knowledge have been noted – the above efforts seek to remedy these, but many concerns and research opportunities remain. Finally, it could be beneficial to have a closer interaction between economic historians and development economists where they work together to analyse obstacles for development in contemporary Africa and even offer policy recommendations.

Africa's history is at times treated by economists merely in terms of major events or contexts rather than processes and structural explanations that identify patterns of change – this may lead to a compression of history, a neglect of both important economic and institutional change and an inability to appreciate in what way history matters for understanding pathways in current and future development. New research on long-term trends in African Economic History suggests important reconsiderations and in particular points to the importance of both decisive historical shifts and trajectories of change.

There is cause for excitement about the current prospects to make use of previously neglected types of quantitative evidence that could enhance our understanding of the economic history of Africa. At the same time, extension of quantitative time series will not tell us everything we need to know. It has been pointed out that the few prices, wages or other observations we can recover may need careful interpretation. This involves a clear understanding of the market and the political conditions under which the observations were made. Many of the research initiatives rely on colonial data collection – this will undoubtedly increase our knowledge, but it must also be acknowledged that the colonial administration had both a limited and a particular view of African economic development. To learn more about the socio-economic context in which data has been collected we need to turn to qualitative sources such as colonial reports, anthropological studies, travel accounts, and so on. Issues of the reliability and validity of data requires economic historians studying Africa to be more open to numerous and varied types of empirical material.

Economic history as a discipline is rooted in empirically grounded research. This is one of its major advantages, not least in the field of African history where economic historians have contributed a great deal by disputing long-lasting misconceptions of the trajectories of long-term economic

development. However, the bias towards empirically oriented research also has its disadvantages and one of the more notable being that economic historians tend to react to existing theoretical ideas rather than use data to develop new theories. The recent debate regarding the ‘reversal of fortune’ thesis is an illustrative example of this. The thesis was proposed by economists and political scientists and a number of economic historians, not least economic historians with an interest in African history. The discussion developed into a welcomed and inspiring debate about methods and causality in economic history. However, it is notable that new major theoretical ideas and approaches have not been put forward by economic historians as a consequence of the debate. Rather, the debate has centred on theory from the economics discipline.

Due to lack of data, African economic history is naturally influenced by a wide range of disciplines apart from economics, such as history, economic anthropology, geography, archeology and so on. A challenge for African economic history is to take advantage of this fairly broad field of inspiration to develop economic-historical grounded theories and analytical models. Scholars may take inspiration from a wider range of theory, and to use empirical work as a foundation for new theory.<sup>29</sup> This challenge has been discussed more generally by Austin (2007) who suggested the use of ‘reciprocal comparison’ to counterweight the fact that most (economic) models of historical change are derived from work on Europe and the West.

Jerven (2012) suggests that the same argument of ‘reciprocal comparison’ should be extended to the use of aggregate metrics, such as historical national accounts. The lack of observations on African GDP in the Maddison dataset is notable, and this extends to other economic metrics too. Williamson’s most recent study of globalization and poverty did not include empirical work on African economies (2011). Here a lack of wages, prices and income terms of trade were the immediate problem. The quick fix is to fill in the gaps in the database, but this must be done with caution. Wages in pre-colonial and colonial economies where coercion was an important component cannot immediately be compared to wages from free labour markets. Similar arguments can be made for other metrics, and finally, there is the problem of the provenance of the data. Most of these data are collected by external observers, be they visitors, traders or administrators, which mean that data may carry bias, sometimes systematic bias, which in turn skews our narratives of Africa’s role in the global history.

Recent work has also tried to make use of quantified measures of ‘institutions’,<sup>30</sup> where again the upside of quantitative testing must be weighed carefully against the disadvantage of sacrificing careful qualitative judgement. Luckily, the two are not mutually exclusive. There is an increasing need for synthesising work on regions, areas and countries and re-thinking the possibility of writing

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<sup>29</sup> Economic historians may for instance rekindle the strong links to the work of economic anthropologists to guide their empirical work (for example, Guyer 2004).

<sup>30</sup> For example, Bolt (2009) where in institutions quantified using the Murdock Atlas are causal variable ‘X’ or as an outcome ‘Y’ (Fenske 2009).

comparative histories of trends in land intensification, privatization of property rights and centralization of power (without a presumption of the direction of change) – some of this work may be helped by creating quantitative data from qualitative sources, using techniques which political scientists would call ‘coding’, thus improving on and extending the work done by Goody (1976), who used measures from the *Ethnographic Atlas* (Murdock 1967). Since these kinds of observations have limited temporal validity and may carry biases, work should be done to validate, historicize and contextualize them. Such research enterprises are best done in collaboration.

Finally, there are two priorities for the future of African economic history that need emphasizing for its future viability. One is to strengthen and stimulate current activities at universities on the African continent. It is a shortcoming that most of this work is being done by scholars based outside Africa. We have pointed out some notable exceptions in this paper, but we hope that the network, and the fact that the World Economic History Congress is organized in South Africa in 2012, may help to foster a process of facilitating research activities on the continent. A related note is that the network is not only focussed on highlighting the importance of Africa within economic history, but also that it continues to highlight the importance of economic history for the field of economic development. And in particular, relevant research in the social sciences, such as the research presented here, ultimately aims to shed light on the process of economic, political and social development, with implications for current day policy in improving living standards of persons and the wealth of nations on the African continent.

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