
BUCHBESPRECHUNGEN

Emmanuel Akyeampong et al.:
Africa's development in historical
perspective. Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 2015, 539 S.

Reviewed by
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There has been a dramatic revival of interest in African economic history in recent years. A handful of economists have started using African history as a quarry for their arguments; most famously, Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson and James Robinson have used African data to argue for the decisive role of institutions in creating or obstructing economic development. At the same time, the rise of comparative history has revived the question how Africa fits into such global-scale schemes of progress and regression. Against this background, Gareth Austin's long-standing research into the conditions of agricultural growth is finding a wider audience, and several of his students, including Leigh Gardner, Morten Jerven and Ewout Frankema, are using advances in data processing to re-examine long-known and locate new sources of numerical information, making African economic history more numerate than

seemed possible earlier, given the quality of the sources.

The edited volume under review here brings together economic historians such as Austin and Inikori with others not specifically known as economic historians, such as Christopher Ehret and Linda Heywood, a historical linguist and an urban cultural historian respectively. Their entry point into African economic history is less through re-examining quantitative evidence or Acemoglu-style regressions, than via the desire to see applied to Africa some of the theoretical developments in economic history that have so far focused on other areas. In particular, they engage with two of them. One is the deployment in the history of developing countries of what is known as 'new institutionalism': the insistence that it is above all else the nature of a society's institutions that determines its economic outcomes, rather than, say, natural resource endowments or commercial exchange. The other is the debate on the 'great divergence': in other words, on the reasons why industrialization happened in Europe and not in other places with a sophisticated pre-modern material culture and strong economy, such as China's Yangtze Delta.

The result is an absorbing, fascinating, and at times frustrating book. It takes an enjoyably wide perspective on economic

history, considering the economic role of cities (Heywood), changing patterns of trade (Akyeampong) and entrepreneurship (Olukoju), the role of malaria (Weil) and pre-colonial warfare (Reid), as well as that of mission culture (Nunn), the improvement of transportation in the colonial period (Chaves, Engerman and Robinson) and 'Imperial Peace' (Bates) among others. Some of the chapters present syntheses of long-pursued research; others very fresh material, and depending on their own specialization, every historian of Africa is bound to find plenty here that is of interest. Rather than summarizing every chapter, the rest of this review proceeds by picking up on some recurrent themes that, I think, help examine the promise and the problems of the editors' undertaking.

Given the enormity of the topic addressed, easy agreement either among the authors or among their readers was not to be expected. There is nevertheless one point which emerges from this collection fairly uncontroversially. This is that there was indeed a 'divergence' in the history of Africa, relative to other continents. Africa was not always the poorest place on earth. Christopher Ehret's discussion of archaeological and linguistic evidence shows that, taking a long-term view, parts at least of Africa did well in terms of urbanization, population density, technological innovation and market development until several centuries after the birth of Christ.

The measures that Ehret uses for Africa's prosperity in the distant past, though, carry a certain baggage with them, whose problems become more evident as the reader works her way through the chapters: they implicitly take for granted the association of economic development with

political centralization, with the role of states and the kind of political economy states tick over by. Given that a relative lack of states is a distinctive feature of African history, this reader wonders what this approach misses. Some authors here clearly take urbanization and political centralization as correlates, and both as preconditions for development, in a way reminiscent of long-standing ideas about the history of civilisations. But even Ehret, who is among these authors, points out that technologies, including iron-working, advanced also outside states in Africa. Inikori in particular points to the prosperity of some stateless societies in Africa. Given the salience of such societies in African history, the question of how to define and assess their economic status hovers in the background of this collection somewhat uneasily. We know very well that many pastoralists, for instance, passed as wealthy in their own and their neighbours' minds, nomadic lifestyle notwithstanding. But how should economic historians parse their wealth-in-cattle?

The focus on the sort of centralized social formations recognized as progressive and wealth-creating in normative histories of early economic development also carries problems in the context of the history of the slave trade. Some of the strongest states in early modern and pre-colonial Africa lived off enslavement and slave trading. Were such states developmental, then, or were they predatory? Or does the question have to be considered on a case-by-case basis? Inikori's chapter on the economic effects of Africa's participation in the Transatlantic trade is clear that the slave trade created 'deep economic inefficiencies'. But for the Americas, whose 'new institutionalist' his-

toriography the editors of this volume cite as an inspiration, there have also been influential claims that slavery created proto-modernisation, e.g. in the sugar industry. In Africa itself, the control over labour enabled by slavery arguably helped intensify agricultural production and supported export-trade participation. Thus Inikori's summary dismissal of slavery as economically disadvantageous sits awkwardly with the implicit assumption, in other parts of the book, that centralization of power (often for the purpose of controlling labour) is a proxy for development.

The implicit normative model at work here connects centralization to economic specialization, thus to greater material sophistication, accumulation of wealth and, ultimately, economic development. There are good reasons why variants of this model have persisted; it is eminently plausible. But in one way or another, they involve a factor which the editors to this volume are reluctant to engage with: the role of the environment, more specifically resource endowment, in economic development. In their introduction, the editors dismiss resource constraints as a cause of Africa's current poverty. They argue that resource constraints are permanent, but Africa's relative position among continents, development-wise, has changed – ergo resources cannot be the cause of Africa's position. The problem with this reasoning is that the meaning of the term 'development' has changed enormously over the longue duree the editors so rightly insist on examining. If Africa's resource endowment was adequate to keep it comfortably in the middle, or even front, of the field in 1500, that does not mean it was still adequate, let alone advantageous, in 1800 or 1900.

It seems regrettable to this reader that the editors' dismissal of resource endowment approaches also precludes them from taking seriously long-standing arguments about the role of people shortage and land abundance in African history. For example, in a chapter about the non-developmental role of certain cultural institutions, Olukoju discusses the conspicuous spending of major traders in nineteenth-century Yoruba towns as a form of unproductive, wasteful consumption. If he recognized the possibility that creating and maintaining followers was a serious political problem, he might instead look upon it as the pursuit of patron-client ties; thus as an element of a political economy that turned in part on the need to parlay wealth in things into wealth in people. He might still want to argue that this kind of political economy was not necessarily developmental. But it would prevent him from taking cultural values as an independent variable, and finding Yoruba culture flawed by its unaccountably flamboyant, wasteful values. Similar points apply to Platteau's chapter on the (as he sees it) anti-developmental role of egalitarian values in many African societies. His argument is focused on a well-known anthropological claim: that witchcraft beliefs are really a way of making judgments about economic inequality and preventing or reducing economic stratification. Accumulators who might otherwise take the economy forward, so the reasoning goes, are reined in and held back by the threat of witchcraft accusations. The connection between witchcraft and egalitarian discourses in contemporary Africa is not in dispute. But there is reason to doubt whether it does much to hold back accumulators. Many societies

where moral mistrust of the rich flourishes have also seen successive generations of successful, at times quite ruthless accumulators. And witchcraft beliefs are nothing if not ambivalent: Martin Chanock, for instance, has shown that big men could also use witchcraft accusations to control followers, in particular, wives.

The kind of discussion of cultural features as obstacles to development exemplified in Platteau and Olukojú's chapters is noteworthy also for treating these features as independent variables: they ask what economic effects cultural practices have, but not why they exist or how they change. As mentioned above, there are ways of connecting cultural features to livelihoods; to the horizon of possibilities offered by environments and other structural factors. Granted, the attempt to do so needs to take care to avoid functionalist reduction. But it may not be much of an improvement to reduce obstacles to development to cultural features instead.

Evidently, then, this is a book worth arguing with and over. It is also worth noting that the refusal to accept environmental limitations as a crucial factor can be seen also as a way of living in hope. If factor endowments are to blame, there is no easy answer to the question of how these limitations can be surmounted. By contrast, institutional factors, whether political or cultural, are clearly very malleable. It is a different question, though, how open they are to the kind of directed change that would be required to implement recommendations derived from institutionalist analyses. And are environmental limitations really that inflexible? Austin's chapter on agriculture and Manning's on population suggest otherwise. This volume pro-

vides plenty of food for thought on these questions and many others, and it is to be hoped that it is not the last of its kind.

Jan Hüsgen: Mission und Sklaverei. Die Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine und die Sklavenemanzipation in Britisch- und Dänisch-Westindien (= Missionsgeschichtliches Archiv, Bd. 25), Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2016, 238 S.

Rezensiert von
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Im Leserraum des Unitätsarchivs in Herrnhut hängt das Ölgemälde von Maria, einer ehemaligen Sklavin aus der Karibik, die nach ihrer Befreiung fünf Jahre in Deutschland lebte und dort 1749 starb. Für mich schien dieses Bild die humanitäre, universalistische Weltanschauung der damaligen Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine zu verkörpern, die viel früher als andere Protestanten mit der Missionierung entfernter Erdteile begannen und bei denen trotz großer sozialer Unterschiede jede Person in gewissem Sinne als „gleich vor Gott“ galt. Zwar wusste ich, dass die Herrnhuter von Anfang an „notgezwungen“ Sklaven auf ihren Plantagen in der Karibik und Suriname besaßen, aber in der Historiographie wurde der Plantagenkauf paradoxer Weise als indirekter Beitrag zur Sklavenbefreiung und zur „Neuordnung der gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse“ dargestellt.