

African History through the lens of Economics

Question and Answers - Week 1

Lecture 1: African Development and History, Tuesday 1 February *with Christopher Ehret*

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Lecture 2: Long-run trends of development in Africa, Wednesday 2 February *with Morten Jerven, Ewout Frankema, and Marlous van Waijenburg*

Please visit our course [website](#) to access the recorded lectures and slides of each session. Due to the high volume of questions received during the live Q&A, we have prepared this document, which addresses a selection of questions that were not possible to answer during the lecture.

Question 1. Many African countries and regions once flourished. Why did this change? Neolithic African societies innovated in agriculture, and subsequent cultures discovered and developed many new technologies. When and why did everything go wrong? Was it all due to slavery and colonialism?

This question and variations on it were posed by many people in week 1. The open-access course will focus on this macro issue.

In week 4 we will delve into the slave-trades period and look at research uncovering lasting harmful consequences of enslavement, conflict and animosity on Africa's long-term political and economic development and its social norms and beliefs (such as interpersonal and institutional trust). If you do not want to wait, we recommend this brief [review](#) by Nathan Nunn.

In week 5 we will examine the legacy of ethnic partitioning and the artificial borders drawn up in European capitals during the Scramble for Africa, and examine empirical studies uncovering their adverse effects on development, public-goods provision and conflict. You may find the review [piece](#) by Elias and Stelios a useful starting point.

In weeks 6 to 8 we will delve into the impact of colonisation. First, we will discuss the macro questions that many of you raised concerning its impact on the continent, then unbundle colonialism into its core impacts: forced labour, violence and repression, road and rail infrastructure, investment in schools and education, and more. Again, you can refer to the [piece](#) by Elias and Stelios for a brief review.

It is important to note that Africa's economic performance is changing significantly. GDP per capita of the continent has nearly doubled during the past 20 years, and six out of the 10 fastest growing economies in the world today are in Africa. Young (2015) tabulated individual-level survey data (discussed on Thursday of week 2) to illustrate the [African growth miracle](#) in the 2000s. This is consistent with [Patel, Sandeul and Subramanian \(2021\)](#) writing, "*this new era of convergence does not stem primarily from growth moderation in the rich world but rather from accelerating growth in the developing world, which has simultaneously become remarkably less volatile and more persistent*". Similarly, [Kremer et al. \(2021\)](#) document faster unconditional growth convergence around the world in the past decades; reflecting, to a great extent, the take-off of African economies.

As the course develops, it will become clear that, like everywhere else, "colonial legacies" play a leading role but are only part of the story. We can disagree on the extent to which the legacy of colonialism is responsible for economic outcomes today, and the four of us still debate this, but clearly more factors are at play, including independence movements, industrialisation policies of the 1960s, other domestic policies, the Cold War, and the impact of political leaders. Examples include Côte d'Ivoire's massive infrastructure and human-capital investments in the 1960s and 1970s, Kenya's promotion of the tech



sector in the past decade, and Rwanda's economic recovery from genocide. Policy reforms tackling market and political distortions also matter, as do trade, investments in infrastructure, education, markets and government efficiency. Many such policies are at least partially independent of historical legacies.

Question 2. Why look only at gross domestic product, income and aggregate trade, and not at broader measures of development?

This is a great question. There is a lot of research that we will start examining next week on issues underlying the compilation of GDP statistics and their relevance for agricultural communities, among others. Given the many questions we have received, we have organised a special lecture on Thursday 10 February (at 3pm GMT), when we will delve into various contemporary datasets (including satellite imagery of light density at night and housing quality) that allow us to move beyond aggregate and noisy output/income statistics.

For those interested in the general patterns of economic growth and inter-continental differences in output, we recommend [Chad Jones \(2016\) *The Facts of Economic Growth*](#).

Another interesting if somewhat technical paper is [Beyond GDP? Welfare across Countries and Time](#) (Johns and Klenow (2016)).

The open-source platform *Our World in Data* has lots of accessible material on various development indicators, growth patterns and other data. Check out the sections on [Economic Growth](#), [Human Development Index](#), [Happiness and Life Satisfaction](#) and [Light at Night](#).

Question 3. What about inequality?

Many have raised the first-order issue of inequality. As many rightly pointed out, inequality is not captured by aggregate income/output composites like GDP. We recommend browsing the [World Inequality Database](#) and the [World Bank Living Standards survey](#) that report inequality statistics for several African countries. You can use the helpful infographics for comparison with other continents and countries.

We will delve into regional and ethnic differences in public goods, education and opportunity more generally in later lectures. A useful starting point if you do not want to wait is this review [piece](#) summarising research (to be discussed in week 10) documenting sizable and persistent differences in opportunity, as reflected in educational mobility between regions across 28 African countries.

[Alesina, Papaioannou and Michalopoulos \(2016\)](#) explore the origins and consequences of between-ethnicity economic inequality across countries. For further discussion about the historical origins of inequality, please see the work by [Belinda Archibong \(2018\)](#), which focuses on Nigeria.

Question 4. Africa is not a homogenous entity but an extraordinarily diverse continent, and treating it as if it is a single country or 'type' of people is highly problematic. Why does the literature not acknowledge this diversity, and why do so many non-Africans get it so wrong?

Africa's diversity is recognised by many of the academic literatures in social sciences. As Chris Ehret highlighted in lecture 1, there is considerable linguistic diversity across and within African countries. There is a plethora of cultures, norms and views. As Stelios highlighted in the introduction, the economics literature often neglected, implicitly or explicitly, this beautiful diversity. Theoretical research in economic development after WWII mostly looked at top-down, 'big-push' style industrialisation, without paying much attention to regional, ethnic and other differences (with the possible exception of rural-urban differences). And empirical research that sprung up in the 1980s and the 1990s mainly compared economic growth across countries, linking it to policies, institutions and educational and capital investments, abstracting from regional and other differences.

But the research of the past 10-20 years that we will mostly cover does (at least partly) unpack Africa's considerable diversity, as research has decisively moved from cross-country comparisons to looking across regions and 'groups' in the same country. Our ambition – and the aim of our research – is to portray these differences in the academic community, understand its origins (which are often related not only to history but also to geography), and shed light on their implications.

We will discuss throughout the class this 'meso' approach. Elias and Stelios have written an overview [piece](#) (Papaioannou and Michalopoulos (2018)) that may be a good starting point.

Question 5. African countries are very diverse. Is there too much 'ethnic politics'? Too much tribalism? Too many languages? What role did this diversity play historically and what is its impact today?

This is another great question that many asked. There is a considerable amount of research on linguistic (and ethnic) heterogeneity, fractionalisation, polarisation and segregation. One strand looks at the origins of language groups, stressing the role of geography, ecology, the disease environment and history. You may want to look, for example, at the following:

- Pelle Ahlerup & Ola Olsson (2012) [The Roots of Diversity](#)
- Matteo Cervellati, Giorgio Chiovelli, and Elena Esposito (2019) [Bite and Divide: Malaria and Ethnolinguistic Diversity](#)
- Michalopoulos Stelios (2012) [The Origins of Ethnolinguistic Diversity](#)

Another strand of research compiles cross-country statistics of various diversity angles, then correlates income, public goods, conflict and education on these measures of diversity. You may want to consult the following cross-country works, for example, which also provide country statistics:

- Fearon (2003) [Ethnic and Cultural Diversity by Country](#)
- Fearon and Laitin (2003) [Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War](#)
- Desmet, Ortuno-Ortin, and Wacziarg (2012) [The political economy of linguistic cleavages](#)
- Alesina, Michalopoulos, and Papaioannou (2016) [Ethnic inequality](#)
- Posner (2009) [Coethnicity: Diversity and the Dilemmas of Collective Action](#)

A more recent strand of the academic literature uses survey data to compile measures of heterogeneity in beliefs, opinions, trust and ideology across and within 'groups', then examines their (conditional) correlation with public goods provision. See, for example, Desmet, Ortuno-Ortin, and Wacziarg (2017) [Culture, Ethnicity and Diversity](#).

Another strand of research looks at favouritism and discrimination (or lack thereof) across social cleavages such as race, ethnicity and religious adherence; often looking across many African economies or within countries. For example, see:

- Franck and Rainer (2012) [Does the Leader's Ethnicity Matter? Ethnic Favouritism, Education, and Health in Sub-Saharan Africa](#)
- Kramon and Posner (2016) [Ethnic Favouritism in Education in Kenya](#)
- Kasara, Kimuli, 2007. [Tax Me If You Can: Ethnic Geography, Democracy, and the Taxation of Agriculture in Africa](#). APSR.

There is also literature on institutional innovation to cope with ethnic diversity, such as:

Francois *et al.* (2015). [How is Power Shared in Africa?](#)

Burgess *et al.* (2015) [The Value of Democracy: Evidence from Road Building in Kenya](#)

Question 6. What are the catalysts and driving forces of the agricultural revolution in Africa and elsewhere, and what shapes early innovations?

This is one of the most fascinating and hotly debated issues in social science. Given its huge importance and the fact that the sample size of countries in the world is rather small, academic research is far from agreeing on the subject.

We recommend Jared Diamond's classic book *Guns, Germs, and Steel* and Yuval Noah Harari's best-selling book *Sapiens*. The theory is that some places, and even whole continents, transitioned from hunter-gathering societies to agricultural ones later than others because of (i) differences in the availability of domesticatable plants and animals, and (ii) difficulties in spreading new technologies over highly variable climatic and geographic zones.

Stelios Michalopoulos and Quamrul Ashraf have an interesting paper on the subject, [Climatic Fluctuations and the Diffusion of Agriculture](#), stressing the impact of climatic volatility on the timing of the Neolithic transition. We also recommend Comin et al. (2010) [Was the Wealth of Nations Determined in 10,000 BC?](#) and Mayshar et al. (2021) [The Origin of the State: Land Productivity or Appropriability?](#)

Question 7. Where can we learn more about various linguistic groups, their histories, their divisions and so on?

Ethnologue is probably the most widely used dataset on languages; see [Welcome to the 24th edition / Ethnologue](#). A good introduction to the dataset and an interesting correlational analysis linking public goods and conflict to linguistic fractionalisation and polarisation is [Desmet, Ortuno-Ortin, and Wacziarg \(2012\) The political economy of linguistic cleavages](#).

Some expressed interest in Bantu groups. The famous paper on the history and spread of Bantu speakers throughout the continent by Grollemund et al. (2015), [Bantu expansion shows that habitat alters the route and pace of human dispersals](#), discusses many features of this fascinating journey. Another illuminating read is the recent economics paper by Arthur Blouin (2021) [Axis-orientation and knowledge transmission: evidence from the Bantu expansion](#).

Additionally, see Christopher Ehret's research [page](#); specifically, [Ehret \(2012\)](#), and Ehret and [Blench \(2008\)](#), for a review.

Question 8. Why is data often lacking, or of low quality in many African countries and places? Are colonial powers to blame? Since there were (and are) so many informal economic transactions, can we learn much from the official data on GDP, trade and taxes?

We will delve into these issues in a special lecture this Thursday 10 February at 3pm GMT on 'Mapping Contemporary African Development' by [Tanner Regan](#) (LBS Wheeler Institute).

Question 9. Why focus on taxation? Is 'taxation' even the right word to describe government activity during the colonial period? How do taxes affect development and welfare generally?

We received many insightful comments and questions on tax systems and development, alongside inquiries about the extractive and oppressive taxation system during the colonial-era.

We have a full lecture on colonial taxation in week 9 featuring [Leigh Gardner](#) (LSE) and [Jutta Bolt](#) (Lund), who have researched colonial tax records and written important papers and books on this topic. There is a lot of extant work on the connection between taxes and development as this is one of the most debated issues in economics.

While most tax payers resent high rates of taxation, countries where taxes (especially on income rather than on trade or consumption) form a higher share of the local economy are, on average, more prosperous and more peaceful, providing citizens with better public goods. A useful starting point for those who want to learn more is the review article by Torsten Persson and Tim Besley [The Causes and Consequences of Development Clusters: State Capacity, Peace, and Income](#) (*Annual Review of Economics*, 2014).

Question 10. Why was the volume of intra-African trade so low, and why does it continue to be low? Can the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) help?

The issue of intra-Africa trade (both across national borders and within countries) is key for the future development of African countries. As we will discuss in the lectures on colonisation, European imperialists were mostly interested in extracting Africa's riches and shipping them to industrialising Europe and the Americas. As a result, there was little, if any, promotion of trade between colonies. Moreover, the limited road and rail investments were designed to link the fertile and mineral-rich areas in the interior with port cities in order to facilitate exports. Illustrative examples are Ghana and Mozambique, where the few railroads linked mineral-rich areas in the interior to coastal cities. This paradigm stands in contrast to railroad investments in Europe and the Americas that connected significant towns and areas, facilitating commerce and promoting development. We will delve into these issues in the lecture by Belinda Archibong (Barnard) and Roland Pongou (Ottawa) on colonial infrastructure investments, which were done with forced labour. For those eager to learn about this issue in advance of the lecture, see the succinct overview by [Remi Jedwab, Alexander Moradi, and Edward Kerby \(LSE\)](#).

Compared to other continents, there is limited road and railroad connectivity across African states. This weak connectivity slows down trade, causes higher prices for consumers and weakens competition. The overwhelming majority of applied research suggests that promoting trade increases economic welfare, although in some instances these gains may come alongside higher inequality.

Question 11. Do cross-country comparisons account for differences in costs of living? Why were wages historically so low in Africa? If wages stay low, should we expect a massive brain drain from Africa – or might some sort of comparative advantage emerge?

Cross-country output (GDP), investment and consumption statistics try to account for differences in the costs of living. Economists term this PPP-adjustment (purchasing power parity). For more details, please see the documentation of the [Penn World Tables](#). We will discuss GDP estimates on Thursday, 10th of February at 3pm GMT in the special lecture 'Mapping Contemporary African Development'.

As we will discuss in the following weeks, enslavement and colonial-era forced labour, alongside specialisation in agriculture, have played a key role in African wages. We recommend Marlous van Waijenburg and Ewout Frankema's [The Great Convergence: Skill Accumulation and Mass Education in Africa and Asia, 1870-2010](#).

We cannot foretell African migration, but this report from the Afrobarometer may be interesting: ['Updating' the narrative about African migration' | Afrobarometer](#)

Question 12. Gender issues in Africa: When and why did the role of women in Africa become so depreciated? How does it compare to the situation in Europe and other places historically? Are colonial powers to blame?

These are all big questions that only have partial answers so far. One hypothesis is that, among agrarian societies with a low level of automation, worker output depends on physical capabilities, and this creates gender gaps and shapes gender roles. [Alesina, Giuliano and Nunn \(2011\)](#) conduct an empirical investigation testing this hypothesis. Their study exploits variations in the historical geo-climatic suitability of the environment for growing crops and the use of the plough. In week 4, Nathan Nunn will speak about the impact of the slave trade on gender roles.

In his lecture Leonard Wantchekon will present his ongoing research on the intergenerational impact of the Dahomey Amazons, an all-female military regiment of the Kingdom of Dahomey. ([Link](#))

I would also like to refer you to several other interesting papers that investigate various forms of the above questions. [Alesina et al. \(2016\)](#) conduct a cross-cultural analysis in Africa to identify the determinants of violence against women. The authors focus on cultural factors arising from pre-colonial customs and find



that ancient socioeconomic conditions explain contemporary social norms around gender roles, family structures and intrafamily violence. [Nunn \(2014\)](#) investigates how Protestant and Catholic missionaries across Africa differentially promoted the education of males and females. [Gottlieb and Robinson \(2016\)](#) discuss gender gap and political behaviour in Sub-Saharan Africa. For further examination of women's historical role in African societies, see [Saidi \(2010\)](#); while [Giuliano \(2017\)](#) conducts a global comparison on social attitudes towards women and their role in different societies.

Question 13. Why learn history and take this course?

We are passionate about history, so perhaps we are not well suited to answering this question! However, historical analysis is not just about 'explaining' what happened: it's about learning from the past to make better and smarter decisions today: "It is at the end of the old strings that you weave the new ones". Studying history is also about being curious about the lives and experiences of past generations and what they liked and didn't like. This is just one of our motivations for studying African history: historical research has intrinsic value, independent of its contribution to current development debates.

Question 14. How reliable and useful are data from colonial archives?

Data and writings from colonial archives are often biased and racist. However, other information and data are more objective, such as the location of cities, roads, weather, number of prisons, commerce, schools, tax rates, etc. While measurement error, systematic or classic, is widespread, we can often at least partially account for it by comparing data with other sources. For example, we can compare reports in European archives on ancestral ethnic regions with anthropological and ethnographic linguistic maps. Likewise, we can contrast colonial reports on political organisation with anthropological information, and even folk tales, on political centralisation. You may find [Stelios Michalopoulos and Melanie Meng Xue's work on folklore](#) interesting.

There is also [new research](#) using primary data collection during the colonial period (Wantchekon *et al.*, 2015 and 2020) that consists of face-to-face interviews of descendants and information from family archives. So, relatively unbiased historical research is possible.

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