

# Africans in the New Economic History of Africa

by James Fenske

A new generation of scholars is changing the face of African economic history. This revival of learning and culture provides an important insight into the continent.



Fifteen years ago, Antony Hopkins described a “new economic history” of Africa, and ten years ago Gareth Austin and Stephen Broadberry announced a “renaissance” of African economic history. Economic historians working in Africa’s past have done a lot to do what Johan Fourie and Nonso Obikili call “decolonizing with data.” Much exciting work in this field is being done by scholars based both in economics departments and in history departments in Africa. Let me describe the work of a handful of these scholars.

**Collins Edigin**, a lecturer at the University of Benin, works on how the people of Nigeria’s Benin region shaped colonial social and tax policies, and how they were in turn shaped by these same policies. Using a historical approach, he argues that the British government was not interested in becoming involved in a colonial adventure in Benin, but was only pulled in after consular officials were killed by soldiers from the Benin Kingdom. In other work, he has shown that the British taxed more than they spent in Benin after 1945, motivated by the desire to rebuild at home after the Second World War.

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**Carolyn Chisadza**, an Associate Professor at the University of Pretoria, works at the intersection of development, inequality and history. In her past research collaborations with Prof Matthew Clance, Dr Leone Walters and Dr Tendai Zawaira, they use a structural equation modelling approach to link historical patriarchal norms relating to kinship, marital residence, and land inheritance with female labour force participation in the present. In related work, they show that the positive link between historical slave trade exposure and women’s voting disappears in patrilineal regions. In other work, they provide evidence that neither missions, nor pre-colonial centralisation, nor coloniser identity on their own explain present-day development outcomes. Rather, these historical institutions interact. For example, the higher literacy rates found in former British colonies and in locations with missions are even greater in areas with pre-colonial centralisation, where leaders were more likely to be accountable.

**Calumet Links**, a lecturer at Stellenbosch University, works primarily on South Africa’s Cape Colony. Using tax data from the early 19th century, he has shown that slave labour and other forms of free labour were not substitutable to farmers, as slave labour not only provided the workforce on a farm, it also served as collateral. In forthcoming work, he demonstrates agency of the indigenous Cree in Canada and Khoe in South Africa in their trade with European companies.

**Nonso Obikili** is currently a Development Coordination Officer with the United Nations in Abuja. In his past work, he has shown that the long-run effects of the transatlantic slave trade in Africa included greater political fragmentation and reduced literacy. He has also shown that cocoa farmers in colonial Nigeria who lived in towns with more social capital spent more on education.

## “Much exciting work in this field is being done by scholars based both in economics departments and in history departments in Africa”

A new generation of African scholars working outside Africa is also pushing the field forwards. Space lets me only name a few.

**Marie Christelle Mabeu** uses a regression discontinuity design to show that hut villages of Burkina Faso exposed to forced labour migration in the colonial period have more temporary migration up to today and lower rates of fertility today. **Awa Ambra Seck** shows that Moroccan soldiers in the French colonial army established emigration networks in the municipalities of France where they were stationed. **Abel Gwaindepi** shows that the Cape Colony, unlike other settler colonies, was insulated from direct taxes, putting it on an unsustainable fiscal path. **Roland Pongou and Dozie Okoye** have shown that colonial investments such as railroads and missions have only had a long-run impact on development where alternatives – water transport and early access to government schools, respectively – were not present. **Belinda Archibong**, in joint work with Nonso Obiiki, has shown that incarceration increased in colonial Nigeria at times when commodity prices and rainfall raised the demand for labour – that is, at times when prison labour would be particularly valuable to the state in keeping the labour costs of public works low. Their paper will soon appear in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*.

A new generation of scholars is changing the face of African economic history, and their work is essential reading. ◀

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