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Edited by Emmanuel Akyeampong, Robert H. Bates, Nathan Nunn and James A. Robinson

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## Introduction

### Africa – The Historical Roots of Its Underdevelopment

Emmanuel Akyeampong, Robert H. Bates, Nathan Nunn,  
and James A. Robinson

Africa poses the development challenge of our time. Once devastated by famine and mired in poverty, India and much of Asia are now growing economically. While Africa's economies too are now growing, in many African countries, people are just now returning to the levels of per capita income they enjoyed more than a half century ago.<sup>1</sup> The current poverty and the widespread economic decline following independence in Africa have led to a great deal of research by development economists and political scientists (Bates 1981; Easterly and Levine 1997; Ndulu et al. 2007; Sachs and Warner 1997). Yet this work is often very policy focused and does not place Africa within the larger processes that created the Great Divergence in the early modern and modern worlds (Pomeranz 2000).

This is somewhat odd, because the adoption of a much more historical approach has revolutionized research on comparative economic development in the past fifteen years. For example, the economic divergence that took place in the Americas during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is now seen as deeply rooted in the different institutional structures created during the colonial period (Bruhn and Gallego 2012; Dell 2010; Engerman and Sokoloff 1997, 2011). It is commonplace, though not uncontroversial, to blame Africa's economic problems on its economic, political, and perhaps social institutions. It is less common to find studies that situate these

<sup>1</sup> In its focus on the historical roots of Africa's underdevelopment, this volume does not include contributions on more contemporary developments, such as the World Bank's structural adjustment programs or the current commodity boom, driven by rising Asian demand, among other factors (Mkandawire and Soludo 2003; World Bank 1994). On the current growth cycle in Africa, see IMF (2009) and Kasekende, Brixova, and Ndikumana (2010). See also Radelet (2010).

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[More information](#)

issues in a historical context and consider why they diverged from the rest of the world in the first place (see Austin 2008; Nunn 2008a; and Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2001, 2002; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2010, for exceptions).

The aim of this book is to trigger a research agenda of the type that has reoriented our understanding of the Americas (see Hopkins, 2009, for similar suggestions). Although scholars have published a rich literature on the economic history of Africa, contemporary approaches are yet to be integrated into the broader literature on its development, and for Africa we have nothing like the type of synthesis or consensus that has emerged for the Americas.

Attempts to provide grand narratives of African economic history are not new, of course, though they took some time to emerge. The economic problems of Africa were an intense subject of interest for European colonial officials. Colonial powers often justified their colonization of Africa on the basis of the continent's poverty, poor institutions, and backward technology. They put forth various explanations for African poverty. An example is the notion that the incidence of the tsetse fly limited the use of draught animals that impeded the adoption of the plow and wheeled transportation (see McPhee 1926). Yet colonial officials did not create a coherent view of the economic development of Africa and were typically content to argue that colonialism would lead to a straightforward dissemination of modern technology and institutions with immediate positive effects on African living standards.

As early as 1958, however, Suret-Canal provided a famous Marxist interpretation of African poverty by applying the notion of the "Asiatic mode of production." This approach took it for granted that Africa was relatively poor and explained this by the fact that Africa was trapped with precapitalist institutions. The research he pioneered long flourished in African studies (see Birnberg and Resnick 1975; Law 1978; Sender and Smith 1986) and triggered a fascinating debate over the role of feudalism in Africa (for example, Crummey 1980; Goody 1971). Another grand narrative emanated from anthropology, when the "substantivist school," also accepting Africa's historical poverty as given, argued that African societies were not based on market principles (though they did have marketplaces), and therefore did not respond to the economic incentives created since the Industrial Revolution in ways that generated prosperity (Dalton 1976; Polanyi 1966; Polanyi, Arensberg, and Pearson eds. 1957). The 1960s and 1970s also saw a great deal of work by dependency and world systems theorists who attempted to explain African underdevelopment not as a consequence of primarily internal dynamics, as in the Marxist and substantivist approaches,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

but as a consequence of its integration on unfavorable terms with the world economy (e.g., Amin 1974, 1976; Wallerstein 1974–2011). This literature has many variants; for example, Rodney (1972) developed an influential synthesis of Marxist and dependency theory approaches with a heavy emphasis on the impact of formal colonization. Other scholars pointed to specific features that were quantitatively so important as to become the dominant force shaping African economic history. For Goody (1971), this was the relative abundance of land and scarcity of labor. For Inikori (1992), it was the Atlantic slave trade. For Douglas (1962, 1963) and Vansina (1978), it was the historical dynamics of state formation in Africa. For Law (1981) and Miller (2009), it was the absence of the horse. For others, it was the impact of colonization (Palmer and Parsons 1977).

Common to this research was the acceptance of Africa's poverty relative to the rest of the world in the early modern period. In a seminal symposium based on the paper by Thornton (1992), those unconvinced by the historical evidence for Africa's poverty challenged this view. Other scholars also critiqued these early approaches for their overly static view of the African past (see Jerven 2010).

Alongside such grand narratives a large monographic literature developed focusing on specific themes. One focused on precolonial trade (Birmingham and Gray 1970; Bohannon and Dalton 1962; Meillassoux 1971). A second investigated the impact of the slave trade (Curtin 1975; Manning 1990; Miller 1996). These literatures have been surveyed by many (e.g., Austen 1987; Hopkins 1973; Wickens 1980, 1986).<sup>2</sup>

Yet while many of these early narratives linger (for example, the relationship between the substantivist school and Hydén's, 1980, 1983, "economy of affection") and have sparked productive and lively debates (for example, that between Hopkins, 1973, and Dalton, 1976, on the empirical applicability of substantivist claims and the book by Hill, 1963, arguing for the sophisticated economic rationality of Africans and the adaptability of traditional economic institutions), their conceptual frameworks have fallen out of favor. Political scientists focused much more on the politics of contemporary Africa. Anthropologists moved away from research on political and economic institutions. Economists studied contemporary development problems as if they were timeless, and conducted no research within the subfield of economic history in economics departments. The consequence is a relative void of convincing narratives of African economic history even in its own terms, let alone in a comparative context. For example, the big

<sup>2</sup> Austin (2008) provides a recent synthesis of much of this research.

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[More information](#)

debates in comparative economic history over the past twenty years have focused squarely on questions such as the divergence between Europe and Asia (Findlay and O'Rourke 2007; Jones 1981; Morris 2011; Pomeranz 2000; Rosenthal and Wong 2011; Van Zanden 2009; Wong 1997) or on why Britain diverged from Western Europe (Allen 2009; Mokyr 2009). In no study is there any reference to Africa or to its divergence from the other economies of the world. Why this occurred has never been one of the big questions in either economic history or comparative economic development.

Our book is a reflection of the fact that this situation of neglect is now changing. Allen (2011) has made a pioneering attempt to integrate Africa into his theory of the great divergence, and we hope that the chapters in this volume will provide stimulus to make further progress toward this goal.

At the same time as this nascent interest by comparative economic historians, economists who saw the economic problems of Africa as essentially those of any poor economy began to recognize the problematic nature of this view. As Africa emerged from colonialism in the 1960s, the first wave of development economists proposed simplified models of African poverty that either wrapped countries into general models of the problems of "backward economies," implying few differences between Africa and Asia, for instance, or proposed ahistorical models of the sources of poverty (see Killick, 1978, for a good overview). The starting point for this is easily seen by reading the characterization of African development problems by late colonial scholars such as Stamp (1953) and Batten (1954). Only with the successive failure of the models of development economics (see Easterly 2001) did a perception emerge that it is critical to understand the specificities of African society and institutions and where these came from in order to unlock the vast economic potential of the continent. There certainly were voices in the wilderness urging this (Hopkins 1986), but the larger intellectual reorientation over the past decade in comparative economic development toward a focus on historical long-run forces shaping institutional development has emphasized the need for completely rethinking the nature of African poverty.

The attempt to develop a convincing comparative account of African development is necessarily interdisciplinary. It involves absorbing not just the recent research in economic history and comparative development, but also the rich literature on the economic and political history and anthropology of Africa. In fact, it was historians, such as McGreevey (1971) and Coatsworth (1978), as much as anyone who initially framed the new questions that scholars began to ask about the comparative economic history of the Americas. The task is neither one of embedding Africa within some

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[More information](#)

preexisting paradigm nor of developing some explanation for Africa's uniqueness. Rather, it is to refine and reevaluate the types of explanations that now reign in comparative economic history and development. The historical evolution and development of African political systems, economic institutions such as product and factor markets, or the nature of landownership provide an unrivaled chance to learn about economic history.

We do not pretend that this book can provide the type of synthesis to which we aspire. We can only hope that it marks the start. Its origins lie in a conference we organized in Accra, Ghana in July 2010, with the type of interdisciplinary group of scholars that seemed necessary for this venture. At the conference, we focused on several main questions: When did Africa become poor? Why did Africa become that way? What mechanisms made it so? And why did it stay that way?

While each of the chapters in this volume addresses the roots of Africa's poverty, they fall into four distinct categories. Contributors to the first category view Africa from a global perspective, asking "When did Africa become poor?" and comparing its development to that in other regions. In response to our next question, "Why did Africa become that way?," a second set of chapters focuses on institutions, both those that antedate the colonial encounter and the slave trade and those that were shaped by them. The third cluster of chapters highlights the values and practices of some of Africa's cultures and assesses the possibilities they open and the limitations they impose for better understanding long-term economic development. The last category of chapters addresses the impact of external forces, most notably the slave trade, colonialism, and global markets, in shaping African development.

#### AFRICA IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The chapter by Christopher Ehret reaches far back in history – in some instances to 10,000 BCE – to argue that the level of economic development on the African continent was on par with that in the rest of the world. Agriculture, he contends, emerged sometime between 9000 and 6000 BCE in the southern part of the Eastern Sahara, which is comparatively early by global standards. Some of the earliest developments in ceramics took place in Africa around 9000 BCE, as did the domestication of cattle between 8500 and 7200 BCE by the Northern Sudanese in the Eastern Sahara. His reading of the evidence suggests that the people of this region also numbered among the first to cultivate crops. Far from lagging behind the rest of the world, African societies of this period were positioned at the technological

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

frontier. Like all issues in early African economic history, the specific dating of developments is debated. Africa is far less studied archaeologically than the rest of the world, and the absence of written records and material remains means that a great deal of creativity has to be used, including such controversial techniques as glottochronology.<sup>3</sup> Yet it was just such innovations that put precolonial African history on the map in the 1960s.<sup>4</sup>

Ehret's chapter suggests that it is most likely that the economic divergence of Africa from Eurasia is a feature of the past millennium. Much other work points in this direction. Phillipson (1998), for instance, illustrated the compelling comparisons between the Kingdom of Axum and the Eastern Roman Empire at the start of the Dark Ages, and even pointed out how theories such as Piernne's "Mohammed and Charlemagne" applied equally to Ethiopia. Haour (2000) showed great continuities during the medieval period between the central Sahel and northwestern Europe.

Further evidence on these issues comes from David Weil's chapter, which manages to narrow down the timing of Africa's divergence to an even greater degree. He presents evidence on some proxies for Africa's prosperity relative to that of other regions, using such commonly employed measures as population density, city size, and technology.<sup>5</sup> His data suggest that at 1500 BCE, rather than being the poorest region of the world, Africa appears quite average. Population density, conditional on land quality, was higher in Africa than in the Americas and Oceania, but lower than in Europe and Asia. A similar picture emerges from the data on urbanization and technological choice: Africa was on par with the Americas, but significantly less urbanized and less technologically advanced than Europe and Asia. Weil also examines state development, measured from 1 to 1500 CE, using the State Antiquity Index developed by Chanda and Putterman (2007). Again, taken as a whole, Africa attained levels of state development that were lower than Asia and Europe, but higher than the Americas or Oceania.

As with Ehret's data, these estimates are conjectural. Population density, for example, has to be reconstructed by backward projection from early colonial censuses, and estimates of urban population may be even more speculative. The fact that different authors highlighted in this book marshal quite different numbers highlights this difficulty and the need for further

<sup>3</sup> See Barker (2006) for a different assessment of what the evidence says about Africa, and see Vansina (2004) for a critique of the use of glottochronology.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Vansina (1985).

<sup>5</sup> See Prados de la Escosura (2011) for a complementary exercise.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

research. However, a great deal of qualitative evidence suggests that the end judgment is broadly accurate and unlikely to be overturned by further refinements in the data.

As Weil stresses, the average difference between Africa and the rest of the world masks significant heterogeneity within Africa, with the most developed parts being North Africa, West Africa, and Ethiopia. The measures Weil examined suggest that these parts of Africa had attained levels of development that were just below or even sometimes on par with Eurasia. Elsewhere, acephalous societies were common, for example, in the Horn of Africa or Southern Nigeria, and these places were probably quite a bit poorer and less technologically advanced. Moreover, even in the more advanced places, we know that there were important elements of technology that lagged behind technology in other parts of the world. While Ethiopia and North Africa had writing, the wheel, and the plow, West Africa did not.

To examine the trajectory of African development between 1650 and 2000 CE, Patrick Manning traces its demographic history. Total population both provides a proxy for economic development and is of interest for its own sake, particularly given the export of human beings during the slave trade. In many ways an update and extension of Manning (1990), the chapter argues that from the seventeenth century to the twentieth century, the continent's population was much larger in size yet growing at a slower rate than previously thought. The implication is clear: by 1650 Africa entered a period of sustained stagnation, one that lasted for two and a half centuries. Such a fact, if it holds up to further empirical scrutiny, is undoubtedly a big part of the story behind Africa's divergence since 1500.

Joseph Inikori takes a comparative perspective in his chapter and probes the relative development of West Africa and the Americas between 1400 and 1850 CE. Inikori examines estimates of city sizes and population densities, as well as the history of market development, trade, and specialization, and argues that, prior to 1500, the level of economic development was higher in West Africa than in the Americas, but that the economic development of the Americas thereafter increased dramatically while that in West Africa did not.

When Inikori turns to the causes of this reversal, he points to the transatlantic slave trade, which shipped between 11 and 12.5 million Africans to the Americas. The use of enslaved Africans enabled the growth of highly specialized plantation agriculture and mining: an advantage that accrued to the Americas rather than to Africa. In West Africa, participation in the transatlantic slave trade diverted effort from and actively hindered productive activity, thus contributing to Africa's stagnation and relative

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

underdevelopment, he argues. See Inikori (1992) for a development of this view.

The chapters thus suggest that Africa's underdevelopment is not a historical constant or something inevitable. Regions within Africa – namely West Africa and Ethiopia – were once more highly developed than the Americas and Oceania and comparable to Europe and Asia. Not until after 1500 did Africa stagnate and lag behind, as measured by population, city growth, state development, or technological progress.

These chapters thus set the stage for our attempt to explain Africa's current underdevelopment. Because Africa's economic fortunes have varied, time invariant factors, such as natural endowments, are unable to explain its present underdevelopment. Rather, the authors turn to more malleable factors: institutions, culture, and relations with the outside world. It is easy to see that these things are likely interconnected. For example, one potential explanation for why Africa exported slaves given that it was labor scarce is that economic institutions within Africa were so poor that while physical marginal productivity was potentially very high, the appropriable product was low, thus making it relatively attractive to sell people into slavery rather than to exploit them on the continent (Robinson 2012).

#### INSTITUTIONS

Among the institutions examined in this book's chapters, the political receive the most attention. And among the most important institutions are the state and the regimes that governed it. Also critical, though less discussed in this book, are economic institutions.

Early accounts of Africa's interior often stressed the level of conflict and war making, which, some researchers claimed, helped to account for the continent's relative lack of development (a lucid nineteenth-century account with this flavor is Speke, 1863). Inspired by subsequent work in comparative history, some of the authors in this volume mount a counterargument. Early modern Europe, which experienced dramatic changes in political and economic institutions, was violent, Reid and Bates note in their chapters. But according to some (e.g., Bates 2001; Brewer 1988; Herbst 2000; Roberts 1956; Tilly 1975), the result was the emergence of the "fiscal-military" state: one that mobilized political power in support of economic development. Be it offensive or defensive, warfare is expensive – it must be financed – and those seeking to enhance the military capabilities of the state may therefore use their power to promote economic growth. In pursuit of this theme, Bates joins Reid in noting the protection states in Africa



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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

offered to trade routes and commercial centers, as well as states' provision of public goods: roads, pontoons, and peace in the market. Using data from the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample, Osafo-Kwaako and Robinson (2013) show that greater precolonial political centralization is indeed correlated with improved transportation infrastructure, greater occupational specialization, and the use of more advanced technologies. Heywood and Thornton, moreover, examine in their chapters attempts by embattled African rulers to promote technological change by securing trained artisans from abroad.

Thornton's chapter applies the paradigm of the fiscal-military state to Dahomey, which sent its armies out virtually every year. But, Thornton argues, these armies "may not have simply been economic instruments destined to shape the development of the state." He draws on the correspondence of Dahomean monarchs in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Agaja in the eighteenth century, Adandozan between 1810 and 1812, and others). Thornton underscores how in the letters the Dahomean monarchs refute the allegation that they went to war to capture slaves. Agongolo noted how, unlike England that was protected by the sea and had commerce everywhere, Dahomey was hedged in by other nations similarly armed, which was the cause of incessant conflict. We certainly can read the Atlantic trade as the backdrop to this militarization and constant wars, as the slave trade both militarized societies and absorbed the captives of wars. But for Thornton, the slave trade is not sufficient explanation for Africa's lack of industrialization. Thornton opines that the Industrial Revolution was not state run in Europe, but a private enterprise, often in spite of state interference and monopoly concessions. And it is this little understood dimension of precolonial African economies – the private sector – that may shed light on Africa's failure to industrialize.<sup>6</sup>

These works resonate with a long history in African studies that addresses the processes of state formation.<sup>7</sup> One tradition, recently surveyed by McIntosh (1999), argues that African states have developed along historical paths that differ from those traced by early states in Eurasian; by implication, it would reject the arguments of Bates and Reid.<sup>8</sup> The historical nature and dynamics of the state in Africa and its comparison with Eurasian states remains an important area for future research, particularly because recent empirical studies suggest that precolonial political institutions have left a

<sup>6</sup> See Law (1977) and Manning (2004) for discussion in the case of Dahomey.

<sup>7</sup> Going as far back as Evans-Pritchard and Fortes (1940).

<sup>8</sup> McIntosh (1988) for the Niger basin in West Africa and Sheriff (2010) for the East African coast stress the feature of heterarchy in inter-polity relations in early Africa, not hierarchy based on aggressive expansion.

long shadow in Africa (Gennaioli and Rainer 2007; Michalopoulos and Papaioannou 2013).

Early accounts by explorers, adventurers, and missionaries tended to stress the malevolence of Africa's rulers: their violent temperaments, their unbridled appetites, and their sadistic dispositions. But, Bates notes from the evidence we possess on Africa's traditional political institutions, while there certainly were despotisms, for example in the Kongo or Buganda, in many places political institutions existed that constrained such behavior (see also Beattie 1959). Even had these leaders been as benighted as European travelers held them to be, they would have found their actions checked by nonroyals who held high office or by independent councils. While travelers' accounts may stress the fearsome character of Africa's monarchs, then, the empirical record suggests a more nuanced portrayal: Africa's precolonial institutions were often imbricated with agencies of constraint. An important example of this theme is the literature that attempts to explain Botswana's extraordinary economic success since independence and that stresses the importance of precolonial institutions of accountability in the Tswana states in helping to create good governance (Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2003; Leith 2005).

In Africa as in Europe, there was warfare, of course; less obviously perhaps, Reid and Bates conclude, military insecurity appears to have fortified the hand of political leaders who sought to protect and promote economic activity. As Reid notes, in West Africa, most states possessed an urban core; in support of merchants and artisans, rulers employed the forces of the state to protect markets and to promote trade. In East Africa, he writes, such efforts were devoted to long-distance trade, which promoted regional specialization and "Smithian" growth, that is, increases in welfare resulting from specialization and exchange. By incorporating those who could pillage and destroy into administrative agencies subject to command and control, the formation of states demobilized banditry and transformed warfare into an instrument of public policy – sometimes for the worst, but sometimes too for the better.

The arguments of Bates and Reid suggest that rather than Africa diverging from Eurasia around 1500, the similarities were much closer until the past two hundred years. Indeed, both chapters suggest that African states were in many places during the early modern period evolving along similar lines to those in Eurasia, and only colonialism and the postcolonial international system blocked this path of institutional change. They both agree with Thornton (1992) that African economic divergence must have come much more recently.