

Hopkins A. G. (2020), *An Economic History of West Africa*, London and New-York, Palgrave, 416 p., second edition.

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Representing part of the discipline of African history, as African Studies emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, a first generation of Africanist economic historians, the likes of Philip D. Curtin (trained in the United States) and Kenneth Onwuka Dike (trained in Sierra Leone and the United Kingdom), were eager to learn more about the internal and external economic relations that had shaped a continent currently on the brink of independence, hoping to establish how this past might inform the development of newly established nation states. The first edition of A. G. Hopkins' *An Economic History of West Africa*, published in 1976, now considered a standard work on the subject, was part of that initial wave of scholarship in this tradition.

Comprising six analytical chapters, the book was daring in its ambition to raise several hypotheses about changes in economy and material life in the large and diverse region of West Africa from a historical perspective (covering the early modern into the postcolonial period). Setup in a chronological order, the chapters of the book documented natural resource endowments, restrictions on wealth accumulation and processes of production between the forest zone and Sahel; external engagements via the trans-Saharan and trans-Atlantic trade; and imperialism and the rise of export agriculture amidst the slow death of slavery. The final three chapters were dedicated to assessing the legacy of colonialism on African development. Using a model that drew on "the concept of open and closed economies" (p. 30), Hopkins explored the initial expansion and later contraction of the modern market economy between the period of early colonial rule, the interwar years, and the era of decolonisation. The author's greatest contribution was his countering of many of the biases of contemporary scholars at Western universities by disproving assumptions about the passivity and irrationality of Africans as well as their supposedly ingrained resistance to



capital and unresponsiveness to economic incentives. To this day, many of Hopkin's hypotheses continue to stimulate the field of African economic history. Expanding on the first edition of the book, the second edition, published in 2020, provides important improvements to the work and presents readers with an informative insight into the past and present of (West) African economic historiography.

As Hopkins explains for the 1950s and 1960s, Africanist economic historians stood apart from the broader field of African history given their particular angle on the subject. It was virtually impossible to present the typically unequal, if not bloody or brutal relations, negotiations and forms of suppression that shaped processes of wealth accumulation on the continent – as well as social and political relations – in a favourable light. These were often grim details, the emphasising of which may have seemed tactless, if not unempathetic, to some amidst African struggles for self-rule and independence from colonial domination. African economic history subsequently flourished during the 1970s before declining alongside many other fields, such as the related sub-field of African labour history, albeit for different reasons. In a 2009 article, Hopkins blamed a general neglect of the study of economic history as well as “the process of cleavage in universities that divided history from economics and took the economic segment into technical complexities that escaped the interest, as well as the grasp, of most historians”.¹ As shines through in the second edition of *An Economic History of West Africa*, Hopkins has made it his mission to re-unite these two fields of expertise in order to address the continent's longstanding challenge of poverty alleviation. Indeed, since his 2009 article was published, we have witnessed a revival of African economic history, with a growing number of academic studies (see e.g. the journal *African Economic History*) and networks (e.g. the African Economic History Network) exploring the topics of poverty, the continent's domestic economies, foreign trade, and related themes.

As part of this process of disciplinary renewal, Hopkins has been particularly eager to promote broad studies with widely applicable theses along the lines of those produced by early Africanist economic historians like himself. As such, amidst self-critical reflections on the shortcomings of the first edition of his book, which he generally ascribes to the growing pains of a young scholar undertaking novel scholarship in a developing sub-discipline, the second edition highlights some of the rich scholarship generated from his original study. This category includes but is certainly not limited to the scholarship of Gareth Austin, Robin Law, Polly Hill, as well as the more recent contributions of Leigh Gardner, Marlous van Waijenburg and Romain Tiquet (which do not necessary limit themselves to the West African context).² They and others have applied an expansive approach to investigating key features, the social

¹ Hopkins A. G. (2009), « The New Economic History of Africa », *The Journal of African History*, 50(2): 157.

² Austin Gareth (2009), « Cash Crops and Freedom: Export Agriculture and the Decline of Slavery in Colonial West Africa », *International Review of Social History*, 54(1), p. 1–37; Law Robin (2002), *From Slave Trade to “Legitimate” Commerce: The Commercial Transition in Nineteenth-Century West Africa*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Hill Polly (1997), *The Migrant Cocoa-Farmers of Southern Ghana: A Study in Rural Capitalism*, Münster, LIT Verlag; Gardner Leigh (2013), *Taxing Colonial Africa: The Political Economy of British Imperialism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press; Van Waijenburg Marlous (2018), « Financing the African Colonial State: The Revenue Imperative and Forced Labor », *Journal of Economic History*, 78(1), p. 40–80; Tiquet Romain, (2019), *Travail forcé et mobilisation de la main-d'oeuvre au Sénégal : années 1920-1960*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes.

impacts, and the legacies of export agriculture, the colonial tax regime, colonial forced labour practices, and much more.

A senior scholar of African and Global History, Hopkins remains modest about his accomplishments but confident in setting out potential programmes of research for future scholars. With an overall message that much work remains to be done, he references his original 1976 study as well as the work of other Africanist economic historians to hint at where fruitful future investigations may lie. Above all, he urges others to take up studies on domestic and external trade in precolonial African history as well on the long-term material impact of the trans-Atlantic and trans-Saharan slave trades on African development.

As a final note, it could be argued that Hopkins has missed an opportunity in his most recent appeal by maintaining a distance from the broader (more political) field of African Studies. With the latter shifting towards embracing more equitable and inclusive – in other words, decolonial – practices in both the Global North and the Global South and promoting research that actually benefits African citizens, for the sake of recruiting fresh talent, there could have been value in putting such a balance sheet on display as it concerns African economic history. Even with a narrow focus on broader and more technical approaches, this means of self-reflection could have given rise to enlightening and inspiring, if not outrightly surprising, attributions of success for the economic historiography of West Africa.

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