
Book Reviews

A Modern Economic History of Africa: Vol. 1 - The Nineteenth Century, by Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, publisher: CODESRIA, Dakar; distributor: ABC, Oxford, 1993, 501 p., 51. bibl., 23 p. index, 5 maps.

Mohamed Mbodj*

Zeleza's aim was 'to strip the thick layers of myth from the complex maze that is Africa economic history. If by the end the reader feels that nothing is new, but questions some of the things assumed known, then it is well worth the effort' (p. 423). In fact, it is a textbook. It is structured in 5 parts, plus introduction, conclusion, maps, bibliography, and index. The introduction is devoted to rethinking African economic history, followed by parts of varied length on environment and demography (59p), agriculture (88 p.), mining and manufacture (70 p.), domestic and regional trade (107 p.), and finally, international trade and Imperialism (80 p.). And, finally, a short conclusion tries to expand the horizons of Africa's economic history.

In Part 1, the author describes the patterns of climatic change alternating between aridity and humidity, the changing ecology of disease, a slight population increase after decline in the first half of the century, the deleterious impact of the slave trade, the settlement patterns including migrations, and African societies' reactions to the new context. He states that environmental and economic disasters advantaged Europe in the eve of conquest which changed the structure of the society's management of environment.

In part 2 he analyzes the different systems of land use, agrarian relations of production, and the beginning of colonial agriculture. He concludes that diversity and complexity dominated before Europe, but with the success of an agricultural revolution by the end of the century, African agricultural systems were introduced into the world economic system at a very vulnerable level.

Part 3 deals with mining and manufacturing, departing himself from the diffusionist models which made every attempt to trace external origins for certain technologies and their eventual adoption or lack in Africa. He saw no technological conservation, but only a need to reassess the 19th century general decline. As with mining, handicrafts was more resilient in withstanding foreign competition than thought. In fact, colonial industrialization was based on dispossession and coercion (South Africa), while the French and

the British deliberately deindustrialized most of North Africa (Algeria and Egypt). At the end, African modernization attempts failed for varied reasons, among which social changes in the basis of the regimes and European intervention played a key role.

Part 4 succeeded in staying away from the rather sterile substantivist-formalist debate because both markets and other forms of exchange played a role, the latter much more than previously asserted. The author discusses the formal distinction between local and long-distance (regional) trade, concluding on a blurred picture based on common organization and products. He traces major differences. A monopoly system was dominant in North Africa where trade with Sub-Saharan Africa was more important than the seaborne one before the last quarter of the 19th century (especially in Morocco and Libya), and did not collapse, on the contrary, while there was continuation of an open trade in the West and the East, a large and complex industry which attracted Europeans and Asians. The major event was the demonetization of African currencies which destroyed accumulation and impoverished overnight the merchant classes.

In the last part, Zeleza describes the enormous expansion in volume and persons involved in the international trade, although considerable differences did exist between regions. Therefore, there were varied patterns of integration into the world capitalist economy. Despite the fact that the partition was a heterogeneous experience, economic factors indeed played the decisive role, even with very different triggers; rising indebtedness in North Africa, intense trade rivalries and steep fall in commodity prices in West Africa, speculative capital by the 'feeble' (Belgium and Portugal) in Central Africa, mining capital in Southern Africa, and preemptive colonization in East Africa. Then, it is safe to say that World factors were the causes of imperialism, and not Africa's internal problems, internal fierce resistance opposed to conquest is another proof of that. The slave trade set the basis for colonization; both were launched by Europe with incredible violence.

In his conclusion Zeleza deplors that too often, African societies were described for what they were not, rather than what they were. Here are his main conclusions. On the social ground, varied gender divisions of labour existed, and there is neither patriarchal oppression nor equality across Africa. Labour process covered a wide variety from household, to bonded, and free wage labour. Social differentiation became more pronounced as the century progressed. The 19th century is a period of tumultuous change in virtually all spheres, thus justifying the term 'revolutionary'. On the physical level, environmental conditions fluctuated violently between peaks of aridity and humidity, while the demographic structure was deeply transformed by abolition, fast spreading virulent diseases, mass migrations, immigration from Europe and Asia, urbanization, and depredations by the colonial conquest. In the economy, diversity remained dominant, but as production for

export increased, there was a tendency towards monoculture and decapitalization of the food sector. African industries and mining resisted well in general. All sectors of trade grew, monetization spread, new credit institutions developed, transport systems were extended and reorganized, in short, many of the features associated with colonialism in the 20th century were already developed. These economies were not capitalist social formations, but they were not 'pre-capitalist' either.

Zeleza brings two innovations: the whole continent: the whole continent is covered, whilst most authors distinguish sub-saharan Africa from North Africa; the greater part is devoted to the development of productive forces and production processes and relations, rather than the usual stress on exchange systems.

Although this is a textbook, the methodological discussion is quite refreshing, authoritative, and very well informed, giving an accurate state of the debates and usually putting forth strong points which generally tend to represent the emerging consensus among African historians. Zeleza's points cover a wide spectrum. He is right at pointing that economic history is no longer the poor relation of political history, on the contrary, although rarely acknowledged within the development community. On the more general side, he attacks neo-classical economics which constructed universal economic laws independent of time and space, while being merely rationalizations if not legitimations of the capitalist system. He reacts strongly against grand constructions, over-broad generalizations, imprecise comparisons, unwarranted evolutionism, and unsubstantiated assertions such as the notions of 'shifting cultivators', 'hunters-gatherers', 'pastoralists', 'land-rich but labour-poor Africa', the resistance to call Africans 'peasants', etc. On a more precise level, he denounces the literature's undue emphasis on trade over production, the unproven opposition/abrupt substitution between traditional and modern, the eagerness to construct (and accept) models and theories imposed over the diverse and complex historical reality of Africa, overlooking field work and real facts (as opposed to construct ones).

Despite the fact that this is indeed a great achievement, there are still some points I wish to raise. The first, all too familiar, and yet the most disturbing, is that all of the sources are in English, particularly for someone who got a Canadian PhD. Besides, the most comprehensive Economic History of Africa was published in French: Daniel Cissé's *Histoire économique de l'Afrique*, Abidjan/Paris, PUSAF/L'Harmattan, 1988, of which 3 volumes are already published. This might explain why he used a single author on Madagascar (D Campbell), ignored the trading activities along the Sahara Atlantic Coast, considered the Soninke Kingdom of Gajaaga' in Upper Senegal as a group among the 'Juula' (p.280). More serious, most of equatorial Africa (Gabon, Centrafrique, Congo, etc., i.e. the whole Ogwe-Zaire-Ubangui-Chari area) is ignored, only Lower Zaire being mentioned. At

a second level, the author did not explain why Egypt and Madagascar were almost the only ones to try to industrialize. On a third level, the maps are too rare and of very little use: the Madagascar one is a political map which has nothing to do with the text; the Transahara trade map is too small to be read; the Central and East Africa one has no title, legend or date; and finally, the Africa 1913 map has pasty bold letters and a very limited variation of grey. For a textbook designed for students this is indeed a serious flaw. Finally, there are some avoidable typing errors such as 'Austin' instead of 'Austen' for the same author on the same page (p.65).

These few shortcomings do not diminish the overall value of the undertaking, and this is definitely a major textbook with a very promising career ahead, especially if the volume on the 20th century maintains the same standard.

* Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar/Senegal
Columbia University, New York.