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Commentary: A Comparison of Comparisons

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Abstract

This commentary on the articles collected in this issue confirms that they illustrate effectively the main approaches to historical comparison for Africa in recent centuries. The essay reaffirms A.I. Asiwaju's introductory statement of the crucial importance of comparative work in advancing studies of African history, and amplifies this argument by asserting that comparative and global frameworks each have their place, and that each can be employed as a tactic or strategy in historical analysis. The discussion continues with exploration of three articles that explore the rules for and results of historical comparison; three articles comparing cases that overlap and interact with each other; and three articles comparing discrete cases. The essay concludes by summarizing the ways that the comparisons, in the various studies, have clarified narratives and have documented historical processes. Overall, it appears, the articles are effective in showing how comparisons can advance understanding of what Professor Asiwaju has called 'the history of man in Africa'.

Résumé

Ce commentaire des articles contenus dans ce numéro spécial confirme qu'ils illustrent bien les principales approches aux comparaisons historiques en Afrique, ces derniers siècles. Cette contribution réaffirme les propos de A.I. Asiwaju sur l'importance critique du travail comparatif pour les études de l'histoire africaine, et développe cet argument en suggérant que les cadres comparatif et global jouent chacun leur rôle analytique, et que chacun peut être employé comme tactique ou stratégie d'analyse historique. La discussion continue avec l'exploration de trois articles qui concernent les règles et les résultats de la comparaison historique ; trois articles comparant des cas empiétant l'un sur l'autre, et interagissant l'un avec l'autre ; et enfin, trois articles comparant des cas distincts. L'essai conclut en résumant la façon dont les comparaisons de ces études ont permis de clarifier des récits et documenté des processus historiques. Enfin, les articles montrent bien la façon dont les comparaisons permettent d'avoir une

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meilleure compréhension de ce que le professeur Asiwaju appelle «l'histoire de l'homme en Afrique».

Comparison in African History

The historical study of Africa was late to develop as a professionalised discipline within the modern academy. Yet the field has made extraordinary advances in the half century since it formed. Applying both conventional and interdisciplinary methods, historians of Africa have expanded the amount of available source materials many times over. They have drawn on these sources to assemble an impressive set of narratives, and have given attention to a wide range of viewpoints in their narrative. They have chronicled debates among historical figures and interest groups in the African past, and have conducted their own historiographical debates.

The challenges of the 1950s were the apparent shortage of data and willingness of other scholars to deny the historicity of African societies and the validity of African identity. Our convenor argues that these challenges have been overcome, and that it is time to address what he sees as the challenge of our own time: articulating larger-scale interpretations and linking them across space and time. Professor Asiwaju notes pointedly that locally focussed expertise which still dominates African historiography, can also be called a 'closet mindset'. More gently but more analytically, he suggests a move from the study of 'Africans' to the study of 'man in Africa'.

To address the study of man in Africa, Asiwaju calls for the application of 'explicitly comparative research designs'. Such an approach, he argues, will enable analysis to escape the search for uniqueness that has pervaded Africanist monographs. Structured comparison provides a device for addressing the great quantities of data now available, and will enable historians of Africa to enter into discourse with Africanist social scientists and with historians of other regions.

The method he proposes involves specifying the units of comparison and the levels of analysis in a study, and developing internally consistent terminology within each study. This leads to less emphasis on place and more on historical problems; it generates thematic and synchronic analysis rather than chronological accounts. All in all, Professor Asiwaju confirms his place alongside Michael Adas, the historian of Southeast Asia, as an effective advocate of structured comparison in history.¹

We may say that comparison can be a tactic or a strategy of the historian. Every historian uses comparison as a tactic: even with the isolated case study, the historian must compare all the pieces of the case to construct a narrative; this is all the more true for global studies. But Asiwaju is proposing comparison as a strategy, as the principal axis of analysis. Furthermore, the

call for explicitly comparative research design alerts us to the reality that there are more steps to completing the design than announcing it as comparative. For instance, it is quite different to compare two isolated cases (such as Taiping and the Aladura churches) than to compare cases in interaction, such as the political communities of Freetown and Monrovia.

Asiwaju's own work began with comparing borderlands of colonial and national units, which led him into the interactions and processes generated by borders, and on to comparison in general.² He notes with favour the work of William Miles, who has published a number of comparative national and territorial studies, beginning in Africa, and then extending to territories throughout the tropics.³ Asiwaju is precise in identifying comparison as 'one of the new approaches to African historical scholarship that one would like to see ... expanded'. Another is the global approach, encompassing individual cases or pairs of cases under comparison in larger contexts and multiple scales of analysis. In commenting on the specifics of the essays I will introduce some remarks in global perspective as well as highlighting comparative methods.

Rules and Results of Comparison

Three of the essays in this collection focus on the rules and logical results of historical comparison. Gareth Austin has chosen a problem for analysis: that of 'Conceptual Eurocentrism'. Where does the historian get his or her ideas? Interpretive bias, he argues, is reduced if one compares both ways, analysing two regions, each in the mirror of the other. Thus, he advocates and explicates the technique of 'reciprocal comparison', a term borrowed from the work of Kenneth Pomeranz.⁴ It seems that this exercise requires applying extra-continental theory to Africa, and that the author must then locate or develop an African-based theory to apply to other areas. Austin finds African-based theory in economic history in the work of Jack Goody and Stefano Fenolteaga; perhaps Esther Boserup might be added to the list.⁵ Then he proposes additional African-based insights that could be applied within and beyond the continent: (i) that intensive agriculture is not necessarily more productive; (ii) that one should rethink the land/labour ratio and its relationship to economic growth; (iii) that property may not be restricted to land and objects; (iv) and that Africans have achieved economic growth outside states. Seen from this vantage point, we find that comparison requires conceptualisation.

Michal Tymowski finds that comparing what are known as 'empires' in pre-colonial Africa shows inconsistent patterns, and recommends that the term 'empire' be applied in a much more restricted fashion in Africa. I would argue that two factors have contributed significantly to the inconsistent attribution of the term 'empire' to African states. First, Africanist historians,

playing catch-up in both historiographical and ideological terms, were anxious to find empires in Africa with which to elevate the political position of African states vis-à-vis those elsewhere. Second, the term ‘empire’ is used loosely everywhere, and across a time-span of three thousand years. Empires have not been theorised and scrutinised as social formations in the way nations have for the past two centuries. Eisenstadt’s beginning at analysis, to which Tymowski refers, needs to be followed up in much more detail.⁶ Meanwhile, Tymowski’s critique clears the way for a more realistic analysis of long-term changes in African political orders.

John Philips addresses most explicitly the history of man in Africa through a search for a consistent terminology. Through an exercise in conceptualisation, he prepares the ground for discussion of ‘slavery’ that enables fruitful comparisons among social situations even when they do not involve precisely the same sort of ‘slavery’. After posing the dilemma of choosing between definitions of ‘slavery’ based on property or on kinlessness, he turns for help to new developments in psychology, arguing that the affect of shame underlies the control over individuals that has led in sequence to several sorts of slavery. Philips’s wide-ranging comparisons in setting up the problem of slavery correspond to what I have labelled elsewhere as ‘exploratory comparison’—that is, considering a wide range of possibilities in order to define the borders of a study. This is a step preliminary to the modelling and structured comparison of organised data sets.⁷

Comparison of Overlapping Cases

Four essays in this collection address multiple cases in political history. In each, the various cases overlap or otherwise interact with one another—usually through geographical contiguity, but also through subjection to a common colonial power. Barhu Zewde analyses ethnicities, languages, and national units on the Horn of Africa. Concisely and clearly, he identifies the elements of his analysis. He compares pre-colonial states, Islamic heritage, colonial legacies, and postcolonial struggles—for Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti. He develops a concept of ‘embattled identity’ to unify the comparisons, and concludes that the degree of ethnic differentiation is no clear key to fractionalisation of politics. When he makes a policy recommendation—regional confederation—it emerges out of the context of his analysis. Pierre Kipré uses the term ‘national question’ to label what Zewde has called ‘embattled identity’. He labels his narrative of Francophone and Anglophone West Africa as ‘a long crisis of collective identity during the last two centuries’. His dense and reflective narrative, more synthesis than comparison, proposes hypotheses that can be tested with systematic comparison. He concludes with a critique of colonial conquests and

postcolonial states for their mishandling of the tension between the needs for safeguarding public welfare and defending individual liberty. Nicodemus Awasom traces the postcolonial history of the Senegambia confederation and its collapse, as compared with the Cameroonian federation and its precarious survival. While his subtitle emphasises the influence of contrasting Anglo-Saxon and Gallic values in the difficulties of these federations, I found more convincing the explanation in his description of the structural political problems of each federation. Underneath the frustrating recurrence of political disunion in Africa, Awasom shows how shifting political coalitions made union of Anglophone and Francophone territories attractive and successful at some times, and unsustainable at other times. Giampaolo Novati compares Monrovia and Freetown in the last half of the nineteenth century. Drawing on the rich documentation of the two settlements, he emphasises both formative processes and vigorous debates, and implicitly accepts the framework of others in this group, taking the past two centuries as a time frame for political analysis. Together, these four essays converge in proposing an agenda for comparative research into African politics, with a time frame of about two centuries. Thus, the division of Senegal and Gambia, the foundation of Sierra Leone and the Sokoto Caliphate go back 200 years; the fragments of Cameroon go back over 100 years.

Comparison of Discrete Cases

Three more essays in the collection involve comparison of discrete cases, which do not interact directly with one another, thus changing the nature of the comparison. In each instance, one case (or set of cases) under study is based in Africa while the other is outside the continent. David Lindenfeld explores the results of encounters with Christian missionaries for the single case of Taiping in China and for four overlapping Aladura churches in Nigeria. In so doing he introduces the theories of Weber and Jung. Gareth Austin would suggest balancing the application of Weber and Jung with an articulation of analyses developed from Nigerian experiences. Indeed Lindenfeld, while he has developed a largely Weberian analysis of charismatic authority and routinisation, sets it in the framework of Robin Horton's vision of change in African religion. He then adds his own notion of concentration of spirituality to address the purging of indigenous religious practices among Christian converts, and parallels it to an argument of Jung. He thus shows that pursuing the path of 'reciprocal comparison' can lead to the posing of yet more types of comparison. Olufunke Adeboye compares Pentecostal movements of two nations, and finds both parallels and contrasts such as the abstention of Nigerian Pentecostals from politics while those in Brazil entered politics actively. The first great Pentecostal wave began with the Los

Angeles mission of African-American Reverend William J. Seymour, 1905–1908, in which visitations of the Holy Spirit were attested by speaking in tongues or glossolalia. Adeboye, in comparing the range of movements in Brazil and Nigeria, shows the remarkable expansion and successive transformations of Pentecostalism since then, including stages of divine healing through mass media and the rise of the prosperity gospel. She shows that structured comparison can be useful for social scientists and also for church policy-makers in determining the direction of change. Ayodeji Olokujo conducts a comparison of Nigerian and Japanese port policies. Here is the case where the differences between the cases make one most tempted to argue, ‘you can’t compare these’. But of course the author has just compared them, and the comparison has been instructive. Nigerian and Japanese port directors faced similar problems and made similar errors, so that each can learn from the experience of the other.

Implications of these Studies

To summarise: What do these essays add to the narrative of African history? To the understanding of processes in African history? To the history of man in Africa?

Narratives. The works of these authors present revised narratives of the cases under comparison, and narratives of larger patterns. Zewde, Kipré, Awasom, and Novati each use comparison to argue that the place of identity in the politics of modern Africa is best analysed over a time frame of roughly two centuries, and that political analysis within shorter time frames risks missing certain fundamental points. This convergence in interpretation, backed up by comparative insights, should be taken seriously. Tymowski challenges a narrative of the rise and fall of empires by challenging the categorisation of empires. Adeboye traces the somewhat parallel transformations of religious movements in two major countries, though without formalising her terminology.

Processes. Austin shows how to seek out processes in economic history for analysis. Philips proposes deeper scrutiny of terminology, and constructs a continuum of social institutions involving hierarchy and oppression. Lindenfeld identifies processes in institutional development of the newly converted. Olukoju shows divergence in experience of Japan and Nigeria in port development, but observes that the underlying problems have been much the same.

History of Man in Africa

Articles based on brief conference papers cannot provide much detail on ‘the history of man in Africa’, but they can indicate clear directions. Austin

shows the way in developing theses in economic history out of African experience and applying them more broadly. Phillips provides a comparative study of definitions as a way to deepen the understanding of slavery. Comparative studies, accompanied by explicit statements of research design, should be high on the agenda of historians of Africa. These include comparisons within Africa and comparisons without; comparisons of Africa with the African Diaspora, emphasising social history; and the more established comparisons with Europe, emphasising politics and economics. Comparisons may be defined geographically, but one may also compare time periods and topics.

Another set of research designs is that of global analysis, focusing on analysis at multiple scales. I pose global studies of Africa not as a substitute for comparisons, but as an alternative and sometimes overlapping frame of analysis. Indeed, part of the work of conceptualising comparative study is to locate the boundaries between it and global study, and to identify the complementarities and the tensions between them. Comparison is always a tactic or tool of historians; in the cases here, it is elevated to the principal strategy for analysis. Conversely, global context can also be used both as tactic and strategy. Even localised case studies draw on global factors as context, and comparative studies necessarily include boundaries set by global context. A fundamentally global study differs from these in its focus on establishing patterns and dynamics that reverberate throughout a system. A strategy of comparison, in contrast, focuses on characterising the experience of the units under comparison, and on developing generalisations about experience at that level.

Certainly the results of these essays suggest that the determined pursuit of a comparative agenda in African history will contribute effectively to expanding the narratives, to debating major themes in the African past, and generally to documenting the experience of man in Africa.

Notes

1. Michael Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion: Millenarian Protest Movements against the European Colonial Order* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, c1979); Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Adas, *Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America's Civilizing Mission* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).
2. A.I. Asiwaju, *Western Yorubaland under European Rule, 1889-1945: A Comparative Analysis of French and British Colonialism* (London: Longman, 1976); Asiwaju (ed.), *Partitioned Africans: Ethnic Relations across Africa's International Boundaries, 1884-1984* (Lagos: University of Lagos Press,

- c1984); Asiwaju, *West African Transformations: Comparative Impact of French and British Colonialism* (Ikeja: Malthouse Press, 2001); Asiwaju, *Boundaries and African Integration: Essays in Comparative History and Policy Analysis* (Lagos: Panaf Pub., 2003).
3. William F.S. Miles, *Hausaland Divided: Colonialism and Independence in Nigeria and Niger* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Miles, *Bridging Mental Boundaries in a Postcolonial Microcosm: Identity and Development in Vanuatu* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998).
 4. Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 8-9. See also R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).
 5. Jack Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Stefano Fenoaltea, 'Europe in the African Mirror: the Slave Trade and the Rise of Feudalism', (1988 conference paper); Ester Boserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1965); Boserup, *Woman's Role in Economic Development* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970).
 6. S.N. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires* (New York: Free Press, 1963).
 7. Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).