



# HISTORIA INDUSTRIAL

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## COMPARATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN COLONIAL AFRICA

Katharine Frederick, Dácil Juif, and Felix Meier zu Selhausen  
(Guest Editors)

K. FREDERICK; D. JUIF; F. MEIER

ZU SELHAUSEN. *The revival of African economic history in the 21st*

*century: A bibliometric analysis.*

M. C. CHISENI; J. BOLT. *The origins of formal educational and gender inequality in Zambia, 1924-1990.*

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K. ALEXOPOULOU; E. FRANKEMA. *Imperialism of jackals and*

*lions. The fiscal-military state in*

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L. DOLAN. *Explaining the transition from forced to free labour in colonial Angola's diamond mines.*







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## ARTICLES – ARTÍCULOS



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# The revival of African economic history in the 21st century: A bibliometric analysis<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Ten years have passed since the publication of the last special issue on African economic history proclaiming the “renaissance” of the field. We carry out a bibliometric analysis of 114 articles written by 104 distinct authors and published in the leading five economic history journals from 2000 to 2024. We derive an updated outline of the key features of the evolution of African economic history in terms of quantity and impact of publications, research topics, historical period, African geographical area, type of sources and data, analytical methods and author characteristics (affiliation and gender). The field has seen an impressive expansion in publication output and impact — also outside the main economic history outlets — as well as in conference participation, variety of research topics and innovation in the use of sources. However, immediately after the publication of the special issue in 2014, this revival plateaued in terms of absolute and relative publications as well as their citational performance. Authors based at African institutions and female authors remain underrepresented; former Belgian, German, Italian and Portuguese colonies, as well as the postcolonial period remain understudied.

**KEYWORDS:** African economic history, bibliometric analysis, top journals in economic history, citational success, authorship.

**JEL CODES:** N01, N37, N77.

1 As an introduction to this Special Issue, *Comparative development in colonial Africa*, this article has not been submitted to external review. Nevertheless, it has been reviewed by the Editorial Board of RHI-IHR.

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## 1. Introduction

African economic history (AEH) has experienced exciting expansion in output, data collection, innovative quantitative methods, comparative scope, and inter-disciplinarity in the 21st century, which has positioned Africa in debates on global economic development. Ten years have passed since Austin and Broadberry (2014) proclaimed the “renaissance of African economic history” in their introductory comments in *The Economic History Review* in the first and hitherto only special issue on Africa to be published in a general economic history journal. In the same year, *Africa’s Development in Historical Perspective*, the first edited volume on AEH incorporating interdisciplinary authors, was published (Akyeampong et al. 2014). This marked the official reversal of AEH’s “recession”, which had been underway since the 1980s (Hopkins 2009). We commemorate the ten-year anniversary of these milestone publications with a second special issue dedicated to AEH and use this opportunity to reflect on the blossoming field’s scholarly developments over the past 25 years through a bibliometric analysis of the top five international economic history journals. Specifically, we provide evidence on the number of articles published and their impact, authorship, the coverage of topics, periods, regions, and analytical methods. We position these trends within a previous literature in scholarly developments in AEH, relate observations to the participation in AEH’s most important conference, and provide insights into AEH’s interdisciplinary character. This article is thus more than a purely bibliometric analysis; we reflect on the state of the art of the AEH discipline over a quarter of a century and suggest areas of potential expansion.

There are several reasons for the renewed interest in Africa’s economic past. First, Africa is at the centre of debates of global concern revolving around: (i) climate change’s disproportional impact on African economies and ecology in light of Africa’s tiny fraction of global greenhouse gas emissions (WMO 2023); (ii) Africa’s increasing weight in global population growth, projected to be home to 25 percent of the world’s population by mid-century (United Nations 2024); (iii) Africa’s growing share in global extreme poverty rates despite robust economic growth since the mid-1990s has generated ambiguous outlooks (World Bank 2024); (iv) African exports of its vast reserves of the world’s critical energy transition minerals (Frankema and Meier zu Selhausen 2024); and (v) heated public perception of African migration of aspirational young generations to Europe in light of lack of opportunity (De Haas and Frankema 2022). The rising role of Africa on the global stage provides ample scope to better understand and engage with the historical nature and origins of the continent’s present-day economic and demographic development.

Second, while the effects of the slave trades received much attention in earlier phases of the AEH renaissance (Inikori 1982; Eltis and Engerman 2000;

Nunn and Wantchekon 2011), European countries have become increasingly critical of the effects and legacies of their colonial rule in Africa (Mathys and van Beurden 2023), which has generated deeper interest in quantitative analyses of colonial governments' policies (and their persistent effects), including the fiscal burden on the local population (Huillery 2014; Frankema and van Waijenburg 2014; Cogneau et al. 2024), contributions to formal education (Frankema 2012; Jedwab, Meier zu Selhausen and Moradi 2021, 2022), the extent and nature of forced labour (Van Waijenburg 2018; Archibong and Obikili 2023), colonial medical campaigns on African health and lasting implications for trust in biomedicine (Lowes and Montero 2021), and investment into transport infrastructure (Jedwab, Kerby and Moradi 2017; Bertazzini 2022).

Third, after 25 years, the life-cycle of the field-defining Great Divergence debate — revolving around the question of why the Industrial Revolution arose first in Britain and not in China, India or Japan — has increasingly run into diminishing marginal returns. The economic renaissance of East Asia and China set in motion rapid economic divergence across the Global South in the second half of the 20th century. In light of Asia's and Africa's (future) economic and demographic weight, currently accounting for three-quarters of the global population and 60 percent of global GDP, research into the historical nature and origins of the divergence between African and Asian economic trajectories offers a timely and logical new window of global comparative investigation (Frankema 2024).

The surge in research on Africa's economic and social past has been underpinned by a quantitative “data revolution” (Fourie 2016; Cappelli, Benos and Goletsis 2023) in which the widespread lack of conventional (printed and written) sources has been overcome by the creative use of a wide range of new sources from both African and European archives that can be analysed using innovative quantitative methods. Additionally, the increased use of statistical software, the availability of digital photography, and the use of geographical software has provided new spatial layers to the analysis and visualization of African long-term development (e.g., transport infrastructure, Christian diffusion, cash crop agriculture). These new approaches can be categorized into two respective schools, which (i) reconstruct and analyse long-term development paths to fill gaps in our knowledge of Africa's past by exploring trends in real wages, skill premiums, human heights, taxation, inequality, and diffusion of Christianity, quinine and new world crops, etc. (e.g., Frankema and van Waijenburg 2012, 2023; Moradi, Austin and Baten 2013; Bolt and Gardner 2020; Jedwab, Meier zu Selhausen and Moradi 2021, 2022; Frankema, de Haas and van Waijenburg 2023; Cogneau et al. 2024; Hillbom et al. 2024; Kerby, Moradi and Odendaal 2024), and (ii) investigate the persistent effects of particular characteristics (e.g., geography, institutions or infrastruc-

ture) by identifying causal relationships between a variable in the past and an outcome today using sophisticated econometric techniques (Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson 2001; Nunn and Wantchekon 2011; Alsan 2015; Jedwab and Moradi 2016; Depetris-Chauvin and Weil 2018).

Our rigorous bibliometric analysis of AEH publications between 2000 and 2024 confirms some of these features and trends and provides new insights into the recent evolution of the field. First, indeed, the past 25 years have seen an impressive expansion of research into Africa’s economic past, as reflected in the relative number and impact of publications on the topic in the top five economic history journals. This trend is also reflected in the sharp increase in the number of participants at the annual conferences of the African Economic History Network<sup>2</sup> (which has doubled since 2014 and peaked in 2019). We also document the topic’s popularity beyond the readership of general economic history journals, as reflected in the impact — in terms of Google Scholar citations — of AEH publications in prestigious economics and development journals, as well as in history journals.

The variety of topics, types of primary sources, and geographic areas covered in research published in the top five economic history journals has increased notably. Chiefly, while in the early 2000s most articles were focussed on the (mostly pre-colonial) slave trade and thus on Western Africa, research on the colonial period covering a wider range of institutional and growth-related topics has gained terrain in the past 15 years. There is also a divide between publication outlets in the methods used and research questions asked, whereby economics journals mostly publish “persistence studies”, while economic history journals — which have seen a rise in the use of econometric methods — still mostly publish “reconstructive” types of studies.

However, our analysis of publications also reveals that the revival of AEH has levelled off since 2014, with little further growth in volume, impact, geographical variety, number of authors publishing or integration of Africa-based scholars outside South Africa. There is scope for further research into under-explored geographic areas (former Portuguese, Italian and German colonies especially) and time periods, particularly in the postcolonial era (see also Simson 2020). Finally, although the proportion of female authors has more than doubled over the past 25 years, there is still a need to achieve greater gender equality in authorship. This special issue represents recent trends and also makes strides to fill some lacunae, with two articles on understudied former Portuguese colonies (Angola and Mozambique); a focus on the colonial pe-

2 The African Economic History Network (AEHN) was founded in 2011 to foster communication, collaboration and research as well as teaching amongst scholars studying African long-term development. It runs a working paper series, organizes an annual conference, publishes the open-access textbook *The History of African Development*, a bi-annual newsletter, and the academic blog *Frontiers in African Economic History*.

riod and colonial effects; the use of state and company archival sources to retrieve new quantitative data; and the geolocation of these data and spatial analyses using econometrics.

The remainder of this introduction proceeds as follows. We first chart the publication evolution and citation trends of articles focusing on Africa in the top five economic history journals (Section 2), then highlight the interdisciplinary character of AEH (Section 3) and explore developments in authorship and affiliation (Section 4), and outline changes in topics, methods, and sources as well as geographical and temporal coverage (Section 5), before finally illustrating how the articles presented in this special issue help fill existing lacunae in the field of AEH.

## 2. A bibliometric analysis of African economic history in economic history journals

### 2.1. The evolution of African economic history

For our bibliometric analysis we have compiled a database of articles that focus on Africa, including both Northern and sub-Saharan Africa, that were published between 2000 and 2024<sup>3</sup> in one of the top five field journals in economic history (hereafter “the top five”), specifically the *Economic History Review* (*EHR*), *Journal of Economic History* (*JEH*), *Explorations in Economic History* (*EEH*), *European Review of Economic History* (*EREH*), and *Clio-metrica* (*Clio*), which consistently score highest in recent citation rankings (Di Vaio and Weisdorf 2010; Cioni, Federico and Vasta 2020).<sup>4</sup> We have selected those articles that focus on “Africa” after studying their titles, abstracts and, in unclear cases, content. For example, we ignored articles on the slave trade if they only touched upon the Americas or exclusively focused on the implications of the slave trade for European economies. We have omitted book reviews, but included research notes and replies if they provided substantial research. Authors’ names, gender and institutional affiliation at the time of publication are also included. Our database comprises 114 articles that focus on Africa’s economic and social past (of a total of 3,089 articles), which we classified by a number of features: topic, historical period, African geograph-

<sup>3</sup> We collected articles published from January 2000 up to September 2024, when this special issue went into production. Consequently, the 2024 data do not include publications from October to December 2024.

<sup>4</sup> We have specifically selected top *general interest* economic history journals to explore how AEH has fared in the broader field of economic history. Here, we thus do not include high-ranking economic history journals with a particular area focus (e.g., *Economic History of Developing Regions*), though we reflect on their significant contribution as outlets for AEH elsewhere in our analysis.