

**A Modern Economic History of Africa, Vol. 1: The Nineteenth Century**  
By *Tiyambe Zeleza*. Dakar, CODESRIA, 1993, viii, 501 pp., ISBN 2-86978-027-3.

This book won the 1994 Noma Award and was commended by the judges as 'an outstanding, pioneering work' which elevates 'the study of African economic history to a new pedestal'. It is an informative, scholarly and clearly written study which is a welcome and important contribution to the study of Africa's political economy in the 19th century.

The book comprises 15 chapters grouped into five parts, each dealing with a select theme. Part I, 'Environment and Demographic Change', examines the patterns of climatic change, the ecology of disease, demographic changes in the heyday of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the prevailing settlement patterns of the time and the ways in which African societies tried to cope with the problems of their time. This section not only argues persuasively for the importance of the role and impact of the environment and demographic changes on the African political economy but also presents an insightful critique of the way in which scholars have either misunderstood and misrepresented these forces or have dismissed them simply as background factors not worthy of serious analysis.

Under 'Agricultural Production' in Part II, the focus is on land use, relations of production, agricultural production and the early manifestations of European colonial agriculture in South Africa and the Portuguese territories of Angola and Mozambique. Part III focuses on mining and manufacturing and examines, not only the technologies and techniques used by African societies in developing their mining and manufacturing industries, but also the predominant relations of production in these sectors. Part IV concentrates on Africa's domestic and regional trade and points out that the over-simplification and generalisations of existing scholarship on the nature of Africa's pre-colonial trade cannot be justified because trade patterns were complex and varied considerably throughout the 19th century. In Part V an effort is made to document and analyse both the volume and nature of Africa's international trade and its relationship with late 19th century European imperialism.

*A Modern Economic History of Africa's* encyclopaedic wealth of facts and figures about Africa and its incisive criticism of a wide range of current scholarly writings on Africa's pre-colonial past is clear testimony to the author's familiarity, not only with his subject matter, but also with the existent scholarship on a wide range of subjects. Its 51-page bibliography is, perhaps, the most comprehensive and accessible record of published and unpublished materials on Africa's pre-colonial past available. In addition, the book offers a refreshingly frank, courageous and insightful critique of existing scholarship on Africa's pre-colonial experience, showing how certain myths and misconceptions, generated

and sustained by both Western and African scholars, have distorted the continent's past.

The book argues persuasively, for instance, against the prevailing trend of treating Sub-Saharan Africa as a separate entity from the rest of the continent and charges that this approach, which was born of 'European imperialist arrogance and racism' in the 19th century, is 'a racist construct intended to divorce North Africa from the mainstream of African history' (p. 2). It maintains that the three historical paradigms which have dominated analyses of the African past, namely the Neo-classical, Dependency and Marxist schools, have offered, at times, 'partial, and sometimes misleading, analyses of the process and content of economic change and development in Africa in the pre-colonial era' (p. 3) and, have, at other times, propagated 'myths and stereotypes' about the African past. The problem has been, it is argued, that scholars in each of these schools of thought have been over-eager to construct over-arching models and theories, which have not been sensitive or applicable to the diversity and complexity of the African experience.

The book's own approach is one that, according to the author, is driven, not by adherence to any 'grand theory or interpretation' nor by the unsubstantiated assumption that economic history can be fully understood on the basis of the 'markets of neo-classical theorists, the world system of the dependency writers, or the modes of production of the Marxists' (p. 5), but by the fundamental conviction that, ultimately, 'economic history is about people, how they produce and reproduce their daily lives in their households, communities, societies, states, regions and within the continent as a whole' (p. 5). This is not to dismiss the importance of material and social conditions of production and reproduction but merely to emphasise the fact that these forces and relations do not operate in a vacuum. Rather they interact in a complex way with 'nature and society, men and women, rulers and ruled, locals and foreigners, the past and the present' (p. 5).

Though a welcome and very useful contribution to the growing discourse on Africa's pre-colonial past, *A Modern Economic History of Africa* does have one major flaw which arises mainly from its rather ambitious scope; not only encompassing a wide variety of subjects, each of which would be a legitimate subject of a book on its own, but also an entire continent. In undertaking this multi-subject and continent-wide study, the author spreads himself thin and runs the risk of making the same generalisations which he castigates past scholarship for making. It is, for instance, not always clear whether what applies to the case studies that the author uses for his analysis is equally applicable to the whole continent throughout the 19th century.

The interests of detailed analysis and thorough treatment of issues would have been better served had the author focused on one or two topics covering carefully chosen regions of the continent. The continent-wide approach not only produces an unwieldy array of facts which are rather difficult to digest but also results in a voluminous book whose price, though not indicated on the book cover, can only be beyond the reach of many potential readers on the African continent for whom, presumably, the book was written.

The above shortcoming aside, however, *A Modern Economic History of Africa* is a welcome and valuable contribution to scholarship which raises the discourse on the African pre-colonial experience to new heights. It is a well-packaged, competently edited and well-written book which should be of use to professional historians, economic historians, high school teachers and any lay readers who are interested in understanding the forces that shaped Africa's historical development on the eve of European colonialism.

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**The Political Economy of the Sugar Industry in Zimbabwe, 1920-90** By A. S. Mlambo and E. S. Pangeti. Harare, University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1996, iv, 90 pp., ISBN 0-908307-43-8, Z\$50.

The book describes the various stages of growth of the sugar industry in Zimbabwe, and the different types of control that are responsible for getting the industry where it currently is. The authors present the establishment of the industry by individuals like McDougall, and later by government, and then by international entrepreneurs. The book describes the operations of the industry during various government regimes and analyses the impact of international relations on the performance of the industry. The final chapter looks at the marketing opportunities and constraints in the region and in distant international markets.

While the book illustrates the importance of history for the understanding of economic development, the book could be strengthened by paying more attention to economic, political and institutional frameworks or paradigms. Several questions can be posed to draw attention to potential avenues for analysis.

The authors readily present reasons given in the reports they reviewed, without providing critical analysis of their own. It seems that they sympathise with the sugar producers. They suggest that the Zimbabwe sugar industry is in its infancy (p.1). This is a typical argument for government protection against cheap imports of sugar, but one that does not appeal to domestic consumers or tax-payers. Statements like 'domestic retail sugar prices are too low' need some kind of objective justification.