

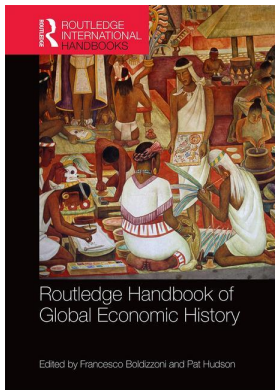
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Francesco Boldizzoni, Pat Hudson

### Beyond a Footnote

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Ayodeji Olukoju

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## BEYOND A FOOTNOTE

Indigenous scholars and the writing of  
West African economic history*Ayodeji Olukoju*<sup>1</sup>

Given the size and diversity of West Africa, charting the trends in, and the contours of, the historiography of its economic history, especially that written by indigenous scholars, is challenging.<sup>2</sup> The sub-region's fifteen sovereign countries vary in size and population, and have diverse historical experiences and intellectual traditions, partly because they have been under different European colonizers. Its peoples speak three European official languages – French, English and Portuguese – in addition to hundreds of indigenous languages. Tackling the multifaceted subject matter of economic history is further complicated by the range and diversity of the literature.

A striking feature of West African economic history is that the bulk of the literature has been contributed by scholars from the North. Contributions by indigenes of the sub-region – based at home and in various Western universities and research centres – have been largely focused on the important job of providing case studies and gap-filling in the historiography. While the bulk of this literature has been dependent on “thick descriptions and analytical narratives,” there are notable exceptions of serious engagements at the individual and institutional levels with theory and concepts (Green and Nyambara 2015: 7; but compare Austin 2015).<sup>3</sup> The writings of indigenous economic historians of West Africa centre largely on the following themes – production, exchange (local and long distance trade), labour, population, transport, money and government policy – especially in the context of European colonialism. As West African colonies exported minerals and commodities – groundnuts, cocoa, palm produce and timber – much attention has been devoted to analysing their production and export.<sup>4</sup>

The scholarship of West African economic historians has been informed by received wisdom from the West ranging from classical and neoclassical economics through dependency theory to Marxism. As Saito (2015: 1) notes with reference to Japan, the “field took shape under Western influences and, as a history discipline.” Yet, (as one of my West African colleagues stated in a private conversation) the publications of indigenous economic historians, even in mainstream Western outlets, are generally cited by their Western counterparts as *sources* rather than for the *arguments* advanced in them. This chapter attempts to rescue some of the contributions by West Africans themselves from the obscurity of footnotes. The task is frustrated by the absence of earlier reviews of the economic history of West Africa though numerous recent surveys of literature at the continental level provide some guidance.<sup>5</sup>

### The profile of West African economic history

In general terms, West African economic history has been approached from two broad perspectives – the mainstream orthodox and the marginal radical. Most indigenous economic historians operate within the conventional domestic historical methodology, which is largely narrative and non-theoretical. As demonstrated in this chapter, the bulk of the literature on West African economic history follows the Western European tradition of historical scholarship, exemplified by A.G. Hopkins, the acknowledged leading authority on the subject. Conversely, a radical political economy streak runs through indigenous scholarship in the region. This is informed by the dependency and radical Marxist approaches. Walter Rodney's influential book (1972) set the tone for much of the radical scholarship of the 1970s and after. Apart from Rodney, Frantz Fanon was an ideological mentor of the radical scholars of West Africa.<sup>6</sup> An early centre of incubation for the radical political economy approach was the Department of History at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria. The Zaria School focused on history from below, labour and class struggles, and a radical reinterpretation of the nexus between the colonial state and colonial political economy. In opposition to colonial historiography, its forte was a methodology that encouraged the use of a wide range of sources, both written and non-written, in historical reconstruction. It denounced the fetish for, or overreliance upon, written sources and subjected all sources, especially archival material, to rigorous analysis. Zaria was noted for the radical historical scholarship of Yusufu Bala Usman and his disciples (such as Monday Mangvwat and Ibrahim Abdullah), and influenced by the Dar es Salaam School, two of whom, as resident members, authored a critique of African historiography (Temu and Swai 1981). Zaria was a hotbed of radical scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s, and Bala Usman, a blue blood turned radical, literally personified a new brand of historical scholarship. His writings (for example Usman 1981) applied interdisciplinarity (blending history, sociology, political science and economics) and historical materialism to the analysis of historical conditions and concrete social formations in his native Islamic Northern Nigeria and in Nigeria at large. Émigrés like the historian Bill Freund and the sociologist Patrick Wilmot added the American and Caribbean flavour to the intellectual ferment at Zaria in the 1970s and the 1980s. Non-radical scholars, such as Joseph Inikori, also contributed to the making of the Zaria brand of historical scholarship. An interdisciplinary journal, *Savannah*, was a respected outlet for the output of scholarship coming out of Zaria. The only drawback was, and remains, the insularity of this school: most of its publications, though generally of high quality, were published locally.

Nonetheless, the influence of the Zaria School extended to other parts of Nigeria. It was complemented by the mentorship of a younger group of economic historians at the University of Ife, notably Toyin Falola and Akanmu Adebayo, and by the Marxist historian, Segun Osoba (1969, 1978). But while both Falola (1984, 1987) and Adebayo (1993) adopted the radical political economy approach, they have also been eclectic in some of their other publications. As shown later in this chapter, the Zaria–Ife radical school was a riposte to the conventional approach at the University of Lagos and elsewhere.

The economic history of the West African sub-region, as elsewhere in Africa, has the following characteristics.<sup>7</sup> First, the field has been dominated by historians but a fair proportion of the literature is derived from studies carried out primarily in other fields, such as geography, anthropology, agricultural economics and political science. Second, most mainstream economic historians are not preoccupied with testing hypotheses or applying economic theory as such. This is assumed to be the province of economists and other social scientists.

This reflects an unwritten “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” (Hopkins 2009: 157). However, interdisciplinarity is widespread as economic historians cross disciplinary boundaries for data and analytical tools. Third, there is no sharp dichotomy between social and economic history. Histories of labour and urbanization, for example, straddle the divide between social and economic history. It is at this intersection that radical political economy has made notable scholarly interventions. Some of the outstanding publications on West African economic history have centred on pawnship, labour migrations, wages and the cost of living, strikes, labour unionization and urbanization. Fourth, research and publishing have been constrained by the linguistic and colonial boundaries within which scholars operate. With only a few exceptions (Adamu 1978; Olukoju 2000, 2010; Adebayo 2007), West African historians tend to focus on issues within their national boundaries. Only a handful of scholars are literate in more than one language.

Fifth, the bulk of the literature consists of microhistories or case studies, articles in learned journals and chapters in collections of essays and monographs, based upon original research and especially the work for postgraduate degrees. A few works of synthesis exist however, set within the mainstream conventional approach to economic history. The two best-known examples are Ekundare (1973) and Agbodeka (1992). The former, by a non-historian, enriched the synthesis of existing literature with primary source material in an attempt to highlight the economic impact of imperialism on a former British colony. In the Foreword to the book, Professor Peter Mathias of Oxford University hailed it as “the first systematic study of the general economic development of Nigeria, including its long pre-colonial story, and, with this, it stands as the first academic economic history of any black African country” (Ekundare 1973: xvii). Significantly, the feat has not been replicated by specialist economic historians.

Sixth, the spatial and gender distribution of practitioners is uneven. The field is male-dominated with only a handful of female practitioners. However, female scholars (Ekejiuba 1967; Awe 1973, 2001; Ikpe 1994; Apena 1997; Odotei 2002a, 2002b; Chuku 2005) have made significant contributions. Their publications highlight the often neglected gender dimension in the indigenous political economy, with emphasis on women’s roles in warfare, entrepreneurship, artisanal fisheries and the food economy. Moreover, only a few departments (such as Lagos) have a cluster of economic (and social) historians. Otherwise, expertise is either thinly spread in Departments of History or non-existent. Finally, the vast bulk of the literature has been contributed by expatriate scholars based in Western countries, mainly France, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States of America. This can be verified by the number of contributions in leading Africanist journals, publications by major publishing houses and major scholarly conferences – all domiciled in the North – and the citations in those scholarly works. Indigenous West Africans generally play a marginal role in these scholarly activities. This is largely a reflection of gaps in training and in the curriculum in West African universities, the balance of power and resources in the global economy, the brain drain from the sub-region to the West, and insufficient engagement of indigenous West African scholars with global narratives.

The rest of this chapter highlights the institutional framework for teaching and scholarship in West African economic history. It then discusses in more detail the contributions of indigenous scholars in both foreign and local outlets. Nigeria, which has more than half the overall population and tertiary institutions in West Africa, accounts for a preponderance of the literature considered.

### **Institutional structure for the study and teaching of economic history**

Across West Africa, economic history as an academic discipline is domiciled in the Department of History at each of the major universities. It is taught in the Departments of Economics of some universities, but only as a marginal course and, in any case, differently from the approach in the History Departments. In Nigeria, for example, Olufemi Ekundare, Eno Usoro and Philip Elegalam taught the subject at the universities of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), Ibadan and Lagos, respectively, in the 1970s–1990s. Until the 1980s, the discipline of History in West Africa was dominated by specialists in political, administrative and cultural history, mainly focused on the pre-colonial and colonial periods. Only a handful of specialists in social and economic history, both indigenous and expatriate, taught in those departments. A striking illustration of this marginality or non-existence of economic history as a speciality was the domination of the influential Ibadan History Series by studies of colonial conquest and administration, the spread and impact of Christian and Islamic missions, and the impact of colonialism and formal education on indigenous societies. The Ibadan History Series was grounded in the tradition of nationalist historiography and focused more on internal (as opposed to external) dynamics in explaining developments in African history but it did validate the use of oral sources.

In general, both indigenous and expatriate scholars of West African history focused largely on non-economic issues. The tendency was replicated at other sub-regional intellectual powerhouses: Legon (Ghana), Fourah Bay (Sierra Leone) and Dakar (Senegal). There were, of course, notable exceptions, such as Dike (1956), Aderibigbe (1962), Ikime (1968), Alagoa (1970) and Daaku (1970), all situated within the trade and politics genre of studies pioneered by Dike. Ikime's *Merchant Prince of the Niger Delta* (1968) centred on the career of Nana Olomu, an Itsekiri merchant, in the wider context of the international trade in palm produce, the dynamics of indigenous entrepreneurship and inter-group relations. The trade and politics studies might be described as an early form of orthodox or liberal political economy. Strands of economic history also appeared in other texts primarily devoted to warfare, political and administrative issues.

The late 1970s and early 1980s marked a major transition in the development of economic history in West Africa. Two contemporaneous internal developments took place – the rise of radical scholarship as explained above and the loss of status of the discipline of History as a privileged subject. The euphoria of independence having worn off, the passion for History, an ally in the decolonization process, waned. Indeed, in Nigeria, the subject was taken off the junior secondary school syllabus during the regime of General Ibrahim Babangida (1985–93). Social Studies soon proved a poor replacement, and both official and popular interest in History never recovered from that setback. University enrolment plummeted as History graduates were not as sought after for jobs in the bureaucracy and diplomatic service as they had been in previous decades. In effect, economic history was merely a branch of a marginal discipline in many West African universities.

Using Nigeria as a West African paradigm, it can be stated that the training of personnel in economic history in the sub-region has not been systematic. Until the 1980s, no institution had a notable reputation for teaching and producing specialists in the subject. The first generation of specialists obtained their higher degrees from the universities of Birmingham, UK, Wisconsin (Madison), USA, and Toronto, Canada, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. While Wale Oyemakinde obtained a Master's degree in Economics from Madison after a Doctorate in History at Ibadan, Babatunde Agiri (supervised by Philip Curtin), Walter Ofonagoro and Deji Ogunremi earned their Doctorates in History at the universities of

Wisconsin at Madison, Toronto and Birmingham, respectively, on such subjects as agriculture, trade, currency and transport. It is significant that those who studied at Birmingham were supervised by A.G. Hopkins, the well-known leading authority on West African economic history. This background in mainstream European scholarship explains why the approach to economic history in Nigeria and elsewhere in West Africa has been orthodox rather than radical, and without much grounding in theory. But, as indicated in the case of the Zaria School, external influences came from other directions – ideas from Marx, Fanon and Rodney – and personnel from the Dar es Salaam School.

As for the teaching of economic history in West African universities, the subject was for long subsumed in regional surveys or national topics. However, discrete courses on economic history were introduced into the curriculum from the mid-1970s. In this connection, the Department of History at the University of Lagos, noted for its specialization in applied or utilitarian history, was a trailblazer in many respects.<sup>8</sup> First, it employed a number of early specialists in the field – Oyemakinde (railway labour history), Ofonagoro (foreign trade and politics), Agiri (agricultural history) and Ogunremi (transport). These were later joined by a younger generation – Adebayo Lawal (financial history), Kehinde Faluyi (trade and agriculture) and Ayodeji Olukoju (maritime, transport and social history). These scholars were recruited primarily to teach general courses on Nigeria, Africa and its sub-regions, and the wider world, mainly Europe, the United States and Asia. However, there is no specific unifying theme in the scholarship produced by them beyond a common focus on Nigerian, African and comparative economic history. All have, however, utilized oral sources, newspapers, private papers and archival material (in English) in local and foreign repositories. The use and interpretation of multiple source material is the forte of this group of economic historians.

Second, the department at Lagos mounted several undergraduate and postgraduate courses in economic history. Most notable is the “Introduction to Economic History” course taken by students of the Faculties of Arts, Business Administration and Social Sciences. This has remained a compulsory and popular course for students of the Faculty of Business Administration. The importance attached to economic history in the department’s undergraduate and postgraduate programmes is underscored by the fact that the subject is offered at every level and that specialist areas in economic history are taught as distinct courses. Among these are business history (final year), maritime history (a first for West Africa) at two levels, economic history of West Africa (before 1800, during the nineteenth century and since 1900), comparative history of developing economies and US economic history (colonial period to 1945). At the postgraduate level, ten courses are listed on the economic history of pre-colonial, colonial and contemporary Africa, economic history of Lagos, Latin America and Asia, and of the advanced economies.

Third, the department produced a course text on economic history (Olukoju et al. 2003), its chapters based on a synthesis of secondary literature and original research by individual contributors. Members of the department also contributed most of the chapters in a major textbook on West African economic history (Ogunremi and Faluyi 1996). Both textbooks are widely used in many Nigerian universities. Fourth, the economic history section has produced several notable doctoral theses, including one on national government budgets that was judged the best in the Humanities category in Nigerian universities (Ogunyemi 2008). On the basis of the foregoing, the Department of History, University of Lagos, prides itself as the leading centre of economic history in Nigeria. In addition to scholarly contributions by members of staff in the 1970s and 1980s (Oyemakinde, 1975, 1977; Ofonagoro 1975, 1979a, 1979b; Ogunremi 1975, 1976, 1982; and Agiri 1974, 1977, 1983–84), a later generation

(Lawal, Faluyi, Olukoju and Iwuagwu), has produced significant publications on local and foreign themes in economic history. Activities in Lagos are complemented by work done elsewhere in Nigeria. Onwuka Njoku, Akinola Olorunfemi, Ben Naanen and Olutayo Adesina based at Nsukka, Ile-Ife, Port Harcourt and Ibadan, respectively, have taught courses and supervised doctoral theses in economic history. Only Naanen (1991, 1993) has been influenced by the radical political economy approach in his publications. Others have published important articles in mainstream Western journals and other outlets on agriculture, international trade and road transport (Njoku 1978, 1979; Olorunfemi 1981a, 1981b, 1984).

West African universities vary in terms of course offerings in economic history. Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, offers eight undergraduate courses in economic history on West Africa; comparative history of industrialization; trade and politics in the Niger-Benue Valley; and on Africa and European imperialism. The University of Jos in northcentral Nigeria also has eight economic history courses on its history curriculum including comparative economic history; history of economic thought; Nigeria in the twentieth century; the African Union and African regional economic blocs; and land and labour in Africa. At the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, five courses are taught on economic history including West Africa in the twentieth century; comparative industrialization (USA, USSR, Japan and China); regional economic development in Africa; and economic history of Nigeria since 1800. Ibadan typifies the marginality of economic history by offering the fewest undergraduate courses, “Economic History of West Africa Since 1800” and “Development: Concepts and Realities in The Third World.” “The Industrial Process and Economy of Colonial West Africa, 1885–1960” and “Economic Cooperation in West Africa since 1958” are taught at the postgraduate level.<sup>9</sup>

The foregoing survey indicates that generally, political/administrative history is dominant in the curriculum at the expense of economic and social history. Second, with the exception of the introductory or survey courses, economic history is offered only in the last two years at the undergraduate level. Third, there is a common interest in comparative industrialization and economic integration.

In terms of institution building in economic history, there is no pan-West African specialist journal or professional association. In Nigeria, however, Ogunremi spearheaded the founding of the Nigerian Economic History Society, which published several issues of the now rested *Nigerian Journal of Economic History*.<sup>10</sup> Edited by Tayo Adesina, it published 58 articles between 1998 and 2005, when it went into abeyance. The journal did cover wide-ranging and interesting topics stretching from the pre-colonial period to contemporary times. With the exception of a few articles on Latin America, Nigeria–Japanese trade relations, Sierra Leone and the Cameroun, the journal was essentially Nigerian. Though some non-Nigerians published in it, the journal does not appear to have had much impact beyond the country in terms of either the submission of articles or readership. That it has been suspended speaks volumes about the limits of the organizational capacity of economic historians in West Africa’s biggest country.

Compared to Nigeria, much less appears to have been achieved elsewhere in West Africa. The University of Ghana at Legon, for example, offers only two undergraduate courses, while it has only just designed (but has not mounted) a postgraduate course on Global Economic History.<sup>11</sup> Undergraduate teaching material includes Hopkins’s well-known *An Economic History of West Africa* (1973), and textbooks and articles written by both Western and indigenous scholars in learned journals. A Special Paper (“The Economic History of the Gold Coast”) aims to “expose students to the main contours of the economic history of the Gold Coast from 1850 to 1957” and to train them in the use of material from the Public Records and Archives. History Departments at other Ghanaian universities also offer survey courses

in economic history. A notable feature of the discipline in Ghana is that there are no major specialists in economic history in History Departments. Agbodeka, author of the aforementioned monograph on the economic history of Ghana, and Addo-Fening (1976), did not specialize in economic history.

Some of the most outstanding work on the domestic economy has been done by anthropologists with a bias for history. Those on trade and markets (Ukwu 1967; Arhin 1970, 1979, 1980) rank among the best in the entire region. The contribution of anthropologists was both theoretical and empirical. On the one hand, French anthropologists, notably Claude Meillassoux, influenced the analysis of indigenous social formations, applying the mode of production analysis. On the other, orthodox anthropologists, such as Arhin, Ukwu and Ekejiuba, made use of written and non-written sources, including oral sources, in their study of economic history.

The Department of History at the Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar, Senegal, is best known for its expertise in social history. Yet, its faculty has made significant contributions to the economic history of the Senegal basin. Perhaps the best-known historian in this regard is Boubacar Barry, who has produced some truly outstanding publications (Barry 1988a, 1988b, 1998, 1985). His main monograph on Senegambia and the slave trade was also published in English by Cambridge University Press. He argued influentially that the slave trade resulted in economic regression, violence, the increased use of slave labour, loss of autonomy and the centralization of royal power in the region. The area lost population and those remaining were more vulnerable to poverty, violence and climate. Other scholars too have written on aspects of Senegalese and West African economic history (Thiouf 1994, 2003; Thiouf et al. 1998). Courses offered in the department include those (taught by Mamadou Fall) on “The Credit Market in West Africa during Colonial Days”; “Trade and Merchant Diaspora in Senegambia from the XVIIth to XXth centuries”; “The Labor Market and Informal Sector in Senegal”; “Random Capitalism or the Capitalist Experience of the Mourides of Senegal” and “Economic History of Mozambique in Modern World Economy XVth–XXth centuries.”

### **Milestones in indigenous contributions to West African economic history**

Contributions by some indigenous scholars represent milestones in the development of West African economic history. Most are national or sub-national in their coverage and there are also sub-regional collections of essays on a common subject, such as indigenous markets, currencies and trade. Kenneth Dike’s seminal book (Dike 1956) is generally accepted as marking the birth of modern West African economic history. Its major contribution was the methodological innovation of using oral sources to interpret the history of trade, state formation and politics of the Lower Niger Delta and its hinterland. Reversing the focus on expatriate factors and actors as the subject of historical inquiry, it highlighted the importance of local actors and dynamics. The focus on trade and politics has also kindled the interest of historians and anthropologists in the indigenous commercial systems. Studies by the anthropologists Arhin in Ghana, and Ukwu and Ekejiuba in Nigeria shed light on market periodicity, capital formation, gender relations and indigenous entrepreneurship.

A complement to the engagement with indigenous systems of production and trade is the examination of transnational and continental issues including the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the external commodity trades during the colonial period. With regard to the former, there are several major case studies (Bathily 1986 and Barry 1988a, 1988b, 1998 for Senegambia) of the volume of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, its political, social and economic impact, resistance to slavery, and the process and consequences of Abolition. Inikori (1976a,



1976b, 1977, 1992) is a major contributor to the literature both in terms of quantifying the volume of slave exports and the linkage between gun imports and slave exports. He also linked the slave trade and West African history with British industrialization, partially rehabilitating the famous Williamson thesis (Inikori 2002).

West Africa's external trade in the context of colonial rule is a major theme in the literature. Most publications, including those influenced by dependency analysis (Olukoju 2003, 2004a, 2008), have focused on individual countries either in relation to the colonial power or the world market. They are useful for quantifying the volume and analysing the patterns of commercial relations in the contexts of world wars, trade cycles and colonialism. Economic historians of West Africa have examined aspects of colonial finances, including the demonetization of indigenous and non-imperial currencies, currency boards and colonial currencies, and financial administration (Ofonagoro 1979b; Lawal 1983/84, 1989, 1998; Naanen 1993). Related issues of the cultural and economic value of money, and the counterfeiting of colonial currencies also engaged scholarly attention (Falola 1997; Falola and Adebayo 2000; Olukoju 2002, 2010). These studies, and most of those by Western scholars, were produced within the conventional paradigm that is narrative and archive-based. Historians and financial experts with a bias for history have also made notable contributions in the study of banking and finance (Uche 1995, 2010).

Alongside preoccupation with the colonial economy, attention has been devoted to the workings of the indigenous economy. Capital and capital formation in the indigenous economy, especially indigenous entrepreneurship, the organization of trade (caravans) and trade diasporas have been examined in various studies (Adamu 1978; Dike and Ekejiuba 1990). Worth noting are Nwabughuogu's article (1984b), on *isusu* (thrift and rotating credit) among the Igbo, and Falola's essays (1989, 1991, 1993) on money-lending, the caravan system and tolls in Western Nigeria. Business biographies are an important dimension of indigenous entrepreneurship, a major topic. These cover various female and male entrepreneurs involved in colonial era export and import trade, money-lending, real estate development and agriculture (Ekejiuba 1967; Ikime 1968; Awe 2001; Njoku 2008).

Studies of external trade account for the bulk of the contributions by indigenous economic historians of West Africa (Olorunfemi 1980, 1981a, 1981b). The dependence of West African colonial economies on commodity exports is reflected in the volume of work done on such items as groundnuts (Senegal and Northern Nigeria), cotton (Sahelian West Africa), cocoa (Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria) and palm produce (Nigeria and Sierra Leone). Commodity imports too have attracted attention. Foreign liquors, for example, assumed great significance in the face of the prohibition policies of various colonial governments. Important studies on fiscal, cultural and social aspects of the imported liquor trade in Nigeria and Ghana have been undertaken by Olorunfemi (1984), Olukoju (1991, 1996, 1997), Korieh (2003) and Akyeampong (1996). The Nigerian studies have featured a lively debate between Olukoju and Simon Heap (1998, 1999) on aspects of the liquor traffic in colonial Nigeria. These studies employ the same sources (mainly archival) and ideas as their expatriate counterparts.

Next to trade, agricultural economic history appears to have attracted the widest interest. This genre is represented by single-crop studies of cotton, cocoa, cassava and the oil palm.<sup>12</sup> Much of this work emanated from postgraduate theses and dissertations completed in local and foreign universities. The introduction of cash crops (Agiri 1977) and exotic food crops to Africa, and the dynamics of the food crop economy and culture (Ikpe 1994; Korieh 2007) attracted some scholarly contributions. Ohadike (1981) established a linkage between the influenza pandemic of 1918/19 and the spread of cassava in South Central Nigeria. His conclusions have, however, been challenged (Iwuagwu 2012), in one of the intellectual

skirmishes involving indigenous scholars in the field. These studies enjoy the leverage of insider knowledge of the cultural dimensions of the subject and milieu under consideration.

Allusion has been made to the conflation of economic and social history in West Africa. There is no compartmentalization between “core” economic history and “core” social history issues, such as labour (Osoba 1969; Thioub 1994; Abdullah 1997, 1998), criminality (Olukoju 2002), prostitution (Naanen 1991; Aderinto 2015) and urbanization. Labour was an early focus of scholarly research and publishing in West African economic history. Oyemakinde’s pioneering study of indigenous labour on the Nigerian railway (Oyemakinde 1970) yielded several important articles on wages, cost of living, unionization and labour militancy in the *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* during its heyday (Oyemakinde 1974, 1977). The pivotal role of transportation as the backbone of the local economy is duly acknowledged in the literature comprising studies in local and national contexts. In Nigeria, for example, scholarly articles have been published on human portage, road, river and camel transport (Ogunremi 1982), bicycle transport (Nwabughuogu 1984a) and ports and shipping (Olukoju 1992a, 1992b, 1996). Railway transport was an early focus of interest in the context of colonial policy and labour (Oyemakinde 1974, 1975, 1977; Oshin 1991).

The study of seaports and port cities undertaken by economic historians straddle social and economic history. In Nigeria, aspects of port engineering, urbanization, trade, inter-group relations and social change in coastal West Africa, and the Lagos and Port Harcourt seaports have been examined in several publications (Olukoju 1992b, 1994, 1996). Fishing, migrations and coastal trade have been studied by some Nigerian and Ghanaian scholars (Olukoju 2000; Odotei 2002a, 2000b). Trade between the coastal outlets and the hinterland entailed conflict over tolls, terms of trade and embargoes. Sierra Leonian and Nigerian case studies have been produced by Aderibigbe (1962), Ijagbemi (1970) and Cole (2008).

During the 1970s and early 1980s, dependency theory influenced the analyses undertaken by indigenous scholars of the relationship between the metropolitan countries and their colonies. In addition to several microstudies, Falola (1987) produced a landmark collection of essays, mainly by indigenous West Africans. In the same vein, the role of expatriate firms in the colonial economy has received attention and this has generated debates on a “special relationship” between the colonial government and such firms in colonial Nigeria, argued by Olukoju (1992a, 1995, 2011), but disputed by Yearwood (1998). The role of British big business in Nigeria’s decolonization has also received attention in the literature (Lawal 1994).

Most economic historians of West Africa tended to shy away from contemporary topics. Steeped in the orthodoxy of the parent Western European historical scholarship, they tended to avoid the post-independence period for which archival records did not open until the 1980s. As Morten Jerven et al. (2012: 16–17) noted, there has been “an informal division of labour between the disciplines whereby economists studied the post-1960 period, while historians were mainly occupied with the pre-1960 period.” However, Falola (1987, 1991), Adebayo (1990, 1993), Dibua (2006, 2013), Ogunyemi (2008) and Iwuagwu (2009) are notable exceptions. They dealt with many contemporary issues, such as revenue allocation and budgeting in the context of nation building, devaluation, structural adjustment, development planning, industrial policy and agricultural modernization. Most engaged with radical theories and concepts in opposition to the dominant paradigms of modernization and patrimonialism/neo-patrimonialism in the explanation of Africa’s development crisis.

The dominance of post-1960 scholarship by economists, in any case, added analytical depth to the study of West African economic history. This is epitomized by Bade Onimode, a Professor of Economics at Ibadan and a radical political economist, who, as early as 1982,

scorned the use of GDP for measuring growth, arguing that it failed to capture “concrete realities on the ground.”<sup>13</sup> He dismissed the use of GDP as a mere statistical exercise that did not capture how “development” affected the quality of life of the mass of the people. To be sure, the statistics themselves are not dependable: this is the lynchpin of Morten Jerven’s more recent critiques (2012, 2013) of the statistics used for computing GDP in African countries. Such critiques of course have deeper antiquity: Phyllis Deane’s (1953) study of East Africa of the 1940s highlighted the problems of applying the concept of GDP to regions where the subsistence sector dominated. And W.F. Stolper’s work (1966), in an evocatively titled book on Nigeria’s development planning in the 1960s, emphasized the inadequacy and unreliability of the statistics used in calculating GDP. Patrick Manning (chapter 25 in in this volume) highlights disquiet about contemporary measures of African growth where seemingly low rates of increase in GDP per capita are occurring at the same time as other indicators such as health, education and welfare are rising significantly in many regions.

### Conclusion

This survey of contributions by indigenous scholars to the writing of West African economic history is by no means exhaustive. It has probably left out much more than it has covered. This is partly a consequence of the considerable volume and dispersion of the literature. Most of the literature focuses on themes of national significance. Nationalist history in some of these works is probably a consequence of the initial association of the discipline of History with the nationalist movements of the 1950s and 1960s, and the influence of dependency theory in the following two decades. The call for historians to embrace the “New Economic History” (Hopkins 2009) won very few converts, perhaps most notably Joseph Inikori, whose contributions to the quantification of the trans-Atlantic slave trade anticipated the new wave to some degree (Inikori 1977, 1992). In the same vein, Wariboko (1998) also demonstrated the possibilities of applying economic theory, this time to the analysis of indigenous politico-economic institutions.

While attempts have been made to challenge received wisdom, these have tended to be intellectual skirmishes rather than sustained challenges on the part of indigenous scholars of West African history. A major exception is Inikori’s stellar role in the guns-for-slaves debate, described as “a great controversy in African history” (Whatley 2008: 17). Validating Inikori, Whatley (2008: 19) concluded that “[g]uns-for-slaves is an appropriate characterization of the 18th century British slave trade in Africa. Gunpowder shipments were a powerful determinant of the number of Africans entering the Middle Passage. This result is robust across a variety of econometric specifications.” Second, Inikori’s review of Phillip Curtin’s *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Inikori 1992) generated debates between him and Curtin’s supporters (Eltis 1995; Richardson and Behrendt 1995) which contributed to the refinement and use of the historical statistics, and threw better light on the impact of the slave trade in Africa.

Much of the literature has in general focused on indigenous agency under colonial rule, utilizing insider knowledge and a rigorous engagement with diverse source material, particularly non-documentary. This is where the broad strength of indigenous scholarship lies, rather than in employing or debating received wisdom informed by econometrics or other similar analysis. In short, given the analytical quality of their work, the outlets of their publications, and the global recognition many of them have won, indigenous economic historians of West Africa deserve much more than occasional mention in footnotes as providers of sources or evidence.<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

- 1 I thank Pat Hudson, Francesco Boldizzoni, Jeremiah Dibua and Ibrahim Abdullah for supplying useful references and for helpful comments on earlier versions of this chapter. The essay is dedicated to the loving memory of my wife, Abosede Omowumi Olukoju, née Olorunda (1961–2014) and my father, Israel Adeniyi Olukoju (1925–2015).
- 2 For similar recent efforts, see Roy (2014) and Saito (2015). Green and Nyambara (2015) offer illuminating perspectives that are equally applicable to West Africa. Austin (2015) has a more pessimistic view about the quality of African scholarship and has good coverage of West Africa. The inclusion of a wider range of studies (some perhaps strictly outside of economic history, more narrowly conceived), and of offshore-based indigenous West African economic historians allows one to paint a more optimistic picture than Austin.
- 3 The Zaria School examined in this chapter epitomizes the institutional adoption of a radical perspective while various individual scholars indicated in the text (Osoba, Usman, Onimode, Falola, Adebayo, Abdullah, Dibua and Naanen) have been influenced by radical political economy.
- 4 Green and Nyambara (2015: 8) summarized the preoccupation of African economic historians as follows: seeking “answers to a broad set of social, political and economic questions on how production is organized, exchanged and distributed as well as how factors of production are allocated.”
- 5 See, for example, Alpers (1973), Hopkins (2009), Austin (2015), and Green and Nyambara (2015).
- 6 Yusufu Bala Usman, discussed at length below, was radicalized when he stumbled on a copy of Fanon’s book at a London train station and stayed till he had finished reading it.
- 7 Details in Manning 1987: 53.
- 8 Details in Olukoju (2004b). As indicated in an earlier passage, Lagos had a counterpoise in the Zaria School of the 1970s–1980s.
- 9 Electronic communication from Professor Olutayo Adesina, Ibadan, Nigeria, March 2015.
- 10 It is accessible via [http://www.africabib.org/query\\_p.php?pe=!227693256!&SR=3](http://www.africabib.org/query_p.php?pe=!227693256!&SR=3)
- 11 Electronic communication from Dr. Kofi Baku, Legon, Ghana, November 2014.
- 12 One of the earliest studies, incidentally by a non-historian, is Agboola (1968).
- 13 I am grateful to Professor Jerry Dibua for this insight (electronic communication, March–May 2015). Onimode (1982) is a highly regarded radical treatise on Nigeria’s political economy.
- 14 Books by Inikori (2002) and Nwokeji (2010), both published by Cambridge University Press, won the prestigious Melville J. Herskovits Book Prize in 2003 and 2011, respectively, while Toyin Falola alone has a catalogue of outstanding publications too numerous to cite here. Toyin Falola (in 2011) and Boubacar Barry (in 2014) won the prestigious Distinguished Africanist Awards of the African Studies Association.

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