ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICA, 1880–1939

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Volume 1
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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Among the many motivations behind Britain's scramble for Africa the most important were economic. It was believed that the continent would supply the raw materials and foodstuffs required by Britain's ever-expanding industries and population, furnish guaranteed markets for some of the goods produced by those industries, and provide investment opportunities and high returns for the large amount of capital unable to find employment at home.[1] There was also a wish to protect this supposed economic Eldorado from exploitation by other European powers, such as France and Germany, which were increasingly threatening Britain's dominance of the world economy. This general introductory essay, the thematic introductions and the sources reproduced in this collection examine the extent to which these goals were realized.

Governmental Contribution to Development and the Impact of External Shocks

The imperial government's attitude to its African colonies was one of *laissez faire*. It had little involvement in the economic development of the continent and, at least until the inter-war period, it was relatively unconcerned as to whether Britain economically directly benefited from its colonies. Over, the period, little finance was provided for development and Africa largely remained a free-trade area. However, although the government's reluctance to finance growth no doubt harmed development, its commitment to free trade probably promoted economic expansion, as did the construction of infrastructure, the introduction of a stable currency and a variety of other services.

Finance

The imperial government provided few funds for the administration of the continent. Colonial governments were expected to be self-financing, to balance their budgets and, if possible, to build up a small surplus. The British Treasury only paid the military and administrative expenses of new dependencies that had yet to develop revenue streams and, subsequently, provided non-repayable

grants-in-aid. These had to be approved by Parliament and were given to those colonies unable to cover their administration costs or that had suffered a natural disaster or civil emergency and needed funds for reconstruction or relief.[2]

Nor was the imperial government willing to finance development. Except for a brief period from 1895 to 1903 when the then Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, promoted the idea of constructive imperialism, the orthodox view was that economic growth should be funded by local administrations and the private sector.[3] The policy only slightly changed in the 1920s. High post-war unemployment and the fear of an imminent shortage of cotton required for the Lancashire textile industry prompted the imperial government in 1924 to provide a £3.5m loan for the construction of the Uganda–Kenya railway and, two years later, to make another £10m available for the further development of transport in East Africa and Palestine.[4] There were also calls by the Conservative MP and later Colonial Secretary (1924–9) Leo Amery in 1922 and the 1925 and 1928 East Africa Commissions for the creation of a Colonial Development Fund. This was eventually established in 1929 with the aim of aiding the development of agriculture and industry in the colonies and thereby fostering industrial expansion in the United Kingdom. The Fund was managed by the Colonial Development Committee, which considered schemes put forward by colonial governments and could advance in any one year up to £1m in the form of grants, loans or the payment of interest on loans raised elsewhere.[5]

Unfortunately, the amount of money available for distribution was determined by Parliament and tended to fall in years of poor trade when colonial needs for finance were at their greatest. By 1940, MPs had permitted just £8m of expenditure, half in the form of grants, of which only £6.5m was actually spent.[6] Moreover, rather than the large-scale projects envisaged, most of the loans and grants were used to finance small-scale transport and public health schemes. The Colonial Development Committee lacked both ambition and a long-term strategy and colonial governments were reluctant to initiate innovative programmes. Naturally conservative, they feared that economic advancement would weaken their ability to rule and were influenced in this belief by the Colonial Office and the British government. Both feared that industrialization would break down traditional societies and also suspected that colonial development by increasing competition would ultimately damage the UK economy and would lead to political repercussions in Britain from those who interpreted industrialization as exploitation.[7] Nonetheless, Africa did relatively well out of the Fund. In total, the continent obtained £2.654m in grants and £1.653m in loans; the greatest beneficiary being Tanganyika, which obtained over £0.8m.[8]

The funds needed to administer and develop colonies came from revenues, the Crown Agents (CAs), and locally raised and guaranteed loans.[9] Revenues were raised via import duties and only to a lesser extent through taxation, as the

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widespread distribution and poverty of populations made taxes difficult to collect and the amount collectable relatively small.[10] Tariffs were calculated on an ad valorem basis and bore heavily on clothing and other consumer items. Taxation comprised flat rate hut or poll taxes, and, in some colonies, miscellaneous fees for grazing, dipping, the ownership of dogs, etc.[11] Non-payment resulted in imprisonment and prison labour, and, in some places, the burning of homes and crops.[12] British trading and mining firms paid UK tax, though a half share was returned to the colony in which the income was generated.[13] Both sources of finance were thus regressive and fell more on Africans than on Europeans, ensuring that the costs of providing the security and infrastructure from which British companies and investors benefited were borne by the ruled rather than the rulers.

The purpose of taxation, however, was not merely to raise revenue. Taxes forced Africans to enter paid employment and to migrate long distances to find work, and helped to keep employee remuneration low (high wages reduced the amount of time Africans had to work to pay off their tax obligations). They additionally encouraged cash cropping, contributed to the abandonment of domestic slavery and forced labour, and had moral and other benefits. Africans were released from their 'lives of sloth and idleness' and firmly placed on 'the path of civilization', and they could use part of the wages earned to purchase British imports.[14] The taxes were initially paid in labour or produce, but later, as the circulation of European currency increased, in cash, thus promoting further currency circulation and the attendant growth of trade.[15] Income tax was rare; given the existence of subsistence farming, it would have failed to force farmers onto the labour market.

The external finance provided by the CAs comprised loans and current account overdrafts and advances. The loans were either publicly issued, sold to private institutions in the London money market or obtained from the inter-colonial loan scheme or from the Bank of England and the London and Westminster Bank. From 1880 to 1939, £128.3m of African government colonial stock was publicly issued or sold on the London market, each loan having a lifespan of five to sixty years, after which it had to be repaid, and an annual interest charge of between 2.5 and 6 per cent of the loan's value (Tables 1 and 2). The majority were used to finance the construction of railways and harbours. Generally, the CAs issued comparatively low interest rate loans for which they charged relatively high prices. Colonial stocks had trustee status, i.e. they could be purchased by trusts, which increased demand, and investors were well aware that colonial government finances were supervised by the Colonial Office and that imprudent behaviour was therefore unlikely and the UK government would never allow a colony to default on its debts. The CAs also adopted a variety of strategies to ensure that there was great demand for issues. In the nineteenth century, for example, several months before a flotation was to occur they purchased

the existing loan stock of the issuing colony for the colonial investment funds that they managed, causing the market price to increase and permitting them to set a relatively high price for the new loan.[16]

Table 1: Public Issues on the London Market, 1880–1939[17]

Period	Colony and year loan(s) issued	Total amount of issue (£m)
Nigeria		
1880–1913	Nigeria/Lagos/S. Nigeria (1905; 1908; 1911)	10
1914–39	Nigeria (1916; 1919; 1921;1927)	17.675
Nigerian total, 1880–1939		27.675
Gold Coast		
1880–1913	Gold Coast (1902; 1909)	2.035
1914–39	Gold Coast (1914; 1920; 1925; 1931)	10.833
Gold Coast total, 1880–1939		12.868
Other territories		
1880–1914	Sierra Leone (1904; 1913)	57.385
1914–39	Kenya (1921; 1927; 1928; 1930; 1936)	17.275
1914–39	Uganda (1932)	2
1914–39	Northern Rhodesia (1933)	1.097
1880–1913	Cape (1880; 1881)	3.5419
1880–1913	Natal (1882; 1884; 1885; 1888; 1889; 1881; 1893)	6.3685
1880–1913	Zanzibar (1901)	0.1
African total, 1880–1939		128.3104

Table 2: The Sale of Stock in the London Market to Institutions, 1914–39[18]

Colony and year loan(s) issued	Total amount of issue (£m)
Gold Coast (1935)	0.052
Nigeria (1922; 1930)	0.504988
Sierra Leone (1930; 1931)	0.3536
Northern Rhodesia (1931; 1932)	1.25
Uganda (1933; 1939)	0.85
Kenya (1933)	0.3056
Total	3.316

In addition to the loans issued and sold by the CAs, colonial administrations also issued guaranteed loans on the London market and floated their own issues on their own money markets. Guaranteed loans were floated by the Bank of England and were so called because the UK government guaranteed to repay the loan and pay the dividends if the issuer defaulted. They were generally issued when a loan without such a guarantee would fail or have to be offered at an excessively low price or high interest rate. During the period, three such loans were issued for Tanganyika and one for East Africa. Colonial administrations began to issue loans on their own money markets after the First World War. The practice was adopted where the colony possessed a local securities market, the

proceeds were to be spent internally rather than on the purchase of goods from the UK, the money was required by public bodies, which were effectively barred from the London market, or when a UK flotation was likely to prove difficult because the colony was not regarded as creditworthy or the money was to be used for unremunerative purposes. The loans were relatively small with short lives, were largely bought by local banks and were issued by Kenya, Northern Rhodesia, Sierra Leone, Tanganyika and Uganda.[19]

The CAs' inter-colonial loan scheme was established in 1925 to allow borrowers that were unable to raise funds on the London market to obtain money.[20] The CAs created stock for the colony requiring finance and then sold it to one or more of the colonial investment funds under their management. The stock was not quoted on the market and recipients therefore faced no flotation expenses and could repay the loan at any time. From 1925 to 1939, Sierra Leone borrowed £0.67149 under the scheme in four loans and Nigeria obtained one £0.045m loan.[21] A number of colonies also obtained loans via the CAs from the Bank of England and the London and Westminster Bank (Table 3). The advances were short-term and, in return, the colonies paid the banks the ruling Bank of England interest rate.[22]

Table 3: Bank Loans from the Bank of England and the London and Westminster Bank[23]

Colony and year of loans	Amount (£m)
Bank of England	
Zanzibar (1899; 1901)	0.096
Uganda (1902)	0.242
Transvaal (1903)	2.515
East African Protectorate (1914)	0.15
London and Westminster Bank	
Cape (1880; 1881; 1882)	2.235
Nata (1880; 1884)	0.576
Gold Coast (1898; 1899; 1900)	0.095
Lagos (1898; 1899; 1900)	0.3345
Sierra Leone (1899; 1900)	0.143
Total	6.3865

The current account overdrafts and advances provided by the CAs to colonies were also relatively small and short-term. Each colony kept in London a current account that contained the unspent proceeds of any loans it had issued and the money it remitted to the UK to be used to pay for its transactions in the country, largely the purchase of supplies. The CAs allowed governments to run overdrafts on their own accounts and to obtain advances from other colonies' accounts. The overdrafts rarely exceeded £100, carried an interest rate and were usually repaid within the month. The advances were larger and were generally provided

when a colony was unable to issue a loan on the London money market, either because the market was depressed or its credit poor.[24]

The imperial government's reluctance to invest in Africa was matched by private investors. The continent received only a small proportion of total British overseas investment; 13 per cent of the £4 billion invested overseas in 1914, and 21 percent of the £4.5 billion invested in 1938.[25] Reasons for this poor performance include the relative absence of plantation agriculture, adequate infrastructure, private capital markets and local demand; in the case of mining outside South Africa and the Rhodesias, the insignificance of the known deposits of the most important minerals; and government policy that was often inimical to inward investment – West African governments essentially forbade Europeans from acquiring land. After 1914, there was also relatively little demand for many of Africa's commodities and their prices were subject to wide swings.[26] Of the private capital invested, the vast majority found its way to South Africa and, to a lesser extent, Southern and Northern Rhodesia (Table 4). Deep-shaft mining generated heavy requirements for fixed capital and for railways, and, particularly in the inter-war period, industries to service and support the mines.[27] Not surprisingly, most of the money was invested in mining and trade and the investors were largely British nationals, though, as will be discussed below, after the First World War there was a significant inflow of American finance.[28]

Table 4: Private Capital Investment in British Territories, 1879–1936[29]

	Amount (£m)	Percentage of total British investment in African territories
South Africa and the Rhodesias	657.084	69.8
West Africa	116.73	12.4
East Africa	156.523	16.63
Miscellaneous	10.97	1.16
Total British territories	941.307	100

Trade

The imperial government's laissez faire view of empire extended to trade. Prior to the First World War and unlike her French colonial counterpart, Britain committed herself to free trade through a number of binding treaties. The Berlin Act of 1885 and the Brussels agreement of 1890 prohibited protective/differential tariffs in much of West Africa, British East Africa and Northern Rhodesia, and further freedom of trade was assured by the 1898 French treaty on West African trade, the 1918 Convention of St Germain and the commercial clauses attached to the 1919 mandates.[30]

As with the finance of the empire, however, Britain's commitment to this policy weakened in the 1920s and collapsed in the 1930s. In 1919 British customs duties on various empire goods including Rhodesian tobacco were reduced;

in the Gold Coast and Nigeria large export duties were placed on palm kernels (1919–22) and tin ore (1919–38) that were not destined for processing within the empire; and, among other countries, Kenya and South Africa introduced protective tariffs.[31] On the fall of commodity prices from 1929 there was a complete retreat from free trade. Britain introduced the imperial preference system, though it had little impact on African imports; colonial administrations increased and extended existing protective tariffs; and Kenya, Southern Rhodesia and South Africa established export subsidies. There was also a clampdown on the import of cheap Japanese textiles into Africa, which had begun to have an impact on the Lancashire clothing industry. In 1934, some West African territories imposed custom duties on Japanese textiles and Nigeria introduced a quota that fixed the maximum amount of such cloth that could be brought into the country.[32] The introduction of similar tariffs and quotas in East Africa was prevented by the pro-free-trade Congo Basin treaties to which Japan had acceded in 1919.[33]

By the end of the period Britain's proud boast of a free-trade empire was somewhat tarnished. In reality, of course, trade was never truly free. Colonial administrations diverted business towards British companies that were endowed with linguistic and institutional advantages not possessed by their foreign competitors, and all the goods imported for the use of colonial administrations were procured through the CAs, who placed almost all of their orders with UK suppliers.[34] Not surprisingly, therefore, Africa's trade was skewed towards Britain (Table 5). In 1900, 65.9 per cent of British Africa's exports flowed to the home country, though the extent of imperial dependence varied greatly. By 1937, the proportion had fallen to 39 percent, a reflection of the relative decline of the UK as a manufacturer, consumer and entrepôt country.[35] As for British imports into Africa, around 65.8 per cent of African imports came from the UK, though again there were great variations, and by the late 1930s the proportion had fallen to 44 per cent.[36] It should be noted, however, that African external trade was relatively small and was severely affected by the 1930s depression (Table 6) and that trade with Africa comprised only a small proportion of total British trade.[37] Nonetheless, the imperial power's relationship with Africa in the inter-war period undoubtedly softened the impact of slower economic growth; whilst at the same time masking economic decline and delaying the much-needed restructuring of the economy.

Table 5: Trade with Britain as a Percentage of Total Trade (annual averages)[38]

	West Africa		East Africa		Central Africa	
	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports
1895–99	50.9	75.3	7.1	11	–	–
1915–19	70.6	77.1	29.1	22.2	64.7	47
1925–9	38.9	59.4	45.5	37.2	72.4	47.5
1935–9	44.1	46.7	32.2	34.1	49.3	44.9

Table 6: Average Annual Exports and Imports of British tropical Africa (£m)[39]

	West Africa		East Africa		Central Africa	
	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports
1895–99	3.5	3.3	1.8	2.1	—	–
1915–19	18.2	15.3	7.8	10.4	5.1	3.5
1925–9	30.8	28.4	16.7	21.3	4.8	10.1
1935–9	23.3	24.1	17.3	18.9	13.4	12.6

Other Contributions to Development

In addition to their commitment to free trade, which on balance probably had a positive impact on development, the imperial and colonial governments further promoted economic growth through the construction of infrastructure and the introduction of stable currencies. The state built and operated most of the railways, harbours and roads of Africa; the private sector lacking the financial resources and will to become involved in projects that would not necessarily provide a return. As will be seen in the second collection of this series, such infrastructure opened up areas to capitalist economic activity, allowing entrepreneurs cheaply to transport produce to the new export markets and import capital goods, and freed labour that had previously been involved in head porterage for other duties.

The need for stable currencies arose from the failings of indigenous means of exchange – barter, credit, cowries, brass rods and gold dust. These were insecure and lacked universal acceptance and thus restricted the growth of trade, the development of a pricing system and the introduction of taxes.[40] To rectify these problems, the UK introduced imperial currencies into its territories – in West Africa sterling, in East Africa until the early 1920s the rupee; and, in South Africa and Rhodesia, the rand.[41] In West Africa, the spread of sterling was slow. Coins were relatively scarce, the lack of small denominations prevented its use for small purchases and its adoption was strongly opposed by the trading companies, who made large profits out of the barter system. Circulation then accelerated largely due to the activities of colonial administrations and the imperial government. Colonial authorities used sterling to pay the salaries of soldiers, administrators and the labourers building the railways and other public works; required taxes, court fees and fines to be paid in coin; publicized the use of sterling; in 1908, introduced smaller denomination coins – pennies and tenths of pennies; and passed ordinances that declared that indigenous currencies were no longer legal tender.[42] More importantly, the Colonial Office and the CAs encouraged the establishment of the Bank of British West Africa (BBWA). In addition to its other services, the BBWA imported and issued coin to customers, for which it received a fee of 1 per cent; sent back to Britain surplus and worn

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coin; and issued paper currency, removing the need for traders and administrators to carry around large amounts of heavy small denomination coin.[43]

By the early twentieth century, the majority of commercial transactions involved sterling. There were, however, concerns about the activities of the BBWA and the stability of the currency. The BBWA made large profits from the difference between the tender and the metallic value of the coins it imported and the fees it charged customers who wished to receive the coin. It was also reluctant to increase its costs by repatriating surplus and worn coins, and there were fears that it would overissue currency, leading to West African inflation, and, by forcing the repatriation of coins to UK, stoking British inflation. In 1912, therefore, a Currency Board for West Africa was established in London. Staffed by financial experts, this took over from the BBWA the import and issue of currency and ensured that the currency was convertible and backed by sufficient holdings of British government securities.[44]

As a large part of the region's trade was conducted with India and by Indian merchants, in East Africa and Somaliland the local denomination was the Indian silver rupee, which from 1893 was convertible to sterling at a fixed exchange rate. The currency proved eminently suitable until 1914 when Britain's abandonment of the gold standard caused the peg with sterling to be removed. Unfortunately, the price of silver and therefore the rupee then began to appreciate and, by early 1920, its exchange value had risen from 1 shilling 4 pence, the exchange rate that was fixed in 1906 and existed until 1914, to 2 shillings 10 pence.[45] The impact of this rise on the East African economy was devastating. Capital imports fell and those farmers and mine owners who sold their produce in London for sterling saw their receipts collapse by over 50 per cent.[46] Although imports were cheaper, other local costs and debts denominated in rupees had not changed and there was little scope for reductions in labour or wages. By March 1920, the situation had become so dire that it was decided to return to a fixed exchange rate and to set the rate at which the East African rupee could be exchanged for sterling at 2 shillings; to introduce a new sterling currency based on the florin coin, each of which was worth 1 rupee, i.e. 2 shillings; and, to oversee this new currency, to establish in London a Currency Board. In the event, the new exchange rate was set too high. Almost immediately after its establishment, the value of the rupee began to depreciate in terms of sterling. Calls from the commercial community for the florin to be devalued, however, fell on deaf ears and the region's currency remained overvalued.[47]

The Currency Boards established in West Africa (1912), East Africa (1920) and the Rhodesias and Nyasaland (1940) contributed much to the economic development of their regions. Board control of the issue of currency spared administrations the problems and risks of currency management and reduced the likelihood of overissue and inflation. More importantly, the Boards ensured

that currencies were freely convertible into sterling at face value and thus facilitated British Africa's trade with the UK and strengthened the sterling area's economic and political standing.[48] On the distaff side, local administrations lost control of their own monetary policy, and, by linking currencies with sterling, the Boards tightened the trade relationship between Africa and Britain, which was not necessarily to the colonial advantage, and made African economies more susceptible to fluctuations in world market prices. The Boards also maintained a high ratio of reserves to currency liabilities, though there were great variations in the ratios retained. The West African Board achieved a target ratio of 100 per cent in 1926 and thereafter exceeded this figure; whilst the East African Board, more influenced by local interests, rarely attained a ratio of 50 per cent, and, in 1932, possessed a ratio of less than 10 per cent. All of these reserves were invested in the UK and generally in low-interest British government securities. Many argued that such funds if invested in the colonies themselves would have assisted economic growth and that their absence had a deflationary effect. Calls, however, for a change in investment policy were rejected; many colonies lacked efficient domestic money markets and African investments were risky.[49]

Of the other facilitators of development associated with the imperial state the most important was probably the establishment of peace. In pre-colonial Africa, inter-tribal warfare and invasions by tribes of other's territory disrupted trade and took up large parts of the lives of young males. British rule permitted Africans to invest for the future without fear that their efforts would be destroyed by raiders, freed males for wage employment and promoted cross-border trade. Other significant contributions include the alienation of land, the replacement of the multiplicity of indigenous legal jurisdictions with a uniform legal system, and better education and health. Land alienation, which is discussed below, permitted European settlement, and a uniform legal system facilitated regional trade, the formalization of trading relationships and the resolution of trade disputes. Education, which was partly financed through subventions from the colonial state, ensured that employees were literate, numerate and, more importantly, disciplined.[50] The provision of very basic medical services and the use of vaccinations, quarantines and the destruction of plague-infected dwellings improved the health and productivity of workers.[51]

External Economic Shocks

A major drawback of Africa's gradual absorbtion into the World commercial system was that its economies were subject to external commercial shocks, the three most important of which over the period covered by this collection were the First World War, the post-war recession and the 1930s recession. The First World War affected colonial economies in a number of ways. There was firstly the loss of German/French markets and imports, the former of which particu-

larly damaged West Africa and the Gambia. Before the war, Germany had been a major importer of Gold Coast cocoa and had obtained respectively 80 per cent and 75 per cent of Sierra Leone's and Nigeria's palm kernel harvests; while France had taken 90 per cent of the Gambia's groundnut crop.[52] Some of the producers struggled to find new markets; Gold Coast cocoa exports fell from £2.5m in 1913 to £1.8m in 1918. Others successfully redirected their exports to Britain, with one of the main impacts of the war being an increase in the dominance of the West African export trade by British trading companies. Unfortunately, some UK firms took advantage of their new-found power. Traders in palm kernels colluded to keep prices low, with the result that, whilst prices rose in London, in West Africa they stayed static or even fell.[53] As for the loss of German and French imports, these were again largely replaced by British goods, entrenching UK firms in the African import trade, though in West Africa a proportion of the replacement products came from the United States.[54]

Trade was further impaired by the shortage of shipping and the related increase in shipping and insurance rates. The imperial government introduced controls on foreign trade and shipping space, which favoured the larger British trading companies and thus led to the disappearance of smaller African merchants, and, in West Africa, the German Woermann line and the French West African steamship service halted operations.[55] The resultant fall in exports affected those who produced for overseas markets and the collapse in imports led to price inflation, which particularly harmed African wage earners; in South Africa, Southern Rhodesia and elsewhere this stimulated the development of local industries manufacturing consumer goods, such as clothes, footwear and processed foods; and in the Gambia, whose main foodstuff was imported rice, it resulted in near-famine conditions.[56] The fall in both exports and imports also reduced local government revenues. Faced with the cost of maintaining large military forces, some raised import duties, adding to the general inflation, and others abandoned capital projects that on completion would have contributed to development.[57]

A further impact of the war was the loss of European and African labour. The absence of Europeans reduced production on settler farms and plantations and forced government trading posts and technical departments to close, though in West Africa there was some temporary Africanization of previously white occupations, such as the driving of railway engines.[58] Africans were recruited as soldiers, and, to a greater extent, as carriers and labourers. Their disappearance crippled the European agriculture and mining sectors and decimated subsistence farming, with Eastern Uganda descending into famine.[59] In some cases, the shortage of labour became permanent.[60] Conditions for both African soldiers and carriers/labourers were poor and food supplies minimal, and large numbers died from tubercolosis, dysentery and malaria. Those that survived and returned often brought with them

smallpox, meningitis and plague and large numbers of Africans, enfeebled by the fall in real wages, succumbed to the 1918–19 influenza pandemic.[61]

The colonies obtained a foretaste of the fall in commodity prices from 1929 to 1933 in the summer of 1920 when the immediate post-war rise in prices, stoked by the release of four years of pent-up demand and monetary inflation, collapsed. Producers for export experienced a drop in incomes, but recovery was relatively swift.[62] This was not the case in the 1930s, partly because in many regions the fall in prices was exacerbated by other problems. Kenya in 1928–9 was ravaged by locusts, and, in 1931–4, by drought.[63] Tanganyika in 1930 suffered heavy floods.[64] Southern Rhodesia in 1931 had to cope with an outbreak of foot and mouth and the restriction of cattle exports to neighbouring countries.[65] The South African economy was damaged by droughts in 1930–1 and 1932–3 and its decision in October 1931 not to follow Britain's lead and abandon the gold standard. Until the end of 1932, when the government finally accepted its mistake, the country thus faced fierce competition from countries that had devalued.[66]

The fall in prices affected both Europeans and Africans. Large numbers of European farmers, who had often financed expansion through heavy borrowing, were ruined.[67] Many voluntarily or otherwise abandoned their farms. Others stayed, generally because their assets were unrealizable and creditors accepted the futility of foreclosure.[68] These farmers variously temporarily halted cultivation; reduced the acreage cropped; where possible, consumed their produce themselves; cut the wages of their African workforce; increased production, encouraged in Tanganyika by the local government's 'Grow More Crops' campaign; or switched crops.[69] In Kenya, where the area under cultivation fell from 644,000 acres to 502,000 acres from 1930 to 1936 and African wages dropped by 40 per cent, there was a movement away from the growing of maize to the rearing of cattle and the growth of pyrethrum.[70] As regards other European activities, the smaller expatriate trading companies went to the wall or were taken over by their larger competitors, which possessed the advantages of vertical organization and strong customer relationships.[71] Gold mining was little affected by the depression. Gold prices remained high and, on the abandonment of the gold standard by Britain and the USA and the greater use of actual rather than notional gold, they rose.[72] Other mining operations survived by forcing down wages.[73] Local governments faced with falling revenues and costly agricultural aid programmes, cut capital projects.[74]

The impact of the price collapse on Africans was uneven. Those farmers who had embraced cash cropping were badly affected, though most lacked the burden of debt carried by their European counterparts; wage labour faced unemployment and lower wages; and the general fall in incomes reduced the turnovers of African shopkeepers and entrepreneurs.[75] The responses of those most damaged by the recession were similar to those adopted by Europeans. Many farmers

halted cultivation for export and large numbers of African retailers and entrepreneurs went out of business, replaced in West Africa by Syrian and Lebanese traders, who were more dependent on and therefore more favoured by the British trading companies and local governments. Those who survived increased production, encouraged in Tanganyika and Kenya by local government initiatives, or switched crops. A large number of Africans, however, escaped the recession relatively lightly. Subsistance farming was unaffected by the fall in prices and all Africans benefited from the drop in import prices, particularly those in East Africa who were able to buy cheap Japanese imports.[76]

African Agriculture

African economic activity comprised agriculture and the production of various crafts and the provision of waged labour. The latter roles are described in the Labour Supply, Working Conditions and African Enterprise thematic introductions in Volume 5 of this collection. African agriculture took the form of subsistence farming, the cultivation of foods wholly consumed by the families that grew them, and cash cropping, the production and sale of goods for the domestic or the export market. Subsistence farming occurred throughout Africa and was the most common form of agriculture; in 1910 it constituted 90 per cent of the Nigerian economy and 75 per cent of that of the Gold Coast.[77] Farmers grew plantains, yams, cassava, rice and maize in West Africa and bananas, maize, cassava and millet in East and Central Africa; selling any surplus in good years in the local markets.[78] By comparison, cash cropping largely took place in West Africa and Uganda, though it was also carried out, to a far lesser extent, in East, Central and South Africa, and generally involved the growth of family foodstuffs and a variety of export crops, such as palm fruits, coffee, cocoa and cotton.

West Africa

Explanations for the Development of Cash Cropping

The emergence of cash cropping in West Africa was related to the trade and the environment of the region. There was a long history of trade between West Africans living in coastal areas and Europeans. On the abolition of the slave trade, merchants turned to 'legitimate business'; British trading companies purchased from Africans palm oil, ivory, ebony, red wood, peppers, gum and beeswax and provided in return such goods as gin, tobacco and gunpowder.[79] The result of such commerce was that Africans had developed political expertise in dealing with and some trust of Europeans and had become familiar with and developed a taste for European goods.[80] The British trading companies, meanwhile, wishing to protect their business interests and lacking the ability to adopt plantation

agriculture, vigorously opposed individuals and firms wanting to establish plantations in the area. The environment of the region was also favourable to cash cropping. Its climate was almost perfect for the cultivation of cash crops, some of which (for example palm fruits and groundnuts) had long been grown there.[81] It was not rich in minerals and therefore did not attract Western mining companies, and it was inhospitable to Westerners. Known as 'the white man's grave', its sweltering temperatures and the presence of malaria and other tropical diseases resulted in high Western mortality rates, though similar conditions elsewhere failed to discourage white settlement and, by 1900, disease could be more effectively controlled.[82]

The reasons why Africans so readily adopted cash cropping are complex and include the rise of consumerism, the availability of labour, and entrepreneurialism. The growth of consumerism obviously played a large part. Africans desired Western goods not only to improve their standard of living, but also to gain the status and authority associated with ownership.[83] Some commentators claim that the appearance of new goods made possible by the development of the steam ship from the 1850s and the construction of railways largely from the 1890s gave farmers an incentive to bring new land into cultivation and to substitute effort for leisure. Others argue that the main incentive was not new goods but a desire to buy more of the same products and the falling price of these imports, again caused by transport improvements, which for the first time brought them within the reach of large numbers of Africans.[84]

To engage in cash cropping, black farmers required additional labour, as production for the market involved an increase in the amount of land cultivated. It is argued that this extra labour was available either because in the pre-colonial era Africans preferred leisure over work, or, more likely, because subsistence agriculture required relatively little labour (and land) and there was therefore a surplus of both, a thesis termed the vent-for-surplus model.[85] However, the latter theory is subject to caveats. It assumes that cash cropping was a new phenomenon. In fact, even before the arrival of colonialism, African farmers had sold a proportion of their harvests to local towns and traders. Although the intensity of sales varied from region to region, it therefore appears likely that the labour surplus was not as great as once assumed.[86] The surplus labour was also not idle all year round. During the planting and harvesting of subsistence food crops all the workers available were fully employed. Farmers who began to cultivate cash crops, the planting and harvesting seasons of which clashed with those of domestically consumed vegetables and grains, therefore had to limit food cultivation. When world prices for the export crops were high, this decision made economic sense, as the cash earned from exports could be used to purchase food. Problems arose when export prices fell. When this occurred, farmers had insufficient food grown by themselves, could not buy in vegetables and grains, and therefore faced starvation.

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