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INEQUALITY REGIMES IN AFRICA FROM PRE-COLONIAL TIMES TO THE PRESENT

EWOUT FRANKEMA, MICHIEL DE HAAS AND MARLOUS VAN WAIJENBURG*

ABSTRACT

While current levels of economic inequality in Africa receive ample attention from academics and policymakers, we know little about the long-run evolution of inequality in the region. Even the new and influential 'global inequality literature' that is associated with scholars like Thomas Piketty, Branko Milanovic, and Walter Scheidel has had little to say about Africa so far. This paper is a first effort to fill that void. Building on recent research in African economic history and utilizing the new theoretical frameworks of the global inequality literature, we chart the long-run patterns and drivers of inequality in Africa from the slave trades to the present. Our analysis dismantles mainstream narratives about the colonial roots of persistent high inequality in post-colonial Africa and shows that existing inequality concepts and theories need further calibration to account, among others, for the role of African slavery in the long-run emergence and vanishing of inequality regimes.

The study of economic inequality has taken a global and historical turn in the past two decades. New perspectives developed by scholars such

*Ewout Frankema (ewout.frankema@wur.nl) is a Professor and Chair of Economic and Environmental History at Wageningen University and a Research Fellow at the Centre for Economic Policy Research, Wageningen, The Netherlands. Michiel de Haas (michiel.dehaas@wur.nl) is an Assistant Professor of Economic and Environmental History at Wageningen University, Wageningen, The Netherlands. Marlous van Waijenburg (mvanwaijenburg@hbs.edu) is an Assistant Professor at Harvard Business School and an affiliate Assistant Professor at the Department of African and African American Studies at Harvard University, Boston, USA. We are grateful for the many valuable comments we received on earlier versions of this manuscript. We are especially indebted to the editors of this journal and the three anonymous referees; to Gareth Austin, Leigh Gardner, and Rachel Taylor; and to the participants of the economic history seminar at Utrecht University (May 2020), of the session 'African Political Economy: Long-Run Perspectives' at the African Studies Association annual meeting in Washington DC (November 2020), of the LEAP seminar at Stellenbosch University (February 2021), of the session 'Inequality, Wealth, and Poverty' at the Social Science History Association annual meeting in Philadelphia (November 2021), and of the session 'Political Economy of Colonialism' at the World Economic History Congress in Paris (July 2022). We gratefully acknowledge the financial support from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research for the project 'South-South Divergence: Comparative Histories of Regional Integration in Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa since 1850' (NWO VICI grant no. VI.C.201.062) and 'A good crisis gone to waste? How the 1930s Great Depression deepened Africa's primary commodity dependence' (NWO VENI grant no. VI.Veni.211F.047).

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as Thomas Piketty, Branko Milanovic, and Walter Scheidel have come to challenge long-held ideas about the driving forces and 'laws' that govern long-run global trends in income and wealth distribution.[1] As part of this growing research agenda, approaches that were originally developed to study historical inequality in the West, such as social tables and top income shares, have found application in other parts of the world.[2] This literature has received ample attention, not in the least because the world's two largest economies, the USA and China, have experienced a discomforting rise in both income and wealth inequality over the past four decades.[3] Indeed, while income gaps 'between' countries have begun to narrow—especially as a result of Asia's economic renaissance—inequality 'within' countries has widened, inciting fierce political debates about the virtues and vices of globalization, capitalism, and the digital revolution.

So far, the 'global inequality literature' has had little to say about Africa.[4] This silence reflects the fact that the state-of-the-art knowledge on long-run economic inequality in many parts of Africa lags far behind what is known for other world regions. This gap has two main causes. First, for most African polities, quantitative evidence on the distribution of income and wealth only goes back a few decades and is often spotty and of questionable quality. Second, the conceptual basis for a long-term analysis is more challenging than for many other parts of the world: How does one analyse long-run developments in inequality when much wealth had long been 'stored' in people rather than in physical or financial capital?

1. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the twenty-first century* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, London, 2014); Thomas Piketty, *Capital and ideology* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, London, 2020); Branko Milanovic, *Global inequality: A new approach for the age of globalization* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2016); Branko Milanovic, *Capitalism, alone: The future of the system that rules the world* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2019); Walter Scheidel, *The great leveler: Violence and the history of inequality from the stone age to the twenty-first century* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2017).
2. Anthony Atkinson and Thomas Piketty (eds), *Top incomes: A global perspective* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010); Branko Milanovic, Peter Lindert, and Jeffrey Williamson, 'Pre-industrial inequality', *The Economic Journal* 121, 551 (2011), pp. 255–272; Branko Milanovic, 'Towards an explanation of inequality in premodern societies: The role of colonies, urbanization, and high population density', *Economic History Review* 71, 4 (2018), pp. 1029–1047; Pedro Souza and Marcelo Medeiros, 'Top income shares and inequality in Brazil, 1928–2012', *Sociologies in Dialogue* 1, 1 (2015), pp. 119–132.
3. Anthony Atkinson and Thomas Piketty (eds), *Top incomes over the twentieth century: A contrast between continental European and English-speaking countries* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007); Thomas Piketty, Li Yang and Gabriel Zucman, 'Capital accumulation, private property, and rising inequality in China, 1978–2015', *American Economic Review* 109, 7 (2019), pp. 2469–2496; Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, 'The rise of income and wealth inequality in America: Evidence from distributional macroeconomic accounts', *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 34, 4 (2020), pp. 3–26.
4. Our use of the term 'global' refers to new empirical approaches that are applied to societies across the globe and to the idea that long-term distributional patterns are governed by 'universal' laws that hold across historical and contemporary societies.

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In this paper, we move beyond such constraints, evaluating how inequality in Africa has unfolded over the last four centuries. A long-term perspective on shifting inequality patterns in Africa is important for at least two reasons. First, it is a prerequisite for a truly global understanding of the evolutionary and revolutionary forces that shape distributional outcomes. Second, a more layered understanding of inequality in Africa draws our attention to the great 'diversity' in Africa's historical inequality experiences. This, in turn, helps us better understand contemporary distributions of income and wealth in African societies, which, as argued by Augustin Kwasi Fosu, crucially shape Africans' economic welfare, alongside and interacting with economic growth.[5]

Our approach to inequality goes beyond a narrow focus on inequality 'levels'. Instead, we structure our argument around the broader concept of inequality 'regimes', which captures both quantitative and qualitative aspects of distributional patterns. We expand Piketty's original definition of an 'inequality regime' as 'a set of discourses and institutional arrangements intended to justify and structure the economic, social and political inequalities of a given society'[6] by adding two components that we hold equally important in shaping inequality outcomes: (i) The 'sources' of income and wealth inequality, which include not only assets such as land, capital, cattle, subsoil deposits, or real estate but also uneven control over human labour and revenues in the form of rents, profits, wages, or salaries; (ii) the 'social groups' that obtain a disproportional share of the pie and thus are the 'main beneficiaries' of inequality. Importantly, a shift from one inequality regime to another does not necessarily involve a change in inequality levels, but it always involves substantive changes in these foundational components: The institutions, sources, and beneficiaries. Inequality regimes are thus part of larger historical evolutionary processes: They emerge out of specific inequality re-enforcing mechanisms; they experience a phase of consolidation when they are embedded in stable power structures; and they break down when significant historical ruptures upset the social equilibrium (e.g. wars, epidemics, mass uprising, and (de)colonization). Such breakdowns, in turn, generate scope for new inequality regimes to emerge. We adopt the concept of inequality regimes to assess changes in African inequality over time and to relate them to the central theories of the global inequality literature.

The timing is right for such an exercise. Recent efforts by economic historians to quantify income inequality levels in colonial Africa have created a

5. For the links among economic growth, poverty, and inequality in sub-Saharan Africa since the 1990s, see Augustin Kwasi Fosu, 'Growth, inequality and poverty in sub-Saharan Africa: Recent progress in a global context', *Oxford Development Studies* 43, 1 (2015), pp. 44–59.
6. Piketty, *Capital and ideology*, p. 2.

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stronger empirical basis to evaluate inequality trends over the long twentieth century.[7] This research, combined with the new conceptual frameworks from the global inequality literature, helps us counter an overly simplistic narrative that keeps resurfacing in public and academic circles. This narrative holds that (i) pre-colonial Africa was egalitarian as a result of 'traditional' (i.e. pre-capitalist) economic structures characterized by land abundance and smallholder agriculture, (ii) the transition to high levels of inequality in Africa today occurred with the co-evolution of colonialism and capitalism in the period 1900–1960, and (iii) colonial legacies of economic dualism and high inequality have persisted throughout the post-colonial era up until the present.[8]

The full version of this myth has been articulated by Arne Bigsten:

> There is not much quantitative evidence on the extent of economic inequality in Africa in precolonial times, but one may presume that inequality was held down both by the limited economic differentiation and by the reasonably good access to land in most regions. Colonialism meant the establishment of modern enclaves in generally traditional settings with a dominance of smallholder agriculture, leading to a substantial increase in inequality. In these dual economy settings, the evolution of overall inequality depended a lot on what happened to the gap between the modern and the traditional sectors. Although per capita incomes in African economies increased significantly during the colonial era, this was also a period that saw a dramatic increase in inequality. Therefore,

7. Jutta Bolt and Ellen Hillbom, 'Long-term trends in economic inequality: Lessons from colonial Botswana, 1921–74', *Economic History Review* 69, 4 (2016), pp. 1255–1284; Facundo Alvaredo, Denis Cogneau, and Thomas Piketty, 'Income inequality under colonial rule: Evidence from French Algeria, Cameroon, Tunisia, and Vietnam and comparisons with British Colonies 1920–1960', *Journal of Development Economics* 152, (2021), pp. 1–20; Prince Young Aboagye and Jutta Bolt, 'Long-term trends in income inequality: Winners and losers of economic change in Ghana, 1891–1960', *Explorations in Economic History* 119, 475 (2021), pp. 177–202; Michiel de Haas, 'Reconstructing income inequality in a colonial cash crop economy: Five social tables for Uganda, 1925–1965', *European Review of Economic History* 26, 2 (2022), pp. 255–283; Ellen Hillbom, Jutta Bolt, Michiel de Haas and Federico Tadei, 'Measuring historical inequality in Africa: What can we learn from social tables?' (Working Paper, African Economic History Network, 2021).
8. For claims about precolonial Africa, see Branko Milanovic, 'Is inequality in Africa really different?' (Working Paper, World Bank, 2003) and Arne Bigsten, 'Determinants of the evolution of inequality in Africa', *Journal of African Economies* 27, 1 (2018), pp. 127–128. For claims about colonialism and persistent inequality legacies, see Arne Bigsten, 'Welfare and economic growth in Kenya, 1914–76', *World Development* 14, 9 (1986), pp. 1151–1160 and Bigsten, 'Determinants', pp. 127–128; Nicolas van de Walle, 'The institutional origins of inequality in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Annual Review of Political Science* 12, 1 (2009), pp. 307–327; Abebe Shimeles and Tiguene Nabassaga, 'Why is inequality high in Africa?', *Journal of African Economies* 27, 1 (2018), pp. 108–109; Philip Nel, 'Inequality in Africa', in Tony Binns, Kenneth Lynch, and Etienne Nel (eds), *The Routledge handbook of African development* (Routledge, London, 2019), pp. 104–119, and Philip Nel, 'Why Africans tolerate income inequality', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 59, 3 (2021), pp. 343–344.

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when the African colonies became independent in the 1960s they started out with very high levels of inequality.[9]

Completing the argument, Bigsten also emphasizes that 'most African countries inherited a dual economic structure and high levels of inequality from the colonial times, and inequality has remained high since independence'.[10]

Our *longue durée* perspective corrects this overly schematic and ahistorical narrative along three intertwined lines. First, we argue that the presumption that limited economic diversification necessarily leads to egalitarian societies—whether today or in the past—is mistaken. Today's oil economies in the Gulf region are not very diversified, yet they are highly unequal. Similarly, control over African gold mines, to mention just one example, made several rulers and their families exceptionally wealthy in the centuries preceding colonial rule, including compared to global standards.[11] Moreover, the notion that Africa's historical low population densities and land abundance gave rise to relatively egalitarian agrarian societies sits uneasy with 'slavery' in pre-colonial Africa and the accumulation of 'wealth-in-people'.[12] Wealth obtained through slavery, human pawning, or polygamous household formation could, in turn, be converted into 'wealth-in-things', including agricultural assets such as cash crop plantations or animal herds. While the intensity of slavery in Africa certainly varied across space and over time, historians have documented that the share of unfree people in pre-colonial societies was substantial, especially during the nineteenth century. It is therefore odd to exclude such an important aspect of African history from historical narratives about the evolution of inequality.

We conceptualize the expanding use of slave labour in pre-colonial Africa as part of a distinct inequality regime. To assess the distributional implications of the intensifying trans-oceanic slave trades and the growth of African ownership of slaves from the seventeenth through the nineteenth century, we build on Milanovic's concept of 'inequality waves'. The key question here is not whether highly unequal societies existed in pre-colonial

9. Bigsten, 'Determinants', pp. 1–2. We illustrate our point here with a quote from Bigsten, but this narrative is present in many other studies as well (see footnote 8).
10. Bigsten, 'Determinants', p. 1.
11. Mansa Musa, for example, who may have been 'the richest person in world history'. See Toby Green, *A fistfull of shells: West Africa from the rise of the slave trade to the age of revolution* (Penguin Random House, London, 2020), p. 39.
12. For the term 'wealth in people', see Jane Guyer, 'Wealth in people, wealth in things: Introduction', *Journal of African History* 36, 1 (1995), pp. 83–90. Note that Africanist economic anthropologists developed this concept of 'wealth-in-people' to capture a broader phenomenon. While the accumulation of slave labour is part of 'wealth-in-people', the concept also captures a broader social and economic value that access to people (and their knowledge) held in pre-colonial African societies.

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times—they clearly did—but rather how this inequality regime looked like (institutions, sources, and beneficiaries); to what extent intensified slave raiding and trading led to a progressive absorption of horizontally organized into more vertically organized states, underpinned by superior military power; and how the 'slow death' of slavery in early twentieth century Africa reconfigured the inequality regimes that characterized the colonial era.

Second, while colonialism certainly generated new forms of inequality, among others through the diffusion of capitalism and coercive institutions, we challenge the view that colonial inequality arose from a dual economic system juxtaposing 'traditional' and 'modern' sectors.[13] Both the notions of 'dualism' and 'capitalism as a colonial invention' are at odds with the historical evidence. For one, the 'strong interweaving' of household production for subsistence ('traditional') and the market ('modern') was a key feature of the export-oriented agrarian economies in colonial Africa. Moreover, this combination between subsistence-oriented and commercial farming, involving farmers, traders, slaves, and migrant workers, had emerged 'long before' the colonial era. If any clear-cut form of dualism existed during the colonial era, it was first and foremost in the legal and fiscal domains.[14] In virtually all African colonies, European and Asian expatriates, settlers, companies, and indigenous (salaried) elites held a different legal status than the great majority of African 'subjects', who were denied basic citizenship rights, but were expected to foot most of the colonial state formation bill through the taxes they paid.[15] To be sure, legal–fiscal dualism contributed to widening socio-economic cleavages: the incomes of Europeans in African colonies far outstripped those of Africans, often by a factor 20 or more.[16] Yet, the distributional implications of fiscal–legal discrimination varied enormously: they were much more profound in the settler colonies (e.g. Kenya, South Africa, and the Rhodesias), than in colonies where African farmers maintained control over large parts of the export

13. For this interpretation, see Bigsten, 'Welfare', pp. 1151–1152 and Bigsten 'Determinants', pp 127–128; Lucas Chancel, Denis Cogneau, Amory Gethin, Alix Myczkowski, and Anne-Sophie Robilliard, 'Income inequality in Africa, 1990-2019: Measurement, patterns, determinants', *World Development* 163 (forthcoming 2023), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2022.106162; Ayodele Odusola, Giovanni Andrea Cornia, Haroon Bhorat and Pedro Conceição, *Income inequality trends in sub-Saharan Africa. Divergence, determinants and consequences* (United Nations Development Program, Regional Bureau for Africa, New York, NY, 2017), p ii.
14. Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*, chapter 7.
15. Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1996); Denis Cogneau, Yannick Dupraz and Sandrine Mesplé-Somps, 'Fiscal capacity and dualism in colonial states: The French empire 1830–1962', *Journal of Economic History* 81, 2 (2021), pp. 441–480.
16. Arne Bigsten, *Income distribution and growth in a dual economy: Kenya 1914–1976* (Gothenburg University, PhD dissertation, 1987); de Haas, 'Reconstructing income inequality'; and Cogneau et al., 'Fiscal capacity'.

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value chain. Indeed, varying levels of inequality in colonial economies were largely contingent on the size of the expatriate community and the commodity composition of the export sector: more expatriates and more capital-intensive exports are the two key factors associated with higher inequality.[17]

Finally, we argue that it was not persistent high inequality, but the large intracontinental diversity in inequality levels and regimes that set post-colonial Africa apart from the rest of the world. Building on Walter Scheidel's work, we argue that this diversity was the outcome of varied (pre)colonial legacies, as well as multiple post-colonial shifts and ruptures. In particular, we highlight two factors. First, the role of post-colonial conflicts, including the expulsion and dispossession of Europeans and Asians in the transition from colonial to sovereign rule, as well as international and civil conflicts that affected the distribution of assets and incomes. Second, a shift away from the egalitarian policies adopted under distinct local versions of 'African socialism' that had emerged during struggle for independence and in the process of sovereign nation-state building, towards 'neoliberal' policies adopted by states with decreasing redistributive capacity and interest and operating in a context of religious revivalism that is imbued with an ethic of accumulation and comparatively favourable conceptions of socio-economic inequality. Before developing these lines of argumentation, we will first review recent empirical evidence.

Africa's diverse inequality landscape

From a global comparative perspective, present-day Africa does not stand out because of exceptionally high levels of economic inequality, but rather because of large intracontinental variation in inequality levels. To make this point, we evaluate three main types of evidence that are used by scholars to piece some parts of Africa's long-run inequality puzzle together and evaluate the sources and assumptions that underpin them. We focus the discussion on income inequality, putting wealth inequality, for which even less is known, aside for the moment.[18]

A first type of evidence stems from nationally representative household surveys, which were already conducted in the 1950s, but for most African countries, surveys trace back not further than the 1980s. These surveys contain micro-level data on the income and expenditure patterns of African

17. Hillbom et al., 'Measuring historical inequality'. The historical prevalence of settlers still correlates with inequality levels in African countries today. See Chancel et al., 'Income inequality in Africa'.
18. For a perspective on wealth inequality in Africa today, see Shimeles and Nabassaga, 'Why is inequality high'.

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households.[19] Cumulatively plotting a given population's income ranking from lowest to highest results in a so-called 'Lorenz curve' (see Figure 5 for an illustration), a Gini coefficient is derived by dividing the area between the Lorenz curve and the diagonal 45-degree line—representing perfect equality—over the area of the full triangle below this line. A Gini coefficient of 0 implies perfect equality, and a coefficient of 1 implies maximum inequality, a situation in which one individual or household receives all income, or possesses all wealth, while the rest of society has nothing. The tail ends of this spectrum are purely hypothetical: all societies are characterized by some degree of inequality (>0), whereas a 'one earner takes-all' society is not viable (<1). In reality, nations' income Gini's range between 0.15 (extremely low) and 0.75 (extremely high), with a world average of 0.39. Wealth distributions tend to be more skewed though, with real world examples reaching up to 0.95.[20]

Table 1 shows the average income Gini of seven world regions as defined by the World Bank based on their most recent observation up until 2017, along with the intraregional variation in inequality expressed by the coefficient of variation (CoVar). For many developing countries, actual 'income' distributions are absent, incomplete, or unreliable, even in recent years. In such cases, Gini coefficients refer to household 'expenditure' data as a proxy of income. Expenditure Gini's, however, tend to underestimate income inequality levels, as prosperous households are able to save (and thus not consume) larger portions of their annual income than the poor.

Bearing this caveat in mind, placing Africa in a global perspective reveals an important insight. While it is true that, with an 'average' Gini coefficient of 0.43, national income inequality levels in Sub-Saharan Africa are comparatively high today, what stands out is that the 'variation' in inequality levels (CoVar of 0.18) is higher than that in any other world region.[21] In other words, Africa below the Sahara harbours some of the most unequal countries in the world as well as a considerable number of countries with modest rates of inequality. These inequality levels are regionally clustered.

19. Sédi-Anne Boukaka, Giulia Mancini, and Giovanni Vecchi, 'Poverty and inequality in Francophone Africa, 1960s-2010s', *Economic History of Developing Regions* 36, 1 (2021), pp. 1–29; and Chancel et al., 'Income inequality in Africa'.

20. These different magnitudes are intuitive, since people can survive without wealth (or even with negative wealth, i.e. debt), but they cannot do without income. Examples of very low-income inequality are Slovakia (1993) and Finland (1991). Gini coefficients over 0.70 have been recorded for South Africa (2010). Extremely high 'wealth' inequality has been recorded for Finland in 1800 (0.94) and the Netherlands in recent years (0.9). See Erik Bengtsson, Anna Missiaia, Ilkka Nummela, and Mats Olsson, 'Unequal poverty and equal industrialisation: Finnish wealth, 1750–1900', *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 67, 3 (2019), pp. 229–248 and Bas van Bavel and Ewout Frankema, 'Wealth inequality in the Netherlands, c. 1950–2015: The paradox of a Northern European welfare state', *The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 14, 2 (2017), pp. 29–62.

21. The CoVar controls for the fact that Sub-Saharan Africa includes a large number of countries (45) as does the region 'Europe & Central Asia' (46).

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Table 1 Average income inequality levels in seven world regions and their intraregional variation, 2008–2017.

	Average	*Standard deviation*	*Coefficient of variance*	*Minimum*	*Maximum*	*Number of Countries*
East Asia and the Pacific	0.38	0.05	0.13	0.29	0.48	27
Europe and Central Asia	0.33	0.04	0.12	0.25	0.41	46
Latin America and the Caribbean	0.47	0.04	0.09	0.38	0.52	23
Middle East and North Africa	0.35	0.06	0.16	0.28	0.46	16
North America	0.40	0.04	0.11	0.37	0.43	2
South Asia	0.36	0.04	0.12	0.29	0.43	8
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.43	0.08	0.18	0.31	0.67	45
World	*0.39*	*0.05*	*0.13*	*0.25*	*0.67*	*167*

Source: Alfani and Tadei, 'Income inequality in French West Africa', Table 1, p. 7, who based these figures on data from UNU-WIDER, version 17 December 2019.
Note: World regions are grouped here according to the World Bank's definition.

Where Southern African countries are among the most unequal in the world, those in West Africa and the Horn are comparatively equal. Most Central and Eastern African countries fall in between. If we would draw in North African countries here, the intra-African variation would only further increase, since most of them feature at the bottom of the continent's inequality distribution.

The high degree of intra-African 'diversity' in inequality levels suggests that scholars have not always been asking the right question: Instead of seeking explanations for why African inequality is high today, we need to explain diversity. Figure 1 provides household consumption–based Gini coefficients for the six most populous African countries since 1985, illustrating the large variation in African inequality levels. The figure shows a huge gap between inequality levels in South Africa, which ranks among the most unequal countries of the world, and other large African countries with modest levels of inequality, such as Egypt, Ethiopia, and Tanzania. Kenya and Nigeria occupy the mid to low range, with levels broadly comparable to the USA and China today.[22] We will return to these differences in the final section and here continue to review quantitative evidence for earlier periods.

Household consumption surveys do not take us far back in time. Estimates before 1980 are scarce. For the period before 1950, we are aware

22. UNU-WIDER, *World Income Inequality Database*, version 30 June 2022.

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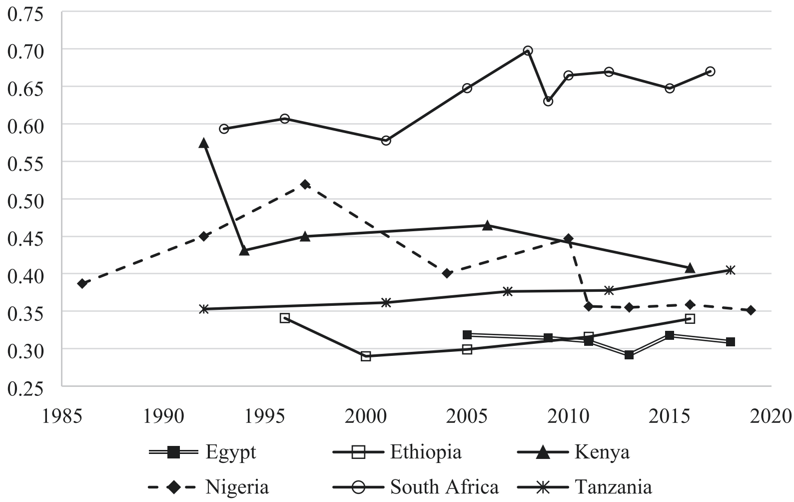

Figure 1 Household expenditure Gini coefficients in six large African countries, 1985–2020.
Note: All Gini coefficients pertain to the national economy and are of 'average' or 'high' quality. If multiple Gini coefficients were reported for a given year, we took the mean value. To illustrate intra-African variation, we picked the most populous countries and excluded the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as too few data points were available (*source*: UNU-WIDER *World Income Inequality Database*, version 30 June 2022).

of only two (more or less) encompassing surveys with micro-level data that have been used to estimate economic inequality. Johan Fourie and Dieter von Fintel have derived income and wealth estimates for Dutch settlers in the eighteenth-century Cape Colony from Dutch East India Company tax returns.[23] Stefania Galli and Klas Rönnbäck have used the 1831 census of Sierra Leone to produce wealth inequality estimates for the Freetown peninsula.[24] These are also highly specific contexts, from which generalization is hardly possible.

To get better insights into the development of inequality under colonial rule in larger parts of Africa, economic historians have taken recourse to the construction of social tables, which require far less fine-grained data.[25]

23. Johan Fourie and Dieter von Fintel, 'The dynamics of inequality in a newly settled, pre-industrial society: The case of the Cape Colony', *Cliometrica* 4, 3 (2010), pp. 229–267; Johan Fourie and Dieter von Fintel, 'A history with evidence: Income inequality in the Dutch Cape Colony', *Economic History of Developing Regions* 26, 1 (2011), pp. 16–48.
24. Stefania Galli and Klass Rönnbäck, 'Colonialism and rural inequality in Sierra Leone: An egalitarian experiment', *European Review of Economic History* 24, 3 (2020), pp. 468–501.
25. The social tables approach has been widely applied to study income inequality for pre-industrial societies. See Peter Lindert and Jeffrey Williamson, 'Revising England's social

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A social table ranks social classes (or occupational groups) in a society from rich to poor. A rudimentary social table consists of only a few classes, while more refined tables contain data on a larger number of groups, sometimes split by region or occupational sector. To justify the grouping of people, the key assumption is that income gaps 'within' each class are significantly smaller than income gaps 'across' classes. The percentage share in the total population of each class is then combined with their estimated share in national income to compute Gini coefficients or other inequality indices.

The social tables approach has its own set of limitations. First, social tables often focus on labour income estimates derived from wage and farm output data, while neglecting income from rents and profits. Second, the assumption that inequality 'within' occupational classes is small can be problematic when farmers are all lumped together in one class or more generally, when societies experience a phase of rapid economic diversification in which homogeneous groups of income earners are evolving into a more heterogeneous group with larger income differentials. Finally, but this is not exclusive to social tables, there are major discontinuities between colonial and post-colonial sources that hamper the comparability of inequality estimates over time.

At present, social tables have been constructed for eight African countries: Algeria, Botswana, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, Tunisia, and Uganda. The estimates are shown in Figure 2 and point to two major patterns: 'Overall' inequality seems to have been on the rise over the (late) colonial period, but inequality levels and trends differed substantially among countries. For example, Uganda and Botswana had low Gini coefficients in the 1920s, but while this persisted in Uganda, Botswana saw a major increase of inequality.[26] In Ghana and Kenya, on the other hand, inequality levels were already comparatively high in the 1920s, only to rise further afterwards.[27] Snapshots from late-colonial Algeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and Tunisia, which were all under French rule (the other four British), reveal high inequality as well.[28]

tables 1688–1812', *Explorations in Economic History* 19, 4 (1982), pp. 385–408; and Milanovic et al., 'Pre-industrial inequality'. More recently, it has been used for industrial societies as well. See Maria Gómez León and Herman de Jong, 'Inequality in turbulent times: Income distribution in Germany and Britain, 1900–50', *Economic History Review* 72, 3 (2019), pp. 1073–1098. For a recent discussion of the available evidence for Africa, see Hillbom et al., 'Measuring historical inequality'.

26. Bolt and Hillbom, 'Long-term trends in economic inequality'; and de Haas, 'Reconstructing income inequality'.

27. Bigsten, *Income distribution*; and Aboagye and Bolt, 'Long-term trends in income inequality'.

28. Guido Alfani and Federico Tadei, 'Income inequality in French West Africa: Building social tables for pre-independence Senegal and Ivory Coast' (Working Paper No. 396, University of Barcelona, 2019); Samir Amin, *Maghreb in the modern world: Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco* (Penguin, London, 1970).

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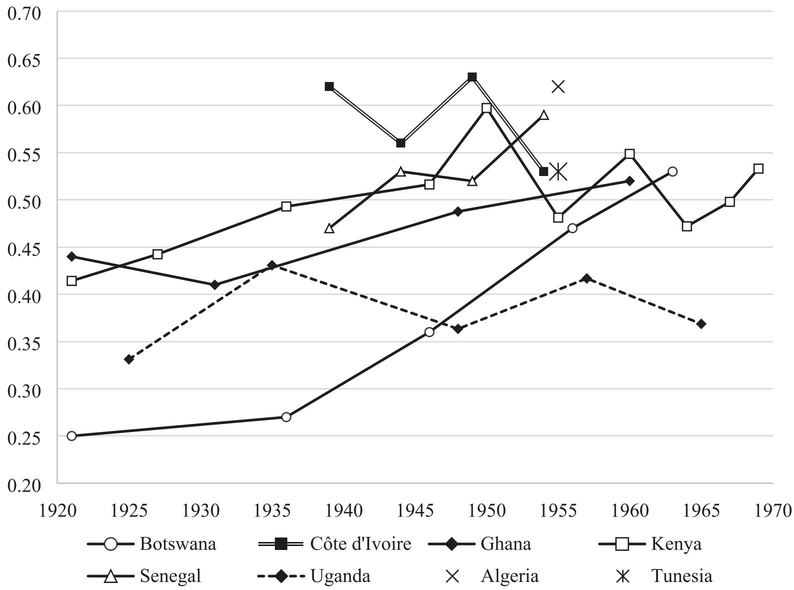

Figure 2 Income inequality estimates based on social tables for Algeria, Botswana, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, Tunesia, and Uganda, 1920–1970 (*sources*: Estimates for Algeria and Tunesia are based on social tables from Samir Amin, *Maghreb*, collated in Alvaredo et al., 'Income inequality under colonial rule'; the remaining estimates for six countries are from Hillbom et al. 'Measuring historical inequality', based on social tables for Botswana from Bolt and Hillbom, 'Long-term trends in economic inequality'; Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal from Alfani and Tadei, 'Income inequality in French West Africa'; Ghana from Aboagye and Bolt, 'Long-term trends in income inequality'; Kenya from Bigsten, Income distribution; and Uganda from de Haas, 'Reconstructing income inequality').

Hillbom et al. analyse inequality levels and trends in colonial Africa based on evidence from 33 social tables from six sub-Saharan colonies and argue that their heterogeneous inequality trends and levels can for the most part be explained by two factors: the capital intensity of export commodity–driven commercialization and the degree to which expatriates were present, as settlers and salaried officials.[29] Senegal's high inequality, for example, was mostly driven by the presence of a large colonial bureaucracy (governing all of French West Africa), which paid high wages

29. Hillbom et al., 'Measuring historical inequality'.

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to both its European and African personnel. At the same time, inequality in Senegal's rural economy, which was dominated by labour-intensive peanut production, remained fairly low.[30] Kenya's initial high and further climbing inequality was predominantly driven by large European farmers. Similarly, high inequality levels in late-colonial Algeria and Tunisia are linked to the presence of a sizeable settler minority from European origin. In Botswana, in contrast, European presence was negligible, but the accumulation of large herds by African elite farmers drove up inequality—even 'before' the exploitation of diamonds, which is often linked to the country's high post-colonial inequality.[31] Similar processes of uneven capital accumulation among African farmers drove inequality increases in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. Uganda's labour-intensive cash crop economy generated less scope for capital accumulation and income differentiation.

In summary, evidence from social tables suggests that inequality rose during the latter half of the colonial era, as African economies were increasingly integrated in the global capitalist system of exchange. At the same time, while all countries discussed here were subjected to European colonialism and experienced rapid export-oriented commercialization, their inequality trajectories were diverse. The capital-intensive commodities such as cattle and minerals ('sources', in our inequality regime framework) and high expatriate presence ('beneficiaries') that Hillbom et al. identify as key drivers of high inequality in the colonial era may also help to explain why the mineral-rich former settler colonies of Southern Africa remain so unequal today.[32] This does not mean, however, that the origins of Africa's current inequality are to be traced back to the (late) colonial era. First, because evidence for the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is largely absent, we have no reason to presume that the comparatively low levels of inequality c. 1920 present some form of 'pre-inequality state', a point to which we return in later sections. Second, former French West and North Africa have witnessed sharply declining inequality since independence, presenting us with a reversal that requires explanation. But even for countries with similar inequality levels between the colonial era and today, there are no measurements available to calculate Gini coefficients of income inequality for the early post-colonial era, which would be a necessary step to establish that similarities indeed represent persistence. We will return to this point in the final section of this paper.

30. More generally, (former) French colonies were characterized by larger gaps between farm and non-farm incomes than their British counterparts. Alvaredo et al., 'Income inequality under colonial rule', and Thomas Bossuroy and Denis Cogneau, 'Social mobility in five African countries', *Review of Income and Wealth* 59, September (2013), pp. 84–110.
31. Bolt and Hillbom, 'Long-term trends in economic inequality'.
32. Also see van de Walle, 'The institutional origins'; Chancel et al., 'Income inequality in Africa'.

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A third method to estimate inequality in contexts of limited data availability focuses on the income or wealth shares of different sections of the income distribution. Top incomes, in particular, tend to be poorly captured by household surveys, but are comparatively well-documented in tax records.[33] For the period post-1990, Lucas Chancel et al. combined data from surveys, tax records, and national accounts to estimate income shares across Africa.[34] For earlier periods, income share data from tax records are only available for earners at the very top of the pyramid (e.g. top 1, top 0.1, or even top 0.01 percent income earners). For African countries, such data have been tabulated—at the earliest—from the 1910s onwards, with coverage expanding significantly after 1945. This estimation method is not without weaknesses either. For one, tax records typically only capture a very small number of top income earners and may contain biases as a result of tax evasion, specific tax deductions, and rebates.[35] Moreover, in order to arrive at solid estimates of top income shares, it is imperative to have reliable national income estimates to estimate the denominator, which are notoriously difficult to obtain without making heroic assumptions.[36]

Figure 3 shows the series of the top 0.1 percent income shares that are currently available for Africa. In a recent paper, Facundo Alvaredo, Denis Cogneau, and Thomas Piketty have analysed these data and placed them in the wider context of income inequality in the British and French empires, including the metropoles.[37] This comparison reveals several interesting patterns. First, and unsurprisingly, the bulk of 0.1 percent earners consisted of Europeans. Second, income inequality as measured by the share of top income earners in African colonies was high compared to contemporary France and the UK, but lower than the rates recorded in nineteenth-century Europe. Third, differences among colonies were substantial, especially in the late 1940s and early 1950s, before converging at 3 to 4 percent in the late colonial and early post-colonial period. This convergence was mainly driven by a fall of the top income share in the most unequal (former) colonies after 1945. This apparent decline in inequality, however, was at least partially an outcome of income convergence 'among Europeans' (those who fall within and outside the 0.1 percent top income

33. Atkinson and Piketty, *Top incomes over the twentieth century*.
34. Chancel et al., 'Income inequality in Africa'.
35. Facundo Alvaredo and Anthony Atkinson, 'Colonial rule, apartheid and natural resources: Top incomes in South Africa 1903–2007' (Working Paper No. 046, CEPR, 2010); Anthony Atkinson, 'The colonial legacy: Income inequality in former British African colonies' (Working Paper No. 045, UNU-WIDER, 2014); and Alvaredo et al., 'Income inequality under colonial rule'.
36. Morten Jerven, *Poor numbers: How we are misled by African development statistics and what to do about it* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2013); Stephen Broadberry and Leigh Gardner, 'Economic growth in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1885-2008: Evidence from eight countries', *Explorations in Economic History* 83, January (2022), pp. 1–21.
37. Alvaredo et al., 'Income inequality under colonial rule'.

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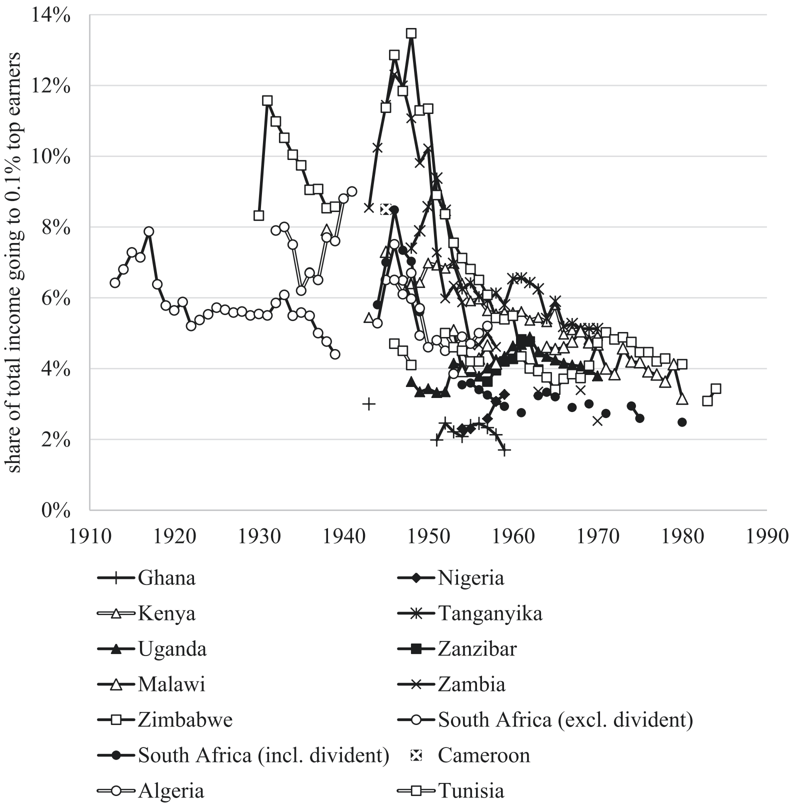

Figure 3 Top 0.1 percent income shares in 11 African countries, 1912–1984 (*sources*: Algeria, Cameroon, and Tunisia from Alvaredo et al., 'Income inequality under colonial rule'; Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Tanganyika, Uganda, Zambia, Zanzibar, and Zimbabwe from Atkinson, 'The colonial legacy'; and South Africa from Alvaredo and Atkinson, 'Colonial rule, apartheid and natural resources').

group) and not necessarily between Europeans and the colonized populations. These elite incomes thus provide only a small piece in a much wider inequality puzzle, as the remaining 99.9 percent of the income distribution remains unobserved.

All in all, the different historical data series that are now available for Africa all point in the same direction: It is the 'great variety' in inequality patterns, both past and present, that sets the region apart from other parts of the world and not universally 'high levels' of inequality across African nations. That said, the currently available quantitative evidence remains largely confined to two periods: the late colonial era and the past four

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decades. To develop a truly *longue durée* perspective on the evolution of inequality in African societies, we need to think beyond the patchy quantitative evidence that is currently available. The new conceptual frameworks of the global inequality literature provide a starting point to move beyond such constraints.

Accumulation through slavery

In a recent essay on the 'deep history' of poverty in Africa, Rhiannon Stephens explored the state-of-the-art historical linguistic and archaeological evidence on the nature and intensity of poverty, stretching several millennia back in time.[38] As first argued by Jan Vansina in his classic account, 'How Societies are Born', the emergence of words in African societies that indicate notions of exclusive ownership provide important clues about the historical emergence of social differentiation.[39] After all, the 'poor' are only a meaningful social category when the adjective applies to a subset of a population. Discussing the varying images of the poor that are embedded in historical linguistic structures—including negatives ones, such as 'bereavement', 'selfish, avaricious, and mean'—Stephens warns against the trap of romanticizing the 'moral economy' of Africa's purportedly pre-capitalist social orders.[40] Where the poor were despised, wealth was a marker of social status.

Archaeological excavations of prehistoric African urban sites testify to growing social stratification associated with the spread of sedentary agriculture.[41] However, as revealed by cities without strong elites and vertical lines of political organization, like Jenné-jeno (Mali) and the terraced site of Bokoni (South Africa), greater clustering of people did not necessarily go hand in hand with significant inequalities in power and wealth.[42] Nor was sedentary agriculture a prerequisite for unequal wealth accumulation. In many nomadic pastoralist societies, where livestock served (and still does) as a means to store wealth, the control over herds also offered possibilities for uneven wealth accumulation, fostering the development of patron–client relationships.[43] Yet again, it is not clear why in some cases,

38. Rhiannon Stephens, 'Poverty's pasts: A case for longue durée studies', *Journal of African History* 59, 3 (2018), pp. 399–409.
39. Jan Vansina, *How societies are born. Governance in West Central Africa before 1600* (University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, VA, 2004). See especially pp. 45–46.
40. Stephens, 'Poverty's pasts', 407.
41. Graham Connah, *African civilizations. An archaeological perspective*. Second edition (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000).
42. See Jenné-jeno Rodrick McIntosh, *The peoples of the Middle Niger Delta: The island of gold* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1988). For Bokoni, see Peter Delius and Stefan Schirmer, 'Order, openness, and economic change in precolonial Southern Africa: A perspective from the Bokoni terraces', *Journal of African History* 55, 1 (2014), pp. 37–54.
43. Thomas Spear and Richard Waller (eds), *Being Maasai. Ethnicity & identity in East Africa*. (James Currey, London, 1993).

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such vertical relations would emerge, whereas in other cases, horizontal or communal ties prevail.

Compared to pre-industrial Europe, the evolution of inequality regimes in Africa was in at least one respect radically different: where capital accumulation based on 'land rents' was prevalent in much of pre-industrial Europe, this was—with a few notable exceptions—of marginal importance in land-abundant pre-colonial Africa.[44] Rather than preventing economic differentiation, the continent's relatively high land-labour ratios facilitated the emergence of institutions that enabled ownership of 'people', thereby creating an alternative pathway to wealth accumulation. In a classic essay, Evsey Domar, building on the work of Herman Nieboer, theorized that in a context of open land frontiers, elites may still obtain disproportional shares of wealth by forcibly obtaining control over labour through systems of human bondage.[45] The Domar–Nieboer theory has been repeatedly invoked by economic historians to explain the prevalence of slavery and other forms of labour coercion in large parts of pre-colonial Africa.[46] Africanist economic anthropologists, in turn, have developed the richer concept of 'wealth-in-people' to capture the central value that access to, or control over, people and their knowledge held in pre-colonial African societies, including through kinship ties or enslavement.[47]

Before we analyse mechanisms through which slavery deepened 'economic' inequalities in pre-colonial Africa, two qualifications are in order. First, slavery was more than an economic institution alone, as enslaved people also provided social and political value for their masters and slave-absorbing communities. They aided the reproduction of lineages and clans, served in armies, were used to settle debt, and served as status symbols underpinning the power of 'big men'.[48] Second, the degree of power held

44. For a general account on the economic role of factor endowments, see Gareth Austin, 'Resources, techniques, and strategies south of the Sahara: Revising the factor endowments perspective on African economic development history', *Economic History Review* 61, 3 (2008), pp. 587–624. For notable exceptions of land-based wealth accumulation in Rwanda, see Jan Vansina, *Antecedents to modern Rwanda: The Nyiginya kingdom* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI, 2004), pp. 66–73 and Catharine Newbury, *The cohesion of oppression: Clientship and ethnicity in Rwanda, 1860–1960* (Columbia University Press, New York, NY, 1993), pp. 40–42.

45. Evsey Domar, 'The causes of slavery or serfdom: A hypothesis', *Journal of Economic History* 30, 1 (1970), pp. 18–32; Herman Nieboer, *Slavery as an industrial system. Ethnological researches* (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1900).

46. Austin, 'Resources, techniques, and strategies'; and James Fenske, 'Does land abundance explain African institutions?', *The Economic Journal* 123, 573 (2013), pp. 1363–90.

47. Jane Guyer, 'Wealth in people'; Jane Guyer and Samuel Eno Belinga, 'Wealth in people as wealth in knowledge: Accumulation and composition in Equatorial Africa', *Journal of African History* 36, 1 (1995), pp. 91–120. For shifting and diversifying strategies to secure 'followers' and access to wealth-in-people, see David Schoenbrun, *A green place, a good place. Agrarian change, gender, and social identity in the Great Lakes region to the fifteenth century* (Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, 1998).

48. Sean Stilwell, *Slavery and slaving in African history* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014).

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by masters varied, and the relationships and cultural norms that underpinned them shifted over time (more on such changes later). Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff have argued that enslaved people in Africa were mostly held with the prospect of becoming integrated into local kinship systems.[49] However, most historians today believe that slaves were valuable for slaveholders precisely because of their status as 'outsiders', which denied them control over the product of their labour, the right to marry, and the rights of reciprocity inherent to free kin.[50] While slaves could at times accumulate wealth themselves and various routes to manumission existed, barriers were high enough to ensure the perpetuation of slavery as a social, political, and economic institution throughout the pre-colonial and into the colonial era.[51]

How widespread was slavery across African societies, and how was the practice distributed across the continent? Stilwell distinguishes 'low-' and 'high'-density slave societies to indicate differences in the nature and prevalence of enslavement.[52] In high-density societies, slavery was 'fundamental' to the economy and an integral part of the social and political order. Enslaved people were part of larger vertical structures of control and ownership and constituted a sizeable minority or even the majority of the population. In low-density societies, on the other hand, slaves would have mainly served in households, as concubines, or as an extra pair of farmhands in the fields along with their master and were more likely to be absorbed into existing kinship structures. In these low-density societies, slaves remained a small minority, adding an extra layer to a social order that did not depend on raiding, trading, and exploiting slave labour for economic or military survival. Some indication of the prevalence of slavery can be glanced from the widely used (but equally contested) ethnographic map and atlas of anthropologist George P. Murdock, shown in Figure 4. His 'type of slavery' variable is supposed to capture the nature of slavery at the ethnicity level 'before' abolition and thus should be interpreted as a rough indication of the situation upon colonization.[53] While we do not

49. Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers, 'African "slavery" as an institution of marginality', in Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (eds), *Slavery in Africa: Historical and anthropological perspectives* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI, 1977), pp. 3–81.
50. For an early critique of the Kopytoff-Miers argument, see Claude Meillassoux, *The anthropology of slavery: The womb of iron and gold* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1992). For more recent revisionist takes, see Paul Lovejoy, *Transformations in slavery: A history of slaving in Africa. Third edition* (Cambridge University Press, New York, NY, 2012) and Sean Stilwell, *Slavery and slaving*; and Muhammed Salau, *Plantation slavery in the Sokoto Caliphate: A historical and comparative study* (University of Rochester Press, Rochester, NY, 2018).
51. Lovejoy, *Transformations in slavery*.
52. Stilwell, *Slavery and slaving*, p. 20. For the original distinction between 'slave societies' and 'societies with slaves', see Moses Finley, *Ancient slavery and modern ideology* (Chatto & Windus, London, 1980).
53. The entries in Murdock's atlas are based on anthropologists' *ex post* assessments, dating between 1830 and 1960, but mostly after abolition. The Murdock atlas and ethnic map have

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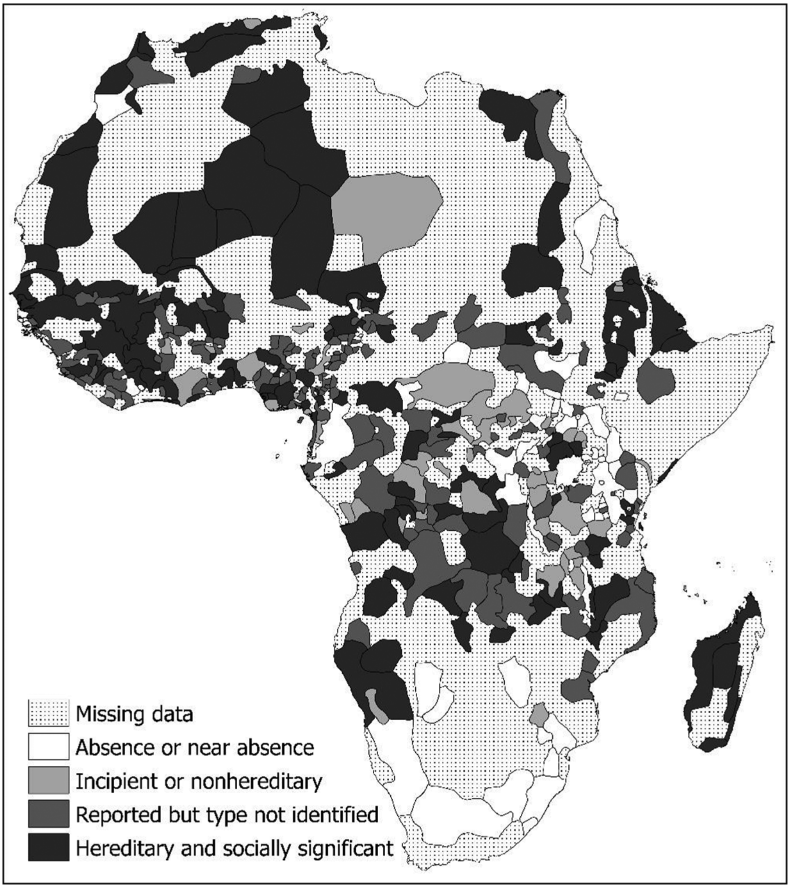

Figure 4 Nature of slavery in late pre-colonial Africa.
Note: Some large regions, especially those located in the Sahara, were thinly populated and the size of these 'ethnic regions' is not proportional to the number of people in them and the absolute number of enslaved people (*sources*: Nature of slavery per ethnic group (variable 70) from Patrick Gray, 'A corrected ethnographic atlas.' *World Cultures* 10, 1 (1999), pp. 24–85. Original data from George Peter Murdock, *Ethnographic Atlas* (University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA, 1967).

have accurate estimates of the total African population that was enslaved on the eve of the colonial scramble, it is probably correct to state that a minority of African polities were high-density slave societies, but that

been widely used by social scientists, but have also received frequent criticism. See Denis Cogneau and Yannick Dupraz, 'Institutions historiques et développement économique en Afrique: Une revue sélective et critique de travaux récents', *Histoire & mesure* 30, 1 (2015),

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these did comprise the largest concentrations of people, including regionally dominant polities such as the Tukalor Empire, Futa Jallon, the Asante Empire, Dahomey, the Sokoto Caliphate, Nilotic Egypt and the Kingdoms of Kongo, Buganda, and Imerina.

What we know about the prevalence of slavery in (late) pre-colonial Africa is manifestly at odds with presumptions of widespread egalitarianism. Slave ownership generated inequalities in terms of status, security, income, and consumption, both between slaves and their owners and among slave owners. Slave owners were also able to convert their 'wealth-in-people' into 'wealth-in-things' (i.e. more 'conventional' forms of capital) and income, either by making slaves produce economic value or by using them as a means of exchange. According to Piketty, slave societies were historically among the most unequal societies in terms of wealth and income distribution.[54] It is likely that the slave plantation societies of the Caribbean, Brazil, and the US South that are discussed by Piketty had even more skewed income distributions than the slave societies that emerged in Africa, as the labour productivity, and hence the income that could be extracted from slave ownership, of slaves was higher on the other side of the Atlantic.[55] Yet, with the progression of the so-called 'commercial transition', these extractive opportunities in Africa rose as well.

Figure 5 presents three hypothetical Lorenz curves that help us visualize the two main channels that can drive slave-based 'wealth inequality'. Panel A shows a Lorenz curve where no inequality of 'wealth-in-people' exists, corresponding to a Gini coefficient of 0. Panel B, which shows the first channel, assumes that 50 percent of a given population is enslaved, but that this group of slaves is evenly distributed across the free population. This will produce a Gini coefficient of 0.50. A second channel operates through the uneven distribution of slave ownership among the free population, as visualized in Panel C. In the hypothetical scenario, the population share of slaves is 30 percent, but slave ownership is unequally distributed among freemen with 5,000 not owning any slaves, 2,000 owning one slave, 100 people (i.e. the elite) owning 10 slaves, and a chief owning 100 slaves, and the corresponding Gini coefficient of wealth inequality is 0.86. If we exclude the 3,100 slaves from the ranking population, the Gini coefficient only drops to 0.80. This is a very high Gini coefficient of wealth inequality in comparative perspective and suggests that slave ownership alone could result in substantial wealth differentiation. Such high levels of wealth inequality were not only merely hypothetical but also historically realistic.

pp. 103–134. To provide a rough sketch as illustrated in Figure 4 though, we believe the atlas is suitable enough.

54. Piketty, *Capital and ideology*, chapter 7.

55. Stefano Fenoaltea, 'Europe in the African mirror: The trade and the rise of feudalism', *Revista Di Storia Economica* 15, 2 (1999), pp. 123–65.

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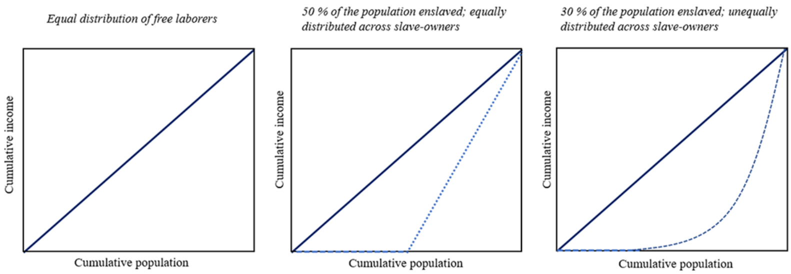

Figure 5 Accumulation in slave-holding societies (*source:* Authors' own).

Secular inequality trends in Africa?

Now that we have established that wealth inequality was a core attribute of many (late) pre-colonial African societies, we need to assess how slave-based accumulation evolved over time and space and how it was both affected by and fed into new forms of inequality that emerged in the colonial era. To elucidate such long-run patterns in Africa and the diversity of the history of inequality across the continent, we build on Milanovic's framework of 'Kuznets waves',[56] which holds that, in the long course of history, inequality levels are subject to secular trends of rise and decline. Milanovic builds on Nobel laureate Simon Kuznets' influential theory that 'modern' economic growth, characterized by industrialization, urbanization, and ongoing technological innovation, first caused an increase in inequality, which was then followed by a decline after passing a certain stage of development. According to Milanovic, such inequality curves have occurred not once, but repeatedly over the long run, and are linked to 'epoch-specific' drivers and mitigators of inequality. In pre-industrial societies, inequality increased as a result of technological breakthroughs, rising land scarcity, or commercial expansion and conquest and declines as a result of breakdowns, related to war, conflict, or epidemics. In (post)industrial societies, declines are no longer necessarily the outcome of 'malign' forces but can also originate in redistributive policies.

As Guido Alfani has shown, in pre-industrial Europe, a long wave of inequality growth occurred in the aftermath of the Black Death (a major inequality-reducing crisis), starting in the middle of the fifteenth century and lasting into the nineteenth century. The main driver of this centuries-long inequality wave was the concentration of land in the hands of noblemen who benefitted from a secular rise in land prices.[57] This upward

56. Milanovic, *Global inequality*, chapter 2.
57. Guido Alfani, 'Economic inequality in preindustrial times: Europe and beyond', *Journal of Economic Literature* 59, 1 (2021), pp. 3–44.

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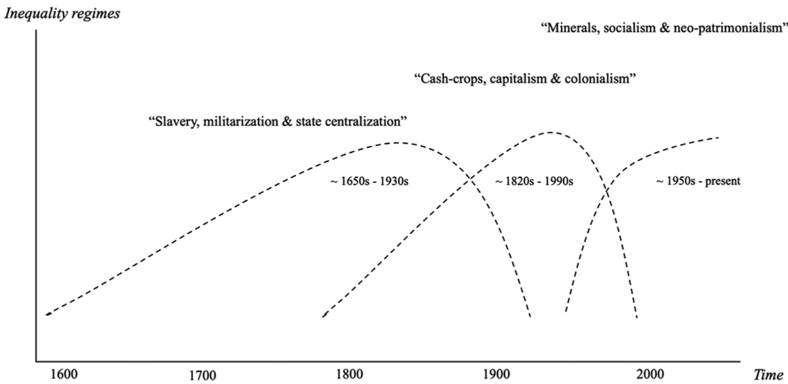

Figure 6 An illustration of shifting inequality regimes in Africa, 1600–present (*source:* Authors' own).

inequality trend was maintained during intermittent phases of population decline, but ended when the landed aristocracies began to lose their grip on power and new sources of wealth emerged through industrialization and accelerating global trade and investments. While high inequality levels were maintained throughout the nineteenth century, they fell dramatically during the political, economic, and social upheavals of World War One, the Great Depression, and World War Two, a period Peter Lindert and Jeffrey Williamson have referred to as the 'Great Leveling'.[58]

The idea of long-run 'Kuznets waves' has clear potential for the analysis of African inequality regimes. Figure 6 shows a schematic illustration of how such consecutive long-run inequality waves may have unfolded in numerous African societies after 1,500. A first wave likely emerged from rising ocean-bound slave trades and the spread of plantation slavery across the continent. Enslaved people, slave-produced commodities, and control over trade routes were key sources of wealth in this inequality regime. The main beneficiaries on the African continent were the slave-owning elites of large and powerful African states. The regime at large was underpinned by ideologies and institutions that enabled enslavement and the extraction of slaves' labour.

This was followed by a second inequality wave during the colonial era, when slavery was abolished and both new and old forms of income and wealth became concentrated in the hands of European expatriates and settlers, as well as an elite group of African commodity producers, salaried

58. Peter Lindert and Jeffrey Williamson, *Unequal gains: American growth and inequality since 1700* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2016). Also see Piketty, *Capital.*

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workers, and power brokers. This inequality regime was in turn interrupted, at least partially, by crises and policy shifts in the wake of decolonization, the rise of African socialism, as well as by a major shift in sources of wealth from cash crops to minerals, and oil in particular. Post-colonial Africa is thus marked by a new inequality regime that differs substantially—in terms of sources, beneficiaries, and the institutions justifying inequality—from the regime that became dominant during the colonial era. Note that our emphasis on shifting inequality regimes over time does not mean that all African societies in the eighteenth century were slave-holding societies or that all African countries have substituted tropical cash- crop exports for minerals. It is precisely because such long-run meta-trends played out differently across the continent that Africa's inequality landscape is so diverse today.

Let us start here though with the origins of the first Kuznets wave. While slavery had existed for millennia in Africa, it likely only became 'a key driver' of economic inequality when the numbers of people that were sold into the transatlantic and Indian Ocean slave trades began to rise dramatically in the course of the seventeenth (West Africa) and eighteenth (East Africa) centuries. At its peak, in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, an estimated annual average of ca. 80,000 captives were exported from Western Africa to the Americas. Along with the rising volume of the trades, the profitability rose as a result of growing demand from American plantations, which drove up slave prices on both sides of the Atlantic. The British ban on slave trading in 1807–1808 propelled a shift in the centre of gravity from West Africa to Central West (Angola) and Central East (Mozambique) Africa, where trade volumes were maintained until the 1850s, after which the Atlantic trade came to an end and the centre of gravity shifted to the Indian Ocean and Red Sea. The Trans-Saharan slave trades likely compounded a long-term rise in slave trade–induced inequality in both sending and receiving regions, but had a smaller impact.[59] The key exception is the sudden rise in agricultural slavery in the Egyptian Nile delta that emerged in the wake of the US Civil War–induced cotton price boom in the 1860s. This temporary peak in demand for slave labour led to an annual influx of approximately 30,000 captives, mainly from present-day Sudan.[60]

Since slave raiding and trading required large-scale investments in military capacity and considerable credit positions, the growing profitability of these slave trades bolstered the power of so-called 'warrior elites' and

59. Ralph Austen, 'The Mediterranean Islamic slave trade out of Africa: A tentative census', in Elizabeth Savage (ed.), *The Human Commodity: Perspectives on the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade* (Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, London, 1992), pp. 214–48, specifically p. 227.
60. For the rise of agricultural slavery in Egypt Mohamed Saleh, see *Export booms and labor coercion: evidence from the Lancashire cotton famine*, CEPR Discussion Paper no. 14,542, pp. 11–13.

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fostered the rise of militarized states with centralized political hierarchies, such as Asante, Oyo, and Dahomey.[61] These warrior elites built up trade networks, acquired valuable knowledge about demand and supply, and became 'violence specialists' who manned their armies with slaves. Human captives were exchanged for guns and gunpowder—an exchange that facilitated further accumulation and generated a vicious cycle of enslavement and violence[62]—as well as carefully selected assortment of consumer items, such as beads, Indian cotton textiles, liquor, and tobacco.[63] In order to defend themselves against raiding parties organized by powerful centralized states, a growing number of communities in the 'catchment zones' adopted slavery and developed new forms of government to fend off increasing threats of annihilation.[64] States, clans, or factions unable to amass comparable degrees of centralized power were often marginalized or vanished.

As shown in Figure 7, the effects of the expanding slave trades were felt especially along the West, Southwest, and East African coasts, affecting societies within a radius of up to 600 miles inland most intensely. Internal demand from the Islamic slave trades in West Africa competed with and partly constrained the supply of slaves into the Atlantic trades.[65] Gender differences in demand, however, accommodated part of this competition. Atlantic exports consisted for about two-thirds of male captives, who fetched higher prices in the Americas. Female slaves, in contrast, were in greater demand within Africa, because of their reproductive capacity, because they were less likely to resist and flee, and because they were easier to integrate in polygynous societies.[66]

To what extent then did the ultimate collapse of the transoceanic trades in enslaved people also mark the end of slave-based wealth accumulation and rising inequality in Africa? The answers to these questions are located in the economic rents that came to replace those from the slave

61. David Richardson, 'Prices of slaves in West and West-Central Africa: Toward an annual series, 1698–1807', *Bulletin of Economic Research* 43, 1 (1991), pp. 21–56; Paul Lovejoy and David Richardson, 'British abolition and its impact on slave prices along the Atlantic coast of Africa, 1783–1850', *Journal of Economic History* 55, 1 (1995), pp. 98–119.

62. Warren Whatley, 'Up the river: International slave trades and the transformations of slavery in Africa' (Working Paper No. 51, African Economic History Network, 2020).

63. Anne Ruderman, *Supplying the Slave Trade* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, forthcoming).

64. Rebecca Shumway, *The Fante and the transatlantic slave trade* (University of Rochester Press, Rochester, NY, 2011), especially chapter 3; Walter Hawthorne, *Planting rice and harvesting slaves: Transformations along the Guinea-Bissau Coast, c. 1400–1900* (Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, 2003).

65. Paul Lovejoy, 'Islam, slavery, and political transformation in West Africa: Constraints on the transatlantic slave trade', *Outre-mers. Revue d'Histoire* 89, 336–337 (2002), pp. 247–282.

66. Stilwell, *Slavery and slaving*. For a society that exported more women, see G. Ugo Nwokeji, *The slave trade and culture on the Bight of Biafra. An African society in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010), especially chapter 6.

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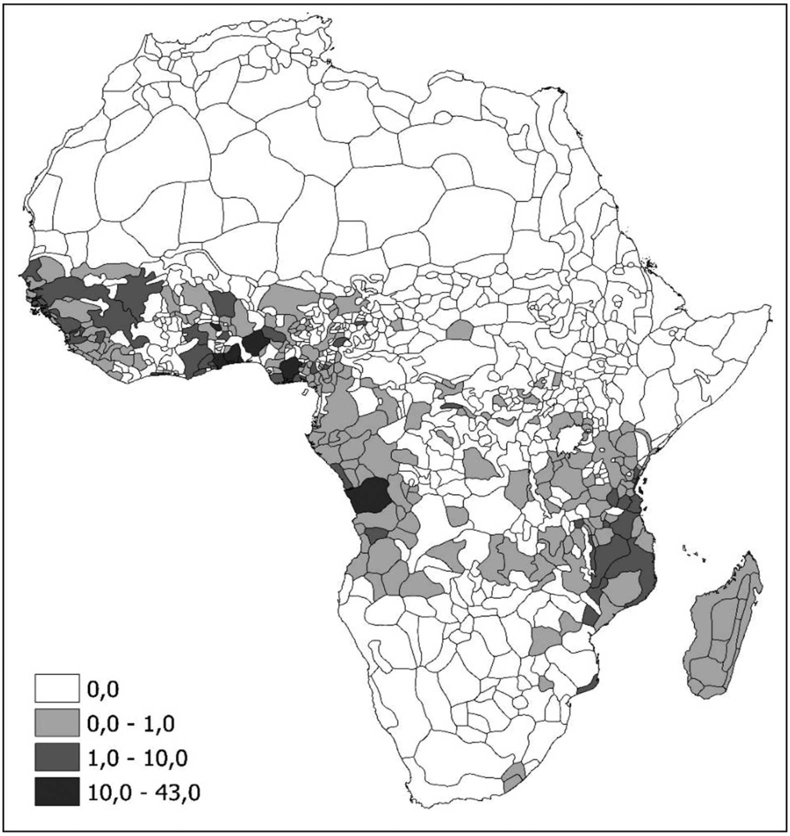

Figure 7 The total number of enslaved people exported to the Atlantic and Indian Ocean per square kilometer (1,400–1,900) (*source*: Ethnic group locations and slave exports per ethnic group from Nathan Nunn and Leonard Wantchekon, 'The slave trade and the origins of mistrust in Africa', *American Economic Review* 101, 7 (2011), pp. 3221–3252).

trades and in who managed to control them. Partly as a substitute for declining opportunities in slave trading and partly responding to a growing demand for tropical commodities from industrializing Europe, African societies gradually transitioned to 'legitimate' forms of commerce (i.e. agricultural commodities) in the course of the nineteenth century. Like the abolition of the slave trade, however, the intensity and timing of this shift varied significantly across the continent, but first occurred in West Africa.[67]

67. Angus Dalrymple-Smith, *Commercial transitions and abolition in West Africa, 1630–1860* (Brill, Leiden, 2019).

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Ewout Frankema, Jeffrey Williamson, and Pieter Woltjer have estimated that the total annual value of 'legitimate' commerce from West Africa already started to overtake the total value of Atlantic slave exports in the 1830s.[68]

The economic and distributional effects of the nineteenth-century transition to legitimate trade have long been subject of scholarly debate. Antony Hopkins argued that the drop in slave trade–based revenues undermined the position of local warrior classes and that polities that switched to the household-based production of export crops experienced a more levelled distribution of trade revenues.[69] Other historians, however, have revisited this interpretation and point to more continuity than change in the nineteenth century. Paul Lovejoy and David Richardson have maintained that the drop in revenues generated by Britain's abolition of the slave trade was likely rather short-lived, as slave prices already recovered in the 1820s.[70] Moreover, many warrior elites who had managed to accumulate vast sums of wealth and power through the slave trade either held on to the 'illegal' trade with French, Portuguese, or Brazilian traders or catered to the rising demand for domestic slave labour that arose from the new cash crop plantations and related transportation needs.[71] In such cases, reigning elites were able to maintain their revenues and military power by 'shifting' the sources of revenues rather than losing control over them, even if some elite members lost out in this process. As argued by Edna Bay, whereas women in the kingdom of Dahomey had wielded significant political power during the eighteenth century, they were increasingly excluded from such an influence after the transition from the slave trade to palm oil in the nineteenth century.[72]

Similar social and economic transformations played out in East Africa. While the transatlantic slave trade faded out in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Indian Ocean and trans-Saharan trades were still climbing to their peaks.[73] The still growing northbound slave trade included the Red Sea area, where captives from the Horn of Africa were sold, and the

68. Ewout Frankema, Jeffrey Williamson, and Pieter Woltjer, 'An economic rationale for the West African scramble? The commercial transition and the commodity price boom of 1835–1885', *Journal of Economic History* 78, 1 (2018), 231–267. See especially p. 234.
69. Anthony Hopkins, *An economic history of West Africa*, second edition (Routledge, New York, NY, 2019), pp. 23–24.
70. Lovejoy and Richardson, 'British abolition', pp. 33–49. See also Robin Law, 'Introduction' in Robin Law (ed.), *From slave trade to legitimate commerce: The commercial transition in nineteenth-century West Africa* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995), pp. 1–31.
71. Robin Law, *Ouidah: The social history of a West African slaving 'port', 1727–1892* (Ohio University Press, Athens, OH, 2004).
72. Edna Bay, *Wives of the leopard: Gender, politics, and culture in the kingdom of Dahomey* (University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, VA, 1998).
73. Ralph Austen, *African economic history: Internal development and external dependency* (James Curry, London, 1987); Richard Allen, *European slave trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500–1850* (Ohio University Press, Athens, OH, 2014).

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Nilotic Sudan, which experienced a rapid surge in demand from the Egyptian cotton fields.[74] Aided by the influx of European guns via the Suez Canal after 1869, slave accumulation also became tightly connected to the expanding clove, coconut, and grain plantations along the East African coast.[75] By 1870, plantations of Zanzibar and Pemba held about 20,000 slaves and growing numbers of enslaved people were retained along the Swahili coast to serve expanding plantations and mercantile activities.[76] Meanwhile, demand in internal markets also increased.[77]

In summary, slavery not only continued to play an important role in the nineteenth century, but it became increasingly 'foundational' to commercialization and militarization of numerous polities across West Africa and East Africa. From both the quantitative and qualitative evidence we have, it is clear that the scale and scope of slave-based state formation in this period were substantial.[78] Martin Klein has estimated that in the vast space of French West Africa, between 30 and 50 percent of the population was enslaved at the time of the colonial census in 1904.[79] Paul Lovejoy put the number for the Sokoto Caliphate between 25 and 50 percent.[80] In Asante, the share of people in servile status also approached 50 percent.[81] In Dahomey and the Yoruba states, Ibadan, Ijebu, Abeokuta, and Lagos, internal slavery was so pervasive by the mid-nineteenth century that only a minority of the population was free.[82] Such numbers were not confined to West Africa. In Buganda, the exact number of slaves remains hard to estimate and complex hierarchies existed among slaves themselves. Most scholars agree though that the prevalence, importance, and extraction of

74. Børge Fredriksen, *Slavery and its abolition in nineteenth-century Egypt* (Historisk Institutt Universitetet i Bergen, Bergen, 1977); Mohamed Saleh and Sarah Wahby, 'Boom and bust: The trans-Saharan slave trade in the 19th century', in Michiel de Haas and Ewout Frankema (eds), *Migration in Africa. Shifting patterns of mobility from the 19th to twenty-first century* (Routledge, London, 2022).
75. Frederick Cooper, *Plantation slavery on the east coast of Africa* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1977).
76. Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, spices and ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African commercial empire into the world economy, 1770–1873* (Ohio University Press, Athens, OH, 1987), p. 60.
77. Henri Médard, 'Introduction', in Henri Médard and Shane Doyle (eds), *Slavery in the Great Lakes region of East Africa* (James Curry, Oxford, 2007), p. 12.
78. Tomich and Lovejoy, *The Atlantic and Africa.*
79. Martin Klein, *Slavery and colonial rule in French West Africa* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998), pp. 252–256.
80. Paul Lovejoy, *Slavery, Commerce and production in the Sokoto Caliphate of West Africa* (Africa World Press, Trenton, NJ, 2005), p. 3. This order of magnitude implies that there may have been as many slaves in the Caliphate in the mid-nineteenth century as there were in the USA on the eve of the civil war.
81. Gareth Austin, *Land, Labour and Capital. From Slavery to Free Labour in Asante, 1807–1956* (Rochester University Press, Rochester, NY, 2005), p. 126; Lovejoy, *Transformations in slavery*, p. 168–169.
82. Lovejoy, *Transformations in slavery*, p. 172.

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slaves (women in particular) rose during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[83] According to Richard Reid, 'it is clear that slaves in all spheres were critical to Ganda social and economic life.'[84] In Unyamwezi and Zanzibar, the enslaved share of the population may have been as high as 65 to 75 percent during the nineteenth century.[85] The shares were much lower in North Africa, however, where the resident farming populations were comparatively large. In Egypt, an estimated total of 173,000 slaves accounted for roughly 3 percent of the population recorded in 1868, a decade before abolition in 1877.[86]

There is ample evidence that the distribution of slave ownership was highly skewed in Africa's nineteenth-century high-density slave societies. Often, wealthier free farmers owned at least one or two slaves, but there were also 'big men', and occasionally 'big women', who controlled thousands of slaves. In Ibadan, for example, 104 families controlled over 50,000 slaves in the 1860s and 1870s, about 500 slaves per family 'if' equally distributed. Madame Efustan, however, already controlled at least 2,000 slaves on her lands alone and many more in town.[87] Similar mentions of large-scale slave ownership are reported for other parts of nineteenth-century Africa as well. A merchant in Calabar in 1880 is reported to have held circa 3,000 slaves divided over three plantations.[88] When European explorers visited Buganda's royal court in the late nineteenth century, they repeatedly reported that the King owned several thousands of female slaves, which held significant market value.[89] Wealthy Omani owners of the lucrative clove plantations in Zanzibar and Pemba amassed anywhere between 200 and 1,500 slaves, and the Sultan himself owned 6,000 enslaved people.[90] A particularly prominent example of slave-based accumulation is the Arab-Swahili merchant Tippu Tip, who built a slave raiding and plantation empire who became a linchpin in the supply of slaves to Zanzibar from the

83. Michael Twaddle, 'The ending of slavery in Buganda', in Susan Miers and Richards Roberts (eds), *The end of slavery in Africa* (Wisconsin University Press, Madison, WI, 1988), pp. 119–49; Holly Hanson, 'Stolen people and autonomous chiefs in nineteenth-century Buganda: The social consequences of non-free followers', in Médard and Doyle (eds), *Slavery in the Great Lakes region* (James Curry, Oxford, 2007), pp. 161–187; Michael Tuck, 'Women's experiences of enslavement and slavery in late nineteenth & early twentieth-century Uganda', in Médard and Doyle (eds), *Slavery in the Great Lakes region* (James Curry, Oxford, 2007), pp. 174–188.
84. Richard Reid, 'Human booty in Buganda: Some observations on the seizure of people in war, c. 1700–1890', in Médard and Doyle (eds), *Slavery in the Great Lakes region* (James Curry, Oxford, 2007), p. 147.
85. Cooper, *Plantation Slavery*, p. 56, table 2.2; Georg Deutch, 'Notes on the rise of slavery and social change in Unyamwezi, c.1860-1900', in Médard and Doyle (eds), *Slavery in the Great Lakes region* (James Curry, Oxford, 2007), p. 76.
86. Estimate based on census data presented by Saleh and Wahby, *Boom and bust*, pp. 60–61.
87. Lovejoy, *Transformations in slavery*, p.175.
88. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
89. Richard Reid, *Political power in pre-colonial Buganda: Economy, society and warfare in the nineteenth century* (James Currey, Oxford, 2002), p. 123.
90. Cooper, *Plantation Slavery*, pp. 53 and 59.

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Congolese hinterland. By 1895, Tippu Tip had amassed fortune of £50,000 and 10,000 slaves.[91]

Qualitative studies have also pointed to significant political, socio-cultural, and spiritual transformations in African societies associated with the intensification of the slave trade and the rise of domestic plantation slavery. Africanist historians and anthropologists have documented in great detail how growing commercialization and militarism produced new forms of political organization, cultural practices, witchcraft rituals, and juridical discrepancy, which often went hand in hand with the erosion of social networks (including kinship ties).[92] Such shifts not only expanded the permissible routes into slavery but also destabilized 'traditional' (mutual) obligations between masters and enslaved people, thereby allowing for greater slave-based wealth accumulation and income extraction.[93] In other words, in line with the notion of a deepening inequality regime based on slavery, we see simultaneous shifts in the discourses and institutional arrangements that justified evolving social and economic realities.

In many places across the continent, wealth inequality must thus have further grown in the course of the nineteenth century as a result of continued slave raiding and trading, the increasing use of slaves in local commodity production for internal as well as extra-continental markets, and the further concentration of their ownership in the hands of militarized merchant elites. That said, while the commercial transition gave new impetus to accumulation of 'wealth-in-people' within Africa, it also generated new opportunities for more broad-based income growth in the major cash crop zones. Potentially, this development constrained inequality growth 'within' such zones, but not 'between' them and other areas that were not (yet) involved in the production of agricultural export commodities.

The 'slow death' of slavery under colonial rule, a process that sometimes took until the mid-twentieth century to be completed, eventually did end up generating a radical rupture with the past and gave rise to a new wave of inequality growth based on foreign capital investment.[94] While it

91. *Ibid.*, pp. 68–69n78.
92. Holly Hanson, *Landed obligation: The practice of power in Buganda* (Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, 2003), pp. 82–84; Rosalind Shaw, 'The production of witchcraft/witchcraft as production: Memory, modernity and the slave trade in Sierra Leone', *American Ethnologist* 24, 4 (1997), pp. 856–876; Charles Piot, 'Of slaves and the gift: Kabre sale of kin during the era of the Slave Trade', *Journal of African History* 37, 1 (1996), pp. 31–49.
93. See Jonathan Glassman, *Feasts and riot: Revelry, rebellion, and popular consciousness on the Swahili coast, 1856–1888* (Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, 1995), p. 36; Hanson, *Landed Obligation*, p. 85. For historical linguistic evidence of such changes, see David Schoenbrun, 'Violence, marginality, scorn & honour. Language evidence of slavery to the eighteenth century', in Médard and Doyle (eds), *Slavery in the Great Lakes region*, pp. 38–75. Such shifts also occurred in more decentralized societies that were targets of stronger predatory neighbouring states. See Walter Hawthorne, *Planting rice*.
94. Paul Lovejoy and Jan Hogendorn, *Slow death for slavery: The course of abolition in Northern Nigeria 1897–1936* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 1993).

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is clear that colonialism concentrated wealth to a much greater degree in the hands of non-Africans, it remains an open question whether colonial rule also prompted a shift in wealth from old to new African elites. The best (and most concise) answer that we can offer to date is that the historical literature points to varying outcomes. Gareth Austin's study on the Asante Empire, for example, shows that incumbent slave-owning elites managed to retain their position, even after they had given up on the slave trade.[95] This outcome was in line with the more general British political philosophy of indirect rule: to sustain and support local rulers and political customs. Yet, in many parts of what was to become French West Africa, incumbent chiefs were pushed aside and replaced by new groups in an effort to build a professional bureaucracy that was loyal to the principles of direct rule.[96] Ultimately, the great majority of slave owners faced dispossession without compensation.[97] It was probably only in areas where slavery had been much less intensive or where alternative routes to wealth accumulation (e.g. through land or cattle) had remained minimal, that foreign capital, colonial monopolies, and forced labour schemes induced a complete overhaul of what used to be a fairly egalitarian political and economic status quo.

Inequality regime shifts in post-colonial Africa

In the 'Great Leveler', Walter Scheidel argues that episodes of inequality decline are of a radically different nature than the secular trends of rising inequality: major inequality declines tend to be abrupt and brought about by 'malign' shocks or what Scheidel refers to as the 'four horsemen' of leveling: warfare, revolution, state collapse, and plagues.[98] Major levelling events in European history include the breakdown of the Roman Empire, in the aftermath of the fourteenth-century Black Death, and the two world wars (1914–1945). Such crises provoked changes in inequality regimes: they eroded much of the wealth that was controlled by elites, either because their assets were destroyed or confiscated or because asset prices collapsed. Such crises also led to fundamental institutional reforms and changes in ideological justification of (re)distribution, resulting in persistent shifts in inequality regimes.

Both Milanovic and Piketty, in contrast, have argued that in industrialized societies, inequality declines can 'also' be driven by more gradual and 'benign' forces than the episodic systemic crises that Scheidel focuses

95. Gareth Austin, 'Cash crops and freedom: Export agriculture and the decline of slavery in colonial West Africa', *International Review of Social History* 54, 1 (2009), pp. 1–37.
96. Michael Crowder, 'Indirect rule, French and British style', *Africa* 34, 3 (1964), pp. 197–205.
97. Klein, *Slavery and colonial rule*.
98. Scheidel, *Great leveler*.

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on.[99] Here, steadily growing mean incomes, the spread of mass education, expanding welfare states, democratization, changing inheritance laws, and progressive fiscal reforms have led to a policy-driven expansion of access to income and wealth and contributed to social norms that foster solidarity and egalitarianism.[100] According to Milanovic and Piketty, such preconditions for a shift towards a lower-inequality regime were predicated on strong states with a large fiscal basis, as was the case in mid-twentieth century Europe, for example. Such preconditions were not met in pre-industrial economies or in contemporary economies that are characterized by boom and bust cycles.

The numerous ruptures and shifts that characterize Africa's post-colonial history provide plenty of reasons to take seriously the role of these two alternative forces of levelling: shocks and policies.[101] While much more research on this can and should be undertaken, our aim here is twofold. First, we challenge the linear narrative in which present-day inequalities are linked in a straight line back to a persistent colonial legacy. Second, we outline a new research agenda to understand diverse and dynamic inequality trajectories in this period. We point to the 'heterogeneous' effects of shocks on inequality levels and flag the role of policies in determining inequality in post-colonial Africa.

Crisis and shocks: from exodus and expulsion to coups and conflict

The most immediate repercussion of decolonization for the distribution of income and wealth was the departure—forced or voluntary—of a significant part of the European and Asian communities that had settled across colonial Africa as administrators, merchants, entrepreneurs, engineers, middlemen, military staff, missionaries, and farmers. In some cases, and for different reasons, decolonization prompted abrupt and mass flight. Key examples would be Algeria, the Belgian Congo, Guinea, and Mozambique.[102] While mass expulsions affected millions of African labour immigrants as well, the exodus and expropriation of Europeans and Asians

99. Milanovic, *Global inequality*; Piketty, *Capital*.
100. Peter Lindert, *Growing public: Social spending and economic growth since the eighteenth century* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2004); Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz, *The race between education and technology* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2008).
101. An important exception is Alvaredo et al., 'Income inequality under colonial rule'. See also Figure 3.
102. Jennifer Hunt, 'The impact of the 1962 repatriates from Algeria on the French labor market', *Industrial and Labour Relations Review* 45, 3 (1992), pp. 445–572; Guy Vanthemsche, *La Belgique et le Congo. L'impact de la colonie sur la métropole* (Parole et Silence, Les Plans, Switzerland, 2010); Elizabeth Smidt, *Cold War and decolonization in Guinea, 1946–1958* (Ohio University Press, Athens, OH, 2007); Stephen Lubkemann, 'Race, class, and kin in the negotiation of 'internal strangerhood' among Portuguese Retornados, 1975–2000', in Andrea Smith (ed.), *Europe's invisible migrants* (Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2003), pp. 75–93.

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directly affected the top of income pyramids.[103] In Uganda, a sizeable Indian community, which had major stakes in cotton ginneries, retail, and urban property, was abruptly expelled and its property was redistributed by Idi Amin in 1972, soon after he rose to power. The economic consequences were disastrous.[104] In Zimbabwe, after a long struggle of black liberation armies against white minority rule, Mugabe's government progressively pushed out its white settler community and implemented large-scale land reform to benefit the African landless majority and counteract the country's extreme level of inequality, from 1980 onwards. After initial successes, by 2000, the pace of land transfers accelerated. Chaotic management, unchecked violence, and a lack of support from new landholders led to a dramatic drop in total farm output and instigated the collapse of Zimbabwe's financial sector, dragging the entire economy into one of the deepest economic depressions seen in twenty-first century Africa as of yet. The land reforms themselves, as well as overall economic collapse, lowered inter-household expenditure inequality (Figure 8), but such redistributive effects made very few people better off.[105]

There were of course also places—most notably South Africa and, initially, Southern Rhodesia—where revolutionary forces were suppressed for much longer. Here, European settler communities retained their grip on power and continued to concentrate wealth in the top end of the distribution.[106] However, even if affluent groups of Europeans left, this did not mean that the 'sources' of accumulation (high salaries, lucrative pension funds, export revenues, mining, and land concessions), or the 'social norms' that legitimize them, necessarily disappeared.[107] On the contrary, in many cases, it resulted in relatively smooth shifts of (at least part of) the sources of income and wealth from European to African hands, for

103. Aderanti Adepoju, 'The politics of international migration in post-colonial Africa', in Robin Cohen (ed.), *The Cambridge survey of world migration* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK, 1995), pp. 166–71; Sylvie Bredeloup, 'Tableau synoptique: Expulsions des ressortissants Ouest-Africains au sein du continent Africain (1954-1995)', *Mondes en Developpement* 23, 91 (1995), pp. 117–21; Ewout Frankema, 'From integration to repatration. Flight, displacement, and expulsion in post-colonial Africa' in de Haas and Frankema (eds.), *Migration in Africa*, pp. 330–352.

104. Vali Jamal, 'Asians in Uganda, 1880-1972: Inequality and expulsion', *Economic History Review* 29, 4 (1976), pp. 602–616.

105. Alexander Laurie, *The land reform deception: Political opportunism in Zimbabwe's land seizure era* (Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2016). Zimbabwe's land reforms have been widely debated. For discussion, see Blair Rutherford, 'Shifting the debate on land reform, poverty and inequality in Zimbabwe, an engagement with Zimbabwe's land reform: Myths and realities', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 30, 1 (2012), pp. 147–157.

106. Alvaredo and Atkinson, 'Colonial rule, apartheid and natural resources'; Fabio Andrés Díaz Pabón, Murray Leibbrandt, Vimal Ranchhod, and Michael Savage, 'Piketty comes to South Africa', *British Journal of Sociology* 72, 1 (2021), pp. 106–124; Katharine Frederick, 'The production of precarity: Industrialization and racial inequality in colonial Zimbabwe', *Industrial History Review* 31, 85 (2022), pp. 51–86.

107. Bossuroy and Cogneau, 'Social mobility in five African countries'.

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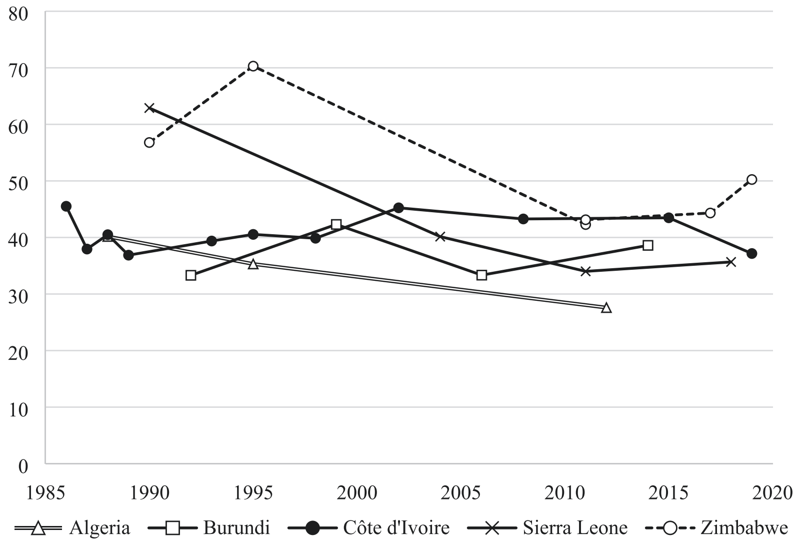

Figure 8 Gini estimates of household expenditure inequality in five African countries in times of civil conflict, 1985–2020 (*source*: UNU-WIDER, version 30 June 2022. All Gini estimates refer to national surveys of household consumption inequality between individuals).

example, in Côte d'Ivoire and Kenya.[108] In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Belgian rule was soon replaced by one of Africa's most unequal and kleptocratic regimes under Mobutu Sese Seko, which relied on sustained mineral wealth extraction and received backing from Western powers.[109]

The closing quarter of the twentieth century has seen a growing intensity of international and civil conflict. However, as illustrated in Figure 8, not all these were necessarily 'levelling events'. The distributional impact was contingent on who gained power, on the damage that was done to key economic sectors, and on the possibilities to monopolize valuable natural resources, especially oil and other subsoil deposits. Algeria saw a major drop in income inequality during its civil war (1991–2002). The civil war in Sierra Leone, which shattered the country for more than a decade (1991–2002), led to a steep drop in inequality. Burundi saw a temporary uptick of inequality in

108. Andrew Burton and Michael Jennings, 'Introduction: the emperor's new clothes? Continuities in governance in late colonial and early postcolonial East Africa', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 40, 1 (2007), pp. 1–25; Boukaka, Mancini, and Vecchi, 'Poverty and inequality'.
109. On wealth extraction by Mobutu and his associates, see Leonce Ndikumana and James Boyce, 'Congo's odious debt: External borrowing and capital flight in Zaire', *Development and Change* 29, 2 (2002), pp. 195–217.

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the midst of its civil war (1993–2005), after which inequality receded to its pre-war level. Côte d'Ivoire's two civil wars (2002–2007 and 2010–2011) hardly affected recorded inequality levels.

Shifting policies: from African Socialism to structural adjustment and beyond

The majority of African countries gained independence at a time when the Cold War was approaching its zenith. Independence leaders faced strategic as well as ideological choices between capitalist or socialist routes to decolonization and nation state building. Socialism, with its anti-imperial bend and reprehension of colonialism's ingrained social, economic, and political inequalities, appealed to many independence movements. African intellectuals such as Leopold Senghor and Kwame Nkrumah, as well as trade unionist leaders of emerging working classes, felt that socialism could make Africa less dependent on foreign markets. They were also in search of an indigenous model of economic development based on an 'ethic of egalitarianism' more compatible with African cultural and social norms of reciprocity and sharing than the individualism on which the Western capitalist model was predicated.[110] Between 1950 and 1985, not less than thirty-five African countries were at some point led by a self-proclaimed socialist regime, the region being regarded as one of the forefronts of the global socialist revolution.[111]

To what extent did African socialism bring new ideas about socio-economic egalitarianism in practice? Socialist governments variously focused on improving the position of wage workers or farmers and aimed for expanded educational opportunities for the poor. They also invested in state-owned companies to develop large-scale energy infrastructures and kick-start industrialization. But while their aims were lofty, many of these projects failed. In situations where equality and redistribution were ruthlessly enforced, such as Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Mozambique, inequality reduction often went hand in hand with repression, economic retrogression, and rising poverty rates.

Julius Nyerere's villagization (*ujamaa*) that was implemented in the mid-1970s was one of the most radical programs in this regard. The state first encouraged and later forced rural dwellers into 'model villages' in order to collectivize agriculture. These model villages became laboratories for state-led education and healthcare, which were deemed essential for overcoming tribalism and associated conflict. Evidence on the impact

110. Emmanuel Akyeampong, 'African socialism; Or, the search for an indigenous model', *Economic History of Developing Regions* 33, 1 (2018), pp. 69–87.
111. Anne Pitcher and Kelly Askew, 'African Socialisms and Postsocialisms', *Africa*, 76, 1 (2006), pp. 1–2.

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of *ujamaa* on inequality is inconclusive,[112] but some indicators point to a decline of overall inequality and especially of top income shares.[113] At the same time, however, the resettlement schemes also led to a major fall in food production and disruption of markets. The socialist experiment was abandoned only when Nyerere stepped down in 1985 by which time the Tanzanian economy was in severe economic crisis, with extreme shortages of commodities and foreign exchange, and high reliance on donor support.[114] Ethiopia's land reforms under the Marxist Derg regime, which aimed for complete confiscation and redistribution of farmland, offer an even more striking example of a policy with a radically egalitarian bent. While involving large-scale violence and repression, and resulting in devastating famine, the intended policy aims were arguably met, as Ethiopia, until today, remains one of Africa's most equal countries and its ancient 'feudal' inequality regime was broken.[115] Using land reforms and other state policies, the socialist regimes that ruled post-colonial North Africa (except Morocco) were successful in bringing down economic inequality substantially from particularly high levels in the 1950s (Figure 2) to among the lowest recorded in Africa today. Here, inequality reduction was compatible with economic growth, especially in Egypt and Tunisia.[116]

Notably, the socialist experiments took place in a context of high dependence on exports of primary commodities such as coffee, cocoa, and copper, the prices of which fluctuated wildly against the backdrop of global events such as the Korea War (1950–1953) and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries oil crisis (1970s). Eventually, as commodity prices collapsed, African states were burdened with unsustainable debts and their capacity for redistributive policies largely eroded. Indeed, the era of African socialism was followed by one of widespread structural adjustments, which not only dismantled many state programs but also eroded states' capacity to intervene effectively in income distributions more generally.[117]

112. On ways in which villagisation, through intended consequences, increased inequality in villages, see Felicitas Becker, *The politics of poverty: Policy-making and development in rural Tanzania* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2019), pp. 201–206.
113. Sascha Klocke, 'Land, labour, legacies: Long-term trends in inequality and living standards in Tanzania, c. 1920–2020' (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Lund University, 2021), pp. 268–74 and 277–81.
114. Reginald Green, D. G. Rwegasira, and Brian van Arkadie, *Economic shocks and national policymaking: Tanzania in the 1970s* (Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, 1980); Becker, *The politics of poverty*.
115. Stephen Devereux, Amdissa Teshome, and Rachel Sabates-Wheeler, 'Too much inequality or too little? Inequality and stagnation in Ethiopian agriculture', *IDS Bulletin*, 36, 2 (2005), pp. 121–26.
116. For the case of Egypt, see Mahmoud Abdel-Fadil, *Development, income distribution and social change in rural Egypt, 1952–1970* (Cambridge University Press, 1975).
117. Some quantitative studies suggest that the conditional lending policies of the IMF increased inequality. See Timon Forster, Alexander Kentikelenis, Bernhard Reinsberg,

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There are two further reasons why we might expect that the 'neoliberal era' increased economic inequality across Africa, albeit to different degrees across countries and time. First, smallholder-grown agricultural commodities have made way for subsoil deposits, oil in particular, as the primary source of income and wealth in the majority of African nations. The extraction of minerals and fuels is more capital-intensive than smallholder agriculture, and rents are easier to capture by local elites as well as foreign companies. These rents have also become important in underpinning neo-patrimonial governments in which patrons use state resources to secure the loyalty of clients and as a way to circumvent the 'social contract' that sovereign governments would need to engage with when raising direct taxes. Second, African societies have embarked on a powerful wave of religious renewal, driven by the expansion of evangelical churches and more orthodox forms of Islam. Based on data from the World Values Survey (1999–2014), Philip Nel finds that Africans are notably tolerant to income inequality and argues that religiousness is a key determinant of such 'inequality tolerance'.[118] The 'prosperity gospel' that characterizes strands of Pentecostalism, especially, is often associated with 'greed and avarice'.[119] Inheritance laws and lending practices of Islam, in contrast, are at least historically associated with greater limits to capital accumulation.[120]

Based on data post-1990, the authoritative 2018 *World Inequality Report* posits that income inequality in sub-Saharan Africa 'has remained relatively stable, at extremely high levels' because the region has 'never gone through the post-war egalitarian regime'.[121] However, as we have argued here, there is little reason to qualify the region as 'persistently unequal'. Such a view is simply inconsistent with past policy responses to, and current low levels of, inequality in Tanzania and Ethiopia (Figure 1)—the sixth

Thomas Stubbs, and Lawrence King, 'How structural adjustment programs affect inequality: A disaggregated analysis of IMF conditionality, 1980–2014', *Social Science Research*, 80 (2019), pp. 83–113; Valentin Lang, 'The economics of the democratic deficit: The effect of IMF programs on inequality', *Review of International Organizations*, 16 (2021), pp. 599–623. For African case studies, see Kwadwo Konadu-Agyemang, 'The best of times and the worst of times: Structural adjustment programs and uneven development in Africa: The case of Ghana', *Professional Geographer*, 52, 3 (2000), pp. 469–83; Joseph Kipkemboi Rono, 'The impact of the structural adjustment programmes on Kenyan society', *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, 17, 1 (2002), pp. 81–98.

118. Nel, 'Why Africans tolerate income inequality'.

119. For discussion, see Nimi Wariboko, 'Pentecostal Paradigms of National Economic Prosperity in Africa', in Katherine Attanasi and Amos Yong (eds), *Pentecostalism and prosperity: The socio-economics of the global charismatic movement* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY, 2011), pp. 35–59.

120. Kuran, Timur, *The long divergence: How Islamic law held back the Middle East* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2011). Notably, African countries with a large Muslim-share have lower inequality today. See Chancel et al., 'Income inequality in Africa'.

121. Facundo Alvaredo, Lucas Chancel, Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, and Gabriel Zucman. *World Inequality Report, 2018.* (World Inequality Lab, Paris School of Economics, 2017), pp. 10 and 42.

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and second most populous countries in Africa, respectively. Moreover, the claim that an 'egalitarian regime' was absent in the region unduly erases an important and widespread era of post-colonial African egalitarian experimentation, which also extended to North Africa. Thus, rather than applying a poorly informed assumption of persistence to a period for which reliable data are largely absent, we should seriously consider the impact of shifting African government policies on post-colonial economic inequality trajectories. Arguably, then, economic liberalization, the rising importance of subsoil deposits (oil especially), and religious–cultural changes are interacting to open up a path towards a new (high) inequality regime across large parts of the continent from the 1980s onwards.

Despite these shifts in Africa's inequality regimes, a plausible recent trend towards growing inequality is not conclusively borne out by the data. In fact, the Gini coefficient has declined in many African countries since the early 1990s.[122] It goes beyond the scope of this paper to comprehensively discuss, let alone explain, these recent trends and the reliability of data that underpin them. We should point out, however, that the oil dollars into the pockets of political elites in countries like Angola, Equatorial Guinea, and Nigeria are not accounted for in inequality estimates based on household consumption patterns, as the invisible flows of capital into Swiss bank accounts and foreign real estate will never appear in household surveys or tax records used to measure inequality.[123] Thus, contemporary inequality estimates might well be substantially understated.

Conclusions: African inequality in global perspective

The lack of insights into the long-run trajectories of economic inequality in Africa has been costly for both scholars of Africa and the expanding global inequality literature. Data limitations and conceptual challenges for Africa have either impeded *longue durée* analyses of inequality patterns or (re)produced stereotypes of static pre-colonial societies meeting absolutist extractive colonial regimes that introduced persistent socio-economic stratification, narratives that often do not even mention Africa's pervasive history of slavery, and pre-colonial market development. With little material to work with, it is not surprising that the influential new 'global inequality

122. Rebecca Simson and Mike Savage, 'The global significance of national inequality decline', *Third World Quarterly* 41, 1 (2020), pp. 20–41; Research based on income shares suggests that inequality levels have been stable since 1990. See Chancel et al., 'Income inequality in Africa'.

123. Piketty (*Capital and ideology*, p. 602) has estimated that at least 30 percent of all financial assets owned by African residents in 2015 was held in tax havens, which is considerably higher than the USA (4 percent), Europe (10 percent), and Latin America (22 percent), but lower than Russia (50 percent) and the Gulf Countries (57 percent).

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literature' has built its theories on the long-run drivers of inequality without factoring in the trajectories of African economies, ultimately leaving its contributions vulnerable to conceptual biases.

We have sought to make use of the opportunity provided by this moment and employ the analytical frameworks of the new global inequality literature to write a first account of the long-run evolution of inequality in Africa. This account for sure can be refined, expanded, and criticized, as more and better estimates of past inequality will undoubtedly become available. Yet, we hope to have achieved two objectives. First, we dismantle a number of lingering and stubborn misconceptions about the historical course of inequality in the region, replacing existing 'flat' and generalized narratives with more substantive and differentiated ones. Building on a wide range of cutting-edge literature in African social and economic history, we have argued that the development of African inequality is characterized by a series of profound transitions in social relations, institutions that governed factor allocation, and political ideology. Second, we hope that our paper will stimulate greater engagement in the global inequality literature with the study of Africa. As we have argued, we believe that inclusion of African patterns can move this literature to new conceptual and empirical frontiers. Existing theoretical frameworks may warrant expansion or revision to better fit places, within and beyond Africa, where much wealth was until relatively recently 'stored in people'. Additionally, Africa's past, both by the strong presence of external 'shocks' (e.g. slave trade, colonialism, and Cold War geopolitics) and through the large number of countries the continent counts, offers myriad opportunities to evaluate the relative importance of 'evolutionary' versus 'revolutionary' forces of distributional change. That potential will only open up, however, once we move beyond the view that present-day African inequality regimes are a 'persistent' imprint of colonial capitalism and economic dualism.

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