

Globalisation in the Long Nineteenth Century: African Perspectives

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The image of Africa was re-made in the long nineteenth century. By the end of that century, Africa was seen as the 'Dark Continent', which was supposed to be in urgent need to be 'civilised' by European colonizers. But of course the forces of globalization had reached various parts of Africa much earlier. In fact, Africa was an integral part of that process, perhaps most intensely in the form of the West African transatlantic slave trade, that provided the labour for the growth of Latin American silver production, Caribbean sugar production as well as North American cotton production, to name just three examples. It is perplexing to note, how strongly connected Africa became in the 19th century, while at the same time, both contemporary and latter-day European observers ever more strenuously denied that these connections existed. It is also perplexing to note, how little is actually known about the effect of this process on Africa itself, be it in terms of economy, society, politics or religion. This raises the question, how did globalization look like from an African perspective, in short: globalization as it appeared from the inside out rather than from the outside in. In order to find answers to that question, the paper examines the following themes: conversion to Christianity in Southern Africa, social marginalisation in East Africa and the exercise of political authority in West Africa in the long 19th century.

This paper wishes to explore two sets of arguments; the first being, that connectedness in the 19th century had a strong regional bias. At the beginning of the 19th century Africa was merely a geographical expression. In historical terms, Africa as divided into 4 regions, whose people had little in common, except perhaps a certain degree of pigmentation (but even that is disputed!) – a distinctly West African connectedness via the Atlantic, a distinctly North America connectedness via the Mediterranean, a distinctly East African connectedness via the Indian Ocean, and a distinctly Southern African connection that linked that part of the continent to a variety of European pre-modern Empires, the Portuguese, the Dutch Empires and of course, since 1800, to the British Empire. Thus, so the argument, globalization as far as Africa's 19th century is concerned, has to be analysed in regional historical contexts and perspectives.

The second line of argument that this paper hopes to explore concerns the question to what extent African polities and societies were strengthened or weakened by becoming more intensely connected with the wider world in the 19th century. As has been argued above,

connectedness had a strong regional dimension. Yet, although there was no uniform African process in this regard, the lack of that uniformity allows for comparison. Arguably, certain patterns might be discernible, which, while happening at different points in time scattered throughout the 19th century, show a degree of similarity. It appears that early contacts and connections were seen as opening up opportunities for obtaining wealth, power and prestige and such connections were thus rigorously pursued, especially by ambitious African elites. However, when these connections became more mature and perhaps more intense, developing on an ever larger scale, they began - first only slowly, but then more rapidly - to undermine severely the cohesiveness of the societies involved, both in social and political as well as economic terms. Thus, so the argument, the forces of globalization ultimately impoverished the continent, not least because globalisation had turned out to be a potent battering ram for the expansion of European colonial rule. In other words, by the end of the 19th century, Africa had become a 'Dark Continent', which was supposed to be in urgent need to be 'civilised' by European colonizers.