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African cities and regional trade in historical perspective: Implications for contemporary globalization trends

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This paper has three objectives. First, to identify pre-colonial African towns of regional and international significance and to highlight their role as centers of long distance trade, art and craft; second, to identify and discuss the major factors that contributed to weakening the position of these towns in the global socio-economic arena; and third, to suggest steps that can be taken to transform African towns in particular, and the continent in general, into active participants in contemporary globalization processes. The suggested actions entail investing in, and promoting the use of, modern information technologies; improving conventional mailing systems; improving road and other transport facilities; and requiring MNCs to contribute meaningfully to development efforts in their host locales and host countries.

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Introduction

Studies of the role of African cities in regional trade and globalization suffer from a number of major deficiencies. Prominent amongst these is their lack of historical grounding. This notwithstanding, the studies are unified in observing that most major indigenous cities in Africa were major centers of regional and international socio-economic activities prior to the European colonial era (see e.g., Schneider, 2003; Sassen, 2002; Jenkins et al., 2002; Beall, 2002; Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1991). The view that these cities currently play an insignificant or passive role in the global economy also attracts consensus (Schneider, 2003, p. 389). Thus, the role of African cities in the international arena has waned, rather than increased, over the years. Why is this the case? What steps are necessary to transform African cities into the active participants in regional and interna-

tional socio-economic affairs that they once were? Stated alternatively: what can be done to make African cities active players in the contemporary globalization process?

This paper has three main objectives. The first is to identify pre-colonial African towns of regional and international significance and highlight their role as centers of long distance trade, art and craft. The second is to identify and discuss the major factors that contributed to weakening the position of these towns in the global socio-economic arena. The third objective is to suggest steps that can be taken to transform African towns in particular—and the continent in general—into active participants in contemporary globalization processes. We begin by exploring the concept of globalization.

The concept of globalization

Globalization has become a favorite buzzword in the international development lexicon and an increasingly popular topic of discussion in intellectual

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and political circles. A testament to globalization's increasing popularity is the growing and proliferating literature on the subject.¹ One commentator suggests that the burgeoning literature on this new master subject attests to a sharpening in public consciousness with regard to matters of global magnitude and significance (Lloyd, 2000). As a concept, the term is mired in controversy, and at the same time, its meaning tends to change from one discipline to another. For instance, sociologists perceive globalization as entailing "the growing interconnectedness of the sociosphere on a worldwide scale" (Peterson et al., 1999, p. 16). Seen from this perspective, it follows that—despite rhetoric to the contrary—globalization is not an entirely new phenomenon, it may simply be "old wine in new bottles". There are recorded accounts of large-scale movements, such as those that culminated in the introduction of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam throughout the world. Along similar lines, there are empire-building efforts, in ancient and more recent history, that resulted in large regions, nations, kingdoms, and cognate entities around the world being brought under a single unifying socio-economic and political umbrella.

For economists, globalization entails geographically large-scale economic interaction. Such interaction involves, *inter alia*, the free and uninhibited flow of capital and other important factors of production. Thus, the term globalization can be taken to mean processes involving the flows of capital, commodities, and information that operate to form a single global economy (Schneider, 2003). The notion of a single global economy, as employed here, is somewhat misleading as it gives the false impression of some degree of equitability in the distribution of the benefits of globalization. Yet, as one analyst accurately notes,

the world has long been—and still is—a space where economic and political relations are very uneven; it is filled with lumps, places where power coalesces surrounded by those where it does not, where social relations become dense amidst others that are diffuse. Structures and networks penetrate certain places and do certain things with great intensity, but their effects tail off elsewhere (Cooper 2001: 190, quoted in Schneider, 2003, p. 390).

The concomitant inequalities of globalization are readily apparent when one examines the impact of this phenomenon on the sub-Saharan African region in the recent past. A discussion of the concept in the context of Africa can hardly be deemed complete without mention of its link to major urbanization trends on the continent. In this regard,

Coquery-Vidrovitch (1991, p. 2) has identified three major phases that comprise the following distinct characteristics:

- Prevalent types of production and exchange, or modes of production, for example a domestic lineage system based on subsistence, or a system based on a slave-derived social and economic organization, or a trading system combining slavery and mercantilism, or a capitalist system.
- Given patterns of power and ideology, which also help to structure and maintain it, will correspond to each of these modes, due largely to a religious mindset in preindustrial societies, or the scientific and technological apparatus of modern capitalist societies.
- From every society, from every system of power and of thought, specific models of cities develop. This process of urbanization reflects and reveals the global organization of the whole group.

We hasten to note that large-scale socio-economic interactions have not always had a negative impact on the region. The negative impacts of such interactions were first felt in Africa in the 16th century, during the heydays of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. We discuss the trans-Atlantic slave trade and other activities with negative implications for Africa below. For now, suffice to mention that the advent of the trans-Atlantic slave trade is perceived by many (e.g., Schneider, 2003) as marking the genesis of modern globalization in Africa.

Pre-colonial African cities

Contrary to popular belief, the existence of towns or cities pre-dated the colonial era in Africa (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1991; Anderson and Rathbone, 2000; King, 1990; Ki-Zerbo, 1978; Hull, 1976). Towns and cities constituted a crucial part of politically sophisticated and well-organized pre-colonial African kingdoms, such as those of the Western Sudan, Ghana, Mali and Songhay. The political superiority of these empires and kingdoms was based on the technological advantage they commanded over other human groupings, especially unorganized polities. For instance, the Great Empire of Ghana, which occupied a region to the northwest of present-day Republic of Ghana, established about 300 AD, was able to conquer its neighbors thanks to its relative superiority in iron technology. Success in maintaining these kingdoms and empires depended on economically productive activities, such as industry and trade. Trade in forest products accounted for the growth of the Songhay Empire, whose size at one point was the same as that of the continental USA and five times that of the Holy Roman Empire (Mazrui, 1998). Geographically, the empire stretched from present-day Rio de Oro to

¹Even by 2000, it was estimated that as many as 1000 pieces had already been written on the subject of globalization (see Lloyd, 2000).

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