

LABOR MIGRATION AND COMMODITY PRODUCTION IN AFRICA: GLOBAL ENTANGLEMENTS

Migração laboral e produção de commodities na África:
conexões globais

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MIGRAÇÃO LABORAL E PRODUÇÃO DE COMMODITIES NA ÁFRICA: CONEXÕES GLOBAIS
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ABSTRACT

This introductory article presents the objectives, scope and contents of the Special Issue titled *Labor Migration and Commodity Production in Africa: Global Entanglements*. By congregating a diverse team of scholars from Brazil, Turkey, Germany, France, the United States, and Cameroon, all at different stages of their careers, this Special Issue seeks to build upon current trends in the fields of Global and African History to expand our current understanding of the centrality of African subjects in the making of the contemporary, densely globalized yet deeply unequal world. This introduction sets the theoretical framework that guided our call for papers, summarizes the key findings of each article, and situates their individual contributions within the topics related to the agency of African subjects in the creation of increasingly interconnected societies. We argue that the articles in this Special Issue offer a path to further strengthen and expand both fields of African and Global History by incorporating the analysis of understudied sources from diverse linguistic backgrounds, such as Arabic, Turkish, Portuguese and German, as well as legal documents produced by contemporary African states.

KEYWORDS

Global History. African History. Labor migration. Commodity production.

RESUMO

Este artigo introdutório apresenta os objetivos, o escopo e o conteúdo do Dossiê Temático intitulado *Migração Laboral e Produção de Commodities na África: Conexões Globais*. Ao congregar uma equipe diversificada de estudiosos oriundos do Brasil, Turquia, Alemanha, França, Estados Unidos, e Camarões, todos em diferentes estágios de suas carreiras, este Dossiê Temático se alicerça sobre tendências atuais nos campos da História Global e da África para expandir nossa compreensão sobre a centralidade de sujeitos africanos na formação do mundo contemporâneo – densamente globalizado, mas profundamente desigual. Esta introdução estabelece o enquadramento teórico que orientou nossa chamada de artigos, resume os principais achados de cada artigo e situa suas contribuições individuais dentro da temática relativa à agência de sujeitos africanos na criação de sociedades cada vez mais interconectadas. Argumentamos que os artigos deste Dossiê Temático oferecem um caminho para fortalecer e expandir ambos os campos da História da África e Global, incorporando a análise de fontes pouco estudadas de diferentes procedências linguísticas, como árabe, turco, português e alemão, bem como documentos legais produzidos por estados africanos contemporâneos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES

História Global. História da África. Migração laboral e produção de commodities.



Human mobility across cultural, political, and social boundaries is nothing new in African History. In fact, anthropologists and historians have consistently argued that people moved beyond their immediate horizons since immemorial times, spurring numerous historical transformations that shaped landscapes and identities for millennia along the way (Kopytoff, 1989; Vansina, 1989). While acknowledging the timeless existence of human mobility in Africa may help in destroying the enduring myth of African societies as ahistorical entities responsive only to external forces, it is important not to gloss over fundamental changes in the circumstances and nature of migratory movements, especially as African societies created and engaged with ever-broadening networks of commercial exchange since the early Modern Age.

This Special Issue was conceived as an endeavor to improve our current understanding on both these propositions, namely, that African societies were never cloistered away from global events but were rather indispensable to their making in the first place, which includes the expansion of commodity markets catering for increasingly industrialized economies. It draws on recent historiographical developments in the fields of Global History as well as African History to posit that the connections established by African historical subjects have been a centerpiece in the creation of the modern world. By focusing on the relationship between a specific, but increasingly pervasive form of human mobility – labor migration – that toiled in producing trade goods extracted from minerals, animals or plants in Africa, the articles in this Special Issue deal with the myriad of ways in which African subjects shaped the commercial networks of commodity production from the Sahelian states in the seventeenth-century to (post)colonial flows of raw materials and laborers that keep the whole global economy afloat.

The focus on the relationship between labor migration and commodity production is by no means incidental to the propositions above. For too long have studies on labor migration and commodity production in Africa effaced the agency of African subjects as peripheral, responsive only to external pressures set by colonial agents or “central” drivers (Atkins, 1993; Sunseri, 2002; Tallie, 2019). And as Samir Amin once put it, many takes on labor migration failed to be more than tautologies that explain the phenomena of labor migration by merely indicating the existence of people who are likely to migrate (Amin, 1995). More recently still, many scholarly investigations on labor migration in Africa have been deadlocked in tailoring cases to fit into a typological “spectrum” of coerced labor ranging from chattel slavery to “free” contract labor, rather than describing how the commodification of labor itself unfolded along the multiple fault lines of modern capitalism (Martino, 2022). Thus, a cursory glance over the burgeoning field of Global History since the last two decades of the twentieth century may offer invaluable insights to historians and analysts wishing to make sense of the connections that undergirded globalization as a historical phenomenon, as well as help us in devising ways to deepen our understanding on how commodity markets – themselves a foundational feature of global capitalism – were created, either in Africa or elsewhere.

It is known that the increasingly interconnected present prompted historians in the late twentieth-century to take a deeper look at the reciprocal influences and the multiple historical connections established between different societies in a global scale (Kocka, 2006). Researchers specialized in the field of African History greatly impacted these historiographical debates by demonstrating not only the centrality of African societies in global processes that were once viewed merely as developments of European history (Thornton, 2016), but also by rejecting narratives of globalization as the corollary of a unilateral and unstoppable “modernization” of non-Western subjects (Cooper, 2007; Inikori, 2007; Conrad, 2013). Moreover, as the protracted abolition of slavery gained traction around the world along the nineteenth century and coexisted with a booming global economy based on the mass

consumerism of industrialized countries that were fed, dressed, and stimulated by tropical commodities, the transformations in the mobility of African subjects who were engaged in supplying such globalized commodities has also received attention from historians (Frankema; Haas, 2022).

The emergence of these analytical trends has particularly favored reinterpretations of the role played by non-European societies in the development of capitalism in a way that critically challenges the metanarratives based on the description of “centers” and “peripheries”, as well as the notion that capitalism arose as a singularity of European/North American history to which the rest of the world was eventually subjected, whether by the force of macroeconomic pressures based on technological supremacy or by the exercise of political and military power grounded in colonial domination. While such concerns figured prominently in African and Latin American academic discourses from the mid-1960s onwards, as indicated by studies originating from the dependency theory and critical perspectives on the paradigm of modernization on a global scale (Ramos, 1967; Amin, 1972; Rangel, 1981; Rodney, 1981), more recent analyses have shifted towards emphasizing the agency of African historical subjects in establishing these interconnections, notwithstanding the fact that their structurally unequal character, in terms of economic value, culminated in the long-term production of underdevelopment and – most importantly – without foregoing a moral critique of modern capitalism (Bosch, 1997; Green, 2019).

Thus, historians have faced the challenge of explaining how the world has become simultaneously (and increasingly) interconnected and unequal without, however, giving undue emphasis to the agency of European subjects (Berg, 2013; Edwards *et al.*, 2020). In this sense, the critical use of the concept of capitalism as a global historical phenomenon has, in turn, allowed African historians to pay attention to the complexities of African societies without overlooking their capacity to establish their own connections with the outside world despite deepening inequalities (Alpers, 2014; Cooper, 2014; Eckert, 2016). However, this appeal for a shift in perspective requires historians to engage with sources in the marginalized languages. Historically, the sources that have been predominantly utilized were authored by British and French agents, as well as colonial officials, who often, whether intentionally or unintentionally, marginalized or neglected the contributions and significance of African agents (Yusha, 2011; Kavas; Tandoğan, 2019). In this regard, uncovering new sources in languages such as Hausa, Swahili, Arabic, Turkish, German, and Portuguese are becoming essential standards for contemporary research projects.

It is our contention that this Special Issue contributes to these recent historiographical developments by congregating scholars from Brazil, Cameroon, Turkey, the United States, Germany and France, all at different stages of their academic careers, who responded to the call of taking a closer look at the global interconnectedness between African societies and the world from a historical perspective, with each author singling out how specific commodities were procured through labor migration networks. Taken together, the seven articles contemplate all regions of the African continent, from the trans-Saharan connections between West Africa and the Middle East, to the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds encompassing Senegambia, Central West-Africa, East Africa and beyond. Chronologically, this Special Issue spans from the seventeenth-century to the present, and each paper shares a common thread of articulating a diverse array of documentary material and oral account collections which remain underexplored in African studies, such as Swahili, Arabic, Turkish, German, and Portuguese sources as well as policy and legal documents governing the international relations between independent African countries.

The articles were arranged in a chronologically ascending order which, as the reader shall see, also expands into a broader spectrum of historical relations deeply intertwined with the global mobility of African subjects. The first three contributions were written by Brazilian

historians and cover the pre-colonial period up to the imperialist scramble for Africa in the late nineteenth century. Felipe Silveira de Oliveira Malacco's paper deals with the production of Arabic gum in northern Senegambia, a region deeply connected to the Atlantic world since the first half of the fifteenth century. His article stresses how this commodity, sought by markets in early modern Europe for its manifold pharmaceutical uses as well as in the manufacturing of textiles and tinctures, remained firmly in control of local Wolof powerbrokers. By analyzing French, British, Dutch and Cape Verdean travelers' accounts written in the seventeenth century, Malacco identifies how commercial networks regulated and taxed by Wolof rulers connected the Atlantic coast and trade hubs along the Senegal River to a much wider Saharan region, further fleshing out the complexities in the commercial interactions between European and African agents before the onset of colonial rule.

Ivan Sicca Gonçalves also looks at commercial networks hinging on the globalized Atlantic economy with the African interior but focusing on a crucial component of commodity production rather than a commodity *per se*: the transportation sector. Gonçalves analyses African commercial agents, known in Portuguese sources from modern-day Angola as *pombeiros*, who were responsible for brokering trade relations between caravan porters, local African chiefdoms such as the Kingdom of Bié, and European merchants by mid-nineteenth century. His paper observes how the rising global demand for products such as ivory, coffee, wax and rubber came with intensified contacts between Portuguese-operated trading caravans, generously financed with credit offered by commercial firms in Luanda and Benguela, and African societies situated as far as Kasai and Barotseland. By examining the agency of African *pombeiros* in crisscrossing the central Angolan plateau to recruit thousands of African porters and play ambiguous, conflict-ridden roles in such trading caravans, Gonçalves examined how greatly expanding markets in West-Central Africa by the mid-1800s were initially met with the rise of autochthonous communities of affluent African traders, yet all in a historical context of deepening inequalities and the spread of violent forms of dependency and labor regimentation thrust by these expanding markets.

The participation of African itinerant workers in the procurement of ivory is also the topic explored by Silvio Marcus de Souza Correa in his article, but under the very different circumstances created by the onset of colonial rule since the late nineteenth-century. Like Malacco and Gonçalves, Correa's article builds upon sources not sufficiently explored in the writing of Africa's central place in Global History – namely, German texts produced during the Wilhelmine era. The vigorous expansion of bourgeois consumerism in Europe greatly influenced increasing demands for brute ivory, a commodity required for appeasing new aesthetic predilections in artistry, musical instruments and decorations across Europe and North America. While only truly describable with reference to widespread pillaging and social terror, the development of a global market for African ivory during the colonialist period described by Correa did not entirely preclude the agency of migrant workers in shaping these commercial connections, including in transforming processes of ethnogenesis and the creation of colonial cities along the East African coast and elsewhere.

Aside from these three initial articles in Portuguese, the remaining papers are written in English and further explore the entanglements between African labor migration and commodity production from the nineteenth through the twentieth century up until our contemporary era. Felipe Bastos and Clara Torrão Busin engage with scholarly debates on migratory labor during colonialism by studying the circulation of tens of thousands of persons from northernmost Portuguese East Africa and British Tanganyika, respectively modern-day Mozambique and mainland Tanzania, and their participation in the world's largest producer of sisal fiber. While labor migration under colonial rule in Africa was generally composed by men and kept under the watchful eye of European authorities, Bastos and Busin explore how Makonde migrants crisscrossed the borders between the backwaters of different colonial

empires in their efforts to make a livelihood since the early twentieth century until shortly before the outbreak of the Mozambican liberation war. The authors interweave archival records consulted in several countries with oral testimonies collected in Dar es Salaam to discuss how migrants' complex life stories, when set against colonial records, renders a complex picture of migrant agency far outstripping and outwitting colonial administrators' and industrial pundits' plans for orderly, quantified and controlled labor migration networks.

Mona Rudolph's article is another piece that explores German sources to write an insightful history on how the labor migration from the Ovambo region, which encompasses present-day northern Namibia and southern Angola, was essential in facilitating diamond extraction by German colonial mining enterprises in the early twentieth century. In her analysis, Rudolph underscores the agency of the people from the Ovambo region who, while not directly subjected to the colonial authority of the German Empire, engaged in seasonal labor within the mines under German colonial oversight, concurrently managing their agricultural activities in their homelands. This perspective challenges the prevailing colonial narrative that depicts the German Empire as an all-powerful entity exerting control over a vast territory. Instead, Rudolph illustrates that colonial administrators and mining companies were compelled to negotiate with these seasonally migrating workers, as well as with local intermediaries, concerning labor conditions and remuneration. The absence of these workers would have rendered both colonial governance and mining operations unviable, as they were essential to the workforce. In this regard, it was mainly the determination and initiative of the Ovambo people that enabled diamond extraction, rather than solely the ambitions of German companies and colonial authorities. These findings elucidate the intricate power dynamics and socio-economic contexts surrounding diamond extraction under colonial rule, highlighting the collaborative efforts and negotiations among various actors involved in the process.

The remaining two contributions to this Special Issue deal with the migratory networks between contemporary African countries and beyond Africa. Mahir Saul and Kerem Duymus adopt a *longue durée* perspective to explore the migratory networks and economic ties between present-day Turkey and West Africa, thereby facilitating a thematic transition from historical analysis to contemporary sociopolitical relations within the Special Issue. Their focus is on the evolving economic and migratory dynamics primarily between West Africa and Turkey. Uncovering Arabic and Turkish archival documents from Turkey and Libya, the authors investigate the mobility networks that existed between West Africa and the Ottoman Empire, thereby linking historical trends to current patterns. Based on further anthropological and sociological field research, the authors reveal both disruptions and continuities in the context of labor migration. While prevailing narratives surrounding so-called "migration crises" predominantly emphasize the European perspective on African mobility, the authors offer an alternative viewpoint that highlights Turkey's policies and interactions with African states, as well as the economic dynamics from the standpoint of African immigrants.

The final paper was authored by Herman Bonabé, a West African scholar engaged with current labor mobilities in Africa and who focuses squarely on the governance of human mobility by African states by the turn of the twenty-first century. Bonabé approaches the topic of labor mobility from an alternative perspective and disciplinary framework: he highlights beneficial aspects of labor migration for both individuals seeking employment and for states requiring labor in underutilized sectors. From this vantage point, Bonabé analyzes the intricate legal frameworks and dynamics surrounding labor migration to assess whether the existing laws among African states confer advantages to both immigrants and the states themselves. Consequently, the author delineates a complex negotiation landscape involving international entities such as the United Nations and the African Union, as well as regional organizations like the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), alongside national governments within Africa. Through his



comprehensive analysis, Bonabé elucidates the multifaceted nature of the legal dynamics pertaining to labor migration among African states, further cementing our current understanding on migratory networks in African History by transcending presentist perspectives based on European-centered narratives of “migration crises”.

Taken together, we believe that the articles in this Special Issue provide an insightful expansion of perspectives, sources, and methods to discuss topics that have been profoundly influential in shaping the contemporary world, particularly within the disciplinary fields of Global History and African History. Aside from sparking debates that help overcome prevailing linguistic limitations in Brazilian academia through dialogue with researchers from Africa, Europe, and Turkey, the Special Issue also contributes to the ongoing effort to situate the mobility and agency of African subjects at the center of the historiographical debate on phenomena constitutive of our increasingly interconnected societies. We thus wish you a good reading!

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