

LeidenASA-Africa 2020

Authors' workshop on African labour history 1600-1900 for the publication of a collective volume (open access)

November 2020

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The activity proposed for this grant application is an authors' workshop on African labour history 1600-1900 for the publication of a collective volume (open access). This is an Africa oriented activity based at Leiden University (ASCL, LUIH, LIAS) and Erasmus University, aiming to involve the Centre for African Studies at the University of Edinburgh and other external partners. This scholarly workshop would represent an important networking and collaboration opportunity both for historians who are already established, as well as the upcoming generation.

The project aims to bring together authors, both within and outside the LeidenASA network. (The Leiden African Studies Assembly could expand thanks to this kind of activities.)

- Working title: General Labour History of Africa, 1600-1900.

- Periodisation: the starting point of this history is ca. 1600. There is certainly sufficient research available data starting from this century for Southern and Northern Africa. However, the option to start earlier or later remains open and will be a matter of discussion in the preliminary meeting (see below).

- Preliminary, not exhaustive, list of issues: forms of labour relations; slavery, tributary and communal labour systems (commodified and non-commodified labour); pastoralist societies (case studies in the West, and in the Rift Valley); labour in segmentary societies, communal labour; cast systems and occupational specialisation; labour in age sets societies: reciprocal labour; communal/public works (e.g. Niger River region/delta); empires and kingdoms: Morocco, Egypt, Sahelian Sultanates, Egypt, Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, Ghana, Mali, Songhay; Ethiopia, etc; African slave labour (including abroad); abolition and its consequences on labour; labour in transport/trade: porters, caravans, canoes, boats, etc.; labour and early capitalism (with a special look at the relationship between forms of labour relations with race, kinship, ethnicity, class, etc.); extensive agriculture/plantation economy (non-European, i.e. Arab Swahili); mining; early (pre-1900) colonial administration (Senegal, Egypt, Algeria, South Africa, Angola); European merchant houses and global markets; dependency, mutualism, and solidarity; religions/faith and labour; religions and labour exploitation; labour in/for the missions and in/for the mosques; welfare/charity systems for non-working people; "imported" and immigrant labour (indentured, free, slaves?, Indians, Chinese, Turks, etc.); military versus non-military labour; early Chinese, Indian, Arab communities, etc.; white settlers from Europe (e.g. South Africa); food production and the domestic domain; child labour.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1) The gender element is fundamental in this project. In fact, the term "labour" is too often limited to a male-only analysis: in particular, men at work in factories or in mines. In Africa, the study of labour entails a deep analysis of the role of women in societies. This is especially true for the period dealt with in this project, where agricultural and household labour was a fundamental aspect of African life.

2) Vertical relations (modes of exploitation of labour), requiring the study of the relationship between labourers and employers, will also constitute a major focus of this project. From this

analysis of vertical labour relations, studies will take into account both sides: the history of workers and that of “employers” (in their multiple-denominations).

3) A comparison between different times and regions will be another methodological tool.

4) Labour will need to be put into context, in connection with culture and family in Africa. Household, communal and tributary labour are central in the centuries under examination.

5) The “transcontinentality” or “translocality” of the topics under historical analysis should emerge from the study of processes of economic organisations of labour: nomadic, perennially on the move, linked to trade or slave systems, etc. Trans-oceanic relationships are also elements of translocality in labour as well as in global migration as we know it today: from Africa towards other continents; from outside Africa towards the continent, and within the African continent.

6) Authors will combine secondary and primary sources when necessary. The problem is not so much that of discovering something new in the history of African labour, but rather and especially to coherently and cohesively organise the existing findings.

ACTIVITY TYPE

The proposed project consists of the organisation of a workshop and a publication. In the interests of professionalism, the workshop will provide an opportunity for internal and cross peer-reviewing. The GLHA should represent not just an edited book but a collective and universalistic effort on the part of all the authors involved. The editors will be the coordinators of the project and will also take on the task of selecting and inviting authors, ensuring that for each contribution there is a common denominator, ensuring constant feedback between different authors and disciplines, etc.