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**Does Africa need Business History?**

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There is a lack of systematic Business History programmes in Africa and most of the research on business in Africa is conducted by scholars outside Africa. In the only recent review of Business History in Africa, Robert Tignor ([2007](#_ENREF_9)) noted “…that relatively little work has been done on uncovering the history of these firms or of the people who founded and ran them.” Tignor’s historiographical overview identifies a small number of studies focussing primarily on British or other European business enterprises’ operations in Africa. While much was published on Africa’s economic development ([Hopkins 1973](#_ENREF_4), [Hopkins 1976](#_ENREF_5), [Hopkins 1987](#_ENREF_6), [Acemoglu, Johnson et al. 2001](#_ENREF_1), [Austin 2008](#_ENREF_2), [Jerven 2011](#_ENREF_7)), a glaring methodological divide between economic historians and business historians is evident.

In what has been dubbed an “African Renaissance”, private business has emerged slowly in the 1990s, leading to a growing number of world class African businesses, such as the Dangote Group, a cement manufacturer in Nigeria, or Real Africa Investments in South Africa. Despite this development few business histories ([Forrest 1995](#_ENREF_3)) were produced on African businesses ([Teagarden 2011](#_ENREF_8)). The focus remained primarily on inward European business developments, with only very little *African business history produced in Africa*.

The aim of this call for papers is bring together scholars of African Business History to start a concerted effort to develop African Business History, to understand the business strategies of how business in Africa evolved. As business has now emerged as one of the drivers of economic development in Africa, they require a systematic exploration of their establishment, growth and business strategies. Where governments are failing (such as Zimbabwe, Ivory Coast, Ethiopia) private business is beginning to move in to supply goods and services to a growing middle class. Business enterprises in Africa are expanding their networks beyond the former colonial and decolonisation paradigm. Regions are increasingly dominated by countries with large markets, such as Kenya and Nigeria in East and West Africa respectively, while South Africa is becoming a significant investor throughout the continent. Now investors, such as China, India and Brazil are actively seeking investment opportunities alongside more established European and North American investors. Issues of colonialism and neo-colonialism have not lost their relevance; however a better historical understanding of various foreign business models would allow a more rational comparison and discussion of these issues.

The onset of globalisation in the neo-liberal macro-economic environment of the late 1980s, generated a new class of African entrepreneurs, who have developed networks and alliances with other businessmen/women inside and outside of Africa to give birth to business ventures of true African origin. The institutional inefficiencies in many African states led these business entrepreneurs to forge links across such inefficiencies and locate themselves in market from where business development could succeed. Refer is made to the development of eg. The *Black Like Me* cosmetics business of a South African black businessman. One can also explore the expansion of MTN, the telecommunications company, with a substantial Black ownership, into Africa, especially West Africa. Furthermore the expansion of insurance business by Sanlam into Africa developed from the basis of a local South African financial services company. The expansion into African markets by all the South African banking groups such as Standard Bank, ABSA, FirstRand – all with substantial black ownership and management, offers an opportunity to explore the role of culture, language and entrepreneurship on African soil.

Business, as noted by Tignor (2007: 107) is no longer contained by the nation-state as unit of analysis, but the emergence of the ‘new’ African business elite and business enterprises is taking place through vital networks with local business entrepreneurs, collaboration between business people from different ethnic and cultural origins in Africa and in their global market.

*If you would like to contribute to our session in terms of research or think-pieces on how to take the field further, please email your proposal to either Grietjie Verhoef (gverhoef@uj.ac.za) or Stephanie Decker (**s.decker@aston.ac.uk**) by 1 April 2013.*

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