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Success and Failure of European Settler Farming in Colonial Africa

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Key words: sub-Saharan Africa, colonial history, settler farming, cash-crop production

Abstract⁴

This paper ties into a new literature that aims to quantify the long-term economic effects of historical European settlement, arguing for the need to properly address the role of indigenous agency in path-dependent settlement processes. We conduct three comparative case studies in West, East and Southern Africa, showing that the successes of European settler farming were often of a temporary nature and that they critically depended on colonial government policies arranging access to local land and labour resources. Further, we argue that these policies were shaped by the clashing interests of African smallholders and European planters, in which colonial governments did not necessarily abide to settler demands, as is often assumed.

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing fascination with a new strand of social science literature that aims to estimate the long-term economic effects of historical European settlement across the globe (Acemoglu et al., 2001; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012; Easterly and Levine, 2012; Putterman and Weil, 2010). The consensus view of this literature is that a substantial part of current world GDP results from historical transfers of technology, human capital and capitalist institutions from Europe towards non-European areas, and that these transfers were stronger in areas experiencing larger shares of permanent European settlement. The key statistic underpinning this view is that places where Europeans have settled in large(r) numbers are significantly richer today than places where they have not.⁵

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⁵ This correlation also holds when the four European offshoots, i.e. the U.S., Canada, Australia and New Zealand, are removed from the sample.

The causal mechanisms underlying the settlement-income relationship are contested, however. Whereas Easterly and Levine (2012) and Putterman and Weil (2010) emphasize the *positive* contribution of European technology, human capital and institutions to ‘backward’ areas, Acemoglu and co-authors have put more emphasis on the *negative* role of so-called ‘extractive’ colonial institutions in areas without significant settlement. They argue that the institutional legacies of European imperialism have put large parts of the Southern hemisphere at a greater distance than they otherwise might have been (Acemoglu et al., 2001; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2010).

This paper does not dispute the correlation between historical levels of European settlement and present-day levels of per capita income as such. We take issue with this literature because we believe that it overlooks a fundamental part of the historical complexity of colonial settlement processes. Our first concern is that ‘settlement’ in these studies is considered as an ‘event’ by taking European settlers as a share of the total population at a *given point* in time (Easterly and Levine 2012). In reality ‘settlement’ was a process that seemed to produce varying economic successes and failures in different periods of time, so that the historical date of measuring ‘settlement’ and present-day income is likely to influence the observed relationship. Our second concern is that the meta-narrative of these studies tends to consider settlement as the result of conditions that are exogenous to the settlement process as such. For instance, European preferences for settlement are regarded as a function of local ecological conditions, tropical diseases or resource endowments, while denying the *path-dependent nature* of settlement processes. By ‘path-dependence’ we mean that in the early phases of European settlement a set of conditions was created that may have either encouraged or discouraged later waves of settlement. The ways in which the political and economic interests of European settlers and indigenous peoples clashed and were mediated in these earlier phases were important for the direction of these ‘settlement paths’. Such paths, as we will show, cannot be properly understood if transfers of technology, human capital and institutions are considered as a unilateral transmission from Europe, or European settlers, to non-European peoples and areas. Instead, indigenous agency played an important role in this process, and the transfers of economically valuable knowledge and technology went in both directions.

At face value, Africa’s comparatively low degree of European settlement and lagged economic development suits the meta-narrative well indeed. With the exception of the southernmost part of the African continent, the bulk of European settlers in sub-Saharan Africa arrived in a fairly short timeframe between 1900 and 1960. Europeans never settled in

numbers large enough to become a majority. The share of Europeans in settler colonies like Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe, the Congo and even South Africa remained below 10 percent. And yes, Africa is the poorest region of the world at present. However, *within* Africa the supposed correlation between European settlement and long-term economic development is not all that obvious. Some areas where Europeans did not settle have fared much better than the typical African ‘settler economies’ (Austin, 2008; Bowden et al., 2008; Frankema and van Waijenburg, 2012; Hopkins, 2009).

In this paper we probe deeper into the determinants of success and failure in European settler farming in sub-Saharan Africa. Settler farmers came to Africa with the objective to become permanent migrants, rather than settling only for a demarcated period of time, as was often the case for white government employees, migrant-workers and merchants. They also posed a clearly identifiable demand to colonial governments: access to land and local sources of labour. Given the relative scarcity of labour and the relative abundance of land in virtually all of sub-Saharan Africa at the onset of colonial rule, obtaining access to African labour was complicated. Labour markets were underdeveloped, and indigenous subsistence farmers had little incentive to engage in wage labour on European plantations (Austin, 2008). African resource endowments thus created a specific demand for colonial government interventions on behalf of the settler farmers, which allows us to study how colonial authorities dealt with their requests.

We have selected three comparative case studies in different parts of sub-Saharan Africa with sound ecological conditions for the production of various export crops: cocoa in the Gold Coast (present day Ghana) and Ivory Coast (West Africa), coffee in Kenya and Tanganyika (present day Tanzania) (East Africa), and tobacco in Nyasaland (present day Malawi) and Southern Rhodesia (present day Zimbabwe) (Southern Africa). These crops can be grown successfully by both large-scale and small-scale farms as they require a combination of land and labour, but do not require large capital investments that would go beyond the scope of indigenous smallholder producers (Curtis, 2003; Orr, 2000). These cases thus enable us to analyze direct conflicts of interests between African and European farmers, which were mediated by changing colonial institutions regulating access to land and labour.

All the six cases analyzed in our study reveal that the settlement of European farmers was contingent on *active* support of colonial governments, but that settlers could not take this support for granted in all places and at all times. Despite the fact that in all six cases the development of a settler farming community was envisaged in the early stages of colonial occupation, we document only one case (i.e. tobacco planters in Southern Rhodesia) where

settler farmers managed to sustain their operations successfully into the later part of the 20th century. In Southern Rhodesia settler farmers managed to survive the two difficult decades of the 1930s and 1940s, when world markets for cash-crops collapsed as a result of, respectively, the Great Depression and the Second World War.

In the other five cases African smallholders managed to outcompete European planters, since they had a deeper knowledge of local ecological conditions and proved more flexible in shifting family labour input back and forth between subsistence activities and cash crop production, which gave them a particular advantage in coping with external economic shocks. Colonial authorities recognized the potential of African entrepreneurship and lifted restrictions on African producers, but the speed and depth of these institutional reforms depended largely on the comparative strength of the settler farmers lobby. Consequently, the success and failure of European settler farming in colonial Africa was endogenous to both, indigenous agency and the path-dependence of European settlement.

WHY EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT WAS ENDOGENOUS

The idea that global economic growth is to a substantial degree driven by the diffusion of Western technologies and knowledge to non-Western areas, particularly after the Industrial Revolution, is not new. In fact, the advantages of global diffusion of technology and knowledge is one of the key arguments in defense of globalization, and it has sparked off a large economic literature on the opportunities and constraints of catch-up growth (Abramovitz, 1986; Easterlin, 1981; Gerschrenkon, 1962; Maddison, 1982; North, 1990). What sets these newer studies apart is the claim that historical European settlement in non-European areas played a crucial role in mediating this process of diffusion.

Easterly and Levine (2012) have estimated in a global cross-country regression study that 47 percent of current global income levels, expressed in average GDP per capita of 1995–2005, is attributable to historical European settlement alone. They identify ‘technology transmissions’ as the single most important mechanism in explaining the contribution of settlement rates to late 20th century income levels. The productivity enhancing effects of access to advanced European technologies range from the guns and steel that were essential to establishing Spanish law and order in the Americas (Diamond, 1998), to a plethora of agrarian, mining, transportation and communication technologies facilitating the commercial exploitation of various types of resource-based commodities across European empires.

The second transmission channel that has received increasing attention in recent years is the diffusion of European or Western education, skills and knowledge via investments made in schooling by colonial governments and Christian missionaries (Woodberry, 2012; Nunn, 2010; Fourie and von Fintel, 2014). These studies suggest that the presence of European missionaries and settlers had a positive effect on the development of literacy and school enrolment rates, as well as on the transmission of specific economic skills. The question of whether British colonial institutions were more ‘developmental’ in this respect has generated substantial additional research into understanding the relationship between various types of colonial rule and long-term educational legacies more precisely (Gallego and Woodberry, 2010; Frankema, 2012; Moradi and Cogneau, 2011; Sokoloff and Engerman, 2000).

The third transmission channel relates to the idea that the presence of European settlers shaped the incentive structures of colonial states to adopt specific institutional arrangements to govern colonial societies. The main argument being developed is that in so-called ‘settler colonies’ the demand for the institutions from the mother country prevailed. So-called ‘developmental’ or ‘inclusive’ institutions guaranteed broad access to economic and political markets, secured property rights and used tax revenues for the provision of developments enhancing public goods, like Europeans were used to at home. In colonies without such demands from European settlers, colonial governments designed ‘extractive’ or ‘exclusive’ institutions that facilitated the extraction of resources (Acemoglu et al., 2001, 2002). In more recent work Acemoglu and Robinson have slightly modified their original claim, arguing that in some colonial societies dual institutional structures were adopted. Here inclusive institutions were adopted to exclusively serve the European part of the population, while extractive institutions determined the rights and obligations of the indigenous peoples. South Africa’s apartheid system is the key example of such a dual institutional structure, which forged indigenous Africans into a readily exploitable source of cheap labour, by denying private property rights to land as well as the rights to free movement, high-quality public services and equal political representation (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012: 258–71).

Notwithstanding, the idea that European migration has been a key driver of differential trajectories of long-term economic development, and hence of present-day global economic inequality, has invoked at least three lines of criticism. Firstly, Austin (2008) and Hopkins (2009) have argued that there is little evidence for better development outcomes in Africa’s settler colonies than in African non-settler colonies. Further, empirical studies of real wages by Bowden et al. (2008) and Frankema and van Waijenburg (2012) have found no evidence

for higher living standards of Africans in either type of society. De Zwart (2011) has also shown that although the real income levels of the white South African population rose during the 19th century, those of native African peoples have stayed at par at best. Access to European technology and human capital apparently produced very little for the native population.

Secondly, and more fundamentally, the above-cited studies display a Eurocentric conception of global economic development, which is illustrated by the commonly held assumption that even in areas without European settlement, the imperial powers were capable of setting the rules. Meanwhile, the possible agency of indigenous peoples, and the conflicts of interests and changing political alliances within these societies are not explicitly factored into the analyses (Austin, 2008; Bayly, 2008; Frankema, 2012; Hopkins, 2009; Storm 2013). For the case of Africa, it is consistent with a long-dominant paradigm of inert African agricultural societies professed by the early explorers, missionaries and colonial officers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In this paradigm ‘traditional’ African agriculture is considered to be captured in a static equilibrium with its natural environment, a situation which could only be changed by external, that is colonial, economic reforms (Niemeijer 1996: 87-88).

Thirdly, the meaning and measurement of the very concept of ‘settlement’ is confused because it is measured as an ‘event’, while it actually constitutes a ‘process’. In fact, the interaction between Europeans and indigenous peoples caused major shifts in the ratio of settlers to natives, and these shifts could have gone in either direction depending on multilayered and multifaceted historical processes that changed the context in which Europeans chose to settle overseas. For instance, the U.S. would never have become a prototypical ‘settler colony’ if the Indo-American population had survived European germs and military technology in large numbers. Also, in many Latin American countries settler communities merged with native communities and stopped being genuine ‘settlers’. Shifting settler ratios raise a problem for the adequate measurement of European settlement levels, because the timing of the observation becomes a crucial factor in the recorded intensity of settlement.

What ties these three lines of criticism together is the acknowledgement that European settlement was an evolutionary process not only determined by exogenous ecological, political and economic considerations (e.g. disease environment, climate, soil fertility, resource endowments and so forth), but also by the indigenous responses to European encroachment. In areas where indigenous populations were quickly collapsing, indigenous

responses influenced long-term institutional and economic development precisely because they lost power. It is only by probing deeper into the path-dependent characteristics of the process of settlement itself that one can identify what determined the successes and failures of European settlement. Doing so will reveal that the argumentation structure is flawed. European settlement is not a pre-condition for the transfer and diffusion of growth-promoting technologies, knowledge and institutions; it is the other way around: the initial success of European institutions, knowledge and technology in alien ecological, economic and political contexts determined the success of settlement and, in turn, conditioned the path of expansion or contraction of settler societies in subsequent historical periods.

EUROPEAN SETTLER FARMING IN COLONIAL AFRICA

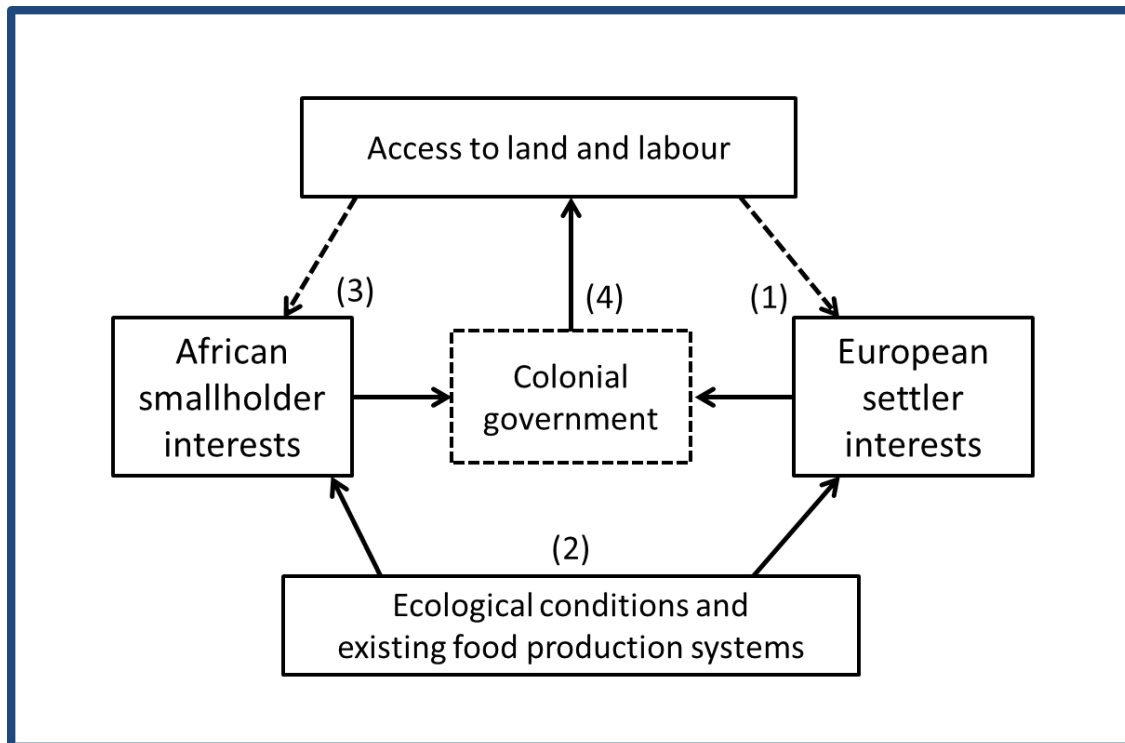
In the remainder of this paper we will back up our argument by comparing cases of successful and failed European settlement in colonial Africa. The main claims we have made are that: a) European settlement has been a path-dependent process, shaped by exogenous factors (e.g. world market shocks) as well as by the endogenous interaction between settlers, colonial governments and African farmers. Given the space constraints of our case studies we will focus on these three groups, admitting that a more fine-grained categorization is needed to explore the social and political complexities of this interaction in more depth. b) Colonial governments were far less inclined to support the interests of settler farmers than commonly assumed. c) The argument that settlement shaped the conditions for the transfer of growth-promoting technology, knowledge and institutions does not square with the historical nature of the colonial settlement process in Africa. Our cases show that much of the causality works in the opposite direction.

To structure our analysis of the three case studies we adopt a framework (figure 1) that details the (changing) political context of the settlement process of farmers in colonial Africa. We define European settler farming as a ‘success’ if there was substantial growth of output and exports of the key cash crop produced by European farmers/planters and/or if there was a growing number of farmers engaged in this sector absorbing a growing share of land and/or local labour. Meanwhile, ‘failure’ is defined as a substantial decline in settler farmers’ output and exports and/or lost opportunities for European settler farmers as a result of African smallholders’ engagement in cash-crop production preventing the European sector from growing or even starting to take off. We briefly discuss the context of the settlement process following the numbers in figure 1.

1) As explained above, settler farmers required secure control over local land and labour resources. Of these two production factors, access to labour was the most complicated, because it proved much easier to secure large tracts of uncultivated and uninhabited land, than to force indigenous peoples into harsh labour activities against their will. Land control was therefore often used as a complementary strategy to raise the labour supply, rather than using it for actual production purposes (Amin, 1972; Mosley, 1983). As colonial authorities held the key to legal and military enforcement of claims to land and labor, European settlers needed their institutional support to obtain access. The framework stipulates that the success of European settlement depended on how the colonial government resolved the conflict of interest between African smallholders and European planters.

2) Ecological conditions determine much of the prospects of setting up a profitable business in agriculture. Local disease environments played a role for the choice of location as European settlers preferred areas outside the major malaria- and tsetse-infested tropical forest zone. The majority of European farmers in Central and Eastern Africa preferred areas at a higher altitude, such as the Rift valley territories, to enjoy more favourable climates (rainfall, temperature) and soils (fertility). This did not mean, however, that Europeans could be found in all ecologically favourable areas, as is, for instance, indicated by the near absence of European settler farming in Uganda.

Figure 1. The political context of European settler farming in colonial Africa



Source: The authors.

3) To understand the stakes of African farmers it is important to look at the complementarity between the production of the key food crops and the cash crops in which European farmers aimed to specialize. Could African smallholders produce these cash crops themselves without disturbing their subsistence activities, for instance by intercropping or double cropping? Or did the cultivation of cash crops interfere with the production cycle of food crops? Did cash crops suit systems based on family labour or wage labour? Did they increase the problem of seasonal peak labour, or rather spread labour demands more evenly over the year? Such considerations were central to the response of African farmers to European labour demands and, in turn, determined the potential degree of coercion that colonial governments had to enforce (by legal and practical means) to make sure that European farmers could tap into sufficient seasonally-bound supplies of rural labour.

4) There existed practical and political constraints to colonial governments' responses to settler demands. Not all colonial authorities were willing to apply high levels of coercion to commodify African labour or alienate land. In case African farmers successfully engaged in the production of export crops, the incentives to concede to settler demands became weaker and in some cases governments would go as far as to prohibit European land ownership.

Moreover, colonial government policies were not stagnant over time, and could switch away from facilitating European settler farming towards encouraging African smallholder production under changing economic or political circumstances. Especially when government revenues came under pressure from declining exports, as occurred during the Great Depression of the 1930s, governments were inclined to reconsider the restrictions on African smallholders.

THREE COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES

We develop three comparative case studies to show how the varying demands and lobbying power of settler farmers and African smallholders have shaped the factor market policies of colonial authorities. These cases also demonstrate *under which conditions* colonial governments tended to reform these factor market policies. All three cases reveal a clear difference in the success of European settler farming contingent upon these policies. Our cases are selected within a uniform timeframe (c. 1900–1960) and include three different types of cash-crop ecologies (coffee, tobacco and cocoa) located in different regions of sub-Saharan Africa (East, West and Southern). All three crops can be profitably grown by large estates as well as by smallholders (Barlow and Jayasuriya 1986; Haviland 1954).

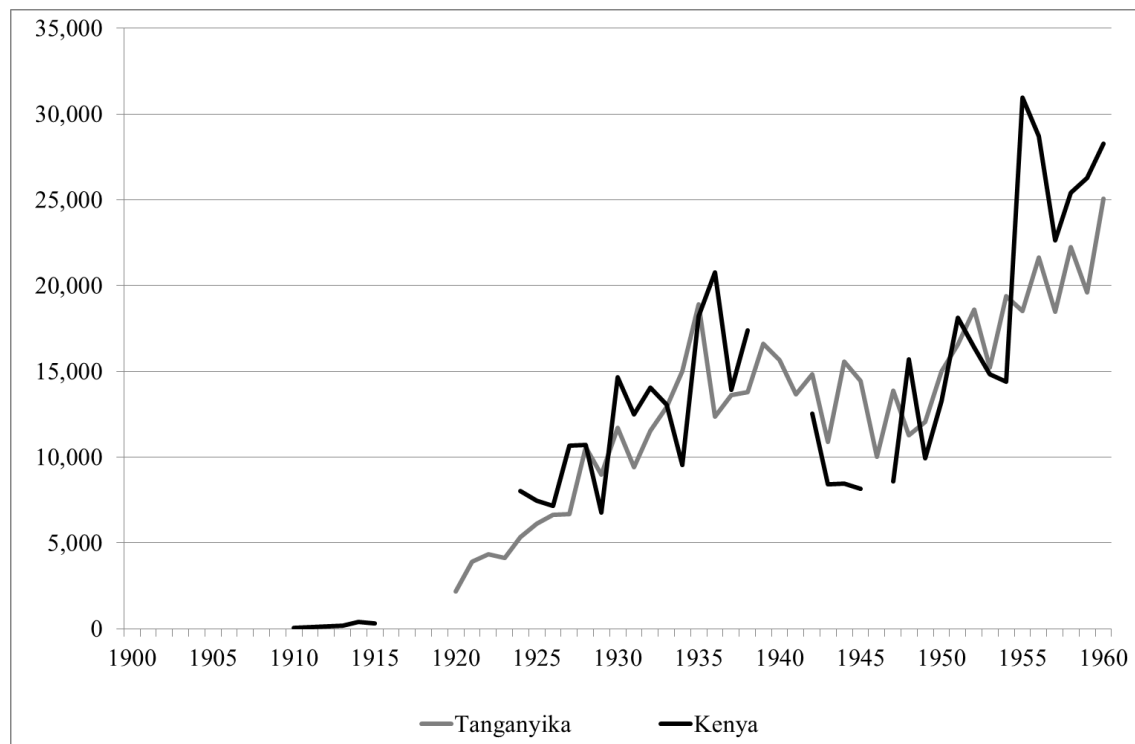
Coffee in Kenya and Tanganyika

The East African Highlands offered a favourable climate for coffee production and the coffee crop fitted well into existing indigenous systems of food production. Coffee demanded a relatively light labour input and was suitable for intercropping with food crops such as plantains (Tosh, 1980), the primary staple crop. Consequently, coffee production became an attractive option for African farmers in search of cash and additional income, while European settler farmers viewed large-scale coffee production as an attractive option to generate substantial export profits. The two producer groups thus struggled to control land and labour resources.

Both Eastern and Central Kenya, and Northern Tanganyika became prominent coffee producing regions during the colonial era. There was a steady and sharp growth of coffee exports from roughly the early 1920s, peaking in the mid-1930s with close to 20,000 tons in both colonies. This was followed by a slump during the Second World War, which was eventually overcome in the 1950s (see figure 2). In both areas coffee production gained momentum due to initiatives by missionaries and settlers supported by the colonial

administrations. In Tanganyika indigenous production complemented settler production early on and already from the 1920s African producers came to dominate the sector. In Kenya the coffee sector was instead dominated by the settler community, and opportunities for Africans came later and were more piecemeal so that it was not until the 1950s that indigenous production overtook settler production.

Figure 2. Coffee exports (tons) from Kenya and Tanganyika, 1900-1960



Source: 1900–1945 from the *Blue books of Kenya and Tanganyika*; 1945–1960 from reports of the Agricultural Department in the *Sessional Papers of Kenya and Tanganyika*.

In the spirit of ‘Christianity and commerce’, European missionaries initiated coffee production in the two areas in the 1890s, spreading the crop and sharing techniques with neighbouring African farmers (Curtis, 2003; Eckert, 2003; Spear, 1997). The indigenous communities as well as European settlers started producing coffee at this time, and from the onset settlers in both areas perceived African production as a threat. The community of largely British settler farmers in Kenya was small, but politically potent and proved successful in lobbying for an almost complete ban on indigenous coffee production from the time of colonial establishment in 1895. Rather than producing cash crops, indigenous people were expected to provide labour for colonial endeavours such as infrastructure projects, work as farm hands on settler estates to produce food either for the domestic market or for the

administration to feed the growing group of African wage labourers (Hyde, 2009). Meanwhile, in Tanganyika the German administration, 1896–1919, was initially hesitant towards European settlement as it feared conflict with African farmers. However, the German administration's position changed as it increasingly perceived white settlement as a precondition for the development of the colony, following the example of white settlement in Kenya (Iliffe, 1979: Chapter 5).

When Tanganyika became a League of Nations Mandate under Britain in 1922, after Germany's defeat in the First World War, the new government changed course. Under this new political mandate, Tanganyika was stipulated to be governed as an 'African' country. While Britain was granted full legislative and administrative powers, she committed to promote the wellbeing of African subjects, which included protecting them from the expropriation of land and labour. Hence, the new administration chose to encourage existing indigenous coffee production, even in areas where European coffee estates had been established. In time, a substantial part of government revenues came to rely on market-oriented African smallholders, thereby pushing the risk of market volatility down to family labourers (Curtis, 2003; Eckert, 2003; Iliffe, 1979: Chapter 9; Spear, 1997). Meanwhile, European coffee estates had to resort to (distant) migrant workers, rather than local labour (Iliffe, 1979: Chapters 6 and 9; Spears, 1997).

The two British colonial administrations thus developed different strategies for settlers' and indigenous farmers' access to land and labour. In Tanganyika the German administration had already been more restrictive in alienating land for white settlement, but these restrictions hardened as African farmers were actively encouraged to engage in cash-crop production along with their subsistence crops (Anderson, 1984; Curtis, 2003). In Kenya, Native Reserves were established to limit Africans' access to land as well as the free movement of people, thereby accommodating settlers' interests in a steady supply of landless labourers. Judging from Mosley's (1983: Table 4.4) estimates these policies were generally successful as the labour supply was mostly higher than demand from the 1920s onwards. Notwithstanding, official government reports from the Labour Department kept voicing complaints about chronic labour shortages for European employers.

The Great Depression hit the Kenyan settler sector hard, resulting in increased unemployment for African labour and a severe cutback in the administration's revenues. Between 1928 and 1934 custom duties dropped by ca. one-third (Frankema, 2011). This shock induced the administration to re-evaluate its support to the settler farmers and instead embark on a more diversified strategy of co-encouraging settler and indigenous coffee

production. While the economic crisis of course also had hit custom revenues in Tanganyika, the shock was to a greater extent absorbed by the territory's African smallholders, who turned out to be better capable of adapting their production decisions. Meanwhile, the crisis for European planters in Kenya caused problems of unemployed and landless plantation workers, causing the administration to look for new policy strategies encouraging indigenous production inspired by experiences from the Tanganyika example (Anderson and Throup, 1985). In 1935, a small 'elite' of African farmers were permitted to start producing coffee, although not in the White Central Highlands where European coffee estates dominated. The idea was to concentrate African production in areas where advisory services and supervision were provided. Until 1946 the rate of expansion was curtailed, but as the colonial administration wanted to take advantage of the post-war boom in coffee prices, indigenous production was allowed in an increasing number of areas outside the White Highlands.

It was also becoming increasingly clear during the 1930s that the Kenyan Native Reserves were becoming too small to support the rapidly growing population (Mosley, 1983: Table 3.3); however, the settler community largely opposed the idea of granting more land to Africans (Anderson, 1984, 2000). It feared indigenous farmers' involvement in cash-crop production and a rapid decline in the supply of African farmhands. But its bargaining was continuously weakened. Not only the adverse economic circumstances, but also the wider shifts in the philosophy of colonial rule towards a more 'development-oriented' agenda, pointed out the need for easing labour coercion. This was further enhanced by intensive African involvement in the military campaigns of WW II. The Swynnerton Plan of 1954 was a real blow to the political muscle of settler farmers, as it gave indigenous cash-crop producers an almost level playing field. The ambition was to double coffee production by supporting two groups of producers: European estates using the African proletariat (landless poor) for wage labour, and the indigenous family farms moving from, or combining, subsistence production with commercial agriculture (Hyde, 2009).

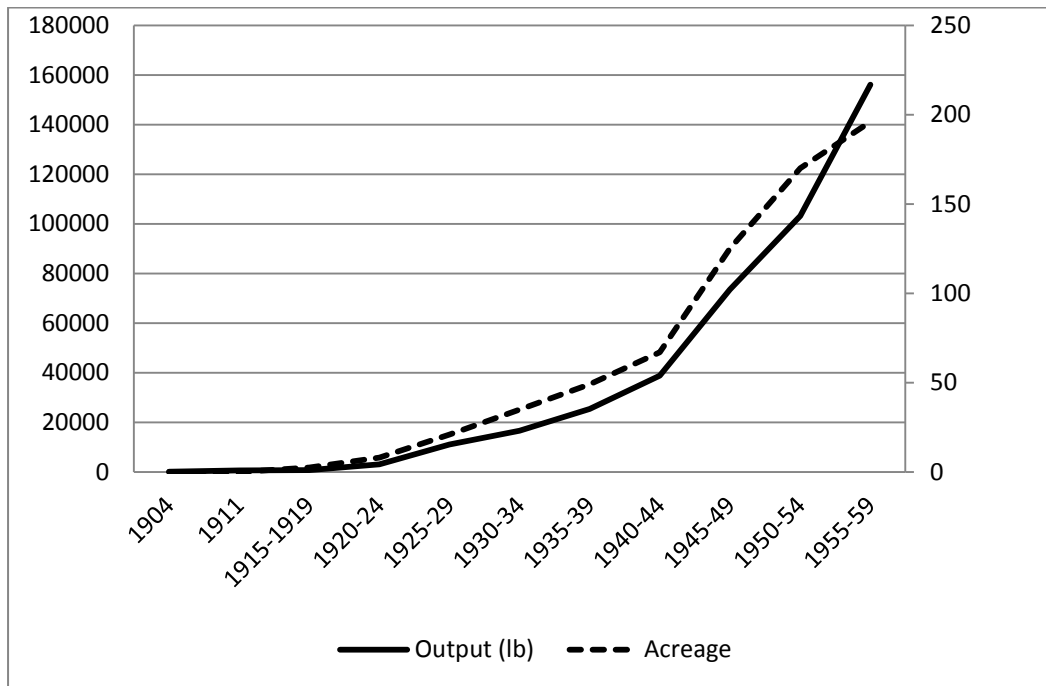
In sum, both cases reveal that settler production could only be superior as long as it was protected and given advantages in access to land and labour by the colonial administration. The timing of the change in policies depended on the varying degree of political influence exercised over time by the two settler communities, and these shifts were affected by demographic changes, two world wars and volatile world markets (Makana, 2009).

Tobacco in Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland

Tobacco could theoretically be grown successfully by both large scale and smallholder farms in most parts of Southern Africa. Although the tobacco crop was not suitable for intercropping, it grew well in rotation with groundnuts and investments in tobacco paid off within a single year (Orr, 2000: 351). The low investment costs enabled small-scale farmers to adjust to volatile market prices by moving in and out of tobacco production on an annual basis. Tobacco became one of the key export commodities of Nyasaland and Southern Rhodesia during the colonial era. In both colonies the crop was initially grown by white settlers, concentrated in the Northeastern region of Southern Rhodesia and the Shire Highlands in the South of Nyasaland. The outcomes were, however, strikingly different. While white settler agriculture in Nyasaland failed, the European farmers in Southern Rhodesia continuously expanded their operations throughout the period, making Southern Rhodesia the only successful case of large-scale settler farming in our study.

The initial purpose of the British South Africa Company's (BSAC) expansion into the area later known as Southern Rhodesia in 1889 was to search for gold, but by 1907 the company's directors officially announced that they had failed to find any major gold reefs (Rubert, 1998: 1). Hence, focus shifted towards establishing a prosperous white farming settler community instead. By 1904 there were 545 European farmers and by the mid-1920s their numbers had increased to, and stabilized at, about 2,500 (Phimister, 1988: 61). Figure 3 shows the progress of European tobacco farming. Both volume and acreage under production expanded continuously throughout the colonial era and remained dominated by settler farmers who had successfully managed to turn the colony into the main producer of tobacco in Africa.

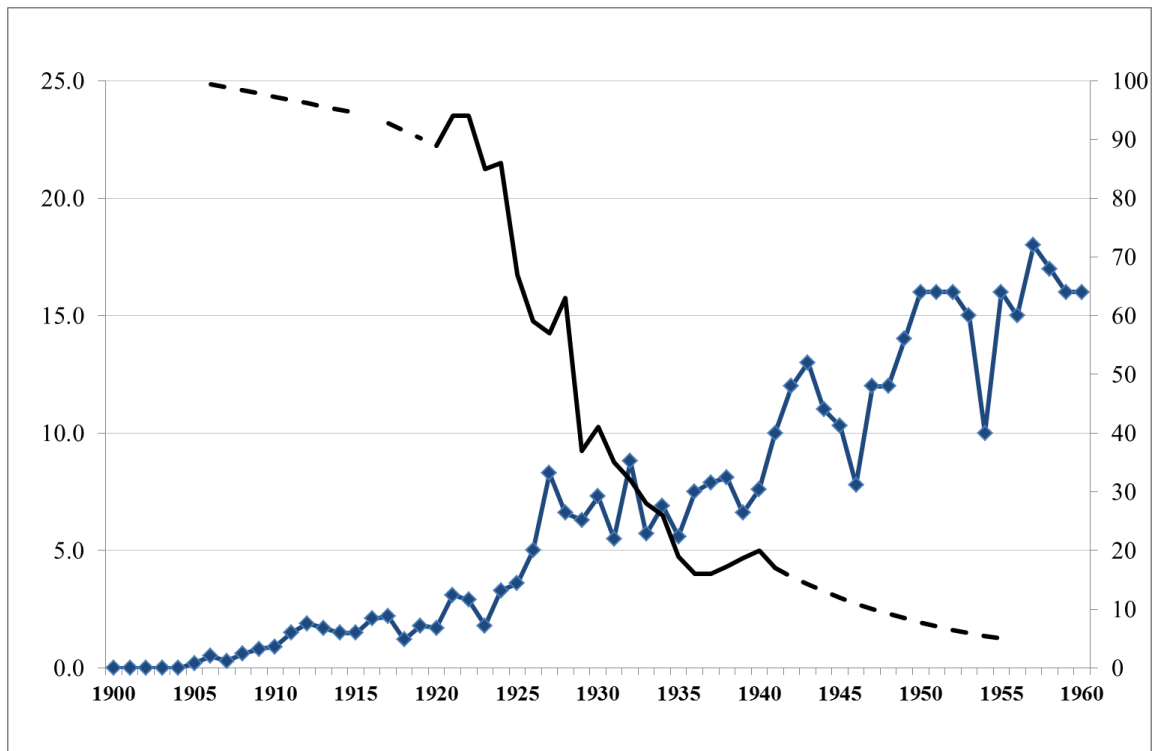
Figure 3. Output (lb, left-hand y-axis) and acreage (ha, right-hand y-axis) under tobacco in Southern Rhodesia, 1904-1959



Source: Phimister (1988: 61), 1904–1919; Mosley (1983), 1920–1959

Meanwhile, the development of European tobacco production in Nyasaland looked strikingly different. Just as in Southern Rhodesia, tobacco was introduced as a settler crop in the South in the early colonial period but, contrary to Southern Rhodesia, it was no success. From the mid-1920s onwards, European settler production of tobacco declined in absolute numbers as well as in relation to African production (see figure 4). In 1921 there were 399 settler farmers, but by 1931 the number had decreased to 290 and in 1945 there were only 171 settler farmers left; most of those left eventually substituted tobacco for tea (Palmer, 1985: 213). In other words, Nyasaland never became a real settler colony as the first governor had foreseen in the late 19th century (Palmer, 1985: 213). Instead, African smallholder farmers took over the bulk of tobacco production in Nyasaland, turning the protectorate into the third largest exporter of African tobacco in sub-Saharan Africa, and the largest producer of African grown tobacco (Haviland 1953, 1954).

Figure 4. Total tobacco output in 1000 metric tons (left-hand y-axis) and the share produced by white farmers in Nyasaland in % (right-hand y-axis), 1900-1960



Source: Tobacco output figures from Mitchell (2007). Share of white farmers from Palmer (1985).

Why was European farming a success in Southern Rhodesia and not in Nyasaland? Colonial policies played a crucial role in mediating access to land and labour in both colonies. In Southern Rhodesia farmers successfully lobbied for restricting African farmers' engagement in commercial agriculture and, consequently, they had better access and control over cheap labour (Arrighi, 1966; Bowden et al., 2008; Gibbon, 2011; Phimister, 1988). In 1897 the colonial authorities decided to create so-called Native Reserves throughout Southern Rhodesia, and in 1909 they introduced a land rent for all Africans living outside the reserves with the intended effect that the inflow of Africans to the Native Reserves began to increase steadily (Punt, 1979: 29). By 1941 it was estimated that sixty-two out of ninety-eight reserves were 'overpopulated' (Phimister, 1988: 77) making it particularly difficult for the average African farmer to allocate land to commercial agricultural production (Arrighi, 1966: 201–203). African agricultural sales per capita declined and real wages remained more or less stagnant up to the end of the Second World War (Bowden et al., 2008: 1065). Meanwhile, the system facilitated white farmers' access to cheap labour.

In Nyasaland white farmers managed to secure access to large parts of the fertile land in the Southern highlands, but they continued to operate side by side with Africans growing cash crops on Crown Land, and Native Reserves were never established (Green, 2013). The colonial authorities initially tried to facilitate settler farmers' access to cheap labour by implementing a differential tax rate system in 1901 (Bolt and Green, 2013).⁶ However, this system was abolished in 1921. Furthermore, the colonial authorities every now and then actively opposed attempts by the settlers to exploit local labour (Green, 2013).

Why did colonial authorities decide to support the settlers in Southern Rhodesia but not in Nyasaland? A key difference was that lower transportation costs and better trade agreements with South Africa helped the colonial government in Southern Rhodesia to attract skilled farmers who, from quite early on, were able to generate some, although modest, profits (Rupert 1998: 5ff). It has been estimated that the cost of shipping tobacco to the coast for Nyasaland farmers in the 1930s was seven times higher than those for farmers in Southern Rhodesia (Palmer 1985: 230). Nyasaland—being one of the poorest colonies in British Africa with relatively underdeveloped infrastructure and limited access to regional markets for tobacco—never managed to attract Europeans with sufficient farming skills and capital to establish competitive farms. Most of the tobacco-growing Europeans in Nyasaland were British ex-servicemen with limited experience in farming. Settlers continuously complained about high labour costs and demanded the colonial authorities to take action to ensure adequate supplies of labour by, for example, the re-introduction of the differential tax system (Bolt and Green, 2013). However, these demands were never met and after the Second World War most of the resources at the Department of Agriculture instead went to support African agriculture (Green, 2007).

This comparison thus reveals that in both cases the active support of the colonial authorities was a pre-condition for European success. The settlers needed the colonial authorities to create an environment that allowed landlords' control over cheap labour. Lacking such support, settlers in Nyasaland were unable to compete with the more efficient small-scale African producers. The Nyasaland government, in turn, was less inclined to back-up the demands for labour coercion because they figured that the potential social costs would not be compensated for by the potential increase in export revenues and that support for African smallholders would be a superior strategy to raise revenues for the state, without

⁶ Africans who worked on estates paid three shillings per month, while the others had to pay six shilling per month.

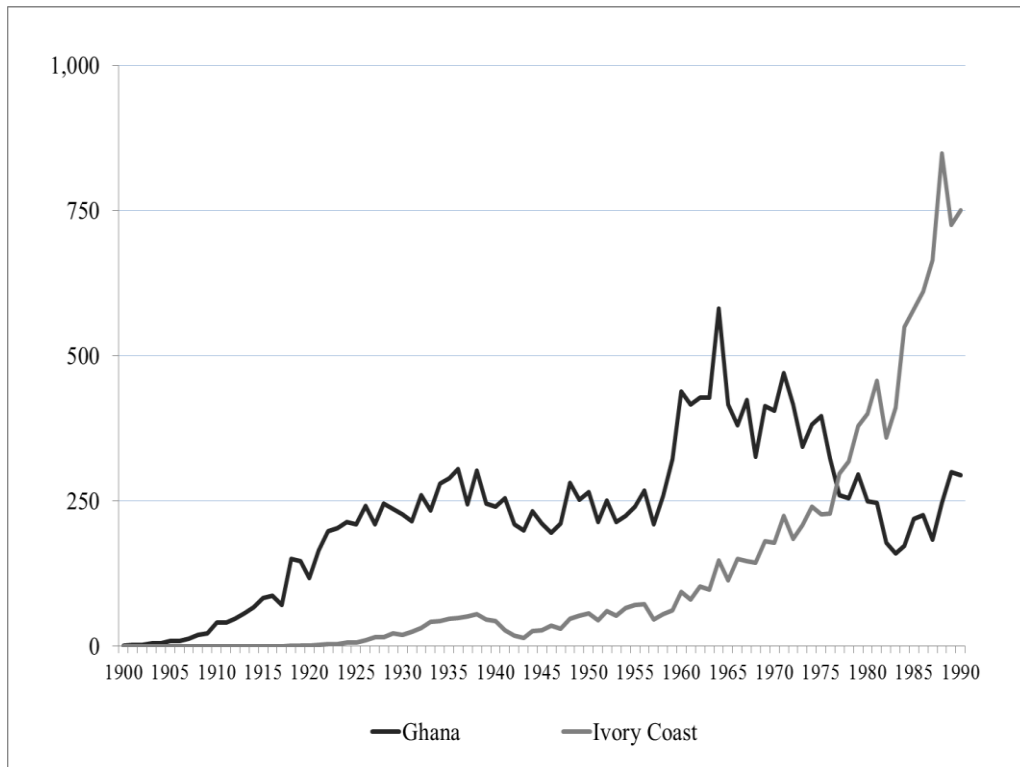
putting systems of indigenous production in jeopardy by the establishment of Native Reserves.

Cocoa in Ghana and Ivory Coast

Due to forest frontiers with rich soils giving high returns (so-called ‘forest rents’), cocoa production was attractive to both African farmers and settlers. In indigenous production the trade-off between growing cocoa and food crops was minimal as the latter (plantain and cocoyams) were planted as shade crops, which limited the spread of weeds. This both saved labour and increased the fertility of the cocoa land (Austin, 2005: 304–310). The forest rent potential paid off as both Ghana and the Ivory Coast have held the position as world-leading cocoa producing nations, but their expansions followed different timelines and development paths.

In 1882 Ghana exported no cocoa beans, but only nineteen years later it overtook Brazil as the world’s largest exporter with 40,000 tons annually. Fifteen years later output had surpassed 200,000 tons and in 1936 it topped 300,000 tons (see figure 5). After a downturn during the Great Depression and the Second World War, and relatively stagnating output figures during the 1950s, the country experienced a second export boom in the mid-1960s, during the early years of independence. Cocoa expansion in Ghana was solely based on African small-scale production, and it has been hailed as one of the most significant success cases in colonial Africa. Meanwhile, it took until the 1920s to introduce cocoa in the eastern parts of neighbouring Ivory Coast and eventually extend production towards the central regions. European settlers played a significant role in this early expansion, but it was with the creation of an indigenous capitalist sector that output started to pick up in a significant way in the 1950s and 1960s (Leonard and Oswald, 1995: 125; Woods, 2003: 645). Although the Ivory Coast produced less than 100,000 tons of cocoa in 1960, the levels of production expanded exponentially in the 1970s and 1980s, and the country overtook Ghana as the world-leading producer in the late 1970s (see figure 5).

Figure 5. Cocoa output in Ghana and Ivory Coast in 1000 metric tons, 1900-1990



Source: Mitchell (2007: 247–9).

That African smallholders would take the lead in cocoa production in Ghana was not certain from the onset of colonial rule. The colonial authorities wanted to keep the door open to European investors, and this policy was supported by local chiefs who saw an opportunity to enrich themselves as the colonial authorities granted a number of concessions to European planters (Austin, 2005: 255–257). Yet, most of these concessions failed to become profitable and were even abandoned at a very preliminary stage, as European planters proved unable to compete with African cocoa producers having superior skills and intrinsic knowledge of the subtleties of forest agriculture. As the expansion of African cocoa cultivation took off and profits were consolidated, the colonial authorities began to discourage European settlement. In 1911 the colonial government closed the door to European settlers permanently, as Chief Commissioner Fuller declared: “All work in connection with the tilling of the soil must be left to the native of the country” (quoted in Austin, 2005: 255). The formal prohibition of European commercial agriculture also meant that there were no further attempts at land expropriation by the administration. In fact, indigenous cocoa farmers in Ghana held secure, although indirect, property rights to land, as ownership was established over the cocoa trees.

Meanwhile, settlers’ interests were stronger in the Ivory Coast and from 1926 onwards colonial policies facilitated a small landed elite in the central and eastern parts of the country.

In 1937 there were fourteen European settlers devoting 733 hectares to cocoa while the African population held 650 hectares in cocoa production (Firmin-Sellers, 2000). The small number of European estates, combined with the generally low population density and low interest in cocoa production among the indigenous farmers, meant that land was to remain abundant and cheap. Contrary to Ghana, colonial policies in the Ivory Coast aimed primarily to fill the needs of the European settlers and, as in Kenya and Zimbabwe, the main concern of the colonial authorities was how to facilitate settlers' access to labour (Woods, 2003: 645). Regulations on forced labour dictated that every adult male contributed twelve days work per year to colonial projects and that the labour demands of settlers should always be met before that of indigenous farmers. Despite the support from the colonial administration, European planters in the Ivory Coast continued to complain about the lack of labour and the unreliability of the African labour force (Chauveau and Richard, 1977: 487–488; Firmin-Sellers, 2000; Woods, 2003: 644). Only in the aftermath of the Second World War, and induced by the general shift in the beliefs of universal human rights and development aid, did the Ivory Coast government abolish its forced labour program in 1946. To develop the indigenous agriculture, the government put more emphasis on agricultural extension services, including subsidized access to farm inputs and infrastructural improvements. In 1945–1960, these changes in colonial policy, paired with a surge in world market prices for cocoa, played an important role in instigating the development of a traditional system of lineage production, where indigenous subsistence farmers increasingly turned into small-scale cocoa producing capitalist farmers (Hecht, 1984, 1985).

In Ghana, indigenous farmers' aspirations to engage in cocoa cultivation had not been blocked by policies favouring European planters. The early successes of Ghanaian cocoa farmers had given them a major stake in the colonial economy from the onset, as well as in colonial state finances (around three-quarters of the total state budget came from trade taxes in the 1920s). This economic contribution gave cocoa farmers a handle on colonial policies, of which labour policies were of utmost importance to them. As in many parts of Africa, low population densities and land abundance made farmers dependent upon various forms of coercive labour and the use of slaves was widespread when the British formally declared control over the area. Despite that, prohibition of slavery was invoked by British officials as a justification for colonial occupation; it took twelve years before the colonial authorities banned the buying of slaves and another twenty two years before human pawning became illegal. In 1905 Chief Commissioner Fuller declared: "It has been the consistent policy of the Government to recognize domestic slavery and 'pawning'" (quoted in Austin, 2005: 206).

Local authorities were reluctant to prohibit slavery, despite continued pressure from the Colonial Office in London, as that could endanger the cocoa boom and lead to political conflicts with the cocoa farmers (Austin, 2005: 270ff). The delay enabled Africans to accumulate enough capital in the initial phase to gradually shift from slavery to employing migrant labourers: first employed as wage labour but in the post-war period replaced by share-cropping contracts. Meanwhile, foreign groups were allowed to acquire virgin land in the forest. Changes in labour contracts signified the ability of the cocoa farmers to maintain access and control over labour in a changing economy (Austin, 2005: 317ff).

Just as in Ghana, systems of share-cropping evolved in Ivory Coast in the 1950s with smallholders hiring farm-hands on a semi-contractual basis. Migrant labourers, originating from all over West Africa, were paid in kind or cash, or were allowed to sell a portion of their cash-crop production. Eventually, they were given access to their own land. Temporary contractual migrant labour also existed, especially among the larger producers. After independence, mass immigration boosted cocoa production in absolute terms, as well as in relation to the ever-struggling settler sector (Hecht, 1985; Woods, 2004: 229).

The question that remains is why the French administration in the Ivory Coast chose to promote settlers' interests, despite tangible successes in African cocoa production demonstrated in the British neighbor colony? That both countries shared similar ecological potential for cocoa is beyond doubt, since the expansion of cocoa production in Ivory Coast after 1950 was even more pronounced than in Ghana during the 1900s and 1920s. That European planters failed to tap into this potential can also be explained. Just like the European planters in Ghana, they lacked the skills and the appropriate knowledge; it is one thing to coerce physical labour for agricultural production, but it is a very different thing to enforce tacit knowledge and skills with coercive means.

But the answer to the question above is not so easy to give. It probably consists of a combination of the following: differential African engagement with commercial farming and a different view of colonial officers in response. The fact that smallholders in Ivory Coast did not demonstrate their engagement in export production as clearly as, for instance, the Asante in Ghana, may have strengthened the colonial government in their pre-conception that European planters were the key to developing the export sector, and the policies that were, in turn, designed to facilitate these settlers did not promote incipient indigenous initiatives.

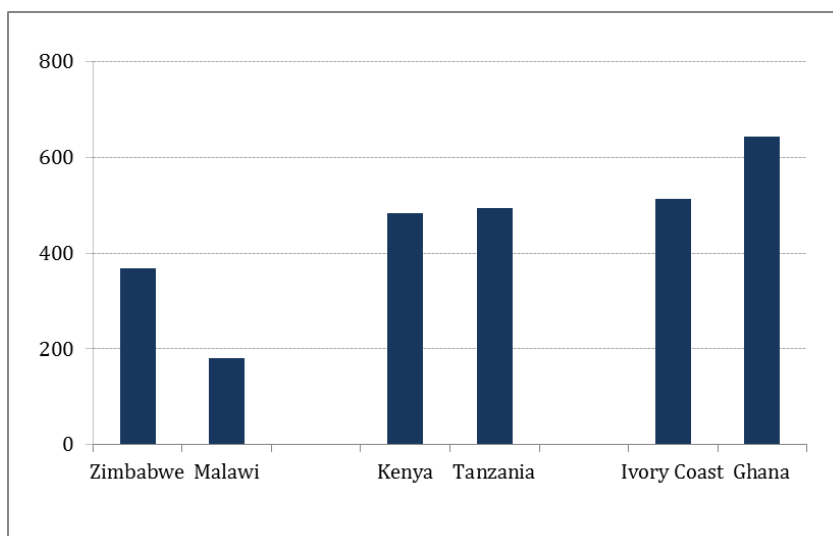
What this comparison reveals is that, apart from the motives of both colonial administrations, Ghana's early success was the outcome of efficient and flexible African production systems and as long as the Ivory Coast administration favoured the settlers'

interests it proved unable to follow suit. The post-war policy shifts towards structural support for indigenous cocoa farms did, eventually, contribute to an impressive expansion of cocoa exports which even turned Ivory Coast into the prime example of an independent African country that did not seem to suffer from post-colonial stagnation and endemic political instability during the 1970s and 1980s (Nugent, 2012). Yet, what both cases share in common is that initial attempts at settlement failed because the transfer of European knowledge, technology and institutions (favouring settlers' interest) had not worked out as hoped or foreseen.

DISCUSSION

In some influential strands of social science literature the history of European imperialism is still being conceptualized as a largely exogenous event. Attempts to quantify the impact of historical European settlement suggest a positive effect on long-term economic performance, either via the set-up of growth-promoting institutions, or due to the diffusion of European technology, institutions and human capital. In Africa this relationship between European settlement and economic growth is highly questionable. As figure 6 shows, there is no reason to believe Kenya and Zimbabwe, the two 'settler colonies' in our sample, have fared much better over time than the four colonies in which settlers' aspirations quickly vanished.

Figure 6: GDP per capita in 2012 (U.S. \$ of 2000)



Source: IMF (2012) Regional Economic Outlook. Sub-Saharan Africa: Sustaining Growth amidst Global Uncertainty. Washington D.C.

We have argued here that this literature overlooks a fundamental part of the historical complexity of settlement processes. By taking European settlers as a share of the total population at a given point in time, ‘settlement’ in these studies is conceptualized as an ‘event’. In reality, however, ‘settlement’ was a process that evolved over time and produced varying economic successes and failures in different periods of time. The meta-narrative of these studies also tends to consider settlement as the result of conditions that are exogenous to the settlement process as such and assumes a linear causality from settlement, to the transfer of growth-promoting forces, to higher income levels at present.

None of our six case studies supports the idea that European settlement attempts translated into outright stories of success or failure. While there were directives given for the governance of Tanganyika as a League of Nations Mandate, the other five cases do not give much reason to believe that outcomes were dependent on factors that were exogenous to the settlement process as such. On the contrary, our cases have shown that settlement processes were dynamic and driven by a continuous competition between European settler farmers and African smallholders over productive sources and revenues, which were varyingly mediated by the colonial authorities. The more direct measure of economic performance that we have used in this study, that is, total cash-crop output and export performance, reflects partly European, but primarily African economic successes.

We have tried to tease out the decisive factors guiding different ‘paths’ of success and failure. European settlers’ success depended on their ability to persuade the colonial authorities to implement policies that prevented indigenous people from fully exploiting their skills and technologies to their own benefit. Settler farmers’ capacity to do so depended, in turn, on the applicability of European technology and knowledge of local ecological conditions as well as the time and leverage they were granted by the authorities to turn their farms into profitable businesses. In this process the aspirations of local African farmers played a crucial role, since they were usually more knowledgeable and efficient in the cultivation of tropical crops in local ecologies.

In all our six cases the early ambition of newly established colonial authorities was to attract European settlers that would form the backbone of the colonial economy, and the fiscal revenues that were needed to extend the colonial state. Africans and Europeans co-determined to which extent this strategy would work. In the case of Ghana the colonial authorities had already witnessed the success of African commercial production in the 19th century. There were lower economic and political incentives for the colonial administration to encourage European settlement, since there was a clear alternative. In the remaining cases

colonial officials' knowledge about indigenous farming was based on stereotypical views of the inefficient small-scale African farmers, which were in most instances disproved by African successes, or European failures, in the export market. Until this potential was properly understood and investigated, it was relatively easy for European settler communities to persuade the colonial authorities that they needed institutional support for the recruitment of manual labour. This support was granted with varying degrees of coercion, ranging from restrictions on African cash crop production, forced labour, land alienation, the establishment of native reserves and the introduction of direct taxes to be paid in cash.

However, the long-term success of settler agriculture in Africa depended on the capacity of settlers to ensure *sustained* support, which proved far more difficult. While Africans were prevented from exploiting their full potential as cash crop producers, it did not turn them into passive victims. The turbulent interwar period made the future of settler agriculture uncertain and in most places African cash-crop production expanded despite unfavorable policies. The Great Depression dealt a major blow to the European farming sector, creating the need to revise fiscal and labour market policies. It became obvious to several colonial authorities that the Africans were more efficient producers. After WWII, only in Southern Rhodesia did the colonial authorities continue to give full-fledged support to the European farming sector. Indeed, the other cases have revealed that the transfer of European knowledge, technology and institutions did not produce a sustained path of economic growth and, consequently, European settlement remained confined to minorities facing an insecure future.

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