

The Myth of Stagnation: Interpreting Long-term Agrarian Change in Africa

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Africa is in general terms described as a continent of stagnation. Collier and Cunning argue in a summarizing article that ‘it is clear that Africa has suffered a chronic failure of economic growth’ (1999: 4). One fundamental cause for the stagnation is the assumed modest performance of African agriculture. Yet, we know very little about actual performance of the agricultural sectors at the aggregate level and the limited information we have at hand does not give support to the stagnation-thesis. This paper critically discusses the existing estimates and its potential as data for agricultural growth in 19th and 20th century Africa. While acknowledging the great variety of production systems, crops grown, degree of market integration, etc. and the impropriety of compressing them into one all-embracing story, some general trends can be identified although they must be treated with great caution. These trends suggest that in 18th and 20th century Africa is best described as recurrent agricultural growth. The paper then moves on to review different causal mechanisms that explain development patterns. We argue that neither factor endowments nor institutions alone can explain the trajectories, but that they have to be combined in a flexible manner that allows for the creation of typologies of agrarian change. The last section of paper contains a rather tentative discussion of how these typologies can be classified.