The African Commodity Trade Database (ACTD) 2.0

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The empirical analysis of this study draws on the new *African Commodity Trade Database 2.0.* The ACTD 2.0. covers the period 1790–2020 and includes 51 (modern) African countries, for which we compiled annual data on (i) total export and import values (at current prices) and (ii) the value, volume, and unit prices of each country's main export commodities. We compiled all export commodities that, at some point, accounted for approximately 5% or more of total annual export value and retained them even if their share subsequently fell below this threshold.[2] ACTD 2.0 includes 193 unique export commodities drawn from 260 primary and secondary statistical sources. Comprising 40,430 annual country–commodity observations, this dataset represents a fourfold expansion of the original ACTD 1.0 (Frankema et al. 2018), extending its spatial coverage from 22 to 51 countries and broadening its temporal scope from 1820-1939 to 1790-2020. The average length of all country series is 130 years, out of a maximum of 230 years. Whereas the ACTD 1.0 covered British and French colonies until 1939, the new version has been expanded to include Belgian, German, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese colonies until and beyond their respective dates of independence. By connecting (some) pre-colonial to colonial and post-colonial trade series the ACTD 2.0 is currently the largest and most complete commodity trade database on 19th and 20th century Africa.[3] ACTD 2.0 also records annual total export and imports.

Figure 1 charts the data coverage of the ACTD 2.0. It starts in 1790 with a series of British imports from West Africa and subsequently includes early colonial outposts in West Africa from Senegal, Sierra Leone, the Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, as well as Mauritius, South Africa and Egypt.[4] For the period up to 1890 the database not only relies on export statistics, but also on recorded imports from West Africa into Britain and France to approximate African exports. The coverage of African trade improves considerably with the onset of colonial rule following the Scramble for Africa and the associated expansion of colonial statistical reporting

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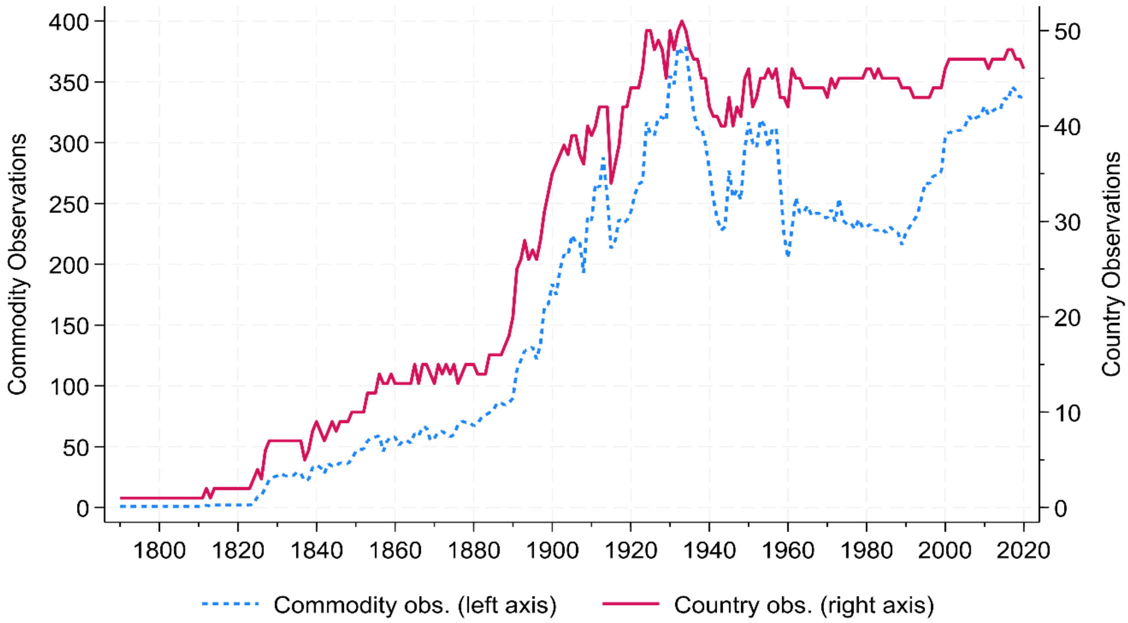
[2] Cabo Verde, Comoros, Djibouti, and São Tomé and Príncipe are excluded. Réunion is included until 1960, although it became an overseas department of France in 1946.

[3] For example, we include 51 countries, while Mitchell (2003) *International Historical Statistics* on external trade only report export values and major commodities for 13 African countries during 1865-1909, 20 for 1910-1944 and 21 for 1945-2000. The *World Trade Historical Database* compiled by Federico and Tena (2019) provides near-universal coverage of African countries but report only annual export and import values for the period 1817–1938, without data on commodity-level values or volumes and excludes precious metal exports in the total export values (except for South Africa) and pre-colonial values guesstimated.

[4] Historical territories are referred to by their present-day country names throughout the paper.

in the 1890s. In 2.8% of cases, when either the export value or export volume was missing, we inferred the missing data from the average commodity-specific unit value ratio (UVR) of all other African exporters. Local currency values have been translated into British Pounds, US Dollars and French Francs using official exchange rate series (Officer 2026).

Figure 1: Number of African countries and commodity observations in ACTD 2.0



Source: ACTD 2.0

The ACTD 2.0 draws on hundreds of distinct trade reports and secondary publications. For the colonial era, the principal sources consist of a wide range of colonial trade reports published by metropolitan and local African statistical agencies. For the 1960-2020 era, we primarily relied on the *International Trade Statistics Yearbooks* and the UN COMTRADE online database. When agricultural commodity values and volumes are missing from COMTRADE we used the official values and estimations provided by FAOSTAT's trading partners database. We also corrected a considerable number of errors in COMTRADE, using UVRs as detection instrument. We complemented the database with numerous national (e.g. Cental Bank reports), secondary sources, and international collections of trade data including the *Stateman's Yearbook,* IMF reports and Mitchell's (2003) *International Historical Statistics* on external trade when data was missing. The ACTD 2.0 contains an extensive description of its sources.

Whereas the ACTD 2.0 is the most comprehensive historical trade database on Africa, it doesn't come without some limitations. The biggest omission is that long-distance trade *within* Africa across political or ethnic borders is not accounted for until the beginning of the colonial period, for the simple reason that colonial borders as well as systematic recording of trade flows were not in place yet. Also, during the colonial and post-colonial eras these flows were only captured in part. To estimate the relative share of overland trade to seaborne trade goes beyond the scope of our project but remains an important research agenda in African economic history to shed light on trade diversion in the century between 1850 and 1950. A second limitation is that the ACTD 2.0 does not include detailed import commodity data, except for total import values, for the mundane reason that imports were much more diversified and harder to categorize than exports. In the future this will be added to the ACTD.

References

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