General Labour History of Africa

Project

The project for a General Labour History of Africa (GLHA) is designed to fill the gap in the literature on the history of Africa and to contribute to an effective understanding of work and labour in Africa. The GLHA aims also to significantly contribute to the Century Project in commemoration of the ILO's 100th anniversary which will be celebrated in 2019. The Century Project is anchored in the study of oral archives and research into the influence of the different ILO instruments and their impact on the lives of working peoples and their families. It is also intended to provide a historical perspective on the role of the ILO in shaping key milestones in the history of labour.[1] The GLHA project in Africa aims to provide a significant contribution from Africa to the Century Project.

Brief Historiography of African Labour History

At the outset, in the 1920s and 1930s, the study of labour history in Africa was closely linked to the study of migration of labour. These early studies of labour were to a great extent governed by colonial agendas which sought to maintain control over local populations, and in that context an accrued understanding of labour played a role in the paternalist advancement of moderated modernisation. By contrast, since the 1950s and 1960s, scholars who were sympathetic to African anti-colonial, nationalist movements focused on labour unions. The orientation of these post-independence studies was largely Marxist. Thus, trade unions were identified as the uncontested representatives of the working classes while their role in nation-building was scrutinised and debated. These historical studies remained faithful to a universalistic narrative of proletarianisation. In the 1980s, when it was increasingly evident that the African working classes had not been transformed into a

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[1] The Century Project has two key objectives. The first is to share knowledge of the ILO's history and experience, highlighting the role of labour and labour-related issues at historic turning points. The other is to expand the ILO's focus to the field, which has been the testing ground of ILO ideas for nearly 100 years.

revolutionary proletariat, universalistic concepts of labour and productivity were challenged by the growing volume of studies on women, rural populations, and the informal sector. While debates were initially focused on why the African working classes did not fit the proletarianisation model, scholars eventually began to question why the model was being used at all.

However during the period of disenchantment with structuralist views of labour history, some scholars advanced a bold programmatic call for a "new international labour studies" (NILS) approach (Cohen, 1980). Methodologically, the NILS was seen to stand in opposition to previously established approaches, such as industrial relations, trade union studies, and what Cohen called "technicist" labour history studies. The work of Robin Cohen, Peter Waterman and others retained a focus on labour history in Africa from a NILS perspective. Roger Southall's work on South Africa's independent "black" unions led to a study on the South African trade union movement (COSATU) and its relationship with Brazilian trade unions which were later to form the Workers' Party. Gay Seidman (1994) compared labour politics in Brazil and South Africa within the paradigm of NILS, moving away from the study of North-South interactions and focusing instead on a South-South comparison. However, by the mid-1990s, the interest in NILS declined as a field of research in tandem with the decline of socialist States in the world.

Since the 1990s, postcolonial critiques have gained prominence in the study of Africa. The study of labour has also come to "incorporate a conscious rejection of essentialist categories", as Frederick Cooper's description of class powerfully demonstrates in his landmark study on African labour in the era of decolonisation (Cooper, 1996). Studies of labourers have shifted from their former rigorously materialist orientation to reflect a growing preoccupation with representation, imagery and ideology as the means through which the African working classes negotiate their place in global markets. Embedded in these approaches is an emphasis on "agency".

The global labour history approach, for example, speaks of the need to identify new concepts and research questions that will inform the study of labour history from a global perspective (van der Linden 2002: 7-9). In particular, as is apparent from the above, the advent of globalization has rendered it problematic to conduct social analysis based on traditional "methodological nationalism". While NILS represented a valid initiative towards a transnational and transcontinental study of labour relations and workers' movements, it failed to live up to expectations. In particular, NILS followed the fate of labour internationalism. The prediction that the "objective" development of transnational capitalism (through multinational corporations) would

create the conditions for "subjective" transnational labour solidarity (transnational class consciousness) did not materialise. In African studies on labour, global labour history could provide a more viable approach than NILS as it goes beyond classic internationalism, overtaking its limits. In terms of labour studies, global labour history takes on board that reality is rendered complex as a result of many forms of interactions: work / home (household, cfr. van der Linden and Lucassen, 1999: 9), paid / unpaid, public / private, workplace / community (family), free / unfree, heteronomous / autonomous, etc.

The Quest for a New Historical Appraisal of African Labour

To analyse labour history in Africa from the perspective of global labour history requires a coherent and consolidated historical reappraisal. This is why I would propose to concentrate during the five years of research and work at the IISH on the writing and publishing of a General Labour History of Africa in two volumes (see section *c*, where I have ambitiously included a third possible volume, the time-frame for which would remain to be seen). It is hoped that this would represent a useful addition to the literature on African labour history and would widen the scope of the global labour history approach to the study of labour and labour relations in the African context and conversely would bring an African perspective to the field.

The above-mentioned studies on labour in Africa (in section *a*) – colonial, Marxist/structuralist and contemporary (poststructuralist and/or postcolonial) – tend to adopt a "static" approach to the study of labour. By static I mean that they are ahistorical. Many studies on labour in Africa deal with African labour issues covering a limited period of time or are not historical in the sense that the researcher deals with purely contemporary issues. For example, works by authors such as Cohen (on forced labour in colonial Africa or on peasantry labour), Southall (on trade unionism in South Africa), Waterman (on labour relations in contemporary Nigeria and Africa in general), Cooper (on the comparison on British and French colonialist labour's exploitation), Bill Freund (on description of workers' categories in Africa) are limited in both temporal and spatial analysis of the historical processes. African labour historiography in French, Italian and Portuguese present similar limitations.

The book *African Labor History* edited by Cohen et al. (1978) represents probably the only attempt that seeks to relate a history of labour in Africa with a clear methodological approach (NILS). However, despite its general title, this work fails to present a

"comprehensive" history on labour in Sub-Saharan Africa, and is constrained by its adherence to "methodological nationalism", which global labour history seeks to avoid.

Global labour history could open a new field in African labour history. This is because: i) histories on African trade unions should not overlook the analysis of unpaid workers' movements; ii) working women and children should be studied in a "global" perspective rather than exclusively from an anthropological point of view; iii) comparative studies should be freed from so-called "errors of contamination" (van der Linden, 2002: 3), and so forth.

A key reference work that would inform my research is the eight volumes of *UNESCO General History of Africa*, written by dozens of established historians, a great many of whom are African, which represents not only a historical work on the *res gestae* of African peoples from prehistoric times, but a *manifesto* of historical methodology: African history must be studied in its *longue durée* and independently of European history (even though European intervention in the continent, both indirectly and directly, has been part of African history). Jan Vansina, for example, who actively participated in UNESCO's project, is credited with the "discovery" of the oral sources on African history, thereby contributing significantly to the historiography of groups normally marginalised by and excluded from the centres of political power and therefore from "official history". For the Ghanaian historian, A. Adu Boahen (in his introduction to the *UNESCO General History of Africa*, vol. VII), the history of Africa is a sum of local and differentiated histories that could be linked between them by the same methodology.

Which Historical Methodology

There are two possible approaches to how to organise the chapters: the first is a geographical approach and the second is thematic approach. It is suggested that a thematic approach would be preferable to a geographical one (see table 1). That is, the chapters would be organized by themes but would include comparative studies and case studies of countries or sub regions. While efforts will be made to ensure a balanced geographical representation in selecting countries for the case studies, more focus will be given to the relevance of the history of a country to a particular theme.

Table 1

Geographic	Thematic
The different sub regions have very different history and different labour relations.	The thematic approach is more useful in bringing about the issues of conceptualization and to highlight the connections between disciplines.
It could be possible to have a sub section for each sub region under each thematic chapter.	If we organize by regions, we are making assumptions about the classification of regions. What is "Western" about Western Africa has to be derived from the results of the research and not taken as given. Thus, a thematic approach will also enable the project to make a statement about the making of regions.
	The experience of the *UNESCO General History of Africa* shows that theme and chronology are very important and useful approaches for presenting the volumes. Case studies were necessary to draw attention to some of the issues arising in one region and not in others.

It is important to remember that much of the labour that Africans have performed happened outside of the continent. One of the issues that has not received due attention in labour history is the location of the workplace because of the limited idea of wage labour. It is crucial to shed light on other forms of labour and other practices.

In Berlin, in February 2013, the Steering Committee will draft a proposal putting together a general labour history of Africa that also deals with the issues of conceptualizations, including addressing the issue of geographical division/representation as well as the issue of what constitutes labour and work. This is in order to get past the historical divide between political and cultural studies that was the cause of the scientific rift in the 1980s. This requires situating Africa in a global context and also studying historically grounded connections.

Authors will be given terms of references with various definitions in order to be consistent across chapters and to produce a useful tool for an audience that includes students and professors along with

practitioners and neophytes. These definitions do not seek to limit the authors by prematurely deciding what, for example, is work and what is not work. However, it is hoped that it can provide the authors with some guidance without necessarily second-guessing the findings of their work. Authors would of course be free to challenge these definitions.[2]

After having analysed the literature on labour and labour historiography on Africa, I now turn to the question of the methodology that would allow me to research, coordinate and write a general history of labour in Sub-Saharan Africa from the perspective of global labour history. I will describe both the collaborative project that I envisage for my work at the IISH and my own role, not only as coordinator but also as researcher and contributor to specific aspects of the historical study. The collaborative project should involve a wide range of historians, anthropologists and political scientists from Africa and elsewhere. An internet site – to be accessed through the website of the IISH – could provide an easily accessible forum for discussion on global labour history and African history amongst group members and participants. The website could include a discussion blog and produce a newsletter via email.

Periodization

The "African periodization" of labour history proposed in the index reflects the diminishing importance of the nation State as a unit of analysis. It is self-evident that the sovereign nation State is a recent creation in African history. After all, the African nation State only came into being in the last 50 or 60 years. Furthermore this period coincided with the Cold War and an increasing process of globalization which reduced the role of the State in general and certainly within the political economy, in industrial relations, in the commodity chain and in the organisation of markets – including labour markets.

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. Also the transatlantic and the neo-colonial relationship are elements of translocality in labour as well as global migration as we know it today – from Africa towards other continents as well as within the African continent (such as between

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[2] The Steering Committee will decide on which themes would be included in the table of contents of the publication. It will then provide an outline and short descriptions of each proposed chapter. It was suggested that there should be an editor for each volume or alternatively the Steering Committee can serve as collective editor for the two volumes.

South Africa and North Africa) and those related to the urban-rural divide (which deals with urbanisation and urban informality in labour relations in contemporary mega-cities).

An overview of the Project[3]

SMALL CAPS GENERAL LABOUR HISTORY OF AFRICA

- VOLUME I *The Age of Contemporary Capitalism* (1900-2020)
- VOLUME II *The Age of Global Integrations and Exclusions* (1600-1900)

Themes/chapters:

Labour in private companies along the coast and along rivers; the organisation of labour in the interior; mining and transport; the imperialist European enterprise; colonialism "racialization" and "nativisation" of labour relations; trade unionism; peasants and workers; the changing role of women and households; colonial and postcolonial migration; transnational forms of solidarity and struggle; industrial and professional organisations; Africa in the world-economy; the East African slave trade; labour along the Swahili coast; the connection between African labour and the Middle East; the transatlantic slave trade; triangular commerce as commodity chain between African labour, American crops, European goods; the emergence of South African white labour versus black "free" peasantry.

For each period covered by a volume it is important to ask questions on the transformations in vertical relations (modes of exploitation of labour), requiring the study of the relationship between labourers and employers (kings and emperors; chiefs and merchants; land-owners and aristocrats; traders and enslavers; commercial and charter companies; multinational corporations and modern industries; etc.) as showed in figure 1. From this analysis of vertical labour relations, different forms of social/labour movements in favour of the exploited could emerge. In other words, in order to follow the model created by global labour

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[3] Depending on future funding, there is a possibility that a third volume will be published on *The Age of Kingdoms and Empires* (Antiquity-1600). Themes of this volume would be: slavery and work in the economy of West African kingdoms; labour in the making of the Swahili garden cities; slavery and land in the central African kingdoms (Kongo, Great Zimbabwe, etc.); labour and trade in the Sahelian sultanates; peasants and aristocrats in Ethiopia; north African territories; etc.

history, the study on labour should also take into account the "other side" (the side of employers and public authorities).

Figure 1

Research Questions

- Which occupational groups prevail?
- What type of control exists over labour?
- What workers's collective actions, if any, are ere?
- Etc.

Volume 1

Volume 2

Volume 3
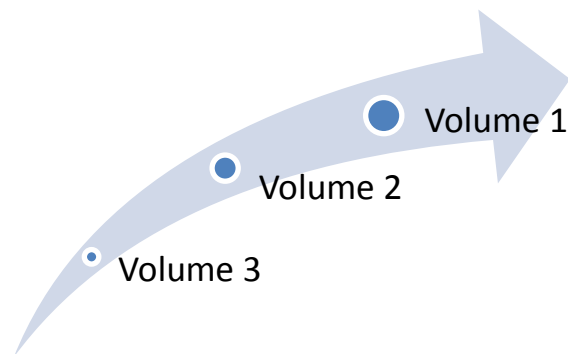
GLH Concepts to be Applied

- Switch in labour relations
- Difference and relevance of free and un-free work
- Work in relation to household/family, groups, and individuals
- Connections and teleconnection of work through labour and commodity chains
- Formality and precarity
- Global and local mobility of labour
- Etc.

Issues such as the role of the commodity chain, family/household, free and unfree labour, labour markets will be analysed as a historical continuum, covering local/regional particularities (see figure 1). The same methodology will apply to gender and age relations. More historical material will of course be available for the more recent periods, in particular the contemporary period (Vol. 1). However, the substantial materials available mean that this period may require greater efforts in terms of selection and rationalisation.

A comparison between different historical periods and diverse realities in Africa may give contributors to the project the opportunity to offer their individual insight into the elements needed for "a" history of labour in Africa. Certainly, when talking of trade, culture, and family in the African context, the question of the "interaction" (or "contamination") between different labour situations is of the essence. Primary and secondary sources should be integrated into this single project, as the problem is not exclusively that of discovering something new in the history of African labour but also the organisation of existing material.

This project will: i) gather together Africanist historians and labour historians; ii) create a new "field of attention" represented in labour history; iii) become the focal point for wider research and discussion on labour in Africa and further stimulate intellectual exchanges between Africa experts and experts on labour specialised in other regions of the worlds (transnational perspective) and/or different sectors and/or different historical periods and/or from different theoretical schools; iv) find new definitions of labour, workers, slaves, unpaid work, household/family work etc. that would fit Sub-Saharan Africa, and that would not simply represent a transfer of European definitions to the African continent. For all of these reasons a continuation of the project would be the creation of an African Association of Labour Studies, with its website and journal. The website would be linked to a more specific website created to expand knowledge on African labour history among younger generations.

Organisational Aspects of the Project

The GLHA should represent a collective and universalistic effort from the part of all the authors involved. There will be no single editor of the books but rather a scientific or Steering Committee (SC) that would direct and supervise the work. The Africa Desk of the IISH in Addis Ababa could serve as "headquarters" for the coordination of the project, the management of funding, and logistical aspects of this endeavour. The main role or task of the SC would be that of selecting and inviting authors, ensuring that for each contribution a common denominator exists, encouraging constant feedback between different authors and disciplines, and fundraising. In particular, in terms of organization: 1) The Steering Committee will have a chairperson and vice chairperson to coordinate the formal aspects of the project; 2) The Committee will meet annually for the four years that the project is operational; 3) The Steering Committee will have two sub committees: a) a financial committee of three persons to deal with aspects related to

expenditure and financial accountability related to funding; and b) a scientific committee of five people who will be responsible for issues such as selecting authors, follow-up with authors and, reviewing contents of chapters; 4) A support officer based in the IISH Africa Desk in Addis Ababa to assist the Steering Committee on a full-time basis. It would be ideal if this person knows both English and French, but proficiency in English is mandatory.

Members of the Steering Committee

Co-Chairs

Dr. Cynthia Samuel-Olonjuwon (Chief Regional Programming Unit of the ILO Regional Office for Africa)

Dr. Stefano Bellucci (Senior Researcher and Head of the Africa Desk of the IISH in Amsterdam)

Management Sub-Committee

Prof. Anshu Padayachee (Chief Executive Officer of South African Research Programme on Alternatives in Development)

Dr. Cynthia Samuel-Olonjuwon (Chief Regional Programming Unit of the ILO Regional Office for Africa)

Dr. Firmin Matoko (Director of the UNESCO Liaison Office with the African Union and with the Economic Commission for Africa)

Dr. Muna Abdalla (Director of IDEA International / Liaison Office with the African Union)

Dr. Guebray Berhane (Regional Communications Officer of the ILO Regional Office for Africa)

Scientific Sub-Committee

Prof. Andreas Eckert (Director of the International Research Centre for Work and Human Life Cycle in Global History, Humboldt University of Berlin)

Prof. Andreas Eshetè (Professor of Law and Philosophy, Former President of Addis Ababa University)

Prof. G. Ugo Nwokeji (Associate Professor of African Studies, University of California, Berkeley)

Prof. Hanan Sabea (Professor of Anthropology at the University of Cairo)

Dr. Stefano Bellucci (Senior Researcher and Head of the Africa Desk of the IISH in Amsterdam)

It is envisaged that the participants in the project should be remunerated for their contribution (see section *d* below). The whole project is based on a peer-reviewing system. Each author will be asked peer-review two chapters by fellow contributors.

A project assistant will be appointed for 4 years (see section *d* below) to work for the steering committee, and help with organisational and financial book-keeping. The SC will post vacancy for the job and select the project assistant.

For each volume, there will be an initial conference at which the authors (about 20 per volume) will present their research questions, methodology and chapter outline. Then a decision will be taken as to the exact title which each author will write their preliminary paper on (or chapter). The paper will have to be submitted to the steering committee by a certain deadline (ca. 10 months). The steering committee will then send the paper to two peer-reviewers selected among the 20 contributors. The peer-reviews will be asked to send their comments within two months. A second conference will then take place for a last constructive exchange amongst author-reviewers. This conference will precede publication of the volume.

Audience

The Steering Committee should not predetermine the audience, instead the aim should be to prepare volumes that can be used by a wide range of people: academics, students, practitioners and the general public as well. The overriding aim is to prepare a quality product, which is serious, straightforward yet sophisticated enough to appeal to a disparate audience. In this respect, there are good lessons to be drawn from UNESCO's General History of Africa.

The main objective of history is to help people to be aware of their own background. Therefore accessibility is crucial and an understanding of technical language and concepts in labour studies should not be assumed or taken for granted.

It was also stressed that the GLHA should be made accessible to young people and students. Hence work will be done to put some of the contents online and in video format.

There was also a suggestion that copy editors be used to look at the accessibility of the online issue of the GLHA (extra funding would probably be needed to this end). The model of the UNESCO General History of Africa was not to contract editors but for the scientific

committee to review the chapters and provide the feedback to the authors. This should be taken as a positive example.

In conclusion, the content should be readable while based on rigorous and in-depth analysis. Three mechanisms were suggested to ensure this:

- Provide an introductory chapter that would introduce the rest of the chapters in one section. This introduction would serve as the prolegomena for the web edition where it is envisaged to have video conversations with the authors online.
- The guidance provided by the Steering Committee to the authors should stress and emphasise the importance of readability and accessibility and provide examples.
- Provide the maximum of editorial support to the authors.

Funding and supporting organisations

- International Labour Organisation (ILO), Africa Office, ECA bld., Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: http://www.ilo.org/addisababa/lang--en/index.htm
- International Institute of Social History (IISH), Africa Desk, Amsterdam, The Netherlands: socialhistory.org
- Research Centre on Work and Human Lifecycle in Global History (Re-Work), Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany: http://www2.hu-berlin.de/arbeit/en/research-center.html

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