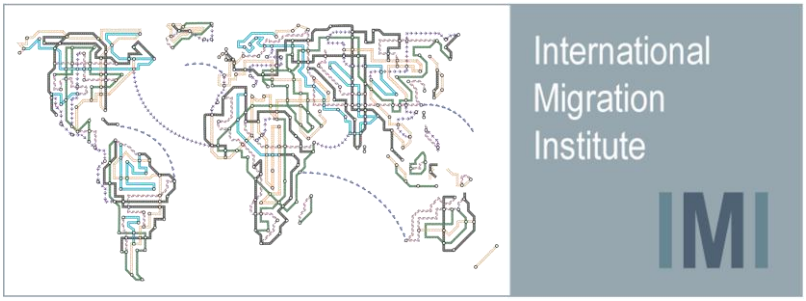

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Tracing the Early Origins of Africa's Migration Transition:

From Precolonial Times to the Present

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Abstract

Accelerated global migration from sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has become a headline-grabbing and highly politicized issue in recent decades. The idea that African migration is on the rise is consistent with migration transition theory (MTT), which postulates that as poor regions develop, migration rates first rise and later decline after surpassing a certain development threshold. SSA is widely seen by scholars, pundits, and policymakers as the region where migration rates have only just begun to mount this upward slope. Adopting a long-run historical perspective, we aim to revise this image in three respects. First, although migration out of SSA has recently risen, Africans overall have not become more migratory since colonial times. Voluntary migration within the region experienced a substantial increase as early as the late 19th century, as a consequence of the abolition of slavery and the uneven commercialization of the African countryside. Second, we argue that migration was widespread under colonial rule. Much of this mobility was voluntary rather than coerced, and converged not only on mines and plantations, but also on regions where cash crops were exported by African small-scale producers. Third, recent iterations of MTT express migration rates as a function of people's aspirations and capabilities to migrate. However, the most important migrant-sending regions were characterized by extreme deprivation and poverty when voluntary mobility to rural and urban destinations in the region became widespread. We re-examine more recent trends in African migration in light of these deeper historical transitions and argue that the recent surge of extra-continental migration reflects a shift in destinations that is better studied and understood as a relatively late stage in a much longer migration transition, rather than as a recent phenomenon.

Keywords: African migration, mobility transition theory, colonial history, Sub-Saharan Africa, development

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Contents

1 Introduction

Sub-Saharan African (SSA) migration has become a headline-grabbing and highly politicized issue over the past two decades. Not only have the number of SSA's migrants to the Global North risen (Figure 1), they have also increasingly moved via irregular channels (Asserate 2018; Carbone 2017; Natale et al. 2018; Smith 2019). The challenges, threats and opportunities arising from such migration are under close scrutiny in destination and origin countries (Akinola & Bjarnesen 2024; Castles 2009). Increasing extra-continental migration rates are often associated with poor governance, conflict, climate change, economic malaise and demographic growth in the African migrant-sending regions. But paradoxically, the belief that African migration rates have begun to surge is also grounded in a more optimistic narrative: it is African "development" that spurs emigration.

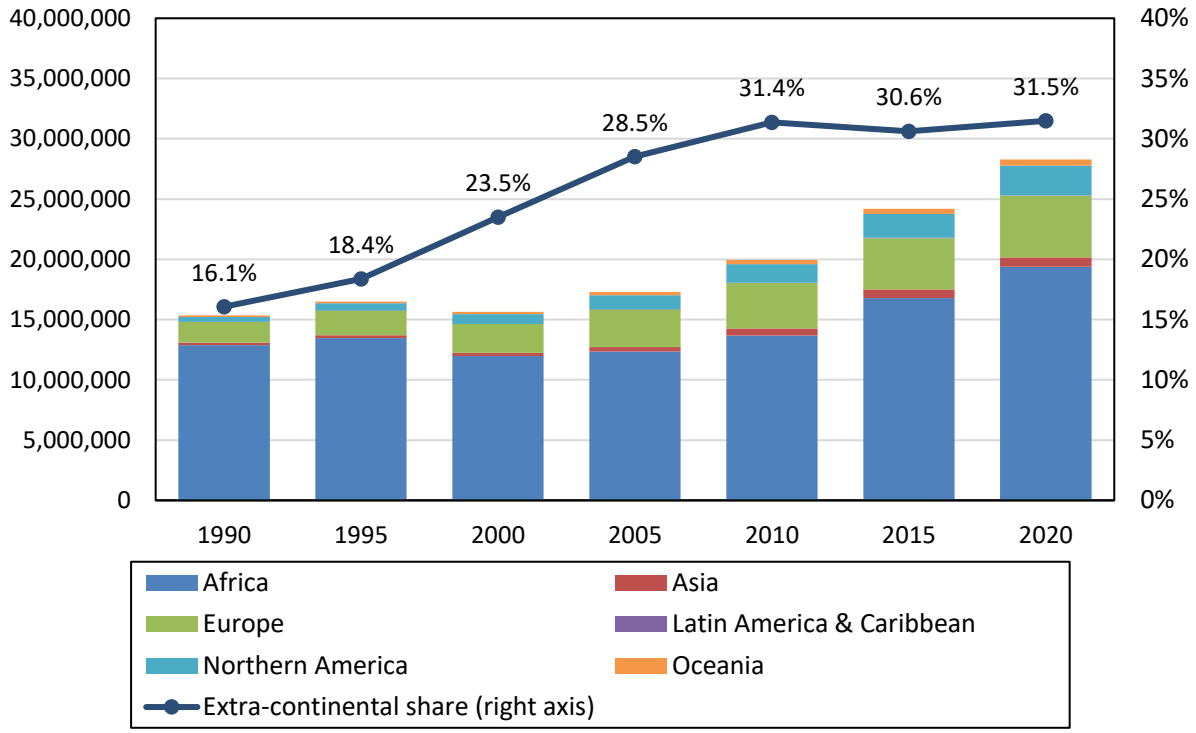
The latter view, widely accepted by migration scholars, is grounded in "mobility transition" or "migration transition" theory (Zelinsky 1971; Skeldon 1990; 1997; De Haas 2010). The logic of migration transition theory (MTT) is that "development", broadly captured by improvements in income, health, education, and political freedom, enhances people's aspirations to migrate in general, and their ability to migrate over long distances in particular. Only beyond a certain development-threshold are such migratory aspirations expected to decline. As African income levels (and thus migration capabilities) are still low, there is ample potential for rates to increase. Overall, then, SSA's "peak migration" is expected to lie in the future, and might reach daunting proportions. According to Gallup survey data for 2010-2015, over a quarter of all Africans aged 15+ had a general wish to migrate to another country, while only 0.12% actually migrated annually (Carling and Schewel 2018, 950). Indeed, the potential appears massive (Hatton and Williamson 2002; 2003; Natale et al. 2018, 17).

However, the most comprehensive bilateral migration statistics, tabulated by the United Nations (2020), hardly support alarmist narratives of surging migration. According to these statistics, the share of SSA-born individuals who live outside their country of birth in 2020 was 2.5%, compared to 1.6% for Eastern and Southeastern Asia, 2.5% for Central and Southern Asia, and 3.3% for Latin America and the Caribbean. Moreover, 69% of SSA's international migrants had moved within their region and overwhelmingly so to neighbouring countries. This is a much higher share than in Eastern and Southeast Asia (40%), Latin America and the Caribbean (26%), or Central and Southern Asia (22%) (see also Mberu & Sidze 2017). While Europe is the world region hosting the highest number of African migrants (Figure 1), documented immigration from SSA remains modest. In 2020, only 6% of all international migrants in Europe originated from below the Sahara, compared to 53% from other European countries. Even if intra-European migrants are excluded, SSA migrants make up a mere 13% of Europe's immigrant population. No SSA nation features among the top countries of origin. With just under half a million Nigerian migrants in Europe in 2020, Nigeria – Africa's demographic powerhouse – ranked 50th of all origin countries, and 23rd when European countries are excluded, followed, at some distance, by Somalia, South Africa, Senegal and Ghana (United Nations 2020).

What do past trends and present situations tell us about future trends? To get some sense of potential directions of change, we can sketch a conservative and a transformative scenario. The conservative scenario is based solely on demographic trends. SSA's population nearly doubled between 1990 and 2020, and is projected to do so again by 2050. Meanwhile, the population of Europe is stagnating and expected to shrink in the coming decades. As a result of these inverse demographic trends, the number of African immigrants in Europe *per European* has almost tripled between 1990 and 2020 (+188%), and even if the share of all African-born individuals residing in Europe remains stable, this ratio will

again more than double (+111%) by 2050 (United Nations 2022). Overall, this adds up to a 6-fold increase between 1990 and 2050. The idea that African emigration is merely a vector of population growth aligns with the predications for future net-migration made in the most recent iteration of the United Nations population project on the basis of probabilistic modelling. According to its medium variant predictions, the net-number of (annual) migrants from SSA will rise to 720,000 in 2050, and largely stagnate thereafter. In terms of rates, the predictions range from 2.43 to 3.44 annual net emigrants from SSA per 10.000 of the population between 2030 and 2050, and 2.00 and 3.28 between 2051 and 2100 (United Nations 2024). Europeans' perception of rising African migrant presence is further heightened by the widely reported and heavily politicized rise of irregular migration linked to tightening entry restrictions and securitization of borders (Beauchemin et al. 2020; Natale et al. 2018, 15). Thus, the growing African presence in Europe does not necessarily hinge on rising emigration rates but can be merely considered as a vector of demographic trends, reinforced by political discourse.

Figure 1. *Sub-Saharan African migrant stock per world region in 2020*



Note: We follow the United Nations classification of countries into world regions.
Source: United Nations Bilateral Migration Matrix for 2020 (United Nations 2020).

The transformative scenario factors in global historical regularities in the relationship between migration and development. Clemens (2014) uses World Bank and United Nations migrant-stock data to show that emigrant stock rates tend to peak at a GDP per capita of c. 7-8,000 US$ at 2005 PPP prices in sending countries. This translates to c. 10-11,000 US$ in 2017 PPP prices, using the Penn World Tables v. 10.01 (Feenstra et al. 2015). South Africa had a per capita GDP of 12,790 US$ in 2019, so it has already surpassed its expected peak emigration rate. Yet, virtually all other countries south of the Sahara are far below this inflection point. Assuming an average GDP per capita growth rate of 5% annually (which is about the rate at which Ethiopia and Nigeria have grown over the past three decades), Nigeria's migration rates will peak in 2034, Ethiopia's in 2047 and DR Congo's in 2066. If growth is only 2% annually (i.e. at par with the long-term growth rates experienced by present-day high-income

countries), it will take Nigeria until 2055, Ethiopia until 2088 and DR Congo until 2134 to reach projected peak migration. If we assume a peak emigrant stock/population of 15%, in line with Clemens' global regressions for 2010, the peak stock of emigrants will be 42 to 60 million for Nigeria, 31 to 46 million for Ethiopia, and at least 44 million for the DRC Congo, depending on the growth rate and using the UN "medium variant" population projections (United Nations 2022). These numbers are several orders of magnitude above the estimated international migrant stocks in 2020, which were only 1.7 million for Nigeria, 0.9 million for Ethiopia, and 1.8 million for DR Congo. In other words, if African nations were to follow patterns similar to other developing countries like Mexico, Turkey or the Philippines, we should expect a continued and rising migration within as well as beyond Africa, for decades to come.

Of course, these projections are highly speculative and do not distinguish intra- and extra-continental destinations. Moreover, it is as unlikely that African migration rates will merely be a vector of demography as that these will evolve in line with that of more developed countries. After all, a migration *transition* is an inherently contextual process. Analysis of present-day and future trends of African migration should therefore be grounded in an understanding of *ongoing* migration transitions in the continent itself. But how well do we understand the effect of development on migration in SSA?

While there is a rich theoretical literature that can inspire research on this question, the application of MTT to Africa has so far lacked historical depth. Historical African migration – pre-1960, or even pre-1990 – has been unduly ignored for reasons of presumed data paucity, or written off as irrelevant due to the context of colonialism which, purportedly, heavily restricted voluntary migration of Africans. Recent scholarly work has done little to correct this imbalance. Even those works that take historical experiences into account have rather drawn parallels between Europe's past and Africa's present and future, rather than analysing Africa's historical migration patterns on their own terms (Hatton & Williamson 2002; 2003; Natale et al. 2018; Clemens 2020). Several empirical and conceptual misconceptions about historical African migration have therefore remained unchallenged, limiting our understanding of changing SSA migration patterns.

Our re-evaluation of long-term migration transition dynamics in SSA yields three insights. First, Africa's migration transition has much deeper roots than is often presumed. Even when focussing solely on international migration, the share of Africans living abroad was in fact substantially higher in the 1960s than it is today, despite tangible, albeit erratic, long-run improvements in income, health and education (Figure 2, Panel A, also see Flahaux & De Haas 2016).[1] As we will show, the large emigrant population in 1960 reflects pervasive inter-territorial migration during the preceding colonial era. The subsequent *decline* of the total migrant population took place despite development: income per head of the population has increased by some 40%, the average years of education have increased from 1.3 years to 5.9 years, and life expectancy at birth has increased from 41.4 to 60.8 years.[2] In 1960, 95% of international movers had done so *within* the continent (De Haas & Frankema 2022b). Only when we look at migration *out of the continent* do we see a clear increase since independence, and a stronger positive relationship with income growth (Figure 2, Panel B).

Second, mass migrations under colonial rule emerged in an era that is not typically regarded as "developmental". Voluntary mass migration rose in the wake of the abolition of slavery in the late 19th and early 20th century. We define voluntary migrants as individuals who deliberately use mobility to

[1] The question whether political freedoms have improved as well is much harder to answer. Decolonization obviously lifted major barriers to political freedom, but this did not necessarily translate in more freedom of mobility granted by sovereign post-colonial governments.

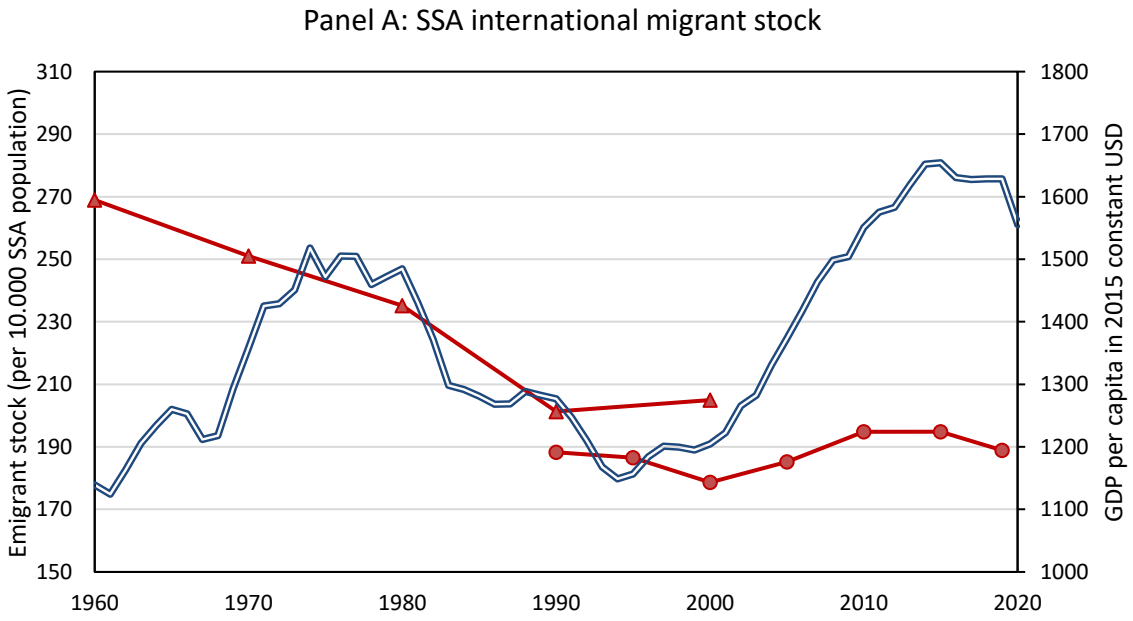
[2] Note that the 1.3 in 1960 includes North Africa as we were unable to aggregate data for this year for SSA. As North Africa was ahead in terms of schooling, this will understate the growth in SSA educational attainment.

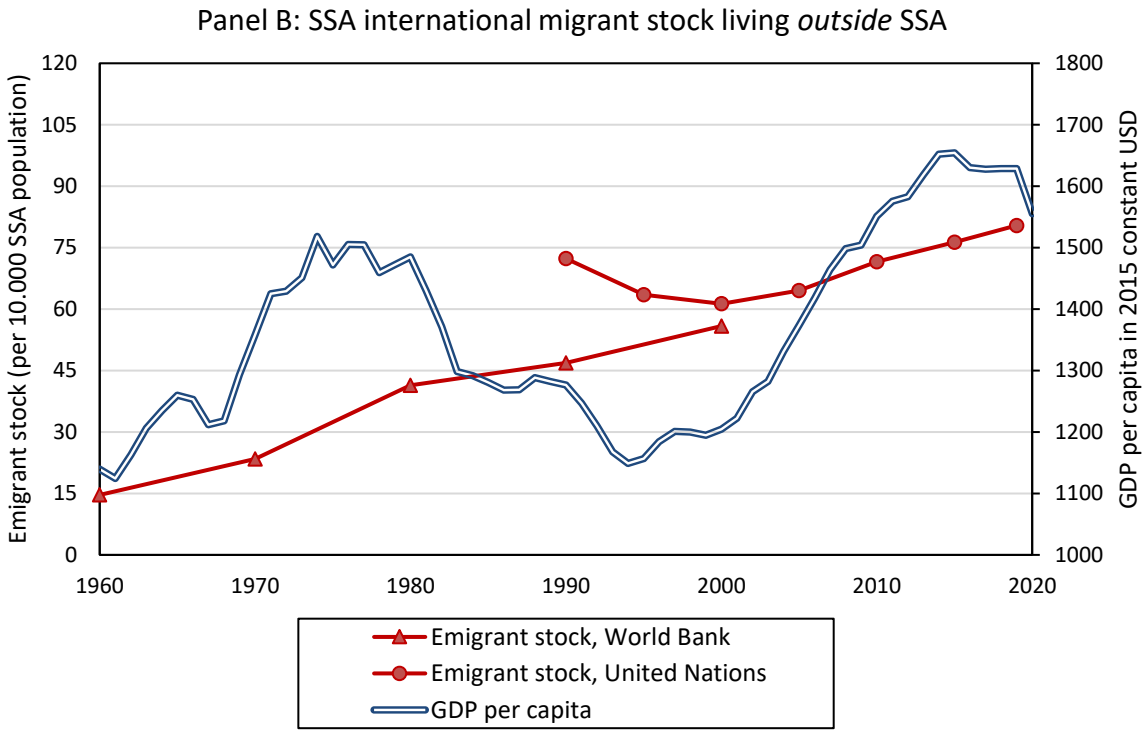
seek out spatial opportunities to improve their lives. Large shares of these migrants, including many former enslaved, were extremely poor not only by contemporary, but also by historical standards. Initially, voluntary migrants moved mostly between rural destinations, seeking out places of cash-crop production and mining, the latter mostly controlled by colonial companies, the former in part also developed and controlled by African farmers. From the 1950s onwards, migration increasingly centred on urban destinations, while rural migration declined, albeit only gradually and unevenly. Colonial rule, while generating substantial forced mobility and involuntary immobility, did not prevent the emergence of large-scale voluntary migration to both rural and urban destinations.

Third, by tracing back migration in SSA over the long-run and taking it forward to the present, we argue that the key question for Africa's ongoing migration transition is not why Africans are becoming more mobile overall, because there is no evidence they are. Instead, we argue that the primary explanandum is why SSA migrants increasingly sought destinations out of the continent after 1960. We contend that the main reason for this shift is the narrowing of the spatial opportunity gaps *within* Africa that had emerged before and during colonial times. Growing hostility in potential African migration destinations as a result of nascent African nation building plays a role too. In addition, extra-continental migration was facilitated by reduced costs of overseas migration, growing migrant capabilities due to educational expansion and income growth, the growth of migration-facilitating networks at origin, along corridors and at destination, and a fluctuating but persistent demand for migrant labour in extra-continental destination countries.

We proceed in section 2 by discussing MTT and elaborating on its implications for Africa. In section 3 we develop the argument why the presumption, implicit in some versions of MTT, that African migration in the (pre)colonial era was either insignificant or of a fundamentally different (i.e. traditional) nature is flawed. Section 4 provides four distinct arguments to show that Africa's migration transition should be traced back to the pre- and early-colonial times, and be studied in the contexts of slavery, colonial rule, uneven rural commercialization and the rise of large mining enclaves. Section 5 revisits the reasons why extra-continental migration has been growing, both in absolute and relative terms, since 1960. Section 6 concludes.

Figure 2. *Estimates of GDP per capita and migration from sub-Saharan Africa, 1960-2020*





Notes: The migrant stock pertains to all Africans residing outside their country of birth except for refugees which we have subtracted from the United Nations figures (1990-2019) using data from UNHCR (2024). In the absence of comprehensive survey data for many African countries and the extensive modelling and projecting that went into the datasets, the estimates should be treated as proximate only.

Source: Adapted from De Haas & Frankema (2022, 382)

2 Migration Transition Theory

MTT posits that developing countries experience a migratory "life cycle" or "transition", which takes at least several decades to unfold. The principal driver of such a transition is "development" in the sending region. Migration transitions have been variously linked to the demographic transition (Zelinsky 1971) or to broader processes of economic and social change (Skeldon 1990; 1997; De Haas 2010; 2021; Hatton and Williamson 1998; 2003). Here, we define "development" as a combination of rising levels of income, educational expansion, and declining mortality rates followed, with a delay, by declining birth rates. We view political freedom as a fourth, migration-enhancing dimension of development. This pertains to the absence of (legal) restrictions on mobility, as well as gains in political stability and security. With development, MTT predicts that emigration rates first rise and decline after reaching a threshold, creating an inverted U-curve of migration rates. Meanwhile, as development also makes societies more attractive to newcomers, they may ultimately shift from net-emigrant to net-immigrant status.[3] Figure 3 depicts these relationships.

Migration scholars have proposed various explanations for non-linear, development-induced migration. In his original formulation of the "mobility transition" Wilbur Zelinsky (1971, 219-22) argued that

[3] The arrival of migrants in colonial and postcolonial Africa is an intrinsic part of the region's migration history (De Haas & Frankema 2025), but for space constraints we focus on Africans' migration within and out of the continent.

mobility was a critical aspect of a broader process of modernization that also set a demographic transition in motion.[4] Without offering a comprehensive explanatory framework, Zelinsky posited that migration moves through five phases, parallel to the five phases of the vital transition: from limited circulation in "premodern traditional societies", to large domestic rural-rural, rural-urban and international permanent migration and circulation during the early and late transitional phases, to urban-urban and circulatory migration in "advanced societies". Skeldon (1990, 112) significantly updated Zelinksy's transition model, allowing for greater mobility pre-transition – a crucial point for our analysis – and further specified the progression in the transitional phases, charting in more detail the shifts from rural, to (small and large) urban, to international destinations, and specifying the sex-ratio of these different migrant flows (see also Skeldon 1997; De Haas 2010, 9).

Economists and economic historians have further elaborated the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of MTT by focusing on the role of shifting age structures, educational expansion and the lessening of financial constraints (Hatton and Williamson 1998; 2002; 2003; Clemens 2014; 2020; Dao et al. 2018). Emigration, then, is expected to rise when an expanding, young, and increasingly educated labour force is confronted with limited domestic opportunities for social mobility. Failure to absorb growing labour supplies in times of rapid population growth incentivizes younger generations to migrate to areas with open land frontiers or tighter labour markets. Educated workers have an additional drive to capitalize on their knowledge and skills elsewhere. Remittances lessen financial constraints and experiences of earlier migrants reduce transaction costs of chain migration. Eventually, as demographic pressures decrease with development and domestic economies grow, migration rates decline.

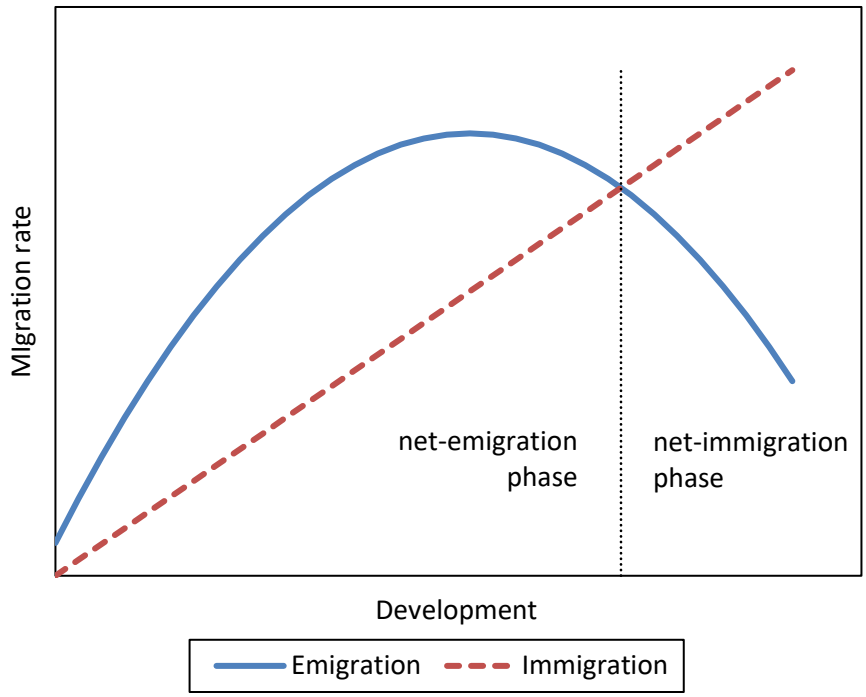
For migration sociologists, the development-migration nexus revolves around the concepts of "aspiration" and "capability". Albeit couched in a different academic tradition, these concepts refer to comparable causal mechanisms (Carling 2002; Carling & Schewel 2018; de Haas 2010; 2021). The central idea is that rising welfare levels spur peoples' aspirations to explore socio-economic opportunities elsewhere that are not (yet) present at home. Meanwhile, the capabilities to act upon such aspirations rise when migrant-sending regions develop. Remittances and the "demonstration effect" generated by returning migrants further increase migration capabilities and aspirations. After reaching a threshold, migration capabilities will continue to rise, but aspirations decline as spatial opportunity gaps narrow. Figure 4 shows these relationships.

Migration transitions have been documented for parts of Europe and Asia during the "Age of Mass Migration" (1860-1914), and on a global scale since 1960 (Skeldon 1997; Hatton and Williamson 1998; 2005; De Haas 2010; Clemens 2014; 2020; Dao et al. 2018). With some major exceptions (Schewel and Asmamaw 2021), more recent scholarship on global and African migration transitions has focused on international migration – even though it is only one type of migration within a broader "migration complex". As theorized by Zelinsky (1971), Skeldon (1990; 1997) and De Haas (2010; 2021), international – let alone intercontinental – migration provides only a partial insight into ongoing migration transitions as it tends to gain salience in later phases of the transition (Skeldon 1990). Moreover, the distinction between internal and international migration is ambiguous, and especially in a region characterized by historically arbitrary and porous country borders. Moreover, African countries are comparatively small, which inflates the propensity of international over internal migration (Adepoju 1998; King & Skeldon 2010). The focus on international migration in recent literature is partly the result of its political salience, particularly when global-north destinations are involved, but also due to more

[4] In fact, he argued that a demographic transition is better called a "vital transition" when migration is excluded.

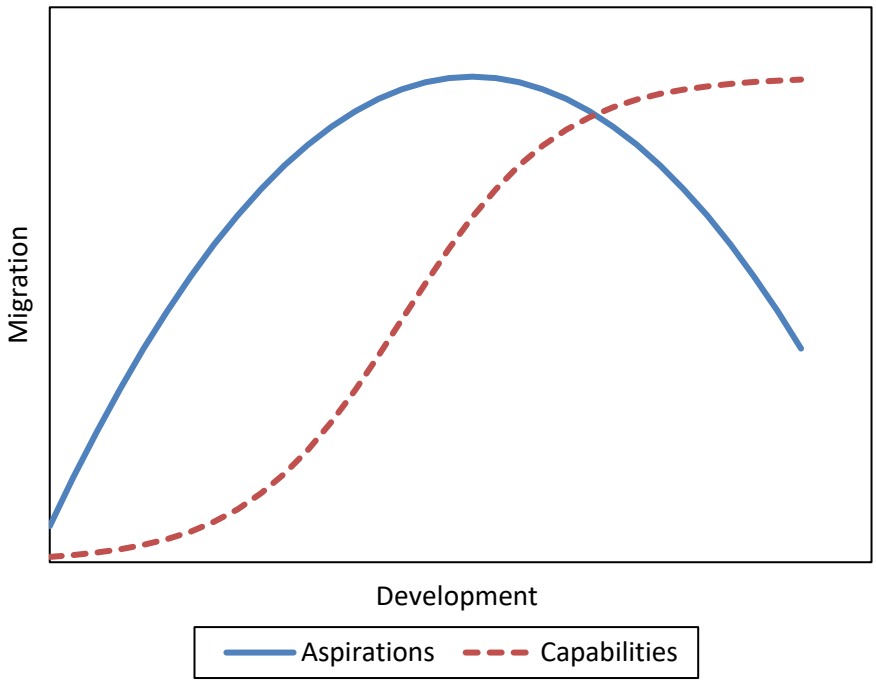
limited availability of data on internal migration. Tracing SSA's migration transition further back in time allows us to rectify some of these imbalances.

Figure 3. *Stylized depiction of the migration-development nexus*



Source: authors' own.

Figure 4. *Stylized depiction of migration aspirations and capabilities*



Source: Authors' own, based on De Haas (2010, 17).

3 Misconceptions about African migration "before development"?

As illustrated in Figure 3, in the MTT framework both emigration and immigration rates rise from low initial levels. Contemporary migration is thus modeled as a deviation from a supposedly sedentary historical state. Zelinsky (1971, 230) explicitly situated the first stage of the mobility transition in a "premodern traditional society", with "little genuine residential migration and only such limited circulation as is sanctioned by customary practice in land utilization, social visits, commerce, warfare, or religious observances". In his iteration of MTT, Skeldon critiqued this assumption of low migration "before development" as the "myth of the immobile peasant", pointing at the prevalence of short-term circulation (pilgrimage, warfare and navigating complementary ecologies) and permanent movement (slavery and "the opening up of agricultural frontiers") (Skeldon 1990, 31-32; 112; Skeldon 1997; Lucassen & Lucassen 2009).

However, as pointed out by Bakewell (2008) and Skeldon (2012), scholars and policymakers engaging with the migration-development nexus still work from the assumption that migration rates have only recently begun to rise from a low "pre-development" starting-point. While not necessarily denying that there were earlier forms of migration, such migration is usually written-off as irrelevant for the subsequent transition. African migration pre-1960 (or even pre-1990) is barely considered, and when it is mentioned, it is depicted as insignificant due to a supposed absence of spatial opportunity gaps large enough to incentivize mass migration. A clear example of such presentist bias can also be found in the historical work of Hatton and Williamson who, in their survey of global migration, argue that "many African countries have neighbors who are at similar levels of development. Thus, the incentives for cross-border migration have not been large enough in most of Africa to induce any secular migrant floods" (2005, 252). The idea that African migration before 1960 was limited is further reinforced by the widespread, but incorrect, belief that colonial governments were able to effectively control movement within and beyond their empires (Herbst 1990, 186; De Haas, Castles, and Miller 2020).

Although not explicitly using MTT, Marxist scholarship took a somewhat longer view of Africa's migration transition, associating migration with "uprooting" arising from growing global inequalities, engendered by colonialism and capitalism. Samir Amin has provided the most influential version of this argument for Africa. In his view, European colonialism induced a shift from what he referred to as "traditional migration" involving "mass movements of peoples", to modern migration of laborers taking "their place in an organized and structured host society" (Amin 1974, 66; Amin 1995, 29). For Amin, historical African societies were not immobile altogether, but they engaged in wholly different types of *group-based* migration, such as nomadic pastoralism and frontier-mobility. Such frontier-group migrations occurred in a non-commercialized, subsistence-oriented economy. The idea that pre-colonial African migration was "traditional" and involved groups rather than individuals is also found in the work of colonial anthropologists, and has remained central all the way to Igor Kopytoff's (1987) seminal study on the reproduction of African societies along underpopulated frontiers.[5]

More recent "migration and development" scholarship has only superficially analyzed African migration patterns before and under colonial rule. In online case study material appended to the widely used textbook *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (De Haas, Miller & Castles 2020), it is argued that various forms of African migration in the later decades of the 20th century were an outcome of the "colonial destruction of African economies and societies",

[5] Which, in turn, inspired Herbst's influential conception of African mobility and state formation (e.g. Herbst 1990).

thus espousing an unqualified underdevelopment explanation for contemporary African migration. Indeed, stylized dichotomies between traditional and modern migration keep resurfacing in recent scholarship on Africa (Adepoju 1998, p. 387; Akin Aina and Baker 1995; Cohen 1995; Cordell 2013, 180–8; De Bruijn and Van Dijk 2003, 287; De Haas, Castles, and Miller 2020; Fernandez 2013, 135; Usman and Falola 2009).[6] By taking a longer view than is common in the "migration as development" literature, we now set out to argue that Africa's mobility transition should be traced back to at least the late 19th century, a period in which demarcations between "traditional" and "modern", or "forced" and "voluntary" became increasingly blurred.

4 Migration transitions in (pre-)colonial Africa

4.1 Africa's migration transition has pre- and early-colonial origins

Despite numerous authoritative studies on frontier group-migration in Sub-Saharan Africa (Ehret 2002; Kopytoff 1987; Wang et al. 2020), Africans were certainly not "mired in timeless immobility" (Kopytoff 1987, 7) before they were either "uprooted" or "developed" under European rule. Neither was pre-colonial African mobility always "traditional" and group-based (Manchuelle 1997; De Bruijn, Van Dijk & Foeken 2001; Austin 2022). In West Africa, frontier group-migration had become rare by the 19th century as most areas were already settled and because the pervasive threat of enslavement limited mobility of small bands (Austin 2022). Manchuelle (1997) has shown that among the Soninke of West Africa voluntary cross-community migration of individuals had deep roots, predating colonial rule. In 19th century East Africa, impoverished pastoralists sought refuge among sedentary farmers, working for them and living among them, sometimes attempting to return back to a pastoralist lifestyle (Hakansson 2022). These were individuals taking "their place in an organized and structured host society", complicating the boundary between "traditional" and "modern" migration.

Slavery involved other types of migration that can also hardly be considered "traditional" and certainly not group-based. African slavery was a dynamic and diverse institution that was widespread across large parts of the continent, and inextricably tied up with migration (as noted by Skeldon, 1990). To enslave a person implied the deliberate cutting of someone's ties with their relatives and homeland. To become a master's property, the slave was forced to integrate in a new household or community. The market value of captives increased the further they were taken away from their homelands, as this reduced the risk of escape (Lovejoy 2000, 91; Allen 2021). Moreover, as slaves were transported over long distances, their mobility supported elaborate diasporic trading networks stretching over expansive geographical zones. While African slave-holding societies were typically keen to procure female slaves for household duties, agricultural labour and sexual and reproductive roles, male slaves were preferred in the Transatlantic trade, giving rise to a gender division in domestic and export prices as well as in migrants' destinations.

The prospect of enslavement through warfare and raiding both induced flight and displacement of African communities and made voluntary long-distance mobility between communities extremely hazardous. Vulnerable people thus preferred to stay close together in fortified or otherwise protected settlements (Austin 2022). It is important to reiterate that these practices were both ancient and ever-evolving, but that the successive surge of the Trans-Saharan, Trans-Atlantic and Indian Ocean trades

[6] Schewel and Asmamaw's (2021) study on Ethiopia's mobility transition is one of very few exceptions which, if not in terms of data, at least in its conceptualization, traces interrelationships between different types of migration (including nomadic pastoralism) going back to the early 20th century.

have greatly intensified slavery in Africa: they raised the number of people and regions involved, spurred investments in military capacity, induced states to specialise in raiding and trading, and enlarged the degree of exploitation to which slaves were subjected. Yet, regardless of the brutality, there is little point in writing expanding slave migrations of as "traditional" forms of migration, or even as "pre-modern", with little relevance for subsequent "modern" or "development-induced" migration. For sure, it was not driven by voluntary explorations of spatial opportunities gaps, neither by personal aspirations or capabilities. At the same time, however, the slave trades were deeply commercialized, capitalist, dynamic and directed towards the integration of subordinated individuals in society.

Moreover, the abolition of slavery during the early decades of colonial conquest and rule (c. 1880-1918) triggered the rise of large-scale voluntary mobility. Emancipated slaves left their masters *en masse*, to return to home or seek a new life elsewhere, while others fled to areas where abolition was enforced (Becker & Liebst 2022; Rossi 2014; Rodet 2015). This opened up new migration pathways and connections, many of which were sustained or expanded in subsequent decades, and some of which – not in the least trans-Saharan ones – are still in use today (Scheele 2012; Saleh and Wahby 2022). The suppression of slave raiding and the "pax colonia" which arose after the European partition of the continent, made it safer for people to be on the move.[7] The abolition of slavery created local labour shortages which voluntary migrants could fill. Hence, adopting the terminology of MTT, the abolition of slavery expanded people's capabilities to respond to spatial opportunity gaps, and so it is not surprising to find large parts of the continent in migratory flux in this period (De Haas & Frankema 2025).

It is also important to note that slave-migration was not the only form of pre-colonial migration that incorporated transitional, development-induced elements. We have already mentioned trade diasporas, of which there were many across the continent, from the Juula and Hausa in West Africa, to the Swahili on the East African coast (Curtin 1984; Lydon 2009; Röschenthaler 2023). These diasporas often involved religious and literate individuals. The numbers involved might have been small, but these were clearly not migrants who responded to "traditional" incentives such as soil exhaustion or population pressure. Indeed their relative significance across time and space depended on conflict, revolution and religious renewal, as well as shifts in the demand for commodities such as gold, ivory and slaves. Many of these diasporas have left deep imprints, which still shape migration patterns today, for example across the West African interior and the Sahara, and in the East African corridors that connected the Great Lakes Region with the Indian Ocean coast.

4.2 Colonial rule did not prevent Africans from moving voluntarily

Colonial rule was a major force driving migration in Africa. Colonial powers were often in the business of forcibly moving people, in order to create nature reserves, to eradicate sleeping sickness, to control nomadic pastoralist mobility, for purposes of white settlement, to reduce population pressure in "overpopulated" areas, or to populate "underpopulated" areas with high economic potential, especially in the presence of large sub-soil deposits of copper, diamonds or gold. In other instances, colonial policies were geared towards limiting mobility, for purposes of political control, to maintain a local labour supply or to enforce racial segregation, especially in urban areas. Generating a cheap and mobile

[7] Note that safer conditions only arose after a highly disruptive and violent process of colonial conquest, and with notable interruptions during the World Wars. In cases where decolonization happened through violent liberation struggles (as in, for example, Kenya, Mozambique or Rwanda), these conditions of course broke down again.

labour supply was a key aim of colonial policies, involving taxation (hut and poll taxes), rules of employment (master and servant ordinances), land ownership (native reserves and settler alienation) and labour recruitment, often by force and riddled with abuses. But can colonial-era migration be seen as top-down engineered uprooting? Or should it be analysed as part of an elongated African migration transition?

The rapid development of large, capital-intensive mining areas in South Africa, Northern Rhodesia and the Belgian Congo can shed a first light on this pertinent question. The rise of large gold, diamond and copper mines was impossible without the inflow of hundreds of thousands of African migrant workers. In the early stages of their operation, these workers were often forcibly recruited (Juif 2022). European settler farms in South Africa and Rhodesia were also major recipients of labour migrants whose mobility was deliberately engineered by creating crowded "labour reserves" with limited options for income earning beyond a meagre subsistence level, as well as taxation regimes that pushed Africans onto a poorly remunerated labour market (Crush 1995). Cheap labour was one of the reasons for forcibly resettling some 3.5 million black South Africans into rural homelands under apartheid (Jeeves 1995; Abel 2019).

That said, the majority of these migrant workers moved voluntarily. Their migration was not always self-initiated, in the sense that they were regulated through agreements between governments, such as between South Africa and Portuguese Mozambique. Mozambican workers in South Africa constituted one of the largest singular bilateral flows in Africa at the time. They would work in the South African mines for an agreed amount of time, stipulated in a labour contract. They would receive part of their salaries upon return in Mozambique to discourage permanent settlement. But Africans did enjoy a considerable degree of agency in terms of the decision to move and the terms of their mobility and employment (Harries 1994). Even in some of the 'whitest' spaces, such as Cape Town, black Africans were able to use mobility as a strategy to improve their lives (Mbem & De Haas 2023). Moreover, as the colonial era progressed, migration tended to become less exploitative. The migrant labour force of the Central African Copperbelt even became some of the best-remunerated African manual workers, with comparatively good access to health and education facilities (Juif & Frankema 2017).

As Thaddeus Sunseri (1996; see also Cordell 2013) has argued, Southern African migration regimes do not translate well to other parts of the continent. Colonial states outside of Southern Africa did seek to control labor mobility, especially when mines (such as the tin mines on the Jos Plateau in Nigeria, or the Kilimoto Gold mines in the eastern Congo) or settler farms (such as in the Kenyan highlands or the Kivu region in the eastern Congo) were involved. However, colonial control over migration was often tentative. Colonial officials, imbued with the idea that African individuals were sedentary and traditional and would therefore not migrate "spontaneously", were oftentimes caught completely off guard when Africans chose to be mobile. Their ingrained biases prevented them from fully appreciating the migration aspirations that many individuals already harboured (cf. Bakewell 2008). In 1923, in Belgian Ruanda-Urundi, colonial officials pondered about the possibility of mobilizing labour for the Congolese mines, but concluded that the people of what are today Burundi and Rwanda were "too attached to their country to envisage the possibility of taking them out of their environment". However, within several years, some 50,000 to 100,000 migrants were circulating annually between Ruanda-Urundi, as the territory, mandated to Belgium by the League of Nations after Germany's defeat in the First World War was known at the time, and neighbouring Uganda, a British Protectorate. They did so voluntarily and without any direction by the colonial state, largely ending up working for local cotton and coffee farmers in the Buganda region of Uganda. Belgian officials observed these moves to their "British neighbours" impotently, and with disapproval. By the end of the colonial period, population census data shows that immigrants from Rwanda and Burundi made up about a fifth of Buganda's

population, with a large female share (over a third), suggesting substantial local settlement, mostly in rural areas (De Haas 2019).

Manchuelle (1997), in a monograph aptly titled *Willing Migrants*, argues that the primacy of migrants' own aspirations explains the emergence of a widespread and versatile diaspora of the Soninke people of Senegal and Mali. The Soninke diaspora stretched all the way beyond the Senegalese coast and into France and formed the basis of a large Senegalese diaspora there. De Haas and Travieso (2022) give more examples of mass circulation in East and West Africa. They demonstrate that the economic gains of migration (earning higher wages, exploiting seasonal complementarities or engaging in price arbitrage) could be very substantial. Meanwhile, voluntary migration often also contained elements of flight from, or even revolt against, colonialism. Upper Volta (today's Burkina Faso) became a major migrant-sending region, first to the Gold Coast (Ghana), and later, after the abolition of forced labour there, to Côte d'Ivoire. Asiwaju (1976) has argued that at least some of this trans-imperial migration should be interpreted as a defiant response to repressive French colonial policies. A similar "voting with their feet" took place from harsh and odious forced labour regimes in Portuguese Africa to neighbouring British colonies and South Africa (Alpers 1984).

Table 1 provides an overview of the largest migration flows in colonial SSA. The numbers in the table are mostly based on observations by colonial officials, border statistics, employment data, and census records. The data are scattered, and inevitably come with limitations, biases and a considerable error margin. At the same time, the estimates are an outcome of careful scholarly interpretation and contextualization in each of the individual cases, thus providing indicative approximation of the actual numbers involved. Of course, people's decisions to move were situated in a setting of colonial intrusion and were partly driven by a lack of opportunity and even regression of livelihoods in the sending regions. Our point here is that this does not render migration under colonial rule fundamentally and categorically different from African migration today, which is equally influenced by poor and often repressive governance and lack of opportunities in the 'sending regions'. Colonial rule hardly curbed migration, nor did it control it to such an extent that we can set this era aside as irrelevant for understanding subsequent migrations. Rather, African migrants proved highly responsive to uneven spatial opportunity structures in sending and receiving areas. The research on African historical migration has not evolved sufficiently to precisely estimate migration number and rates, but that colonial-era migrations were of a very large scale goes beyond doubt. Based on earlier population census-based calculations (Zachariah and Condé 1981), De Haas and Frankema (2022b, 7) place a lower-bound estimate at 7.5 million people (17 percent of the region's total population) who permanently resettled from the interior to the coast of West Africa west of Nigeria alone between 1920 and 1970 (see also Mabogunje 1972). For all intents and purposes, a migration transition narrative that starts in 1960 would miss out on momentous migratory dynamics in the preceding half century or more.

Table 1. *The major migration systems of colonial and early post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa*

Destination	**Main source of migrants' income**	**Most important sending regions**	**Timing and reason for emergence of the system**	**Approximate size of the peak annual flow**	**Key reference works (listed in appendix)**
Forests of southern Ghana	Settlement of thinly populated areas. Seasonal employment on African cocoa farms leading to some rural settlement at destination.	Burkina Faso, Northern Ghana, Nigeria, Mali	Cocoa farmers, who started growing the crop in the 1890s, were themselves largely migrants. They soon came to employ a growing number of seasonal long-distance migrant labourers.	100,000 to 200,000 during the 1930s to 1950s	Hill (1963) Austin (2005)
Forests of southern Côte d'Ivoire	Settlement of thinly populated areas. Seasonal employment on African cocoa and coffee farms leading to substantial rural settlement at destination.	Burkina Faso, Northern Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali	French settlers had relied on forced migratory labour. When this system was abolished in 1947, voluntary migration expanded very fast.	Up to 300,000 annually during the 1950s to 1970s	Zachariah & Condé (1981) Chauveau & Léonard (1996) Cordell et al. (1996) Traoré & Torvikey (2022)
Senegal-Gambia river estuary	Seasonal groundnut growing along the coast and river. Some rural settlement at destination.	Northern Senegal, Mali, Guinea	Long-distance migration to the coast dates back to at least the 1850s and intensified in the early 20th century.	50,000 to 100,000 during the 1910s to 1950s	Swindell & Jeng (2006) David (1980) Sallah (2019)
Forests of Southwestern Nigeria	Some settlement of thinly populated areas. Seasonal employment on African cocoa farms.	Southern and Northern Nigeria	Cocoa growing took off after 1900. Labor migration from the north had deep roots, tangled up with the abolition of slavery, but increased from the 1930s onwards.	Up to 200,000 during the 1950s	Prothero (1957) Swindell (1984) Berry (1975)
Jos Plateau and Kano in Northern Nigeria	Short-term contract labour in the Jos tin mines and various forms of seasonal employment around Kano and Zaria	Northwestern Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon	Seasonal migration had deep roots, but increased markedly after the abolition of slavery in the migrants' origin regions in the early 20th century	Up to 100,000 to the tine mines alone in the 1940s and 1950s	Freund (1981)

Buganda Province in Southern Uganda	Seasonal cotton growing and employment on African coffee farms. Substantial rural settlement at destination.	Western and northern Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania,	Flows from different regions emerged during the 1910s and 1920s and swelled after the abolition of forced labour in the destination area.	Well over 100,000 during the 1920s to 1960s	Powesland (1957) Richards (1953) De Haas (2019)
Destination	**Main source of migrants' income**	**Most important sending regions**	**Timing and reason for emergence of the system**	**Approximate size of the peak annual flow**	**Key reference works (listed in appendix)**
The Witwatersrand ("Rand") in South Africa	Contract labour in gold mines. In some cases (such as Mozambican workers) wages were partially deferred until migrants had returned home.	South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Eswatini, Zambia, Malawi, Botswana, Lesotho, Angola, Tanzania	Migrants arrived in large number when the mines opened in the 1880s. Recruitment ground expanded over time. During Apartheid, South African workers became more important but international recruitment did not cease.	Up to 300,000 during the 1940s to 1960s	Wilson (1972) Crush et al. (1991) Harries (1994)
Rural and mining areas of Zimbabwe	Employment on European settler farms (mostly tobacco), employment in various types of mines	Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia, Botswana	The arrival of European settlers as well as mining and industrial businesses spurred a large demand for migrant labourers from the 1890s onwards.	Well over 100,000 during the 1930s to 1950s	Van Onselen (1976) Mosley (1983) Groves (2020)
Copperbelt in Zambia and Katanga in the DR Congo	Contract labour in copper mines.	Zambia, DR Congo, Rwanda, Burundi	Copper mining took off in the 1910s in Katanga, followed by the Rhodesian Copperbelt in the 1930s, immediately requiring a large inflow of migrants into the thinly populated region. Migrants were forcibly recruited upon the opening of mines. Over time the flow became voluntary, and eventually the labour force was stabilized (long contracts, better wages and family facilities)	Some 100,000 during the 1940s	Perrings (1979) Parpart (1983) Juif & Frankema (2018)

White highlands in central Kenya	Employment on European settler farms (mostly coffee) on as casual (daily) workers or on longer (half year) contracts.	Kenya (mostly central and western Kenya)	The arrival of European settlers from the 1900s onwards spurred a demand for farm labour, which became increasingly migratory as time progressed.	Some 200,000 during the 1950s and 1960s.	Stichter (1982) Mosley (1983) Fibaek & Green (2019)

Note: For purposes of clarity and brevity, present-day country names are used. The estimation of peak annual flows should be considered indicative only, given that no consistent statistics were collected on annual migration flows in almost all cases and the numbers had to be indirectly inferred from employment censuses, information about contract duration and incidental estimates and observations by contemporaries. Only migration destinations that attracted 50,000 migrants annually for a prolonged period of time are considered here. Many more smaller migration flows and systems existed across colonial Africa, such as those pivoting on tea plantations in Nyasaland (Malawi) (Palmer 1986) and sisal plantations in Tanganyika (Tanzania) (Alpers 1984; Sabea 2008), both of which relied on local as well as Mozambican labourers, or the settler coffee plantations in the Kivu area of the Eastern Congo, which relied on labour from across Belgian Africa (Van Melkebeke 2020) – just to mention a few. For a map visualizing the major flows c. 1960, see Hance (1970, p. 147). The references are a selection. I have prioritized sources that contain useable statistics and targeted information on migration, if these exist (which is not the case for all of the systems listed here). See Appendix for further references for Table 1.

4.3 Low capabilities did not inhibit mass mobility

Central to MTT is the idea that initial gains in income from a low starting point result in growing migration rates, as it increases people's capabilities and aspirations to move. However, a striking aspect of migration in colonial Africa is that voluntary migrants, including those travelling over large distances of over 1000 kilometres and crossing colonial or even imperial borders, often came from areas where extreme poverty was an almost universal condition. Among these sending regions were Upper Volta (Burkina Faso), Nyasaland (Malawi), the Soudan (Mali), Mozambique, and Ruanda-Urundi (Rwanda and Burundi). Moreover, most of the migrants' destinations, such as the cash-crop producing zones of coastal West Africa and the Great Lakes region, were also very poor, certainly when viewed from today's standpoint. Was it primarily poverty and adverse livelihood shocks – potentially induced by colonial policy – that drove migration? Or did migrants seek out opportunities despite their limited capabilities?

For each of the cases, the evidence is nuanced, and both deprivation and aspiration factored into migrants' decisions. In the case of mass migration from Ruanda-Urundi to Uganda, De Haas (2019) shows that migrant flows involved mostly poor peasants, and were affected by conditions of high population density, commercial isolation and a high degree of socio-economic inequality. The introduction of a colonial tax, the occurrence of major food shortages in the late 1920s and early 1940s, and onerous colonial labour demands instituted during the Great Depression of the 1930s, all played a role too. Migrants sometimes walked the entire journey of well over 500 kilometres. Especially during episodes of famine, many migrants arrived at their destination too weak to work for the first days or even weeks. Some perished along the way. At the same time, migrants often returned home after several months or years with substantial amounts of cash and assets, such as textiles, which they could use to establish their own household, buy livestock, and pay bride price, which in turn created a demonstration effect for other prospective migrants. Initially, the Ruanda-Urundi migrants managed to double their wages by migrating to Uganda, but over time the wage premium declined, not in the least due to the effect of mass migration on labour markets at both origin and destination. This was one reason why migrants began to settle at their destination (De Haas 2019).

In other cases of colonial era mass migration, such as migration from Upper Volta to Ghana or from the Soudan to Senegal, aspiration played a more important role than deprivation. Here, the wage premium was much higher than in the case discussed above, with migrants able to triple or sometimes even quadruple their earnings (De Haas & Travieso 2022, 238). As noted earlier, the ways in which migrants, particularly in West Africa, exploited seasonal complementarities by migrating in the agricultural "slack season" also testifies to the opportunity-seeking nature of their mobility. In all of these cases, people migrated to obtain and bring back specific items, such as foreign currency (shillings) and textiles. Migration also interfaced in important ways with expanding modern education and Christianity – carried to a large extent by European missionaries as well as a fast-growing number of African converts (Meier zu Selhausen 2019) – as it had done with Islam in the 19th century. Christianity and modern education expanded people's world view beyond the local thus fostering curiosity and openness towards distant places. They also created new bonds of morality and understanding between previously distant peoples, contributing to the spread of new ideas, and sometimes even ending up subverting the colonial order (Peterson 2012).

Recent studies on the long-run impact of voluntary migration in colonial Africa have shown various positive effects on development in the sending region related to remittances, adding to our point that it was, in fact, opportunity-driven. For circular migration from Malawi to the South African mines, Dinkelman and Mariotti (2016) have observed a positive effect on education, and Dinkelman, Kumchulesi and Mariotti (2024) on non-farm employment. Denton-Schneider (2024) finds lower HIV

rates in the regions of Mozambique that formerly were recruiting grounds for the South African mines, which he links to migration providing the capital necessary to pay the bride price and marry young. Dupas et al. (2023) find that regions of Burkina Faso exposed to forced labour migration to Côte d'Ivoire under French rule have lower fertility rates today. They argue that it is not the forced labour itself, but subsequent voluntary migration from the same regions that drove the fertility decline, as it reduced the reliance on subsistence farming and child labour, which in turn lowered fertility preferences.

Table 2. *GDP per capita in country-pairs with major migration flows in 1950*

Destination Country (D)		**Corresponding Origin Country (O)**		
Country	**GDP/capita**	**Country**	**GDP/capita**	**Ratio (D/O)**
Côte d'Ivoire	1,041	Burkina Faso	474	**2.19**
Gambia	607	Mali	457	**1.33**
Ghana	1,122	Burkina Faso	474	**2.37**
Nigeria	753	Niger	617	**1.22**
Senegal	1,259	Mali	457	**2.76**
South Africa	2,535	Mozambique	1133	**2.24**
South Africa	2,535	Malawi	324	**7.82**
Uganda	687	Burundi	360	**1.91**
Uganda	687	Rwanda	547	**1.26**
Median	1,041	Median	474	**2.19**

Note: GDP per capita is expressed in 1990 (year) international Geary-Khamis dollars.
Source: Maddison Project Database v. 2013 (Bolt & Van Zanden 2014).

The conclusion that Africans responded to spatial opportunity gaps also lines up well with GDP per capita estimates in 1950, as shown in Table 2. Incomes in the sending regions were close to a bare-bones survival level at the time. Angus Maddison, who first compiled this dataset considered $400 (at 1990 prices) to be the subsistence minimum. Others have set the absolute minimum at $300 (see Milanovic et al. 2011, 262, fn 17). The only migrant-sending country considered here that appears substantially above this level is Mozambique. This is partly driven by the fact that Mozambique had a substantial European settler community, and that its southern regions benefitted from close integration with the South African mining economy, not in the least through large scale labour migration and remitted wages. The average level is misleading, however. Unskilled wages and rural incomes in central and northern Mozambique were much lower, and labour regimes there were characterized by a very high degree of coercion (Ishemo 1995; Alpers 1984). On the destination end, Table 2 shows a variety of average income levels. For the cases of Ghana, Nigeria and Uganda, Broadberry and Gardner (2021) have extended the constant-price GDP series back in time into at least the early 20th century. Their data suggests substantial income gains in all three cases: 111% for Ghana between 1885 and 1960, 61% for Nigeria between 1885 and 1960, and 45% for Uganda between 1904 and 1960. For French West Africa, a federation of colonial territories including Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Senegal, Cogneau et al. (2021) estimate GDP growth of 94% between 1905 and 1960. The annual per capita growth rates that underpin these gains are not spectacular – 1.21% for French West Africa, 1.01% for Ghana, and lower rates for Nigeria and Uganda – and were heavily based on agricultural commodity export expansion. They do

suggest, however, that expanding opportunities in some colonies induced intra-regional migration flows.

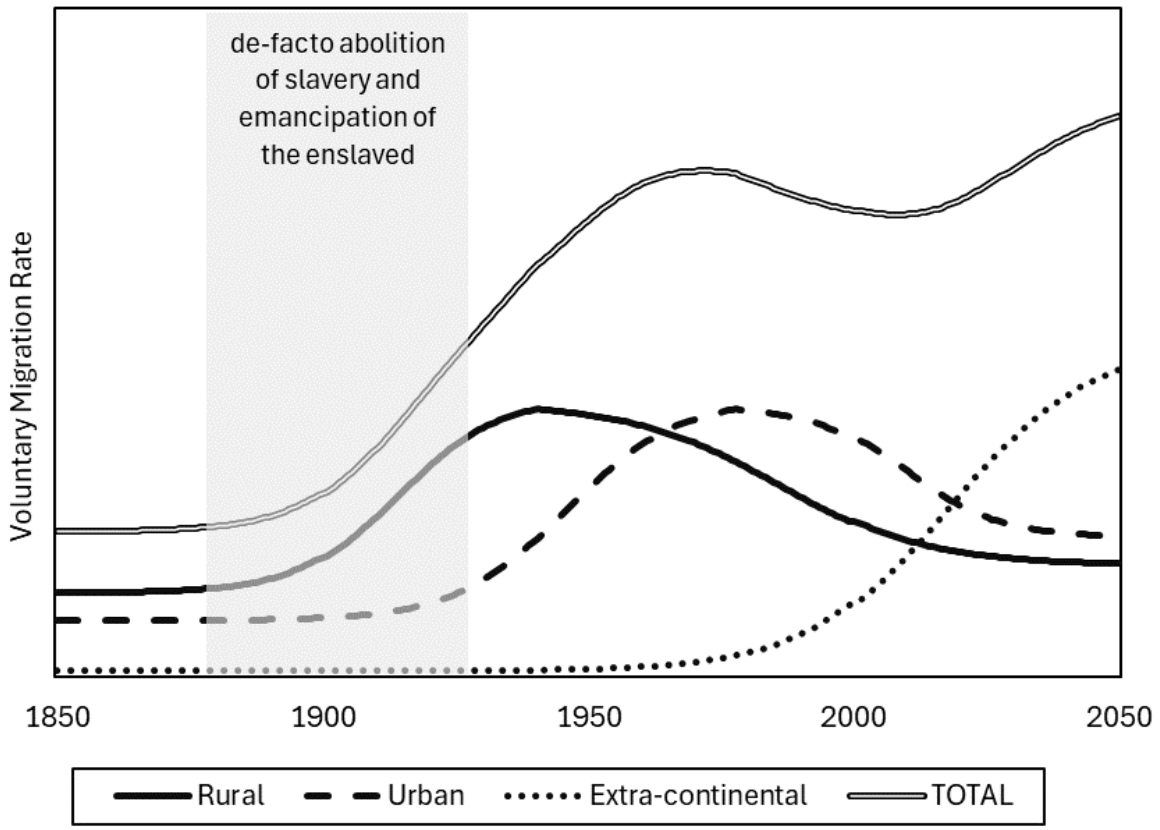
4.4 A new perspective on African migration in the long-run

If we want to understand ongoing migration transitions in Africa, we must engage more critically with the fact that African individuals chose to migrate in large numbers before 1960 and, in light of that revision, also reconsider what drives migration shifts post-1960. Even in the 19th century, before colonial rule, large spatial opportunity gaps existed across the African continent. In that context, migration was often involuntary, although, as noted, the slave trades also involved sizeable voluntary mobility. In the 20th century, spatial opportunity gaps widened, as slavery was abolished and some regions became major exporters of agricultural and mineral commodities, attracting large flows of voluntary migrants. These migrant flows were initially centred on agricultural and mining areas. From 1950 onwards, migrant destinations became increasingly urban, as cities grew fast. Urbanization rates rose from 11% in 1950 to 23% in 1980 and over 40% in 2020 (United Nations 2018). Most of this rapid urbanization was driven by rural-urban migration, especially in its early stages (Meier zu Selhausen 2022).

These overlapping developments largely pre-dated – but cannot be separated from – the sustained increase of extra-continental migration since 1960. Thus, we argue that migration transitions in Africa have much deeper roots than is commonly considered. Even though extreme poverty was near universal in migrant-sending regions during the colonial period, intra-regional spatial opportunity gaps were growing, the abolition of slavery and the "pax colonia" increased peoples' capabilities to move, and the demonstration effects generated by early generations of migrants as well as new religious ideas and expanding modern education expanded people's aspirations to migrate. Demographic trends points in the same direction. Although our knowledge of mortality and fertility rates before 1950 remains tentative, most scholars point to second quarter of the 20th century as the time when populations started to grow, often recovering from a period of stagnation or even decline during the disruptive years of colonization (Manning 2010; Frankema & Jerven 2014; Doyle 2013; Sevladakis et al. 2023).

Scholarship has not yet progressed up to a point where we can put precise numbers on African migration rates over this entire period. Nonetheless, it is helpful to summarize our argument visually. In Figure 5, we plot migration to rural destinations, urban destinations and extra-continental destinations. Albeit tentative and essentially qualitative, these trends represent our reading of the extensive historical literature on intra-African migration before 1960 (De Haas and Frankema 2025), and the available migration statistics since 1960. More research, well beyond the scope of this paper, can further enhance our understanding of rates and trends. The future projections are, of course, even more tentative.

Figure 5. *Stylized depiction of voluntary African migration to various destinations 1850-2050*



Note: Drawn up by the authors. Large but temporary extra-continental flows of African migrants during the two world wars (Killingray 2022) have not been factored in.

5 Why is migration out of the continent on the rise? A re-evaluation

Thus far we have argued that Africans were already engaging in voluntary migration on a large scale in the half century before independence. International migration rates post-independence have not increased, despite tangible, albeit erratic, improvements in income, health and education over the long-run (cf. Flahaux & De Haas 2016). Instead of seeing the rise of migration *out of* SSA as a reflection of development-induced growth of international migration rates, this rise primarily constitutes a shift in destinations from within to outside the continent. This changes the explanandum: why has African migration become increasingly centred on extra-continental destinations since 1960? Our aim in this section is not to survey the extensive literature that exists on this more recent period, but to review six main reasons why migration *destinations* – rather than migration *rates* per se – have changed.

First and foremost, since independence, and especially as the majority of African economies came crashing down during the 1980s (see Figure 2), the spatial opportunity gaps that opened up within the region during colonial times, shrunk during the last quarter of the 20th century. Declining exports of cash-crops and minerals in the wake of collapsing world market prices reduced the demand for immigrant labour in former migrant-receiving regions. Decades of growing (circular) migration now turned into an oversupply, putting downward pressure on migrant wages (De Haas & Travieso 2022). Rapid urbanization and population growth put urban public goods provision under pressure, and led to

rising urban un(der)employment and expansion of slums, thus also reducing opportunities for lucrative rural-urban migration, especially in the third quarter of the 20th century (Meier zu Selhausen 2022).

Accelerated expansion of schooling in a context of limited job opportunities for skilled labour, also put pressure on skill premiums, reducing the attractiveness of migration to cities of skilled workers (Frankema & van Waijenburg 2023). The economic decline of formerly growing economies like Ghana (in the 1970s) and Nigeria (in the 1980s) reduced opportunities for intra-regional migration as well. There were some exceptions to this general pattern, most importantly Côte d'Ivoire (until the 1990s), Gabon, and South Africa, which indeed continued to attract large numbers of migrants, and in the case of South Africa continues to do so until today. But all taken together, the prolonged and widespread economic depression incentivized migrants to look for places elsewhere – further afield, and often outside the continent.

Second, even if African migrants wanted to move to neighbouring countries, they were less welcome than before. As argued above, people had moved across cultural, ethnic and territorial borders with relative ease during the colonial period. Labor shortages in the most commercially developed regions were often acute and there were no citizenship rights and few public resources to call upon. Post-colonial states, seeking to strengthen the social contract through the provision of jobs and public services in a context of disappointing economic performance, became more reluctant to host "strangers" (Cohen 2019; Frankema 2022). While intra-African trade is widely viewed as an opportunity, mobility continues to be seen as a threat (Fernandez 2013; Moyo et al. 2021). Given that people had often moved without official recognition, they could now be made illegal, which meant precarity, harassment and sometimes mass expulsion (Adepoju 1984; Bredeloup 1995). This lack of ability to move freely within the region added a further incentive for migrants to look for places elsewhere, although many continued to move intra-regionally (Flahaux & De Haas 2016).[8]

Third, technological change induced long-distance migration by increasing both migrants' aspirations and capabilities. Largely, this is a story of reduced economic and non-economic costs of migration. Most obviously, the proliferation of modern transportation such as air planes, has made long-distance journeys cheaper. Perhaps even more importantly, modern information technologies – social media, mobile phones, mobile money, etc. – have expanded the possibility for long-distance communication. This has not only increased knowledge about distant places as potential destinations (and thus migrants' aspirations to move there), but also gave people better opportunities to maintain 'multi-sited lives', for example through phone and voice calls and sending remittances electronically. Thus, technology didn't so much increase aspirations and capabilities to migrate *per se*, but it did substantially increase aspirations and capabilities to migrate intercontinentally.

Fourth, Africans' growing educational attainment has increased both aspirations and capabilities for long-distance migration. Although attainment rates and educational quality lag behind other world regions, schooling for boys and girls has expanded massively since the colonial era (Baten et al. 2022). One reason for educated Africans to migrate out of the continent is to seek further education and pursue studies in North America and Europe (including the former Soviet Union), but also in various Asian and other countries. As job prospects and the general socio-political situation worsened in many African countries during the last quarter of the 20th century, many African students decided to stay abroad, while others were keen to join the diaspora. Improved educational attainment of course also increases opportunities to find stable and well-paying jobs in places like France, the United Kingdom, Canada or

[8] Again, South Africa is an important case, which continued to attract large numbers of migrants despite rising xenophobia, marginalization and violence (Kok et al. 2006).

Qatar. Many African doctors and nurses have left Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya and Uganda. Even irregular migrants from Africa, who rely on smuggling networks and dangerous migration routes, tend to be comparatively well-educated compared to their non-migrant peers, probably because their education enhanced their capabilities and aspirations to attempt one or multiple crossings. Tellingly, 85% of all irregular migrants in Europe interviewed for UNDP's *Scaling Fences* project came from towns and cities (UNDP 2019, 29), and migration origins were strongly concentrated in the most developed and urbanized parts of the countries of origin.

Fifth, network effects operated in receiving and sending countries. Initially, the vast majority of Africans migrating out of the continent did so to the former colonial metropole, responding to specific labour market opportunities that existed there, or to follow education in the language of instruction at colonial and missionary schools (Lucas 2015). Today, destinations have diversified and links with former colonizers have become less pronounced, although they are still visible in the bilateral migration statistics (Zeleza 2008). Senegalese migrants, for example, initially moved almost exclusively to France, but the prime destination of new migrants shifted to Italy in the 1980s and Spain in the 1990s (Beauchemin et al. 2018). In 2019, only 50% of African extra-continental migrants from former French African colonies lived in France; for migrants from former Portuguese colonies living in Portugal the share was 59% (United Nations 2019, cf. Lucas 2015, 1452). Refugees, whose presence outside of the continent became more marked from the 1980s onwards, followed a different path. Large Ethiopian, Eritrean and Somali diasporas fanned out across the global North. In each of these cases, network effects were crucial, with initial "bridgehead communities" stimulating the arrival of further migrants from the same national, ethnic or local background. These network effects were also at play at the place of origin, driven by return migrants, smuggling networks and other facilitators of migration. Benin City in Edo State Nigeria is the key example of a migrant-origin network effect that results in large-scale intercontinental African migration. Even though Benin City is a relatively small city of 1.5 million inhabitants and Edo State hosts less than 3% of Nigeria's total population, the region perhaps accounts for close to half of all irregular Nigerian migrants in Europe – a clear example of regional economic specialization (Beber & Scacco 2022).

Lastly, external demand for African migrant labour has been a key driver too. Sub-Saharan Africans have been employed in Europe since the early 20th century, albeit in very small numbers.[9] In the postwar decades of the 1950s and 1960s, attempts to moderate wages in rapidly growing Western European economies, drew large numbers of actively recruited 'guest workers' from Europe's internal and external peripheries, particularly Algeria, Turkey and Morocco. At the time, there was free movement between (former) colonies and the metropoles, a right that was gradually abolished in the 1960s and 1970s, when sizeable African 'bridgehead communities' had already formed across Europe. While migrants have always found their way into 'dirty, dangerous, and difficult' jobs, Europe's labour markets tightened again from the 1990s onwards. This intensified demand for migrant labour in agriculture, care work and the informal economy. Job market opportunities in the United States and Canada also expanded and the number of African migrants in North America has increased substantially over the past decades (for the Ghanaian case, see Arthur 2017). The Gulf Region has also become a major migration destination due to its oil wealth and concomitant ability to attractively remunerate labour, albeit mostly for temporary work. Ironically, the most prominent narrative about migration to all these three regions is one of restriction and rejection. Yet, as De Haas (2008) has argued, despite restrictive migration policies and narratives, African migration to Europe is catalysed by the demand for precarious, cheap and flexible migrant labour, and there is no genuine intent on the part of either

[9] Setting aside the two World Wars when African soldiers were employed in non-negligible numbers, especially in World War Two (Killingray 2022).

sending or receiving countries to stop migration altogether. Overall, policy restrictions in Europe have tended to increase African irregular migration and make the migrants' moves more permanent, rather than reducing migration altogether (Beauchemin et al. 2020). On their side, African governments who benefit from incoming remittances, have been reluctant to curb labour migration to Europe, or even actively promote and support it, for example through bilaterial labour recruitment arrangements and diaspora engagement policies (Turner & Kleist 2013).

6 Conclusion

The widespread belief that African migration rates have only recently started to increase and should be expected to continue climbing is hampered by a knowledge gap about the region's long-term migration trajectories. Adopting a historical perspective, and by zooming in on migration dynamics within Africa, we have aimed to correct the presentist misconception that African countries, due to their history of poverty and colonialism, have only recently (after 1960 or even 1990) begun to experience voluntary and development-induced migration on a large scale. Although systematic quantification of migration prior to 1960 remains wanting, we have invoked a sizeable literature demonstrating that large spatial opportunity gaps existed prior to, and further widened during the colonial period, and that migrants had the capabilities and aspirations to respond to such gaps.

Africa's migration history has repercussions for how we view Africa's ongoing migration transition. The fact that demographic growth, educational expansion and economic growth have roots going back to the colonial era, and that these processes were already intertwined with large scale rural-rural and later rural-urban migration, deserves acknowledgement and closer research. In this dynamic, the abolition the slavery also plays a crucial rule. If there ever was a fast expansion of voluntary international migration rates in a context of (uneven) economic growth, it was in the century *before* 1960, not thereafter (see Figure 4).

Hence, Africans' growing presence outside their continent is not a sign of growing migration rates, but rather one of shifting destinations. We have provided a range of mutually reinforcing explanations for this shift, which is hardly the first one in African history. With the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trades, African migration shifted decidedly inwards constituting an age of intra-African Migration (De Haas & Frankema 2022b; De Haas & Frankema 2025). Subsequently, and aided by the abolition of slavery within Africa, African migrants converged upon commercially vibrant rural areas where cash-crops were grown and minerals extracted for export. Towards the middle of the 20th century, urban destinations (sometimes emerging out of mining sites) became dominant. The shift towards extra-continental destinations can thus be viewed as another shift in this long-term story of proactive seeking out of opportunities through migration, rather than a fundamentally new development.

What is also not new is the ability of African migrants to tolerate precarity and hardship, *en route* and at the destination. Indeed, historically most migrants originated from some of Africa's poorest countries and regions. They used simple means to migrate – mainly their feet – and their poverty did not mean that they lacked the necessary aspirations and capabilities to undertake such moves. Although extant research gives us a fair sense of the order of magnitude of migrant circulation and settlement in key areas, much remains unknown about the precise migration rates. Further research will be required to develop a more precise picture of trends across time, and a greater understanding of regional differences within the sub-continent.

Does a fuller consideration of the past affect the way we view the future? We wouldn't go as far as to argue that future economic growth – which remains to be desired in an African context to alleviate

poverty, will not expand overall migration rates, and especially migration out of the continent. However, given the deep roots of opportunity-seeking migration in Africa, and given the pragmatism with which Africans have sought out opportunities through migration, it is helpful to envision scenarios where migration within Africa regains its momentum, if some countries and regions pick up the pace of economic development and expand opportunities much faster than others. It is also possible that overall migration rates will not change at all, as they hardly have over the past six decades, and perhaps even the past century as a whole. The extent to which this early emergence of large scale voluntary migration at such low levels of development is peculiar to African history deserves more research. One possible conjecture, albeit it speculative, would be that compared to other world regions, Africa's migration transition took off at a much lower level of development, may peak at lower average levels of income than has been the case elsewhere, and may therefore already be much further advanced than is often presumed. Much remains to be studied and learned about the long-run patterns, in terms of quantification and understanding regionally specific dynamics. A closer mutual engagement between historians of Africa and migration scholars today could help to address this knowledge gap.

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Appendix: Additional references for Table 1

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