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Pre-Colonial South-East Africa: Sources and Prospects for Research in Economic and Social History

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In recent years, historical research on the pre-colonial period in the area between the Zambezi and Limpopo has almost ground to a standstill. A number of seminal works on the economic and social history of the area appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, each of which were underpinned by the documentary legacy of the Portuguese presence in the region from the beginning of the 16th century. Since the 1990s, it has been archaeologists that have taken up the mantle of post-1500 history, but the corpora of documentary material available is now seldom used systematically or to any great length. This article revisits the use and availability of historical documents for the study of African society in this region prior to 1840, specifically by presenting a newly constructed database of c.1,140 published and unpublished documents of relevance to African society, economy and the environment. The need for this database is first set into context by a critical overview of two of the major historiographies in pre-colonial economic and social history in this region – those of the relationships between trade and politics and drought and food production – from which a series of common problems are identified. The database is then introduced, together with an analysis of its chronological and spatial coverage and a discussion of the availability and accessibility of the documents. The article concludes by pointing to some potential future directions for a revival of pre-colonial economic and social history in south-east Africa north of the Limpopo, to which renewed interrogation of the wider range of documentary material collated here can contribute.

Keywords: pre-colonial; Portuguese documents; Zimbabwe culture; Zambezi; economic history; social history; trade; agriculture

Introduction

The 1960s and 1970s were decades of remarkable progress in the fields of African economic and social history. Emphasis on the history of the European presence in Africa began to be supplanted by a focus on the activities of the indigenous population, and there followed a recognition that the documentary history of the European imperial powers could be used to uncover the African past as well as that of the colonists. Progress was especially noteworthy in areas with large quantities of documentary evidence. In south-east Africa (see [Figure 1](#)), for example, historians are particularly fortunate to have available written evidence recorded by the Portuguese from several hundred kilometres inland from the trading posts on the Mozambique coast as early as 1512, which continued, in a frequency almost unrivalled for

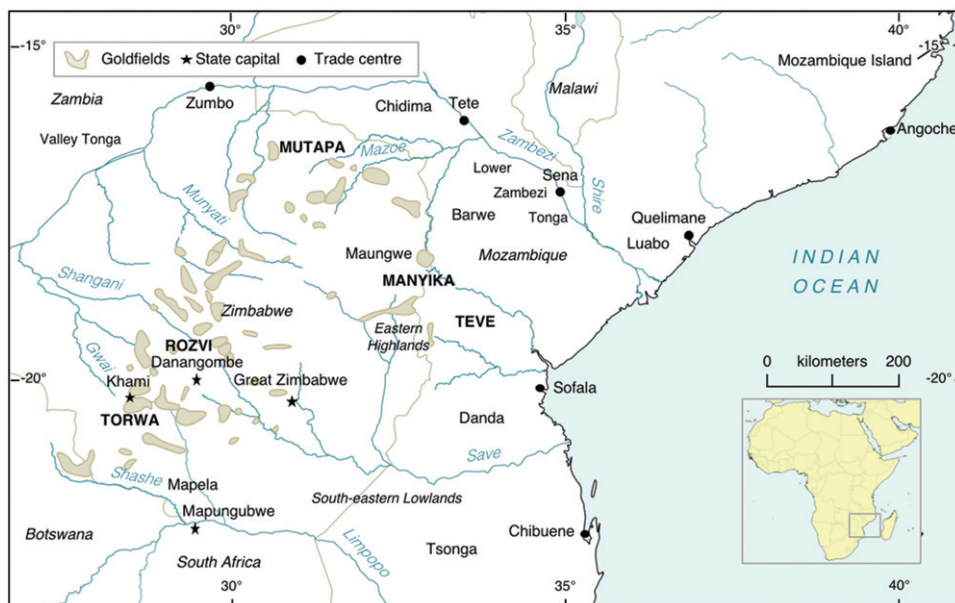


Figure 1. Area of south-east Africa under consideration in this study.

much of Africa south of the equator, until well into the 19th century. As these documents began to be sifted for information on the African past, so a narrow focus on the histories of Portuguese governors turned into one on African society and economy.¹ New regional and local studies departed from earlier assumptions about the relative importance of gold mining and long-distance trade in state formation, while the emergent consensus on the primacy of agriculture in the pre-colonial economy appeared to be incontrovertible.²

Although these studies contributed much to our understanding of the pre-colonial past, there were several shortcomings. Much writing on the economic history of the region was limited to contextual and descriptive 'land and peoples' outlines, wherein several centuries of written information was squeezed into generic overviews that tended to depict African society as existing within a timeless vacuum. A lack of systematic and comparative analysis also led to an obscuring of geographical differences in pre-colonial economy and society, despite the fact that economic activity or societal organisation were far from uniform, even in societies relatively close to one another. Furthermore, explanations for historical developments focused predominantly on clear-cut political or military events, whereas more structural economic and social factors were often isolated from this discourse rather than viewed as drivers of historical change themselves. The role of economic and social factors in pre-colonial historical change in this region therefore remains poorly understood.

More critically for pre-colonial history as an academic discipline, however, is that it now finds itself in danger of disappearing almost entirely. Warnings to this end were made in the 1990s, but the slowdown in the flow of fresh 'historical' publications observed two decades

1 Examples of the former include the works of Alexandre Lobato and Eric Axelson, who only touched in passing on the African societies in the region.

2 For example, S.I.G. Mudenge, 'The Rozvi Empire and the Feira of Zumbo' (PhD thesis, University of London, 1972); I.R. Phimister, 'Pre-Colonial Gold Mining in Southern Zambezia: A Reassessment', *African Social Research*, 21 (1976), pp. 1–30; D.N. Beach, 'The Shona Economy: Branches of Production', in R. Palmer and N. Parsons (eds), *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (London, Heinemann, 1977), pp. 37–65; H.H.K. Bhila, *Trade and Politics in a Shona Kingdom: The Manyika and their Portuguese and African Neighbours, 1575–1902* (London, Longman, 1982); S.I.G. Mudenge, *A Political History of Munhumutapa c.1400–1902* (Harare, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1988).

ago has now turned into a protracted silence, with the share of research coming from colonial and post-colonial history vastly dwarfing that of the pre-colonial period.³ In some ways this is not surprising. The study of pre-colonial Africa presents its special challenges, of which the loss of specialist knowledge of the tools to actually *do* pre-colonial history must be considered a major one.⁴ This point is exemplified when one considers that it is not merely an advantage but a necessity for anyone practising in this field to acquire familiarity with scholarship in archaeology, oral history, linguistics and anthropology in order to contextualise or corroborate the insights of European writers. Yet in south-east Africa, where historians have a relatively large body of documentary information at their disposal, it is arguably the area of written history itself where one is most hard-pressed to find detailed discussion of the availability, accessibility and content of one of its major sources – European documents – for the study of African society. In turn, this has created a perception that the coverage of the documents is too fragmentary or their quality too low to facilitate the kind of detailed, original studies of pre-colonial economy and society as one can conduct for matters such as the workings of Portuguese early colonial society, or simply that the documents have been exhausted by earlier investigation.

The main intervention of this article, then, is the creation of a new database of published and unpublished written source material of relevance to African society, economy or the environment in the region between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers for the period 1500–1840. The need for such a database is first set into context by an overview of two of the major trends and debates in post-1500 pre-colonial economic and social history since the 1960s: the relationship between trade and politics, and the effects of drought on food production. This overview identifies a set of problems common to the wider pre-colonial historiography, and it is argued that none of these problems is independent of the need for a more comprehensive, systematic and comparative assessment of available written evidence. The database is then introduced, together with an overview of its temporal and geographical coverage and a discussion of the present availability and accessibility of the documents. To conclude, the article points to some prospects for the future of pre-colonial economic and social history in south-east Africa, to which renewed interrogation of these documents can contribute.

Economy and Society in the Pre-Colonial World, 1500–1840

Much research on the pre-colonial period between the Zambezi and Limpopo has focused on state formation and disaggregation. Initially, research on both the pre- and post-1500 era concentrated on reconstructing the chronology of state change and political succession using archaeological, oral and written records, but attention also turned to the drivers of this change. In the pre-1500 period, where information on political ‘events’ is inherently far less precise, it was economic, social and environmental factors that assumed greater agency in explaining this change. The idea that the rise of the Indian Ocean gold trade was the key causal mechanism behind the emergence of centralised political authority between the Zambezi and Limpopo, for instance, received much attention in the 1960s and 1970s, though this was later nuanced, and greater emphasis was placed on the build-up of cattle herds and

3 R. Reid, ‘Past and Presentism: the “Precolonial” and the Foreshortening of African History’, *Journal of African History*, 52, 2 (2011), pp. 135–55.

4 Most notable were the losses of David Beach, who had planned further research projects on the Zambezi valley, and Stan Mudenge, whose major work on the Rozvi remains largely unpublished. In his inaugural lecture at the University of Zimbabwe in 1999, the year of his passing, Beach noted that he had become ‘almost the only remaining academic historian on four centuries of pre-colonial Zimbabwean history’. D.N. Beach, ‘Zimbabwe: Pre-Colonial History, Demographic Disaster and the University’, *Zambezia*, 26, 1 (1999), p. 30.

changes in climatic conditions.⁵ In the post-1500 period, when Portuguese settlement on the Mozambique coast led to a swell of documentation on African society, emphasis has instead been placed on more specific, event-based factors as drivers of societal change. This was unsurprising inasmuch as this history had been neglected up until then, and the exceptional documentary situation in this region provided a valuable opportunity to trace African political change over the period, but the result was that studies of the historical change that shaped the 16th to early-19th centuries tended to take place separately from economic and social changes and instead hinged upon political events and the decisions of individual leaders.

This is not to say that economic factors in the post-1500 period have received no attention. In 1977, Beach published a chapter titled 'The Shona Economy: Branches of Production', easily the most comprehensive account of the pre-colonial economy of Zimbabwe and central Mozambique, in which the argument that African polities were 'basically agricultural communities, in that the most important activity of the greatest number of people was the production and collection of food' thoroughly overturned any remaining uncritical acceptance of the notion that gold mining was the basis of the economy.⁶ Further works by Beach in 1980 and 1994 also contained valuable large-scale assessments of human interaction with the physical environment in the plateau area of Zimbabwe, in particular the relationships between resource abundance, economic inequality and social structure. Indeed, although ideas such as the 'Great Crescent' of settlement preference have been critiqued, Beach's work broke free from the conventional tendency to view Zimbabwean history through the lens of the lowveld, middleveld and highveld classifications.⁷ Similarly, a series of landmark studies of the Zambezi valley made extensive use of the richness of Portuguese documents in this area to shed new light on the development of an Afro-Portuguese society and the moulding of its distinctive social structure.⁸ But even these studies retained a tendency to separate economic factors from historical developments or wider theory, or remained squarely focused on political or 'event-based' history.

Where such studies did make connections between economic, social and historical change, these were largely centred around two meta-narratives on the influence of 'external' factors on African society: the first on the relationship between long-distance trade and African politics, and the second on the effects of drought on food production and state security. These two debates are now considered below. The trade and politics section will primarily serve to demonstrate the analytical problems raised above, while the drought and food production section will place emphasis on how renewed assessment of the wider body

5 G. Pwiti, 'Trade and Economies in Southern Africa: The Archaeological Evidence', *Zambezia*, 18, 2 (1991), pp. 119–29; I. Pikirayi, *The Zimbabwe Culture: Origins and Decline of Southern Zambezi States* (Walnut Creek, Altamira Press, 2002); T.N. Huffman, 'Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe: The Origin and Spread of Social Complexity in Southern Africa', *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, 28, 1 (2009), pp. 37–54.

6 Beach, 'The Shona Economy', p. 40. In some cases, this view persisted into the 1970s; for example, Bhila's earlier position was that 'gold-digging and trade, and not farming, were the main occupations of the Manyika', H.H.K. Bhila, 'Trade and Survival of an African Polity: The External Relations of the Manyika from the Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century', *Rhodesian History*, 3 (1972), p. 11.

7 D.N. Beach, *The Shona and Zimbabwe 900–1850: An Outline of Shona History* (London, Heinemann, 1980); D.N. Beach, *The Shona and Their Neighbours* (Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 1994); see G. Mazarire, 'Reflections on Pre-Colonial Zimbabwe, c. 850–1880s', in B. Raftopoulos and A. Mlambo, *Becoming Zimbabwe: A History from the Pre-Colonial Period to 2008* (Harare, Weaver Press, 2009), pp.1–38 for critique.

8 M.D.D. Newitt, *Portuguese Settlement on the Zambezi: Exploration, Land Tenure, and Colonial Rule in East Africa* (London, Longman, 1973); A.F. Isaacman, *Mozambique: The Africanization of a European Institution: The Zambezi Prazos, 1750–1902* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1972); W.F. Rea, *The Economics of the Zambezi Missions: 1580–1759* (Rome, Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1976).

of documentary evidence has enriched and could further enrich our understanding of the pre-colonial past.

Trade and Politics

One of the early themes to dominate writing on the pre-colonial period was the ‘trade and politics’ historiography. In south-east Africa, this literature primarily focused on the link between the rise of the gold trade from around the mid 10th century onwards and the subsequent growth of large-scale political organisation in the mineral-rich interior (see Figure 1). This ‘trade stimulus’ hypothesis posited that, whereas internal systems of exchange were geared towards the subsistence economy and did little to support a central authority, external trade created storable wealth that enabled rulers to secure allegiance and service. As awareness of the value of gold grew rapidly under the stimulus of the Muslim presence on the east coast, mining and trade began to assume greater significance through the introduction of exchange media in the form of cloth and beads, the accumulation of which by elites allowed an enhanced degree of social stratification to be maintained, and ultimately the financing of stone construction.⁹

This idea reached its height in Gray and Birmingham’s 1970 collection, *Pre-Colonial African Trade*, though it was repeatedly challenged for its simplicity.¹⁰ Not only did it underplay the role of the build-up of cattle herds in promoting social differentiation, but a focus on trade at the expense of the wider economy meant that some analyses came ‘dangerously close to depicting the Shona economy as a mining, manufacturing and trading economy’.¹¹ Rather, it was stressed that, even in those societies most affected by the external trade, the changes were generally confined to restricted sectors of the economy that were peripheral to the central concern of agriculture, while the uneven distribution of gold-bearing areas saw to it that many people, including in the gold-rich Mutapa and Torwa states, were never involved in mining. Yet rejection of the primacy of mining and trade in the pre-colonial economy is not to say that external trade had no role whatsoever, and scholars have found it difficult to ignore the correlation between the growth of links with intercontinental trade and the emergence of new social and political organisation in the interior.¹²

If there is some consensus that the role of trade in the growth of large-scale political organisation was to amplify pre-existing inequalities based on cattle and to reinforce the hegemony of the leadership, the reverse side of this relationship – that is, the role that changes in gold mining and trade played in state disaggregation from the 16th to 19th centuries – is far less clear. The changing nature of external trade links with the coast and the wider world certainly had some spill-over effect on to the interior polities. While rulers had a choice of trade routes, all of these ultimately joined up with the ports on the Mozambique coast, meaning that a power that controlled one or more of these ports could essentially dictate the prices at which cloth and beads were sold in the interior, but could also influence African politics.¹³ Equally, the periodic loss of control over trade routes to the coast, or declining gold production and exports over the very long run as a result of the

9 See Beach, *The Shona and Zimbabwe*, and Huffman, ‘Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe’, for an overview of the trade hypothesis.

10 R. Gray and D. Birmingham, *Pre-Colonial African Trade: Essays on Trade in Central and Eastern Africa before 1900* (London, Oxford University Press, 1970).

11 Beach, ‘The Shona Economy’, p. 37.

12 Huffman has also argued for the existence of a similar relationship when the ‘trade zone’ penetrated south into KwaZulu-Natal in the late 18th century, T.N. Huffman, ‘The Archaeology of the Nguni Past’, *Southern African Humanities*, 16, 1 (2004), pp. 79–111.

13 This was the case most of the time, the exception being in the early to mid 16th century, when Portuguese and Muslim traders were vying for control of the trade.

working out of surface gold deposits, must have led to a decline in potential surplus wealth.¹⁴ In contrast to the meddling of individualistic Portuguese traders in African politics, however, the questions of if and why trade remained significant and how diminishing gold deposits and a decline in surplus wealth contributed to political change have been rather less adequately explained.

Central to the above question and the trade and politics historiography as a whole is the unresolved debate over the organisation of the economy and 'control' over resources. The common characterisation of the pre-colonial economy of the Zimbabwe culture states is one subject to central 'influence' rather than control, where dispersed power structures apparently gave gold mining a localised nature.¹⁵ Yet this characterisation raises a tension with a stack of documentary evidence on the organisation of gold mining. In various 16th-century sources, for example, we are told that the Mutapa ruler attempted to exert a considerable degree of authority over the working of major gold deposits,¹⁶ while similar descriptions are given of the Manyika and Rozvi rulers in the 17th and 18th centuries.¹⁷ Although the notion that rulers held a monopoly over gold mining or that trade was the economic and political basis of these polities has been refuted, the many references to attempts to exert some form of central control over gold mining have not been adequately explained.¹⁸ At the very least, those who argue for a uniformly localised view of the pre-colonial economy, or at least the gold mining sector, appear to do so in the face of much evidence to the contrary.

The issue of resource control also has implications for interpretation of the consequences of what is commonly viewed as the high watermark of Portuguese power in the pre-colonial period – the years between 1628 and 1694. Indeed, the Portuguese documents suggest that one structural change that took place after the Mutapa 'capitulations' of 1628–32 was a shift in the control of gold mining from the state or community to the Portuguese; in other words, a change in the 'terms of production' of gold, rather than one in the 'terms of trade' as in the previous century. Importantly, we are told that the effects of this change spilled over on to village communities as the expansion of the *feira* system became a basis for aggressive

14 An approximate trajectory of gold extraction was reconstructed by Roger Summers through a study of 4,000 pre-colonial gold workings and was later modified by Ian Phimister. These analyses found that gold production grew steadily from the mid 10th century, reached its height between the 12th and mid 15th centuries, and began to decline thereafter. R. Summers, *Ancient Mining in Rhodesia and Adjacent Areas* (Salisbury, National Museums of Rhodesia, 1969); Phimister, 'Pre-Colonial Gold Mining'.

15 Mudenge, *A Political History of Munhumutapa*.

16 Diogo de Alcaçova reported that 'no man may take it without the King's leave under pain of death', D. Alcaçova, 'Diogo de Alcaçova to King, 20-11-1506', in A. da Silva Rego and T.W. Baxter (eds), *Documents on the Portuguese in Mozambique and Central Africa, 1497–1840* (Salisbury, National Archives of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, 1962–1989, I), pp. 388–401. João de Barros also reported that when the Mutapa ruler wants gold 'he sends to the mines where they dig gold [for] one or two cows, according to the number of people there, to be divided among them ... and in return for this each of them gives a little gold, to the value of five hundred *reis*', J. Barros, 'Da Asia', in G.M. Theal (ed.), *Records of South-Eastern Africa* (Cape Town, C. Struik, 1898–1903, VI) pp. 271. This practice was echoed by Francisco de Monclaro's account in the 1570s, who stated that 'when the Monomotapa wants gold, he sends kine to his men to extract it, the kine being distributed among the diggers in accordance with the work performed', F. Monclaro, 'Narrative of the Expedition to Monomotapa', in Silva Rego and Baxter (eds), *Documents*, VIII, pp. 391.

17 Later examples can be found in B. Figueiredo, 'Copy of the Legal Testimonies Taken about the Matter of the Mines', in D.N. Beach and H. Noronha (eds), *The Shona and the Portuguese (1575–1890)* (Harare, University of Zimbabwe, 1980, I), pp. 20; A. Gomes 'Voyage Made by Fr. António Gomes to the Monomotapa Empire and His Work There for Several Years', in Beach and Noronha (eds.), *The Shona and the Portuguese*, I, pp. 79; A. Bocarro, 'Decade of Asia', in Theal (ed.), *Records*, III, pp. 356; and F.M. Castro, 'Descrição dos Rios de Senna' (Lisbon, Imprensa Nacional, 1861).

18 Some hypotheses include: to keep a tight hold on wasting assets, to attempt to raise the price of gold in the face of declining global prices, to avoid their discovery by the Portuguese, or to avoid their discovery by the Mutapa ruler, as this would lead to greater tribute payments. See N. Sutherland-Harris, 'Trade and the Rozvi Mambo', in Gray and Birmingham (eds), *Pre-Colonial African Trade*; Phimister, 'Pre-Colonial Gold Mining'; Mudenge, *A Political History of Munhumutapa*.

salesmanship, which thereafter turned into forced and often violent recruitment of labour for the mines.¹⁹ We are also told that the effects of this forced labour in the Mutapa state were a contributing factor in the gradual depopulation of its plateau heartland.²⁰ Rather less clear, however, are the long-term consequences of these structural changes to the trade system on the Mutapa political system, and, in this respect, the potential for comparative studies between the gold-rich Mutapa, Manyika, Torwa and Rozvi polities remains largely unfulfilled.²¹

Outside the gold trade, a related question concerns the changing importance of the ivory trade and its relationship with the political structure. The Portuguese documents tell us that elephant hunting itself was generally a communal activity, where the ruler took one tusk, the hunter kept the other, and the meat was distributed to the community. In the 16th and 17th centuries, it is also noticeable that the documents stated that elephants were primarily hunted for their meat, which would indicate that ivory was a by-product of hunting for protein rather than vice versa.²² From the patchy figures of ivory exports afforded by the documents, however, we can also see that the volume of ivory exports from the Mozambique coast grew rapidly in number over the course of the 16th century and significantly in proportional terms relative to gold over the following two centuries.²³ What is less clear is whether and how the growth in ivory exports acted as a replacement to the gold trade as a source of surplus wealth. Conventional wisdom on African state formation has postulated that, unlike the gold trade, elephant hunting did not require the possession of a specific territory to the same extent as gold mining, and, if pushed too far, an area could be very rapidly depleted, making political consolidation unrewarding.²⁴ This was in turn thought to have necessitated a more flexible organisation, which gave the internal aspects of the ivory trade a rather different dynamic from those of the gold trade. But absent in such hypotheses are societies that change from largely gold-based exports to almost entirely ivory-based exports, as the Mutapa state did after the 1720s, when it shifted to the lowland, mineral-poor Zambezi valley. A re-examination of the role of the ivory trade in Zimbabwe culture political formation is therefore long overdue.

Drought and Food Security

A second major historiography to emerge in the 1970s related to agricultural history. This was largely driven by Beach, who focused on the supposed fragility of food production in the face of drought and other environmental hazards, or '*shangwa*'.²⁵ This hypothesis was initially advanced in the broadest of terms. Instrumental rainfall records from 20th-century Zimbabwe suggested that, on average, one out of every five years brought a deficiency of rainfall. This, as well as seasons of excessive rainfall, the late or premature appearance of the rains or climate-related occurrences such as locust plagues, could destroy the crops on which the people depended. Although grain storage, herding, hunting and gathering could alleviate these problems in individual years of drought, none of these activities was able to stand back-to-back years of extreme weather, which could have disastrous consequences. Thus drought was said to be central to an understanding of pre-colonial history, and the

19 Gomes, 'Voyage', pp. 77–8; Bocarro, 'Decade of Asia', p. 491.

20 Bocarro, 'Decade of Asia', p. 491; Anonymous, 'Description of the Rivers of Cuama', in Beach and Noronha (eds), *The Shona and the Portuguese*, I, pp. 162.

21 But see Phimister, 'Pre-Colonial Gold Mining', for an example of a comparative assessment.

22 Another reason was 'because they cause great damage to the plantations of millet, which they eat and tread under foot'. J. Santos, 'Ethiopia Oriental', in Theal (ed.), *Records*, VII, pp. 321.

23 Beach, *The Shona and Zimbabwe*, p. 26. R.W. Dickinson, 'Sofala and the Rivers of Cuama: Crusade and Commerce in SE Africa 1505–1595'. (MA dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1971).

24 For example, A.I. Salim, *State Formation in Eastern Africa* (London, Heinemann, 1984).

25 Beach, 'The Shona Economy'; Beach, *The Shona and Zimbabwe*.

Table 1. Documentary and oral evidence of climatic extremes in south-east Africa to 1830

Year(s)	Event	Location	Sources
1515–16	Scarce provisions	Sofala	Almada 1516
1560	Heavy rain, flooding	Inhambane	Fernandes 1560
1561–63	Drought, locusts, famine	Mutapa state, Zambezi, Inhambane	Fernandes 1562, Sousa 1697
1563–65	Floods	Zambezi, Mutapa	Sousa 1697
1571–73	Drought, locusts, hunger	Zambezi valley, Manyika	Monclaro 1573, Carneiro 1573
1589–95	Locusts, famine	SE Africa-wide	Lavanha 1593, Santos 1609
1642–47	Drought, locusts	Mozambique coast	Feyo 1647
1663	Drought	Mozambique island	Mascarenhas 1663
1698	Food shortage	Teve	Assumpção 1698
1714–15	Drought, famine	Mutapa, Zambezi valley	Viceroy of India, 1715
1736–45	Locusts	Lower Zambezi	Miranda 1766
1758–59	Drought	North of Tete	Castro 1763, Miranda 1766
1765–66	Drought	Rozvi	Anna 1767
1795–1801	Drought, famine	SE Africa-wide	Almeida 1798
1822–23	Floods	Delagoa Bay	Owen 1823
1823–30	Drought, famine, locusts	SE Africa-wide	Silva 1827, Ferrão 1828, Silva 1831

Source: J.V. Almada, 'João Vaz de Almada to the King, June 26 1516', in Silva Rego and Baxter *Documents*, IV, p. 277; A. Fernandes, 'André Fernandes to the Father Provincial, June 24 1560', in Silva Rego and Baxter *Documents*, VII, p. 469; A. Fernandes, 'André Fernandes to the Brothers and Fathers, December 5 1562', in Theal, *Records*, II, pp. 150–51; F. Sousa, 'Francisco de Sousa, 'Oriente Conquistado a Jesu Christo pelos Padres da Companhia de Jesus da Provincia de Goa', in Beach and Noronha, *Shona and the Portuguese*, I, pp. 260–61; Monclaro, 'Narrative of the Expedition to Monomotapa', *Documents*, VIII, p. 373; A. Carneiro, 'Record of the Enquiry made by Command of the Governor Francisco Barreto, May 1, 1573', in Silva Rego and Baxter, *Documents*, VIII, p. 237; J.B. Lavanha, 'Wreck of the Ship Saint Albert, at the Rock of the Fountains, in the year 1593', in Theal, *Records*, II, pp. 327–8; J. Santos, 'Ethiopia Oriental', in Theal, *Records*, VII, pp. 318–19; B.T. Feyo, 'Wreck of the Ships Sacramento and Nossa Senhora da Atalaya on the South African Coast', in Theal, *Records*, VIII, pp. 352–3; M. Mascarenhas, 'Mascarenhas to the Viceroy, August 4 1663', in Beach and Noronha, *Shona and the Portuguese*, I, p. 141; P. Assumpção, 'Brief Account on the Rivers of Cuama', in Beach and Noronha, *Shona and the Portuguese*, I, p. 270; Viceroy of India, 'Viceroy to King, Goa, 3 January 1715', in Arquivo Portugues Oriental, I, pp. 149–50; A.P. Miranda, 'António Pinto de Miranda, Report on the Coast of Africa', in Beach and Noronha, *Shona and the Portuguese*, II, pp. 105–6; D.M. Castro, 'Report on the Marave Empire and the Rivers of Senna, January 20 1763', in Beach and Noronha, *Shona and the Portuguese*, II, p. 61; M.J.S. Anna, 'Fr. Manoel Jozé de Santa Anna to Balthazar Manoel Pereira do Lago, Zumbo, 24 September 1767', cited in Mudenge, 'A Political History of Munhumutapa', p. 312; Almeida, 'Lacerda's Journey to Cazembe', in *The Lands of Cazembe*; W.F. Owen, 'The Bay of Delagoa, by Captain Owen, of H.M.S. Leven', in Theal, *Records*, II, pp. 475–7; J.B.A. Silva, 'João Bonifácio Alves da Silva to Francisco Henriques Ferrão, 10 January 1827', in Isaacman, 'Mozambique', p. 116; F.H. Ferrão, 'Francisco Henriques Ferrão to Sebastião Xavier Botelho, 29 October 1828', in Isaacman, 'Mozambique', p. 119; J.J. Silva, 'Relatorio de João Julião de Silva, 1.6.1831', in M.D.D. Newitt, 'Drought in Mozambique 1823–1831', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15, 1 (1988), p. 25.

failure to devise an absolutely reliable defence against it was suggested to be the 'basic weakness that underlay the whole economy' of the Zimbabwe culture states.²⁶

The 'pessimistic' view of the agrarian economy advanced by Beach was challenged on several grounds, the most influential of which was John Iliffe's suggestion that evidence of severe famine impacts, such as mass mortality, were limited to those famines that were caused or worsened by violence.²⁷ This reasoning appeared to convince Beach, who thereafter fell silent on the subject, that drought was not the threat to the economy and society as was once thought. One apparent reason for this was environmental, in that drought alone was rarely enough to cause mass mortality, as rainfall was supposedly of such a localised nature that 'there was nearly always food not too far away'.²⁸ More recent work has cast doubt on this argument, however, on the basis of both historical and modern evidence. While 'local' seasonal droughts, such as that recorded in 1758–59 around the mines north of Tete (see Table 1), may have fallen into this category, a string of more severe and protracted regional droughts were reported in the early 1590s, late 1790s, late 1820s, early 1860s, late 1890s – each of which have been corroborated by independent rainfall reconstructions – and observed in the 20th-century instrumental record.²⁹ Similarly, Iliffe's evidence on the link between famine

26 Beach, 'The Shona Economy', p. 40.

27 J. Iliffe, *Famine in Zimbabwe, 1890–1960* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1990).

28 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

29 M.J. Hannaford and D.J. Nash, 'Climate, History, Society over the Last Millennium in Southeast Africa', *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 7, 3 (2016), pp. 370–92. Significantly, the spatial extent of

mortality and violence appears to have been based on a relatively patchy reading of sources for the pre-colonial period. Indeed, aside from the region-wide famine of the 1820s and the rather dubious evidence of famine in the Mutapa state in 1561–63, most of his evidence drew from the records of the London Missionary Society in Matabeleland after 1859, thus overlooking numerous widespread multi-year droughts reported by Portuguese writers (see Table 1). In this respect, a major shortcoming of the drought hypothesis was not that it was necessarily conceptually misguided but that it was argued (and counter-argued) with only very limited recourse to the evidence of drought and famine in the longer historical record.

Arguably, a more significant counter to this hypothesis was the view that pre-colonial farmers and institutions devised robust and reliable defences against famine mortality arising exclusively from drought.³⁰ Early attempts to substantiate this assertion nevertheless tended to treat pre-colonial society as either a singular block, which masked differences both between and within societies, or derived their evidence in large part from late 19th-century documents, when African society had already begun changing under British colonial rule. More recently, scholars have begun to use written records together with theoretical frameworks developed in the social sciences to assess how drought impacts and responses across the Zambezi–Limpopo region were channelled through differences in societal vulnerability and resilience.³¹ There were, for example, geographical differences in food production strategies and changes in these strategies over time, so while the Mutapa state appears to have remained largely dependent on sorghum, pearl millet and finger millet, experimentation in crop cultivation among Afro-Portuguese communities along the banks of the Zambezi led some observers to write of dietary change in this area by the end of the 17th century.³² This diversification has been linked, albeit tentatively, with the reduction in reports of drought-related food scarcity in this area during the 17th century (see Table 1). Analyses of the documents also inform us of differences in the possession of domestic animals, so whereas in the 16th century the Mutapa, Manyika and Torwa polities were reported to contain vast herds of cattle, reports relating to areas such as Teve neglect to mention cattle altogether.³³ Although it is more difficult to situate hunting in the context of the rest of the food system from the documents, it is also noticeable that in areas like Teve, where cattle were apparently not possessed in great numbers, we have descriptions of highly organised hunts, which would suggest that hunting was of amplified importance in these areas, not least in times of dearth.³⁴

This branch of scholarship has also shed light on societal resilience, in particular the way in which the organisation of institutions and social networks shaped responses to

the severe droughts documented by the Portuguese in 1795–1801 and 1823–30 are corroborated by independent rainfall reconstructions from the southernmost part of the southern African summer rainfall zone; see M.J. Hannaford, J.M. Jones and G.R. Bigg, 'Early-Nineteenth-Century Southern African Precipitation Reconstructions from Ships' Logbooks', *The Holocene*, 25, 2 (2015), pp. 379–90.

30 H.H.K. Bhila, 'Southern Zambezi', in B.A. Ogot (ed.), *UNESCO General History of Africa*, vol. 5 (London, Heinemann, 1992).

31 A. Ekblom, 'Changing Landscapes: An Environmental History of Chibueni, Southern Mozambique' (PhD thesis, Uppsala University, 2004); M.J. Hannaford, G.R. Bigg, J.M. Jones, I.R. Phimister and M. Staub, 'Climate Variability and Societal Dynamics in Pre-Colonial Southern African History (AD 900–1840): A Synthesis and Critique', *Environment and History*, 20, 3 (2014), pp. 411–45; M.J. Hannaford, 'Climate, Causation and Society: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from the Past to the Future,' in L. Asuelime, J. Yaro and S. Francis (eds), *Selected Themes in African Development Studies: Economic Growth, Governance and the Environment* (Cham, Springer International Publishing, 2014), pp. 7–25; M.J. Hannaford, 'The Consequences of Past Climate Change for State Formation and Security in Southern Africa' (PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 2015).

32 Manuel Barreto, 'Supplement to the Report upon the State and Conquest of the Rivers of Cuama', in Theal (ed.), *Records*, III, p. 506.

33 Although absence of evidence forces us to rely on the 'argument from silence', it seems unlikely that three centuries of written reports, including Santos's highly detailed account, would omit mention of cattle.

34 Santos, 'Ethiopia Oriental', p. 208.

environmental stress. Although the documents are relatively silent on communal activity and long-term planning in agriculture at the village level, they do provide accounts of centralised institutional arrangements in the Zimbabwe culture polities, for example labour service and grain tribute.³⁵ In theory, siphoning off a surplus from the capital hinterland then meant that the stored grain could be redistributed in times of drought. However, Beach reminded us of the difficulties of transport in the era before cattle were used to carry grain, especially in large territories such as the 16th- and 17th-century Mutapa state. In this sense, the capital may have been able to rely on grain tribute only from its immediate hinterland and less so on the fringes of the state, though, as with the issue of resource ‘control’ in the previous section, further research is needed to fully disentangle the differences between evidence, theory and practice. Although we lack similar evidence of such practices in the chiefdoms and village communities in the Zambezi valley in the 16th century, this, of course, does not mean that they did exist. It is nevertheless noteworthy that gathering took centre stage in times of drought – and was often important during ‘normal’ years – on the Zambezi. This, together with a trade in manufactures for grain, may have been enough to combat seasonal deficiencies in rainfall, but was likely to have been insufficient for the more severe multi-year droughts, when, we can infer, chiefs and village heads had a more limited capacity to provide food and hold communities together.

This reconstruction of vulnerability and resilience from the Portuguese documents has been shown to be reflected in evidence on responses to climate-related hazards and their deeper political impacts. In the drought and locust plagues of the early 1590s, for example, we have reports of more vulnerable people from the Tonga-speaking chiefdoms on the lower Zambezi seeking the ‘protection’ of centralised political authority or of the Portuguese, the result of which appears to have been the accelerated incorporation of the Zambezi lowlands into the Portuguese jurisdiction centred at Sena and Tete, which, although also suffering food shortages, could import grain from Mozambique and Goa.³⁶ In the Mutapa state, however, it seems to have been only when the cumulative impacts of drought and food scarcity coalesced with civil war and large-scale conflict with Maravi armies in the 1590s that we have evidence of deeper social and political instability.³⁷ To some extent, the works of Isaacman, Newitt and Rea have shown us how this picture changed when the Portuguese expanded their settlement on the Zambezi from the 1570s, for the growth of the *prazo* system brought with it a level of diversification of food production in certain areas. But the *prazo* system also brought new instabilities, most notably the growth of absentee landowners in the late 18th century, which accentuated the exploitative aspects of the system and placed priority on short-term gain rather than prolonged stability, which served to undermine resilience to the multi-year droughts in the 1790s and 1820s. Vulnerability also increased in the Mutapa state at this time, through an increased physical exposure to drought in its dryland Zambezi valley setting, together with a loss of cattle and mineral resources, yet there was no reported breakdown of society as on the *prazos*.³⁸ Rather, in spite of these changes, the state actually recovered some of the land previously lost and exerted increased power

35 For example, Barros, ‘Da Asia’, p. 271; Santos, ‘Ethiopia Oriental’, p. 222. A. Conceição, ‘Treatise on the Cuama Rivers’, in Beach and Noronha (eds), *The Shona and the Portuguese*, I, p. 207.

36 According to Santos, ‘Ethiopia Oriental’, p. 318, the locusts ‘passed through in such numbers that they covered the ground, and when they rose in the air they formed so dense a cloud that the land was darkened. During this time there was great sterility and famine, of which numbers died’.

37 Hannaford and Nash, ‘Climate, History, Society’; I. Pikirayi, ‘Environmental Data and Historical Process: Historical Climatic Reconstruction and the Mutapa State 1450–1862’, in W. Beinart and J. McGregor (eds), *Social History and African Environments* (Oxford, James Currey, 2003), pp. 60–71.

38 Evidence on the state at this time is scanty, though in 1831 Gamitto noted that the Mutapa ruler’s power was still respectable and that his sub-rulers still obeyed him: A.C.P. Gamitto, *King Kazembe* (trans. Ian Cunnison), 2 vols. (Lisbon, Junta de Investigações do Ultramar, 1960).

over the Portuguese.³⁹ Beach has argued that a key factor in this appears to have been an element of ‘military’ innovation in the organisation of society, which may be seen as a social response to the lowland, cattle-poor environment of the Zambezi valley and to the wider political pressures of the 18th century.

By a more systematic and comparative use of the historical record, we can therefore see that, far from the simplistic view of drought impacts painted in earlier works, structural economic and social factors and their changes over time played a key role in the differential effects of drought and its deeper political implications.

Common Problems

This section has highlighted a set of problems common to two of the major strands of literature in pre-colonial economic and social history. These relate to the need for more (i) rigorous engagement with theory relating to the causal links between economic, social and political change; (ii) systematic use of the historical record to test this theory; (iii) comparative studies between and, where possible, within societies; (iv) comparative studies over time. To some extent, these problems have begun to be addressed in recent literature on drought and food production, but, in general, the field as a whole has advanced only incrementally since Phimister’s 1979 observation that

[t]he conceptual poverty of much of this work [on the pre-colonial period] is especially disappointing in view of the availability of Portuguese documents as a source for Shona economic and social history from the 16th century onwards. Although the geographical and chronological coverage provided by the documents is highly uneven, they do offer, in combination with oral traditions, an extraordinarily valuable opportunity to reconstruct and trace developments in precolonial economy and society over a reasonably lengthy time span.⁴⁰

While Phimister argued that there was a conceptual poverty in much research on the pre-colonial period in spite of the availability of Portuguese documents, the next section argues that, in recent years, this exists in part *because* of a number of key problems that have contributed to a lack of comprehensive and systematic assessment of the available documentary evidence, which, in turn, has forced a reliance on a small number of well-known classics at the expense of a range of other documentary evidence.⁴¹ Thus, while calls to reinvigorate economic history elsewhere have suggested that historians place less precedence on the archive and more on engagement with theory, pre-colonial history in Africa must do both.⁴² Opportunities to address the above-mentioned problems will be returned to in the final section of this article, but first a new effort to collate available documentary evidence on the pre-colonial period in the form of a database is presented.

European Documents on South-East Africa, 1500–1840: A Database

The arrival of the Portuguese on the Mozambique coast at the beginning of the 16th century led to a consistent stream of written recording on south-east Africa. ‘The Portuguese’, however, were not simply a homogeneous unit, and the documentary legacy of their presence in the region consists not only of administrative records but also of missionary

39 Beach, *The Shona and Zimbabwe*.

40 I.R. Phimister, ‘Zimbabwean Economic and Social Historiography since 1970’, *African Affairs*, 78, 311 (1979), pp. 253–68.

41 This was observed with regard to pre-colonial Africa as a whole by A. Jones and B. Heintze, ‘Introduction’, *Paideuma*, 33 (1987), pp. 1–17.

42 D.R. Curtis, B. van Bavel and T. Soens, ‘History and the Social Sciences: Shock Therapy with Medieval Economic History as the Patient’, *Social Science History*, 40, 4 (2016), pp. 751–74.

accounts, traveller and explorer diaries, chronicles and letters. Many of these documents dealt with only the day-to-day needs of the Portuguese and so contain little information on African society, while the documents that are of relevance to African society have their particular strengths and weaknesses, the most important of which is that they reflect both Portuguese interest in and understanding of African society. In most cases, this meant that their descriptions ultimately related in some way to the exploitation of the land. Although this may be viewed as an inherent weakness, it does not preclude their utility for the study of pre-colonial economy and society. Indeed, the ever-present link between information and exploitation, as pointed to by Beach, means that historians are left with a relative abundance of information on economic activities such as mining and hunting owing to their importance for long-distance trade. The same can be said for agriculture, herding, hunting and gathering because of their potential value to traders or soldiers, and even the rituals of the courts for the use of envoys of the crown.⁴³

All of this provides valuable information to compare societies; however, there are some very definite limitations. The sources are rather poor at capturing inequalities within these societies, so where oral traditions tend to idealise the pre-colonial past and stress economic equality, the documents often treat African society as a singular block for very different reasons. The quantity of data, although superior to that for many areas of sub-Saharan Africa prior to 1840, is largely insufficient to assemble continuous series of information on phenomena such as extreme climatic events before the 19th century, while the legacy of quantitative material on economic activity is also fairly disappointing until the late 18th century, although scattered figures have been compiled by Mudenge and Beach for the gold and ivory trades, and by Alpers and Newitt for the slave trade.⁴⁴

Despite general recognition of their value as a source for African history, the Portuguese documents have been given relatively little focused attention. The exception to this was in a special issue on the pre-1900 documentary history of Africa in the journal *Paideuma* in 1987, where again the major text on south-east Africa was written by Beach, who was one of the few authors to devote lengthy space to the documents.⁴⁵ This article nevertheless focused more on the contents of a handful of widely known texts and issues relating to source criticism rather than on availability. Yet it is arguably this availability that now represents a more fundamental issue, given the precarious state of pre-colonial history as a discipline. This limited discussion of availability and accessibility has resulted in some significant problems remaining unaddressed. These include a lack of knowledge of: (i) the breadth of sources that exist, (ii) the format in which the sources are available (e.g. published, transcribed but unpublished, unpublished manuscript), (iii) the format in which the documents are accessible (e.g. electronic, hard-copy), (iv) the location in which the documents in each of these formats are held (e.g. archive, academic institution, web repository), (v) the particular sources that are useful for the study of African society, and (vi) the geographical areas and levels of society that can be studied over various timeframes. In many ways, these issues have been implicitly recognised in previous works. Beach, for example, repeatedly called for efforts to collect, collate, edit and translate the documentary evidence, and, as part of this effort, he envisaged a 'master list' of documents to expand on Eric Axelson's appendix for the early 16th century, stating that:

43 D.N. Beach, 'Documents and African Society on the Zimbabwean Plateau Before 1890', *Paideuma*, 33 (1987), pp. 129–45.

44 M.D.D. Newitt, *A History of Mozambique* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1995); E.A. Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves: Changing Patterns of International Trade in East Central Africa to the Later Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1975).

45 Beach, 'Documents and African Society'.

[a]lready, in the published works of the historians, we have copious references to documents that must, obviously, have been of practical use to researchers. Surely, by compiling a giant, chronological index of documents already cited, giving the dates, authors, recipients, titles, and different locations of the documents and a very brief comment on their apparent content as used by previous researchers, it should be possible to provide a research guide that covers published and unpublished sources in Portuguese and other languages? In short, a 'user-friendly' guide?⁴⁶

Thirty years on from Beach's call, this article presents such a database of documentary sources, together with analysis of their temporal and spatial coverage and discussion of the availability and accessibility of the documents.⁴⁷ It should be noted that such an effort is not without precedence in Africa. In the 1990s, Fage compiled a 'guide' of European documents on west and west central Africa before 1865, consisting of c.700 European books or articles, although, by his own acknowledgement, this was far from comprehensive and did not include unpublished archival sources.⁴⁸ The database presented here, by contrast, attempts to achieve a far greater level of comprehensiveness by incorporating both published and unpublished sources. It would, of course, be simplistic to argue that this is all that is needed to reinvigorate the economic and social history of the pre-colonial period, and there are bound to be some documents that have been missed in the compiling of the database. Rather, this database should be seen as a starting point, and the more vital tasks concern the continuation (or resumption) of the transcription, translation and publication of the documents for wider use.

Database Structure

Intensive searches of archives have made known a large amount of material on pre-colonial society in south-east Africa. This database forms a first attempt to collate this material, both from the more widely known source compilations and from references to archival documents in secondary literature on the pre-colonial period.⁴⁹ Before discussing the database in detail, it is necessary to make clear what makes a document 'relevant' for the study of African society and economy. Here, 'relevance' is given a relatively broad definition, in that it covers documents with indirect evidence on African economic activity or societal developments as well as those with more explicit descriptions. For example, a document that gives a figure for ivory exports from Sofala in 1515 is classed as relevant for African society as it provides indirect evidence of elephant hunting and trade with the Portuguese. Similarly, a document that contains evidence on the size of the Portuguese garrison at the Mutapa *zimbabwe* is also included in the database, as this information is of relevance for internal developments. On the other hand, a document that relates to the payment of salaries to the Portuguese at Sofala would not be included, as this relates squarely to the Portuguese community.

The total volume of sources (1,140) are separated into two Excel worksheets of published (transcribed and available outside the archive, n = 376) and unpublished (available only in original manuscript form in the archive, n = 764) documents, and a range of information relating to content and availability are assigned to each entry.⁵⁰ The vast majority of the

46 *Ibid.*, pp. 140–41.

47 The full database is openly accessible via the JSAS website: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2018.1508864>.

48 J.D. Fage, *A Guide to Original Sources for Precolonial Western Africa Published in European Languages: For the Most Part in Book Form* (Madison, University of Wisconsin African Studies Program, 1994).

49 The full list of secondary works consulted for references to documents on African society can be found in the database metadata.

50 For convenience, the documents found within the volume *Shona and the Portuguese* are included in the tab of published documents as they have been transcribed and translated, though remain held at the University of Zimbabwe.

documents within the database fall within the timeframe 1500–1840. This latter limitation is imposed owing to the transformational changes that had taken hold in the region by c.1840, including new state formation in present-day South Africa and southern Mozambique, the settlement of the Ndebele state in the former Rozvi heartland and the growth of documentary sources from non-Portuguese diarists and missionaries in this region. Nevertheless a few documents, such as the early writings of Arab writers Al-Mas'udi, Ibn Battuta and Ibn Madjid, and later documents, such as the diary of Albino Manoel Pacheco in 1861–62, are also included owing to their importance for the bulk of the period under consideration. The geographical coverage of the database falls almost entirely within the area shown in Figure 1, although some documents, such as shipwreck accounts and coastal surveys, extend further south to Inhambane and beyond. This is in contrast to the work of Beach, who focused on the plateau area of present-day Zimbabwe, which provides a rather artificial geographical limitation for certain lines of investigation, such as for the study of the spatial extent of climate extremes that struck the region.

A range of information is attached to the entry for each document. This first includes basic data (grouped under the heading 'document') such as the author, year and title of the document. The next group of information relates to the contents of the document (under the heading 'details and contents') and includes information on the type of document (e.g. letter, book, report), the observer (e.g. priest, traveller, chronicler), the areas described in the document that were seen at 'first-hand' or were the product of 'second-hand' information, the extent to which the document deals with African society ('major' or 'minor'), and a list of subject matter described (e.g. mining, agriculture, climate). Some of these criteria warrant further explanation. The terms 'major' and 'minor' are taken from the article by Beach in 1987, where major documents include those that devote 'at least a couple of paragraphs to African society and the local economy as opposed to the intercontinental trade', and 'minor' documents deal primarily with the administrative concerns or policies of the Portuguese but still pass comment on matters of relevance to African society.⁵¹ The second categorisation that requires comment is the distinction between 'first-hand' and 'second-hand' evidence. Here again this article follows the lead of the *Paideuma* collection in 1987, where a first-hand writer is one who had actually visited the area described in the document, while a second-hand writer had not.⁵² The final category gives more practical information concerning the availability of the document (under the heading 'availability and notes'). For published documents, this relates to the source compilation in which the document was published or the reference details if published as an individual text, together with the medium in which the document can be accessed at present (e.g. book, electronic). Importantly, this also gives the original language in which the document was written and indicates whether it has been translated. For unpublished documents, a further category refers to the archive in which the manuscript can be found and the more precise details of the collection and volumes to which the document belongs.

Published Documents and Source Compilations

Published documents include both major and minor documents, many of which have been translated from Portuguese to English. Almost all of the major documents on African society and economy have been published in some form or other, yet the general haphazard nature of the publication of the various source compilations has meant that the use of these

⁵¹ Beach, 'Documents and African Society'.

⁵² *Ibid.* As Beach notes, this distinction is not necessarily a definitive indicator of reliability, as a vital source of information for the Portuguese were African traders, contact with whom could provide information on the situation in a certain territory with a reasonable degree of accuracy over a period of years.

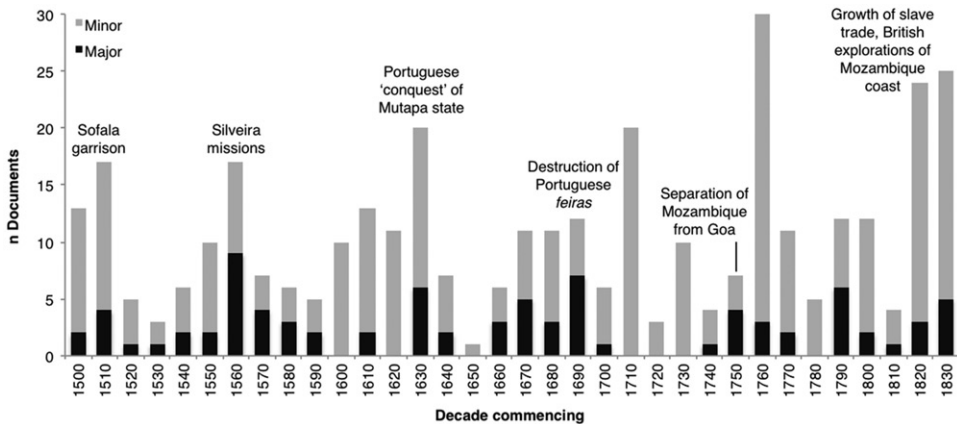


Figure 2. Number of published ‘major’ and ‘minor’ documents per decade cited in major works.

documents has tended to be heavily dependent on the extent to which the various source compilations are widely known and accessible. Figure 2 illustrates the temporal coverage of the 376 major and minor published documents captured by this study. This uneven picture largely reflects the general archival pattern and changing Portuguese knowledge of the region until the 1740s. After this point, the separation of Mozambique from the Viceroyalty of Goa led to a substantial increase in the vigilance of record-keeping, and so the number of published documents resembles only a fraction of the total number in existence, although even here many of the major documents have been published. Before 1750, we have a mixture of data-rich decades, for example the 1560s, 1630s and 1690s, when major events took place, and data-deficient decades, for example the 1530s, 1600s, 1650s and 1720s, where the number of documents actually written in the region appear to have been few. There are also consistent runs of decades with several major documents, as in the 1560s–1590s and 1660s–1690s, and spikes in the 1560s, after the killing of Gonçalo da Silveira, and in the 1630s, after the Portuguese ‘conquest’ of the Mutapa state. On the other hand, the decline in Portuguese knowledge of African society outside their immediate hinterland from the beginning of the 18th century is very noticeable, with only two major documents in the first half of that century.

Insofar as the geographical coverage of published documents is concerned, Figure 3 shows the number of documents that describe areas of the region at (a) first-hand observation and through (b) second-hand information over the period 1500–1840. First-hand reports are, unsurprisingly, most abundant for those areas within the Portuguese jurisdiction, including the lower Zambezi Tonga chiefdoms between Sena and Tete. There are fewer first-hand reports of the Mutapa state (23) and the Manyika (12) and Teve (13) areas, although, for those that do exist, the proportion of major to minor documents is relatively high. Noticeably, there is an absence of first-hand evidence for the Torwa and Rozvi states in the south-west outside a document written on behalf of Sisnando Dias Bayão in 1644. The number of second-hand accounts for Mutapa, Manyika and Teve are considerably higher, at 141, 40, and 24, respectively, while there are also a relatively high number of second-hand reports on the Zambezi valley between Sena and Tete (56). Importantly, a number of published second-hand accounts of the Torwa (15) and Rozvi (14) polities are also available.

A crucial point on the published documents relates to their availability and accessibility. Figure 4 replicates Figure 2, but shows the main volumes in which the documents have been

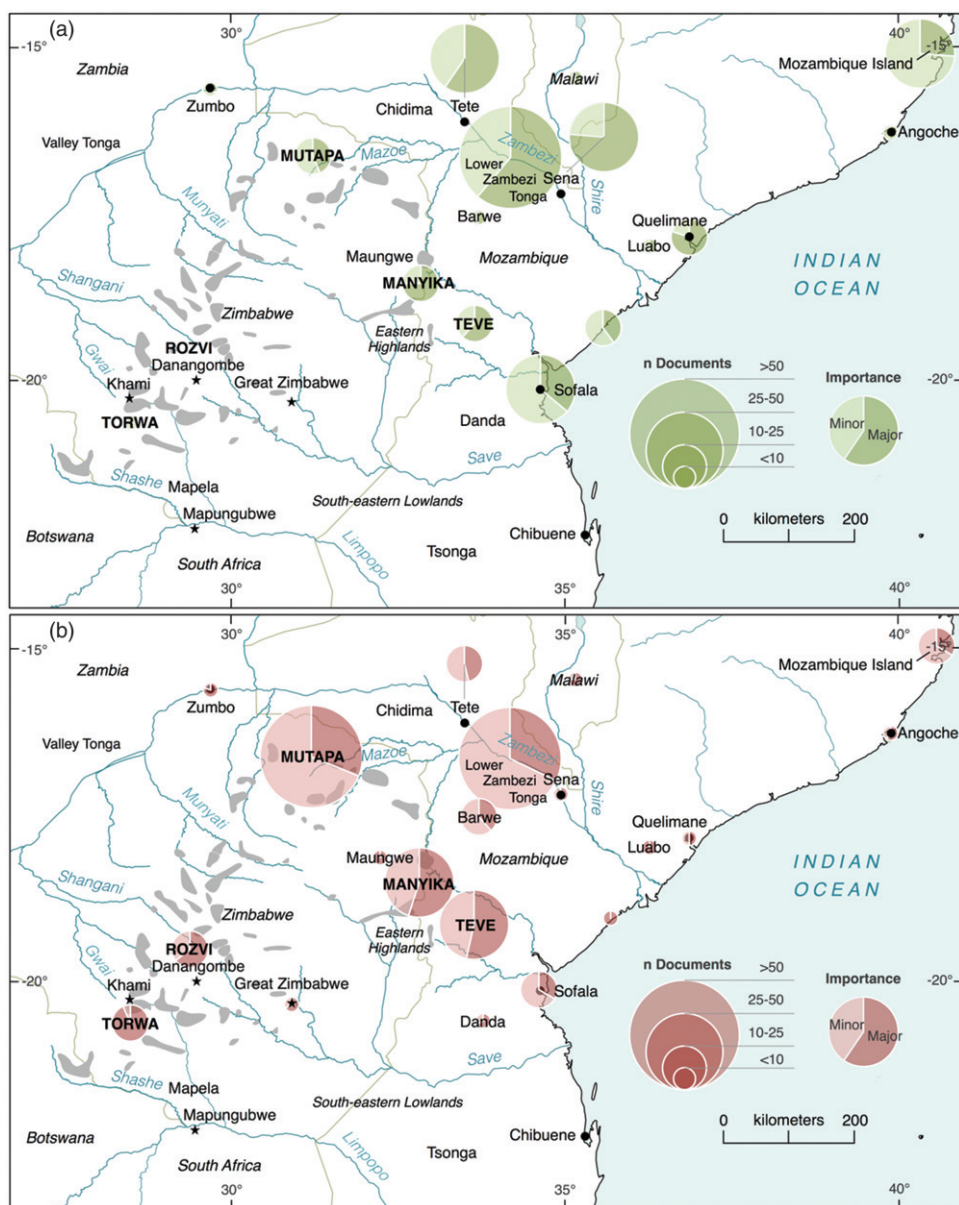


Figure 3. Spatial coverage of (a) first-hand and (b) second-hand published documents that refer to African society, economy or the environment in various areas and states, 1500–1840.

published. The most important compilation for the majority of this timeframe is Theal's nine-volume *Records of South-Eastern Africa*, with 117 documents of relevance for African society.⁵³ This work was haphazard in its chronological order, but contains a good number of the total major documents for the 16th and early 17th centuries. These include lengthy extracts from João de Barros's 1552 *Da Asia* and João dos Santos's 1609 *Ethiopia Oriental*, but also several Dutch shipwreck accounts from the 17th century and English coastal surveys from the early 19th century. This collection also has the advantage of being

53 Theal, *Records*.

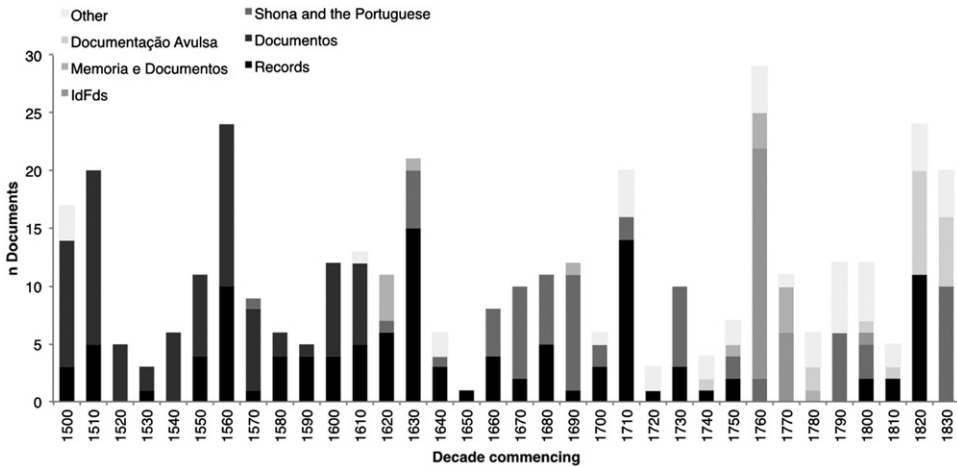


Figure 4. Number of published documents per decade by volume. Note that the total numbers differ slightly from Figure 2 owing to the inclusion of some documents in multiple source compilations.

relatively accessible compared to other source compilations, with eight of the nine volumes available online via repositories such as archive.org.

The next most important compilation by number of documents is Silva Rego and Baxter's *Documents on the Portuguese in Mozambique and Central Africa, 1497-1840*, which contains 85 texts relevant to African society.⁵⁴ This series emerged out of a project initiated by Axelson, the director of the then Salisbury archives, in the 1950s, and its ninth and final volume was published upon a revival of the project in the 1980s. It was once hoped that this series would ultimately supplant the Theal volumes and provide a definitive compilation of Portuguese documents on the region, but there were several problems that prevented this from becoming a reality. The first was that the series aimed to cover the activities of the Portuguese – a criterion which meant that practically every document ever written could have been included within its remit. Indeed, in the first five volumes it appears that almost every document relating to the region was included, with a stream of information on the day-to-day workings of the garrisons of Sofala, Mozambique and Kilwa. This meant that some volumes (4 and 5) covered just two years, and, at such a rate of progression, it would have taken almost two centuries to reach the cut-off date of 1840.⁵⁵ After Volume 5, however, information on the garrisons became less frequent, but there were some serious omissions, not least the accounts of Barros and Santos, but also the detailed account of André Fernandes in 1562 and Augustine da Zevedo in the 1580s. The *Documents* series therefore remains valuable in the sense that it complements the earlier work of Theal, but limited in that the last volume reached only the mid 1620s, and did so only by omitting several of the most important documents on the period. A further issue with this compilation is its accessibility, as the volumes are available in hard copy only, and, in most cases, require a visit to a central library.

As a partial remedy to this incomplete coverage of major Portuguese documents after the mid 17th century, a further 70 texts were transcribed and translated by Beach and Noronha in 1980 in their two-volume *The Shona and the Portuguese 1575-1890*.⁵⁶ The focus here

⁵⁴ Silva Rego and Baxter, *Documents*.

⁵⁵ D.N. Beach, 'Publishing the Past: Progress in the "Documents on the Portuguese" Series', *Zambezia*, 17, 2 (1990), pp. 175-83.

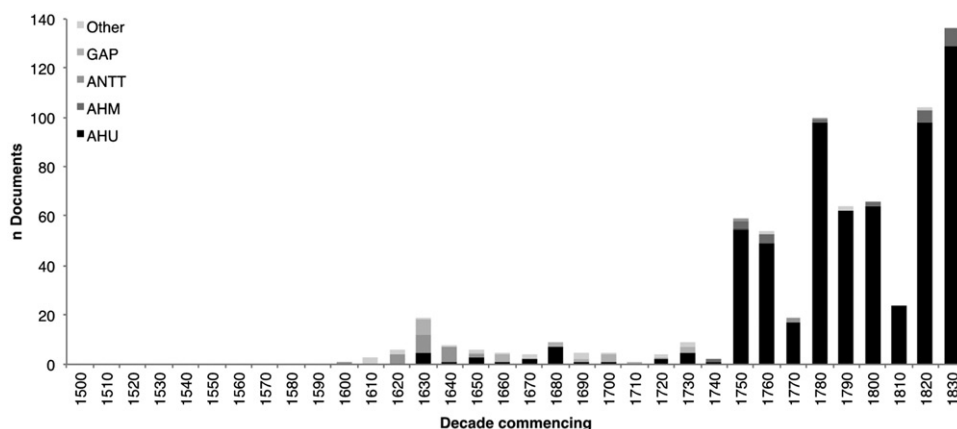


Figure 5. Unpublished documents cited in major works by archive.

was firmly on documents relating to Shona-speaking people, but the collection also included accounts of the adjacent Zambezi valley and Mozambique coast. The inclusion of highly detailed accounts, such as those of Antonio Gomes' *Voyage to the Monomotapa Empire* and Albino Manoel Pacheco's *Voyage from Tete to Zumbo*, make this compilation of great value, though a significant problem is its lack of accessibility, as this compilation is available only in hard copy in the University of Zimbabwe History department. Priority should therefore be given to the wider publication of these translations.

Taken together, the three compilations mentioned above have made available many of the major documents on African society, though a few other collections, available only in Portuguese, are worth noting. A number of these began to appear in the late 19th century in the midst of the scramble for Africa, such as *O Chronista de Tissuary*, *Arquivo Português Oriental*, *Annaes do Concelho Ultramarino*, and *Memoria e Documentos acerca dos Direitos de Portugal aos Territorios de Machona e Nyassa 1890*.⁵⁷ These were later followed by volumes such as *Relações de Moçambique Setecentista*, while other volumes, including *Documentação Avulsa Moçambicana de Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino*, *Inventário do Fundo do Século* and *Arquivo das Colónias* contain reprints, summaries and extracts of documents for the 18th and 19th centuries (see Figure 4).⁵⁸ There also remain a significant number of documents edited and published as individual booklets. Some of these are translated, for example Francisco Raimundo Moraes Pereira's 1752 *Account of a Journey made Overland from Quelimane to Angoche* and the valuable 1798 account of Lacerda's *Journey to Cazembe*, although most of these individual accounts were published only in Portuguese.⁵⁹

56 Beach and Noronha (eds), *The Shona and the Portuguese*.

57 J.H. da Cunha Rivara, *O Chronista de Tissuary* (Nova Goa, Imprensa Nacional, 4 vols, 1866–69); A.B. de Bragança Pereira, *Arquivo Portugues Oriental* (Bastora, Tipografia Rangel, 1936–40); Annaes do Conselho Ultramarino (Lisbon, Imprensa Nacional, 38 vols., 1867–1913); *Memoria e Documentos acerca dos Direitos de Portugal aos Territorios de Machona e Nyassa 1890* (Lisbon, Imprensa Nacional, 1890).

58 A.A. de Andrade, *Relações de Moçambique Setecentista* (Lisbon, Agência Geral do Ultramar, 1955); F. Santana, *Documentação Avulsa Moçambicana de Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino*, 3 vols. (Lisbon, Centro de Estudos Historicos Ultramarinos, 1964–1974); *Inventário do Fundo do Século XVIII no Arquivo Histórico de Moçambique* (Lourenço Marques, Imprensa Nacional, 1952–58); *Arquivo das Colónias*, Ministerio das Colónias (Coimbra, Imprensa da Universidade, 5 vols., 1917–33).

59 F.R.M. Pereira, *Account of a Journey made Overland from Quelimane to Angoche in 1752*, ed. and trans. M.D.D. Newitt (Salisbury, Central African Historical Association, Occasional Paper no. 14, 1965); F.M.L. Almeida, *Lacerda's Journey to Cazembe*, trans. Richard Burton (London, John Murray, 1873).

Unpublished Documents

Almost all known 16th- and early 17th-century documents have now been published. The search of sources cited in the secondary literature on the region revealed that a reasonable number (88) of 17th- and the early 18th-century minor documents remain unpublished, which primarily relate to Mutapa–Portuguese relations, power struggles and civil war in the Mutapa state, and the Zambezi *prazos*. The number of unpublished documents then grows enormously from the 1750s (see Figure 5). The subject matter of these documents is varied, with large numbers of documents relating to the Zambezi *prazos*, in particular agriculture, social structure, migration and conflict, to trade between the Portuguese and the Mutapa, Manyika and Rozvi polities, and to internal affairs within these polities. There is also valuable unpublished statistical material on exports from the Mozambique coast, price data, and demographic data from the Sena area. Whereas the dominant archives in which the documents are held prior to 1752 are the Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo in Lisbon and the Goa Archives in Panaji, after this point it is the collections relating to Mozambique in the Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Lisbon, and, in the 19th century, the Arquivo

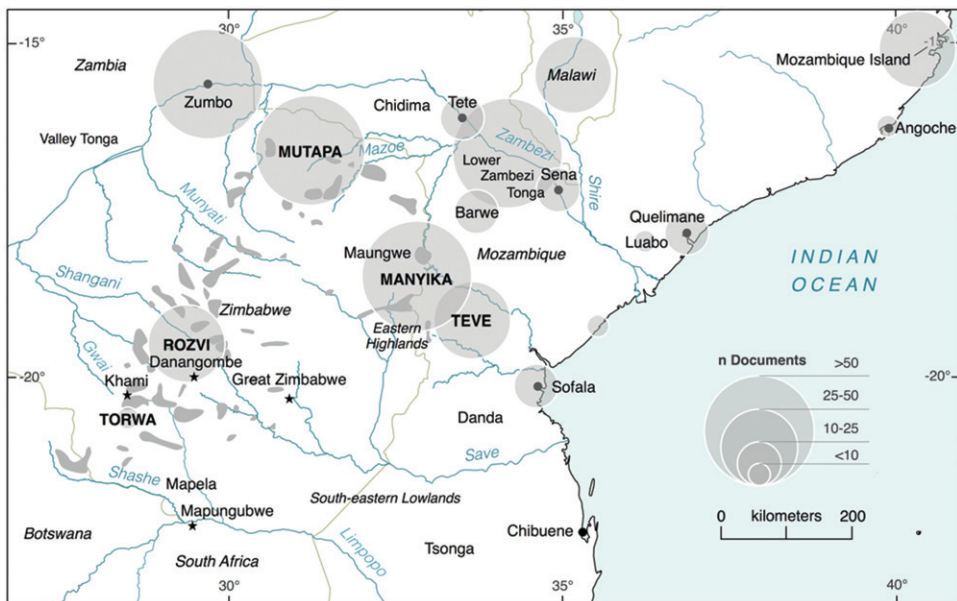


Figure 6. Number of known unpublished documents that refer to African society, economy or environment in various areas and states, 1500–1840.

Histórico de Moçambique, Maputo, that house most of the remaining unpublished documents. Other archives, such as the Biblioteca Nacional, Lisbon, and the Biblioteca Pública de Ajuda, Lisbon, also house a small number of unpublished documents, while the work of W.F. Rea uncovered important quantitative material for the Jesuit *prazos* on the Zambezi in the 18th century from the Archivum Romanum Societatis Jesu in Rome.⁶⁰

The spatial coverage of the unpublished material differs considerably from that of the published texts (see Figure 6). There are, for example, many more documents that relate to Zumbo (68), the north bank of the Zambezi (42), and Barwe (15), while the number of

60 Rea, *The Economics of the Zambezi Missions*.

documents on the Mutapa state (135), Manyika (84), Teve (24) and the Rozvi state are also considerable. It is important to note, further, that the geographical coverage of unpublished sources in particular does not reflect *every* document available on African society in this region, but rather is heavily influenced by the major studies of Mudenge on the Rozvi and Zumbo, Bhila on Manyika, and Newitt, Isaacman and Rea on the Zambezi. Thus there may be further quantities of information still to be uncovered, especially relating to the societies in the hinterland of Portuguese settlement on the Mozambique coast, which have received less focused attention prior to the 19th century.⁶¹

Future Directions in Pre-Colonial Economic and Social History

When the idea for this article was originally conceived, the intention was to focus on the database of documents as a tool for the reinvigoration of pre-colonial history. The present state of the field has nevertheless warranted a much fuller analysis of existing shortcomings and gaps, and therefore now necessitates comment on some potential ways forward. Several suggestions are made here, with particular reference to the two bodies of scholarship discussed in the second section of the article, though these hold wider applicability for the discipline as a whole. These suggestions converge broadly around the need for systematic use of the historical record (and other sources) to engage more rigorously with theory, especially by making use of the opportunities offered by comparative methodologies.

One of the main criticisms of pre-colonial historical scholarship in south-east Africa was its focus on the history of events, and the disconnect between this history and economic and social change. With regard to the trade and politics historiography, the social effects of changing patterns and mechanisms of the intercontinental trade remain unclear, and, while scholars have been quick to dismiss the idea that rulers held a monopoly over gold mining, the internal organisation of the export-related economy in centralised political units has rested on hazy assumptions that are often in direct contradiction to the documentary evidence itself. It may therefore be necessary to pose more basic questions before such an analysis can be arrived at. These could include questions raised by Beach several decades ago, such as ‘what made cloth and beads wealth?’ And ‘what drove the apparent rapid response to external trade opportunities?’⁶² In some ways, this takes us back to earlier calls to consider the ‘relations of production’ in trade-related economic activities, in other words the ways in which production, exchange, distribution and consumption interacted, although added to this must be an assessment of the issue of resource control as called for in the trade and politics section of this article. Only then, and also when these mechanisms are compared across societies, can the relationship between trade and social and political change be better understood.

A related question involves the ways in which the relatively early penetration of European traders into the region affected pre-colonial society outside the direct realm of intercontinental trade. This could include exploration of the more subtle growth of small-scale trade in foodstuffs around trading posts such as Sofala, Sena, Tete and the better-documented *feiras*, or the gradual but more pronounced spread of crops such as maize, wheat and rice across the region as a whole. In this area, collaboration with researchers in palaeoecology, archaeobotany and archaeology could be particularly rewarding. Indeed, the integration of the long record of historical documentation with data from archaeology and

61 For example, T.H. Elkiss, *The Quest for an African Eldorado: Sofala, Southern Zambezia and the Portuguese, 1500–1865* (Waltham, Mass., Crossroads Press, 1981). The major work of Alpers relates mostly to the area north of the Zambezi; Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves*.

62 D.N. Beach, ‘Second Thoughts on the Shona Economy: Suggestions for Further Research’, *Rhodesian History*, 7 (1976), pp. 1–13.

the natural sciences remains one of the key challenges and opportunities for pre-colonial history in south-east Africa.

There also exists further scope for research into other areas of food production. For example, if we can accept many of the basic points in Beach's *Shona Economy*, there is a need to revisit its assumptions about the role and relative importance of certain activities, such as hunting. Earlier work promoted the idea that hunting was primarily a scarcity-driven activity, or that communities could not survive when reliant almost exclusively on hunting and gathering. This has been contested in recent literature.⁶³ It would therefore be illuminating to reassess hypotheses advanced at the high point of pre-colonial historical research, which in many cases have become 'entrenched knowledge', by way of cross-regional comparative studies using documentary evidence, archaeobotanical studies and – in the case of hunting, for example – new methods of mapping historical elephant populations.⁶⁴ The legacy of research conducted in the 1960s to 1980s has also left several geographical lacunae in certain areas of investigation. The 17th and early 18th centuries in the lower Zambezi valley and coastal Mozambique, for example, lack the detailed studies on environment and economic activity that have been conducted for the plateau area of present-day Zimbabwe.⁶⁵ This is especially surprising given the high concentration of documentary evidence in these areas (see Figure 3). In this respect, attempts to combine the valuable data presented by Rea in his study of the Jesuit *prazos* with the mass of Portuguese documentation on the *prazos* could enable the production of a series of rich micro-level studies of changing historical food production and the interaction of communities residing in the Zambezi valley with their neighbouring states.

A different area of opportunity for pre-colonial history relates to developments in the wider field of economic history. There is now a drive to produce large datasets and long-run time series of social phenomena, often by those outside the historical discipline. In turn, these datasets have been used to assess the relationship between social phenomena, for example conflict, and exogenous variables, such as temperature variability. To take the example of conflict, however, studies have relied upon datasets that only partially capture historically documented conflicts in south-east Africa, or that lack source criticism, which inevitably has subsequent effects on any observed statistical relationship.⁶⁶ In this respect, the richness of documentary data on south-east Africa provides an opportunity to contextualise and contribute to the formulation of large datasets, but also to engage critically with the simplistic readings of African history that may emerge from their use.

Critical engagement with wider developments can also extend to the social sciences. Although the limited amount of quantitative evidence provided in the Portuguese documents may be a drawback, the relatively favourable documentary situation in the Zambezi–Limpopo area – in terms of temporal time frame and its coverage of numerous

63 M. Manyanga and G. Pangeti, 'Precolonial Hunting in Southern Africa: A Changing Paradigm', in M. Manyanga and S. Chirikure (eds), *Archives, Objects, Places and Landscapes: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Decolonised Zimbabwean Pasts* (Bamenda, Langaa Research and Publishing Common Initiative Group, 2017).

64 A.N. Coutu, J. Lee-Thorp, M.J. Collins and P.J. Lane, 'Mapping the Elephants of the 19th Century East African Ivory Trade with a Multi-Isotope Approach', *PLoS ONE*, 11, 10 (2016).

65 A notable exception is the Chibuene area, which has been covered in extensive detail, see A. Ekblom, 'Livelihood Security, Vulnerability and Resilience: A Historical Analysis of Chibuene, Southern Mozambique', *Ambio*, 41, 5 (2012), pp. 479–89; P. Sinclair, A. Ekblom and M. Wood, 'Trade and Society on the South-East African Coast in the Later First Millennium AD: The Case of Chibuene', *Antiquity*, 86, 333 (2012), pp. 723–37.

66 See, for example, H.F. Lee and D.D. Zhang, 'Quantitative Analysis of Climate Change and Human Crises in History', in M.P. Kwan, D. Richardson, D. Wang and C. Zhou (eds), *Space-Time Integration in Geography and GIScience: Research Frontiers in the US and China* (Dordrecht, Springer, 2015), pp. 235–67; J. Fenske and N. Kala, 'Climate and the Slave Trade', *Journal of Development Economics*, 112 (2015), pp. 19–32.

societies and subject matters – provides an opportunity to systematically test ideas and methods developed in the social and natural sciences. Van Bavel and Curtis have spoken of using the past as a ‘laboratory’ to test hypotheses empirically, which, in a sense, has already begun to take place in the area of historical disaster vulnerability and resilience in south-east Africa, but this could be fruitfully extended to more regional and socially contextualised analyses of ideas put forward by economists on environment, resources, trade, climate, the roots of inequality, and African state formation and disintegration.⁶⁷ Finally, in each of these potential endeavours, it is important to note the importance of geographical and longitudinal comparisons. Although we now have major works on the Mutapa state, the Rozvi state, the Manyika polity and the lower Zambezi valley, the goal of identifying patterns, mechanisms, key variables and causality in the post-1500 period has largely stalled, and, in the absence of such a comparative approach, research may be limited to mere description.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to evaluate some of the major trends in the economic and social history of pre-colonial south-east Africa, and, in doing so, it has sought to identify why continued analysis and interpretation of the full range of written source material on this region remains crucial. It has also offered some potential ways forward in terms of materials, methods and research themes, where the major contribution is the database of documentary sources and the overview of its temporal and geographical coverage. This may be seen as an entry point both for renewed investigation of pre-colonial history in the region and for further efforts to transcribe, compile and publish the substantial portion of documentary history that remains difficult to access for, or often unknown to, Africanists and non-Africanists alike. A final word may be given to the timing of this contribution. Since the late 1990s, the appearance of fresh works in pre-colonial history about the post-1500 period has slowed considerably. Some possible reasons for this were given in the introduction, but it is also possible that this may be due, at least in part, to the perception that pre-colonial history possesses less relevance to problems that are perceived as more immediate and closer to home. More recently, calls to decolonise curricula in South Africa’s higher education institutions have become more prominent, and studies of the region’s history prior to the late 19th century are once again in demand. It is surely now also time for a reinvigoration of pre-colonial historical research north of the Limpopo.

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67 B.J.P. van Bavel and D. Curtis, ‘Better Understanding Disasters by Better Using History: Systematically Using the Historical Record as One Way to Advance Research into Disasters’, *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, 34, 1 (2016), pp. 143–69; J. Fenske, ‘Ecology, Trade, and States in Pre-Colonial Africa’, *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 12, 3 (2014), pp. 612–40.