

The Material Foundations of the Sub-Saharan African State in Historical Perspective

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the historical roots of African state fragility by exploring the continuities *and* changes in the revenue-raising strategies of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial states in Sub-Saharan Africa. We develop a conceptual framework of fiscal capacity building to explain 1) how pre-colonial regimes in Africa responded to location and ecology-specific opportunities of state revenue production and power concentration; 2) why African state revenues were comparatively instable, which translated in a high degree of temporal and spatial dynamics in African state development; 3) how state revenue production strategies changed with the onset of colonial rule, without altering the deeper material foundations of the African state. Our emphasis on the long-term patterns and dynamic characteristics of the fiscal foundations of African states scrutinizes static conceptions historical processes of African state formation that dominate political science and development studies.