

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: London School of Economics and Political Science		
Unit of Assessment: 28A – Economic History		
Title of case study: Currency revolutions in Africa: creating an open access online resource		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Leigh Gardner	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Associate Professor	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2011 to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2018-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Research on the monetary history of West Africa has underpinned an LSE collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution and the creation of new digital collections. These resources have engaged new audiences and enhanced understanding of the economic, political, and social histories of West Africa, and contributed to a decolonisation of the Smithsonian collection. Teaching resources based on the collection have been tailored to the history curriculum of the 96 public schools in Loudoun County, Virginia, and made public on the Smithsonian's education platform, Learning Lab. At the same time, the innovative "research-led digitisation" model of showcasing small-scale but historically significant collections has influenced how other Smithsonian curators approach their own digitisations, and has recently been extended to the digitisation of Smithsonian collections from South Africa.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Currencies and their use provide a window into wider histories of trade, politics, and cultural interaction. In West Africa, they reflect the complex legacies of colonial rule and decolonisation. It was once popular to refer to a "currency revolution", in which colonial coins and notes displaced indigenous currencies with the advent of imperial rule, and were later replaced by national currencies after independence. Subsequent research has painted a more nuanced picture of the interaction of economic, political, and monetary change in the region over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries [1] [2] [3].</p> <p>Central to Dr Leigh Gardner's research has been the study of how specific coins, notes, and other objects were used as currency by different communities. In Europe, the nineteenth century saw the consolidation of multiple currency systems into the system of national currencies we know today. Far from being the norm, however, such systems were historically exceptional. In Africa, different currencies were used for different types of transactions, often contrary to the intentions of colonial and post-independence governments [1] [2]. In this way, trade, politics, and culture intersected to form complicated monetary geographies which were shaped as much by Africans as by European colonisers.</p> <p>Case studies of individual countries provide some of the most vivid illustrations of these patterns. One example is the issue of the Liberian dollar after Liberia's declaration of independence in 1847 [1]. Liberia remained one of the only parts of Sub-Saharan Africa to maintain formal political sovereignty through the colonial period, a point which the issue of the currency was intended to emphasise. Joseph Roberts, the first President of Liberia, claimed that the new coins would provide the "stamp of nationality" for the Liberian state. The first coins had the image of an allegorical woman wearing a cap associated in classical imagery with freed slaves on one side, and of a ship and an oil palm on the other, reflecting the key anchors of the Liberian economy. However, the exercise of monetary sovereignty by the Liberian government faced immediate practical challenges due to its limited resources, which resulted in the de facto adoption of British colonial currency. This provided economic stability but amounted to a concession of Liberian sovereignty; Liberian officials feared that the use of coins bearing the words "British West Africa" in the country was an attempt to "British-ise Liberia", in the words of the Liberian President at the time. During World War II, US dollars replaced British currency, and to this day Liberia retains a dual-currency system which uses the US dollar and the Liberian dollar simultaneously.</p>		

Another case uses monetary history to show how attempts to compromise between political and commercial imperatives often had unanticipated consequences [2]. In the early twentieth century, the Gambia was a tiny British colony surrounded by French Senegal. When British rule was established, the colonial government acknowledged that the local economy was dependent on trade with Senegal and set a fixed exchange rate between British sterling and the French franc. This created opportunities for substantial profits from arbitrage when the international rate of exchange began to fluctuate during World War I and the following decades. Enterprising African traders profited handsomely by crossing the long land border between Senegal and the Gambia, exchanging French five-franc coins (which were historically associated with the groundnut trade) for sterling coins at the official rate, then crossing the border again to buy francs at the depreciated international rate.

This research illustrates how understanding the use of money in Africa across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries helps to answer wider questions about the extent of state capacity and colonial control, as well as the influence of global shifts in exchange rates on African economies [4] [5]. Crucial to this work is the fact that the objects themselves had meaning, both for those who issued them and those who used them. After independence, African governments faced important choices about both the extent to which monetary ties to former colonisers should be maintained, and how to use coins and banknotes to express their newfound political freedom [3].

By providing access to images of the objects themselves through digitisation, and the curation of sub-collections on the Learning Lab platform, this project helps bring these histories to a wider audience of students and the general public.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[1] Gardner, L. A. (2014). The rise and fall of sterling in Liberia, 1847-1943. *Economic History Review*, 67(4), pp. 1089-1112. DOI: 10.1111/1468-0289.12042.

[2] Gardner, L. A. (2015). The curious incident of the franc in the Gambia: exchange rate instability and imperial monetary systems in the 1920s. *Financial History Review*, 22(3), pp. 291-314. DOI: 10.1017/S0968565015000232.

[3] Gardner, L. A. (2016). From currency boards to central banks: nationalism, regionalism and economic development. In Feiertag, O. and Margairaz, M. (Eds), *The Central Banks and the Nation-State* (pp. 231-260). Paris: Mission Historique de la Banque de France. ISBN: 9782724619102.

[4] Gardner, L. A. (2012). *Taxing Colonial Africa: The Political Economy of British Imperialism*. Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780199661527.

[5] Gardner, L. A. (2017). Colonialism or supersanctions: sovereignty and debt in West Africa, 1871-1914. *European Review of Economic History*, 21(2), pp. 236-257. DOI: 10.1093/ereh/hex001.

All outputs are based on original archival research and have undergone rigorous peer review. [1] and [5] appear in the top journals in the wider field of economic history, while [2] was published in the leading journal in the field of financial history. [4] appeared in the prestigious *Oxford Historical Monographs* series and the dissertation on which it was based won the 2011 Thirsk-Feinstein Dissertation Prize awarded by the Economic History Society. [1], [2], [3], and [5] were supported by peer-reviewed funds, including a Leverhulme project (on which Gardner was a post-doctoral researcher).

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Over the course of a collaboration between the LSE and the Smithsonian Institution, the underpinning research has been used to create innovative new digital collections and physical exhibits. These collections and resources have contributed to the preservation of the cultural heritage of West Africa, engaged new audiences and enhanced understanding of its monetary history, and also helped to decolonise Smithsonian collections. Digital collections tailored to the 10th-grade history curriculum and posted to the Smithsonian's education platform (Learning Lab) highlight the applications of the collection for teaching. This collaborative project has also

developed a new "research-led digitisation" approach to showcasing small but historically significant collections, one that has already influenced other Smithsonian curators.

Smithsonian-LSE collaboration

The collaboration began when Gardner approached Dr Ellen Feingold, Curator of the National Numismatic Collection (NNC) at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History (NMAH), for permission to digitise images of a selection of coins and notes for a forthcoming book. This led to broader discussions based on recent research about the ways in which currency objects could tell wider stories about political and economic change in West Africa for use in teaching, research, and public history. As the Smithsonian did not have resources to support the digitisation of small but historically important collections like this one, the LSE agreed to provide funding for the project from its knowledge exchange and impact funds.

Creation of new digital collections for the Smithsonian

The heart of the project is a new [open-access digital collection](#) of 880 coins, banknotes, and other objects used as currency from West Africa [A]. This collection was first made publicly available on the Smithsonian website in August 2019. Subsequently, sub-collections have been curated for classroom use. Availability through the Smithsonian's platforms is particularly significant; as the world's largest museum, and through its vast physical and digital presence, it aims to reach a billion users worldwide. According to the Head of Digital Programs at the NMAH, the West Africa project "offers a new way of engaging with wider audiences and, crucially, assessing the effect of that research outside academia" [B].

Understanding the history of currency objects themselves – why they were created, where they circulated, and what they communicated to their users – has been central to knowledge about how monetary systems developed and reflected wider economic, political, and social changes. However, access to these objects remains a challenge, and research is often targeted at specialist audiences. As of 2020, there is no comparative numismatic collection in sub-Saharan Africa, and much of what is held in museums elsewhere has either not yet been digitised or is not easily discoverable in large, museum-wide collection databases. Catalogue entries for these objects often reflect dated understandings of how they were used. This project offers a new perspective on the economic, political, and social histories of the region, engaging new audiences and contributing to an enhanced understanding of the topic.

The 880 objects digitised as part of this project included coins and banknotes from the colonial and post-independence eras as well as a range of alternative currencies like cowrie shells, manillas, and iron bars known as Kissi pennies. The images created are open access and can be used freely by scholars and educators in Africa and beyond. As part of the digitisation process, Gardner's recent research [1] [2] [3] [4], among others', was drawn upon to update object descriptions, for example by removing dated or often offensive language referring to alternative currencies as "primitive" or "curious", and replacing with new versions which reflect more recent scholarly understandings of indigenous monetary systems [C]. In this way, the project has contributed to a decolonisation of this Smithsonian collection.

The project has been well-received among professionals in public history, digital humanities, and other fields. In May 2020, *Reviews in Digital Humanities* described the project as "a wonderful resource that will bring an otherwise rather obscure collection into a wide range of lesson plans and research projects" [D]. It has also featured in the February 2020 edition of *E-Sylum*, a numismatics newsletter with a large readership.

Smithsonian Learning Lab – impacts on educational practices

As literature on digitisation notes, it is one thing to place an image of an object online, and another to get people to use them in teaching. To facilitate the use of these objects in teaching, several sub-collections were curated for use on the Smithsonian's Learning Lab platform [E], which is targeted for use by educators and has around 600,000 current users. Gardner and Feingold selected relevant objects for each sub-collection and wrote the supporting material, based on the underpinning research. One of these [collections](#), "Money and Exchange in West Africa", used a selection of the objects to tell the story of how money has changed in West Africa since the nineteenth century. Others focused on particular themes in West African history, including: 1) [the](#)

[shift from indigenous colonial currencies](#); 2) [decolonisation and the transition to independence](#); and 3) [the impact of the Second World War in West Africa](#) [E].

To illustrate the potential for Learning Labs to be customised for particular education goals, three of the Learning Labs (colonialism, decolonisation, and World War II) were tailored to specific modules in the World History curriculum taught to 10th-graders (15-16-year-olds) in the Loudoun County, Virginia, school system. Loudoun County has 96 schools and a total enrolment of 81,964 students, including 6,829 in 10th grade [F]. The Labs were designed and developed in collaboration with the NMAH's educators team and their network of teachers with the intention of promoting their use in classrooms, with "*Dr Gardner's scholarship [playing] a key role*" [C]. The social studies department chair at one school wrote that she "*definitely [thinks] our students would benefit from seeing these*", and identified various ways in which students might engage with the objects in the course of their learning, such as researching who appears on coins and notes in different periods, and using their findings as a basis for debating who should be the next person on US currency [G].

The Senior Education Specialist at the NMAH has highlighted the impressive and diverse pedagogical potential of these new digital resources. After they were shared with teachers in the northern Virginia region, she commented not only on their benefits to learning, but also on their deeper cultural value: "*the resources present significant potential learning opportunities for developing global competencies and critical thinking skills among students, as well as providing a powerful method for validating and centring the experience of students who may have cultural ties to the nations represented. Teaching with the West African currency can help students develop cross-cultural understandings. They will have the opportunity to see connections across time and cultures and through this broaden their understanding of what it means to be a global citizen with awareness of and empathy for the experience of people in nations outside of their own. The currency provides a launching point for understanding not only economic systems, but also cultural identities and how people adapt to change and continuity, through which students may recognise similarities and differences to their own cultures and see others as part of their global community*" [H].

While the promotion of actual classroom use was delayed by school shutdowns, the objects and Learning Labs have received significant downloads thus far. As of February 2021, object pages have been accessed 5,071 times by 3,517 users. Collectively, the Learning Labs have been viewed 2,813 times by 540 unique users [I]. As schools reopen, we will build on these initial foundations by reaching out to additional networks of teachers.

Contribution to National Museum of American History exhibition

Alongside the digital sub-collections was a physical display on the history of the US dollar in Liberia, based on [1], opened in October 2019 as part of the "Value of Money" exhibition at the NMAH. The Curator of the NNC has called this "*a meaningful contribution in terms of diversifying the lenses through which we interpret American history and which histories are included in it*" [C]. The museum receives around 4 million visitors annually. A [virtual version](#) of the display also appears on Learning Lab. The display was the subject of a [post](#) on the Smithsonian's *O Say Can You See?* blog [J] and a presentation at the NMAH Colloquium series in November 2019, with an audience of around 30 curators and other museum staff. As of 5 January 2021, the blog post has received 2,380 unique page views.

Development of a new "research-led digitisation" approach

This project has also provided a new template for partnerships between museums and universities: "research-led digitisation". Digitisation projects at museums generally aim to place images online so that they become the subject of research, maximising access by digitising as many objects or documents as possible with minimal description. Such projects are dependent on grant or donor funding and tend to prioritise large collections. In research-led digitisation, scholars and curators can digitise smaller but historically significant collections, using current research to update object descriptions and help facilitate the use of the digital images in teaching. The Curator of the NNC has noted how "*this approach is already having an impact on how other Smithsonian curators think about digitising their collections*" [C]. Similarly, the Head of Digital Programs at the NMAH has said "*this same model is potentially generalisable across multiple public history institutions, and may help in diversifying sources of funding for digitisation projects while at the*

same time providing new avenues for the public dissemination of academic research” [B]. An article explaining this new model of collaboration is the cover feature for the November 2020 issue of *Perspectives on History* [K], the American Historical Association’s news magazine, which is circulated to 15,000 individual and institutional AHA members, 40% of whom are students, teachers, public historians, and publishers.

Extension to South Africa

This project and its “research-led digitisation” model has already been extended to South Africa. Gardner and Feingold were approached by Johan Fourie at Stellenbosch University, who wanted to digitise the NNC’s South African materials as part of a series of events commemorating the centenary of the South African Reserve Bank. Again supported by the LSE’s knowledge exchange and impact funds, 714 coins, notes, and other currency objects are to be digitised and will be used as the basis for new digital sub-collections on the Learning Lab, offering new perspectives on the history of political and economic change in South Africa over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from the establishment of colonial regimes to the South African War and the rise and fall of apartheid. Alongside the Learning Labs, lesson plans specifically tailored to the South African history curriculum will enable the use of the digitised objects in teaching at school and university level, providing the basis for a new, “bottom-up” history of money in South Africa [C]. This was due to commence in Autumn 2020 but has been delayed by the forced closure of the Smithsonian.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[A] West African currency collection, National Museum of American History.

[B] Supporting statement from Head of Digital Programs, National Museum of American History.

[C] Supporting statement from Curator of the National Numismatic Collection, National Museum of American History, 11 November 2020.

[D] Review: Money and Exchange in West Africa, *Reviews in Digital Humanities*, 2 May 2020.

[E] Smithsonian Learning Lab collections (various).

[F] Loudon County Public Schools (LCPS) Dashboard data, calculated based on the LCPS 2020-2021 school year. Retrieved 18 November 2020.

[G] Communication between school Social Studies Department Chair and Senior Education Specialist, National Museum of American History, 19 November 2019.

[H] Supporting statement from Senior Education Specialist, National Museum of American History, 10 November 2020.

[I] NNC/LSE West African Currency Digitization Project [web stats](#), collated via Google Data Studio. Retrieved 16 December 2020.

[J] “Dollars for Donuts in Monrovia, Liberia”, *O Say Can You See?*, 5 November 2019.

[K] “Research-Led Digitization: Inverting the Usual Way of Thinking about Digitization”, *Perspectives on History*, 6 October 2020.