

GLOBAL AND LOCAL FORCES IN AFRICAN DEINDUSTRIALIZATION: THE CASE OF COTTON CLOTH IN THE LOWER SHIRE VALLEY

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ABSTRACT: Up to the nineteenth century, cloth production flourished in many parts of east Africa. However, in several cases, this production had waned or disappeared entirely by the early twentieth century. Numerous scholars have suggested that industrial decline in places like east Africa was largely affected by externally wrought global forces (promulgated by capital-rich countries) that influenced production choices in lesser-developed world regions. In particular, theorists have pointed to strong global demand and favorable terms of trade for agricultural primary products, along with an apparent flood of foreign cloth imports from industrialized countries, which purportedly disincentivized local production. But to what extent did such global forces affect local production, and to what degree did local factors influence outcomes? The process of deindustrialization is investigated through a case study of Malawi's Lower Shire Valley, where the local cloth industry deteriorated in the second half of the nineteenth century. I argue that global forces did play a role, but the specific pathways of their influence differed from what has been suggested by popular deindustrialization theories. Further, deindustrialization studies must give greater attention to local factors - in this case, a changing land-labor ratio - which were affected by both global and local forces and subsequently influenced production choices.