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THE USE OF SLAVES IN
WEST AFRICA

by

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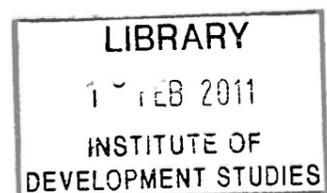
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of European goods and European demands upon the allocation of slaves in the supposed economic equilibria in the asset, factor "money" and goods markets of West Africa.

It concludes that the bulk of slaves would seem to have been allocated with an awareness of the alternatives.

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PREAMBLE

I would like to make my own the following quotation from a recent Doctoral thesis: (1, 5)

"...it seems necessary to point out that this thesis is a study of economic history and not a study of morality. This last point seems of some importance because so many of the present as well as past scholars working in the area of the slaves trade have felt compelled to continuously reassert their conviction that the institution of slavery was morally reprehensible. Not infrequently the issue of morality may still be detectable even in the conclusions of modern historical analysts. (2;5). Hopefully, it will be enough for this author to assert once, now, that he believes slavery to be an immoral institution. In the rest of this study we shall try to approach and analyze the Atlantic slave trade in much the same manner and with much the same tools that would have been used in a study of, say, the twentieth century home construction industry."

THE USE OF SLAVES IN WEST AFRICA.

INTRODUCTION

As in earlier essays (3;4) the scope of this paper is limited to the West Coast of during the four hundred years 1450 - 1850.

The question of how any given stock of slaves was used on the West African Coast might first be seen as allocating some portion to "public goods": peace and the propitiation of the gods i.e. taxes to a suzerain and sacrifice.

Those that remained could be retained or exported; exports could be either Trans Atlantic or to other African Kingdoms. Those that were retained could be used for a range of productive activities, their retention probably yielded a satisfaction to their owners in prestige and they may also have given some utility analagous to the holding of cash balances.

As assets slaves were probably more risky than, say, gold or wives but their present discounted value was at least as high because of their productive potential.

SLAVES AS ASSETS.

When the Portuguese and later the Dutch, English, French and Danes started trading to the West African Coast it is not to be supposed there was no so-called modern economic activity going on. Evidence of trade, of wealth accretions and of production for exchange all have come down to us and recent historical studies strengthen these conclusions.

We may assume that assets (stores of wealth and factors used in producing desired goods) were not free and those who held them held some combination which in a sense¹ was in equilibrium.

1. The equilibrium might be described as one in which the expected earnings (maybe suitably discounted) of each asset was proportional to its price. This would embody some assesement of the relative riskyness of the available assets.

Since the transactions of these economies were largely in barter terms (occasional exceptions of cowrie and bar, bark cloth or gold currencies occur (6, passim)) one might conclude that the wealthy of those days were different from their modern counterpart. There seems little reason to believe this of African rulers etc. any more than of the barons of the early Middle Ages, let alone the merchants. One merely needs to understand their economic environment and the choices open to them.

They held gold, ivory, slaves, wives, cattle and probably a number of other assets; they could get more of one type by giving up some of another (6,145,159; 7,I:386). Some assets, analagously to investment, could be used to produce more. And like conventional portfolio analysis (8) people could hold "money" as an asset.

In virtue of their liquidity, acceptable exchange media were desired assets. Slaves were both productive and acceptable in transaction. Although they were not homogeneous there seems to have been an abstract slaves (similar to the piece d'Indies in the Trans Atlantic Trade 9,193; 10,22)). They were - obviously - "portable", useful, recognisable, reasonably durable and probably not too unstable in value. Thus they possessed most of the desirable properties of a primitive exchange medium, lacking mainly the quality of divisibility. Gold, too, was desired for ornament and exchange.

What happened with the opening up of the Trans Atlantic Trade? It seems we can distinguish three separate disturbances to the old equilibria causing wealth holders to change. Firstly new assets appeared - tinselled trinkets, guns. European durables like bows etc., secondly new consumer goods appeared - cloth and liquor² and finally new prices for old assets were quoted, particularly gold and slaves. Besides these considerations, somewhat later the new source of income via taxes and 'dashes' must have influenced consumption patterns.

2. The Europeans also introduced some goods that would have competed with local produce directly such as iron, maybe certain types of cloth and in the later years, gold and other intermediate inputs like gun-powder.

The new-comers represented markets for certain traditional goods too, particularly food (33,120; 30,268). But it was mainly as sellers that they were welcomed. The Kingdoms vied with each other to attract ships while compromising neither their sovereignty nor market position (3,2,13).

The foreigners were prepared to accept gold and slaves in exchange for their cargoes so, not unnaturally, Gresham's law came into effect.³ The poorest medium that would pass as current was used in trade. Gold was adulterated (20,1777:fo. 312), and every conceivable trick was practiced to pass off inferior slaves as prime ones (34,94; 19, 77; I:401: 20,1777; fo. 317). (This was no one sided business either since the literature that has survived makes mention of short cloth lengths (35,27) and diluted liquor (17,134; 36,147) among the European trade goods).

The fact that slaves were not costless to store - at a minimum they required feeding - must have weighed against their retention unless they could be used. Slaves were risky assets: they could die, escape or be captured; death and capture undoubtedly also applied to wives, cattle and horses.

Wives were productive of slaves through wife-palavers⁴ and also yielded the more normal conjugal satisfactions.

Horses were used in cavalry raiding but had a very short life span in the unhealthy regions where they were highly regarded for prestige reasons.

SLAVES IN PRODUCTION.

Slave labour figured in the production of a large number of the most significant products. They were used in armies to produce more slaves (17,56; 25,36; 40,53), in mines for gold (40,53) and on farms for both locally required goods and export agriculture. So the relative values of these goods should have influenced the allocation of the slave labour force. They were also used as porters. (19,51; 13,177; 41,96; 42,94).

3. Gresham's Law states that bad money drives out good. A modern example of its operation was found in Second World War Prison camps. (11)

4. Wife palavers were the accusations by a ruler's wives that men had molested them which resulted in those men being punished with slavery. (14,200; 15,107; 16,22).

We have the case of the import of slaves into Elmina from the Bight (37,30; 24,352), where they had been purchased by the Portuguese, so as to get a labour force for the mines for the gold which the Portuguese took to Europe. We have Dahomey insisting in the mid 1700's on some gold in each slave payment⁵ so gold was even imported⁶ (38,171).

We have slaves being withdrawn from sale and put to work in agriculture and the agricultural produce being sold. (17,157; 18,435; 19,54; 30,265).

We also find captains complaining that they can get no legitimate cargo when slave ships lie in the roadsteads (12,40; 13,106).

From examples such as these it seems reasonable to conclude that middlemen and rulers did regard relative prices. Indeed the Portuguese reaction on discovery of gold in Brazil (Minas Gerais) is similar to the African: the Portuguese then found it cheaper in terms of gold to buy slaves for their own mines than to get gold direct from Africa. There was the additional consideration that slaves previously brought into Brazil from Angola were not of the right quality for mining which required the stronger men from the Gold Coast. (20,1749-50:fo.39-42; 9,130).

It was not just slaves which could move between occupations. The traders too were able to enter several other industries, but not in all cases. It is noteworthy that mulattoes could not own land and so were excluded from the agricultural cycle which gave them more free time, and also less alternative potential occupations (30,203ff).

When the middleman had no store of slaves he had to return to cultivation himself with the absence of ships (143,9; 44,211). This class of operator probably relied on ships advancing trade goods with which he would buy slaves in the interior.

5. Richard Brew writing from Castle Brew, Anamabo, in August 1771 remarks:

"... there is no buying a slave without one ounce of gold at least on it, and the windward Coast has been so ransacked, that there is no such thing as getting gold, even though you sell your goods for forty to fifty per cent under prime cost...." (7,II:539).

6. David Dunn, a captain trading to the Gold Coast since 1763 replying to the question: "Was gold a necessary article in the purchase of a slave when you first knew the trade?"

answered in 1777: "No, we bought them (slaves) with manufactures; gold was then brought home, now we carry it out." This was before the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations. (20,1777:fo.262,270)

There does seem some evidence that the alternatives were not the same to all people in all places even among the African middlemen. Some lacked opportunities because the economy had been too long biased to a monocrop - Angola might come under this (19,120; 39,159;17,45). It is hard to imagine a trader who had built up contacts in the interior and maybe acquired a language, easily making the transition to legitimate trade. In particular if he had neither land nor canoes on which to use his slaves.

Fetish priests were unlikely to change their profession with the decline in slave price, their alternatives do not appear attractive (21.I:326; 22,40).

THE DEMAND FOR SLAVES AS FACTORS OF PRODUCTION.

The level of inputs into the production of anything conventionally might be argued to depend upon factor payments (implicitly market power), factor productivity and the price of outputs.

Although a slave is nominally an unfree labourer, he is not free as an input to his owner. He requires subsistence, which probably rises with work load, and may well need policing.

Slave inputs to traditional agricultural work probably were subject to diminishing marginal productivity, although land was probably plentiful it is most unlikely that slaves figured on the margins, escape would have been too easy. Plantation agriculture may have had some division of labour leading to early economies of scale. New crops or more systematic cultivation would also have altered labour productivity. Gold production, too, was probably subject to diminishing returns, whether in mines or on alluvial. An interesting aspect of slave use in gold production was the case of wars for auriferous areas contested by armies that included slaves. (16,15; 33,31).

7. This would tend to support Domar's hypothesis that slavery can only exist where land is free. (23).

There were definitely gains from scale in armies in terms of slave output. Furthermore as the Trans Atlantic traffic continued the guns which figured as trade goods became more and more significant in changing the productivity of armies. One might even obtain the major gain of winning independence from some suzerain and thereby save the annual levy of slaves which in some cases were paid by vassal states. (24,359).

Within the slave-and-gun technology for producing slaves there was probably some substitutability and since slave inputs probably "wore out" faster than gun inputs one would expect more slaves to be retained for reinvestment relative to the new supply of guns.

Where horses were used in the razzias of the kingdoms of what are now the Northern parts of Nigeria, Ghana etc. they represented a depreciable, but very productive asset. They were certainly purchased with slaves some of the time. (30,171). In the early sixteenth century the Sapes traded six to eight slaves for a horse.

In transport it is probable that the slave did become more productive - although headloads and canoe sizes are unlikely to have altered - with the increase in European goods to the coast it is possible that backhaul cargoes to the interior became more common.

The most significant consideration in deciding the number of slaves to work in which of the feasible occupations seems to have been the relative price of outputs. The rulers and middlemen would, particularly, have been influenced by the relative prices in terms of trade goods.

Bear's price series for slaves does indicate that prices rose during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on the African Coast, with the most spectacular increases at the end of the seventeenth century⁸. Probably a similar rise occurred during the illegal years.

8.	Year	Price in £stg. of 1601 (prime male slave)
	1678-82	3.67
	1698-1702	5.43
	1703-07	10.24
	1708-12	11.21
	1728-32	13.37
	1748-52	14.28
	1773-75	15.96

(Source (1,72))

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It is likely that the price of food to foreigners was higher than the price to neighbours but there is no evidence of a rise in food price over the years, on the contrary prices are said to have remained stable (25,91-2). But the availability of food surpluses at certain locations attracted ships. Furthermore where European barracoons held large stocks of slaves pending the arrival of company ships there must have been some encouragement to local people to produce food for them. Bosman and Barbot both note that it cost two pence a day to feed a slave ashore, which encouraged rapid loading (7,I:293,442).

Gold price also rose in terms of goods⁹. The Ounce trade that Johnson and Polanyi wrote of is interesting in that it clearly distinguishes between the goods-value of the abstract ounce and the concrete ounce of gold (26;27). The Royal African Company ordered its servants not to give gold in payment for slaves. To them, at the proposed relative rates gold was more valuable than slaves. (Likewise it seems the rate of exchange between slaves and cowries undervalued cowries in the eyes of the European traders.)¹⁰

SLAVES IN CONSUMPTION.

There seem two lines of thought on the consumption of slaves: one is to regard them as consumer durables which yields utility in prestige etc. and the other is to consider them like firecrackers which, once used are no more!

9. From the Journal of the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations the following series of prime cost values for an ounce of gold is obtained.

Year	£ stg.	folio
1748	1.5 -2.5	279
1766	4	270
1774	5	287
	5.5	294
1775	6	312 (20,1777:passim)

10. John Barbot, describing transactions on the Slave Coast in 1682, remarks that cowries (Gauries) are the money of the country but that commonly part of the slave price will be paid in cowries and part in goods "because slaves bought with Gauries cost double the price as if purchased with other commodities, especially if those shells are dear in Europe...." (7,I:292).

Snelgrave's efforts to buy slaves held in Dahomey for sacrifice failed, he could buy the surplus but not those for the propitiation of the gods.⁽²⁵⁾ These probably represented a small number of the total West African slave output but they indicate that some were consumed in the firecracker sense.

Another group of slaves that were not available for private use but had to be found each year were those paid as an annual tax to a suzerain. Although this payment was not made by the individuals we can assume that the rulers withheld some portion of the annual slave production from distribution. (It would seem that raids on neighbouring nations would have been the main source of consumption slaves),

The question of whether slaves were a consumption good in the Southern United States was considered by Conrad and Meyers (28;29) and rejected. But it is probably more appropriate to think of slave ownership in the African context as yielding some psychic income. Undoubtedly they were regarded as wealth and so the return to their owner would have been both their net product and this psychic element.

The exact calculations of distribution of income over slaves and other goods cannot be done. It seems in the later years of the trade that human sacrifice declined (45,73)(which would have been expected from the rise in slave price); it also is likely that tastes and preferences altered in favour of the new European goods several of which would probably have competed as prestige items. The often noted fact that the West African consumer market was very thin (30,135-7,III,206) for any particular trade good bears out the contention that African consumers did try and distribute their purchasing power in some utility maximising sense.¹¹ The whole question of 'sortings' or the assortment of trade goods brought to the coast is relevant here. Profit or loss to the shippers seems to have depended on how good their sorting was (30,186-9; 31,112).

11. "Some third of the Cargoe that was sent from Cape Corsoe was Long Cloth which is not vendible at present by reason there comes here more than will vend ... which makes a great glut for the present." (From a letter to the Royal African Company in 1678.) (7, I:236; 13,27,278).

"The Acra Black come down to this coast to trade (South Guinea), when they hear there are ships riding, that have a well sorted cargo, of such goods as they have occasion for,..." (from Barbot, writing in 1682)(7, I:287).

Chronicalers record that different areas appreciated different goods so tastes were undoubtedly relevant (13,30; 7,I:405; 20,1749-50; fo. 28-31, 45-48).

Slaves within Africa in the years under consideration, were unlikely to have lived long lives. Twentieth century demographic information would lead us to expect very low life expectancies at birth, probably less than thirty, and even for those who survived infancy, an average life of forty would be high. So slaves (particularly women) treated as consumer durables (40,65; 46,181) might have competed with horses or cattle which had similar short life spans.

It has proved impossible to find any general statement on what type of slaves were desired in Africa, but where women and children were desired then there would have been a bundle of less desirable men for sale - these were, of course, just what were wanted in the New World.¹² The age and sex mixture would probably have varied with the way in which the slaves were produced.¹³

12. Cornelius Hodges writing to the Royal African Company from James Island in September 1690 remarks:-

"But yo'r Hon^{rs} are Sincible the quantity of Slaves that are brought down Annually by them (Merchants) are Considerable but we never find that in a Thousand they (bring) Either woman boy or Girle but in General Men Slaves such as they know not what to do with all, Either through Stubbornness or feare of the Runi'g,..." (7,I:386).

The relative prices would strongly favour this. Hodges goes on to note in the interior women and boys cost two ounces while men fetched only one. The export relative prices were the other way round. Bean has men costing on average 29.3 percent more (1,134) and Postma reckons the Dutch paid 50 percent more for men (32,197).

13. Marauding bands would tend to collect men, women and children whereas prisoners of war would be mainly men.

SLAVE AS CURRENCY.

Besides the considerations already mentioned above under Asset regarding slaves as stores of value and as acceptable media for exchange we should consider what alternatives as currency were available. Gold and ivory were desired by the Europeans and undoubtedly figured in a lot of early transactions. This might have been a matter of adjustment of portfolio, that the rulers had a surplus of these when faced with new possible assets and prices that were better than local ones for gold and ivory. Anyway whatever the explanation they bought European goods with these types of currency. The records show very large amounts of gold going out in the early years (47,19-21; 20,1749-50: fo. 62; 33,6), this tapers off into the eighteenth century (20,1777:fo. 261,319). It is suspected that what had happened was the large cumulated reserves of gold (maybe even private minor hoards) had been run down. The same was true of fossil ivory. New production was probably not replacing the export so gradually the value of these alternative exchange media rose in terms of trade goods.

Meanwhile modes of producing a steady supply of slaves were being perfected (3,2 ff). There was the occasional inflation when there was either a dearth of ships for a long period or, more normally, an uncontrolled flood of captives; in either case the slave-price of trade goods rose.

Locally produced slaves were not good stores of value since the risk of their escaping must have been larger. The speed with which they were traded to captains (analogous in a sense to the velocity of circulation) must have lowered their trade good price: this is certainly true of the sale of illegal slaves (i.e. those who had been kidnapped) (19,68). These last types of slaves had very little opportunity cost if they could not be used to buy trade goods.

There were, as well, some slave-types, which could not be used in transactions at all due to their legal-social status (34,10; 7,II:396,633).

An analogy of slaves held for a precautionary motive is to be found in the cases where slaves were given in ransom for a captive "free man" or ruler. Slaves are mentioned as acceptable in this context (7,I:22, II:634) and oxen (30,115).

CONCLUSION.

The prices offered for slaves for the Trans - Atlantic trade were not high enough to have drawn off the whole of the West African marketable slave stock. There were some small number of slaves produced purely and simply for export that could not have been used internally but besides these the bulk were allocated to activities or ends that clearly show an awareness of alternatives.

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