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2/9/2017

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Econ 541: Paper I

The Effects of the Slave Trade in West Africa

**I Introduction**

Slavery used to be prevalent in most African societies for centuries as it was in many of ancient worlds. However, due to the influence of Atlantic slave trade, slavery in Africa exaggerated and spread widely thus created an era of disorder and disintegration for the African society. Especially for West Africa, slavery caused a profound effect on its demographics and economic development, as it is estimated that around 11 million population were exported through Atlantic slave trade in total.

Since Africa’s post-war economic performance are incompetent compared to other regions, there rise theories claiming that slave trade devastated Africa’s social structure and made it extremely hard for African society to recover from the hurt and make progress on economic development. People had intense debates on this statement, as David Eltis argued that “the slave and commodity trades together formed such a small percentage of total African economic activity that either could expand without there being any impact on the growth path of the other.... neither the slave nor the commodity traders were large enough to have to face the problem of inelastic supplies of the factors of production.” (Eltis, 1987) Whether the volume of the slave trade is big enough to deeply influenced the African economy is doubtable, however, there is new evidence argued that slavery could ruin the foundation of the economy through another mechanism. This paper will review the different arguments on this issue, and try to explain how does Atlantic slave trade encouraged the transformation of slavery in West Africa, and how such change eventually made harmful effects on West Africa’s societies. The following section will introduce the historical background, section III will present the debates on effects of the slave trade, section IV will explain other channels for slavery to affect society and section V concludes the paper.

**II Background of African Slavery**

The existence of slavery in Africa can trace back to the age of the Roman Empire (47 BC - ca. 500 AD) when chattel slavery is legal and common in North Africa, while it is probable that slavery had appeared even earlier than that time. Although chattel slavery, which means the slave is treated as the property of the owner, consistently existed in Africa through the history, another form of slavery similar to indentured servitude remained majority around the continent until the rise of the slave trade. Unlike chattel slavery that owner has the total ownership of the slave, under indentured servitude systems slaves were only employed by the owner for a period of time and restricted by debt or contract. To make definition clear, forthcoming “slavery” will be refined to the chattel slavery system to pair with the definition of the slave trade.

From the 15th century to 19th century, the Atlantic trade slave took place across the Atlantic Ocean. With the dramatically increasing demand for slaves brought by European traders, many West Africa states began to focus on the slave trade and implemented institutional slavery. The majority of West Africa population became slaves during the peak of Atlantic slave trade by mid-1700s, and each year around 70,000 people were exported from the West Africa.(Manning, 1990) Efforts against slavery by Europeans started to have an impact on slavery until late 18th century when many European countries claimed slavery is illegal. However, ban on slavery is inconsistent and slavery has never been eradicated in Africa, especially in states where order and law have totally elapsed.

**III Effects of the Slave Trade**

To what extent did slavery influence Africa, from the perspective of both economy and demographics, is very controversial. While some people argued that the slave trade “involved an absolute loss of population and a large increase in the enslaved population”, others insisted “the slave trade and its suppression were of minor importance in African history” (Lovejoy, 1989). A good way to see the effect of the slave trade upon West Africa is to compare the slavery status before and after the start of the slave trade. Walter Rodney (Rodney, 1972) concluded from historic literature that no serious slavery can be identified in the Upper Guinea region and I. A. Akinjogbin (Akinjogbin, 1967) also stated that Yoruba people and Aja people did not implement slave trade as a major activity along the coast before Europeans arrived. After the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, many states in West Africa became centered on the slave trade and enslaved population increased rapidly (Manning, 1990). The slave trade definitely provided strong incentives for chiefs of communities to expanded the existing slavery or establish a slavery system if not existed before so that they could find more “goods” to sell. In this way, it can be shown that the Atlantic slave trade helped deteriorate the level of slavery so that more population were enslaved.

Despite the fact of large depopulation in West Africa caused by the Atlantic slave trade, J.D. Fage (Fage, 1969) argued that the decision of slave trade was made by West African countries after comprehensive evaluation on the value that the slave trade could bring to them. Countries which did not sell slaves to Europeans would lose the revenue from trading, and also got worse off because its rivals became stronger due to the slave trade. The situation of less wealth and strong rivals was more dangerous than the loss of population, thus these countries all ended up with a slavery system. They could use the money from selling slaves to buy weapons and commodities from European, so the power of government will not be harmed in the short run. Fage also mentioned that European demand for slaves was growing over years so the price of slaves also increased. However, it cannot be observed an increasing amount of population exported through the Atlantic slave trade from Gold Coast states. Fage concluded that Gold Coast states actually exported only an affordable amount of slaves so their manpower will not be weakened, meanwhile, the trade brought them wealth and their life quality increased. As Fage wrote, “West African rulers and merchants reacted to the demand with economic reasoning, and used it to strengthen streams of economic and political development that were already current before the Atlantic slave trade began.” (Fage, 1969) West African society efficiently organized their slave trade and utilized the chance to develop their economy, while it is unreasonable to believe that the export of population could damage the development of West Africa.

As people can see, the start of the Atlantic slave trade encouraged more states in West Africa to adopt and strengthen slavery, but whether the export of population through the slave trade did harm to the West African society was ambiguous. While lack of labor could stagnate production and weaken the economy, the revenue gained from the trade could probably improve the quality of life and offset the negative effect due to loss of manpower. More empirical evidence is needed for a judgment on slavery.

**IV Evidence of Other Channels**

It is hard to find historic evidence that directly shows slave trade could draw back the development, but using modern statistical tools, it is able to see the correlation between population exported and state’s modern economic development is significant or not. Besides this, Nathan Nunn (Nunn, 2004) also tried to show the channels of causality, that is through what path did the slave trade eventually influence the economy. With new evidence from Nunn, people now can suggest that the slave trade had a high probability to be a major reason for the gloomy economic growth in modern Africa.

Before making empirical analyses, Nunn surveyed the data from other relatively recent researches about the slave trade. From the data, it is shown that “the majority of slaves (34–76%) were taken by slave raiders. A significant proportion of slaves were taken in kidnappings (15–30%).” (Nunn, 2004) These numbers tell that almost all of the slaves sold to the Atlantic slave market were involuntarily captured and then became slaves. The enslavement of individuals is a process filled with violence and destruction, but not what Fage described as a state-organized mobilization of labor.

Once some armed groups sold slaves to the Europeans, they were more possible to equip good weapons and expanded their hunting for slaves thus gained more money. This positive feedback “gave rise to the formation of groups of bandits all over the western Africa” (Inikori, 2000) and they overthrew the previous political institutions. Instead of governing society, these groups of bandits and slave raiders only cared about the enslavement of more people. As the result, “the slave trades led to a large increase in warfare, banditry, and kidnapping. They weakened previously well-functioning domestic institutions, which in many cases led to a complete disintegration of the societies ravaged by the slave trade.” (Nunn, 2004)

An additional consequence of the slave trade was the alternation of the judicial system to a tool for the enslavement of others. As Nunn wrote, “warlords and slave raiders became the new leaders and they altered previously existing institutions to facilitate their needs.” (Nunn, 2004) The importance of this change is that with a legal system working for enslavement, communities could enslave their own. Leaders could use it to enslave people who violated the laws, which formerly penalized violators for money, beatings or exile.

A third effect of the slave trade was its “prevention of the formation of centralized states that could ensure a stable rule of law” (Nunn, 2004), which makes economics development especially hard. Without a stable rule of law, people would not invest in the production sector since the risk was too high. Thus, the productivity of African states would remain low until the disorder ended. Since the slave trade lasted for centuries as well as low productivity, it might explain why Africa’s economy is not competent because the aggregate investment on production was stopped for a long period of time.

After working out the channels of causality, the empirical evidence is easy to understand. Nunn first tested the relationship between the amount of exported slaves and economic development and the result is a robust, significant negative correlation with both IV and OLS methods. Besides, he found that the slave trade influenced current economic performance through the effect on the quality of domestic institutions, and no other channels.

**V Conclusion**

To understand what did the slave trade bring to Africa is a hard job since exact data were missing for a big part of the time interval, thus efforts of using empirical analyses to have the casual effect were not successful for a long time. Most previous researches on the slave trade most focused on the historic literature and tried to reconstruct the picture of Medieval Africa with the descriptions. However, without statistical tests on different theorems, it was hard to exam which theorem was correct. People argued that the slave trade incented more enslavement throughout West African states and devastated economic development; on the other hand, trade brought more power and wealth to the leaders of the states in the short run which encouraged them to enlarge their enslavement. With more data and econometric tools, modern economists are able to make a good estimation of the relationship and causality between the slave trade and economic development. Controlling all other potential characteristics, results show that slave trade will have a negative impact on the economic development through the deterioration of domestic institutions. If people have a look at West Africa countries, right now, many of they are still suffering from the low quality of domestic institutions, such as corrupted government, unjustified judicial system and so on. Thus, to make a solid foundation for economic development, it is necessary for West Africa to restore the institution so that a stable rule of laws could be established, then these people will start creating fortunes.

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