The Atlantic slave trade and the economy of West Africa

MARION JOHNSON

Much attention has been paid recently to the Atlantic slave trade as a form of European and American business enterprise, and particularly to the way in which it was conducted from Liverpool, Bristol, Nantes and other ports. By contrast, recent work on the African end of the trade has tended to look at the numbers involved, the areas from which they came, and the possible effects of the trade on African societies rather than at the economic organisation in Africa and the way the trade related to the general economy of West Africa. Since the Atlantic slave trade patently involved large numbers of Africans (far more than the ten million or so who were procured as slaves and removed to America) it is perhaps surprising that more attention has not been paid to the African end of the trade. What goods went in to Africa in return for the men and women taken out? From whom did the European merchants buy the slaves? Where did the slaves come from, and how did they reach the coast? How did they come to be slaves in the first place, and why did it pay anyone to go to the expense of transporting them across the Atlantic rather than employing them at home? And what long-term benefits, if any, did Africa reap in compensation for the very obvious losses inflicted by the trade?

The Africans who took part in the Atlantic slave trade have left virtually no records, apart, that is, from the slightly dubious reminiscences of a handful of the slaves. The European trading companies, on the other hand, left voluminous trading records from which a great deal can be deduced; and the papers of a
fair number of slaving voyages have fortunately survived, some from parts of the coast not visited by company ships. Resident merchants on the coast and ships’ captains gave evidence to various commissions of enquiry, and took part in the controversies over the slave trade during its last half century: some but not all of this material was printed contemporaneously. Much of the unpublished English material is to be found in the Public Record Office; a number of useful documents from this source are printed in Domnan’s *Documents illustrative of the Slave Trade to America*. French, Dutch, Danish and Portuguese companies and ships also left records about the West African trade, to be found in the various national archives. This paper is based in part on the first findings of research into some of these extensive records. It concentrates on the experience of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and on the West African or Guinea region. The experience of the Congo/Angola region, where there is more evidence of European intervention inland and the obtaining of slaves in ‘just wars’, with correspondingly more destructive effects on states and societies, may have been rather different.

**THE TRADE GOODS**

European merchants stole, literally, very few of the slaves they exported. At the very beginning of the trade, in the fifteenth century, seizure was fairly common, and cases were reported even in the eighteenth century. But it was always a short-sighted policy, and so frequently brought swift retribution upon its perpetrators that only ignorant greenhorns tried it. Hence, almost all the slaves exported were purchased, either by trading ships or by resident traders ashore. In some areas, slaves were bought for what was locally used as currency—manillas in the eastern Niger Delta, cowries on the Slave Coast, *guinée* cloth on the River Senegal. Even in these areas, other goods were usually handed over in addition to the local money; elsewhere, slaves were paid for entirely in goods. The main categories of goods in demand were as follows: cloth and beads, iron bars, brass rods and brass bowls, alcohol and tobacco, guns and gunpowder. Each of the European trading countries had its favourite goods, which it could supply cheaply—Dutch linen and brassware, English
woollens, French brandy—while the Brazilians brought tobacco, the only item they were officially supposed to use in the trade.

Cloth

The item imported into Africa most regularly and in the largest quantities was cloth in various forms—small quantities of silks from China, an occasional Japanese dressing gown, and a wider range of Indian silks and cotton and silk mixtures; woollen goods from England and Flanders, including the ‘perpetuanas’ woven in Devon, often dyed in specially bright colours for the African trade; coarse linens from Europe, particularly from Silesia, and incredible quantities of second-hand linen sheets from Holland; finally, cottons from India in considerable variety, mainly of the coarser types, known by English, French, Dutch or Danish approximations to their local names. Despite their unsuitability for the climate, and despite the evident difficulties experienced in storing them, woollens continued in demand throughout the period of the slave trade. One trader noted that, as might be expected, woollens were more popular during the cooler season. The types of cottons sold by each European nation corresponded originally with the parts of India and the East Indies each controlled and traded with. But from an early date, European-made imitations entered the market, and in the eighteenth century the new mechanised techniques were applied to the manufacture of these imitations. Not all imitations were successful; French imitation guînées were rejected because they did not have the smell which guaranteed the authenticity of the Indian original, and many of the Manchester prints and dyed cloths were rejected as inferior to the Indian products whose names they bore. A whole category of cotton prints were ‘prohibited imports’ in England, but could be imported in bond for re-export to West Africa. Fashions in cloth varied from place to place and from time to time, so that it was all too easy to arrive with a cargo of unsaleable goods. Many of the more expensive items were used as presents for kings and important traders. Some cloths were bought in short lengths for the purpose of unweaving them, to incorporate the silk or wool or dyed cotton yarn in locally-woven cloth.

Not all the imports of cloth came from Europe or Asia. In the
late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, considerable quantities of cloth from Benin and Ijebu in what is now southern Nigeria, and ‘Quaqua’ cloths from the Ivory Coast, were taken by European ships to the Gold Coast (which seems to have lacked a local cloth industry in the coastal area), and there exchanged for gold and slaves. The ‘high cloths’ and ordinary cloths woven in the Cape Verde Islands by Afro-Portuguese and their slaves were widely traded for slaves on the Upper Guinea coast, as were local cloths from the Gambia and (until the great famine of the 1710s) from the Senegal. The coastwise export of African cloth seems to have diminished in the eighteenth century, though some of it continued even after the ending of the slave trade.

Cloth, whether locally woven or imported, was used primarily for clothing, though some was also used for bedding and as baby-wrappers, to hold the baby on its mother’s back, and for a variety of minor domestic uses. Clothing for a woman implied at least a waist wrapper some $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 yards by $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 yard; all but the very poorest women expected some sort of upper garment, usually of similar dimensions, at least in their more mature years, and a baby wrapper if needed. Men on the Guinea coast might wear little more than a loincloth (such as a Quaqua cloth), but if well-to-do would require a large cloth in addition; the second-hand sheets, possibly locally dyed, suggest men’s cloths, and most of the woollens would have been more suitable for men’s wear.

Beads

A considerable quantity of beads was generally included in a cargo. But even more than with cloth, the demand for beads in any one locality was restricted to a few types, and these were subject to the vicissitudes of fashion. However, fashions sometimes persisted; as early as the seventeenth century there was a demand in Whydah and the Niger Delta for the small beads of the kinds still used at the present day in ceremonial beadwork in Yorubaland and in Cameroon, while the Gambia was already demanding amber, as it was to do a century later in Mungo Park’s time. Many of the beads were of Venetian manufacture, but the Dutch were already making imitations by the middle of the seventeenth century. There were also very valuable local beads,
the famous ‘aggrey’ beads, which were in demand on the Gold Coast; their source has never been properly identified, though they seem to have come from somewhere in the Niger Delta. By the eighteenth century, beads for the African trade were being made in many parts of western Europe. Knowledge of local African preference was essential for success in the bead trade, and not all imitations were acceptable.

Metals and hardware

Iron bars were much in demand. Iron was smelted in most regions of the coast, but the quantities produced were evidently insufficient, particularly on the Upper Guinea coast. Moreover, in many areas the local product was inferior. Some of the imported iron was doubtless forged into spear- and arrow-heads, but in the early eighteenth century it was noted that the demand for iron was greatest in the planting season, which was the time of year when war was least common. It is likely that most of the iron went into the making of hoes and knives. In the Senegambia region, the bar of iron became the unit of account in the export trade. A great many knives of all sizes were imported, particularly the larger ones known on the Gold Coast as ‘cutlasses’ and in the Niger Delta as ‘machetes’. These large blades could be used as weapons, but were probably mainly used as tools in agriculture, as they are today. Brass, in the form of rods, of brass manillas, and of bowls of all sizes and shapes, was a commodity much in demand. Many of the bowls were doubtless second-hand or rejects: one account mentions how the African buyers used to inspect them for holes. They were used for many household purposes, and for salt-boiling in some areas; a number of the larger and more decorative ones acquired a ritual use as containers for ‘fetishes’. It was alleged that they were sometimes filed down into ‘false gold’ to be traded to the unwary ship’s captain.

Alcohol and tobacco

Much publicity has been given to the import of alcohol into West Africa in this period, and to the picture of Africans selling their wives and children for a few drinks. In practice, the quantities of alcohol were usually small, at least until the later eighteenth
century; but, of course, there were always a few conspicuously rich or important men who over-indulged. Much of the alcohol imported was used for oiling the wheels of commerce, being employed for the various forms of commission, customary dues, gifts and bribes that went by the name of 'custom'; much also was needed for the consumption of resident European traders, many of whom drank very heavily. In addition, however, alcohol in standardised containers took its place alongside other trade goods in the local price-lists of the period, and was frequently included in the purchase price of slaves.

Tobacco was almost a monopoly of the Brazilian traders, though both English and Dutch tried to produce similar tobacco in the West Indies. The Bahia tobacco was of third grade, considered too poor for consumption in metropolitan Portugal; it had to be treated with molasses before export, to prevent it breaking up altogether. The resulting product proved an indispensable item of trade on many parts of the coast, so that traders of other nations bought it from the Brazilian ships. A related import was that of clay tobacco pipes, some from Merseyside.

**Firearms and gunpowder**

The import of firearms into West Africa in any significant numbers began at much the same time as the large-scale export of slaves, in the mid-seventeenth century, and there is an obvious connection between the two. Many defective weapons were sent, though not all were necessarily accepted. By the 1680s, African traders were demanding 'bright' muskets, probably as distinct from rusty ones (though there was also a market for guns with black barrels). It was usual for purchasers to test their guns with a blank charge before accepting them. Sales of gunpowder depended a good deal on the prospect of war in the near future, a prospect regarded with mixed feelings by resident traders, since war usually meant more slaves for sale, but could temporarily disorganise the entire transport and marketing system.

**Gold**

The Brazilians could legally export only tobacco to West Africa; all other Brazilian produce, and especially gold, had to be sent to
Lisbon. In practice, considerable quantities of Brazilian gold were smuggled out of the country, and brought to West Africa, especially to Whydah, and used there to purchase slaves who were needed partly for the mining of gold in Brazil. There was a period in the later eighteenth century when gold was actually taken from Europe to the Gold Coast, since Gold Coast traders had begun to demand gold for their slaves. This must have been the time when the gilded splendour of the Ashanti court was being built up; it is also possible that some of the gold mined in Ashanti was being drawn away northwards to pay for prestige imports, and that some of the imported gold found its way back to Europe through Dutch hands. Nevertheless, it remains something of a mystery how it could ever have paid anyone to carry gold to the Gold Coast.

**Cowries and manillas**

Between the Gold Coast and the Niger (and a great way inland), the currency was cowrie shells; African traders often demanded a third or a half of the price of the slaves in cowries. These shells came originally from the Maldive Islands, reaching the main European market of Amsterdam by way of Ceylon; their cost price fluctuated greatly, and Europeans disliked them as trade goods because they were so easily pilfered; but in this, as in other matters, they had to follow the local demand. Despite the very large quantities imported, there is no evidence of serious inflation of the cowrie currency during the slave trade period.

Manillas were a form of brass bracelet, of which the commonest form was too small for wear. Like cowries, these may have been in use as currency before the Portuguese arrived in West Africa, and both were certainly employed in the early sixteenth-century slave trade in the Delta. Like cowries, their use long outlived the slave trade.

**Guinée cloth**

*Guinées* were cotton cloths from south-east India, dyed a dark indigo blue. The currency use of *guinées* in the Senegal area dates only from the later eighteenth century, when they replaced an earlier currency of local cotton cloth. They had long been
imported as trade goods by the Dutch and the French, and owed their acceptability as currency largely to the continuing demand for them by the Moors of the desert.

With the exception of firearms and gunpowder, none of the trade goods was new to the Guinea coast. Most parts of the coast that were involved in the slave trade had already been trading with Europeans in gold, ivory, gum, and local products such as the cloth and beads which were used for trading on other parts of the coast, and sometimes in foodstuffs. Very few of the trade goods were new types of commodity even when first introduced by Europeans—cloth, beads and iron were all produced locally in considerable quantities, though in some areas, such as the southern part of what is now Ghana, certain crafts such as weaving may have been absent. Alcohol, but probably not distilled liquors, was well known; tobacco, though a New World introduction, was well established in local taste, and was being locally grown, before the large-scale slave trade began. On the import side, therefore, there was little need to create new patterns of demand; in many areas, however, much larger quantities of the same kinds of trade goods came to be demanded—reflecting, no doubt, the growing area affected by external trade. An exception was the trade in firearms, where the nature of the slave-getting process served to stimulate demand. The seventeenth century saw considerable developments in the technology of hand-guns, which no doubt influenced both their cost and their usefulness.

METHODS OF TRADING

In the earlier days of the large-scale Atlantic slave trade, the chartered companies of various European nations held monopolies over the trade of their own nationals, and attempted to oust the other nations from the trade. Their monopoly was always challenged by ‘interlopers’, who generally avoided the main places of trade, but were often able to undercut them elsewhere; various arrangements were later made to license ‘separate traders’. The merchants of the trading companies operated through established relations with the local chiefs and traders, agreeing with them the prices of the main categories of trade goods, and also the dues payable to them for various services.
Some of these arrangements, particularly on the Gold Coast, went back to the period when slaves were a small part of the trade. Frequently a subsidy was paid to the local chief on condition that he refrained from trading with interlopers or ships of other nationalities. On the Gold Coast, where the European traders built forts to secure their trade, relations between fort and chief were often ambiguous, the payments being regarded by the Europeans as a form of rent, and by the Africans as a form of tribute. In general, it was to their mutual advantage for traders and chiefs to keep on good terms and maintain the structure of trade. This delicate structure was threatened by the ‘interlopers’, who ignored the carefully negotiated prices and undermined the entire basis of trade.

The resident traders sent home lists of trade goods in demand, and maintained stores in the main trading-posts; from these, goods were drawn to purchase slaves at agreed prices from the local African traders. Each main fort had a secure area where the slaves were ‘stored’ until the arrival of a ship to carry them across the Atlantic. ‘Out-forts’ and minor posts received smaller quantities of goods by canoe from the main post. If the correspondence is to be believed, quantities were always too small, quality too low, and goods were of the wrong kind or colour—never could the expected number of slaves be bought. On the other hand, again according to the correspondence, the resident merchants of the out-forts and minor posts, in addition to being quarrelsome and drunk, were constantly engaged in such practices as selling company’s goods to ‘interlopers’ for their own profit, instead of obtaining slaves for the company, or selling them the best of the slaves they had obtained. From some of the minor posts, the companies expected to obtain timber, canoes and supplies of foodstuffs to hold for the use of the slave-ships. A famine or bad harvest, which might fill the slave-market with the dependants whom local households could not feed, could also present the slave-traders with difficulties in finding the food required for the passage of the slaves to America.

It was only on the Gold Coast that the chartered company system was in full operation, though the forts on the Gambia and at Whydah on the Dahomey coast worked on much the same system, but without out-forts—as did the English trading-posts in the Sierra Leone area. By the mid-eighteenth century, interlopers
and licensed traders had made such inroads into the system that
the English abolished it, establishing a non-trading company to
maintain the forts; the resident traders were permitted to trade
on their own account, and were frequently the largest traders in
the locality. The Dutch West India Company continued to oper-
ate, but was unable to exclude other traders from Holland or
elsewhere. In this later period, ships bought slaves mainly from
the resident European traders, who in turn bought them from
African traders; but many small purchases, of usually one or two
slaves only, were made direct from local African traders by ships'
captains and supercargoes. Many ships preferred to trade at
smaller places where there was no fort or trading-post. Traders
sought protection from a local chief, to whom they made suitable
presents. They then could either advance goods on credit, or wait
for trade to arrive: 'The former is the most expeditious way,
when they fall into good hands; but the latter is always the
safest.' Granting credit was nothing new—the chartered com-
panies had done it for African traders known to them, and credit
had formed a regular part of trade at Benin in the seventeenth
century, when cloths were purchased there for the Gold Coast
trade. As numbers of slaves and prices increased, and as slaves
were brought from further afield, credit, too, was extended
further.

MONEY AND BARGAINING

Whether the buying of slaves was done by the captains and super-
cargoes of ships, or by resident European merchants, some
amount of bargaining was involved. In early years, and in out-of-
the-way places, every transaction may have involved a separate
act of barter, in which each side satisfied itself that the com-
mmodity received was worth more than the commodity surrendered.
But where a regular trade developed, trade goods soon acquired
regular fixed values in terms of a unit of account such as the
iron bar in Senegambia, or the ounce of gold dust on the Gold
Coast. At the same time, the price of a slave was expressed in the
same units, and it thus became possible to include different types
of trade goods in the purchase price of a slave. (On the Dahomey
coast, where, until the mid-eighteenth century, the slave himself
was the unit, it was customary to bargain that out of a consign-
ment of slaves, so many should be paid for in cowries, so many
in particular types of cloth, and so on. Eventually the Dahomey coast adopted the trade ounce.) While the bar or ounce values of trade goods were not wholly immutable, they tended to change much less rapidly than the costs of production of the goods, especially in the eighteenth century when mechanised production was lowering the prices of many goods. The European traders naturally tried to pay as far as possible in the cheaper goods. Where, as in the case of French brandy, these were also the popular goods, everyone was happy; but where the popular goods were, or had become, relatively expensive, there was considerable scope for bargaining as to the proportions of the various types of goods to be included in the price of a slave.

The price of a slave did not remain constant in terms of the units of account, though it was often fixed for a trading season at a particular port. The price may originally have been as low as one gold ounce (about £4, or goods to an equivalent value on the Guinea coast, worth about £2 in England); by the early eighteenth century the price was about three ounces on the Gold Coast; by the end of the century, something like twelve or thirteen ounces. To a limited extent, the rise in price was countered by a devaluation of the ounce as cloth could be cut shorter, alcohol diluted, gunpowder mixed with charcoal. Attempts were also made to substitute cheaper goods, like those Manchester manufactures which were rejected by the more expert among the African traders. The fact that African traders did reject goods, and that they could demand and obtain consistently higher prices as time went on, may suggest that they were by no means the helpless victims of an 'unequal trade', but rather that they were in a position to dictate the terms of trade to the European merchants. It may also suggest that the cost of obtaining slaves was rising, probably in the main because they were brought from further and further afield.

It has been suggested by various writers from the seventeenth century onwards that slaving was the business of 'kings, rich men, and prime merchants, exclusive of the inferior sort of blacks', because of the capital involved in obtaining slaves. There is no doubt that many of the Africans involved in the slave trade fell into these social categories, including most of those about whom anything is known. Powerful chiefs could organise wars and slave-raids, and could obtain slaves as tribute; wealthy traders
could act as brokers in the trade, and not a few of them eventually made themselves independent chiefs of the coastal towns. Other traders were agents for those kings who were able to take part in the trade on their own account. Nevertheless, there were always small-scale traders at work, men who relied upon credit from ships or resident merchants before they could embark on trade, and who brought their slaves in ones and twos. In smaller places, away from the posts of the European companies, most of the trade was done by small men, most of the purchases made in ones and twos. Many of the large-scale traders belonged to ethnic or quasi-ethnic groups which had long specialised in trade, as had the Dyula and the Dyakhanke in the western part of West Africa, the Akanni of the Gold Coast, or the Aro of the Niger Delta. Some of these groups had originally traded in gold, and had adapted their trading system to the slave trade. Many of the groups were Muslims; and the Aro were able to use the sanction of the Aro Chuku oracle. One such network in the Senegambia/Upper Guinea coast area was that of the ‘Portuguese’, that is, the Afro-Portuguese descendants of traders operating from the Cape Verde Islands. Many of these had broken free from Portuguese imperial control, and had become permanently committed to the long-distance trade of the mainland, marrying local wives and establishing relations with local chiefs, while remaining nominally Catholics. Trading networks of this kind usually involved resident traders in the market towns, who served as innkeepers and brokers to those who travelled with the slave-caravans; sometimes it was the caravan leader himself who acted as broker. Very frequently there was some official who collected taxes for the king or chief; in the case of both Ashanti and Dahomey, the king himself was an important trader with special privileges, his agents being the most important African traders in the coast town.

Resident European merchants had to keep on good terms with merchants, royal agents, and caravan leaders. Especially where there were several different European nations present, considerable quantities of goods were expended as gifts, and some degree of support was often given in local wars. In return, the Europeans hoped for exclusive trading privileges.

In some cases, the African merchants from the coast went inland to purchase slaves. This seems to have been generally the case on the Gold Coast, where there were recognised slave-
markets not very far inland; here and in Dahomey slaves from up-country were generally sold ‘from hand to hand’, so that long-distance caravans did not reach the coast. On the other hand, in Senegambia it was common for a slave caravan to bring the slaves all or most of the way to the river ports. Elsewhere, according to the account of a Liverpool slave-trader, slaves were bought from ‘Black Traders’ who were princes and headmen and who travelled into the ‘interior country’ to purchase slaves; they obtained ‘passports’ from the intermediate states, went to markets in the interior where slaves were sold, and could be away for a month or more. In the Niger Delta, slaves were bought from the king at Bonny, and from important traders at New Calabar. ‘These Traders go up into the Country to purchase Slaves. They go up the Rivers to the Distance of about Eighty Miles from Bonny, and the same from New Calabar, in large Canoes with two or three principal Persons, and about Forty Men in each. The Canoes go in a Body all together to defend themselves if attacked. At the Head of these Two Rivers there is a Mart for Trade where the Black Traders purchase these Slaves of other Black Traders, who bring them from the interior Country.’ These Delta traders came down once a fortnight with 20 or 30 canoes, sometimes less, each with 20 or 30 slaves, who had their arms tied behind their backs with twigs, canes, grass rope or other ‘ligaments of the country’, and, in the case of strong slaves, they were also tied above the knee; they were thrown into the bottom of the canoe where they remained in great pain. When the slaves reached the trader’s house, they were oiled, fed, and ‘made up for sale’. Slaves brought by land were brought in ‘droves of 20, 30, or 40, chained together’; strong men might have a log attached to their arms. Another description runs: ‘their Way of bringing them is, tying them by the Neck with Leather-Thongs, at about a yard distance from each other, 30 or 40 in a String, having generally a Bundle of Corn or an Elephant’s Tooth upon each of their Heads’; these slaves had also to carry water-skins for their own use. However they travelled, the movement of large numbers of slaves called for considerable quantities of foodstuffs to be available along the route. If accounts of the nineteenth-century caravans and slave-markets are anything to go by, food was often specially grown for this purpose by slave-labour, usually under the control of resident African traders.
Although there are accounts of wanton brutality, it was in the interests of the traders and caravan leaders to deliver their slaves alive and looking reasonably fit. This consideration sometimes resulted in callous treatment of the sick and weak, who could be sacrificed in the interests of the health of the remainder of the caravan; moreover, attempts at escape were often punished savagely as a warning to others. But losses on the way to the ports seem not to have been on the scale of the terrible toll of the trans-Saharan trade with its melancholy trail of skeletons. Slave-caravans travelled armed, a necessity in hostile country; on occasion they added to the number of the slaves at the expense of the less well-armed local population, making the latter even more hostile to subsequent caravans.

**ENSLAVEMENT**

It may well be asked how it came about that so many people were available to be marched to the coast in slave-caravans—though before the last half-century of the Atlantic trade, this question seems to have occurred to surprisingly few people. Amongst those who offered any answer to this question at the time, there was a general consensus of opinion that people were enslaved as criminals, debtors and prisoners of war; Mungo Park added the victims of famine, and many observers also added victims of kidnapping. There is disagreement as to the proportions in the various categories, as there is on the wider question of the extent to which African societies were distorted to provide slaves, that is, whether wars were waged mainly for the purpose of obtaining slaves, and whether legal process was abused to add to the supply of saleable victims. The only statistical evidence about the causes of enslavement comes from the period after the legal abolition of the slave trade, from records of interviews conducted in the 1850s by a linguist, S. W. Koelle, among slaves released and brought to Sierra Leone; these records have been analysed by Paul Hair. Of those interviewed, 11 per cent admitted to having been sold after being condemned by judicial process, 7 per cent to pay debts, generally incurred by others; 30 per cent had been kidnapped; and 34 per cent were taken in war. There is an additional category, ‘sold by relatives and superiors’, amounting to 7 per cent of the total; some of these slaves, as Hair suggests, may...
actually have been ‘criminals’ by the laws of their own society. But sometimes there was also a history of family quarrels or jealousy: such causes have brought victims to the slave-markets since the days of Joseph and his brethren.

It is possible that this sample, which was chosen by Koelle to include as many different languages as possible, may over-state judicial process, family quarrel and kidnapping as causes of enslavement. Of those taken in war, many were the victims of the wars and raids associated with the Fulani jihad; similar conditions obtained in the eighteenth century in certain areas. Lieutenant Matthews stated in the 1780s that ‘the nations which inhabit the interior parts of Africa, east of Sierra Leone, profess the Mahometan religion; and following the means prescribed by their prophet, are perpetually at war with the surrounding nations who refuse to embrace their religious doctrines.... The prisoners made in these religious wars furnish a great part of the slaves which are sold to the Europeans....’ Elsewhere he spoke of great numbers taken as prisoners of war, and brought down, fifty or a hundred together, by the black slave merchants. He denied the accusation that war was instigated by the European traders; whenever the people at the sea-coast were at war, it put an entire stop to trade. Probably the expectation of selling prisoners of war entered into the decision whether or not to wage war and it is unlikely that without this resource, wars could have continued so long or on such a large scale.

Kidnapping must have taken place at times, despite the denials of some of the more biased observers. Well-governed states were perhaps able to prevent the practice within their own boundaries, but their demands for tribute must surely have encouraged it beyond the frontiers. Descriptions of the ‘breaking’ of towns and villages by kings and chiefs may refer to the over-vigorous collection of tax or tribute, or punishment for rebellion. But there were also instances where organised raiding took place—the activities of the African dealers in ‘black gold’ in the hinterland of Accra are vividly described by the eighteenth-century Dane, Roemer; the victims of these villains were taken secretly to the coast, hidden in the houses of the resident brokers, and smuggled aboard the slave-ships by night. Pawning a person for debt was a normal, accepted, and probably traditional legal process; it carried the implication that if the debt was not paid, the pawn
could be sold. Some of the victims, however, seem to have been sold before there was time to repay the debt. It was also normal to ‘panyar’ or kidnap a member of the debtor’s family, or a fellow-townsman, to enforce the repayment of debts; such persons were normally redeemed by the repayment of the debt, but in case of failure, they too could be sold. Europeans on the coast resorted to both practices, and it is difficult to see what other security could have been offered for debt, except possibly certain items of the royal regalia. Occasionally the tables were turned, when a chief offered a wife as security, and she succeeded in seducing the merchant; having committed a capital offence, he had to buy his pardon.\textsuperscript{47}

Crimes were of various kinds; murder, theft, adultery and witchcraft. The high proportion of cases attributed to adultery may be due, as one of the 1789 witnesses suggested, to the fact that this was the only crime to which slaves would admit.\textsuperscript{48} Conviction for witchcraft and, in some places, certain crimes against the chief, involved the enslavement not only of the offender, but of his entire family. Opponents of the slave trade, then and later, claimed that new crimes were invented and trumped-up charges accepted, because of the profit from selling convicted criminals. It must certainly have been a standing temptation to those who stood to gain from the sale of criminals, to multiply the offences for which the criminal could be sold; but some of the offences which appeared and still appear trivial to European observers undoubtedly loomed much larger in the thinking of the local society.

**PROFIT AND LOSS**

There has been much discussion about the profitability of the slave trade to the European traders involved in it, and to the New World slave-owners. Here we must consider the balance sheet of profit and loss in Africa.\textsuperscript{49} For the slaves, it was almost all loss, loss of freedom, loss of family and friends, and, for one in seven or so, loss of life itself. No one would now accept the argument used by some of the slave-traders to justify themselves, that life in Africa was in general so nasty, brutish and short that any alternative, even the Middle Passage and New World chattel slavery, was preferable. Certainly the victims themselves did not think so, to judge by the attempts at escape and the frequency of
suicide. For a few it may have been true that the alternative to deportation and slavery was capital punishment.

As to the country they left behind, it would seem at first sight that the loss of some millions of people, the majority of them adults in their most productive years, from a continent where there were usually too few people rather than too little land, could only have had disastrous effects, both on population and on the economy. So far as population is concerned, recent work has shown that the loss, taken over West Africa as a whole, was probably not very serious, amounting at its worst to little more than the natural increase. Moreover, the really large and steady drain of population in the latter (and larger) part of the trade was from areas which are now, and probably were then, exceptional for the density of their population: the very areas where today it is shortage of land, not of manpower, that is the limiting factor. The present high reproduction rate in south-eastern Nigeria could have arisen as a response to the losses of the slave trade, and remained, after the manner of such adaptations, long after the emergency was past.\textsuperscript{80}

It is evident that the removal of some millions of workers must have reduced production but at the same time it must have reduced consumption. Overall, the loss would depend on how much more they produced than they consumed and this must have varied from one part of West Africa to another. If West Africa had represented, as has been sometimes assumed, merely a homogeneous subsistence economy, producing only enough for home consumption, there would have been no loss. But, in fact, in many areas it was possible, with existing agricultural tools and methods, to produce something like double the cultivator's needs. Had slaves been drawn to any great extent from those areas, there would have been an overall loss of about half the total production. However, these are just the areas where it paid to keep slaves on the land and once established on the land, slaves were normally sold only for crimes, or in cases of dire necessity.\textsuperscript{51}

At the other end of the scale were the areas in which people could produce little or nothing beyond their own needs, either because the land was inherently unproductive or because it had lost its fertility from over-use, or because population pressure limited the land available to each household. The first kind of area, common in the so-called Middle Belt, was always an area
of low population density, and therefore vulnerable to slave-raiding. The more vigorous peoples were able to fend off mounted raiders by the use of poisoned arrows and hooked throwing knives, against which cavalry could only defend themselves by losing most of their mobility, but against firearms they had little or no defence. In many places the survivors took refuge in even less fertile, but defensible, areas of hill country where they could live, precariously and laboriously, out of reach of human predators.52

Areas of population dense enough to cause land shortage were rare in West Africa, but the hinterland of the Niger Delta slaving ports was most probably such a region, as it is today. Here a steady drain of population was positively advantageous to those who remained behind, and hence the Ibo people evolved a system whereby the Aro Chuku shrine and the Aro traders between them were able to provide a steady flow of surplus manpower to the coasts. The shrine was a court of appeal, the loser running the risk of being ‘sold down the river’, or being fined a large number of slaves.53 In this area there was no question of depopulation, and it could be argued that the shrine provided a self-regulating mechanism for relieving population pressure—the heavier the pressure, the more cases before the court, and the more people exported. Such considerations would be little comfort to the victims, but it could be argued that without this outlet, serious over-population problems would earlier have been encountered in Ibo country.

Since a considerable proportion of the slaves exported came either from areas of dense population which had evolved a mechanism for relieving population pressure, or from the vulnerable areas of sparse population and low productivity, the actual loss in production in West Africa may have been little more than the consumption of those who were removed. Correspondingly, their productivity was probably much higher in New World plantation agriculture, on new land, than it had been in Africa, but this global benefit did not for the moment affect Africa.

For those who remained in West Africa, increasing quantities of consumption goods became available by import, usually at much lower prices than the corresponding local product. It is often suggested that these imports were at the expense of local handicrafts,54 and in some instances this may be true. It is prob-
able that iron smelting in coastal districts was particularly affected (though in some places, local iron had already given way to imported iron before slaves became a significant export). But in general, handicraft industries survived, sometimes making use of imported raw material. Imports of iron, while they may have had a deleterious effect on local smelting, did provide iron for the making of essential tools for farming, cheaper and in many cases of better quality than tools made of local iron. Craftsmen, whether members of specialised castes as in much of the savannah area, or court craftsmen, or others who had acquired specialised skills, were normally regarded as immune from sale as slaves (though they could be transferred from a defeated West African state to its conqueror). This may account for the limited transfer to the New World of African technology in the crafts. West Africa thus avoided the loss of the most skilled of its manpower; in terms of skill, as in terms of geographical location, it was the least productive who were lost.

There can be no doubt that, as Professor Fage has pointed out, African commerce gained greatly from the slave trade, not only by direct participation in the trade but also by the demand it created for local foodstuffs, both to feed the slaves on their way to the ports and to provision the slave-ships. It helped to bring to Africa buyers of gold, ivory, timber, dyewoods, gum and other produce, and it created or expanded African trade networks. Many merchants, African and mulatto, made fortunes directly or indirectly from the trade: John Cabis at Commenda, John Conny at Princes Town, the de Souzas at Whydah or the Brews at Anomabu, to give examples only from the central section of the coast; and some achieved positions of political importance. Several major polities had the slave trade as their economic base; Dahomey is the classic example, but much the same is true of Ashanti and perhaps of Oyo, and of the smaller states of the Niger Delta. Sometimes the king himself was an important slave-trader, and always he was able to tax independent traders.

It is, however, an exaggeration to suggest that only kings and important chiefs could benefit from the trade, because they alone could afford to make war or equip a slave-raiding expedition. The small man could also benefit: as a soldier he could take prisoners; as a kidnapper he could capture the unwary traveller or lost children in the woods; as a creditor he could sometimes
foreclose upon the unfortunate individual pledged to him; as the accuser in a witchcraft or adultery case he could sometimes acquire a slave for sale. The log-books of slaving voyages are full of transactions in which only one or two slaves are sold by an individual, and these can hardly be the transactions of kings or large-scale dealers. Many more small transactions must have taken place between up-country sellers and the long-distance traders or the coastal brokers, whose function was a ‘bulking’ one.

If some elements of society gained, others as surely lost by the Atlantic slave trade. The very uneven economic development which is perhaps the most serious problem in most African states today must have been encouraged by the slave trade, since it tended to penalise areas which were ill-endowed and economically backward. Further, it is arguable (the argument would have more force if it were not so frequently overstated) that the economy, legal structure, and political organisation of participating African societies were grossly distorted by the slave trade. Much of the argument concerning the distortion of the economy could be applied with equal force to any external trade, particularly in an underdeveloped situation. Trade encourages rising expectations in terms of imported goods, which come to be considered necessities, only to be obtained by continuing and intensifying the trade. In a sense, it was the previous trade in gold that made the Gold Coast so easy a victim of the slave trade, just as it was the trade in ivory, copper and dyewood that tempted Loango into the slave trade. Accelerating exports of palm oil and cocoa and groundnuts in more recent times have had a similar distorting effect—the economy was made vulnerable to changes in external demand over which producers had no control. Expectations were as brutally denied by the great depression of the 1930s as by abolition in the 1800s.

Distortion of the legal structure doubtless varied from district to district. In some localities there can be little doubt that the law was operated to the private economic advantage of chiefs and other prominent persons, but in many cases, sale overseas provided a way of ridding the community of criminals and misfits without actual bloodshed. Distortion of political organisation is particularly difficult to assess, since there is no means of knowing what the undistorted structure would have been. Some witnesses
before the 1789 inquiry into the slave trade suggested that wars were made in West Africa for much the same reasons as in contemporary Europe. This may well have been true; the kings of Ashanti and Dahomey both disclaimed the idea that they made wars for the purpose of obtaining slaves, but the fact that war could be made to pay for itself must have strengthened the hand of the 'war party', and made possible the incorporation of many underdeveloped areas in the larger kingdoms. Witnesses were also clear that kidnapping was rare in the strong kingdoms; a strong state was one which could defend its own citizens, and impose upon its neighbours the duty to provide slaves.

If, as has been recently reasserted, 'the slave trade underdeveloped Africa' it did so, not because it was an external trade, but because it was a trade in human beings, whose supply could only be maintained at increasing cost, not only to the traders who dealt in slaves, but also to the communities from which the slaves were ultimately drawn, the vulnerable populations of the poorest areas.

NOTES

1 The present paper represents in part a 'spin-off' from research on the economic history of West African textiles. I am grateful to the Social Science Research Council for support in this research during 1971-4.

2 'The remarkable expansion of the slave trade in the eighteenth century provides a horrific illustration of the rapid response of producers in an underdeveloped economy to price incentives,' A. G. Hopkins, An economic history of West Africa (1973), p. 105; this work includes an interesting and balanced discussion of the Atlantic slave trade in relation to the West African economy (pp. 89–111). For revised figures of the numbers involved, see P. D. Curtin, The Atlantic slave trade: a census (Madison, 1969); the figures are summarised in J. D. Fage, A history of West Africa (revised ed. 1969), pp. 81–9, where the question of demographic loss is discussed. See also Fage's article in R. P. Moss and J. A. R. Rathbone (eds.), The population factor in African studies (1975), pp. 15–23.

3 A rare exception is the set of extracts from the diary of Antera Duke, 1785–8, published in Daryll Forde (ed.), Efik traders of Old Calabar (1956).

4 Probably the most useful single source is the Report of the Lords of the Committee of the Privy Council relating to Trade and Plantations... on the Slave Trade, 1789 (hereafter 1789 Report): unpaginated, it is cited below by the names of witnesses giving evidence. Sections were reprinted in E. Donnan, Documents illustrative of the slave trade to America, 4 vols. (1930–5) (hereafter Donnan), the first two volumes of which contain numerous extracts bearing on the African end of the
trade. Records of the English companies are to be found in the Public Record Office in London, mainly in the T70 series, and also under CO 338. Further papers are in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, catalogued as Rawlinson C745-7 (hereafter Rawlinson). The records of the Dutch West India companies are in the State Archives at The Hague, and most of the material relevant for this paper is catalogued under 2eWIC (hereafter Hague 2eWIC).


6 It is impossible to include more than a minute fraction of the references in trade lists, inventories and accounts to the various kinds of trade goods. Lists with some detail as to provenance, values, etc. are to be found in J. Adams, *Remarks on the country extending from Cape Palmas to the river Congo* (1823) (hereafter Adams), Appendix; S. Berbain, *Le comptoir français de Juda (Ouidah) au XVIIIe siècle* (Memoires de l’Institut Français d'Afrique Noire, 3) (Dakar, 1942); and in various ships’ papers printed in Donnan. The papers of the *Maria Gertruda*, Hague 2eWIC 179, include a set of samples of the textiles in demand in the late eighteenth century. Silks were most in demand on the Whydah coast (modern Dahomey), at least in the seventeenth century: PRO T70/20, dated 13.10.1680, from Ophra in Ardra, asks for ‘good flowrd silks some purple flowers, other vermilion flowers: it matters not though they be out of fashion in England, so they be but gaudy and large flowers they will be taken here’. Japanese dressing gowns are mentioned in Hague 2eWIC 1042 (1690-1); ‘Cheany’ (China) silks in PRO T70/20/3. India silks included taffeta, see P. Isert, *Voyages en Guinee* (Paris, 1973), p. 109, ‘taffetas raye’; or Berbain’s trading accounts. Another silk or half-silk cloth was ‘sasracundie’, alias ‘Sister Gandi’, of which there is a sample in the *Maria Gertruda* books. Some of the Indian handkerchiefs or romals were also silk or part-silk. Woollens included perpetuanas (usually blue, though the Akwamu behind Accra liked green, PRO T70/22/36), sayes and long ells – all relatively light-weight fabrics. Silesian linens, alias ‘platillas’, were popular through the slave trade period, but the most popular linen item, at least in the first half, was the bed-sheet from Holland, usually described in English records, and sometimes in Dutch, as old or second-hand. As many as 50,000 of these might be in stock at Cape Coast, but were soon disposed of, PRO T70/230, Inventories. Cheap Indian cottons of bewildering variety can be traced in the trade lists, inventories, and the English Customs accounts, where English imitations can also be traced, PRO CUST 3.

7 Adams, p. 237.
10 Adams, pp. 79-80; T. E. Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee* (1819, reprinted 1966), pp. 331-2; letter of Robert Parker from Commenda 1737, saying that large quantities of woollen imports
were taken up country and there ‘taken a Pieces and unwove and again made into Cloth of their own divising’, *Historical Manuscripts Commission, 11th Report: Townshend MSS*, Appendix, pt. IV, p. 355, quoted in Donnan, 2, p. 192n.

11 Benin cloths are constantly referred to in English and Dutch records of the later seventeenth century, e.g. Hague 2\(^{\circ}\)WIC 124. Ijebu cloths also appear in these records, and are still found in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, e.g. Adams, p. 97; G. A. Robertson, *Notes on Africa* (1819), p. 301. Both sources mention that Ijebu cloths were exported to Brazil, possibly for the use of the slave population.

12 For Capc Verde cloths, see A. Carreira, *Panaria Cabo-Verdiano-Guineense* (Lisbon, 1968). Gambia cloths are to be found in English records of the later seventeenth century, e.g. PRO T70/60; see also F. Moore, *Travels into the inland parts of Africa* (1739, reprinted 1970) (hereafter Moore), p. 72. For Senegal cloths, see P. D. Curtin, *Economic change in pre-colonial Africa: Senegambia in the era of the slave trade* (1975), p. 213.


14 Seventeenth-century Dutch beads are in the collections of the Ghana National Museum.


16 PRO T70/22 contains several references to the demand for iron bars in the planting season.


18 ‘I have heard of those who, depending on their own judgement, have brought to England what they conceived to be boxes of [gold] and which, on inspection, proved to be almost wholly the filings taken from brass pans’, Adams, p. 237. There are other references to this practice, e.g. Hague 2\(^{\circ}\)WIC 97 (13.5.1701).

19 The commonest measure was the anchor (ancre) of brandy; for details of measures, see Berbain, p. 71. For the inclusion of brandy, etc. in the prices paid for slaves, see M. Johnson, ‘The eighteenth century ounce’, *JAH*, 7 (1966), pp. 197–214.

20 P. Verger, *Le fort St Jean-Baptiste d’Ajuda* (Paris, 1966), pp. 9ff; for purchases of tobacco by ships, see Berbain, Appendix.


22 See, for example, Rawlinson C745 f. 26, letter from Thelwell at Anomabu, 10.9.1681, ‘They say [various peoples] are to fight . . . if so, powder may go off here’; and two days later, ‘if war be as they say, powder will goe off’, while a neighbouring fort reported that traders had bought all the powder sent. But powder was also in more regular demand for hunting (though possibly this consumed only small quantities) and for firing salutes at funerals.

26 A. F. C. Ryder, 'An early Portuguese trading voyage to the Forcados River', Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria, 1 (1951), pp. 30ff; Dutch records refer to manillas as 'gladde armringen' (smooth bracelets), e.g. Hague 2"WIC 97, f. 176v.
28 See correspondence with out-forts, Rawlinson, C745-7 passim.
29 See, for example, the accounts of the Judith (1728) and the Swallow (1779-81) in Donnan, 2, pp. 372, 612ff; or of the French ship Dahomet in Berbain.
30 1789 Report, evidence of Lieutenant Matthews.
32 On systems of money and bargaining, see Johnson, 'The ounce', op. cit. The bar currency of Senegambia and the 'Heads of the Goods', i.e. those goods recognised as relatively expensive, were discussed in Moore, p. 45.
33 Adams, pp. 253, 258.
34 E.g. Hopkins, Economic history, op. cit., p. 105.
35 See the accounts of trading voyages, for instance, those cited in note 29.
36 For the Dyula and Dyakhanke, see Curtin, Economic change, passim, and Y. Person, Samori, une revolution Dyula (Dakar, 1968), passim; for the Akanni, see K. Y. Daaku, Trade and politics on the Gold Coast 1600-1720 (1970); for the Aro, see K. O. Dike, Trade and politics in the Niger Delta 1830-1885 (1958).
37 1789 Report, evidence of James, and Penny (of Liverpool).
38 Ibid., evidence of Wadstrom.
39 Moore, p. 41; an eyewitness account of a journey with a slave-caravan is contained in Park, Travels, chaps XXIV–XXVI.
40 E.g. in the Togo/Dahomey area, diary of Captain Kling, Mitteilungen aus den deutschen Schützgebieten, 6 (1893), pp. 108-47.
41 Francis Moore was unusual in attempting to answer this question in the 1730s, Moore, p. 41ff; at the 1789 enquiry, it was one of the standard questions asked of witnesses.
42 1789 Report, part I; Park (1799), op. cit., p. 212.
43 P. E. H. Hair, 'The enslavement of Koelle's informants', JAH 6 (1965), pp. 193-203. Dr Hair now writes: 'The percentages given only add up to 89 per cent: the missing 11 per cent represent partly a handful not fitting into the stated categories, but mainly a number who belong to more than one category, e.g. war refugees who were kidnapped. Dr David Northrupp, who has re-analysed the material relating to the Delta-Cameroun region, has pointed out to me that the high proportion of prisoners-of-war derives almost solely from Fulani activities among the more Northern peoples, and that the coastal peoples had instead a high proportion of enslavement by relatives and superiors, and by kidnapping. These coastal proportions may have been more typical of the whole slave trade era, at least for regions untouched by jihad.'
44 1789 Report, evidence of Lieutenant Matthews.
Ibid., evidence of Poplett and others.


There was an example of this at Accra in the early 1680s, when Wendover was seduced by Boquee, a wife of the king of Akwamu, who was a pawn at the castle; she was eventually sent back to Akwamu, Rawlinson C745, 178, 591.

1789 Report, evidence of Norris.


Ibid., pp. 89–91.

1789 Report, evidence of Matthews and others. This was a very widespread convention: those born in slavery could only reach the slave markets if captured in war, and would only be recognised as slaves if they remained unassimilated. The 1789 Report mentions instances only in Gambia. Descendant slaves, or slaves of the second generation, were often known by a term different from that employed for freshly captured or purchased slaves. It follows that the slave trade did not draw its victims mainly from a local ‘slave class’, though the markets which provided reinforcements for the local slave population also served the external trade. The concept of the slave as a vendable commodity, rather than as someone to be incorporated in the economy and often in the household, may well derive from the export trade in slaves.

Skill in making arrow poison was highly localised. Horses and men could be protected with quilted armour, cumbersome and excessively hot. Throwing knives had a wide distribution, both in the Middle Belt and in the desert. The Jos Plateau was a typical refuge area.

For Aro Chuku, see Dike, *op. cit.*, pp. 37ff.


To refuse to trade in slaves, when both the supply of other commodities, and the demand for them, were dwindling, would result in an economic decline, and in a dangerous failure to meet immediate expectations. Loango therefore became caught . . .’, D. Birmingham, ‘Central Africa from Cameroun to the Zambezi’, *Cambridge History of Africa*, 4 (1975), p. 347. It could even be argued that, with steadily rising prices for slaves, imports increased more than proportionately to exports. As in affluent societies elsewhere, the creation of new consumer wants and expectations was part of the seller’s business; on which see D. Rimmer, *Macromancy* (1973).