

**COERCION AND MARKETS: INTEGRATING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL EXPLANATIONS OF SLAVERY IN PRECOLONIAL WEST AFRICA, c1450-c1900** <sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract**

*Enslavement and slave trading were the main source of labour recruitment, apart from the slower process of marriage and child-rearing, in the economies of precolonial West Africa. As elsewhere in the world, first-generation slaves in African societies were mostly foreigners. Unlike the forms of slavery practised by Europeans, however, indigenous African slavery was usually assimilative, in that the descendants of slaves tended to be integrated into the society concerned on increasingly more equal terms over subsequent generations, with varying rates and degrees of completion. The conjunction of slave labour and partial assimilation has generated a long-running debate between 'economic' and 'social' interpretations of the institution in its West African settings. This paper aims to reconcile and integrate these traditionally rival interpretations, and to explore the economic implications. I argue that, in radical ways, it was the interaction of economic and social (and cultural and political) dimensions of slavery that was central to the history of slavery in precolonial West Africa. On the one hand, the growth in the volume of slavery and the specific uses to which slaves were put within the region cannot be explained without reference to the demand for slaves as labourers producing commodities. On the other hand, without organized coercion, and the political and ideological conditions for applying it, there could have been no slavery and no slave trade. Indeed, it will be argued here that, without such coercion, there would have been no market in labour at all in the economic conditions that prevailed in most of West Africa during this era. Moreover, the assimilative tendency in African slavery should be seen both as responding to the political circumstances of the region (the severe constraints on state formation) and, ironically, as underpinning the continuation of the internal slave trade.*

Enslavement and slave trading were the main source of labour recruitment, apart from the slower process of marriage and child-rearing, in the economies of precolonial West Africa. As elsewhere in the world, first-generation slaves in African societies were mostly foreigners. Unlike the forms of slavery practised by Europeans, however, indigenous African slavery was usually assimilative, in that the descendants of slaves tended to be integrated into the society concerned on increasingly more equal terms over subsequent generations, with varying rates and degrees of completion. The conjunction of slave labour and partial assimilation has generated a long-running debate between 'economic' and 'social' interpretations of the institution in its West

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African settings.<sup>2</sup> In Dylan Penningroth's view, the second approach is currently the more widely accepted: 'Unlike American historians, who agree that slavery was defined in terms of property rights and designed to produce commodities, most African historians argue that slavery was defined as the absence of kin.'<sup>3</sup> The aim of this paper is to reconcile and integrate these traditionally rival interpretations.<sup>4</sup> I argue that, in radical ways, it was the *interaction* of economic and social (and cultural and political) dimensions of slavery that was central to the history of slavery in precolonial West Africa. On the one hand, the growth in the volume of slavery and the specific uses to which slaves were put within the region cannot be explained without reference to the demand for slaves as labourers producing commodities. On the other hand, without organized coercion, and the political and ideological conditions for applying it, there could have been no slavery and no slave trade. Indeed, it will be argued here that, without such coercion, there would have been no market in labour at all in the economic conditions that prevailed in most of West Africa during this era. Moreover, the assimilative tendency in African slavery should be seen both as responding to the political circumstances of the region (the severe constraints on state formation) and, ironically, as underpinning the continuation of the internal slave trade.

The relationship between markets and coercion in the period was explored in a short but influential section of A. G. Hopkins's pioneering synthesis of West African economic history, published in 1973.<sup>5</sup> He emphasised that in the precolonial era – his evidence being mainly for the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries - goods markets were widespread and important in daily economic activity. This trade and associated production of goods for sale was sufficient to generate substantial derived demand for factors of production. More generally, Hopkins argued that the evidence was overwhelmingly consistent with the basic proposition that what economists would consider to be orthodox market behaviour was the norm, in that (to take an indicative example) when prices rose, producers tried to increase their output. In so doing, they responded to the prevailing pattern of relative scarcity in productive resources. Where a factor of production was relatively scarce, Hopkins argued, there emerged a market for it; where it was relatively abundant, there did not. He emphasised that land was generally not a constraint on the expansion of production: hence, the hiring and sale of land occurred only in where and when this abundance ceased to apply. Conversely, labour was scarce in relation to land. Hence labour markets existed. That labour was scarce while land was so abundant as to have no market value, meant that the material conditions existed in which it was profitable to use coercion to lower the

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<sup>2</sup>The controversy – which in its modern scholarly form will be set out below - can be traced to the arguments among colonial officials over abolition. Some local administrators, arguing against any precipitate government action to end slavery, maintained that 'slavery' in West Africa was a misnomer, or at least was far from entirely exploitative (see, e.g. Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital in Ghana: From Slavery to Free Labour in Asante, 1807-1956* [Rochester NY, 2005], 191, 208, 211). But the most prominent of all British colonial administrators, writing for publication in 1922 - comparatively late in the debate - restricted his qualifications to the evils of slavery to the case of Muslim societies holding slaves seized from non-muslim ones. Here 'the temporary continuance of slavery' had 'certain advantages as a form of labour-contract between a more advanced and a very primitive people' (Lord Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, London 1922: Frank Cass reprint, London 1965, 365).

<sup>3</sup>Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003), 8.

<sup>4</sup>In a sense, I seek to expand, from a political economy perspective, upon the view that the two approaches are compatible and can be linked, stated briefly by Martin A. Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* (Cambridge, 1998), 15.

<sup>5</sup>A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London, 1973), esp. 23-7.

cost of labour.<sup>6</sup>

Thus Hopkins applied the Nieboer hypothesis to West Africa: the proposition that slavery as an economic system was profitable where labour was scarce in relation to land, in conditions where capital was not essential for subsistence (as it might be in pastoral economies).<sup>7</sup> Historians of Europe are familiar with the hypothesis via an article by Evsey Domar, which put it differently from Hopkins. In Domar's model there is no price (i.e. no wage rate) at which free labour would be profitable to both the prospective employer and the prospective employee.<sup>8</sup> Thus the free (non-coercive) recruitment of labour from outside the family was not an option. In contrast, Hopkins emphasised that wage labour was possible, but expensive: slavery predominated over wage labour because of 'a deliberate choice based on an elementary, but broadly accurate, cost-benefit analysis': masters preferred it because it was cheaper.<sup>9</sup>

By contrast, in a much-cited essay of 1977, Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers interpreted the institution(s) of slavery in indigenous African societies essentially as devices for the social incorporation of strangers. They argued that precolonial societies had a 'heavy domestic demand for people', which was 'only partially a demand for units of labor and to a very great extent a demand for social and political units': 'the need for wives and children, the wish to enlarge one's kin group, and the desire to have clients, dependents, servants and retainers.' Again, 'African societies were so organized that there was a high demand for acquired people in many nonproductive and non-economic roles. Hence we do not need to appeal to an economic *raison d'être* for the existence of African "slavery"'. As the inverted commas round 'slavery' suggests, Kopytoff and Miers rejected the applicability to Africa of the Western distinction between freedom and slavery. They emphasised that African institutions of servitude were part of broader systems of 'rights-in-persons', in which transactions were anyway often monetary (as in bridewealth, though the latter is surely much more ambiguous than slavery with respect to 'selling').<sup>10</sup>

Some prominent more recent writers, while themselves putting more emphasis than Kopytoff and Miers on slaves as economic assets, also found Hopkins's view too economicist. Jack Goody averred that Hopkins's 'argument from economic principles appears to neglect the location of slavery in a social system'. In the latter context, he maintained, the issue of a 'choice between wage labour and slavery, as practical alternatives', did not arise.<sup>11</sup> Further, John Thornton has insisted that 'Slavery was widespread in Atlantic Africa because slaves were the only form of private, revenue-producing property recognized in African law.'<sup>12</sup>

The subsequent discussion is organized in six sections. The first reviews the evidence on the changing incidence of slavery within West Africa during and after the Atlantic slave trade: 'slave' meaning someone who could be sold. It is argued that the periodization which emerges is

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., ch. 2, esp. 23-7, 39.

<sup>7</sup>H. J. Nieboer, *Slavery as an Industrial System* (The Hague, 1900; revd edn 1910).

<sup>8</sup>Evsey D. Domar, 'The causes of slavery or serfdom: a hypothesis', *Journal of Economic History* 30 (1970), 18-32.

<sup>9</sup>Hopkins, *Economic History*, 24-6 (quote at 26).

<sup>10</sup>Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers, 'Slavery as an institution of marginality', in Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (eds), *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison, 1977), 3-81 (the quotations are at 65, 67, and 65n respectively).

<sup>11</sup>Jack Goody, 'Slavery in time and space', in James L. Watson (ed.), *Asian and African Systems of Slavery* (Oxford, 1980), 16-42. Cf. Frederick Cooper, 'The problem of slavery in African studies', *Journal of African History* 20 (1979), 108.

<sup>12</sup>John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn: Cambridge, 1998), 74.

inconsistent with the social interpretation of slavery, and very much fits an economic analysis. The second section takes up the issue of why labour markets took the form of slave trading (and pawning), and whether, in economic terms, there was actually a choice between coerced and free hired labour. It explores the very limited quantitative evidence available on the prices of slaves in relation to the proceeds of self-employed labour. This is the first time this has been attempted on a West Africa-wide scale; but only a beginning is made here. The section goes on to suggest a geographically wider application within the region for an argument I have made elsewhere from primary research on the Asante kingdom: that in economic terms there was no choice. As in the Domar model, if there was to be a market in labour, it had to be based on coercion. For that possibility to become reality, however, required certain political and cultural conditions. These conditions, and the particular forms in which they were met in precolonial West Africa, are considered in the third section. This relates the assimilative aspect of African slavery to the obstacles to state formation in the region; and considers the implications of both for the incentives to trade slaves. The fourth section considers the implications of the assimilative tendency in West African slavery, and the relative high degree of economic autonomy that was consequently experienced by many slaves, for whether the people concerned are better regarded not as slaves at all, but as serfs. The implications of this element of autonomy for the profitability of investment in slaves are explored in the fifth section. Finally, the paper reflects on the implications of slave-holding and the internal slave trade for economic development. It is argued that, despite the costs – even to the masters - and limitations of slavery as an economic system, slave-owning societies in West Africa expanded economically to some extent, especially during the decades during and immediately after the decline and ending of the Atlantic slave trade.

## **1. The expansion of slavery and slave labour in West Africa, c1450-c1900**

There is no dispute that slavery in West Africa predated the arrival of European traders: indeed the Portuguese, whose appearance on the coast was motivated by the desire to bypass the Saharan middlemen in the gold trade from West Africa, were offered captives to buy in the kingdom of Benin. The export of slaves beyond the region was itself old, indeed ancient, via the trans-Saharan caravan trade. Yet the contention that slavery was relatively uncommon in the region before the Europeans started buying slaves there<sup>13</sup> is consistent with the accumulation of evidence that slave-holding expanded during the Atlantic slave trade, and especially in the nineteenth century; during and after the decline of that trade.

The evidence for the Atlantic slave trade era itself is relatively patchy. For instance, it has been argued plausibly that there was a major expansion of agriculture in the Akan-speaking societies occupying much of the forest zone of what is now Ghana in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and that this was based on the large-scale importation of captive labour from the savanna to the north and from the coast. In the latter case, the slaves were bought by the Portuguese from the kingdom of Benin, shipped along the coast and re-sold on the Gold Coast (this part of the argument is well documented). In both directions, the Akan sold gold in return for slaves.<sup>14</sup> Thus in this case external trade facilitated the growth of internal slavery.

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<sup>13</sup>Walter Rodney, 'Slavery and other forms of social oppression on the Upper Guinea coast in the context of the Atlantic slave trade', *Journal of African History* 7: 4 (1966), 431-43.

<sup>14</sup>Ivor Wilks, 'Land, labour, capital and the forest kingdom of Asante: a model of early change', in J. Friedman and M. Rowlands (eds), *The Evolution of Social Systems* (London, 1978[1977?]), 487-534; revised version in Wilks, *Forests of Gold: Forests of Gold: Essays on the Akan and the Kingdom of Asante* (Athens OH, 1993), 41-90: see esp. pp. 72-8; also Ray A. Kea, *Settlements, Trade, and Politics in the Seventeenth-*

But the proposition that there was a *general* rise in slave holding in West Africa from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century rests primarily on the trans-Atlantic slave trade itself. This may seem surprising given that the latter placed buyers of slaves for use within the region in competition with massive external demand. This applied to a lesser extent also to demand from the Saharan trade, with both preceded and outlived the much more intense Atlantic one. But the external and internal slave trades complemented as much as competed with each other. The mechanisms by which people were captured, moved away from the places of origin, and sold to distant strangers was basically the same whether the final owners were across the ocean or just 200 kilometres away. The external trades, and especially the Atlantic one because of the vastness of its demand, induced a huge increase in the supply of slaves. The commercial aspect was the development of an elaborate credit system reaching far into the interior. The political aspect was that revenues available to sellers of slaves encouraged or reinforced militaristic behaviour by states and enslavement as the punishment for those convicted, on whatever grounds, of offences.<sup>15</sup> Thus the overseas competition affected the price of slaves from both directions: bidding it up on the demand side, but pushing it down on the supply side. The latter effect reduced the cost to West African societies of importing foreign captives themselves. Sellers (or re-sellers) of captives to Europeans also retained a share of the captives.<sup>16</sup> On the whole, European-American buyers (though not their North African counterparts) appear to have preferred to buy males rather than females, whereas African buyers had the opposite preference.<sup>17</sup> This complementarity helps explain why coastal societies seem to have retained relatively large numbers of women captives while selling on a larger number of the male captives.<sup>18</sup> While areas subject to systematic slave raiding lost population, in slaving ports the number of residents rose, as did the total populations.<sup>19</sup>

With this massively enlarged slave-supplying system in place, the decline in European-American demand for slaves in the early nineteenth century, following British withdrawal from the trade from 1 January 1808, made slaves (presumably especially male slaves) much cheaper for West African buyers. According to Lovejoy and Richardson's series, reproduced in Table 1, the average real price of slaves on the coast of West Africa in 1815-20 was only 30 per cent of the average for the five years preceding British abolition (1803-7). Conversely, the substantial recovery of slave prices that followed reflected the increasing demand for slaves to produce palm oil, kola nuts, raw cotton or other 'legitimate' commodities (whether the produce was for the maritime or intra-regional markets).<sup>20</sup> The average real price for 1825-30 was back to 67 per

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*Century Gold Coast* (Baltimore, 1982), 85-94. Peter Shinnie presents an archaeological perspective in Shinnie, 'Early Asante: is Wilks right?', in John Hunwick and Nancy Lawler (eds), *The Cloth of Many Colored Silks: Papers on History and Society Ghanaian and Islamic in Honor of Ivor Wilks* (Evanston, 1996), 195-203. Wilks's latest statement is his 'The forest and the Twis', *Journal des Africanistes* 75:1 (2005), 19-75.

<sup>15</sup>Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2000).

<sup>16</sup>E.g. Rodney, 'African slavery', esp. 434-6, 442-3.

<sup>17</sup>Lovejoy, *Transformations*.

<sup>18</sup>Albert van Dantzig, 'Effects of the Atlantic slave trade on some West African societies', *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 62: 1-2 (1975), 252-69.

<sup>19</sup>On the latter see *ibid.*, and Kristin Mann, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City: Lagos, 1760-1900* (Bloomington, 2007).

<sup>20</sup>Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life* (Cambridge, 1990); David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge, 2000); Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, 'Competing markets for male and female slaves: prices in the interior of West Africa, 1780-1850', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 28: 2 (1995), 261-94; Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, 'British abolition and its impact on slave prices along the Atlantic coast of Africa, 1783-1850', *Journal of Economic History* 55: 1

cent of the 1803-7 average.

**Table 1. Real Prices of Slaves in West Africa, 1783-1830**

Base: mean prices of 1783-1787.

Period	Price
1783-1787	15.6
1788-1792	19.1
1793-1797	17.5
1798-1802	23.3
1803-1807	25.3
1808-1814	14.2
1815-1820	7.7
1821-1825	11.0
1826-1830	17.0

Source: Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, 'British abolition and its impact on slave prices along the Atlantic coast of Africa, 1783-1850', *Journal of Economic History* 55: 1 (1995), Table 3 (p. 113).

The Atlantic market for slaves was progressively closed, albeit very unevenly, chronologically and geographically, between 1807 and 1867. The loss of this source of export earnings was gradually offset by the emergence of markets for West African palm and peanut oil, which were used initially in western Europe to make soap to wash the masses as industrialisation proceeded there. We also saw that while the commercial transition in the maritime trade was the biggest change in goods markets during the nineteenth century, it interacted with a major, largely endogenous development: a commercial expansion centred on the city of Kano (in what is now northern Nigeria) and in the new jihadist state of which it was part, the Sokoto Caliphate (1804-1903). The cutting edge of Kano's expansion was its output of cotton textiles, which were sold for hundreds of kilometres around by Hausa traders. Again, the purchasing power of customers in the Caliphate did much to enable the kingdom of Asante to off-set some of the economic effects of the closing of the maritime demand for slave exports, by providing an expanding market for kola nuts from Asante forests.<sup>21</sup>

It has become increasingly clear from the accumulation of specialist research on various parts of West Africa, since Hopkins' book appeared in 1973, that the trading and holding of slaves within the region became more and more common during and in the aftermath of the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>22</sup> The nineteenth-century expansion applied not only to the coastal and riverine areas producing for the Atlantic 'legitimate commerce', but very much also to the Sokoto Caliphate and the Central Sudan generally. The Kano textile industry, in particular,

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(1995), 98-119; Austin, 'Between abolition and *jihad*'; Gareth Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*, 122-7.

<sup>21</sup>Hopkins, *Economic History*; Paul E. Lovejoy, 'Plantations in the economy of the Sokoto Caliphate', *Journal of African History* 19:3 (1978), 341-68; Gareth Austin, 'Between abolition and *jihad*, from abolition to civil war and colonisation: the response of the Asante state and economy to the ending of the Atlantic slave trade, 1807-1896', in Robin Law (ed.), *From Slave Trade to 'Legitimate' Commerce: the Commercial Transition in Nineteenth-Century West Africa* (Cambridge, 1995), 93-118; John E. Flint and E. Anne McDougall, 'Economic change in West Africa in the nineteenth century', in J. F. A. Ajayi and M. Crowder (eds), *History of West Africa*, vol II (2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Harlow, 1987), 379-402.]

<sup>22</sup>For overviews see Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*; Manning, *Slavery and African Life*; also Robin Law (ed.), *From Slave Trade to 'Legitimate' Commerce: the Commercial Transition in Nineteenth-Century West Africa* (Cambridge, 1995). More recent case-studies include Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*, esp. 122-7; Mann, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City*.

derived its raw materials of cotton and indigo from *rinji* (or *gandu*), plantations or slave villages.<sup>23</sup>

By the late nineteenth century the proportion of slaves in most West African societies was high. It is difficult to be precise. Estimating slave numbers in precolonial African societies presents related conceptual and source problems. Were foreign observers, who are the usual source of such estimates, able to distinguish a slave from a 'free' subject? In Akan societies, such as the Asante kingdom, yes: at least in that the majority of first-generation slaves there were distinguished from the rest of the population by ritual scars on their faces (from their places of origin in the savanna north of the Akan forests) and their very limited capacity to speak the Akan language.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, the children of slaves – usually, of free fathers and slave mothers – had a still subordinate but slightly improved status, could speak the language and were not distinguished by ritual scars from the free population. Like their mothers, they were obliged to provide labour for their masters, but they are impossible to count. The most systematic evidence for the incidence of slavery in West Africa come from French surveys carried out in 1894 and 1904 (by the latter date, many slaves had left on their own initiative). Martin Klein has examined this source in detail, and estimates that for French West Africa as a whole, over 30 per cent of the population were slaves in 1904.<sup>25</sup>

Slaves were used in a range of different ways. This included in administration. Among West African states the Oyo empire made perhaps the most extensive use of slaves as government officials: from bodyguards, tax collectors and messengers to senior positions of authority in judicial, administrative and religious affairs.<sup>26</sup> This was not the only major state in which slaves could become important officials and even generals. Such appointments were advantageous to the ruler both in that they were based purely on merit, and in that those promoted lacked kin of their own and were therefore in the position of being, as a foreign observer said of the Bantamahene Amankwatia, a top Asante official and general, “‘a mere creature of the king, whose ancestry no one knows, or, at least, troubles about.’”<sup>27</sup> Such exceptional cases would have had no effect on the prices generally paid for slaves. In the Asante case, moreover, such promotions to general all involved individuals who were Asante-born and

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<sup>23</sup>Lovejoy, 'Plantations'. For a case-study, see Jan S. Hogendorn, 'The economics of slave use on two "plantations" in the Zaria emirate of the Sokoto Caliphate', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 10:3 (1977), 369-83. For a view from within Nupe, which was absorbed into the Caliphate, see Michael Mason, 'Captive and client labour in the economy of Bida emirate, 1857-1901', *Journal of African History* 14:3 (1973), 453-71.

<sup>24</sup>As Basel missionaries reported (Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*, 115; on the size of the slave labour-force in Asante, see *ibid.*, 125-6).

<sup>25</sup>Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule*, esp. Appendix 1, 252-6. On the weaknesses of the information, see also Richard L. Roberts, *Warriors, Merchants, and Slaves: The State and the Economy in the Middle Niger Valley, 1700-1914* (Stanford, 1987), 118-19. In the case of the Wolof kingdoms of Kajoor and Bawol, James Searing argues that Klein's estimates for 1904 are too high, because of slave runaways, but that in 1880 between a quarter and a third of the population would have been slaves in Kajoor, and rather less in Bawol (James F. Searing, *God Alone is King: Islam and Emancipation in Senegal. The Wolof Kingdoms of Kajoor and Bawol, 1859-1914* (Portsmouth NH, 2002), 166-72, 184-88, 191-3).

<sup>26</sup>Robin Law, *The Oyo Empire c.1600-c.1836: A West African Imperialism in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Oxford, 1977).

<sup>27</sup>F. Boyle, *Through Fanteeland to Coomassie: A Diary of the Ashantee Expedition* (London, 1874), 276-7, citing the Basel missionary Kühne. Quoted in Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: the Structure and Evolution of a Political Order* (London, 1975: 2nd edn, with new preamble, Cambridge, 1989), 446.

not first-generation slaves,<sup>28</sup> and therefore unlikely to be sold even had they stayed at their original humble social level. Much more important to the overall picture was the gender distinction. In matrilineal societies, such as the Akan (including Asante), free men might marry women in the hope of having children who could inherit from them, unlike their sons by free mothers.<sup>29</sup> Generally, the non-economic advantages of female slaves help explain why African buyers of slaves all over West Africa were usually willing to pay more for female than for male slaves.<sup>30</sup> But it is also clear that both women and men were valued for their productive labour, albeit to different extents.<sup>13</sup>

The rapid and widespread increase in the intensity of slave trading and the incidence of slave holding over these four centuries, and especially in the nineteenth century, constituted a change which seems inexplicable within the framework of Kopytoff and Miers's view of the labour demand for slaves as a far from dominant part of a much wider demand for slaves. Rather, the growth of slave numbers was clearly economically motivated: the economic uses of these slaves, and the rise in the effective demand for extra-familial labour, is documented in most of the case-studies.<sup>32</sup> Susan Martin's study of the Ngwa Igbo records an exception, where slavery apparently did not rise.<sup>33</sup> This contrasts with Don Ohadike's emphasis on the importance of slavery to the Igbo economy generally by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup> These local variations within southeast Nigeria are explained in Nieboer terms by David Northrup, who correlates relatively high local incidence of slavery, and relatively exploitative forms of it, with relatively low population and relatively high participation in goods markets.<sup>53</sup>

Whereas the expansion of slavery within West Africa during and, even more so, after the Atlantic slave trade can be explained in economic terms, a social explanation of this change is lacking. There is no evidence of, for example, a widespread change in inheritance practices such as might, in principle, have expanded greatly the 'social' demand for slaves.

Equally significant, where slaves were used in relatively large concentrations in earlier centuries, that too seems to have been always either made possible by the receipts from market activity (as with the gold sales that funded the importation of slaves to the Akan forests in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), or motivated by a desire to expand production of goods for

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<sup>28</sup>Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century*, 404, 417, 431, 446, 461, 499; Akosua Adoma Perbi, *A History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (Legon, 2004), 147-51. Adu Bofo, who organized and later personally commanded the Asante invasion of Eweland in 1867-71, had a slave mother. But his father was Opoku Frefre, who had slave parents but had risen to be a successful general and was given a major hereditary chieftaincy (Perbi, *History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana*, 149, 150; Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century*, 225, 417, 431, 461, 499).

<sup>29</sup>Emmanuel Terray, 'La captivité dans le royaume Abron du Gyaman', in Claude Meillassoux (ed.), *L'Esclavage en Afrique précoloniale* (Paris, 1975), 389-453.

<sup>30</sup>Lovejoy and Richardson, 'Competing markets'. This was not always so, as prices from the major slave market at Salaga, in central/northern Ghana, show. We cannot exclude the possibility that the equality in prices observed there in 1887 may have reflected a higher than usual availability of female compared to male captives (Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*, 132, 177).

<sup>31</sup>Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*, 174-80.

<sup>32</sup>E.g. Law, *From Slave Trade* and Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*, 114-34.

<sup>33</sup>Susan Martin, 'Slaves, Igbo women and palm oil in the nineteenth century', in Law, *From Slave Trade*, 172-94.

<sup>34</sup>Don C. Ohadike, "'When the slaves left, the owners wept': entrepreneurs and emancipation among the Igbo people', in Suzanne Miers and Martin A. Klein (eds), *Slavery and Colonial Rule in Africa* (London, 1999), 189-207.

<sup>35</sup>David Northrup, 'Nineteenth-century patterns of slavery and economic growth in southeastern Nigeria', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 12, 1 (1979), 1-16.



market (as with the massive nineteenth-century expansion of slave-holding). A partial exception, the ‘slave estates’ of the Songhay empire in the sixteenth century, will be considered later.

Thus in West Africa, as was often true elsewhere in the world, slavery (as distinct from serfdom, to which we will return) was a form of coercion highly associated with the market: with the sale of people, usually primarily for their labour, and with production of goods, usually for sale.<sup>36</sup> Further, an essentially ‘social’ interpretation of slavery cannot account for the changes in its scale, nor for the evidence about the motivation of these changes, from the seventeenth to the end of the nineteenth century. Contrary to Kopytoff and Miers, the slave trade within West Africa was largely a market in labour, thus – precisely - a factor market.

## 2. Why markets in slaves rather than wage labour – if labour markets at all?

According to Mungo Park, describing his travels in Senegambia and what is now Mali in the 1790s, ‘Hired servants, by which I mean persons of free condition, voluntarily working for pay, are unknown in Africa ...’<sup>37</sup> The payment of wages to Africans by Africans was not unknown in early modern West Africa, but it was vanishingly rare. There were enough instances to confirm Hopkins’s implication that it was not culturally unthinkable,<sup>38</sup> but (apart from the material rewards that might be given to groups of youths for casual help) these were usually in the European enclaves.<sup>39</sup> For the kingdom of Asante, for instance, I was unable to find any proof that long-term hiring of labour (for example for a season, let alone a year) happened at all before the colonial occupation (and the growth of cocoa farming). Rather, the recruitment of labour from outside the family relied on the practice or threat of coercion: in the form sometimes of *corvée*, often of pawning, and most commonly, of slavery.<sup>40</sup>

So what accounts for this reliance on slave (and pawn) rather than free wage labour? The prevailing factor ratios did indeed fit the Nieboer conditions.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the period, West Africa as a whole – and in most localities too - was characterized by an abundance of natural resources in relation to labour and capital.<sup>42</sup> Cultivable land was not only relatively abundant physically, usually it was also easily and extremely cheaply accessible in institutional terms.<sup>43</sup> In these market-oriented but land-abundant, capital-scarce economies in which economies of scale were generally lacking,<sup>44</sup> there were two possibilities for a principal seeking to expand output beyond that possible using only his or her own labour, and that of free family members. One possibility was that emphasised by Hopkins, in which wage labour was a feasible alternative to slavery. Thus slavery was preferred because it was the cheaper option.<sup>45</sup> The other possibility is

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<sup>36</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>37</sup>Mungo Park, *Travels into the Interior Districts of Africa* (London, 1954; 1<sup>st</sup> edn, 1799), 219.

<sup>38</sup>Hopkins, *Economic History*, 24. See, further, Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*, 159, 161.

<sup>39</sup>Lynn Garrett, [Ph.D.dissertation (University of Birmingham, early 1980s(?))]

<sup>40</sup>Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*: on absence of free hired labour, 112-14.

<sup>41</sup>Hopkins, *Economic History*, 15, 24-7.

<sup>42</sup>Gareth Austin, ‘Resources, techniques and strategies south of the Sahara: revising the factor endowments perspective on African economic development, 1500-2000’, *Economic History Review*, 61: 3 (2008), 587-624.

<sup>43</sup>Hopkins, *Economic History*, 39; Gareth Austin, ‘Sub-Saharan Africa: Land rights and ethno-national consciousness in historically land-abundant economies’ in Stanley L. Engerman and Jacob Metzger (eds), *Land Rights, Ethno-Nationality, and Sovereignty in History* (London, 2004), 276-93.

<sup>44</sup>Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*, 88-91.

<sup>45</sup>Hopkins, *Economic History*, 23-7.

that the Domar version of the Nieboer hypothesis applied: that wage labour, even if it was conceivable within the culture, was not an economic option because there was no wage rate that it would have been mutually profitable for an employer to offer and for a worker to accept.

Staying at Kamalia, a small town just west of Bamako, for several months in 1796-7, Mungo Park gave an account of gold mining among the Manding: 'Generally speaking, if a person uses common diligence in a proper soil, it is supposed that as much gold may be collected by him in the course of the dry season as is equal to the value of two slaves.'<sup>46</sup> A more extraordinary figure was given by the French explorer Raffenel, from a journey in 1843-4. He reckoned that 'in one year a hard-working man can extract the value of four to five captives' from gold-mining in Bambuk, Mali.<sup>47</sup> Claude Meillassoux took this as implying 'an amortization period of two to three months'.<sup>48</sup> We know from Philip Curtin, however, that mining in Bambuk (Bambuhu) was necessarily confined to four to five months of the dry season.<sup>49</sup> Thus the period would be about one month, at the right time of year. A less extreme conclusion about the free-labour effort-price of slaves comes from the Casamance river in 1828. There the price of male slaves in Casamance was £14.85. An able-bodied man could produce a ton of groundnuts a year, for which the full-on-board price averaged £12 during 1834-57.<sup>50</sup> For the kingdom of Asante I assembled 25 observations of the prices of slaves in the markets in which Asantes bought slaves, from 1823 to the late 1890s, which can be expressed in terms of the market value of gold-miners' output. Some of the observations gave a range of prices reflecting differences between the slaves on offer.<sup>51</sup> Relating them to the evidence of labour productivity in gold mining yielded the generalization that 'in most of the years for which we have price observations, it seems that an able-bodied male or female slave cost the equivalent of one to three seasons' gold-mining, sometimes less, by a single miner.' At certain times the cost seems to have been as little as half or even a third of one season.<sup>52</sup> Thus slaves were indeed very cheap, in that it took relatively very little time for a free person to make enough money to buy one.

Table 2 attempts to make these observations commensurable. Certain reservations should be noted. Park's estimate is based on gold mining (as opposed to the less productive 'washing the sands of the streams'), and gold mining was confined to 'the height of the dry season'.<sup>53</sup> I have assumed (following Curtin's figure for Bambuk) that this was 4-5 months long.<sup>54</sup> I have interpreted the Casamance figures literally, as implying that 15 months would enable a man to produce enough groundnuts to buy a slave. Actually it depends on which 15 months, because of seasonal constraints. But the literal ratio is the most meaningful, because in practice more than one slave would often be bought at a time, reflecting the market value of the work of more than one man. The brevity of this table is an invitation to further research. As it stands, it shows that, seasonally adjusted, to buy a slave required the effort that one man put into extra-subsistence production in the course of anything from half a year to three years.

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<sup>46</sup>Park, *Travels*, 232.

<sup>47</sup>Anne. Raffenel, *Voyage dans l'Afrique occidentale (1843-1844)* (Paris, 1846), 285, quoted by Claude Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery* (Chicago, 1991; French original 1986), 308.

<sup>48</sup>Meillassoux, *Anthropology of Slavery*, 308.

<sup>49</sup>Philip D. Curtin, 'The lure of Bambuk gold', *Journal of African History* 14: 4 (1973), 629.

<sup>50</sup>Swindell and Jeng, *Migrants, Credit and Climate*, 10. The price data are from 1828; the daily output figure may be from 1848.

<sup>51</sup>Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*, 128-34.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 162-5, quote at p. 163.

<sup>53</sup>Park, *Travels*, quotes from pp. 230 and 231 respectively.

<sup>54</sup>Curtin, 'The lure of Bambuk gold', 629.

**Table 2 Effort-price of Buying a Slave: Time required for a free man[?] to make enough money to buy a slave**

Year	Place	Effort-price (months)	Source (detailed cited in text)
1796-7	Near Bamako	2 - 2.5 (dry-season)	Park
1828	Casamance	15	Swindell & Jeng
1843-4	Bambuk	1	Raffenel
1823-late 1890s	Asante	1.5 -9 (during dry-season[s])	Austin

We can now turn to the question of economic choice in the use of coercion to recruit labour. Elsewhere I have compared the Domar and Hopkins versions of the Nieboer hypothesis to the evidence for the Asante case, using both quantitative and qualitative sources. Both point to the same conclusion: that there, at least, the Domar version applies. As noted earlier, slaves could be acquired typically for the product of only a few months extra-subsistence labour, for example in gold mining. When wage labour first appeared in Asante, at the beginning of the colonial period, the daily rate for unskilled labour was almost exactly the same as the contemporary estimates of the average daily winnings of a gold digger. Thus one free person could not afford to hire the services of another. To obtain additional labourers he or she would have had to resort to buying slaves or lending on human pawns, if either was possible.<sup>55</sup> The quantitative evidence, fragmentary as it is, chimes with the claim made by the chief and elders of a south Asante chiefdom, Adanse, in 1906, when they petitioned the colonial government to continue to tolerate slavery and pawning. They depended on the labour of slaves and the descendants of slaves ‘as we have no money like Europeans to hire men to do necessities for us.’<sup>56</sup>

It remains to be investigated whether the Domar or the Hopkins model applies in other West African societies. New research is needed for these cases to quantify the comparative cost of slave and free labour when they began to co-exist. That historical moment - usually early in the colonial era - was generally brief. A finding that makes the Domar model more likely to apply is the very fact that regular wage labour seems barely to have existed in West Africa alongside slavery, in the same society and for any period. This is to be expected if wage labour was really not an economic alternative.

We must never forget that no economic explanation of slavery (or any other form of labour coercion) can ever be sufficient. It is necessary also, though, to be careful about the particular senses in which this truism applies in a particular context; otherwise we may mislead ourselves into adopting an implausible counter-factual, by presuming that more alternatives existed than actually did. For precolonial West Africa, it is not realistic to imagine that political authorities had sufficient fiscal, administrative and military means effectively to change factor

<sup>55</sup>Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*, 155-70.

<sup>56</sup>Petition of ‘Kings, Chiefs and Head men of Adansi’ to Governor of the Gold Coast, Fomeana, Ashanti, 30 November 1906, in National Archives of Ghana, Kumasi, ARG 1/2/30/1/2. Quoted in Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*, 165.

ratios by dispossessing a large part of their own populations from the land – as was to happen in parts of southern and eastern Africa under colonial settler regimes. Even if it was an option for precolonial rulers (and much of the region was politically decentralized), it would have been much safer politically to do what was actually done: in effect, a collaboration between rulers and ‘free’ subjects to exploit foreign captives.<sup>57</sup> Land alienation would have meant losses for many of the subjects; whereas they, too, stood to gain from the exploitation of enslaved outsiders.

What was realistic, in material terms at least, would have been to reject the ambition of expanding labour forces beyond the freely-recruited family unit (however ‘nuclear’ or extended). Thornton’s assertion of a legal-cultural explanation for property rights being in people seems to be to amount to cultural determinism, begging the question. For sure, slavery is only possible on a widespread and sustained scale where the means of coercion, and the willingness to use them for this purpose, are both in evidence. Politics and culture matter here, and cannot be assumed to be themselves simple functions of economic opportunity. To demonstrate this we have one relatively well-documented case of a society, the politically decentralized Sereer-Safèn of western Bawol, Senegal, who according to James Searing, not only resisted slave raiders but also seem not to have practised slavery themselves.<sup>58</sup> But in most of the region, responding to the opportunities to expand the output of goods for the market when they arose, that option was rejected, if it was considered.

This section has argued that the material conditions were such that the effective choice was between foregoing the recruitment of labour through the market, and hiring labour in the form of slaves (and pawns). Thus we have a drastic example of the market as a social institution: its existence dependent on certain extra-economic conditions, which we will now explore.

### **3. ‘Social death’, ‘weak’ states, and the assimilation of and trade in slaves**

This section seeks to bridge the social and economic interpretations of slavery in precolonial West Africa, and to highlight the interactions between the social and economic dimensions of slavery and slave trading. Penningroth’s statement, quoted earlier, encapsulates (without judging) the tendency for historians who reject the Nieboer hypothesis to see as an alternative the view most sharply put by Orlando Patterson, that slavery meant above all kinlessness, and in that sense, ‘social death’.<sup>59</sup>

Patterson’s observation did indeed apply to newly-imported slaves in West African societies. It is suggested here that this should be seen, not as a refutation of the Nieboer hypothesis, but as the identification of a basic social mechanism which enabled the economic logic of slavery to become social reality. For it was precisely the kinlessness of the first-generation slave that made possible the comparatively unrestrained exploitation of their labour. Penningroth himself notes that in Fante society (on the coast of what is now Ghana), ‘Defining slaves as metaphoric “orphans” gave masters sweeping rights over everything the slaves possessed: their belongings, their muscles, and their children.’<sup>60</sup>

There was a second key mechanism, which similarly had the effect of initially isolating the slave within the masters’ society, thereby making coercion and appropriation both

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<sup>57</sup>This argument is elaborated for the kingdom of Asante in Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*, 158-60.

<sup>58</sup>James Searing, “‘No kings, no lords, no slaves’: ethnicity and religion among the Sereer-Safèn of Western Bawol, 1700-1914”, *Journal of African History* 43:3 (2002), 407-30.

<sup>59</sup>Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge MA, 1982).

<sup>60</sup>Penningroth, *Claims of Kinfolk*, 22.

ideologically legitimate and practically more effective. This was the tendency for slaves imported into a given society to be identified as foreign and/or of alien religion: in both cases, commonly with a stigma of contempt and inferiority attached. It should be noted that this did not apply to all slaves: some slaves in Asante, for instance, were culturally fellow-Akans, speaking a variety of the same language and brought up with similar customs. But the vast majority of slaves in Asante were initially obtained from the savanna societies to the north,<sup>61</sup> and were seen thereby as culturally other, in a strongly derogatory sense.<sup>62</sup> Over a much wider swathe of West Africa, in the Muslim societies of the region the capture and holding of slaves was seen in principle as removing the slaves from infidelity to Allah. However, the mere act of conversion to Islam was not enough to mandate emancipation for a slave, unless he or she had fled towards territory under Muslim control before the master himself converted. In practice, there was a strong tendency for the criterion of non-belief to be interpreted in wider, ethnic terms: turning into legitimate targets of enslavement all members of any population whose majority lacked unambiguous Muslim faith. The Timbuktu jurist Ahmad Baba (1556-1627) denounced this tendency. But it re-emerged particularly strongly following the foundation of the Sokoto Caliphate in the early nineteenth century, and during the regular raids that followed.<sup>63</sup>

So far no mention has been made of the role of the state as such, in enforcing slave status. Indeed, during this period slavery was found in many of the politically decentralized societies of the region as well as in all the centralized ones. Precolonial West Africa was characterized by a changing mixture of polities of different levels of centralization, from independent village confederacies to large kingdoms and tributary empires. The abundance of land made it hard for rulers to tie down subjects and tax them.<sup>64</sup> This in turn limited rulers' coercive and administrative capacity, denying them the option of making land artificially scarce. In this context, it is not surprising that markets were often controlled by, or operated through, private arrangements. Even so, given its characteristic military power, the state's most important area of intervention in factor markets was participation in the capture of slaves,<sup>65</sup> protection and participation in slave raiding, and enforcement of slave status internally.

Emmanuel Terray suggested that the larger and more centralized polities were able to enforce slave status more harshly, and with more gradual remission over succeeding generations, than in 'stateless' communities and micro states.<sup>66</sup> As usual when one considers the implications of state formation in West Africa, model-building is complicated by southeast Nigeria, in this case specifically northeastern Igboland in the nineteenth century. Despite being stateless, it was, according to Northrup, 'Among the northeastern Igbo in this period [that] one finds the closest approximation of New World plantation slavery: the status of a slave was hereditary without amelioration, even when his father was a freeman; there was no recognition of marriage between slaves ... who were regarded as mere chattels.' They 'enjoyed none of the social mobility of the coastal slaves nor could they hope for the gradual assimilation common in the oil palm belt.'<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*.

<sup>62</sup>T. C. McCaskie, *State and Society in Asante* (Cambridge, 1995), 96.

<sup>63</sup>John Ralph Willis, 'Introduction: the ideology of enslavement in Islam' and 'Jihad and the ideology of enslavement', in Willis (ed.), *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa*, vol. I (London, 1985), 1-46; Bernard Barbour and Michelle Jacobs, 'The Mi'raj: a legal treatise on slavery by Ahmad Baba', in the same volume, 125-59. See also Hunwick, 'Notes on slavery in the Songhay empire', 19.

<sup>64</sup>E.g. Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa* (Princeton, 2000).

<sup>65</sup>Emphasised for the Segu Bambara state (c.1712-1861) by Roberts, *Warriors, Merchants, and Slaves*, 23.

<sup>66</sup>Terray, 'La captivité'.

<sup>67</sup>Northrup, 'Nineteenth-century patterns of slavery', 10.

Terray's hypothesis is thus not the whole story. But it may be part of it: it is worth examining in other cases, as there is logic to the idea that, other things being equal, the harshness of slavery was related to the coercive power available to support the masters; and that such power was, almost by definition, stronger in the larger states.

We can extend Terray's logic to make the further argument that the hindrances to the construction of state authority – making for statelessness or relatively weak states – and thus the relative weakness of the organization of the means of coercion, at least at the level of the daily life of villages and households, provided a strong incentive for slave owners and political authorities to take steps to minimize the risk of fight or flight by slaves – steps additional to the threat of punishment. One such step was the characteristic practice of selling on many of the captives obtained by a given polity's own forces, while buying in captives who originated further away. This made running home less feasible for slaves (though it still happened).<sup>66</sup>

Another such step was represented by the characteristic - though, as we have seen, not quite universal - assimilative dimension of slavery as practiced in African societies. An almost essential compromise by masters to slaves was granting them fictive kinship; or, at least, allowing them to keep whatever assets they made. In the former case, exemplified by both Fante and Asante in what is now Ghana, the end result could be that slaves or (more realistically, after emancipation) former slaves could claim inheritance rights as junior kin, or because they had laboured in creating the master's farm.<sup>69</sup> Specifically, the descendants of slaves were absorbed and integrated into their masters' society, though the process could take two or three generations, and still be incomplete (especially where slave descent was a disqualification for chiefly office).<sup>70</sup> Thus slavery as an economic system in precolonial West Africa worked – necessarily – within social mechanisms and cultural understandings, as well as (and inter-relatedly with) the threat of force as such.

The ameliorative aspect of indigenous slavery had an ironic commercial implication. For the assimilative tendency itself obliged slave owners to keep trying to acquire captives, thus reproducing the demand for slaves. So the social and political context of slave holding in West Africa doubly reinforced the slave trade. For it created incentives to obtain slaves from relatively far away – which meant buying them rather than relying on direct capture – and to replace relatively assimilated second- or third-generation slaves with fresh acquisitions.

#### **4. Slaves or serfs: conceptualizing the relative autonomy of many slaves in West Africa**

It is in this context of the gradual assimilation of slaves that we should consider whether serfdom, as distinct from slavery, existed in precolonial and early colonial West Africa. Joseph Inikori has drawn the attention of Africanists to an important aspect of the terminological distinction as it has been made in European historiography. Serfs enjoyed greater economic autonomy than slaves: they lived away from their masters, and had enough access to land, and enough of their own labour-time, to support a family including dependent children. Characteristically, they could reproduce themselves socially. Inikori goes on to show that a high proportion of the people

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<sup>68</sup>Paul E. Lovejoy, 'Fugitive slaves: resistance to slavery in the Sokoto Caliphate', in Gary Y. Okihiro (ed.), *In Resistance: Studies in African, Caribbean, and Afro-American History* (Amherst MA, 1986), 71-95.

<sup>69</sup>Penningroth, *Claims of Kinsfolk*; Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*.

<sup>70</sup>Even after the abolition of slavery, cases of debarring of candidates from chiefly office occurred in Asante. See Perbi, *History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana*, 136-7. Yet about one-fifth of all Asante chieftaincy positions had been 'occupied at one time or another by slaves and servants' (Perbi, *History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana*, 139-44: quote at p. 139).

usually described as slaves in the literature on nineteenth-century West Africa had, in this sense, the characteristics of serfs. For example, the labour-time of slaves was often divided between their masters and themselves.<sup>71</sup> In my view, economic - and social - autonomy was particularly associated with second (and later) rather than first-generation slaves. Compared to newly-enslaved people, the descendants of free men and slave women were much more likely to be able to marry a free person (where they were themselves male) or a slave (if they were female). They were more likely to have enough time of their own to accumulate modest property and support young children. But the sheer number of first-generation slaves also meant that some enjoyed a degree of economic (if not social) autonomy, by virtue of being settled in villages distant from the master.<sup>72</sup>

Is 'serf' the appropriate category for those who lived under servitude but with relative autonomy? Africanists have generally been reluctant to use the term 'serfdom' because of its connotation of a kind of servile relationship based on land<sup>73</sup> - the serf being in the double-edged position of 'enjoying' access to a parcel of land and being tied to it - which had little meaning where, as in West Africa, land was generally neither physically nor institutionally scarce.<sup>74</sup> Let us reflect on a case that was unusual in West African history.

By and especially during the first half of the sixteenth century the askias (rulers) of the Songhay empire established a chain of estates or plantations at about twenty places along the Niger river, from Jenne to Dendi, which are described in chronicles from mid-seventeenth century Timbuktu.<sup>75</sup> They were worked by a servile labour force, which was said to number 1,700-2,700 people on plantations at one site alone. The slaves produced grain upon which the major political and religious centres of the empire depended.<sup>76</sup> About 800 tons of rice a year was sent to Gao, the Songhay capital.<sup>77</sup> The producers were described by the chroniclers as slaves,<sup>78</sup> operating in groups of 20 or more under a *fanfa* ('slave captain'). The estate of Abda in Dendi, southeast of Gao, had 200 'slaves'.<sup>79</sup> Anglophone historians have tended to follow the sources by adopting the term 'slave'.<sup>80</sup> There definitely were slaves in the Songhay empire, and the market for slaves in Gao, the Songhay capital, was exactly that, in the sense that the prices responded to shifts in the balance between supply and demand, and tended to converge. A Songhay 'raid into "Gurma" (inner buckle of the Niger) during the reign of Askia Isma'il (1535-1549) produced so

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<sup>71</sup>Joseph E. Inikori, 'Slaves or serfs? A comparative study of slavery and serfdom in Europe and Africa', in Isidore Okpewho, Carole Boyce Davies and Ali A. Mazrui (eds), *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities* (Bloomington, 1999), 49-77.

<sup>72</sup>E.g. in the Asante kingdom (Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*).

<sup>73</sup>E.g. Frederick Cooper, 'The problem of slavery in African studies', *Journal of African History* 20:1 (1979), 105n.

<sup>74</sup>Cf. Jack Goody, *Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa* (London, 1971), 30-33.

<sup>75</sup>Michal Tymowski, 'Les domaines des princes du Songhay (Soudan occidental)', *Annales économiques sociétés civilisations* 25:6 (1970), 1637-58; Tymowski, 'L'économie et la société dans le bassin du moyen Niger: fin du XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles', *African Bulletin* (Warsaw), 18 (1973), 9-64.

<sup>76</sup>See esp. Tymowski, 'Les domaines des princes'; also the synthesis in Paul E. Lovejoy, 'The internal trade of West Africa to 1800', in J. F. A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder (eds), *History of West Africa*, vol I, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Harlow, 1985), 667-75.

<sup>77</sup>J. O. Hunwick, 'Notes on slavery in the Songhay empire', in John Ralph Willis (ed.), *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa*, vol. II (London, 1985), 25.

<sup>78</sup>Tymowski, 'Les domaines des princes', 1650.

<sup>79</sup>J. O. Hunwick, 'Notes on slavery in the Songhay empire', in John Ralph Willis (ed.), *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa*, vol. II (London, 1985), 25.

<sup>80</sup>Lovejoy, 'Internal trade'; Hunwick, 'Notes on slavery in the Songhay empire', 25.

many slaves that their price on the Gao market fell to a paltry 300 cowries.<sup>81</sup> But were the rice-growers on the royal domains, the riverside estates, slaves? Michal Tymowski argued that they were serfs, because they were 'were tied to the land that they cultivated.'<sup>82</sup> The land concerned was highly fertile, in a part of West Africa that was generally pretty arid. Tymowski's view is plausible because the context was, for West African history, unusually like that of the serf economies of earlier European history, where land was often fertile - usually, more so than in West Africa - but was only accessible to poor people if they accepted the obligations and subordination of serfdom. As Goody commented, 'unfree tenancies mean little unless land is highly valued and your peasantry has nowhere else to go.'<sup>83</sup>

The relative economic autonomy that many slaves or slave-descendants experienced in later centuries, especially during the period of large-scale slave acquisition, fits less well with the concept of serfdom. The context was not land scarcity and being tied to land. Where land was granted or mortgaged, for instance, what was transferred was rights of control over people, with their resources attached.<sup>84</sup> Again, the relatively large number of hours that many slaves were allowed to use for their own ends is explicable partly as a means of giving incentive in the context of difficulties of supervision: something compatible with either slavery or serfdom. But it is also partly to be seen as a response to the low fertility of the soil, especially in much of the savanna. Klein remarked that 'In the most market-oriented African systems, slaves worked for their masters about half as much as in the US South, largely because they had to provide for their own subsistence, not an easy task with hoe agriculture.'<sup>85</sup> Another way in which 'slave' fits this context better than serf, is that whereas serfdom carried no necessary connotation of foreign origin, slavery in Africa, as elsewhere was associated with the sense of being a kinless outsider. Cooper observed that the derivation of the word 'slave' in western Europe, from the ethnic term Slav, points to 'the essential characteristic of the slave in both classical Europe and Africa - the foreigner brought by force into a society.'<sup>86</sup>

Unlike in Europe, servitude in West Africa was rarely tied to land, and its object was most often not, or not mainly, the production of grain surpluses. Slavery in West Africa was associated with extra-subsistence production, of cotton or gold or, in the nineteenth century, palm oil and groundnuts for export; but not usually of staple food crops. The royal domains of the Songhay empire, with their 'serf' cultivators, may have been an exception that proves this rule. The relative economic autonomy of many of the slaves held in precolonial West Africa is perhaps most precisely regarded as a feature of institutions of slavery in this part of the world, rather than as definitive evidence of serfdom.<sup>87</sup> In economic terms it may be seen as a response to high supervision costs, especially given the widespread limits on state power. In social and political-economy terms it was part of the drift, at the level of individuals, from slavery towards higher degrees of freedom; which was the opposite of the European path noted by Inikori, of

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<sup>81</sup>Hunwick, 'Notes on slavery in the Songhay empire', 18-19.

<sup>82</sup>Tymowski, 'Les domaines des princes', 1651.

<sup>83</sup>Goody, *Technology, Tradition and the State*, 31.

<sup>84</sup>E.g. Roberts, *Warriors, Merchants, and Slaves*, 130; Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*, 98-102, 104-5.

<sup>85</sup>Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule*, 13.

<sup>86</sup>Cooper, 'Problem of slavery', 105.

<sup>87</sup>Along with the fact that slavery was much less common in West Africa before the Atlantic slave trade than after it, this could explain, as plausibly as would widespread serfdom rather than slavery, the phenomenon noted by Inikori: that in 'slave societies in the Americas . . . the greater the proportion of African-born people in the population, the greater the incidence of resistance or revolt.' Inikori, 'Slaves or serfs?', 68.



slaves ultimately becoming serfs.<sup>88</sup>

## 5. Slaves' partial economic autonomy and masters' returns on investment in slaves

The time that slaves were allowed to work for themselves, which in savanna societies was typically a day or perhaps two,<sup>89</sup> had mixed implications for the profitability of their labour to their masters. It gave them a motive for staying and working rather than facing the risks of flight. Importantly also, the majority of their 'own' labour time would have been spent producing enough to feed themselves, so saving their master the cost of providing food. A similar point can be made where slaves engaged in cotton growing. But on the other hand, during much of the dry season, slaves could use 'their' time to produce commodities and thereby obtain currency and even property. Where slaves produced grain for sale, this facility applied to part of their wet-season work too. In this context, let us consider the profitability of investment in slaves.

Regarding productivity, Lord Lugard expressed the view that slaves lacked the motivation to work. Slavery, he wrote, in a book published in 1922, after his retirement from the governor-generalship of colonial Nigeria:

is economically bad, for the freeman does more work than the slave, who, moreover, is indifferent to the productivity of the soil and careless of posterity. Barth [the German traveller who visited Kano, for example, in 1851] noted, as we do to-day, the more thorough agricultural methods of the independent tribes compared with the land under slave cultivation.<sup>90</sup>

On the other hand, according to an ethnographic report by an early colonial administrator in Sierra Leone, in 1906, slaves there worked from sunrise to the beginning of sunset, a couple of hours more than freemen.<sup>91</sup> Given that either of these views might be right (and they could both be, for northern Nigeria and Sierra Leone respectively), we should not assume that the productivity of free and slave labour was the same. Neither distinguished the master's surplus from the slave's total output.

Let us now turn to direct comparisons of the commodity productivity of slaves themselves with the cost of buying a slave. As of the early 1830s it was claimed that a slave could produce a ton of palm oil per year; while the price of a ton of palm oil in an oil-producing area of the Niger Delta, £4, was the same as the price of a slave.<sup>92</sup> Kenneth Swindell and Alieu Jeng's observation that there seems to have been 'a relatively good annual return' on slave labour, compared to selling the slave, applies not only to slaves' role in export production, but also to their deployment in supplying the export economy with foodstuffs.<sup>93</sup> In Sierra Leone, on

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<sup>88</sup>Inikori, 'Slaves or serfs?', 51-55.

<sup>89</sup>E.g. Peter M. Weil, 'Slavery, Groundnuts, and European Capitalism in the Wuli kingdom of Senegambia, 1820-1930', *Research in Economic Anthropology* 6 (1984), pp. 77-119.

<sup>90</sup>Lugard, *Dual Mandate*, 364-5.

<sup>91</sup>Quoted in Ismail Rashid, "'Do dady nor lef me make dem carry me": slave resistance and emancipation in Sierra Leone', in Suzanne Miers and Martin A. Klein (eds), *Slavery and Colonial Rule in Africa* (London, 1999), 218.

<sup>92</sup>See Robin Law, 'Introduction' to Law (ed.), *From Slave Trade to 'Legitimate' Commerce: The Commercial Transition in Nineteenth-Century West Africa* (Cambridge, 1995), 28 (nn. 31, 36).

<sup>93</sup>Kenneth Swindell and Alieu Jeng, *Migrants, Credit and Climate: the Gambian Groundnut Trade, 1834-1934* (Leiden, 2006), 10.

the north side of the Freetown estuary, slaves were used to produce rice for the Freetown market. A Bulom chief ‘declared that each of his slaves earned him, over and above the cost of their subsistence, about £7.[50] annually, whereas the average price of a slave was only £10’.<sup>49</sup>

Estimates have been made relating to the interior of the Western Sudan. François Manchuelle described how Soninke traders bought slaves and put them to work as farm labourers. According to him, ‘at the end of the nineteenth century . . . it took only three years for the marketable production (cereals or cotton cloth) of a single slave to become equal to the value of another slave.’<sup>95</sup> Three years was also the time taken for amortization in another Soninke area, Diahunu in Mali, according to Eric Pollet and Grace Winter.<sup>96</sup> Again for a Soninke area in Mali, Gumbu, Meillassoux estimated that a slave household of two adults and five children could generate for its master the price of a slave in one to three years by weaving and growing grain for exchange with the nomads.<sup>97</sup> That is hard to convert into per capita productivity. However, he wrote later that, ‘according to my own calculations, a slave in Gumbu repaid his own price, through labour in textiles alone, in about four years’.<sup>98</sup> In 1904, as Klein has reported, the commandants of various *cercles* in French West Africa offered estimates of the time taken for a slave to produce enough to match his purchase price. For example, the French administrator at Podor, on the Senegal river, estimated that the figure there was four to five years.<sup>99</sup> What should be given most emphasis is the modal figure estimated by the official who collated the reports from all the *cercles* in French West Africa, Dehereme. Assuming 200 remunerative working days a year, his conclusion was: three years.<sup>100</sup>

**Table 3 Returns on Investment in Slaves: Time taken for a slave’s cash-earning output to match the cost of his (or her?) purchase**

Year	Place	Effort-price (months)	Source (details cited in text)
c1831	Niger Delta	12	Law
1836	Sierra Leone	16	Law
[Late 19 <sup>th</sup> century?]	Gumbu, Mali	48	Meillassoux
[Late 19 <sup>th</sup> century?]	Diahunu, Mali	36	Pollet and Winter
End C19	Soninke	36	Manchuelle

<sup>94</sup>Law, ‘Introduction’, 9, 28.

<sup>95</sup>Manchuelle, *Willing Migrants*, 29. It must be noted, though, that Manchuelle’s reference does not actually document the point, but rather cites parallels for other Soninke areas.

<sup>96</sup>Eric Pollet and Grace Winter, *La société Soninke* (Brussels, 1971), 228 and 239, cited respectively by Manchuelle, *Willing Migrants*, 29/237, and by Meillassoux, *Anthropology of Slavery*, 308.

<sup>97</sup>Claude Meillassoux, ‘Le commerce pré-colonial et l’esclavage à Gūbu’, in Meillassoux (ed.), *The Development of Indigenous Trade and Markets in West Africa* (London, 1971), 193.

<sup>98</sup>Meillassoux, *Anthropology of Slavery*, 308.

<sup>99</sup>Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa*, 13, 263.

<sup>100</sup>Meillassoux, *Anthropology of Slavery*, 308.

1904	Senegal river	48-60	Klein
1904	French West Africa	36	Meillassoux

Comparison of tables 2 and 3 suggests that whereas typically it might take someone the dry season component of one to three years to produce commodities worth the price of a slave, a slave-owner would probably have to wait three to five years to recover the value of that investment. Clearly, further observations may alter this conclusion. But the existence of such a discrepancy is likely to be sustained by future research. For, even if slaves did work as hard as free peasants, in the social and political conditions of West Africa, probably more than in the American South, masters could not appropriate the whole of a slave's extra-subsistence output.

## 6. Developmental consequences of slave holding and slave trading within West Africa

Let us consider the economic significance of this socially-constructed response to the combination of land abundance and demand for goods. In particular, how far did the slave trade within the region exhibit the characteristics of an integrated market? And what were the implications of the capture, trading and economic exploitation of slaves for the material development of the region?

In view of the massive scale of the internal trade at this period, and given that slaves transported themselves, it would not be surprising if the market(s) became relatively integrated. This does indeed seem to have been the case, by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, at least – probably before, but data are lacking. Lovejoy and Richardson have combined 30 observations of slave prices in the savanna interior of West Africa, from 1780 to 1850, closer to the terminals of the Saharan than to those of the Atlantic export trades. They comment that the price differentials are relatively low, within West Africa and between prices in the internal and in the export termini.<sup>101</sup> Their data may be too few to be conclusive: in their tables, there are only three years for which there are as many as three observations for the same year, and as they emphasise, the sources give variable attention to the 'quality' of the slaves concerned. But their research points the way forward: to combining observations from the savanna with more from the forest, for example, and unearthing more observations from previously unpublished or unconsidered documentation. In principle, it would be surprising if there was not a considerable degree of price convergence given that the human commodities were mobile, and were indeed forced to move along intersecting networks of routes and markets across West Africa.

Was this coerced labour market 'efficient' - for the buyers and sellers, as opposed to their victims? It is worth looking at some comparative evidence, that of the evolution of the volume of slaves exported to the Atlantic market, in relation to real prices. The best evidence available is Richardson's series for the British slave trade in the eighteenth century.<sup>102</sup> For most of the period the supply of slaves appears to have responded positively to the rises in the real price: though the elasticity was low, as one would expect from a commerce based on raiding and warfare, and subject to resistance and flight. In the last twenty years of the British trade, however, real prices rose steeply while the volume of purchases declined. As Richardson suggests, this may reflect rising supply costs, as the slaving 'frontier' was pushed further from the coast. Ultimately, it

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<sup>101</sup>Lovejoy and Richardson, 'Competing markets'.

<sup>102</sup>David Richardson, 'Prices for slaves in west and west-central Africa: towards an annual series, 1698-1807', *Bulletin of Economic Research* 43: 1 (1991), 21-56.

seems likely in principle that something similar would have happened with the internal trade. Yet at the time of colonization at the end of the nineteenth century – when the slave trade, though not slavery, was rather effectively suppressed by colonial intervention – the internal trade was flourishing. Prices in the markets in which traders from the kingdom of Asante bought slaves fluctuated without a clear trend between 1817 and the British occupation in 1896. In the several years immediately preceding the colonization, far from prices rising and volumes falling, prices were low and imports of slaves into the kingdom appear to have been at an all-time high, fuelled by large-scale captures from Almani Samori Toure's wars.<sup>103</sup> Yet the inconsistency between the record of the Atlantic slave trade shortly before British abolition, and the Asante slave trade shortly before British colonization, may be resolved by the assumption that the sub-regional slave trade of Asante and its neighbours, and of West Africa as a whole, was always smaller than the Atlantic trade had been at the end of the eighteenth century; and therefore not as yet facing rising supply constraints.

The 'external' (third-party) costs of dealing in slaves, whatever the ultimate destination of the latter, were grievously high: not only for the captives, but also for the politically decentralized societies which were often raided (though not without resistance and refuge), and for the region as a whole in the sense that slave trading and the use of slaves in production provided a material incentive or reinforcement for militaristic ruling elites. Even for centralized states, slavery and the internal slave trade had major costs. On one hand, slaves and pawns contributed to the growth of production for 'legitimate commerce' after 1807, and to the Sokoto Caliphate's economic expansion at much the same time. On the other hand, the fundamental problem of economic development for the slave-holding economies of West Africa was the fact that the slaves were obtained from within the region. Thus the costs of slave acquisition, both direct and indirect, also fell within West Africa. The material rewards of capturing people helped wars to pay for themselves and presumably encouraged militarist ideologies and behaviour among ruling elites.<sup>104</sup> On the other hand, by reinforcing militarist ideologies among ruling elites, it reinforced the insecurity of the whole region, which may have inhibited long-term economic development.

It should be added, that while the scale of the growth of slavery after 1807 is much better explained in Hopkins' framework than in Miers and Kopytoff's, it also has an important implication for one of Hopkins's other arguments: that the transition from the export of slaves to 'legitimate commerce' changed the social composition of the suppliers of exports from West Africa, by allowing large numbers of small-scale producers to enter the Atlantic commerce for the first time.<sup>105</sup> While that was so, the 'egalitarian' implication of this shift is seriously qualified by the evidence that it was accompanied by such a widespread increase in slave holding: Not only were kings and aristocrats trying to reproduce their dominance of the export trade by establishing slave plantations (as Hopkins already noted, for example for the kingdom of Dahomey),<sup>106</sup> but also commoner households were adding slaves by ones or twos themselves.<sup>107</sup>

Despite the social costs, the internal slave trade does appear to have performed the basic function of a labour market, in channelling labour to areas where the returns were relatively

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<sup>103</sup>Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*, 123-34. See also Emmanuel Terray, 'Réflexions sur la formation du prix des esclaves à l'intérieur de l'Afrique de l'Ouest précoloniale', *Journal des Africanistes* 52: 1-2 (1982), 119-44.

<sup>104</sup>E.g. Kwame Arhin, 'The Asante praise poems: the ideology of patrimonialism', *Paideuma* 32 (1986), 163-97.

<sup>105</sup>Hopkins, *Economic History*, 124-9, 138-47.

<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>107</sup>E.g. Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*, 117-19, 184-5.

high. This is no surprise given that it was in the areas where commercially valuable resources existed that masters had the most purchasing power. The routes of free labour migration in the twentieth century were generally broadly similar to those of the internal slave trade of the century before, for example from the savanna areas of what is now Burkina Faso, southeastern Mali, and northern Ghana and Ivory Coast, to the gold-bearing, later cocoa-producing, districts of southern Ghana and Ivory Coast.<sup>108</sup>

Without slavery, it is hard to envisage the export economies of the nineteenth (and early twentieth) centuries growing as fast as they did. Slavery in general, while in principle detrimental to the creation of mass markets and to human capital formation, was not incompatible with economic growth, as parts of the New World showed. In West Africa, greater economic autonomy for slaves would have constrained the accumulation of profits from slave-owning. More so, whereas the plantation economies in the Americas were able to deploy African slaves while avoiding the external costs entailed in their initial supply, West Africa as a whole suffered those externalities in full. This surely constrained prospects for long-term economic growth within the same institutional matrix, despite the expansions noted in various parts of the region during the precolonial nineteenth century.<sup>109</sup>

## Conclusions

This paper has reconsidered some of the major propositions about slavery in precolonial West Africa. It has argued that there the changes in the incidence of slavery, especially its major growth after 1807, can only be explained with reference to the economic analysis represented by the Nieboer hypothesis. That slaves were cheap to acquire, in terms of the amount of labour required to obtain the purchase price, and were profitable to use, is clearly indicated by the admittedly very limited quantitative evidence produced so far. Further, it is suggested here that, for the region as a whole, the Nieboer hypothesis applies in its radical Domar form, in which there is no profitable alternative to labour coercion under the material conditions defined by Nieboer. This, however, presupposes that the ideological and political conditions permitted slavery. This applied generally, but not universally, in the region. Thus, while the social interpretation of West African slavery turns out to be ahistorical in the sense of being unable to account for the scale of change, economic analysis is insufficient: the very existence of a market in slaves was only possible because of extra-economic interventions.

Servitude in precolonial West Africa varied in form as well as in volume, over time and space. That assimilation was a strong but not universal tendency in slavery within the region cautions us against essentialism about its social dimension. Similarly, it was not quite always and everywhere the case that the economic context of servitude in West Africa was land scarcity. Those who tilled the plantations or estates created by the Songhay emperors on exceptionally fertile flood plains along the Niger are perhaps better understood as serfs, tied as they were to the land in an environment in which highly-productive land was scarce. Slavery proper multiplied in volume and economic importance during and after the Atlantic slave trade. In view of the large numbers of slaves, and therefore increasingly of the descendants (at least of slave women and free men), it was in masters' interests to permit many slaves, especially second-generation ones, a

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<sup>108</sup>Cf. Gareth Austin, 'The political economy of the natural environment in West African history: Asante and its savanna neighbors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries', in Richard Kuba and Carola Lentz, eds. *Land the Politics of Belonging in West Africa*, 187-212.

<sup>109</sup>Austin, 'African business'.

substantial degree of economic autonomy. This gave slaves incentives to work, and, complementing their partial social assimilation, gave them at least small stakes in the community. On the other hand, the concession of shares of time for slaves to work for themselves in commodity production implied a limit to masters' profits from their investment in slaves. In relation to the debate about terminology, I suggest that the varied and shifting mosaic of servile relations in nineteenth-century West Africa is best characterized not as a mixture of slavery and serfdom, but rather as a perpetually re-started transition towards greater autonomy for slaves: many of whom lived under close supervision (within courts and within owners' families) while many others had substantial economic autonomy.

Ironically, the assimilative tendency in African slavery itself helped sustain the internal slave trade. Slave and intra-regional slave trading contributed to the growth of extra-subsistence production in much of nineteenth-century West Africa. It is no coincidence that, despite our reliance on European primary sources for the quantitative evidence on the productivity of slaves, and on how much labour was needed to buy one, this evidence relates as often to the production of goods traded within the region as to the overseas trade. The use of slaves was an integral part of an extra-subsistence dimension of economic activity that went far wider and deeper than the external links. Yet the contribution of slavery to the growth of West African economies was limited by the fact that, though the slaves were mostly of foreign origin, they were captured from within the same region, with pernicious 'collateral damage' at various levels.