

# Slavery, Statehood, and Economic Development in Sub-Saharan Africa

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**Summary.** — Although Africa's indigenous systems of slavery have been extensively described in the historical literature, comparatively little attention has been paid to analyzing its long term impact on economic and political development. Based on data collected from anthropological records we conduct an econometric analysis. We find that indigenous slavery is robustly and negatively associated with current income levels, but not with income levels immediately after independence. We explore one channel of transmission from indigenous slavery to income growth consistent with this changing effect over time and find evidence that indigenous slavery impeded the development of capable and accountable states in Africa.

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*Key words* — Africa, indigenous slavery, pre-colonial societies, long-term political development, economic growth

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper contributes to an expanding literature which has recently sought to identify the impact of (pre-)colonial-era conditions on long-term development in ex-colonies.<sup>1</sup> A prominent argument in the African context is that its long-term economic development was hampered by the slave trades, or “export slavery” (Bairoch, 1993; Eltis & Engerman, 2000; Manning, 1983, 1990; Mitchener & McLean, 2003; Nunn, 2007, 2008; Nunn & Wantchekon, 2011; Rodney, 1972; Whatley & Gillezeau, 2011). The present paper extends the investigation to sub-Saharan African (hereafter African) *indigenous* slavery. This denotes customs of slavery within African societies before, during, and after colonization. We distinguish indigenous slavery from export slavery, although indigenous and export slavery also existed in symbiosis (Hilton, 1985; Lovejoy, 1981, 1983, 2000; Thornton, 1998; Vansina, 1989).

That slavery and bonded labor systems can have persistent impacts over centuries has been shown in various contexts—for Africa, see Austin (2008b) as well as Nunn (2008), Klein (1998), Miers and Klein (1999), Ayittey (2006) and Perbi (2004); for Latin America in general see Sokoloff and Engerman (2000), Engerman and Sokoloff (2002) and Dell (2010) on forced labor in Peru and Bolivia. We collect data from anthropological records on indigenous slavery and assess how present-day African countries with societies which historically had institutions of indigenous slavery, have fared in terms of long-term economic growth. We also explore plausible channels of influence, where we focus on the impact of indigenous slavery on the formation of capable states.

In the next section we define and explore African indigenous slavery based on a review of the literature. In Section 3 we assess its consequences on long-term income development. Previewing the results, we find a clearly negative impact of indigenous slavery on present-day income levels, also if we

control for geographical conditions, nationality of colonizers, export slavery, and for the possible endogeneity of indigenous slavery to income development. Within the web of complex historical legacies of the different regions and sub-regions explaining Africa's long term development, indigenous slavery indeed seems to be one of the threads. In Section 4 we propose a tentative channel from slavery to development that can account for this changing effect over time. We suggest that indigenous slavery may have created social structures that impeded the development of capable and accountable “open access states” after independence. This hypothesis is consistent with the changing effect of indigenous slavery on economic development during 1950–2008. A significantly negative effect is observable only well after most African states had gained independence, as it took time for states to take shape after the colonial period, and formulate and implement effective policies. The paper concludes with a summary, a stock taking of the results, a critical discussion of our findings in the context of the literature, and suggestions for future research.

## 2. THE NATURE OF AFRICAN INDIGENOUS SLAVERY

Slavery in Africa's history can be categorized into indigenous slavery and export slavery. The distinguishing feature

\* We thank for their helpful discussions and suggestions Robert Inklaar, Stephen Block, Herman de Jong, Tamás Vonyó, participants in the session ‘Empirical studies in African Economic History’ at the WEHC 2009 in Utrecht and participants in seminars at Utrecht School of Economics, the Faculty of Economics at Groningen University, the University of Reading, the Centre for the Study of African Economies in Oxford, and faculty of economic history at the Lund University. We are responsible for any remaining errors. Final revision accepted: December 17, 2013.

adopted in this paper is whether or not slaves were traded beyond the continent.<sup>2</sup> Thus, African indigenous slavery includes both slavery and the slave trade in Africa, which often occurred over long distances across the continent. Indigenous slavery was an ingrained feature of many African societies in recorded history (Austin, 2008a, 2008b; Cooper, 1977, 1979; Goody, 1980; Klein, 1998; Thornton, 1998). For example Perbi (2004), describing indigenous slavery in Ghana, takes the view that indigenous slavery predated the Atlantic slave trade, coexisted with it from the sixteenth to the 19th centuries and survived it through the early 20th century (also Miescher, 2004, p. 157).

Slavery has been studied in two broad frameworks: functionalism and (economic) rationalism. In the first school, Miers and Kopytoff (1977) argued that slavery in Africa was a response to chronic excess demand for labor in African societies. In this view, people are a resource but not just an economic one: they were adaptable to a multitude of uses, also social and political. In the functionalist perspective therefore, indigenous slavery in Africa cannot be understood simply as commodification of people. Or as Tuden and Plotnicov (1970, p. 12) define it, as “slavery as the legal institutionalization of persons as property”, which is a more appropriate description of slavery in ancient Rome or the New World. Instead, Miers and Kopytoff (1977) view indigenous slavery in Africa as part of a continuum of social relationships within the kinship system, of which slavery was the most marginal (see also Goody, 1980, p. 35 and Watson (1980)). Terms like (private) “property” and (individual) “freedom”, they stress, are unhelpful to understanding traditional African society. Instead, slavery is defined more in terms of “those without kin”, and “natal alienation”.

In the second framework, Hopkins (1973), building on Nieboer (1900) and Domar (1970), argues that indigenous slavery was a more overt economic response to scarcity of labor especially in West Africa, where under conditions of simple agricultural technologies, “the costs of acquiring and maintaining slaves were less than the costs of hiring labour” (Hopkins, 1973, p. 25). This assumes the treatment of slaves as a commodity, since the slave was a chattel. It also takes a dimmer view of slaves’ living conditions. Klein (1978, p. 601) suggests (based on fieldwork in Senegal) that this approach might be most appropriate in high-density slavery systems. Austin (2005, pp. 160, 170) in the same vein suggests that the 19th century Asante empire, an intensive user of slave labor, relied so heavily on slavery because substitution by wage labor was not economically viable. Thornton (1998, p. 74) in addition argues that slavery was prevalent in Africa because “slaves were the only form of private, revenue producing property recognized in African law”, and thus a means to obtain and maintain private wealth.

Slaves’ social position varied greatly over slavery systems, ranging from chattel slavery in high-density systems in West Africa, to a context where slaves were adopted into the extended kinship system, and could fulfill prestigious administrative positions. But there always was a social relationship that was based on subordination, with typically strict rules about behavior, clothing, and diet (Klein, 1998, p. 7). Especially captured (as opposed to born) slaves were treated harshly and had few rights. In particular, slaves had no familial rights, did not control their children and could not make bequest decisions: if a slave died, his or her property fell to the master (Klein, 1978, p. 602). They could be used as sacrifice or to pay off debts; were expected to work harder and dress simply; could not freely mix with free men and women; needed the owner’s permission to embark on any enterprise; and received only the

simplest burials (Perbi, 2001, p. 1). All slaves could be sold at the discretion of the owner (Klein, 1998, p. 6). People always entered into slavery by an act of violence which stripped them of their social identity in their own kinship system, to be integrated (but often only marginally) into an alien kinship system. Precisely the danger that a slave might escape in the area where (s)he had social linkages was an important reason why slaves were transported and traded across societies (Klein, 1978, p. 601, 1998, p. 2; Manning, 1983, p. 2). In sum, although indigenous slavery was generally less harsh a system than export slavery, still slaves were exploited, excluded, and marginalized, more intensively so in the “high-density” slave systems.

Many have speculated that indigenous slavery was a precursor for (and facilitator of) export slavery, and that the existence of indigenous slave trade “opened up . . . societies to the temptation of the Atlantic trade” (Klein, 1978, p. 605).<sup>3</sup> Rodney (1966) and Lovejoy (1983) advocate this “transformation thesis” (coined by Lovejoy), which argues that the development of the Atlantic slave trade extended indigenous slavery and resulted in more people being enslaved and kept under increasingly deteriorating circumstances. In contrast, others have argued that in fact indigenous slavery may not have predated New World export slavery but that the Atlantic slave trade may have stimulated slavery within Africa. Nunn (2008, p. 159) notes that “[w]hether the parts of Africa that were untouched by the Islamic trades had chattel slavery has been the subject of an old debate [. . .]” (see also Fage, 1962; Hilton, 1985; Rodney, 1966; Vansina, 1989). But Austin (2008a, p. 1006) argued that within the current African historical literature, there really is no disagreement about whether “domestic” slavery, pre-dated the Atlantic slave trade. The current debate is more about whether slavery was “[. . .] widespread and slave trading routine [. . .]”, or only common within a few societies before the Atlantic slave trade (see Thornton, 1998 for the first argument, and Lovejoy, 2000 for the latter; see also Cooper, 1979; Goody, 1980; Klein, 1998). It is clear however that there was an intimate connection between slavery for export and for indigenous use. Ewald (1992, p. 466) notes that “the same networks taking millions of slaves out of Africa also transported others within the continent”.

Indeed, the indigenous slave trade from its earliest observations was part of pan-African trade in goods including salt, copper, and dates from the Sahara and millet, sorghum, wheat, livestock, gum, shea butter, ivory, and gold from West Africa. There were two major slave routes, one between North and West Africa, and one linking East, Central, and Southern Africa. Important West African slave markets are recorded from as early as the year 1000. Ghana obtained slaves—mainly in returns for its abundant gold resources—from the 1st to the 16th century. Bono Manso and Begho in Ghana were important slave markets from AD 1000 to around 1750 (Perbi, 2001, p. 4); others were Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso and Bonduku and Buna in Cote d’Ivoire.

Slavery was not only an integrated part of trade relations but also of political relations between states. Almost all the states conquered by the famous Asante empire (in what is now Ghana) from 1700 to the end of the 19th century paid annual tributes in slaves and other goods, between several hundred and a thousand (Perbi, 2001, p. 5). Also domestically, slavery lay at the core of Ghana’s pre-colonial states, whose economy was almost totally dependent on slave labor (Austin, 2005, p. 160; Perbi, 2004, p. 110). Likewise the Sudanese empires heavily depended on slave armies and slave administrators (Thornton, 1998, p. 91).

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