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English-East Indian Cotton Textiles Competition, 1750-1850: A Window into the Impact of Imports on Cotton Textile Production in West Africa^{*}

Of all the subjects concerning the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on African societies debated by historians over the decades, the most difficult to study empirically is the effect of imports on the development of manufacturing in West Africa. This is due largely to the paucity of quantitative evidence on manufacturing activity in West Africa during the period. The problem is compounded by the underdevelopment of economic history in African studies. Thus, very little of the limited evidence that can be found in the archives and other sources has been systematically collected and studied. Yet, general statements on the subject are not wanting. The received wisdom appears to be that imported manufactures had no adverse impact on the development of manufacturing in the region during the period. John Fage provided the lead when he argued *a priori* that increased imports of European manufactures stimulated increased “African production and economic activity generally”, and that “the increase in imports of Indian, European or American cloth meant that more people could afford to clothe themselves rather than that local manufacture ceased (or, so far as there is evidence, declined).”¹ My objection to the argument was similarly general; that it was a wrong application of Ricardo’s static comparative advantage principle to issues of structural transformation and general economic development. “There is no historical example”, I added, “of an economy in which the technology and organization of industrial production were transformed during a period of uncontrolled importation of cheap foreign manufactures.”²

Over the past several decades the Fage argument, in one form or another, has been presented repeatedly in the literature with no new evidence. David Eltis and Lawrence Jennings

^{*} Draft; please, do not quote.

¹ John D. Fage, *A History of Africa* (London: Hutchinson 1978), pp. 272-273.

² J. E. Inikori, “Introduction,” in J. E. Inikori (ed.), *Forced Migration: The impact of the export slave trade on African societies* (London, New York: Hutchinson, Africana, 1982), p. 55.

asserted in 1988 that trade with the Atlantic world made no difference to the history of Western Africa in the period 1600-1860, and that imported manufactures had no adverse impact on local industries.³ John Thornton argued in 1992 that manufactures imported into Africa by European traders were luxury products that did not affect adversely the development of manufacturing in Africa.⁴ Somewhat more cautiously, Herbert Klein disputes the argument of “some scholars that the East Indian cotton goods were a deterrent to the local textile industry in many parts of West Africa”, noting that “in all regions of Africa, local artisanal textile production continued into the post-slave-trade era, which suggests that local cloth was probably quite competitive with European imports at the lower end of the scale, at least until the British were able to introduce their coarser cloths in the late nineteenth century on a massive scale.”⁵ More recently, Ralph Austen and Dennis Cordell have argued that although Africa traded with Europe after 1500, African economies were much less radically transformed than those in the Americas and Asia, because African economies were largely protected by the physical environment against direct competition with European economies, “except in the southern regions where whites settled.” Austen and Cordell believe that “This absence of direct competition allowed continued growth in the early modern period, but may be linked to the major crises of the modern period . . .”⁶

These general claims are difficult to prove or disprove, because there are no detailed empirical studies of manufacturing activity in pre-colonial West Africa. However, reasonable inferences can be drawn from a combination of import statistics and the available evidence on the history of cotton textile production and inter-regional trade in West Africa during the period 1200-1850. To avoid confusion, the issue for investigation needs to be clearly stated. The question is not whether cotton textile production of any form declined or disappeared

³ David Eltis and Lawrence C. Jennings, “The Trade between Western Africa and the Atlantic World in the Pre-colonial era,” *The American Historical Review*, Volume 93, No. 4 (October, 1988), pp. 936-959. See also David Eltis, “Trade between Western Africa and the Atlantic World Before 1870: Estimates of Trends in Value, Composition and Direction,” *Research in Economic History*, Volume 12, 1989, where Eltis argues that imported textiles and other consumer manufactures did not breach the economic self-sufficiency of Africans (p.231).

⁴ John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the making of the Atlantic world, 1400-1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 44-53.

⁵ Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.124.

⁶ Ralph A. Austen and Dennis D. Cordell, “Trade, Transportation, and Expanding Economic Networks: Saharan Caravan Commerce in the era of European Expansion, 1500-1900,” in Alusine Jalloh and Toyin Falola (eds.), *Black Business and Economic Power* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2002), p.108.

totally from all or most parts of West Africa during the period as a result of the adverse impact of imports. The question is whether the development of the industry was adversely affected by the import of textiles in exchange for captives. Again, we have to be precise when we talk about development. To say that industrial development or general economic development was retarded by the import of manufactures in exchange for captives does not imply that West Africa would have achieved an industrial revolution during the period in the absence of the Atlantic slave trade.⁷ Industrial development or general economic development is a long-term process with observable manifestations or elements, some measurable and others not. An industrial revolution is the end product of a successfully completed industrialization process. But between handicraft production of manufactures – or peasants' craft – and mechanized, factory production of manufactures, there are several observable intermediate points in the industrialization process, where progress can be assessed. Some of these have measurable characteristics. One such point that has gained widespread observation and treatment in the literature on industrialization is proto-industrialization – a point in the process characterized as “industrialization before industrialization.” While critics of the concept have demonstrated historically that not all regions that achieved proto-industrialization went on to achieve full industrialization or an industrial revolution,⁸ there can be no doubt that proto-industrialization is an important measure of progress in the process of industrial development. The discussion of industrial progress in West Africa during the period in question centres on the evidence concerning this important measure. Specifically, the paper focuses on the extent to which proto-industrial production developed in cotton textile production in West Africa during the period and examines the role of textile imports exchanged for captive exports. This role is analyzed in the light of the competition between East India and English cottons both in England and in

⁷ David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 163, where Eltis attributes to me an argument totally alien to my work (see my review of the book, *American Historical Review*, December 2001, p. 1753); A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1973), p. 119.

⁸ Sidney Pollard, *Peaceful Conquest: The Industrialization of Europe 1760-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 14-20; D. C. Coleman, “Proto-Industrialization: A Concept too Many,” *Economic History Review*, 36 (1983); Brian Short, “The de-industrialisation process: a case study of the Weald, 1600-1850,” in Pat Hudson (ed.), *Regions and Industries: A Perspective on the Industrial Revolution in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Frank Perlin, “Proto-Industrialization and Pre-Colonial South Asia,” *Past & Present*, No. 98 (February 1983), pp. 30-95.

West Africa. Some reference is also made to somewhat similar competitions in other parts of Western Europe and in the Ottoman Empire.

I

Cotton textile production in West Africa dates back to medieval times and beyond. Several parts of the region, from the Igbo heartland in the east to Senegambia in the west, were involved from very early times. But the evidence suggests that the main centers of early production were in the savanna interior where the medieval empires, with their commercial and Islamic learning cities, were located. Politico-demographic factors interacted with long distance trade as cause and effect to trigger the process of inter-regional specialization. From the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, the bulk of West Africa's population and the major centres of high population density were in the savanna interior, especially the Niger Bend. Several cities in the interior savanna – Niani, Timbuktu, Jenne, Gao, etc. – had populations ranging from 30,000 to 100,000 between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. Population concentration, political organization, relatively low cost of transportation in the open savanna and along the Niger and other rivers, and their greater links to the early centres of world trade located in the Mediterranean meant that the major societies in the interior savanna were relatively more commercially and industrially developed in the fifteenth century than those located between them and the Atlantic (Atlantic Africa, for short). This is reflected in the character of the trade between the societies in the interior and those to the Atlantic coast and their hinterlands, the latter selling mostly primary products, such as gold and kola nuts, in exchange mainly for the former's manufactures.⁹ Thus, the Niger Bend and Hausaland were major centres of cotton textile production in the evolving inter-regional specialization in the fifteenth century. As the Hausa historian, Mahdi Adamu, wrote about three decades ago, "one would perhaps not be far wrong if one described Hausaland as the workshop of West Africa in the textile and leather industries."¹⁰

⁹ See Joseph E. Inikori, "Transatlantic Slaving and Market Development in the Atlantic World: West Africa, 1450-1850," in David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman (eds.), *The Cambridge World History of Slavery, Volume 3: AD 1420-AD 1804* (In Press).

¹⁰ Mahdi Adamu, *The Hausa Factor in West African History* (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1978), p. 11.

The evidence indicates that in addition to trade in cotton textiles between the interior savanna and the coastal regions and their hinterlands to the south, there was a similar trade among the latter regions. The Gold Coast (modern southern Ghana) appears to have been one of the main cotton importers from other coastal regions. The early European traders operated as carriers in this pre-existing regional trade in cotton textiles. The Portuguese had started the carrying trade in the fifteenth century, establishing a factory in the Benin kingdom in 1487 largely for the purpose of buying what the Europeans called Benin cotton cloth and exporting it to the Gold Coast. The Dutch and other Europeans continued the carrying trade. Between 1633 and 1634 the Dutch alone imported about 12,641 pieces of Benin cloth into the Gold Coast; another 16,000 pieces in 1644-46. Other imports were brought from Allada in modern Republic of Benin and from the Ivory Coast.¹¹ A similar trade in cotton textiles developed between the Igbo heartland in the savanna and other regions in southeastern Nigeria.¹²

Given the long history of cotton textile production in West Africa before the establishment of regular seaborne trade with Western Europe in the fifteenth century, what does the available evidence tell us about the level of proto-industrial development in the industry in different parts of the region by the mid-nineteenth century? John Iliffe's investigation concerning the level of capitalist development in West Africa at this time provides a helpful summary of the evidence. In his investigation Iliffe employs the general conception that views the dominance of free wage labour in the production of goods and services as the defining element of capitalism. He takes proto-industrialization, with its merchant control of the production and marketing process through the putting-out system, as the closest to capitalist manufacturing in the industrialization process.¹³ In all of West Africa he finds no evidence of proto-industrialization in cotton spinning or weaving. Only in dyeing is there some oral evidence concerning the industry in Kano and not in the coastal and forest regions to the south.¹⁴ As Iliffe puts it, "There is no significant written evidence from the nineteenth-century West

¹¹ Kwame Yeboa Daaku, *Trade and Politics on the Gold Coast, 1600-1720: A Study of the African Reaction to European Trade* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 24; Marion Johnson, "Technology, Competition, and African Crafts," in Clive Dewey and A. G. Hopkins (eds.), *The Imperial Impact: Studies in the Economic History of Africa and India* (London: The Athlone Press, 1978), pp. 262-263.

¹² Kenneth Onwuka Dike and Felicia Ekejiuba, *The Aro of South-eastern Nigeria, 1650-1980: A study of socio-economic formation and transformation in Nigeria* (Ibadan: University Press, 1990), pp. 114-115.

¹³ John Iliffe, *The Emergence of African Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-15.

African savanna of any trend towards what in Europe is now called proto-industrialisation.” But oral evidence collected in the 1970s shows that in the nineteenth century “Kano’s cloth merchants began to buy unfinished cloth from the weavers and put it out for processing by dyers and beaters in return for what was in effect a wage. The merchant then received the cloth back for marketing; his signature on the bale acted as a trademark.”¹⁵ I argue in the rest of the paper that this limited development of proto-industrialization in West Africa’s cotton industry in the mid-nineteenth century is attributable largely to the sale of imported textiles in exchange for captives in the region between 1650 and 1850.

II

Consistent with the evidence showing European traders’ distribution of local cotton textiles in the early decades of their trade in West Africa, British trade records show very few textiles imported from England in the early decades. Because West African sub-regions got seriously into regular trade with the Europeans at different points in time, the early decades of the trade mean different periods for different sub-regions. By the last quarter of the seventeenth century, the Gold Coast had been heavily involved in trading with the Europeans for about two hundred years. But serious European trading in the Bight of Biafra (southeastern Nigeria) was only a few decades old. Commodity composition of imports into the latter region may, therefore, be taken as representative of the early decades. Between 1661 and 1681, textiles were at most 1.6 percent of the total value of imports into the region from England. In the first quarter of the eighteenth century it rose to over 30 percent, and by the late eighteenth century it was over 46 percent.¹⁶ By the second half of the eighteenth century, West Africa had become a major export market for English and East India cottons. Producers in Lancashire struggled hard and long to take over the market from Indian cottons and succeeded in doing so in the first half of the nineteenth century. Table 1 shows the competing exports of English and East India cottons to Western Africa in 1751-1850.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁶ Inikori, “Transatlantic Slaving and Market Development.”

As the table shows, the competition was neck and neck in the 1750s. English cottons appear to be pulling ahead in the 1760s, but Indian cottons fought back in the 1770s. The English industry, the export sector concentrated in Lancashire in particular, adopted revolutionary new technologies in the last two decades of the eighteenth century. In spite of that Indian cottons expanded their share of the West African market in the 1790s, while in the last seven years of the British slave trade the competition was more or less a draw. The competition in the 1790s shows some intriguing facts. The evidence shows that the gains made by Indian cottons in this decade did not result from a relative decline in demand for English cottons in West Africa. In fact the manufacturers in Lancashire were unable to meet export orders from the British slave traders during the period.

Table 1: Competing Exports of English and Indian Cottons to Western Africa, 1751-1850
(Decennial totals in £ sterling, 1751-1807; in yards, 1827-1850)

Decade	East India Cottons (£)	English Cottons (£)	Decade	East India Cottons (£)	English Cottons (£)
1751-60	436,802	406,254	1781-90	1,457,298	1,407,583
1761-70	798,955	898,921	1791-1800	2,865,340	1,987,565
1771-80	993,251	636,456	1801-07	2,202,400	2,136,109

Quantity in Yards

Period	East India Cottons	English Cottons
1827-30	2,835,500	6,915,577
1831-40	4,536,200	59,295,855
1841-50	4,776,590	107,675,091

Sources & Notes: Computed from Joseph E. Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England: A Study in International Trade and Economic Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Table 9.8, p. 444. From 1827 to 1850 the English cottons are shown in yards in the customs ledgers, while the East India cottons are shown in pieces. The conversion of the Indian cottons to yards is based on information taken from the records of Thomas Lumley & Co. of London, slave merchants and dealers in East India goods (PRO, England, C. 114/154). The computation from this source gives 10 yards per piece, average. Figures for English cottons are not available for 1844.

This may have been due to the shortage of skilled workers to operate the new machines.¹⁷ In the first half of the nineteenth century, however, things changed drastically. Indian cotton imports increased from approximately 4.5 million yards in 1831-40 to 4.8 million yards in 1841-50, while English cotton imports grew from 59.3 million yards to 107.7 million yards (without figures for 1844) during the same period.

This competition between English and Indian cottons offers a window into the impact of textile imports in exchange for captives on the development of cotton textile production in West Africa between 1650 and 1850. It should be noted that large-scale import of Indian cottons into England by the English East India Company began in the mid-seventeenth century. The quantity ordered by the company grew from an annual average of 174,000 pieces in 1661-64 to approximately 2.4 million in 1681-83.¹⁸ This rapid growth was not just new demand in England; a significant portion of the domestic market for English woollen and silk was taken away by the new product. This was the occasion for the pressure put on British legislators by the woollen and silk manufacturers to restrict its import. The legislators obliged, only to pave the way for the growth and development of a new industry, cotton textile, behind import control. It was from the protected domestic market that the new industry launched its battle with the Indian cottons in West Africa. It is significant that before this encounter European woollens and linens were being imported into Western Africa, especially the Gold Coast, in considerable quantities. Imports into the Gold Coast by the Royal African Company of England in a single ship in 1684 amounted to £10,740 (sterling fob) out of a total merchandise worth £13,626 shipped on board.¹⁹ There is clear evidence that by the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century these imported European woollens and linens had driven from the Gold Coast market local cotton cloths previously imported from Benin, Allada, and the Ivory Coast that were shown earlier in the paper.²⁰ If the imported woollens that were unable to compete with Indian cottons in England had this

¹⁷ Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution*, pp. 443-446.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Table 9.5, p. 430.

¹⁹ Inikori, "Transatlantic Slaving and Market Development."

²⁰ Daaku, *Trade and Politics*, p. 24; J. K. Fynn, *Asante and its neighbours 1700-1807* (London, 1971), pp. 11 and 12; Johnson, "Technology, Competition, and African Crafts," p. 263.

impact on the local cotton trade it is reasonable to infer that Indian cottons and their English rivals had even greater adverse impact in the second half of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, the fact that with all the technological innovations of the late eighteenth century, induced by the competition, the English cottons still had to share the West African market more or less equally with the Indian cottons is a clear indication of the competitive strength of the latter, which producers in West Africa (especially those on the coast and the immediate Atlantic hinterland) were unlikely to match. This point is supported by one piece of indirect evidence. While the correspondence of the English cotton manufacturers with the British slave traders shows a sustained preoccupation with their competition with Indian cottons in West Africa, there is not a single mention of competition with local producers in West Africa in the eighteenth century. There are many references to raw cotton production and efforts to encourage large scale production for export to Europe.²¹ But there is no indication at all that local cotton textile producers presented any competition in the West African market. A report made from Keta (in Anlo, just east of the Volta River) by a Dutch official in 1718 is revealing:

I found here at Quita a large number of children and men constantly busy spinning cotton on little sticks of about a foot length. I wanted to buy some, as they said that they collected this cotton in order to maintain their children. They were prepared to sell, but they asked not less than three strings of cowries for one ball of cotton which does not weigh more than about half a pound, which would mean paying about as much as at home [Holland]. When I proposed to buy a big quantity of about hundred pounds for 20 Angels, they just laughed at me . . . I am sure that if the Negroes did their best to make cotton plantations, they could gain a lot from it; but these people think only in a day-to-day manner, and never think of tomorrow.²²

The indication here is that raw cotton was expensive because of non-development of commercial production of raw materials. The Dutch official must have mistaken economic behaviour arising from lack of market opportunity for productive employment of resources for lack of foresight. It is significant, however, that there is no mention of a competing cotton textile industry. The same thing is true of the English documents.

²¹ Dutch documents translated by Van Dantzig contain many references to raw cotton production, especially in the Bight of Benin: A. Van Dantzig, *The Dutch and the Guinea Coast, 1674-1742: A Collection of Documents from the General State Archive at The Hague, Compiled and Translated* (Accra: GAAS, 1978). The English documents contain similar information.

²² *Ibid.*, p.206.

It is now becoming clearer with increasing evidence that countries in Western Europe (and also the Ottoman Empire), which imported Indian cottons on a large scale without import control policies, were unable to develop their cotton textile industries in the eighteenth century to a point where regular adoption of new technologies was likely.²³ It is clear from the evidence presented in the paper that West Africa could not have fared better.

In fact, the evidence suggests strongly that the adverse impact of imports got even worse in the first half of the nineteenth century as the factory system and mechanization in Lancashire slashed the cost of production and export prices. The evidence on this for imports into West Africa is clear. A comparison of the constant eighteenth-century prices with the current prices in 1796-98 shows the ratio of the former to the latter was 1.40. By 1827-29 the current prices were 43.2 percent of the constant eighteenth-century prices. The prices fell continuously and by 1848-49 they were only 19.9 percent.²⁴ It is thus understandable why the growing West African market was captured by Lancashire and Indian cottons were limited to a small fraction of the market. Clearly, West African producers must have fared worse.

What worsened the impact of imported textiles on local cotton textile production in West Africa was the peculiar nature of the export trade in captives. Because the people exported were violently taken from the more densely populated hinterlands – these were, in several instances, the regions that produced the manufactures previously traded inter-regionally (including the Igbo heartland in the savanna) – the evolving inter-regional trade and specialization stated earlier in the paper was disrupted. Like trade in stolen goods, the

²³ A. P. Wadsworth and J. de L. Mann, *The Cotton Trade and Industrial Lancashire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1931), p. 141; Patrick O'Brien, Trevor Griffiths, and Philip Hunt, "Technological Change During the First Industrial Revolution: The Paradigm Case of Textiles, 1688-1851," in Robert Fox (ed.), *Technological Change: Methods and Themes in the History of Technology* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996), pp. 169-170; Halil Inalcik, "When and how British cotton goods invaded the Levant markets," in Huri Islamoglu-Inan (ed.), *The Ottoman Empire and the World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 374-455; Halil Inalcik, "The Ottoman Cotton Market and India: The Role of Labor Cost in Market Competition," in Halil Inalcik (ed.), *The Middle East and the Balkans under the Ottoman Empire: Essays on Economy and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 264-306.

²⁴ J. E. Inikori, "West Africa's Seaborne Trade, 1750-1850: Volume, Structure and Implications," in G. Liesegang, H. Pasch and A. Jones (eds.), *Figuring African Trade: Proceedings of the Symposium on the Quantification and Structure of the Import and Export and Long Distance Trade in Africa, 1800-1913* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1986), pp. 70-71.

forceful removal of people could not stimulate the growth of trade with the hinterland, instead it reduced it absolutely. The direct exchange of imported manufactures for captives (in a barter system) gave rise to the growth of enclave economies on the Atlantic coast and its immediate hinterlands, economies that had little or no commercially stimulating links to other regions, including those in the savanna that were so earlier connected.²⁵

Iliffe's findings on the non-development of proto-industrialization in West Africa by the mid-nineteenth century testify to the retardation of market development in the region between 1650 and 1850. Proto-industrialization, by definition, was a function of the growth of markets for manufactures. As Peter Kriedte noted more than two decades ago, "The world market which was slowly coming into existence acted as the engine of proto-industrial growth."²⁶ That the region in West Africa that came closest to a full blown proto-industrialization, Kano emirate, is located in the interior savanna (far removed from the Atlantic coast) is instructive.²⁷ Its industry developed behind natural protection by distance from the chaos of the Atlantic slave trade and the direct adverse impact of imported textiles. Even so, Kano's industrial development was still adversely affected by the impact of the slave trade and imported textiles in regions that would have been major markets for its products, as the evolving inter-regional trade and specialization of the period 1200-1600 suggests.

²⁵ Inikori, "The Development of Entrepreneurship in Africa."

²⁶ Peter Kriedte, *Peasants, Landlords and Merchant Capitalists: Europe and the World Economy, 1500-1800* (Leamington Spa, Warwickshire: Berg Publishers, 1983), p. 13.

²⁷ Philip James Shea, "The Development of an Export Oriented Dyed Cloth Industry in Kano Emirate in the Nineteenth Century" (Unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1975); Philip James Shea, "Economies of Scale and the Indigo Dyeing Industry of Pre-colonial Kano," *Kano Studies*, NS I (2), 1974, pp. 55-61.