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The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on West Africa: Polygyny and Female Reproductive Success

Katherine Lamie

Abstract: J.D. Fage (1969) and Patrick Manning (1981; 1990) examine demographic data from historical records, in the West African political and economic context, in order to formulate theories of the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on West African populations and social structure. However, Fage and Manning come to markedly different conclusions. Fage maintains that the intensification of polygyny in West Africa that accompanied the Atlantic slave trade preserved African populations. In contrast, Manning argues that intensified polygynous marriages on the West African coast decreased the fertility of female slaves, thereby depressing population growth and affecting traditional social structures. Manning later recants this assertion due to a dearth of evidence, yet I argue that recent studies on the negative effects of polygyny on female reproductive success can inform and support Manning's demographic model.

Introduction

J.D. Fage (1969) and Patrick Manning (1981; 1990) present quantitative data from merchant records in the historical context of African economic and political structure to explain the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on West Africa. However, whereas Fage argues that the Atlantic slave trade did not depress African populations and therefore did not meaningfully affect social structure, Manning’s demographic model predicts differential population losses that, in turn, caused fundamental social changes.

Fage’s (1969) research is supplemented by John Thornton’s (1980) analysis of sex ratios in Angola during the Atlantic slave trade. Thornton (1980) explains that the retention of female slaves in Africa intensified polygynous unions. Female slaves fetched higher prices in the African slave markets than in the New World markets. On the African coasts, the sex ratio became increasingly skewed as male slaves
were shipped off to the New World en masse. Over time, males of the political and economic elite on the West African coast substantially increased their number of wives. This intensification of polygynous unions, argues Thornton (1980), would have increased fertility rates. Fage (1969) concludes that the increased fertility rates of polygynous communities would have effectively balanced the West African population in spite of the large-scale export of human cargo.

Contrary to this, Manning (1981) argues that the prevalence of polygynous unions in the coastal areas of West Africa during the Atlantic slave trade did not help preserve African populations. Instead, these unions decreased female fertility rates on the coast while the outlying inland populations were continually decimated by slave raids. However, critics of Manning’s model cite the dearth of evidence in support of his claim that polygyny decreases female fertility rates (see Caldwell 1982) and Manning (1982) eventually conceded to this criticism.

After presenting Fage’s and Manning’s arguments concerning the influences of the Atlantic slave trade on West Africa, I will argue that Manning’s model of social change is supported by recent studies on polygyny by Beverly Strassmann (2000) and Steven Josephson (2002). Strassmann’s (2000) work among the Dogon reveals that polygynous marriages in Africa can negatively affect female reproductive success while Josephson’s (2002) comprehensive literature review and historical study of polygyny in nineteenth century Utah examines the factors that can decrease female fertility in polygynous relationships within certain contexts. I argue that polygyny, in the specific historical and social context of West Africa during the period of the Atlantic slave trade, likely led to decreased fertility rates, which would have seriously affected West African population growth.

While Strassmann’s (2000) case study involves a contemporary West African society and Josephson (2002) studies historic Mormon populations, their findings are still relevant to studies of historical African social structure. Many studies of polygyny attempt to reconcile the documented negative effects of polygyny on female reproduction with the female choice to join a polygynous union. However, female slaves during the tenure of the Atlantic slave trade could not exercise any form of female choice in mate selection. Because female slaves could not make decisions with their best reproductive interests in mind, theories of polygyny as an overall worthwhile female reproductive strategy may not be applicable to polygynous unions made up of female slaves. Moreover, I argue that the reproductive success of female slaves in polygynous marriages with
large numbers of co-wives would be hampered by fierce co-wife competition and the numerous "stresses" associated with being a female slave.

Lastly, I will use Manning’s demographic model and the work of other demographers to discuss some qualitative changes in West African marriage patterns, in both matrilineal and patrilineal societies, that were brought on by the Atlantic slave trade. These fundamental changes in marriage patterns were developed alongside the Atlantic slave trade in the form of new strategies of descent rule manipulation and the new economic possibilities female slaves afforded their owners.

**The Slave Trade and Demography**

An understanding of slavery in Africa before and during the Atlantic slave trade is essential to a study of its impacts. However, Igor Kopytoff (1982) maintains that the discipline of anthropology has consistently ignored historical systems of African slavery because anthropologists could not participate in or observe seventeenth century West African society. The reports of overzealous missionaries and biased slave merchants held no credence in anthropological studies and Victorian abolitionist movements distorted data to further their own political agenda (Kopytoff 1982).

Most studies of the Atlantic slave trade have focused on the disastrous death tolls of the Middle Passage and the harsh treatment of slaves in the New World, while always assuming African population growth was greatly retarded by the slave trade, leaving a politically disorganized Africa ripe for imperialist expansions. The historical processes in Africa that would give context to the Atlantic slave trade, such as the trans-Saharan Muslim slave trade and internal slave trading between African states, are not integrated into many studies of the Atlantic slave trade.

Despite the difficulties of studying slavery in pre-colonial Africa, Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (1977) edited a volume of comparative studies of African systems of slavery. African slavery, according to Kopytoff and Miers (1977), is fundamentally different than Western conceptions of slavery; slavery in Africa is not defined by the absence of freedom or autonomy. Instead, an African slave can best be characterized as “a person who had become dispossessed of his lineage” (Harms 1978:332). Slavery in Africa is functionally related to the corporate kinship groups that organize social structure.

Whereas slaves in the Americas were utilized solely for their productive labor, slaves retained in Africa contributed to lineage growth and worked the land in relation to their new corporate kin
Slaves in Africa were valued as laborers, yet, with dedication and loyalty to their masters (buttressed by a lack of competing familial obligations), could eventually be incorporated into a kinship system (Kopytoff & Miers 1977). Transactions such as bridewealth, essentially the purchase of prospective children from the mother’s lineage by the father’s lineage, are in fact similar to the purchase of slave women. Kinship and marriage in Africa is based on duties and responsibilities, or “rights-in-persons” (Kopytoff & Miers 1977: 23), and a lineage’s wealth resides in the number of its members.

Not all slaves, however, were fully incorporated into their new lineage. Kopytoff and Miers’ (1977) summary of the various slavery forms throughout Africa reveals that many levels of social marginality existed alongside the complete incorporation of female slaves into kin groups. While the Hausa integrated slave mothers into lineages after they gave birth to children within the lineage, many other West African groups organized the structure of slavery in order to perpetually isolate and reproduce the slave class (Kopytoff & Miers 1977).

Merchant records of the Atlantic slave trade reveal female slaves retained in Africa consistently fetched prices double those of male slaves sold in Africa (Robertson & Klein 1983). Moreover, Atlantic slave trade merchants aimed to export twice as many males to New World markets than females (Klein 1983; Thornton 1983). Male slaves fetched higher prices than females in the New World market because they were preferred for intensive agricultural work (Robertson & Klein 1983). Furthermore, rebellious male slaves of rival political factions could be effectively deported. Only about one-third of all slaves exported in the Atlantic slave trade were female (Fage 1969).

Female slaves were valued in Africa not only for their reproductive capabilities, but also for their work as the main food producers in African horticultural and small-scale agricultural subsistence systems (Robertson & Klein 1983). High status and wealthy males were polygynously married to large numbers of productive females that worked the land cooperatively. Wealthy males could increase the productivity of their land and the size of their lineages by purchasing numerous slave wives.

This basic understanding of the structure of African slavery helped Fage and Manning interpret export records and African population and population growth estimates. Both Fage and Manning agree that the retention of profitable female slaves in Africa influenced the results of the Atlantic slave trade, yet their disagreement about the fertility rates of these retained female slaves carries them to completely different conclusions.
Fage (1969) studies the significance of the Atlantic slave trade on West Africa by focusing on the slave trading systems present in Africa before European interest was sparked in the sixteenth century. He begins his analysis by examining Arabic manuscripts that mention the trade networks from West Africa into North Africa and the Arab world. According to these historical accounts, trade systems in slaves and goods had been in operation since the eleventh century (Fage 1969). Moreover, Fage asserts that West Africans were familiar with slave trade and understood the value of slaves because Portuguese sailors, around 1500, documented their selling of slaves to Africans on the Gold Coast (1969).

The development of slave trading in West Africa was correlated with advancements in West African political organization (Fage 1969). The states and chiefdoms of West Africa controlled trading activities centuries before the European demand for slaves began. European traders essentially gave African political leaders and wealthy slave merchants a new economic choice (Fage 1969). They could retain their slaves, and keep human capital, or trade slaves to Europeans for new technologies, such as guns, and other commodities. Slave trading in West Africa was therefore an arms race; each state maintained its political authority by mobilizing slave labor and increasing the number of people within powerful lineages. Insubordinate war captives and criminals could be exported en masse in exchange for power enhancing European technologies (Fage 1969).

No good estimates from the trans-Saharan Muslim slave trade exist; however, Fage (1969) believes a much smaller number of slaves were brought from West Africa into North Africa and the Arab World, over a longer period of time, than during the Atlantic slave trade. Phillip Curtin’s (1969) estimates of Atlantic slave trade traffic frame Fage’s study. Fage (1969) maintains that these new estimates are significantly lower than original estimates based on abolitionist agendas, and that out of the approximately 11 million slaves exported to the New World from Africa between 1650 and 1865, about six million were from West Africa. Four and half million slaves were exported from West Africa from 1701 to 1810 alone (Fage 1969).

With these estimates of exports in consideration and probable growth rates gauged through extrapolation from twentieth century censuses, Fage (1969) reveals that, with a probable population of at least 25 million and a population rate increase of around 15 per 1000 at the start of the eighteenth century and a population rate increase of around 19 per 1000 at the end of the eighteenth century, West African exports would have halted population growth at the height of the Atlantic slave trade, but would not have depressed the total population.
Additional factors, such as deaths during capture and transit, may have affected West Africa’s population; yet Fage (1969) argues that these additional deaths would have been more than counterbalanced by West African polygynous unions intensified by the unbalanced sex ratios caused by differential exportation.

Research by Thornton into West-Central African populations supports Fage’s assumption. Thornton (1980), using census data from eighteenth century Angola, noticed the artificially high ratios of reproductive-age females to males. He accounts for this anomaly with a consideration of the prevalence of males exported through the Atlantic slave trade. In Angola, argues Thornton (1980), the practice of polygyny must have intensified as sex ratios became distorted by the export and internal slave trades because fertility rates seemed to remain relatively constant for the population during the years of the two censuses, 1777 and 1778.

Fage’s research implies that the Atlantic slave trade was not pressed upon the helpless African continent by racist Europeans. Centuries of trans-Saharan Muslim slave trades in northern and eastern Africa and internal slave trading in West Africa provided the infrastructure and economic rationale that allowed the rapid institutionalization of the Atlantic slave trade. The retention of reproductively and economically viable African females intensified polygyny, which in turn preserved West African populations even at the height of slave exports. Fage (1969) concludes that the Atlantic slave trade was so integrated in West African state politics that the end of the Atlantic slave trade could have actually helped to bring about the demise of African political and economic structures during colonization.

Manning (1981) challenges Fage’s basic assumptions and conclusions. While internal African slave trading and the trans-Saharan Muslim slave trade were instituted centuries prior to the Atlantic slave trade, Manning argues that it was the demands of the Atlantic slave trade that shaped African populations. The Atlantic slave trade is responsible for drastic decreases in the population of West Africa and the resulting social changes (Manning 1981).

Manning’s (1981) demographic model of the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on West Africa is based on a number of assumptions intended to mimic the actual conditions of the slave trade systems. The model assumes that all males captured in the West African interior are sold at the coast and exported to the New World and that out of all the females captured in the interior half are exported at the coast and half are retained in West Africa. Slave raids in the interior are thought to have captured the most valuable captives,
notably men and women between fifteen and thirty years old (Manning 1981).

Manning (1981) explains that raid after raid decreases the population of the interior as rather equal proportions of reproductive-aged males and females are captured and marched to the coasts. The populations cannot simply rebound in the interior; younger males and females must come to reproductive age and older males and females have much lower fertility rates. Even as the populations of specific communities begin to increase, these communities must deal with the heightened risk of new slave raids (Manning 1981).

At the West African coast, however, half of all females captured are sold into polygynous relationships with members of the political elite (Manning 1981). The population at the coast has increased with the importation of women from the interior, yet Manning (1981) argues that these women have a lower fertility because of their forced polygynous relationships. Manning uses modern African census data to support this claim. From the census data, it is clear that modern African women in monogamous relationships have higher fertility rates than women in polygynous relationships (Manning 1981). Yet, he concedes that the differences in the magnitude of fertility and the interacting mechanisms at work are not well understood.

In summary, Manning (1981) argues that the population of Africa today would be much larger if the Atlantic slave trade did not export populations of males and females from Africa and did not lead to the intensification of polygynous relationships at the West African coast. Fage (1969) argues that African populations were preserved and West African political and social structures were retained until the abrupt end of the Atlantic slave trade brought about the demise of West African political autonomy. This contrasts with Manning’s (1981; 1990) argument that West African social structures were fundamentally altered in the middle seventeenth century as soon as the Atlantic slave trade began demanding male slaves, and therefore reinforcing polygynous relationships based on wealth and political power.

Whereas Fage analyzes West African population as a whole, Manning identifies the population dynamics that existed between the raider populations of the coast and the raided populations of the interior and aims to explain other possible influential demographic factors. Manning’s more detailed analysis highlights the population problems each region would experience. Slave raiding changed the demographics of the interior, decimating communities and forcing migration. The demands of the export trade, including the high price
for prime males in New World markets, established just who was kept at the coast and who was exported.

Fage’s conclusion of population preservation does not address the differential forces impacting populations at the interior and the coast. Would Fage argue that increased polygyny at the coast preserved only coastal populations, or that it also made up for the loss in the interior populations? Furthermore, Fage does not seem to accept that West African political and social organization could have qualitatively changed even as West African populations averaged out to levels of preservation.

Critics of Manning’s model, however, argue against his assumption that polygynous marriages reduce female fertility. Addressing this model, John Caldwell asserts:

Perhaps the weakest and most unnecessarily stressed part of [Manning’s] argument is the claim that a woman who enters a polygynous marriage will have decisively lower fertility than she would have exhibited if she had been married monogamously. There is no agreed evidence for this [1982:128].

In his response, Manning concurs, “Caldwell and others are correct in arguing that polygyny had little significant effect on fertility” (1982:138). Manning should not have so readily agreed with his critics, but should have attempted to identify the possible mechanisms that could have caused such negative effects on the reproductive success of female slaves in historic West African populations.

**Polygyny and Female Fertility**

In theory, a skewed sex ratio, with many more reproductive-age females for each reproductive-age male, could potentially lead to rapid increases in population. The wife of a monogamous male reproduces at a fixed rate. A baby must be carried for nine months and, in some cultures, long lasting post-partum sex taboos ensure the survivorship of her child before the birth of another (see Whiting 1964). In contrast, a single polygynous male can continually sire multiple children at the same time because he can utilize the reproductive faculties of other wives when one wife becomes pregnant or is nursing.

Ideally, polygynous unions between wealthy slave owners and their multiple slave wives could have preserved West African populations even as millions of slaves were exported through the
centuries of the Atlantic slave trade. However, in practice, the intensified polygynous marriages during the Atlantic slave trade would have more likely presented a number of challenges to a woman’s reproductive success.

Anthropologists have begun supplementing historical and modern census data with ethnographic research on polygynous relationships in West Africa. Strassmann (2000) tested the “polygyny threshold model” with the modern Dogon of West Africa. According to the polygyny threshold model, women choose to marry wealthy polygynous men because these men command enough resources to comfortably support multiple wives. If the polygyny threshold model is correct, the reproductive success of women in polygynous marriages should be equal to the reproductive success of women in monogamous marriages (Strassmann 2000). However, Strassmann (2000) found that child mortality increased along with an increase of wife number in polygynous marriages.

In her study of the Dogon, Strassmann (2000) discovered that the polygyny threshold model does not hold because age differences between marriageable males and females emphasize male preference within a surplus of young females. In the context of the Atlantic slave trade, we know that slave females exerted no mate choice. Wealthy slave owners simply purchased slave wives along with their wives bought through bridewealth transactions. Some slave owners may have been able to afford slave wives, yet may not have had the resources needed in order to take adequate care of them and their children. Child survivorship rates are reduced among modern Dogon women in polygynous relationships, yet Strassmann’s initial findings would be even more relevant to the study of child survivorship among female slaves in polygynous relationships because their reproductive lives were controlled by their masters. Strassmann (2000) does not yet understand the mechanisms through which polygyny decreases child survivorship rates, but she posits four hypotheses. These are factors of resource dilution, co-wife competition, paternal investment, and nepotistic investment.

Josephson (2002) argues that there is no simple relationship between polygyny and fertility throughout time or across cultures. While anthropological and demographic studies continually reveal mixed results, Josephson’s own work with nineteenth century Mormon records suggests that historic Mormon polygynous women had decreased fertility compared to monogamous women of the same population. In this particular case study, the age of the polygynous women and co-wife conflict may have led to decreased fertility. Josephson (2002) concludes that women of this historic population, and
many modern women, choose polygyny because a polygynous marriage could be part of a long-term reproductive strategy. I argue that the intensification of polygynous marriages that Fage assumed saved West African populations would have more likely had negative effects on child survivorship rates and female fertility. Further examination of the specific social context of the Atlantic slave trade in West Africa can elicit the possible mechanisms by which polygyny affects female reproduction.

Wealthy West African males were known to have large harems, with sometimes as many as hundreds of wives (Manning 1990). Manning (1982) initially assumed that the fertility of slave women would be reduced in harems due to less frequent sexual contacts. Yet a better understanding of slave systems in Africa reveals many more factors that would reduce the fertility of slave women in polygynous unions. In particular, co-wife competition between those wives married through traditional bridewealth transactions and slave wives could have had a deleterious effect on the children of slave women. Additionally, the “stress” associated with capture and retention would probably have had an effect on the reproductive success of female slaves (Harms 1983).

Kopytoff and Miers (1977) frame the discussion on co-wife competition in the context of the Atlantic slave trade. They argue that the usual hierarchy among co-wives, based upon age, would be complicated with the addition of slave wives. Wives bought through bridewealth are still affiliated with their own lineage where exogamous marriages cemented political and economic alliances. In the polygynous households of the West African political elite, wives bought through bridewealth transactions would also retain the high status associated with their own politically prominent lineages. Slave wives were not acquired through bridewealth. Therefore, slaves may have been automatically relegated to the lowest status in the co-wife hierarchy and even sometimes viewed as concubines (Kopytoff & Miers 1977). This low status could directly affect the survivorship rate of a slave’s children in a polygynous household. Co-wives bought with bridewealth transactions would have controlled more resources than the slave wife. Moreover, a kinless slave wife and her children would be missing their most essential advocates, their maternal kin. Maternal kin often indirectly or directly provision the mother-child pair (Sear et al. 2002; Hawkes et al. 1989, 1997).

Slave wives were not always fully incorporated into a lineage. Their children could be continually differentiated from children bought with bridewealth (Kopytoff & Miers 1977). Such distinctions would further hinder the reproductive efforts of slave females brought to the
West African coast because these differences in status would directly influence the amount of resources distributed by the husband and his kin to each wife and child, as well as the social and economic relationships between all co-wives.

The “stress” placed on the fertility of slave women should not be underestimated in an analysis of the recuperative power of enslaved populations. Claude Meillassoux (1983) argues that the available fertility data of female slaves seems to completely discount theories that female slaves were worth more in West African markets because of their reproductive potentials. New World slave populations in particular had to be continually replenished with new shipments because they could not reproduce efficiently (Klein 1983).

Stresses on the fertility of slave women could take a variety of forms. Enslaved females were brought to the West African coast after episodes of capture and agonizing marches. Robert Harms (1983) explains the psychological forces that decreased female slave fertility. Female slaves, devoid of their lineage rights, may not have been enthusiastic about investing in their children so that their masters could later enjoy exclusive rights to their offspring. Harms (1983) also claims that female slaves had to consciously weigh the costs of childbearing and rearing against any future benefits. Having a child without the necessary resource base would put both the life of the female slave and her child in danger. Low birthrates of slave women, Harms (1983) maintains, were probably the result of abortions and infanticide.

Changes in Social Structure

The demands of the Atlantic slave trade not only intensified polygynous marriages by increasing the availability of profitable female slaves, but also affected many other West African social orders. Matrilineal descent rules could be manipulated with slave wives and patrilineal males could make economic decisions concerning their female slaves’ fates. Moreover, an important function of exogamous marriage would be undermined by a male’s marriage to a kinless female slave.

The Atlantic slave trade fundamentally changed West African marriage patterns by affording a new strategy to men in matrilineal societies. Men in matrilineal societies cannot ensure the reproduction of their own lineages by marrying many women because the children of each wife would become part of her lineage. A man’s marriage to kinless female slaves, however, would allow him to manipulate matrilineal descent rules. The children of kinless female slaves would
become part of the father’s lineage (Harms 1978). A slave wife in a matrilineal society therefore functioned as though she were her husband’s sister or mother (Kopytoff & Miers 1977).

In patrilineal societies, men who acquired female slaves could choose to retain them as wives, sell them in slave markets, or use them for bridewealth transactions. In general, a female slave who was married off by her master’s patrilineage to another patrilineage was a risky bridewealth transaction. If this female initiated a divorce, the patrilineage of her original master would be forced to give back the bridewealth. Yet female slaves, having no kin associations of their own, were not held in sentimental esteem by their master’s patrilineage (Kopytoff & Miers 1977). A potential husband from another patrilineage would realize that if a divorce were to occur bridewealth return would not be guaranteed, even if the life of the slave woman was at stake. Female slaves were sold off for bridewealth only when bridewealth prices were higher than slave prices (Kopytoff & Miers 1977).

While marriages to slave women helped men manipulate descent rules and the acquisition of a female slave could enhance future economic transactions, marriages to female slaves would have also fundamentally changed the nature of alliance structures between prominent West African lineages. West African social structure is characterized by exogamous marriages (see Goody 1976:99-114). Marriage unions between different kinship groups promote political and military alliances. The purchase of a female slave involves the transfer of wealth from the prospective slave owner to the slave trader. In contrast, bridewealth transactions involve the transfer of wealth from the husband’s family to the bride’s family, in compensation for the loss of future children to the bride’s lineage.

At a time when powerful West African states and chiefdoms struggled for political power, the political elite were amassing slave wife harems. Slave women retained no kinship ties and therefore brought no political or social affiliation with them into a marriage. Males with slave wives would be more politically and socially isolated than males with socially connected wives.

Large demographic changes caused by the Atlantic slave trade would certainly result in a myriad of changes on the familial level. Yet, slight changes on the familial level could also bring about new demographic changes. The corporate kinship groups that governed slave exchanges were also changed by slave exchanges. The manipulation of kinship rules, in order to benefit one’s own lineage or economic status, would lead to the further subjugation of slave women.
(and women in general) and to a breakdown of traditional alliance theories.

**Conclusion**

The work of Fage and Manning is important in that it places historical documents and population estimates of slave trading into the context of larger West African society. As estimates of slave exports, historic African populations, and population growth rates are calibrated, models of the impact of the Atlantic slave trade are adjusted accordingly. However, disagreements between Fage and Manning are not based on different sets of numbers.

Fage’s study focuses on the slave trade infrastructure and ideology already set in place long before the Atlantic slave trade, while Manning examines how the unique demands of the Atlantic slave trade influenced West African demographics and social structures. However, both frameworks could be integrated into a single model that explains how the Atlantic slave trade fit into already existing slave trade patterns, yet uniquely conditioned West African slave trading strategies due to centuries of tremendous New World demand.

Both Fage and Manning make basic assumptions about female reproductive success in polygynous unions. Manning’s more practical evaluation of polygyny and West African populations can be supported by recent studies of polygynous communities. While contemporary West African polygyny should be seen relative to contemporary West African factors, the study of historical polygyny in West Africa can benefit from modern data and theory. Studies of Mormon historical data reveal the differential effects of polygyny based on contextual factors. Due to the intensity of polygynous relationships in historic West Africa, the factors that affect the reproductive success of modern Dogon women may also have had an effect on historical populations. In particular, the reproductive success of slave women in West Africa would most likely be impacted by co-wife competition, in addition to the omnipresent psychological and nutritional “stresses” felt by subjugated female slave populations.

Fage, by arguing that populations stabilized and that no dramatic social changes occurred in West Africa because of the Atlantic slave trade, ignored the many dynamic factors at work on the continent. Population shifts, not just population losses, affect social order. Populations in Africa may not have been preserved by intense polygynous relationships because slave social structures were far from the ideal conditions necessary for population explosions in polygynous
communities. Either way, assumptions need to be formulated into hypotheses and tested against West African historical factors.

Demographic models of the Atlantic slave trade that account for the negative effects of polygynous unions must also aim to explain how other social and environmental factors could have limited population growth. An understanding of the effects of the Atlantic slave trade would have to take into consideration possible population increases brought about by the expansion of maize and manioc production, but also any drought, disease, or warfare that would initially depress populations (Manning 1990). Moreover, West African strategies of resistance to the Atlantic slave trade may have led to a population increase in defendable communities (see Diouf 2003), while other communities might have consciously suppressed their populations in order to deter slave raiders (see Manning 1981: 520).

The changes brought about in West African social structure by the Atlantic slave trade must also be seen as new causal factors. Matrilineal men could reproduce for their own lineage with the help of a slave wife. Patrilineal men increased their economic bargaining power with the use of female slaves as commodities; men could retain female slaves while slave prices and bridewealth transactions were cheap and plan to later sell them to slave traders or for bridewealth when prices were higher. A reduction in exogamous marriages between different kinship groups would weaken political and social alliances and add to the political unrest of the times. Outlying communities without kinship affiliations to the coast could be efficiently targeted by slave raiders.

The lack of anthropological interest in slave trades in historic African societies has allowed demographers and historians free reign in their interpretations of qualitative social change. An anthropological perspective, sensitive to West African social organization before and after the Atlantic slave trade, would bring life to the models of demographers and historians and reveal the more subtle changes caused by dramatic social change. Anthropologists could study how changes in the basic family structures, and the functions of these structures, could eventually develop into the more dramatic changes within larger social organizations. In addition, anthropologists must continue to use a contextual framework to determine if and when polygyny decreases fertility.

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