A NOTE ON SLAVERY, SECLUSION AND AGRARIAN CHANGE IN NORTHERN NIGERIA*

BY GINA PORTER

For geographers and others working on contemporary development issues in Africa, the historical perspective is of considerable significance. Such topics as the incidence and form of indigenous slavery and slave-trading in pre-colonial times are particularly pertinent to modern-day studies of population and rural development, and work published by historians is read with interest by researchers outside the discipline. Thus, some years ago, discussion was generated between geographers and historians on the impact of slave raiding in Nigeria’s ‘Middle Belt’, initially stimulated by a paper in the Journal of African History. As the subsequent debate illustrated, the relationship between modern population density and settlement patterns and pre-colonial slavery is a fascinating one.¹

In a recent review article in the Journal of African History, H. J. Fisher raised another issue which has important implications for our understanding of contemporary rural life in Northern Nigeria: the incidence of indigenous slavery in pre-colonial Borno.² Fisher, reviewing a number of books on the Lake Chad region of West Africa, refers to Nur Alkali’s study of ‘Economic factors in the history of Borno under the Seifuwa’, where it is affirmed that ‘ownership of slaves was the exclusive preserve of the ruling class’.³ Fisher presents material from his recent translations of Nachtigal to suggest that the use of slave labour was far more widespread than Alkali indicates, and moreover, that many Borno people, from a wide social range, took part in slave raiding.⁴ Fisher’s comments are brief, but they run clearly contrary to previous writing by other researchers on this issue.⁵ Brenner, in his studies of Borno under the al-Kanemi dynasty, had examined the economic conditions of the nineteenth century and suggested that while slave raiding, slave ownership and slave-trading were of vital significance to the Borno elite, and while all village heads owned some slaves, probably ‘very few slaves indeed passed into the...

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hands of Borno commoners’. Brenner’s suggestion seems to be based essentially on Barth’s reports of the slave raid which he accompanied in the early 1850s, and upon opinions expressed in Borno in the mid-1960s ‘that the only booty which filtered down to the troops was “blind, lame or broken-horned cattle”’.

We have then two rather different interpretations of the labour situation in pre-colonial Borno. Does this matter? Alkali certainly suggests that the issue of slave raids and slave trade is peripheral to the study of the economic factor in Borno, at least under the Seifuwa; but as Fisher implies (p. 290), such an issue cannot be dismissed so lightly. The availability of slave labour for commoner farmers would surely have been crucial to the agricultural productivity of this region. The implications for our understanding and interpretation of subsequent development and change in the region are also very considerable. This can be illustrated by reference to the question of the low incidence of rural wife-seclusion (kulle) in contemporary Borno.

In a field study of modern rural marketing in Borno I found that Kanuri women played a prominent role in the distribution of local produce, which seemed rather surprising, in view of their Islamic background, and also in contrast to the pattern of trade in central Hausaland, where even rural women from poor families have retreated into seclusion in the twentieth century, and pursue their economic activities from compounds and through intermediaries, rather than in the market place. This suggested the need to look at the reasons behind the move to rural seclusion in Hausaland, and the absence of such development in Borno.

In part, the differences seem attributable to cultural variation between the Hausa and Kanuri; to differences in ground-water hydrology (it is more difficult, and expensive, to sink wells in many parts of Borno: thus, women may need to leave the compound to collect water); and to the differences in colonial economic history, itself related, in part, to location. Hausaland became the centre of export groundnut production in Nigeria due to its central location. This generated both greater wealth to pay for field labour, water carriers etc., and the need for large amounts of compound labour to shell the nuts. Central Borno was too peripheral, in locational terms, to make groundnut cultivation profitable to the same degree that it was in the central

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Hausa region. (The railway to Maiduguri was not constructed until after Independence.)

However, it is tempting to postulate as a more basic and deep-seated reason for the non-seclusion of rural women in Borno, the limited availability of slave labour in the pre-colonial period. The argument rests on the view that just as agricultural labour was largely female, so too was agricultural slavery, and it is in the first place cultural. M. G. Smith suggested, some years ago, that in Hausaland the abolition of slavery in the colonial era led women who had been slaves to withdraw from farm labour ‘as an assertion of their new legal status and in imitation of the traditional role of the free Hausa women, who neither farmed nor gathered firewood.’ If, as Brenner seems to imply, slaves were basically confined to the slave farms of the royal and noble classes in Borno (and were thus presumably of far more limited significance in domestic production than in Hausaland), perhaps agricultural work was not so closely associated with slave status as it was in the Hausa context. Thus Borno women would not feel that the same degree of social stigma attached to female labour in the fields.

Underlying such attitudes may have been the demographic factor, related perhaps, in part, to the differential import of slaves in pre-colonial times. Population densities in Borno seem to have been considerably lower than in central Hausaland over a long period. Census data for 1931, 1952 and 1963 suggest that in Borno, densities were not only lower than those in central Hausa country, but also, in many areas, lower than those in north-western Nigeria. The reasons are almost certainly to be found in the pre-colonial period. In central Hausaland and around each of the Caliphate capitals a substantial net in-migration of labour occurred in the nineteenth century, associated with Fulani slave raiding and trading. The Kano region’s textile industry, and the plantations and farms which provided grain and other produce for the Caliphate’s inter-regional trade with its northern neighbours, necessitated a vast input of cheap labour. This was achieved, in part, through the use of slaves. In Borno, by contrast, the nineteenth century appears to have been marked by severe economic decline, related both to long-term climatic deterioration and to invasion – the incursions of the Fulani into Western Borno in the early part of the century, and that of Rabih at the end – and associated with a fall in population. Thus the once-famous textile industry of West Borno apparently collapsed, while some of Borno’s most entrepreneurial groups seem to have moved across to Hausaland. At the same time, the establishment of

10 Cf. e.g. Claire C. Robertson and Martin Klein (eds.), Women and Slavery in Africa (London and Madison, Wis., 1988), Introduction.

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the Fulani emirates of Adamawa, Bauchi and Gombe cut off Borno from some of its major sources of slave supply, and hence of people. Instead, despite limited migrations of population into the region over the nineteenth century, including Shuwa Arabs following al-Kanemi’s rise to power and Sudanese followers of Rabih in the last decade of the century, out-migration may have prevailed.15

In this way, a serious shortage of labour may have characterized the region. Nachtigal observed, with reference to flour refining, ‘the labour power available among the middle classes for such work is not adequate’.16 Cohen has stated that sons of non-Kanuri slave women were considered fully incorporated members of Borno society in pre-colonial times, which seems to suggest a perceived need for population expansion.17 Certainly, in the twentieth century Borno’s low population densities have had considerable influence on the pattern of agriculture and settlement, allowing the widespread continuation of bush-fallowing systems and considerable village migration. The effect upon women is likely to have been twofold, on the one hand obliging them all to work in the fields, on the other, putting a high price on their free labour. This may well account for the spirit of independence, associated with a high divorce rate, exhibited by many Borno women through to the present day. They are often able to withdraw from unsatisfactory marriages in the knowledge that they will find a ready demand for their labour elsewhere. In such circumstances, the question of purdah does not arise.

The non-seclusion of women is an important issue because of its continuing significance for the development of the Borno region. This is clearly exemplified by Usoro’s survey of disparities in Nigerian rural poverty in the 1970s, when a major distinction in productive efficiency and well-being was drawn between the north Sokoto area and the Kukawa district, the latter’s relative prosperity being related, in large part, to the participation of women in the labour force.18 Paradoxically, it would appear that the distinction between

15 Out-migration may have been a continuing demographic feature of Borno in the nineteenth century. Vogel, in a letter to Barth (30 January 1855), apparently wrote: ‘countless emigrants to the Bauchi hills, carrying their little property, bear witness to the bad government in Bornu; the same is proved by the large ruined and deserted towns that one passes on the road’. Cited in P. A. Benton, The Languages and Peoples of Borno, 1 (London, 1912, reprint 1968), 279. However, this is a translation from the original German, and Benton’s translations of (Nachtigal’s) German are not always as precise as they might be. (Fisher’s translation of Nachtigal, Sahara and Sudan, 111, 112, 113, 115, 116 and 118 refers to Benton’s translation of Schultz, in which passages from Nachtigal are cited. Also see Kirk Greene’s introduction to Benton, 1 (1968), 16.) Unfortunately, the original letter has not been traced. Equally unfortunately, it is difficult to assess the extent to which Rabih’s exploits, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, further contributed to population decline. Although his army laid waste many areas, and W. Hallam, The Life and Times of Rabih Fadl Allah (Ilfracome, 1977), 160, for example, refers to large-scale population movements northwards and eastwards, some of the population subsequently returned (Hallam, 161), new markets were established (field evidence), and Gentil suggests (T. Hodgkin (ed.), Nigerian Perspectives (London, 1960), 321) that the wealth of the country increased substantially.

16 G. Nachtigal, Sahara and Sudan, 11, 189.

17 R. Cohen, ‘Incorporation in Bornu’, in R. Cohen and John Middleton (eds.), From Tribe to Nation in Africa (Scranton, 1970), 162. In practice, however, Cohen suggests that they had lower status than their half brothers whose mothers were free.

Hausaland and Borno in the seclusion of women has been responsible for a certain reversal of the previous twentieth-century contrast between the prosperity of the one and the poverty of the other. Clearly, we need to know more about the origins of non-seclusion in Borno in order to plan effectively for the future development of the region.

In this short paper I have not introduced new historical material, but merely pointed to the linkages between pre-colonial and present-day economies and the way in which information from each can, perhaps, help to throw light on our interpretation of the other. The Alkali/Brenner thesis of slave ownership is certainly attractive, in terms of its possible explanation of contemporary rural economy in Borno, but lacks adequate substantiating historical evidence. The alternative view, presented by Fisher, raises many questions, but cannot be dismissed lightly, because it is based on detailed analysis of Nachtigal’s work. There is clearly need for further research on the question of slave utilization (and, indeed, of free labour movements) in Borno, presumably through the use of both archival and oral history sources. The early colonial archives merit careful examination. Lovejoy uses some district notebook material to suggest the existence of large slave populations in eastern Borno in the early twentieth century but it is not clear, from the material presented, who owned the slaves concerned. The collection of oral history material could probably greatly supplement such sources. Even the contemporary writings of Denham and Clapperton, Barth, Nachtigal and others, could perhaps benefit from further assessment, in particular with reference to their view of rural Borno. Were they hampered – as are many twentieth-century researchers – by an (involuntary) urban bias, despite their not inconsiderable journeys through rural Borno? This could well have occurred because of the difficulties of obtaining information on, and real understanding of, contemporary rural peasant society from their capital city residences and their mainly urban elite contacts.

There is currently much emphasis on interdisciplinary research. Here we have an issue – labour supply and agrarian economy – in which cooperation and collaboration between historians and researchers in contemporary development issues could be extremely fruitful. In peripheral regions like Borno, where research activity has been hampered, until recently, by the lack of a university and other research institutions, there are enormous gaps in our understanding, and the potential benefits from such collaborative efforts would be particularly large.

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20 For a recent exposition of the problems of urban and other biases in research in the twentieth century see Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (London, 1983).