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BOOK REVIEW

An Economic History of Central Niger. Stephen Baier. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980. 325 pp.

"Desert-edge economics" and the growth and collapse of "desert-savannah interdependence" may invoke esoteric themes of exclusive interest to the committed and specialized researcher. For An Economic History of Central Niger, however, these are but a few themes that should arrest the attention of students, researchers and policy-makers throughout its pages.

This book traces the economic history of central Niger covering a period of a little over a century, 1850 to 1960. Whereas the author's focus is on central Niger, particularly the Damagaram, a precolonial state, he provides a penetrative study of events well beyond this region. For example, he relates a Tripoli-Kano trade corridor to central Niger's wider cultural and economic significance through a detailed analysis of the trans-Saharan "trade diaspora," a concept of cross-cultural trade that was carried out by dispersed communities of traders (chapter III).

The major perspective of the book is an attempt to relate and assess the impact of the shift in direction of trade from Saharan and intra-Sahelian to trans-Atlantic. Concentrating on two contiguous time periods, the decades before 1900 as precolonial and the period thereafter as colonial, and the observed changes within each of those periods, the reader is given an opportunity to make direct comparison of events and even a crude welfare analysis of historical change, although the author takes pains to discourage such an exercise (p. 229).

Baier's book follows the years of historical change through detailed research work that attempts to capture as much of the past as possible through archival and oral material. His style is analytical and authoritative. While it is commonplace to experience a lack of vital information in historical research, many readers will be surprised to learn, from the author's assertion, that material on economic change in Damagaram during the later years of colonial occupation was less available than during the earlier years of colonial rule.

The book begins an introduction that provides an excellent occasional reference to remind the reader of the focus and perspective of the book when detailed accounts are encountered in ensuing chapters. Background information on the peoples of central Sudan, a theoretical sketch on pastoral and sedentary peoples and a model of reaction to drought conditions are presented.

This model, namely, the imposition of limits on economic and demographic growth during droughts, provides an invaluable glimpse into the response capability of a society towards an adverse environmental feature. In view of the well-publicized Sahelian drought of 1969-73 and its socio-economic implications, the historical lesson provided by reaction to drought is insightful.

An important aspect of any economy deals with the organization and finance of trade. The book analyzes these elements of trade focusing on: changes that occurred in local trade and production, b) the collapse of the domestic economy and, c) the subsequent adjustment problems. The role of the "trade diaspora" as a mechanism of capital movement along the Tripoli-Kano route is vividly documented in chapter III. The author's account of strategies adopted by merchants to bypass wholesalers and suppliers in Tripoli is intriguing and provides a parallel, however modest, to today's competitive strategies adopted by commercial enterprises. The book's presentation of precolonial economic history of central Sudan ends with the demise of the Tripoli-Kano trade which was triggered by the advent of competitive routes and increasing insecurity in the desert.

Chapter V of the book provides the reader with an informative discussion of how central Niger adjusted to changing economic influences arising from: a) the collapse of desert trade and b) the colonial intervention in the political and economic life of the region. The direct effects of French colonial rule, "apart from causing the ruin of a whole generation of merchants," perpetuated the decline in prosperity and induced emigration from the region, according to Baier. The author summarizes the colonial impact: "In short, where precolonial economy was strongest, reorientation to colonial economy produced the greatest shock" (p. 141).

The book further illustrates the adjustment process that ensued during the colonial occupation through an in-depth discussion of the pastoral economy and livestock trade. A shift towards an export-oriented economy centering on Kano and a tendency towards specialization were major reactions of the indigenous distribution system to the changing socio-economic environment, Baier argues in chapters VI and VII. This analysis should provide a historical lesson to economic theorists, "substantivists" (as they are referred to in the literature), who have questioned the sensitivity of societies with subsistence economies to market forces.

The book goes on to devote considerable space to an important nonmarket force in the economic activity of the region, namely, the role of kinship in the organization and control of the firm (chapter VIII). The author concludes that the kinship system provided continuity and was also associated with problems

of enlarging the scale of economic enterprises. From a market economy standpoint and the author's stated approach to "espouse elements" of the market principle, the book suffers from a lack of a coherent analysis in the interplay of nonmarket forces in determining prices, market failures, monopolies--to mention but a few of today's subjects of debate in developing economies. Perhaps these were not matters of public concern then or little evidence is available for an informative analysis. Nevertheless, Baier has raised several issues in the role of nonmarket, institutional forces in economic activities which should provide opportunities for further inquiry in this region. Baier's analysis of "fluidity and adaptation" in the Linder community and his conclusion that the complexity of relations between market and nonmarket sectors is greatly understated should enlighten apologists of more doctrinaire approaches to developmental problems in West Africa, particularly so since such doctrinaire approaches are justified on the grounds of authenticity in the African economic context.

In chapter IX the author devotes considerable space (fourteen pages) to a success story of an African entrepreneur, Al-Hajj Mukhtar, spanning two decades of "formidable restrictions on local participation in economic life." It is unfortunate that archival material on other entrepreneurs was not available, for, as the author laments, Mukhtar, with his strong ties to the French colonial administration and culture, represented the exception rather than the rule in the Linder commercial community. Economic historians may, however, compare Mukhtar's personal qualities in adapting to economic change with cases elsewhere in West Africa during the difficult years of commercial depressions after World War I.

Before the concluding chapter, the book covers a period of thirty years, 1930-1960, using the concept of an open economy as a framework of analysis. The author's presentation here is an analytical commentary on the inadequacy of a simple center-periphery model in describing the economy of central Niger during this period. Rather, Baier proposes a more complex description of economic relations which encompass the pastoral sector and livestock trade areas that remained relatively free from governmental control and taxation.

Readers looking for a more complete survey of government policies will find this chapter lacking in specificity of those policies. Notable exceptions exist, however. For example, the author describes the influence of "Operation Hironnelle," a government-sponsored program that was designed to channel part of the Nigérian groundnut exports through Dahomey (instead of through Nigeria) on the export economy. Likewise, the ubiquitous colonial taxation, direct or indirect through marketing board arrangements, such as SONARA, are fully presented. A major area

of enlightenment is what Baier describes as "the encounter of official colonial policies and what was actually done."

The concluding chapter, apart from recapturing the major themes presented in earlier chapters of the book, such as the desert-savannah interdependence, raises other issues and questions that should provide opportunities for further research. Among them are included what Baier calls: "economic effects of forty years of extreme monetary tightness" under colonial administration. Again the author raises an issue of critical concern for Niger: "the effects on the ecosystem of extreme specialization in the production of livestock and groundnuts for regional or overseas exports." Interestingly, he rejects "the crude hypothesis of inexorably advancing desert" because such a hypothesis ignores historical patterns of "decline and recovery."

Finally, Baier proposes two familiar lines of action in the formulation of development policy: first, the need for assuring pastoralists, through new means, of access to savannah resources during drought. Secondly, efforts to encourage re-investment of commercial capital in agriculture and stock-breeding. A third and perhaps novel idea he proposes is the need for investigating models for controlling labor in noncommercial activities as applied in indigenous commercial enterprises.

Baier's book is an excellent contribution to the economic history of West Africa and central Sudan. The book's provocative assertions, hypotheses and conclusions are an inspiration for further inquiry in historical analysis of change elsewhere in West Africa. With its rich collection of tables, appendices and bibliographical information, the book helps fill in the gaps in the literature on economic history of central Niger, thus making it an outstanding text on the region.

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