

Indian Cotton Textiles in the Lower Senegal River in the Early Nineteenth Century

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This paper focuses on the trade in the region of the lower Senegal River in the early nineteenth century. The trade was characterised by the exchange of guinée and gum Arabic. Guinée was a dark-blue cotton textile produced in Pondicherry, in French India, and was imported into the region by way of France. The lower Senegal River region produced gum Arabic of high quality, which was an indispensable stiffener in dyeing textiles in Western Europe. Hence, acquiring gum Arabic in Senegal by exporting guinées was critical in propelling the development of European textile industries, and the French government and entrepreneurs invested in textile production in Pondicherry for the trade with Senegal.

A new set of quantitative data from the British and French trade statistics uncovers a peculiar trend in Senegalese and West African overseas trade in cotton textiles: Senegal imported more Indian guinées than European textiles from Western Europe, whereas other regions of West Africa imported more European textiles than Indian textiles. The paper asks why guinée was increasingly imported from France to Senegal.

To answer this question, the paper argues that there are two major reasons why guinée captured the Senegalese markets. One was linked to conspicuous consumption and consumer taste. The quality of guinée, rather than that of European textiles, met the consumer taste in the nomadic emirates on the right bank of the lower Senegal River who controlled the supply of gum Arabic. The other reason was that guinée was used as a regional currency that was circulated far into the interior regions, or the Saharan Desert, via caravan trade networks. The use of local cloth as money in the savannah regions of pre-colonial West Africa and the desert regions had been established since the spread of Islam that accompanied the diffusion of weaving technology. However, the aridification that hit the regions around the lower Senegal River from 1600 to 1850 dislocated the weaving industry, and this ecological change created a path-dependency and meant that the Saharan merchants accepted guinées as a currency in these regions.

In conclusion, this paper stresses that a historically constructed local agency in West Africa shaped the trajectory of globalisation of that time. In the global context, such African consumer agency influenced not only the Euro-West African trade and industrialisation in Western Europe but also textile production in Pondicherry. Moreover, on the other side of the coin the development of European textile industry was dependent on such global-scale interactions.