The Idle and the Industrious – European Ideas about the African Work Ethic in Precolonial West Africa

Klas Rönnbäck

Abstract: There is a growing interest in the historical attitudes to work globally. This paper studies the stereotype of the "lazy African" in European travel accounts from precolonial West Africa. This was one of the central aspects in the European construction of an African "other" during this period, and came to be used as a justification for much European oppression in Africa in both precolonial and colonial times. It is argued in the paper that the stereotype has existed for much longer than suggested in previous literature in the field. Previous studies have also made oversimplified statements about the stereotype, since it overlooks a most significant trend among European writers, who described not only idleness, but also industriousness, among the Africans they wrote about. By the late eighteenth century, finally, the development of an anti-slavery ideology was followed by a challenge to the whole stereotype.

Résumé: L'évolution des attitudes vers le travail suscite un intérêt croissant à travers le monde. Le présent article étudie le stéréotype de l'"Africain paresseux" véhiculé par les récits de voyages d'Européens en Afrique de l'Ouest précoloniale. Aspect central de l'élaboration de l'image d'un Africain "différent" au cours de cette période, ce stéréotype a été utilisé, en grande partie, pour justifier l'oppression européenne en Afrique à l'époque tant précoloniale que coloniale. Ce stéréotype serait bien plus ancien que ne le laisseraient entendre les précédentes études dans ce domaine, qui le présentent, de surcroit, de manière simpliste car elles omettent une tendance fondamentale chez les auteurs européens, qui décrivaient

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non seulement l'oisiveté, mais aussi le zèle des Africains. Finalement, à la fin du XVIIe siècle l'émergence d'une idéologie anti-esclavagiste a été suivie d'une remise en question globale de ce stéréotype.

Introduction[1]

The study of historical attitudes to work has for a long time been a topic of interest in studies of European history.[2] One example of an attitude frequently expressed in many historical sources, from many parts of the world (including for example Britain, Spain, the Netherlands, the United States, Russia and Ming China), is the idea that the lower classes were generally lazy.[3] One of the issues debated by early modern authors in Europe, for example, was thus how the lower classes could be encouraged to become more industrious: should for example wages be kept so low that the lower classes were compelled to work hard in order to earn their subsistence, or was it more effective to let them "taste the fruits of their industry," as the Irish bishop Berkeley put it?[4] In the previous scholarly literature, there has however been some controversy over how much credibility one should give

[1] I would like to thank Irene Elmerot for help with translation from some of the French sources. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and the editor of this journal for many helpful and constructive comments on previous drafts of this article.

[2] For some recent studies see for example: Josef Ehmer and Catharina Lis (eds.), *The Idea of Work in Europe from Antiquity to Modern Times* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); "Special Issue: The Joy and Pain of Work: Global Attitudes and Valuations, 1500–1650," *International Review of Social History* 56 (2011).

[3] Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery. From the Baroque to the Modern 1492–1800* (London: Verso, 1997), 357; Peter Kolchin, "In Defense of Servitude: American Proslavery and Russian Proserfdom Arguments, 1760–1860," *American Historical Review* 85 (1980), 809–827, 811; Arkadiy Tarasov, "The Religious Aspect of Labour Ethics in Medieval and Early Modern Russia," *International Review of Social History* 56 (2011), 125–140; Jonathan Glickstein, "Pressures from Below: Pauperism, Chattel Slavery, and the Ideological Construction of Free Market Labor Incentives in Antebellum America," *Radical History Review* 69 (1997), 114–159; Sarah Jordan, *The Anxieties of Idleness: Idleness in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2003); Ruth Mackay, *"Lazy, Improvident People:" Myth and Reality in the Writing of Spanish History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), chapter 4; Ariadne Schmidt, "Labour Ideologies and Women in Northern Netherlands, c. 1500–1800," *International Review of Social History* 56 (2011), 45–67; Christine Moll-Murata, "Work Ethics and Work Valuation in a Period of Commercialization: Ming China, 1500–1654," *International Review of Social History* 56 (2011), 165–195, 175–176.

[4] John Hatcher, "Labour, Leisure and Economic Thought before the Nineteenth Century," *Past & Present* 160 (1998), 64–115, 97. See also: A.W. Coats, "Changing Attitudes to Labour in Mid-Eighteenth Century," *Economic History Review* 11 (1958), 35–51.

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to any statements about the work ethic of the population.[5] Many scholars would agree with Herbert Applebaum when he argues that there is a great problem with sources that can inform us about such attitudes: "People who work are mostly humble, with no voice in the recorded pages from which histories are written. It is mostly the leisured or the recipients of the state's or a patron's largess who have the time, energy, and training to produce written works. (…) while we may see these ideas as representing the values of a culture, we must recognize the class origin of such ideas."[6] In a recent study, Luca Morelli has for example shown how the attitude to work could differ considerably between workers and the elite in pre-industrial Milan.[7]

In recent years, there have been attempts to study historical attitudes to work in countries or regions outside of Europe. When studying global attitudes to work, however, there is the further problem, aside from the bias from the class origin of the source, that there may have been few historical sources that gave voice to domestic agents in many parts of the world – particularly many countries in the current-day global South. The available written sources about precolonial Africa, for example, have, to a very large extent, been written by European authors. This adds the problem of the European "othering," the construction of stereotypes about other peoples, emphasized in much postcolonial theory and research.[8] The expressions of attitudes to work that can be found in historical sources are therefore often not only biased by class origin but also by racism. Syed Hussein Alatas has for example shown how the stereotype of the "lazy native" was commonly used by Europeans in their descriptions of people from Southeast Asia.[9]

The stereotype of the "lazy native" was historically frequently used when Europeans were describing Africans. Many scholars have discussed the stereotypical, racist picture that Europeans constructed about Africans in the early modern European discourse: Africans were in general portrayed as savage, primitive brutes – a portrait that had very little or nothing to do with reality. One of the core propositions in the bundle

[5] Hatcher, "Labour, Leisure and Economic Thought," 67–76.

[6] Herbert Applebaum, *The Concept of Work: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), xii–xiii. See also: Karin Hofmeester and Christine Moll-Murata, "The Joy and Pain of Work: Global Attitudes and Valuations, 1500–1650," *International Review of Social History* 56 (2011), 1–23, 13.

[7] Luca Morelli, "The Attitude of Milanese Society to Work and Commercial Activities. The Case of the Porters and the Case of the Elites," in: Josef Ehmer and Catharina Lis (eds.), *The Idea of Work in Europe from Antiquity to Modern Times* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 101–121.

[8] Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998), 104.

[9] Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native. A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (London: Frank Cass, 1977).

of characteristics that was attributed to the Africans was the particular claim that they were lazy. William Cohen has argued, based on a study of French sources, that the stereotype of the "lazy African" "was repeated an infinite number of times, finally becoming a basic European belief."[10] In his study of the British image of Africa, Philip Curtin argued likewise: "Laziness was the vice most frequently reported, and the emphasis was repeated from several sides."[11] Anthony Barker has made the even stronger claim that "virtually all" British writers referred to laziness among people in West Africa.[12] The same stereotype can also be found in Danish travel writings.[13] The stereotype would survive well into colonial times. It was for example, as Babacar Fall has shown, widely used by Europeans in colonial French West Africa.[14] It was also ubiquitous in sources from the British colonies in Africa, as Okia Opolot has shown in the case of colonial Kenya,[15] and Ann Whitehead in the case of colonial Zambia.[16] Several scholars have similarly shown its use by people of European descent when describing Africans in colonial South Africa.[17] The previous literature thus shows that the stereotype had become quite hegemonic in European travelogues

[10] William Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530–1880* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 23.

[11] Philip Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780–1850* (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), 224. See also: Peter J. Marshall and Glyndwr William, *The Great Map of Mankind. British Perceptions of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1982), chapter 8.

[12] Anthony Barker, *The African Link: British Attitudes to the Negro in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1550–1807* (London: Frank Cass, 1978), 104.

[13] Selena Axelrod Winsnes, "An Eye-Witness, Hearsay, Hands-On Report from the Gold Coast: Ludewig F. Rømer's 'Tilforladelig Efterretning om Kysten Guinea'," in: Mai Palmberg (ed.), *Encounter Images in the Meetings between Africa and Europe* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2001), 37–53, 43.

[14] Babacar Fall, *Social History in French West Africa: Forced Labour, Labour Market, Women and Politics* (Amsterdam: SEPHIS, 2002).

[15] Opolot Okia, *Communal Labor in Colonial Kenya: The Legitimization of Coercion, 1912–1930* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

[16] Ann Whitehead, "'Lazy Men,' Time-Use, and Rural Development in Zambia," *Gender & Development* 7 (1999), 49–61; Ann Whitehead, "Continuities and Discontinuities in Political Constructions of the Working Man in Rural Sub-Saharan Africa: The 'Lazy Man' in African Agriculture," *European Journal of Development Research* 12 (2000), 23–52.

[17] Keletso Atkins, *The Moon is Dead! Give us our Money! The Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethic, Natal, South Africa, 1843–1900* (Portsmouth NH: Heinemann, 1993); John M. Coetzee, "Idleness in South Africa," *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies* 8–1 (1982), 1–13; Zine Magubane, "Labor Laws and Stereotypes: Images of the Khoikhoi in the Cape in the Age of Abolition," in: Mai Palmberg (ed.), *Encounter Images in the Meetings between Africa and Europe* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2001), 76–95.

from and descriptions of Africa from the precolonial, as well as the colonial, periods.

This stereotype of the lazy native had several implications. At the time, there was a widespread idea in early modern Europe that to work and strive hard was virtuous. Laziness, on the other hand, was considered a sin that had to be opposed.[18] This idea commonly originated in religious doctrines, but over time it experienced a process of secularization, as Ilja Veldman for example has shown in the case of the Netherlands.[19] One way of fighting the vice of laziness was to coerce the unwilling people to work. The stereotype of the "lazy African" therefore came to be used as an excuse for the institution of slavery in Africa, as well as for the transatlantic slave trade.[20] Indeed, Jeffer Daykin has argued – based on a study of French travel accounts – that the discourse was constructed in France by the late seventeenth century precisely in order to justify the French slave trade taking off at this time.[21] The stereotype also became ubiquitous in the Americas, often used as an excuse for exploiting the slaves there.[22] Many scholars have also written about how the stereotype of the "lazy African" came to be used during the colonial period in African as an excuse for various forms of forced labour.[23] As William Cohen summarized it: "Under

[18] Cohen, *French Encounter*, 33; Blackburn, *Making of New World Slavery*, 237; Robin Blackburn, "The Old World Background to European Colonial Slavery," *William and Mary Quarterly* 54 (1997), 65–102, 85; Applebaum, *Concept of Work*, chapter 14.

[19] Ilja Veldman, "Representations of Labour in Late Sixteenth-Century Nederlandish Prints: The Secularization of the Work Ethic," in: Josef Ehmer and Catharina Lis (eds.), *The Idea of Work in Europe from Antiquity to Modern Times* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 149–175.

[20] Cohen, *French Encounter,* 25.

[21] Jeffer Daykin, "'They Themselves Contribute to Their Misery by Their Sloth:' The Justification of Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Travel Narratives," *European Legacy* 11 (2006), 623–632; see also: Jordan, *Anxieties of Idleness*, 139, even though Jordan is somewhat undecided as to whether she believes the stereotype was consciously decided for this purpose or not.

[22] Eugene Genovese, *The World Slaveholders Made. Two Essays in Interpretation* (New York: Vintage books, 1971), 5; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage books, 1974), 295–309; Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death. A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 96; Claude Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery. The Womb of Iron and Gold* (London: Athlone Press, 1991), 73; Blackburn, *Making of New World Slavery*, 334; Blackburn, "Old World Background," 69.

[23] Coetzee, "Idleness;" Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Roxanne L. Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), chapter 3; Magubane, "Labor Laws and Stereotypes;" Fall, *Social History*, 7; Whitehead, "'Lazy Men';" Ann Whitehead, "Continuities and Discontinuities;" Okia, *Communal Labor*; Atkins, *Moon is Dead.*

the impact of imperialism, these stereotypes were increasingly emphasized to justify conquest."[24]

Aim of this Paper – The Question and the Sources

In this paper, I am going to study the stereotype of the "lazy African," as it was discussed in the European literature in the early modern period. The paper will therefore try to deal with the question: *how did Europeans write about the work ethic of the people in precolonial Africa?*

It is of the utmost importance to remember that the sources used for the study clearly represent an "alter-perspective," in Marcel van der Linden's terms.[25] They do not therefore necessarily reveal much or anything at all about the actual work ethic of West Africans, but only of the European perception or idea of this ethic. The European accounts will be analyzed with an eye both to the *observer* (Who were the observers? What role did they play in West Africa, and did this impact on the way they wrote about Africans? Did it change over time?) and the *observed* (Who were the Europeans writing about? Are there any geographical differences in the observations? Did it change over time?). The study will be limited to accounts referring to the region of West Africa in particular. The choice of region is motivated by the fact that this was the part of sub-Saharan Africa which first came into contact with Europeans during the age of explorations.

Both primary and secondary accounts will be used: the primary accounts for an analysis of the impressions that European travellers in West Africa presumably gained from their stay in this part of the world, whereas the secondary accounts will be used for an analysis of what other European writers picked up and transmitted from the primary accounts.

There are two main problems with much of the previous scholarly literature on this topic. Firstly, previous studies have often been based on a quite limited number of sources, but have made bold generalizations about the stereotype based on limited samples. William Cohen's claim that the stereotype of the lazy African was repeated an "infinite number of times," to take one example, is directly supported by references to just four sources. Secondly, previous studies have also been country-specific (looking at the British/American or French sources, respectively). As will be argued in this paper, more sources and – most importantly – a comparative approach can nuance and deepen our understanding of this stereotype considerably.

[24] Cohen, *French Encounter*, 283.

[25] Marcel van der Linden, "Studying Attitudes to Work Worldwide, 1500–1650: Concepts, Sources, and Problems of Interpretation," *International Review of Social History* 56 (2011), 25–43, 30. Peter Burke more poetically calls this perspective a "distant gaze," see: Peter Burke, "Representing Women's Work in Early Modern Italy," in: Josef Ehmer and Catharina Lis (eds.), *The Idea of Work in Europe from Antiquity to Modern Times* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 177–187.

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The article is based upon more than seventy sources – travel accounts and reports (both published books and pamphlets, and unpublished manuscripts), as well as some secondary sources such as geographical atlases – produced prior to formal European colonization in Africa. Most of these sources only discuss the African work ethic very briefly in passing. The sources were located using existing guides, by Adam Jones and John Fage, to primary sources on African history.[26] All sources found in these guides in languages mastered by the author of this paper (English, French, and Scandinavian languages) or translations of primary sources into any of these languages have been searched for any discussion related to the work ethic of the African population. Other sources referring to West Africa were located by searching a number of digital databases: The Making of the Modern World, Part I (MOMW1), Early English Books Online (EEBO), Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (ECCO), and Gallica.[27] In this search, various keywords frequent in this literature, e.g. Guinea, or the various countries in the region, have been used in combination with keywords related to the stereotype (e.g. "lazy," "laziness," and various synonyms of these words). In practice, since three of the four databases used focus on English-language publications primarily, this method of locating sources has amounted to a bias in favour of English sources; roughly half of the sources used were written by English authors. French authors account for roughly a fifth of the sources used, whereas the remainder is publications by Portuguese, Venetian, Dutch, German, Danish, and Swedish authors. Because of my limited language skills, I have been forced to rely on translations into English for sources in Latin, Portuguese, Italian, Dutch and German.

There has been a lot of previous research into how reliable many of the presumed *primary* sources are. It is well known that some of the authors of travel accounts – for example Olfert Dapper or William Smith – were in reality plagiarizing much of their accounts from previous authors. Scholars have therefore put a lot of effort into analyzing and decompiling what these authors plagiarized from others, and what they contributed

[26] Adam Jones, *Raw, Medium, Well Done: A Critical Review of Editorial and Quasi-Editorial Work on Pre-1885 European Sources for Sub-Saharan Africa, 1960–1986* (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin, 1987); John D. Fage, *A Guide to Original Sources for Precolonial Western Africa Published in European Languages* (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin, 1994).

[27] The databases can be found at the following websites: The Making of the Modern World, Part I (MOMW1): http://gdc.gale.com/products/the-making-of-the-modern-world-the-goldsmiths-kress-library-of-economic-literature-1450-1850/; Early English Books Online (EEBO): http://eebo.chadwyck.com/home; Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO): http://gdc.gale.com/products/eighteenth-century-collections-online/; Gallica: http://gallica.bnf.fr

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themselves.[28] It seems reasonable to assume that some of the plagiarizing, perhaps especially among some of the lesser-known and less well-used sources, has still gone unnoticed. And even if an author has not directly plagiarized texts, he or she might still have read and been influenced by previous authors. For that reason, we cannot treat all the observations in the primary sources as being made independently of each other. For the paper, I have also tried to assemble the picture from some of the *secondary* literature. Whereas the paper probably covers a large share of the primary sources that describe the work ethic in precolonial West Africa, this is not necessarily the case regarding the sample of secondary sources because of the much greater problem of finding such sources. The results from this part of the study must therefore be treated as being of a more impressionistic nature.

Ideas of the Lazy African

As Mary Campbell has argued, there is no corpus of travel accounts from the Middle Ages that are concerned with Africa – "Egypt, then as now, was part of Asia, and Ethiopia was legend alone."[29] A lack of primary accounts did not stop people in Europe from having prejudices and putting forth ideas about Africans. The idea of African laziness can be found at least as early as in some medieval documents.[30]

The stereotype would occur frequently in the early modern travel writings from West Africa. In 1453, the chronicler of the Portuguese explorations of the African coast, Gomes Eanes de Zurara, argued that the Africans lived like beasts: "no knowledge of bread and wine, and they were without the covering of clothes, or the lodgment of houses; and worse than all, through the great ignorance that was in them, in that they had no understanding of good, but only knew how to live in a bestial sloth." The argument was used as a direct excuse for slavery, since "their lot was now quite the contrary of what it had been," once they had been enslaved by the

[28] See for example: Harvey M. Feinberg, "An Eighteenth-Century Case of Plagiarism: William Smith's 'A New Voyage to Guinea'," *History in Africa* 6 (1979), 45–50; Adam Jones, "William Smith the Plagiarist: A Rejoinder," *History in Africa* 7 (1980), 327–328; Adam Jones, "Double Dutch? A Survey of Seventeenth-Century German Sources for West African History," *History in Africa* 9 (1982), 141–153; Jones, *Raw, Medium, Well Done*; Adam Jones, "Decompiling Dapper: A Preliminary Search for Evidence," *History in Africa* 17 (1990), 171–209; Adam Jones, *Olfert Dapper's Description of Benin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1998); Fage, *A Guide*; Axelrod Winsnes, "Eye-Witness, Hearsay."

[29] Mary Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 3.

[30] Blackburn, "Old World Background," 69, 93.

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Portuguese.[31] The stereotype is also to be found in the accounts of Cadamosto, who wrote about people in Senegal in the second half of the fifteenth century: "They are very bad labourers – unwilling to exert themselves to sow more than will barely support them throughout the year. Few trouble to raise supplies for market."[32] The stereotype can be found to be used as an excuse for coercion in another early source, an anonymous Portuguese report on El Mina on the Gold Coast, dated to 1572:

> In the same way as is done in Spain to vagabonds who seek out masters and travel about for work, it will be necessary to force all these blacks to work, punishing them, in pecuniary and even corporal terms, when they fail to work, for they are the most idle, do-nothing people in the world. How evil a thing idleness can be has been proved, and human and divine laws indicate this: *otium reges prius, et be[a]tas perdidit urbes.*[33]

The idea of the lazy African would be repeated over and over again in the following centuries, by many authors writing on Africa. In the year 1600, for example, the German explorer Johann von Lübelfing had the same idea: "They do not take the trouble to work, either: they live on the fruits of the country and on their livestock."[34] The Jesuit priest Baltasar Barreira would, in 1605, argue that the land in Guinea was extremely fertile, suitable for sugar and cotton plantations, but it could be problematic to establish plantations since "the inhabitants have little interest in agriculture and are more inclined to enjoy themselves than work."[35] In 1623, the English explorer Richard Jobson's book on the exploration of the river Gambia was published. Jobson wrote about the Mandingos: "The men for their parts, do live a most idle kind of life, imploying themselves (I meane the greater part) to no kinde of trade nor exercise, except it be onely some two

[31] Gomes Eanes de Zurara, *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea, Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 [1453]), 84–85.

[32] Gerald R. Crone (ed.), *The Voyages of Cadamosto and Other Documents on Western Africa in the Second Half of the Fifteenth Century* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1937), 42.

[33] "Idleness has destroyed kings and rich cities" – Anonymous from 1572 published in: Avelino Teixeira da Mota and Paul E.H. Hair (eds.), *East of Mina: Afro-European Relations on the Gold Coast in the 1550s and 1560s. An Essay with Supporting Documents* (Madison WI: WISC African studies collection, 1988), 84.

[34] Johann von Lübelfing (1599–1600) published in: Adam Jones, *German Sources for West African History 1599–1669* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1983), 11.

[35] Letter by Father Baltasar Barreira (1605) published as "document 6" in: Avelino Teixeira da Mota and Paul E.H. Hair (eds.), *Jesuit Documents on the Guinea of Cape Verde and the Cape Verde Islands 1585–1617* (Madison WI: WISC African studies collection, 1989), 1.

moneths of the yeare, which is in tilling, and bringing home their countrey come, and graine, wherein the preseruation of their liues consists."[36] An unpublished French document written in Senegambia by the late seventeenth century, attributed by historians to the French governor Louis Moreau de Chambonneau, echoed the same idea: "For the most part the men do nothing at all and are terribly lazy and lecherous. Provided that they can sit with the sun playing down on their bellies, and they have something to smoke, and a little millet and water they are more content than Princes in France."[37] In 1696, the physician Jaques-Joseph le Maire, employed in the French slave trading company, would argue likewise, claiming that: "If they Work one hour, they'll be sure to Chat two for it." [38] The Norwegian priest Johannes Rask, working for the Danish slave trading company in the early eighteenth century, argued: "If they had been forced to it, or if they themselves had had the energy to work, something that is very much against their nature, then they would probably be found to be able to learn all sorts of things."[39] Other travellers adhering to the stereotype of the "lazy African," but who only touch upon the issue in passing, include the explorer André Álvares de Almada (1605),[40] Jean Barbot who worked for the French slave-trading company (in his highly influential accounts of Guinea, dating from 1678 to 1712),[41] the French explorer François de Paris (1682–1683),[42] the German physician Johann Peter Oettinger (1692–1693),[43] the French explorer François Froger (1698),[44]

[36] Richard Jobson, *The Golden Trade, or, A Discovery of the River Gambra* (London, N. Okes, 1623), 38.

[37] Anonymous manuscript, attributed to Louis Moreau de Chambonneau, published in: Carson I.A. Ritchie, "Impressions of Senegal in the Seventeenth Century," *African Studies* 26 (1967), 59–93, 85.

[38] Jaques-Joseph Le Maire, *A Voyage of the Sieur Le Maire…* (London: F. Mills/W. Turner, 1696), 62, see also 45, 63.

[39] Translated by the author. The original is: "Dersom dei vart drivne til det, eller dei sjölve iddest å arbeide, nokosom er deira natur mykje imot, så skulle dei nok finnast skikka til å laere alle slags kunster," in: Johannes Rask, *Ferd til og frå Guinea 1708–1713* ([Oslo?]: Fonna forlag, 1969 [1754]), 87.

[40] André Álvares de Almada, "Brief Treatise on the Rivers of Guinea" (unpublished manuscript, c. 1594) – available at: http://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/AfricanStudies/Africana, 105–106, accessed 13 June 2013.

[41] Jean Barbot, *Barbot on Guinea* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1992), 84, 527–528.

[42] François de Paris, *Voyage to the Coast of Africa, named Guinea, and to the Isles of America, Made in the Years 1682 and 1683* (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin, 2001), 42–43.

[43] Johann Peter Oettinger, "Account of his Voyage to Guinea," in: Adam Jones, *Brandenburg Sources for West African History* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1985), 191–193.

[44] François Froger, *A Relation of a Voyage…* (London, M. Gillyflower, 1698), 11.

the English slave trader Nathaniel Uring (1726),[45] John Atkins, who was employed as a physician by the English slave trading company (1735),[46] the Moravian priest Christian Oldendorp who worked for the Danish slave trading company (1784),[47] John Matthews, officer in the Royal Navy (1788),[48] the English slave trader Robert Norris (1789),[49] and the Swedish scholar Adam Afzelius (1795–1796).[50]

Many of these authors state their claim of the lazy African quite matter-of-factly: the Africans are just lazy. The claims are often made in passing, with the main emphasis of the publication instead being put on completely different issues – for example the adventurous journey of the author, trade or political negotiations undertaken, or the natural environment of the region.

For many writers, the idea of the lazy African would be discussed in highly moralizing, pejorative terms. The Portuguese priest Manuel Alvares would for example in the early seventeenth century argue that the Jolof "accept the burden of work unwillingly and the seventh of our mortal sins predominates with them. To see a Jalofo is to see a true portrait of laziness."[51] Willem Bosman, merchant of the Dutch West India Company, could for his part write: "These degenerate Vices [Africans were described as e.g. crafty and villainous] are accompanied with their Sisters, Sloth and Idleness; to which they are so prone that nothing but the utmost Necessity can force them to Labour."[52] Ludewig Ferdinand Rømer, working as a merchant for the Danish slave-trading company, would similarly condemn what he thought were lazy natives of the Gold Coast: "How the Almighty has blessed this land which these lazy natives do not know how to utilize! God has undoubtedly left them to their evil nature, and they consider good to be evil and evil good, since they consider all work too demeaning, and beneath them."[53]

[45] Nathaniel Uring, *A History of the Voyages and Travels of Capt. Nathaniel Uring* (London: J. Peele, 1726), 156.

[46] John Atkins, *A Voyage to Guinea, Brazil & the West Indies* (London: Frank Cass & Co, Ltd, 1970 [1735]), 50–51.

[47] Christian Oldendorp, *Tillförlåtlig underrättelse om negrerne på Guineakusten* (Uppsala: J. Edman, 1784), 133, 138.

[48] John Matthews, *A Voyage to the River Sierra-Leone* (London: B. White and Son/J. Sewell, 1788), 96.

[49] Robert Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee, King of Dahomy* (London: W. Lowndes, 1789), 147.

[50] Adam Afzelius, *Sierra Leone Journal 1795–1796* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1967), 116.

[51] Manuel Alvares, "Ethiopia Minor and a Geographical Account of the Province of Sierra Leone" (unpublished manuscript, c. 1615), 7, accessed 13 June 2013 at http://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/AfricanStudies/Africana.

[52] Willem Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (London: J. Knapton et al, 1721), 101.

[53] Ludewig Ferdinand Rømer, *A Reliable Account of the Coast of Guinea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1760]), 217–218.

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The same ideas would continue to be spread by European travellers in the early nineteenth century as well. In 1806, for example, the French governor J.P.L. Durand wrote: "The character of the Blacks is nearly the same every where: they are indolent, except when animated by the desire of vengeance."[54] The slave traders Joseph Corry (writing in 1807)[55] and Hugh Crow (memoirs published posthumously in 1830),[56] the ship surgeon Francis Spilsbury (1807),[57] and the English governors Henry Meredith (1812)[58] and Brodie Cruickshank (in 1853),[59] as well as another governor of the British Cape Coast Castle, in a letter to the African Committee in 1809,[60] would be of a similar opinion, but would never elaborate on the issue.

The idea of the "lazy African" existed even among travellers sympathetic to the abolitionist cause. This, for example, is what the physician and abolitionist Thomas Winterbottom wrote in 1803: "When unoccupied by these employments they [people in Sierra Leone] while away the hours in listless indolence, reclined upon mats, or sleeping in the shade. Indolence is, without doubt, a distinguishing feature in the character of Africans, as of all uncivilized nations."[61] It is also noteworthy that the lazy African workers were also argued to have become a real problem for the Europeans, once they started to employ Africans. In a narrative of a journey to Sierra Leone, published in 1802, Anna Maria Falconbridge claimed, for example, that the British colony in the area had problems with the workers, since "when they get their wages, like our English tars, they quit work while they have money."[62] In Falconbridge's opinion, then, it seems as if the African workers were at least no worse than the British ones.

[54] Jean Baptiste Léonard Durand, *A Voyage to Senegal* (London: R. Philips, 1806), 99, see also 61, 164–165.

[55] Joseph Corry, *Observations upon the Windward Coast* (London: G. and W. Nicol, 1807), 66.

[56] Hugh Crow, *Memoirs of the late Captain Hugh Crow of Liverpool* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, 1830), 221.

[57] Francis B. Spilsbury, *Account of a Voyage to the Western Coast of Africa* (London: R. Philips, 1807), 36.

[58] Henry Meredith, *An Account of the Gold Coast of Africa* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1812), 96, 130.

[59] Brodie Cruickshank, *Eighteen Years on the Gold Coast of Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 1853), 284–285.

[60] Quoted in: Edward Reynolds, *Trade and Economic Change on the Gold Coast, 1807–1874* (Harlow: Longman, 1974), 66.

[61] Thomas Winterbottom, *An Account of the Native Africans of Sierra Leone. Volume 1* (London: C. Whittingham, 1803), 91.

[62] Anna Maria Falconbridge, *Narrative of Two Voyages to the River Sierra Leone* (London: L.I. Higham, 1802), 204.

Ideas of the Industrious African

Idleness is however not the only description of an African work ethic that can be found in the writings of European travellers in precolonial Africa. Quite a few authors argued that Africans on the contrary were or could be highly industrious. These ideas can be found from an early date in the accounts of the Muslim diplomat and traveller Leo Africanus. In the English translation of his book, published in 1600, one can read that the inhabitants in a number of kingdoms in Western Africa, south of where he himself travelled, were "most rich and industrious."[63] Similar ideas can also be found in the writings of many later European travellers. The stereotype of the industrious African would however virtually always be made regarding people of a special ethnicity or nationality in Africa.

In the early seventeenth century, the Portuguese priest Manuel Alvares would on the one hand condemn Jolof for the sin of slothfulness, while both the Banhu and the Balanta were described as excellent workers.[64] The people of Metts, a polity described as lying to the east of Timbuktu, were depicted as industrious in an anonymous English pamphlet published in 1665.[65] A very explicit proponent of this idea is perhaps the French explorer Nicolas Villault. In his account from a journey to the coast of Guinea (translated into English in 1670), he wrote:

> So great an aversion have these people against idleness, that amongst them the aged men and women are not allow'd it, but are constrained to get their livelihood by such employments as their age and infirmities will bear, some of them being set on work either to blow the bellows in some forge, to supervise the business of the house, or some such trifling affair, which require not much pains.[66]

Jean Barbot would, by the end of the century, describe several peoples on the Gold Coast as being more industrious than Africans living inland.[67] William Snelgrave described the people of Whydah as industrious in 1734.[68] The Fula in Senegambia were held forth as a particularly

[63] Leo Africanus, *A Geographical Historie of Africa* (London: G. Bishop, 1600), 5.

[64] Alvares, E*thiopia Minor*, chapter 7, 2–3; chapter 12, 1.

[65] Anonymous, *The Golden Coast or a Description of Guinney* (London: S. Speed, 1665), 4.

[66] Nicolas Villault, *A Relation of the Coasts of Africk called Guinee* (London: J. Starkey, 1670), 195–196.

[67] Barbot, *Barbot on Guinea*, 527–528.

[68] William Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea* (London: J., J. and P. Knapton, 1734), 65.

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"industrious and frugal" by Francis Moore in 1738,[69] and in 1794 James Watt would also describe them in similar terms.[70] William Smith claimed in 1744 that the people of both the Gambia and the Gold Coast in general were lazy, whereas people in Axim or Whydah were described as industrious.[71] The French naturalist Michel Adanson wrote in 1759: "Is it not amazing that the inhabitants of this island [Goree] should have traded with those of Senegal more than thirty years, and all this while not have given themselves the trouble to open a convenient road! Can there be a stronger proof of the laziness and indolence of the Negroes?"[72] A few pages later in the same publication, Adanson would describe the people of Rufisque in Senegambia as highly industrious.[73] John Matthews would for his part similarly argue that both the "Bagoes" and the "Suzées" in Sierra Leone were very industrious, whereas the "Mandingos" were described in the same publication as "too lazy and too proud to attend to trade."[74] In 1792, mr Saugnier described people in the region of Senegambia as "laborious."[75] The inhabitants of Fante on the Gold Coast were described in similar terms by Paul Erdmann Isert in 1788.[76] Captain John Adams would in 1813 describe men on the Gold Coast as quite lazy, whereas the people of Dahomey and Ardrah were industrious.[77] In 1821, William Hutton would describe a number of peoples in Sierra Leone, on the Gold Coast and Ashante as industrious, whereas the people of Paintrey were described as indolent, "sitting about in lazy postures, drinking palm wine, and talking palavers."[78] Peter Leonard, in an account of a voyage to West Africa published in 1833, described the Kru in these terms:

[69] Francis Moore, *Travels into the Inland Parts of Africa* (London: E. Cave, 1738), 32.

[70] James Watt, *Journal of James Watt: Expedition to Timbo Capital of the Fula Empire in 1794* (ed. Bruce Mouser) (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1994), 25.

[71] William Smith, *A New Voyage to Guinea* (London: J. Nourse, 1744), 28, 115, 143–145, 195.

[72] Michel Adanson, *A Voyage to Senegal, the Isle of Goree, and the River Gambia* (London: J. Nourse, 1759), 43, 54, 117.

[73] Adanson, *A Voyage to Senegal*, 202–203.

[74] Matthews, *A Voyage to the River Sierra Leone*, 12–15, 18.

[75] Pierre-Raymond de Brisson Saugnier, *Voyages to the Coast of Africa* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1792), 219.

[76] Paul Erdmann Isert, *Letters on West Africa and the Slave Trade* (ed. Selena Axelrod Winsnes) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 173.

[77] John Adams, *Remarks on the Country Extending from Cape Palmas to the River Congo* (London: G. and W.B. Whitaker, 1823), 40, 74.

[78] William Hutton, *A Voyage to Africa: Including a Narrative of an Embassy to one of the Interior Kingdoms in the Year 1820* (London: Longman, 1821), 33, 38, 47, 91, 156, 161–162, 196.

> These men are an emigrant and industrious race, natives of a part of the grain coast, in the neighbourhood of Cape Palmos (…), who come here for a few years only – let themselves out for hire to ships or as servants on shore – make a little money – return home again, and are succeeded by some more of their fortune-pushing countrymen.[79]

Thomas Winterbottom, who generalized about Africans in very pejorative terms, as noted previously, would at least be satisfied with the same group as Peter Leonard, the Krumen of the Grain Coast, describing them at least as "very industrious."[80] J.P.L. Durand would similarly describe people of Foigny as industrious.[81]

The Hegemony of the Stereotype

The stereotypical discourse on the "lazy African" soon found its way into secondary accounts in Europe, since many authors were citing – if not outright plagiarizing – the travel accounts of travellers who actually had visited Africa. The arguments could be found in the literature defending the slave trade, for example from Malachy Postlethwayt[82] and other pro-slavery authors.[83] Some of the leading abolitionists, such as James Ramsay[84] and Thomas Clarkson,[85] came to adhere to the same stereotype, and had to adapt their arguments in favour of abolition of the slave trade accordingly. Abbé Grégoire argued, in 1808, that Christianity might correct the vice of idleness.[86] The idea also found its way into contemporary novels.[87]

The idea was also repeated in contemporary scholarly accounts. The British geographers Richard Blome and John Ogilby, collecting their information on Africa from a number of other European authors, got the impression that Africans in general were lazy, from the literature they

[79] Peter Leonard, *Records of a Voyage to the Western Coast of Africa* (Edinburgh: W. Tait, 1833), 55.

[80] Winterbottom, *An Account of the Native Africans,* 9.

[81] Durand, *A Voyage to Senegal,* 38.

[82] Malachy Postlethwayt, *The Importance of the African Expedition Considered* (London: C. Say, 1758), 18.

[83] Anonymous, *Slavery no Oppression; Or, Some New Arguments and Opinions Against the Idea of African Liberty* (London: Lowndes and Christie, 179?), 12.

[84] James Ramsay, *Objections to the Abolition of the Slave Trade, with Answers* (London: J. Philips, 1788), 51.

[85] Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (Philadelphia: N. Wiley, 1804 [1786]), 150.

[86] Abbé Grégoire quoted in: Curtin, *Image of Africa*, 241.

[87] Christopher Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 43.

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consulted.[88] The French scholar Henri Justel would argue likewise in 1684.[89] In the anonymously published book *The Compleat Geographer*, published in 1723, one can find the claim that: "The Blacks are here [in Guinea] generally crafty and deceitful, given to Sloath and Idleness, and no less careless and trepid."[90] In 1728 the French scholar Jean-Baptiste Labat would similarly argue: "They are excessively lazy, flee work as if it were the worst thing in the world; if hunger did not force them, they would never cultivate their land."[91] Others would in a similar manner pick up the same pejorative terms, for example John Barrow in his *New Geographical Dictionary*, published in 1759: "The negroes (…) are all, without exception, crafty, villainous, fraudulent, and very seldom to be trusted. They are prone to sloth and idleness, incredibly careless and stupid; being equally unmoved at good or ill success."[92] The Swedish natural scientist Carl Linnaeus would, in the twelth edition of his famous *Systema Naturae*, classify Africans as "*niger, phlegmaticus, laxus*" ("black, phlegmatic, lax"), and later in the same entry adds that they are "*vafer, segnis, negligens*" ("cunning, lazy, negligent").[93] In the French *Encyclopédie,* published in 1780, it was argued that Africans "are blamed for ferociousness, cruelty, perfidy, cowardice, laziness. This accusation is but too true."[94]

Only a few of the secondary accounts acknowledged that there might be exceptions to the general stereotype. In 1704, Henry Curson argued that the "People [of Guinea are] the richest and most Industrious amongst the Inhabitants of Negroland."[95] The *Universal Modern History*, published in the middle of the eighteenth century, clearly adhered to the stereotype of the "lazy African" as a general rule of thumb, but did at the same time add the caveat that the stereotype primarily applied to people in the inland of Africa, whereas "those who live on the coasts and maritime parts, having been long since allured to a more active and laborious life, as well as civilized in their manners."[96] In *A New System of Geography*, published in 1765, it is similarly argue that "though idleness is the favourite vice of the Africans,

[88] John Ogilby, *Africa: Being an Accurate Description of the Regions…* (London: T. Johnson, 1670), 347, 456–457; Richard Blome, *Brittannia: Or, A Geographical Description of the Kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland* (London: T.N., 1670), 46.

[89] Henri Justel, *Recueil de Divers Voyages Faits en Afrique et en l'Amérique* (Paris: L. Billaine, 1674), 4.

[90] Anonymous, *The Compleat Geographer* (London: J. Knapton et al, 1723), 176.

[91] Quoted in translation in: Cohen, *French Encounter,* 23.

[92] John Barrow, *A New Geographical Dictionary. Volume 1* (London: J. Coote, 1759), entry on Guinea.

[93] Carl Linnaeus, *Systema Naturae per Regna Tria Naturae* (Vindobonae: I. Thomae, 1767), 29.

[94] Quoted in: Cohen, *French Encounter,* 68.

[95] Henry Curson, *A New Description of the World* (London: J. Nutt, 1704), 361.

[96] Quote in: Barker, *African Link*, 118.

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people of both sexes are here [in Whydah] so laborious and diligent, that they never desist till they have finished their undertaking, carrying the same spirit of perseverance into every action of their lives."[97] Charles Middleton, publishing *A New and Complete System of Geography* in 1777, claimed that some (e.g. people on the Gold Coast) were "naturally slothful and indolent," whereas others (e.g. people in Whydah) were described as highly industrious. Most innovatively, when discussing the people of Benin, Middleton described the people as divided into four classes, the lowest being the commonalty: "The generality of these are very indolent, nor will they go to work but when necessity obliges them: the laborious part of their business is executed by the wifes, such as tilling the ground, spinning the cotton, weaving of cloth, and other handicrafts."[98] In 1799, John Leyden would describe several peoples in Senegambia as industrious (often adding, though, that they also were "warlike," "rude," or some similar pejorative term).[99]

Challenging the Hegemonic Stereotype

In time, a third line of argument would start to develop, quite explicitly challenging the stereotype of the "lazy African." The American abolitionist Anthony Benezet seems to have been the first to directly and explicitly question the whole stereotype of the "lazy African." Reading and quoting many of the primary travel accounts at length (including those of Willem Bosman, Jean Barbot, and Francis Moore), Benezet in 1762 came to the conclusion that:

> (…) the Foregoing are sufficient to shew them to be entirely different from the stupified and malicious People some would have them thought to be. They have the Judgement and Industry sufficient to cultivate their Country, which in most Parts abounds in the Necessaries of Life.[100]

The French *philosophe* and abolitionist Condorcet would, in a pamphlet published in 1781 under the pseudonym Mr. Schwartz, argue similarly, adding that laziness was a "fate of slaves" rather than any "natural" trait of

[97] Daniel Fenning and Joseph Collier, *A New System of Geography. Volume 1* (London: S. Crowder, 1765), 410.

[98] Charles T. Middleton, *A New and Complete System of Geography. Volume 1* (London: J. Cooke, 1777), 341 – see also: 317, 328.

[99] John Leyden, *A Historical & Philosophical Sketch of the Discoveries & Settlements of the Europeans in Northern & Western Africa at the Close of the Eighteenth Century* (Edinburgh: J. Moir, 1799), 241–242.

[100] Anthony Benezet, *A Short Account of the Part of Africa, Inhabited by the Negroes* (Philadelphia: W. Dunlap, 1762), 18–19.

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Africans.[101] Another important contribution came from Olaudah Equiano, an abolitionist of African origin (possibly from Benin). In the chapters of his memoirs devoted to his early life in Africa, first published in 1789, Olaudah Equiano claimed that: "[W]e [the people of Benin] are all habituated to labour from our earliest years. Every one contributes something to the common stock; and, as we are unacquainted with idleness, we have no beggars."[102] Other abolitionists would also contribute to challenging the stereotype. Thus, for example, wrote the Swedish scholar and abolitionist Charles Bernhard Wadström in 1794:

> The opposers of the colonization of Africa would have it believed, that the natives are incurably stupid and indolent: but I have in my possession the means of proving the contrary (…). All men are idle till incited to industry, by their natural or artificial wants.[103]

In a letter published in Wadström's book, the English naturalist Henry Smeathman also agreed on this issue:

> From these accounts of this people, it may be conceived, that they want spirit and abilities, and that they have such a propensity to indolence, that no mode of legislature or education will inspire them with ingenuity and industry. But this is not a just opinion. This unhappy race have continually suffered by misrepresentation. [104]

In 1799, the explorer Mungo Park wrote:

> The Negroes in general, and the Mandingoes in particular, are considered by the whites on the coast as an indolent and inactive people; I think without reason. (…) Few people work harder, when occasion requires, than the Mandingoes; but not having many opportunities of turning to advantage, the superfluous produce of their labour, they are content with cultivating as much ground only as is necessary for their own support.[105]

[101] Condorcet, *Réflexions sur l'Esclavage des Nègres* (Neufchatel: La Société Typographique, 1781), 21.

[102] Olaudah Equiano published in: Philip Curtin (ed.), *Africa Remembered. Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 76.

[103] Carl Bernhard Wadström, *An Essay on Colonization* (London: Darton and Harvey, 1794), 14–15.

[104] Henry Smeatman published in: Wadström, *Essay on Colonization. Volume 2*, 202.

[105] Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* (London: W. Bulmer and Company, 1799), 280.

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Philip Beaver, who was an officer in the Royal Navy and had tried to establish a colony of free people in Sierra Leone, argued in 1805: "[A]s far as my experience goes, I am warranted in saying that the Africans are not averse to labour, unless those in the neighbourhood of Bulama are unlike the rest of their species."[106] By the early nineteenth century, some writers even started to turn the tables on the claims of idleness. G.A. Robertson, a merchant in Africa with clear pro-abolitionist tendencies, argued in 1819 that a number of people on the Windward and Gold Coasts and further inland were highly industrious, whereas a number of other people – primarily those who had been in contact with the Europeans for a longer period of time – had become less industrious as a consequence of the intercourse with the Europeans.[107] Another example comes from the book *Anecdotes of Africans*, published anonymously in 1827. One particular anecdote tells of the author being taken captive by some Arabs after being shipwrecked. After the author complains about the harshness of the captivity, the Arab slaver is claimed to have told the Englishman: "You are too lazy to work yourselves in your fields, and therefore you send your ships to the Negro coast." The author later continues: "Although the purpose of my voyage had been very different from what Ahomed suspected, yet I felt the sting of his reproach, in a manner that I can never forget."[108]

Discussion

Previous scholars have certainly been correct in arguing that the idea of sloth, idleness and laziness among Africans was very common among European observers and writers describing precolonial West Africa. Some of the most widely read, oft-cited and influential writers of travel accounts from precolonial West Africa – such as Willem Bosman and Jean Barbot – all chimed in with the chorus. Many of the writers were also explicitly moralizing on the topic, condemning the laziness that they believed they saw evidence of among the Africans. This creation of the African "Other" would survive for hundreds of years, well into the twentieth century, and would come to be used as a justification for much European oppression of African peoples.

The first main contribution of this paper has been to show that the stereotype was of much older origin than many previous scholars seem to have allowed for, perhaps even antedating direct European contacts with

[106] Philip Beaver, *African Memoranda: Relative to an Attempt to Establish a British Settlement on the Island of Bulama* (London: C. and R. Baldwin, 1805), 385–387.

[107] G.A. Robertson, *Notes on Africa: Particularly Those Parts which are Situated between Cape Verde and the River Congo* (London: Neele & Son, 1819), 42, 92, 116–117, 155, 169, 226, 232, 235, 274, 281, 301.

[108] Anonymous, *Anecdotes of Africans* (London: Harvey and Darton, 1827), 22.

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people from Sub-Saharan Africa. Chronologically, the stereotype of the "lazy African" therefore seems to have developed very much earlier than previous scholars have claimed. That the long history of the stereotype has been missed in much previous research seems to be due mainly to the fact that previous scholars have limited their analysis to looking at writers of a single nationality (in practice French or British accounts). Analyzing a broader range of sources from a number of different countries, including some of the earliest accounts from West Africa written by Portuguese authors, such as Gomes Eanes de Zurara or Cadamosto, shows clearly that the stereotype already existed in Europe by the time of some of the first accounts of European travels in West Africa from the fifteenth century.

Geographically, the stereotype can be found in Europeans' descriptions of people throughout all of West Africa. Many writers refer to the stereotype in relation to any people in "Guinea" (by which they can mean pretty much all of West Africa), or indeed to Africa as a whole, but many of them also specified that they believe that the stereotype applied (perhaps specifically) to certain peoples in Cape Verde, Senegal, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, or Whydah. The stereotype can also be found among writers of every nationality in Europe from which I have been able to locate relevant sources: Portuguese, British, French, Dutch, Danish/Norwegian, German, and Swedish. There is furthermore no obvious relationship between the observer's role or occupation, and the observations made. The list of people who argued for the stereotype of the "lazy African" certainly, as might be expected, includes many slave traders and other staff – notably a number of governors and physicians – working for the European slave-trading companies. But the stereotype was also exhibited by a number of explorers and priests who were not directly involved in the slave trade, as well as a scientific scholar and even some people sympathetic to or working for the abolitionist cause.

There might however be a gender aspect to the stereotype: some of the observers, for example the British explorer Jobson in the early seventeenth century, or an anonymous French document from the late seventeenth century, seem to refer only to African men when using the stereotype, whereas women – to the extent that the largely male authors took any notice of them – were rarely described in the same terms. This would then support Ester Boserup's claim that the stereotype in practice only concerned the African men.[109] This might be the topic for further research in the future.

How can we explain the fact that the stereotype survived for such a long period of time? First, as Ania Loomba has argued, all the European colonial projects generated similar stereotypes of strangers – lazy, violent,

[109] Ester Boserup, *Woman's Role in Economic Development* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1970), 19.

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brutal, primitive and so on. The stereotypes, Loomba emphasizes, were never mere reflections of the economic and material realities of colonialism, but were involved in a dialectical process "with racial assumptions both arising out of and structuring economic exploitation."[110] As the transatlantic slave trade grew in importance over the early modern period, any justification of the institution remained convenient for the European agents involved in the exploitative trade, so the idea was certain to have many adherents throughout the period.

Second, in his influential study *Orientalism,* Edward Said furthermore argued that the European idea of the Orient could be constructed with very little resistance from the Orient itself.[111] The same was arguably true in the case of the European "othering" of Africans, too. Until African voices started to be heard directly in Europe, there was little or no resistance in Europe to the constructed idea of the African "Other."

Third, there are aspects to the process of knowledge accumulation and scientific progress that contribute to the longevity of a stereotype. As Edward Said has further argued, there are many factors which contribute to streamlining the contribution of the individual researchers, creating a sort of consensus: "A great talent has a healthy respect for what others have done before it and for what the field already contains. The work of predecessors, the institutional life of a scholarly field, the collective nature of any learned enterprise: these, to say nothing of economic and social circumstances, tend to diminish the effects of the individual scholar's production."[112] Even though the writers studied in this paper might not have formed a school of thought as institutionalized as the orientalist school studied by Edward Said, this particular factor most certainly also came into play in the case of the African travelogues studied in this paper, since many of the European observers, when writing their works, were more or less inspired by the people who had travelled to Africa before them.

Fourth, there was most certainly also the factor of laziness among the authors of the travelogues, as well as the authors of the secondary literature. Many authors of travelogues found it easier to just use (plagiarize or cite from) previous travel accounts than it was to actually gather information of one's own, and write an independent travelogue. With such practices commonly occurring, old stereotypes would have been prone to survive much longer than might have been possible had the travelogues been written more independently of each other. It is therefore not at all surprising that the dominant stereotype in the literature for a long time was that of the "lazy African," as has been shown in this paper, with both primary and secondary authors only rarely including any other point of view.

[110] Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 113.
[111] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1977), 7, 204.
[112] Said, *Orientalism*, 202.

It is however all too easy to get the impression from the previous scholarship on the topic that the stereotype went completely unchallenged during the whole early modern period. The second main contribution of this paper has been to show that this was not the case. Starting in the seventeenth century, with writers such as the Frenchman Nicolas Villault, and gaining more attention in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a growing number of European writers initially started to acknowledge that the stereotype did not necessarily apply to all Africans. From this time onwards, a growing number of European writers also take note of an industriousness that they believed some African peoples exhibited. The people who noted this industriousness among Africans also came from a variety of occupations: this list also includes some slave traders, as well as explorers, a priest and a scholar. The list of people also includes representatives of a couple of other occupations: notably some merchants (in the period of "legitimate trade"), and officers of the Royal Navy who had been stationed in West Africa. Geographically, peoples described as industrious are spread throughout West Africa: ranging from various peoples in Senegambia to people in Sierra Leone (particularly the Kru), on the Windward and Gold Coasts, in Ashante, Whydah, and Dahomey. A disproportionally large share of these writers are English, but this is probably to a large extent an effect of a bias in the sample (English sources dominate the sample of sources used for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), so we should probably not draw any conclusions from this particular fact. Virtually all of the writers, even many of those who acknowledge that some Africans could be industrious, still seem to operate with the stereotype of the "lazy African" as the default assumption, but had found that one specific group of people or another that they had come into contact with was an exception to the rule.

Paradoxically, many of these travellers who observed industriousness might have had little contact with any groups in Africa other than those that they wrote about as industrious. The stereotype of the "lazy African" then seems to have become hegemonic to such an extent that none of the writers at this time appear to have been intellectually able or willing to challenge its veracity, even though their own empirical observations might have shown them evidence only of the opposite characteristics.[113]

Why did the European view of the African work ethic then slowly change over the period? One aspect might of course be that the observers became more acquainted with the African population over time. As Marcel van der Linden has suggested, one "might expect reports to be more reliable the longer the observer had lived in the society about which he or she was writing."[114] Initial mistakes or misconceptions might slowly have disappeared, as the initial cultural contacts turned into cultural

[113] Compare with: Cohen, *French Encounter*, 27.
[114] Van der Linden, "Studying Attitudes," 35.

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relationships, or even cultural intermingling, to use the typology of Urs Bitterli.[115] One example of this might be due to a simple misunderstanding: Philip Curtin has argued that the European observers might have been mistaken in their observations of the African work ethic due to the former not understanding the seasonal pattern of labour demand in Africa: "The usual dry-season under-employment became a wet-season labour shortage. The dry season pattern might look like simple laziness."[116] This would perhaps explain why some observers, particularly those who stayed only a shorter period on the coast and never got to know any African society in depth, would be mistaken in their use of the stereotype. As a growing number of Europeans came to live for many years on the African coast, they might have been able to learn more about the seasonal fluctuations in labour demand. This explanation hardly seems satisfactory, however, since the stereotype was adhered to even by authors who lived in Africa for many years, and since the stereotype survived well into the twentieth century.

Many scholars have discussed the new political and philosophical thinking associated with the Enlightenment that had gained ground in Europe at this time, including new thoughts on cosmopolitanism and a uniformitarian view of mankind.[117] There were however often clear limitations to this cosmopolitanism. As Louis Sala-Molins has argued, there was always a "dark side" to the Enlightenment, in that many Enlightenment thinkers had a major blind spot: the issue of the enslavement of Africans. This, argues Sala-Molins, was "a darkness that the Enlightenment did not create but that it did not dissipate either because it did not throw light on it."[118] By the late eighteenth century, some writers did however start to challenge the stereotype of the "lazy African" directly and explicitly. This challenge to the stereotype seems to have been directly associated with the development of what Christopher Brown has called an anti-slavery ideology.[119] Virtually all those who began to challenge the stereotype of the "lazy African" were to a greater or lesser extent involved in the abolitionist movement, or at least made their anti-slavery sympathies known to the public in their writings. The earliest example of this was the American abolitionist Anthony Benezet. The hegemonic European stereotype of the African "Other" would therefore really be challenged only when people started to shed light also on this particular "dark side" of

[115] Urs Bitterli, *Cultures in Conflict: Encounters between European and non-European Cultures, 1492–1800* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), 20, 40–43.

[116] Curtin, *The Image of Africa,* 224.

[117] Roy Porter, *The Enlightenment. 2nd edition* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 57–58.

[118] Louis Sala-Molins, *Dark Side of the Light: Slavery and the French Enlightenment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 9.

[119] Christopher L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

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the Enlightenment. This is not to say that all abolitionists were able to break with the hegemony of the stereotype. Even leading abolitionists, such as Thomas Clarkson or James Ramsay, could by the late eighteenth century still adhere to the stereotype of the "lazy African." A growing number of voices, not least some prominent African voices such as Olaudah Equiano, did however start to resist this construction of the African "Other."

The agency of Africans in America and the Caribbean at this time – and in particular the revolution on Saint Domingue – certainly also impacted hugely upon the European "othering" of Africans.[120] By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the idea that the stereotype of the "lazy African" might be wrong had spread beyond immediate abolitionist circles. Once this idea had started to be challenged, brave new ideas were put forth by scholars critical of the stereotype, including the idea proposed by G.A. Robertson in the early nineteenth century that the "laziness" actually might be due to some Africans having developed such negative traits precisely from their contact with the Europeans. Exactly how he thought this transculturation would have worked was, alas, never elaborated upon. The abolitionist movement would unfortunately not succeed when it came to challenging the stereotype of the "lazy African." As many previous scholars have shown, the stereotype was revived, or kept alive, during the nineteenth century, and was actively used by colonial agents in Africa in order to justify colonization and various schemes of labour coercion. None the less, the abolitionist critique at least shows that the racist stereotype of the "lazy African" was not completely hegemonic in European thinking during the early modern period.

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[120] Cyril L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1963); Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery 1776–1848* (London: Verso, 1988), chapter 6; Sala-Molins, *Dark Side*, 53.

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