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Why Slavery Expanded

"The Import of Firearms into West Africa in the Eighteenth Century" by W. A. Richards, in *Journal of African History* (Jan. 1980), Cambridge University Press, 32 East 57th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

Shipments of European firearms to native kingdoms revolutionized warfare in 17th- and 18th-century West Africa. They also fueled a great expansion of the slave trade, writes Richards, a historian at Britain's North Worcestershire College.

For several centuries, various West African rulers served as local "agents" for European slavers, selling the captives they took in wars and raids on their neighbors. Starting in the 1650s, they began to purchase large numbers of guns from the Europeans, particularly in Akwami, Denkyira, Dahomey, and Asante on West Africa's southern coast. By 1730, these and other "expansionist, militarized, slave-exporting states" were buying 180,000 firearms—mainly Dutch and British—each year. As early as 1698, their needs alone sustained the new English weapons industry.

The early primitive matchlock muskets gave Africans on the coast only a minor advantage over their spear-wielding neighbors. These guns functioned poorly in rainy, humid climates. But by the 1690s, technological progress had led to mass production in England of more



Courtesy of Kenneth M. Newman, The Old Print Shop, New York.

Armed with new British muskets, West African tribesmen met the New World's growing demand for slaves by selling captives taken in battle.

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advanced flintlocks; African slave raiders soon appreciated "the psychological impact of the musket in night and dawn raids, in causing panic by sudden volleys of gunfire." Moreover, flintlocks loaded with buckshot could fell foes—and potential slaves—without fatal injury, unlike earlier muskets capable of firing only the more lethal single ball.

These cheap weapons made slaving so profitable for West Africans that warfare became a way of life. Moreover, the insatiable demand of new Dutch and English plantations in the Americas for slave labor boosted the price of human exports. In some regions of West Africa, slave prices tripled between 1685 and 1803. Eventually, the commerce of West Africa was completely transformed. Wrote one Dutch official in 1705: "The natives no longer occupy themselves with the search for gold but rather make war on each other to furnish slaves."

Burma's Road Back?

"Burma 1979: Reversing the Trend" by William L. Scully and Frank N. Trager, in *Asian Survey* (Feb. 1980), University of California Press, Berkeley, Calif. 94720.

During the 1960s, Burma's socialist government isolated itself diplomatically, rejected all foreign aid, and ran the nation's once-prospering economy into the ground. President Ne Win's recent decision to welcome outside assistance, plus improved agricultural management, seem to be spurring a slow economic comeback, report Scully and Trager of New York University's Burma Research Project.

An International Monetary Fund report indicates that in recent years Burma (population: 31.5 million) has halted its agricultural decline. New government rice production incentives seem to be working. Though problems remain with poor yields, low prices, and careless milling (which damages the rice grains), the 1979 harvest totaled 10.3 million metric tons—1.3 million more than in 1976 and enough to give Burma a marketable surplus.

Another revived export is oil. Once the world's No. 14 petroleum producer (with pre-World War II exports of some 6 million barrels a year), Burma resumed foreign oil sales in 1977. Burma's state-owned oil corporation plans to export 1 million of the 12 million barrels expected from its offshore wells in 1980.

During 1979, the regime in Rangoon accepted sizable loans from several Western European countries, plus \$35 million in aid from the World Bank and \$49.6 million from the Asian Development Bank. But diplomatically, Burma is likely to continue to go its own independent way—as it showed last year by quitting the Non-Aligned Movement to protest the 98-nation group's apparent tilt toward Cuba and the Soviet Union. If Ne Win's one-man rule can keep political order in Burma (its secession-minded northern tribesmen and communist insurgents are currently lying low), the country's next decade will be marked by real economic improvement.