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Africa and Asia Entanglements in Past and Present : Bridging History and Development Studies

Africans in the Early 20th Century Persian Gulf

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Abstract

This paper derives from my current project on bonded population in the Persian Gulf in the first half of the twentieth century. Currently, I am composing dataset based on over 1,600 (ex-)slave testimonies (not only Africans) in order to analyse the life under bondage in that region. In this paper, I pick up African experiences from the dataset and show their characteristic features to be compared with other ethnic groups.

The Persian Gulf in the time period which I will focus on is an exceptional in the context of slavery. While slaveries elsewhere have been abolished one after another by the beginning of the twentieth century, slavery was still legal in this region though several countries eventually abolished it throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

In the paper, first, I introduce the testimonies and clarify both its reliance and limit while examining circumstance of testimony production. Then, after showing proportion of African in the dataset, it will analyse status by nature, mode of enslavement, marriage and divorce, family ties, sex ratio among Africans, in comparison with other groups.

One of remarkable features of African population found in the dataset is that they were preferred by purchasers. Indeed, severe naval patrol almost demolished slave transport from African continent to the Persian Gulf in very early twentieth century, still African or African descendants living within the region were frequently traded. Considering what is often pointed out that unlike the Atlantic World there were variety of ethnicity among slave population in the Indian Ocean World, how can we understand African preference among the purchasers? Adding to this, several questions will be raised in order to locate African experiences in the Persian Gulf context.