

The TseTse fly is unique to the African continent and transmits a parasite harmful to humans and lethal to livestock. This paper tests the hypothesis that the presence of the TseTse reduced the ability of Africans to generate an agricultural surplus historically by limiting the use of domesticated animals and inhibiting the adoption of animal-powered technologies. To identify the effects of the fly, a TseTse suitability index (TSI) is created using insect physiology and demographic modelling. African tribes inhabiting TseTse-suitable areas were less likely to use draft animals and the plow, more likely to practice shifting cultivation and indigenous slavery, and had a lower population density in 1700. As a placebo test, the TSI is constructed worldwide and does not have similar explanatory power outside of Africa, where the fly does not exist. Current economic performance is affected by the TseTse through its effect on pre-colonial institutions.

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