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From slave trade to 'legitimate' commerce

The commercial transition in nineteenth-century West Africa

Papers from a conference of the
Centre of Commonwealth Studies,
University of Stirling

Edited by
Robin Law

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Introduction

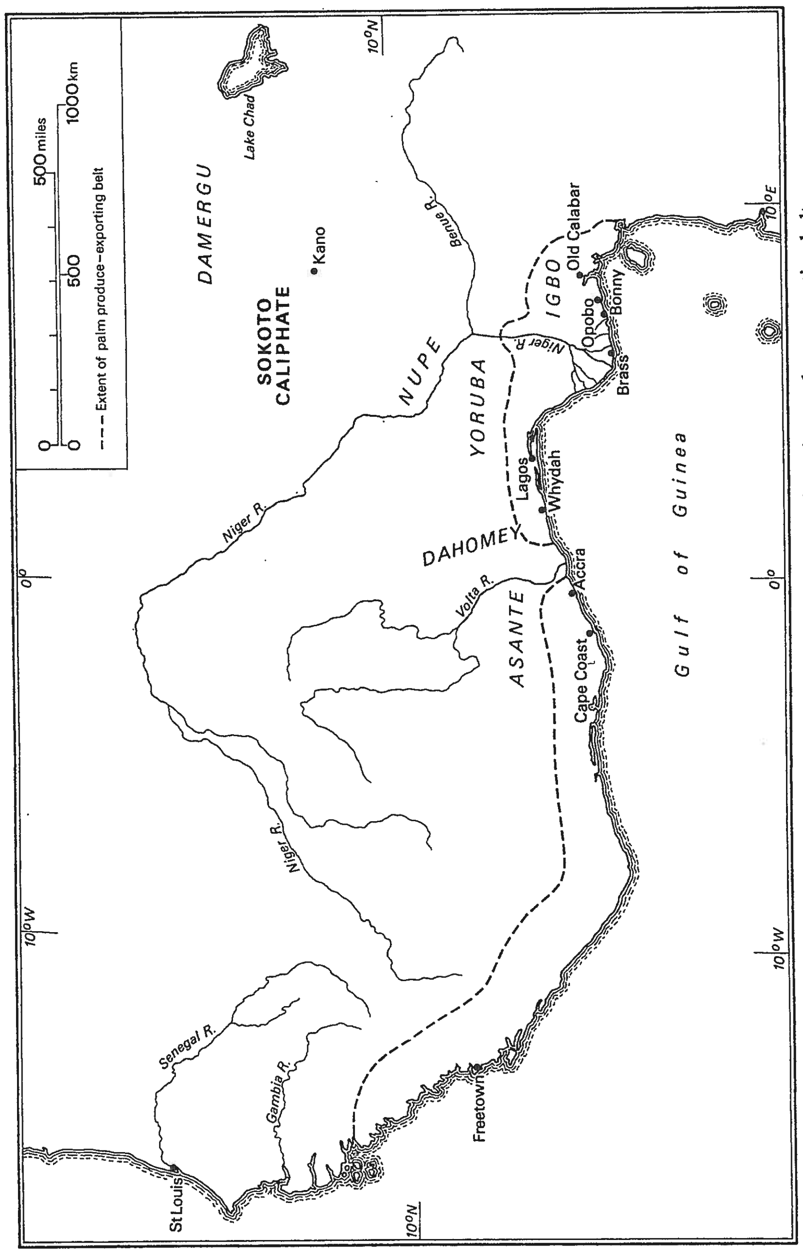
Robin Law

The ending of the Atlantic slave trade and its replacement by what contemporaries called 'legitimate' (i.e. non-slave) trade – principally in agricultural produce, such as palm oil and groundnuts[1] – during the nineteenth century has been one of the central themes in the historiography of western Africa since the beginnings of serious academic study of African history in the 1950s.[2] Basil Davidson, in his classic study of the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on Africa, published originally in 1961, held that the slave trade had had a profound and essentially destructive effect on the African societies involved in it. Paradoxically, however, he argued that the ending of the trade in the nineteenth century was also negative and disruptive in its impact:

> The ending of the trade was of tremendous significance for Africans and Europeans on the Guinea Coast. It upset the trading habits of four full centuries, undermined systems of government, disrupted social customs and opened the way for European intervention.

In Davidson's analysis, the ending of the slave trade caused an 'economic crisis' for African societies, leading to 'political upheaval' in them, which in turn provoked imperialist intervention and ultimately annexation.[3]

When Davidson was writing in 1961, there was little detailed research on the impact of the ending of the slave trade in Africa to sustain the apocalyptic picture which he painted. Essentially, he generalized from the one specific case-study which was then available, Kenneth Dike's pioneering monograph on the trading states of the Niger Delta (and more especially Bonny), published in 1956.[4] Dike argued that the shift from slaves to palm oil in this region's export trade had politically and socially disruptive effects on the African communities involved in it, weakening the authority of existing ruling elites and enabling men of slave origin (such as the famous Jaja, who eventually seceded from Bonny to establish his own kingdom at Opobo) to acquire wealth and bid for political power. These tensions were allegedly reflected in the civil wars (interpreted by Dike as 'slave revolts') which occurred in Bonny in



Map 1 West Africa in the nineteenth century, showing the extent of the palm produce exporting belt.

1855 and 1869. Dike himself, however, while noting the growth of consular interference in the troubled politics of these states, did not very clearly link the strains of the commercial transition to the ultimate annexation of the area by Britain in the 1880s.

The development of the historiography of this issue since the 1960s has been surveyed elsewhere.[5] Detailed rehearsal would be out of place in the present context, but some of the salient steps in the progression of the debate may be noted. In the early stages, the tendency was to extend the scope of the argument geographically, identifying more or less analogous processes of social and political upheaval in other West African societies. Especially critical was the extension of the argument from the coastal middleman states studied by Dike to societies in the hinterland which were involved in the actual production, as well as marketing, of goods for export. Tony Hopkins, in an article published in 1968 dealing with Yorubaland, sought to link the endemic wars of that area in the nineteenth century, and especially their final phase in 1877–93, to the shift from slaves to palm oil, arguing that this commercial transition had undermined the wealth and power of existing rulers, causing them to resort to warfare and plunder to maintain their incomes. Since these wars in turn, by disrupting the export trade, provoked the British annexation of Yorubaland in the 1890s, the strains of the commercial transition were held to have contributed to the European Partition of Africa. This article was also noteworthy for coining the phrase 'crisis of adaptation' to refer to these problems.[6] A similar analysis was subsequently applied by Martin Klein to the rise of groundnut exports from Senegambia, where the commercial transition was held to have contributed to the overthrow of the existing political order in the 'Muslim Revolution' which occurred there from the 1860s onwards.[7]

More clearly than Dike, both Hopkins and Klein explained that the military chiefs who had dominated the slave trade were less able to control the new trade in agricultural produce, because the latter was readily open to participation by small-scale traders and farmers. In a notable epigram of Klein (much quoted or adapted for examination questions in African history courses), 'whereas the slave trade strengthened the elite, the peanut trade put money, and thus guns, in the hands of peasants'.[8] Hopkins also stressed the significance of the collapse of West African produce prices in the 'Great Depression' of 1873–96, which compounded the problems facing local rulers by reducing their income from exports, and also created conflicts between African suppliers and European merchants. Both the 'crisis of adaptation' and the origins of Partition, therefore, were to be sought not in the strains arising from structural change in West Africa's export trade alone, but in their exacerbation by the adverse movement in the terms of trade in the late nineteenth century. In his *Economic History of West Africa* published in 1973, Hopkins generalized his analysis of the 'crisis of adaptation' and its relevance to European imperialism to the whole of coastal West Africa. Again emphasizing the opening-up of the export trade to small-scale enterprise, he now added the reflection that this development could be regarded as

> the start of the modern economic history of West Africa ... In so far as firms of this type and size are the basis of the export economies of most West African states today, it can be said that modernity dates not from the imposition of colonial rule, as used to be thought, but from the early nineteenth century.[9]

This view has not, of course, commanded universal support among historians of Africa. It has been contested in two rather different ways, which need to be distinguished (although they are not mutually incompatible, and may be combined). On the one hand, some historians have argued that the Atlantic trade was, in fact, of only marginal significance for the African societies involved in it, with the implication that the transformation of the character of that trade in the nineteenth century can likewise have had little effect on their development: the most systematically argued case along these lines has been made by David Eltis.[10] Alternatively (or additionally), it has been argued that, in fact, existing ruling elites were able to dominate the new trade, as they had the old; this view has been propounded perhaps most influentially by Ralph Austen, originally in an article published in 1970.[11] According to this view, West African economic and political structures remained substantially intact until they were destroyed by the European colonial conquest at the end of the nineteenth century; 'modernity' (in Hopkins' terminology) thus came only with colonial rule. The breakdown of indigenous structures is seen as a consequence rather than a cause of the European Partition; implicitly, indeed, it was the continued resilience of these indigenous structures, seen as inimical to European capitalist interests, rather than their weakening (as Hopkins proposed) which required the European colonial takeover.

Although many aspects of the debate remain contested, something of a consensus may be said to have emerged on at least one central point, the need to distinguish between conditions in the coastal middleman states (such as Bonny) and the hinterland producing societies (such as Yorubaland). Although often presented as a criticism of Hopkins' concept of a 'crisis of adaptation', this distinction was, in fact, incorporated by him into the revised (and generalized) version of his thesis propounded in the *Economic History* of 1973, which conceded that 'the traditional unit of

trade was less affected by the structural changes brought about by legitimate commerce than was the traditional unit of production'.[12] The critical contribution in this area was the research conducted (under Hopkins' supervision) by John Latham on the case of Old Calabar, which argued that the existing ruling elite there retained their dominance of the new trade in palm oil; although some ex-slaves in Calabar (as in Bonny) were able to become substantial merchants, they rose through the patronage of their masters rather than in competition with them, effectively from within the existing political and commercial structure rather than through its overthrow.[13] Other research showed that this was also true of the rise of ex-slaves such as Jaja in Bonny itself.[14] Dike's argument linking the rise of such ex-slaves, and political disorder in the Delta states more generally, to the shift from slaves to palm oil, is now generally held to be unsustainable – though there remain questions about the degree to which, in practice, existing merchants faced small-scale competition, elsewhere on the coast if not in Bonny itself, as will be seen later in this introduction.

While a 'crisis of adaptation' is generally held not to have materialized (or at least to have been successfully surmounted) in the coastal middleman communities, the subsequent extension of the argument to areas of palm oil and groundnut production in the hinterland, associated with Hopkins and Klein, although criticized, has not been so decisively refuted.[15] Some recent research on the case of Dahomey, for example, tends to support the idea of a 'crisis of adaptation' arising from the inability of the ruling elite to control and profit from the new 'legitimate' trade to the same extent as they had from the earlier trade in slaves.[16]

It also seems clear that distinctions have to be made between different periods within the nineteenth century, as well as between different societies within West Africa. Patrick Manning, in particular, has stressed the need to periodize the development of 'legitimate' trade, in order to grasp its impact upon social and political structures. On his view, conditions in the early nineteenth century, when the slave trade was in decline and the palm oil trade, although expanding, remained limited, 'favoured powerful monarchs and wealthy slave merchants'; the middle decades, when the volume and price of oil exports soared, were marked by 'free-swinging competition and unusual upward social mobility'; but the later nineteenth century, when the trade was stagnant (because of the collapse of oil prices) again saw a trend towards 'consolidation' of political and economic power.[17]

A conference organized by the Centre of Commonwealth Studies of the University of Stirling in April 1993 provided an opportunity both to take stock of the state of the debate on the impact of the ending of the Atlantic slave trade, and to present new detailed research bearing upon that debate. Revised versions of the papers from that conference are presented in the present volume. Where, then, does the debate now stand, after over twenty years of discussion and research? And more particularly, how do the contributions assembled in this collection advance understanding of these issues? This seems best approached not through summary and assessment of each individual contribution, but rather through consideration of certain general aspects of the commercial transition which were highlighted in the discussions, as well as in the papers presented, at the conference.

The market for slaves

Although the decline of the trans-Atlantic slave trade broadly coincided with the rise of 'legitimate' trade in agricultural produce, analytically these two processes have to some degree to be considered separately. As Hopkins pointed out, not all West African societies experienced a transition from exporting slaves to exporting 'legitimate' products, since some former slave-supplying societies were unable to get involved in the new trade in agricultural produce, and others which had been marginal to the slave trade became significant suppliers for 'legitimate' commerce.[18] The distinction is especially important in considering those societies in the West African interior (represented in this volume by Ann McDougall's study of the western Sahel region), which had supplied slaves for the Atlantic trade but were effectively excluded (by the high cost of transport) from the new trade in agricultural produce.

Assessment of the impact of the decline of trans-Atlantic exports of slaves is complicated, first, by the fact that this decline was a very protracted process: despite the legal abolition of the trade in the early nineteenth century, trans-Atlantic exports remained at a high level until at least the mid nineteenth century.[19] This persistence of slave exports involved, not only straightforwardly illegal trade, but also legal evasions promoted by some European governments, such as the scheme for the recruitment of supposedly 'free emigrants' from Africa to the West Indies pursued by the French government in 1857–61, discussed in Elisée Soumonni's contribution to this volume.[20] There was, moreover, an alternative export market for slaves, across the Sahara to northern Africa: although smaller in scale than the Atlantic trade, the trans-Saharan slave trade probably did not suffer significant decline until the end of the nineteenth century, and may indeed even have been increasing in volume.[21]

Even more critically, account has to be taken of the demand for slaves within West Africa itself, which was also expanding at this period. The general study of slavery in Africa by Paul Lovejoy, published in 1983, documents a growth of the use of slaves throughout West Africa (and in other regions of the continent) during the nineteenth century.[22] In part, this growth of slavery within West Africa reflected the increased use of slave labour in the production and transport of exports for the growing 'legitimate' trade. In addition to their use in production directly for export, slaves were also employed extensively, in coastal areas of West Africa, to produce food for the commercial and urban centres involved in overseas trade. In Old Calabar, for example, as Latham showed, slaves on agricultural plantations were producing for local consumption rather than for export;[23] and in this volume, Ray Kea's study of plantations on the south-eastern Gold Coast shows that many of these were likewise oriented to the local market. To a large degree, therefore, directly or indirectly, the growing demand for slaves was a consequence of the growth and transformation of the character of the Atlantic trade. Since, however, the expansion of slavery also occurred in areas relatively uninvolved in exports of 'legitimate' produce, such as the West African interior, this cannot be a complete explanation.

The existence of this growing demand for slaves within West Africa tended to cushion the effects of the ending of the overseas trade, since slaves could be diverted from export to the local market (as noted, for example, in the case of Asante, in Gareth Austin's contribution to this volume). It may even be argued on this basis, as is done by Ralph Austen, that the ending of overseas exports in practice posed 'little problem' for slave suppliers, since 'it did not diminish the total regional market for servile labour'.[24] Against Austen, it has generally been held that the price of slaves in West Africa fell in the early nineteenth century, reflecting a glut in local markets caused by the collapse of overseas exports.[25] It has commonly been supposed, indeed, that the expansion of slavery in West Africa during the nineteenth century was largely supply-driven, as slaves became cheaper to acquire. This was certainly an observation often made by contemporary observers: the missionary Samuel Crowther in the 1850s, for example, noting the 'accumulation of slaves' by wealthy persons in the the towns of Aboh, Idah and Igbegbe on the lower Niger, explained that 'since the slave-trade has been abolished in the Bight of Biafra, slaves have become very cheap; and ... they have the means of purchasing a great many slaves'.[26] At the same time, however, the supply of slaves within West Africa may well have been increased by factors not directly related to the ending of the overseas slave trade, such as the wars occasioned by the *jihads* or 'Islamic Revolutions' in the interior.[27]

Whatever its causes, a fall in the price of slaves must be presumed to have reduced the profitability of slave-raiding and slave-trading, and undermined the incomes of those involved in them. There have been different views as to the likely consequences of this. The more usual assumption has been that the reduced profitability of slaving would have encouraged those involved to withdraw from it, and seek alternative sources of income – as Ivor Wilks, for example, argued for Asante.[28] Claude Meillassoux, however, with regard to the West African interior, suggested that the effect there was quite the contrary, the response of local rulers being to increase the scale of their slaving activities, in order to offset the decline in price.[29] Perhaps these alternative analyses are not, strictly, contradictory, but may each be applicable to different cases, depending on the degree to which viable alternatives to slaving were available. Withdrawal from the slave trade would have been a rational option for those who could transfer their energies into other forms of exports, while an increase in output to compensate for falling prices would have made sense for those for whom no such alternative was on offer.

The basic assumption that slave prices fell in the nineteenth century is, however, now seen to be more problematical than hitherto appreciated. This question is treated, in this volume, by Paul Lovejoy and David Richardson, who argue that the evidence for falling slave prices in the early nineteenth century is, in fact, far from clear-cut. The ostensible decline in slave prices, as expressed in European currencies, appears to have reflected falls in the cost of the imported goods exchanged for slaves (in part, a consequence of the cost-reducing changes asscociated with the 'Industrial Revolution' in Western Europe); the real price of slaves, in terms of quantities of imports, shows little sign of long-term decrease, at least down to the mid nineteenth century. Although there was indeed a collapse of slave prices (and to that extent, presumably a 'crisis of adaptation' for West African slave suppliers) in the years immediately following the legal abolition of the British and USA slave trades in 1807/8, this was only temporary, with slave prices in real terms recovering by the 1820s. These findings are complemented by McDougall's contribution to this volume, which examines slave prices in the Sahelian interior, and likewise concludes that, far from declining, if anything they probably increased during the course of the nineteenth century.

If this evidence for the continued buoyancy of slave prices is accepted, how does it affect assessment of the impact of the ending of the overseas

slave trade? One possible inference is that the Atlantic trade was, in fact, of only marginal significance for West African societies, the major market for slaves (and therefore the major determinant of slave prices) residing within the domestic economy. Alternatively, however, the rapid recovery of slave prices after the initial impact of declining overseas sales might reflect the expansion of local demand for slaves arising from the expansion of 'legitimate' exports. Such an inference can be supported by at least some contemporary comment, which recorded rising rather than falling slave prices: in Sierra Leone in the 1860s, for example, an officer of the British navy engaged in anti-slave trade patrols reported that the local price of slaves had risen to a level where it was more profitable to sell them on the local market than for export:

> The reason is the great increase of trade, and all labour being required for the cultivation principally of ground nuts, palm nuts, and palm oil ... the legal trade and the increasing communication has made the slaves much more valuable, so many being required for home slavery that the increased price would not pay any one exporting slaves from this part of the coast.[30]

If this was so, the recovery of slave prices would illustrate the continuing importance, rather than the marginality, of trans-Atlantic demand for West African domestic economies.

Comparative profitability

Whatever the explanation for the recovery of slave prices, the implication remains that West African slave suppliers, although certainly from time to time suffering severe temporary price falls due to localized gluts of slaves caused by disruption of overseas exports, may not have faced any substantial long-term decline in profitability. Since, however, nominal prices for palm oil in the first half of the nineteenth century were actually increasing, the *relative* profitability of slave-trading, by comparison with 'legitimate' alternatives, was presumably falling. In this context, as Lovejoy and Richardson note, it may have become more profitable for African slave-holders to employ their slaves in production for export than to sell them. Such calculations were already being made in the Sierra Leone area, at least, by the 1830s, where a chief of the Bulom, who was using slave labour on his farms (to produce rice for the Freetown market, rather than strictly for export), declared that each of his slaves earned him, over and above the cost of their subsistence, about £7 10s. annually, whereas the average selling price of a slave was only £10, suggesting that greater profits might be obtained by retaining than by exporting slaves.[31]

The question remains whether, more generally and in the long run, 'legitimate' trade was an adequate substitute for the slave trade. Part of Hopkins' argument for a 'crisis of adaptation' is that the new forms of trade were generally less remunerative than the export of slaves.[32] Although this issue is not addressed in detail in any of the contributions to this volume, it warrants some further comment here.

This is not, it should be stressed, merely a question of aggregate export earnings, but also of relative profit rates, since the costs of gathering/producing slaves and agricultural produce and delivering them to the coast probably differed substantially. On this, it must be conceded that there has as yet still been little detailed research. There is, however, an abundance of impressionistic evidence, in the form of statements reported from West African traders and rulers, most of which tends to support the suggestion that the new trade was less profitable. The trading chiefs of Abeokuta, inland from Lagos, in 1855, for example, complained that

> From that time [when] they began to sell this oil, those that have 300 slaves, now [have] left 50; and they that have 200, left 40; and that of 100, left 20; that of 50, left 5. So they remember that it would have been better if they have been trading slaves as they used to.[33]

Such self-interested testimony, of course, is clearly not by itself decisive. One area, however, in which it does seem possible to demonstrate that costs were higher in the new trade is that of transport, especially where goods had to be moved overland. Slaves required feeding in transit, but were themselves self-transporting, needing only to be guarded. On the basis admittedly of a single illustrative example, it may be suggested that one armed guard could supervise around five slaves.[34] Agricultural produce, on the other hand, had to be transported, which in the absence of wheeled vehicles or (in most coastal areas of West Africa) of pack animals, meant that it was carried on human heads. The normal head-load (of around 40–50 lbs), corresponded to only about 5 gallons of palm oil.[35] A rough comparison of transport costs can be based on the statement that in the Niger Delta in the 1830s a slave commanded the same price as a ton of palm oil, or 320 gallons.[36] To deliver five slaves to the coast would involve the cost of subsistence for six persons (five slaves + one guard); but to deliver five tons of oil would require over 300 porters, incurring subsistence costs over fifty times as great.[37]

The difference was less where, as in the Niger Delta, waterborne transport was available, since both slaves and palm oil were carried in canoes. Even here, however, the transport costs for oil were clearly significantly greater than for slaves. The great trading canoes of Bonny,

requiring up to 40 rowers, could carry probably up to 80 slaves each.[38] By contrast, in the oil trade the great canoes carried only around 12 puncheons (equivalent to 9 tons) of palm oil.[39] In order to deliver oil in quantities which would realize the same gross return as in the slave trade, a trader in oil would therefore need nine times as many canoes (or, of course, the substitution of larger for smaller canoes). In terms of subsistence costs, while transporting 80 slaves required subsistence for 120 persons (80 slaves + 40 rowers), oil of an equivalent value (80 tons, or 106–7 puncheons) would require 360 paddlers in 9 canoes, and costs around three times greater.

The profitability of the oil trade varied, of course, from area to area within West Africa, reflecting differential yields of palm trees in different regions as well as differing transport costs. Two modern estimates of the labour required to produce a ton of palm oil in pre-colonial conditions give around 315 person/days per ton in Dahomey, but only around 250 in Igboland, suggesting that oil was nearly 20 per cent cheaper to produce in the latter.[40] Profitability also varied through time, with fluctuations in palm oil prices. If the profits from 'legitimate' trade were considered insufficient in the early stages of the trade, when European prices for palm oil were rising, they presumably became even less adequate with the fall in prices which set in from the 1860s onwards and reached catastrophic proportions in the 'Great Depression' of the 1880s. On Hopkins' view, the profit margins and incomes of African suppliers were then significantly eroded, compounding the already existing problems of the commercial transition and bringing the 'crisis of adaptation' to a head.[41] On this, however, some caution is needed, since the precise relationship between European and local prices of West African produce is not yet wholly clear. It has been suggested that, at least in the Lagos area, prices paid for oil in West Africa did not fall in line with those in Europe, thus squeezing the profit margins of the European purchasers but leaving those of African suppliers relatively intact.[42] African resistance to European attempts to force down prices in the Depression of the 1880s, and European merchants' inability to overcome it, was one of the factors which brought the latter to favour imperialist annexation.

Large-scale and small-scale enterprise

The central element in Hopkins' conception of the 'crisis of adaptation' was that the slave trade had been effectively monopolized by a small number of large entrepreneurs, often the political and military chiefs of West African societies, whereas the new trade in agricultural produce was open to the generality of the populace. The argument was partly related to economies of scale: it was suggested that whereas slave-trading was most profitably carried out on a large scale, in agricultural production large-scale enterprise enjoyed no competitive advantage. The domination of large-scale enterprise in the slave trade was not absolute, since records of slave-ships document many purchases of slaves in ones and twos, which presumably implies the involvement of relatively small-scale traders;[43] but the validity of the general point does not seem in doubt. In any case, quite apart from the question of economies of scale, a trader selling even a single slave was dealing in a relatively large unit of value. As Hopkins noted, by their physical natures, whereas a slave is indivisible, oil could be produced and marketed in small quantities.[44] If (as noted earlier) a slave was equivalent in value to 320 gallons of oil, and if we take the pot of 5 gallons which formed the normal head-load as the smallest unit in which oil was likely to be marketed, oil could be traded in units of less than one-sixtieth of the value of a single slave.

The involvement of small-scale producers and traders in the new 'legitimate' trade, and the contrast with conditions under the slave trade, was frequently noted by contemporary observers of the nineteenth century. For example, in the hearings of the Select Committee of the British Parliament on the Slave Trade in 1848, the question was put to some of the witnesses, whether the oil trade was done with the chiefs, or with the generality of their subjects. A naval officer of the anti-slavery patrol, Commander Matson, replied that 'it is sold by the different families; different families cultivate the berry'. Pressed as to whether he meant that 'each family trades in palm oil on its own account', he agreed: 'Yes; sometimes they come down with a canoe with a small quantity, and they come alongside a vessel laying in the river to sell it for anything they can get'. The trader William Hutton likewise deposed that whereas 'it is only the chiefs and better classes of the inhabitants of the coast of Africa that can be slave merchants', on the contrary 'the palm oil trade is pursued by all classes; whoever takes a pot of palm oil into a factory gets an equivalent for it in the shape of British goods'.[45]

Despite such contemporary testimony, as was noted earlier, it has generally been held, following Latham's study of the case of Old Calabar, that the coastal marketing (as opposed to the hinterland production) of agricultural produce continued to be dominated by existing large-scale traders. The distinction was, in fact, clearly made in some contemporary accounts of trade in the Delta, which noted that, although the palm oil was originally purchased (at least in large part) from small-scale producers, it was bulked up by the coastal traders before being transported to the coast. A British trader at Bonny in the early 1840s, for example, noted that 'The Bonny men buy the oil in small

quantities from the growers, and sell it by the puncheon to the masters of the ships.'[46] Likewise in the 1860s, Winwood Reade described the collection of oil up-country by the Bonny traders in similar terms: 'The oil is brought to them little by little in calabashes. This they pour off into barrels.'[47] The smallest unit in which oil was normally traded at Bonny was evidently the 'puncheon', of 240 gallons, or three-quarters of a ton of palm oil. It is not entirely clear, however, whether this was true of trading conditions elsewhere on the coast. At Old Calabar to the east also, oil seems normally to have been traded in puncheons.[48] At Brass, however, the smallest unit in which oil was traded was apparently the 'angbar', of only 30 gallons.[49] A standard measure of 30 gallons was also employed at Badagry, west of Lagos; but at Lagos itself the measure was even smaller, of only 10 gallons.[50] In Dahomey, it was 18 gallons.[51] Outside Bonny and Old Calabar, therefore, it was possible to trade palm oil on a relatively small scale, in units which were (at the rate cited earlier, of one slave to one ton, or 320 gallons, of oil) equivalent to between about one-thirtieth (10 gallons) and one-tenth (30 gallons) of the value of a slave.

Even in places such as Bonny and Calabar, in so far as larger-scale trading remained dominant, this did not reflect merely the superior competitive efficiency of large-scale merchants (or the preference of European traders for dealing with them), but was enforced through prohibitions on small-scale enterprise. In Old Calabar, it is explicitly reported that the slaves in charge of the trading canoes, while receiving a commission on their trade, were not permitted to trade on their own account in palm oil.[52] In the last resort, small-scale enterprise could be excluded by legislative action. The best-known instance of this in Calabar was in 1862 when, after 'young men and boy [i.e. slave?] traders' had begun selling oil in smaller measures – barrels (i.e. 32 gallons), hogsheads (63 gallons) and rum puncheons (72 gallons?) – the governing Ekpe society decreed that oil should not be sold in smaller quantities than 'the usual trade-cask or puncheon'. The British traders complained that this measure discriminated against 'the young traders, many of whom are at present unable to command the requisite means for conducting a wholesale trade, but if allowed to go on gradually would in time become useful and extensive traders', and served the interests only of 'the King and a few men of position, who thus monopolize the whole trade of the interior markets to the exclusion of all others'. The British Consul Richard Burton intervened to negotiate a treaty which stipulated that anybody should be free to trade 'in any quantities whatever . . . in his own name'.[53] It is doubtful whether this removal of restrictions was wholly effective, but the provision was reiterated in a second treaty imposing free trade on Calabar in 1878, which stipulated that people should be 'permitted to buy in large or small quantities as suits them, whether puncheons, hogsheads, barrels or any lesser measure'.[54]

Similar disputes about access to the market occurred in other communities of coastal West Africa also. For example, Kosoko, the king of Lagos expelled by the British in 1851 for refusing to accept a treaty banning the slave trade, established himself at Epe, across the lagoon to the north-east. Although he initially tried to continue to sell slaves, within a few years he had entered the palm oil trade. It was noted in 1856, however, that 'he wishes to carry into this, to him, new trade, the same arbitrary and monopolizing policy that he pursued with the Slave Trade at Lagos', which he did by requiring all imported goods to be delivered to himself (on credit, moreover), enabling him to re-sell them at 'monopolizing prices'. But by 1859 it was reported that 'many' of Kosoko's slaves had been granted 'the privilege of trading for themselves', and the freedom they had gained was held to be a constraint on Kosoko resuming the slave trade, as he was then disposed to do.[55]

In this volume, the question of continuity of economic structures at the coast is most directly addressed by Martin Lynn, primarily with regard to the Niger Delta/Old Calabar region. Unlike most earlier analyses, however, Lynn looks mainly at the European rather than the African end of the trade – in effect, asking whether there was a 'crisis of adaptation' for Europeans, as well as for Africans. He concludes that in the initial stages of the development of the new 'legitimate' trade there was an essential continuity of structures, with both the personnel and the trading methods of the slave trade carried over into the new trade, and that the entry of new traders was inhibited by the high capital costs of entry into the trade as then organized. Structural change did occur, from the 1850s, with the entry of new (including smaller-scale) traders, some of whom were 'Krio' from Sierra Leone; and Lynn identifies, if not exactly a 'crisis of adaptation', at any rate a 'crisis of restructuring'. This was due, however, not to the move from slaves to palm oil as such, but to subsequent technical and managerial innovations, notably the introduction of steamship services and the commission house system, which lowered the costs of entry. In an interesting parallel to the strategies pursued by their African suppliers, existing European traders sought to use extra-economic means to exclude this developing competition. In Old Calabar in 1856, for example, when a Court of Equity was established to regulate the affairs of foreign traders, it was stipulated that traders had to pay a fee of 20,000 'coppers' (£1,000) for permission to operate, a provision which seems to have been aimed especially at excluding the Sierra Leonean petty traders.[56] The British Consul who authorized this regulation, when it was queried by the Foreign Office, admitted that 'on the face of it, this may seem to be protecting a monopoly'.[57]

The eventual break down of the established European traders' monopoly and opening up of the trade to wider competition presumably had implications for African suppliers, since the entry of additional (including smaller-scale) purchasers of oil would potentially have offered opportunities for new (including smaller-scale) traders on the African side also. The fall of palm oil prices and profitability in the 1870s and 80s, however, prompted a movement towards amalgamation into larger firms among European traders (as, for example, in the formation of the African Association in 1889), which parallels the trend of 'consolidation' which Manning postulated during the same period on the African side of the trade.

As regards the African suppliers, the question of large- and small-scale enterprise in the palm oil trade is touched upon in this volume by Kristin Mann (with regard to Lagos) and Robin Law (on Dahomey and Yorubaland). In these areas, it seems clear that both large- and small-scale enterpreneurs were involved in the production and trading of oil, though the balance between them is difficult to establish. Mann, however, suggests that in Lagos, as in Old Calabar or Bonny, petty traders could advance into larger-scale enterprise only through the patronage of existing big traders; and further (again, consistently with Manning's argument) that opportunities for profitable petty trading became more restricted in the commercial depression of the 1870s and 80s.

The issue is more systematically explored by Susan Martin, with respect to Igboland. Martin does somewhat qualify Hopkins' assumption that there no economies of scale in palm oil production, identifying innovations in the production process which facilitated larger-scale operations (involving the treading out of oil in canoes or hollowed-out tree trunks, as opposed to the earlier method of squeezing it out by hand). But she concludes, in corroboration of Hopkins' model, that most of the oil exported from this area was produced by small households using family labour and that, contrary to some earlier research, there was far less use of slave labour here than in the Niger Delta. In the hinterland, the traders who had dominated the slave trade (members of the Okonko society, associated with the Aro merchants) were less successful than those at the coast in maintaining their position in the new 'legitimate' trade. Although thus vindicating the central premise of Hopkins' concept of a 'crisis of adaptation', however, Martin queries his emphasis on this entry of small-scale producers into the export trade as marking the beginning of the 'modern economic history' of West Africa. She argues that even where, as in the Igbo case, little use was made of slave labour, lineage heads were able to use their authority over their juniors and wives to exploit their labour for palm oil production and transport, and thus circumscribed the autonomy of individual 'households' which Hopkins emphasized as an index of 'modernity'.

Slavery and gender

The growth of 'legitimate' trade had significant implications for two important aspects of West African social organization: the institution of slavery and the position of women. These two issues are, indeed, closely connected, in so far as a majority of the slaves held within West Africa were probably women – as, conversely, a majority of those sold for trans-Atlantic export were men.[58]

The institution of slavery within West Africa was affected by the commercial transition in various ways. First, as has been seen, the decline of overseas demand led to a fall in the price of slaves within West Africa – even if this was only temporary, or restricted to certain areas. Such a cheapening of slaves would evidently have facilitated the expansion of their use locally, and may also have tended to encourage worse treatment of them, since it became more economical to work slaves to death and replace them than to restrict the burden of their work in order to keep them alive. This was certainly claimed to be the case by some contemporary observers in the Niger Delta. Consul Burton, for example, told the British Select Committee on the Western Coast of Africa in 1865 that slaves had fallen in price there, and that consequently 'it is worth while for a native gentleman to buy those men at a cheap rate, and work or starve them to death in a few months to buy others'.[59]

In a second respect, however, the ending of overseas sales probably tended to ameliorate slaves' conditions, inasmuch as the threat of sale overseas had operated as an important mechanism of social control over slaves (much like sale 'down the river' in the USA). It was reported of Old Calabar, for example:

> While the foreign slave trade prevailed, the masters easily got quit of their troublesome people, and the fear of it had a deterring effect on the rest. Often therefore was the wish expressed that it could be resumed, if only to the extent of one ship in the year, to let them sell off their bad people.[60]

Initially, human sacrifice (for which slaves formed the principal victims) may have served as an alternative method of social control; the scale of human sacrifice did, in fact, increase in Calabar in the years immediately following the ending of the Atlantic slave trade, although it was itself legally abolished there in 1851.[61]

Thirdly and most important, as was noted earlier, slaves were extensively used in the production and transport of 'legitimate' exports such as palm oil and groundnuts. One aspect of this which is easily overlooked is that Europeans, as well as Africans, made use of slave labour in the production of agricultural exports, slavery itself of course being still legal in the period immediately following the banning of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.[62] Coffee was cultivated in Angola, for example, by Portuguese planters using slave labour, as well as by free African peasants.[63] In this volume, Ray Kea offers a detailed study of slave plantations established by the Danes and by Africans under their influence on the Gold Coast, in the period between the abolition of the Danish slave trade and the Danish withdrawal from the Gold Coast in 1850.

Those slaves owned by Africans might be employed on large-scale plantations broadly similar to the European or American model, or incorporated (in smaller numbers) into households. However, in some cases slaves operated as independent producers or traders, working on their own account while paying a duty (or, it might be said, a rent, for their own labour power) to their owner: this was clearly the situation of the trader-slaves of Bonny or Old Calabar, and similar arrangements existed elsewhere (for example, in Yorubaland and Dahomey, as shown in Law's contribution to this volume). The implications of these different forms of relations of production for the living conditions and opportunities for upward mobility of the slaves involved were, evidently, very different. Slaves on plantations producing for the market might expect to suffer intensified exploitation and harsher conditions, as (in a different historical context) Karl Marx suggested;[64] while those incorporated into households would normally have received better treatment (and, in principle, ultimately assimilation among its free members). Those who could operate as independent entrepreneurs, however, could potentially accumulate wealth, and might thus even be able to achieve their own freedom by redeeming themselves (as noted, again, in Law's contribution on Dahomey and Yorubaland). Even where slaves were theoretically prohibited from such independent enterprise, they might engage in it illegally: in Brass, for example, it is reported that one of the duties of the 'head slaves' who delivered oil to the European shipping was to ensure that the rowers did not steal any oil, presumably with a view to selling it on their own account.[65]

In this volume, although the question of slavery is touched upon in several of the contributions, it is most centrally dealt with by Kristin Mann, for the case of Lagos. Mann documents a tendency towards the weakening of owners' control over slaves during the second half of the nineteenth century, with slaves seeking independence, re-negotiating their relations with their masters, or transferring their allegiance to other patrons. This is attributed in part to the commercial changes of the period, with the trade in palm oil seen (in corroboration of Hopkins' analysis) as offering expanded opportunities for small-scale enterprise, including independent trading by slaves. In the case of Lagos, however, evaluation of the impact of the commercial transition is complicated by the legal changes which occurred there after the British annexation in 1861, which brought the abolition (or more accurately, non-recognition) of the status of slavery, and it must therefore be uncertain how far Mann's analysis of developments in Lagos can be generalized to other areas which remained outside European jurisdiction until the end of the nineteenth century. Moreover, it is suggested that the more difficult trading conditions in the 1870s and 1880s, when palm oil prices fell, restricted opportunities for independent accumulation by slaves, and stimulated a reassertion of control over their labour by owners.[66]

The commercial transition impacted upon gender relations also, not only because many slaves were female, but also because of the importance of specifically female labour in 'legitimate' trade. Whereas the slave trade was an overwhelmingly male occupation, agricultural labour and the marketing of produce were, at least in many coastal societies, predominantly female tasks. The distinction was explicitly noted, for example, in somewhat colourful and censorious terms, by the British expedition on the lower Niger in 1832: 'The women and children are employed in collecting palm-oil; the men, in trading to Brass and Eboe [Aboh], kidnapping their neighbours, and drinking the worst description of spirits'.[67] (The reference here to the role of children's labour, it may be noted, points to the possible significance of the commercial transition for relations between generations, as well as between the sexes, which would merit detailed research in the future.)[68] This issue, which has hitherto attracted little attention, is treated in this volume by Susan Martin and Robin Law, with regard to Igboland and Dahomey/Yorubaland respectively. Although the predominance of female labour in the production and trading of palm oil is clearly established in both these areas, the consequences for relations between the sexes were apparently different. In Igboland, Martin argues that the new commercial opportunities caused men to move into the production of palm oil and seek to appropriate the product to their own profit, leading therefore to greater exploitation of women's labour rather than to their enrichment (though the trade in palm kernels, which developed later in the nineteenth century, remained in female hands and did give women opportunities for independent accumulation). In Yorubaland, however, as interpreted by Law, women were more generally able to operate as independent small-scale producers and traders, and thereby achieved both greater wealth and (presumably) greater independence *vis-à-vis* their menfolk. These different hypothesized outcomes need not, perhaps, be regarded as problematical, since the distribution of benefits from changing commercial opportunities was not pre-determined in any mechanistic fashion, but surely depended to some degree on the contingencies of particular struggles, as well as upon the nature of the pre-existing social structures.

A 'crisis of monarchy'?

As was noted earlier, the structural changes associated with the transition from the slave trade to 'legitimate' trade were held by Hopkins and others to have undermined the position of existing West African ruling elites. Borrowing a concept from the history of seventeenth-century England, Hopkins spoke of a 'crisis of the aristocracy';[69] John Lonsdale, however, in a more recent historiographical survey, noting the emergence of conflict within West African ruling elites, as well as opposition from below, suggested that there was rather a 'crisis of monarchy', a challenge more specifically to the authority of central (and centralizing) government.[70] In Hopkins' analysis, rulers' incomes, and hence their effective power, were supposedly undermined by a combination of the lower profitability of the new trade, and of their smaller share in it, as they now faced competition from ordinary farmers and petty traders. It can be suggested, indeed, that ruling elites suffered increased competition, not from small-scale enterprise alone, but from the private sector more generally, including wealthy merchants operating on a large scale; whereas the slave trade depended on violence (capture in warfare being the principal source of slaves for export), and therefore favoured the domination of the chiefs who controlled military forces, the new trade in agricultural produce offered no special advantages to warrior elites, and enabled private individuals of wealth, such as merchants, to strengthen their position by moving into large-scale production for export.[71] Existing rulers might, as Hopkins acknowledged, seek to maintain their incomes by taxation of private-sector enterprise, but he argued that since 'legitimate' trade was more dispersed in its operation (because of the involvement of a multiplicity of small producers), it was likely to be more difficult to monitor and tax effectively. In addition, such attempts to increase taxation (like the attempts to enforce monopolies of trade mentioned earlier) were likely to be resisted, and thus to provoke political problems of their own.[72]

That 'legitimate' trade generally yielded lower revenues than the slave trade was, certainly, frequently asserted by West African rulers. King Ghezo of Dahomey in 1848, for example, fending off British pressure for the abolition of the slave trade, complained that the palm oil trade was 'a slow method of making money, and brought only a very small amount of duties into his coffers'.[73] The Yevogan, or official in charge of European trade at Whydah, the principal port of Dahomey, in discussion with a British naval officer in 1850, dramatically emphasized the point by comparing the capacity of a tumbler and a wine-glass: 'The tumbler is the slave, the wine-glass the palm oil trade.'[74] Such statements need, of course, to be treated with caution, since in the context in which they were made (making a case for the continuation of the slave trade, or at least for substantial compensation for its abolition) there was good reason to exaggerate the fiscal difficulties posed by the transition. Although, in the case of Dahomey at least, there is apparently corroborative evidence for the relative impoverishment of the royal court by the 1870s,[75] this might reflect the decline in palm oil prices at that time, rather than the problems of the original move from slaves to oil.

In this volume, the problems allegedly posed by the commercial transition for African states are studied especially by Elisée Soumonni and Gareth Austin, for the cases of Dahomey and Asante respectively. For Dahomey, Soumonni argues that the transition from slaves to palm oil down to the 1850s was a relatively smooth process, and to that extent the 'crisis of adaptation' here was successfully surmounted. This was possible partly because, contrary to the assumption often made by British abolitionists in the nineteenth century, the slave and palm oil trades were compatible rather than contradictory, and the new trade could thus be developed alongside the old.[76] Even more critically, King Ghezo of Dahomey was able to resist or evade British pressure for the abolition of the slave trade, in large part because the French, although theoretically also committed to abolition, in practice adopted a much less demanding attitude on this issue, and Ghezo was therefore able to develop trade in palm oil with them while still continuing the slave trade. (To some extent, indeed, as was noted earlier, the French themselves traded in slaves, under the guise of 'free emigrants'.) It is acknowledged that, in the longer run, when the overseas slave trade came to an end (in Dahomey, effectively in the 1860s), the Dahomian state had difficulty in realizing an adequate revenue from the export of palm oil alone. Dahomey was not, however, destabilized by these problems, and remained a strong polity down to the French conquest in the 1890s.

The case of Asante, studied by Austin, was more complex than that of Dahomey since its heartland lay north of the palm oil belt, and it

was therefore for most of the nineteenth century (until the development of rubber exports from the 1880s) unable to participate directly in the supply of agricultural produce to the coast. Asante responded by a re-orientation of its foreign trade, selling gold at the coast to obtain necessary European imports (such as firearms) and compensating for the decline of its trans-Atlantic trade by increasing exports of kola nuts to the West African interior. Although questioning the degree of state control over trade suggested in some earlier work, Austin argues that overall Asante was successful in accommodating to the changing commercial environment, and in securing adequate revenues under the new conditions – at any rate down to the catastrophic military defeat which it suffered at the hands of the British in 1874. In the aftermath of that defeat, Asante did suffer a major political crisis, collapsing into civil war in the 1880s, and some role was played in this by tensions arising from increases in government regulation and taxation of private-sector enterprise.[77] The immediate cause of this crisis, however, was clearly the defeat of 1874, which undermined the authority of the Asante state and led to the loss of territories which eroded its tax base (thereby necessitating increases in taxation of those areas which it still controlled). On the face of it, therefore, Austin's analysis appears to suggest that, without the intervention of the British, the Asante state might have survived the commercial transition intact. Austin also, however, raises the question (which has a relevance beyond the case of Asante, as will be argued later in this Introduction) of whether, in fact, it is realistic to see the British intervention as an entirely 'exogenous' factor, since it was itself, in part, provoked by Asante commercial policies; the official regulation and taxation of trade which had enabled the Asante state to cope with the commercial transition were condemned by the British as interference in the free operation of the market.

Whether it remains appropriate to speak of a 'crisis of adaptation' in these cases is, ultimately, a semantic as well as an empirical question; for some historians, a 'crisis' successfully surmounted may not merit the title at all. Both Dahomey and Asante were, however, by West African standards, exceptionally strong states, with relatively effective centralized administrations, and caution is therefore required in generalizing from their experience. Weaker or more decentralized states may have been less able to contain the strains of the commercial transition. The different perceptions of Hopkins and Martin Klein, in the cases of Senegambia and Yorubaland, may well reflect differing realities on the ground in West Africa, as well as the differing perspectives of these authors.

The interior

Analysis of the 'crisis of adaptation' has, naturally enough, tended to concentrate upon the coastal societies which were most directly and intensively involved in the Atlantic trade. Account needs to be taken also, however, of conditions in the West African interior, which was less involved in the sale of slaves to the coast, and for the most part unable to participate directly in the new 'legitimate' trade. In general, societies in the interior were precluded from direct participation in the export of agricultural produce by the high cost of overland transport, noted earlier. The point is illustrated by the development, by the mid nineteenth century, of seasonal migration from the interior to the valley of the River Gambia to cultivate groundnuts for export: it was easier to move the labour force nearer the coast than to cultivate crops in the interior and transport them.[78] Societies in the interior could only export bulk agricultural produce profitably if situated close to navigable rivers which provided relatively cheap access to the coast. An important example is Nupe, on the lower Niger, which exported shea-butter in the second half of the nineteenth century.[79] The export of gum arabic from the southern margins of the western Sahara was likewise made possible by the navigable waterway of the River Senegal.[80]

The question of the impact of the ending of the Atlantic slave trade on the West African interior is addressed in this volume by Ann McDougall, with regard to the western Sahel region. Although the scale of this region's involvement in the supply of slaves to the Europeans was evidently marginal, by comparison with coastal societies such as Dahomey or Asante, McDougall argues that the impact of the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade was nevertheless significant. Adjustments to trading patterns were necessary, as in Asante, to secure the continued importation of European firearms, which had now to be purchased with exports of gum arabic rather than slaves. The growth of the export trade in gum here provides a parallel with 'legitimate' trade in palm oil and groundnuts in coastal areas – though McDougall stresses that this expansion of the gum trade was not directly linked to the ending of the Atlantic slave trade, and had begun before the abolition of the latter. Although these changes involved shifts in economic power among groups within the region, overall the transition was managed smoothly; in Hopkins' terminology, there was successful 'adaptation' here, but no 'crisis'. Moreover, in this successful adaptation, McDougall emphasizes, rather than the impact of the Atlantic trade, the dominant importance in this case of internal regional networks, especially the exchange of slaves for Saharan salt. This reminder that there were other factors than the

Atlantic trade affecting the development of West African economies is salutary. Its significance, moreover, extends beyond the interior itself, since the autonomous internal dynamism of the economies of the Sudan/Sahel region had important effects on at least certain parts of coastal West Africa also. As Austin notes in this volume, the relatively successful response of Asante to the ending of the Atlantic slave trade was only possible because of the contingent circumstance that, owing to the 'Islamic Revolution' which created the Sokoto Caliphate in the early nineteenth century, the internal West African demand for kola from Asante was expanding.[81]

It may be, indeed, that if a parallel to the coastal 'crisis of adaptation' is to be sought in the interior, it is to be found, not in the impact of the ending of the Atlantic slave trade, but rather in the subsequent ending of trans-Saharan exports, around the end of the nineteenth century. There is even a parallel here to the development of 'legitimate' trade at the coast, with the increasing importance in the late nineteenth century of commodities other than slaves, such as ivory, ostrich feathers and goat skins. An explicit attempt to apply Hopkins' analysis to the trans-Saharan trade has, in fact, been made by Stephen Baier, with regard to the central Sahelian state of Damergu. The new forms of trade here, Baier argues, like the trade in agricultural produce at the coast, lacked economies of scale and were accessible to 'commoners' as well as chiefs, so that the trade acquired 'a broader social base'. As at the coast, the warrior aristocracy tried to tighten control over the new trade, leading to tensions and conflicts. While hesitating to speak of a 'crisis' (because foreign trade accounted for 'only a very small fraction' of rulers' incomes), Baier suggests that these commercial changes did tend to 'shift the balance of social and economic power' within Damergu.[82]

Imperialism

Hopkins' analysis was concerned not only to elucidate the internal dynamics of African states and economies but also to link these to the European conquest of West Africa in the late nineteenth century. In this volume, the connections between commercial change and European imperialism are touched upon by Martin Lynn, with reference mainly to the case of the Niger Delta, and by Gareth Austin, for that of Asante; and also, in a broader overview, by Tony Hopkins himself.

The links between the commercial transition and European imperialism can be conceived at two levels. First, the project of suppressing the slave trade and promoting 'legitimate' trade by its nature tended to draw Europeans into political interference in West Africa, since it involved

European governments (primarily the British) in seeking to impose economic change on African rulers who were often unwilling to comply, and to use diplomatic and sometimes military pressure to coerce them – as, for example, in the British intervention at Lagos, to depose a ruler who refused to end slave exports, in 1851. The commercial transition was thus inherently 'imperialist', not because it necessarily led to actual annexation (though this did, in fact, occur in Lagos ten years after the original intervention), but in the looser sense of involving the exercise of political power to promote approved forms of commercial development – what has come to be called, though arguably infelicitously, 'informal imperialism'.[83]

The second dimension of the problem relates to the move from 'informal imperialism' to formal annexation, with the Partition of Africa among rival European colonial powers in the late nineteenth century. Hopkins, as has been seen, sought to connect this shift in policy also to the West African 'crisis of adaptation'. The connection was partly that 'informal' methods were now perceived as insufficiently effective in bringing about the desired transformation of African economies and societies, but partly also that the difficulties posed by the transition for West African rulers themselves obstructed the healthy development of European commerce. In this context, it should be stressed that it was not necessary for the 'crisis of adaptation' to have occasioned local disorder obstructive of trade (though this was the scenario posited for Hopkins' original case-study in Yorubaland). Even 'successful' responses to the crisis, in the sense of ones where West African ruling elites remained in effective control, presented threats to European commercial interests. Whatever else the European conquest of West Africa was intended to effect, it was centrally concerned to impose free trade on West Africans, with the elimination of the monopolies enjoyed by coastal middlemen such as Jaja of Opobo, and more generally of the duties levied on trade by African rulers.[84] More broadly, imperialism aimed to modernize African economic structures, an objective symbolized by the issue of slavery, whose abolition was a central concern of European powers, reaffirmed at the Congress of Brussels in 1890.[85] In so far, therefore, as African rulers had responded to the commercial transition by asserting monopolies of trade, increasing taxes, and by the more extensive and intensive use of slaves for export production, they were reinforcing the very practices whose abolition, in the longer run, European capitalism would demand. African states, it may be suggested, could not win. Where the commercial transition had a disintegrative effect on political structures, as Hopkins suggested in Yorubaland, European commercial interests would demand intervention for the imposition of order; but

where local states kept effective control of the situation, as Austin shows in the case of Asante, this might provoke intervention in the interests of free trade. From this longer perspective, even a 'successful' response to the commercial transition, therefore, could be so only in the short term.

The difficulty here, it may be suggested, is not so much whether these problems have any bearing upon the ultimate Partition of West Africa, as what weight of emphasis to place upon them. It is possible to argue, as Lynn does in his contribution to this volume, that both the difficulties of West African rulers and their conflicts with European traders were due more to the decline of produce prices in the 'Great Depression' than to the original commercial transition. The Hopkins thesis, however, does not require a choice between the two, but a dialectical interaction between them.

Wider perspectives

In conclusion, it should be stressed that the debate on the impact of the commercial transition in nineteenth-century West Africa is, or should be, of interest to others than specialists in this particular region in this particular period. As Hopkins argues in his contribution to this volume, the topic has a broader relevance, both chronologically (in relation to longer-term issues of economic development in Africa) and geographically (by comparison with similar processes elsewhere in the world). As regards Africa's economic development, it is evident that the reality (if not the terminology) of 'imperialism', in the sense of the power relations between local and foreign governments (and also, nowadays, trans-governmental agencies, such as the World Bank) and the constraints in economic policy which these impose on the former, is as critical in the contemporary situation was it was in the nineteenth century. Moreover, the transition from the slave trade to 'legitimate' commerce, as is shown in this volume, raised questions about the relative advantages of large-and small-scale enterprise and about the role of the state in relation to the private sector, which were actively contested and debated on the African as well as the European side of the trading frontier, and which remain central to discussion of African economic development today. Indeed, if the analysis of commercial change in nineteenth-century West Africa is extended beyond the specific issue of changing export staples on which this volume focuses, to include the coincident (or rather, indirectly related) problems of currency instability (with the depreciation and ultimate collapse of local currencies, such as the cowry shell)[86] and of the expansion of European credit to African traders (with consequent conflicts over the enforcement of debt repayment),[87] the contemporary resonance of West Africa's nineteenth-century experience may well seem uncanny. If the present really can learn from the past, there must surely be lessons of significance here.

At the same time, what occurred in West Africa has to be seen against the wider background of commercial change and the growth of European imperialism throughout the world. This aspect of the question is explicitly explored in Tony Hopkins' contribution to this volume, which shows that the British government's promotion of commercial change on the western coast of Africa in the nineteenth century was merely one local application of a much wider project, applying to other regions of Africa and indeed to other continents, which sought to reconstruct the world in the image and interests of British liberal capitalism. Although the issue of the suppression of the Atlantic slave trade gave this process a special character in West Africa, British policy there had much in common with other areas of the world, and study of the West African case needs to be viewed in this broader context. The specificity of West Africa's experience will be clarified by a comparative perspective; and conversely, historians of other areas, and especially of other regions of Africa, may gain fruitful insights from more explicit and sustained engagement with the abundant literature which already exists on the 'crisis of adaptation' in West Africa.

NOTES

1 The term 'legitimate trade' is clearly open to objection, both because it is Eurocentric (since the slave trade itself initially remained 'legitimate' in African societies, although now illegal for Europeans), and because it tends to obscure the fact that commodities other than slaves (including agricultural produce such as palm oil) had been exported from Africa even before the legal abolition of the slave trade; it remains, however, so deeply embedded in the literature that it is difficult to avoid.

2 It should be acknowledged that the subject had also attracted some attention earlier, from historians working from an 'imperial' rather than an Africanist perspective: see esp. Allan McPhee, *The Economic Revolution in British West Africa* (London, 1926), ch. 2; W. K. Hancock, *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs, Vol. II: Problems of Economic Policy 1918–1939, Part 2* (London, 1942), ch. 2.

3 Basil Davidson, *Black Mother: Africa, The Years of Trial* (London, 1961), pp. 222, 224.

4 K. O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830–1885* (Oxford, 1956).

5 Robin Law, 'The historiography of the commercial transition in nineteenth-century West Africa', in Toyin Falola (ed.), *African Historiography: Essays in Honour of Jacob Ade Ajayi* (Harlow, 1993), pp. 91–115.

6 A. G. Hopkins, 'Economic imperialism in West Africa: Lagos, 1880–92', *EHR*, 21 (1968), 580–606.

7 See esp. Martin Klein, 'Social and economic factors in the Muslim Revolution in Senegambia', *JAH*, 13 (1972), 419–41. The argument was already adumbrated, although not elaborated, in Klein, *Islam and Imperialism in Senegal: Sine-Saloum 1847–1914* (Edinburgh, 1968), pp. 44–5.

8 'Social and economic factors', p. 424.

9 A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London, 1973), ch. 4.

10 See esp. David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 62–77. For a counter-argument, cf. Paul E. Lovejoy, 'The impact of the Atlantic slave trade on Africa: a review of the literature', *JAH*, 30 (1989), 365–94.

11 Ralph A. Austen, 'The abolition of the overseas slave trade: a distorted theme in West African history', *JHSN*, 5/2 (1970), 257–74; recently reiterated, in *African Economic History* (London, 1987), esp. pp. 101–2.

12 Hopkins, *Economic History*, pp. 145–7.

13 A. J. H. Latham, *Old Calabar 1600–1891: The Impact of the International Economy upon a Traditional Society* (Oxford, 1973).

14 See esp. Susan Hargreaves, 'The political economy of nineteenth-century Bonny: a study of power, authority, legitimacy and ideology in a Delta trading community from 1790–1914', PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1987. For Jaja, cf. also Sylvanus Cookey, *King Jaja of the Niger Delta: His Life and Times, 1821–1891* (New York, 1974). The dynamics of social mobility in the Delta, including the dependence of slaves on the permission and support of their owners to enter the palm oil trade, are also, in fact, clear from the contemporary published account (relating mainly to Brass) of C. N. de Cardi, 'A short description of the natives of the Niger Coast Protectorate', in Mary Kingsley (ed.), *West African Studies* (London, 1899), esp. pp. 471–2.

15 Hopkins' analysis of the transition in Yorubaland was criticized especially by J. F. Ade Ajayi and Ralph A. Austen, 'Hopkins on economic imperialism in Africa', *EHR*, 25 (1972), 303–6 (with rejoinder by Hopkins, ibid., 307–12). Klein's analysis of developments in Senegambia, however, is supported (or maybe repeated) in the most recent published research: Mamadou Diouf, *Le Kajoor au XIX^{e} siècle: pouvoir ceddo et conquête coloniale* (Paris, 1990), esp. pp. 154–5, 293.

16 John Reid, 'Warrior aristocrats in crisis: the political effects of the transition from the slave trade to palm oil commerce in the nineteenth century kingdom of Dahomey', PhD thesis, University of Stirling, 1986; also Robin Law, 'Dahomey and the end of the Atlantic slave trade' (African Studies Center, Boston University, Working Papers in African Studies No. 165, 1992). See, however, the different emphasis of Elisée Soumonni, in this volume.

17 Patrick Manning, 'Slave trade, "legitimate" trade, and imperialism revisited: the control of wealth in the Bights of Benin and Biafra', in Paul E. Lovejoy (ed.), *Africans in Bondage: Studies in Slavery and the Slave Trade* (Madison, 1986), pp. 203–33.

18 Hopkins, *Economic History*, p. 140.

19 See, most recently, Eltis, *Economic Growth*, Appendix A, pp. 241–54.
20 Another instance was the recruitment of soldiers for the Dutch colonial army in Asante in 1831–42: Larry W. Yarak, *Asante and the Dutch 1744–1873* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 107–11.
21 See, most recently, Ralph A. Austen, 'The Mediterranean Islamic slave trade out of Africa: a tentative census', in Elizabeth Savage (ed.), *The Human Commodity: Perspectives on the trans-Saharan Slave Trade* (London, 1992), pp. 214–48.
22 Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge, 1983), ch. 8.
23 Latham, *Old Calabar*, pp. 92–5.
24 Austen, *African Economic History*, p. 102.
25 E.g. Lovejoy, *Transformations*, p. 139.
26 Samuel Crowther and John Taylor, *The Gospel on the Banks of the Niger* (London, 1859), p. 438.
27 Note, however, the arguments that at least certain specific *jihads* were themselves, in part, a consequence of the decline of the slave trade: see Martin Klein for Senegambia (cited above, n7) and Claude Meillassoux for the western Sudan more generally (below, n29).
28 Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 679–83.
29 Claude Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery* (Chicago, 1991), pp. 62–3. Meillassoux linked this need to increase the scale of slaving with the nineteenth-century *jihads*; see, however, criticisms of this view in Ann McDougall's contribution to this volume.
30 Parliamentary Papers [hereafter, PP]: Correspondence relating to the Slave Trade 1864, I, Inclosure 4 in No. 110: Commander Cochrane, Sierra Leone, 9 Jan. 1864.
31 Public Record Office, London: CO267/132, Governor Campbell, Freetown, 11 July 1836. Cf. the argument of MacGregor Laird and R. A. K. Oldfield, *Narrative of an Expedition into the Interior of Africa* (London, 1832), II, p. 361, that a slave retained in Africa could produce one ton of palm oil a year, which allegedly fetched twice as much as could be obtained by selling him for export (though this takes no account of the slave's subsistence costs).
32 Hopkins, *Economic History*, p. 142.
33 PP: Correspondence relating to the Slave Trade 1855–6, II, Inclosure in No. 17: S. B. Williams, Report [of Meeting 17–18 Sept. 1855].
34 Hugh Clapperton, *Journal of a Second Expedition into the Interior of Africa* (London, 1829), p. 33, referring to slave caravans going from Oyo to Badagry, speaks of 10–12 armed guards to each batch of fifty slaves.
35 This was the normal head-load of oil in Dahomey: Reid, 'Warrior Aristocrats', p. 346. On the Gold Coast, oil was transported in pots of 5–6 gallons: Brodie Cruickshank, *Eighteen Years on the Gold Coast of Africa* (London, 1853), II, p. 180. On the lower Niger, it was collected in gourds containing 2–4 gallons: Laird and Oldfield, *Narrative*, I, p. 103.
36 Laird and Oldfield, *Narrative*, I, p. 106, referring to Aboh. Elsewhere, the same source says that a ton of oil fetched twice as much as a slave, £8 as opposed to £4 (II, p. 361); but this seems to confuse the price of oil at the coast with that at Aboh, where it was only £4 per ton (cf. ibid., I, p. 103).

37 This ignores the fact that porters would receive pay as well as subsistence; on the other hand, slaves might be moved over longer distances.
38 In the early nineteenth century, the Bonny canoes sent up-country for slaves are described as capable of carrying 120 persons, but this figure presumably includes rowers as well as slaves: John Adams, *Remarks on the Country Extending from Cape Palmas to the River Congo* (London, 1823), p. 130. In the seventeenth century, Kalabari canoes carried 40 rowers, and had space for 60–80 additional passengers: Olfert Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge der Afrikaensche Gewesten* (Amsterdam, 1668), quoted in Thomas L. Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives* (2nd edn, London, 1975), p. 175.
39 Richard Burton, *Wanderings in West Africa* (London, 1863), II, p. 277. The size of a 'puncheon' varied, but at Bonny the standard puncheon was of 240 gallons, or three-quarters of a ton: ibid. II, p. 270.
40 Patrick Manning, *Slavery, Colonialism and Economic Growth in Dahomey 1640–1960* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 99; David Northrup, *Trade without Rulers: Pre-Colonial Economic Development in South-Eastern Nigeria* (Oxford, 1978), p. 186.
41 Hopkins, *Economic History*, p. 148.
42 Colin Newbury, *The Western Slave Coast and its Rulers* (Oxford, 1961), p. 87.
43 Marion Johnson, 'The Atlantic slave trade and the economy of West Africa', in Roger Anstey and P. E. H. Hair (eds.), *Liverpool, the African Slave Trade, and Abolition* (Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, 1976), pp. 24–5.
44 Hopkins, *Economic History*, p. 125.
45 PP: Report from the Select Committee on the Slave Trade, 1848, Minutes of Evidence, 1638–9: Commander H. J. Matson; 2620, 2627: W. M. Hutton.
46 PP: Report from the Select Committee on the West Coast of Africa, 1842, Appendix No. 3: Report of Her Majesty's Commissioner of Inquiry on the State of the British Settlements on the Gold Coast, at Sierra Leone, and the Gambia, 1841, Appendix B, No. 22: Queries addressed to Captain Gentle Brown, 2 Feb. 1841.
47 Winwood Reade, *Savage Africa* (London, 1863), quoted in Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives*, p. 347.
48 At least by the mid nineteenth century. But note that earlier in the century, oil is said to have been sold at Old Calabar by the 'tub, or crue, of ten gallons': Adams, *Remarks*, p. 247.
49 De Cardi, 'Short description', p. 472.
50 Newbury, *Western Slave Coast*, p. 59.
51 E.g. PP: Correspondence relating to the Slave Trade 1850–1, I, Inclosure 3 in No. 198, Lieutenant Forbes, At sea, 6 Apr. 1850.
52 Hope Masterton Waddell, *Twenty-Nine Years in the West Indies and Central Africa* (London, 1863), pp. 319–20.
53 PP: Correspondence relating to the Slave Trade 1862, II, Inclosures 2 & 4 in No. 44: Supercargoes in Old Calabar River, 28 Apr. 1862; Agreement between Supercargoes & Native Traders of Old Calabar, 5 May 1862 (article 13).
54 Treaty with Kings and Chiefs of Old Calabar, 6 Sept. 1878, text in Ekei

Essien Oku, *The Kings and Chiefs of Old Calabar (1785–1925)* (Calabar, 1989), pp. 257–61 (article IX); cf. Latham, *Old Calabar*, pp. 81–2.

55 PP: Correspondence relating to the Slave Trade 1856–7, II, No. 38: Consul Campbell, Lagos, 1 Oct. 1856; 1859–60, II, No. 1: and, 4 March 1859.

56 This episode is treated more fully in Martin Lynn, 'Technology, trade and "a race of native capitalists": the Krio diaspora of West Africa and the steamship, 1852–95', *JAH*, 33 (1992), 434–5.

57 Thomas J. Hutchinson, *Ten Years' Wandering among the Ethiopians* (London, 1861), p. 199.

58 See esp. Claire Robertson and Martin A. Klein (eds.), *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison, 1983).

59 PP: Report from the Select Committee on the State of the British Settlements on the Western Coast of Africa, 1865, Minutes of Evidence, 2167. Another report of this period claims that in Bonny 'an able-bodied slave is only calculated to stand three years' work in consequence of the ill-usage he receives': Correspondence relating to the Slave Trade 1862, I, No. 124: Commodore Edmonstone, Sierra Leone, 22 Oct. 1862.

60 Waddell, *Twenty-Nine Years*, p. 321.

61 See further Robin Law, 'Human sacrifice in pre-colonial West Africa', *African Affairs*, 84 (1985), 53–87.

62 This was not entirely new, since there had been European attempts to develop agricultural plantations using slave labour in West Africa even before the legal abolition of the slave trade: see, most recently, Robin Law, 'King Agaja of Dahomey, the slave trade and the question of West African plantations: the embassy of Bulfinch Lambe and Adomo Tomo to England, 1726–32', *JICH*, 19 (1991), 137–63.

63 David Birmingham, 'The coffee barons of Cazengo', *JAH*, 19 (1978), 523–38.

64 Karl Marx, *Capital*, I (London, 1974), p. 226.

65 De Cardi, 'Short description', p. 472. Theft of palm oil by slaves is also reported as a problem in Dahomey, as noted in Law's contribution to this volume.

66 This is at least broadly paralleled in Old Calabar, where in the later nineteenth century there was an effort by freemen to curb the influence of wealthy traders of slave origin, by asserting owners' rights to inherit slaves' estates on their deaths: Latham, *Old Calabar*, p. 102.

67 Laird and Oldfield, *Narrative*, I, 105.

68 As urged by Tony Hopkins, in his contribution to this volume.

69 Hopkins, *Economic History*, p. 143. The allusion is to Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641* (Oxford, 1965); the parallel is not exact, since the English aristocracy were threatened by the growth of the central power of the state, rather than from below.

70 John Lonsdale, 'States and social processes in Africa: a historiographical survey', *African Studies Review*, 24 (1981), 180.

71 As argued by Claude Meillassoux, 'Introduction', in Meillassoux (ed.), *The Development of Trade and Markets in West Africa* (London, 1971), pp. 56–7.

72 Hopkins, *Economic History*, p. 145.

73 Quoted in Hopkins, *Economic History*, p. 142.

74 PP: Correspondence relating to the Slave Trade 1849–50, I, Inclosure 1 in No. 198: Journal of Lieutenant Forbes, 15 March 1850. For an attempt to assess state revenues from the palm oil trade in Dahomey in the 1850s (which supports the view that they were an inadequate substitute for the slave trade), see Reid, 'Warrior Aristocrats', pp. 353–8.

75 Reid, 'Warrior Aristocrats', pp. 489–93.

76 Soumonni here develops the argument originally articulated (in the case of Igboland) by David Northrup, 'The compatibility of the slave and palm oil trades in the Bight of Biafra', *JAH*, 17 (1976), 353–64.

77 See further Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 703–5, 712–17; Thomas J. Lewin, *Asante before the British: The Prempean years, 1875–1900* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1979), pp. 53–9.

78 Ken Swindell, 'SeraWoollies, Tillibunkas and strange farmers: the development of migrant groundnut farming along the Gambia River, 1848–95', *JAH*, 21 (1980), 93–104.

79 See Michael Mason, *The Foundations of the Bida Kingdom* (Zaria, 1981), p. 101.

80 In addition, gum was of significantly higher value relative to bulk than palm oil or groundnuts: see James L. A. Webb, Jr, 'The trade in gum arabic: prelude to French conquest in Senegal', *JAH*, 26 (1985), 149–68.

81 For the kola trade, see esp. Paul E. Lovejoy, *Caravans of Kola: The Hausa Kola Trade, 1700–1900* (Zaria, 1980). Like gum arabic, kola could bear the cost of long-distance transport because it had a high value relative to bulk.

82 Stephen Baier, 'Trans-Saharan trade and the Sahel: Damergu, 1870–1930', *JAH*, 18 (1977), 37–60.

83 The terminology seems infelicitous, because this sort of imperialism often involved formal agreements – such as the anti-slave trade treaties imposed on Lagos and Dahomey in 1852, or indeed (outside Africa) that imposing free trade in the Ottoman Empire in 1838, and the 'Unequal Treaties' with China in 1842 and 1860. It should also be stressed that the existence of a policy of 'informal imperialism' does not necessarily mean that an 'informal empire', in the sense of effective control, was actually established: on this, see Martin Lynn, 'The "Imperialism of Free Trade": and the case of West Africa, *c*.1830–*c*.1870', *JICH*, 15 (1986), 22–40.

84 Hopkins, *Economic History*, p. 156.

85 Suzanne Miers, *Britain and the Ending of the Slave Trade* (London, 1975).

86 See esp. Jan Hogendorn and Marion Johnson, *The Shell Money of the Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 1986); and more generally, Jane I. Guyer (ed.), *Money Matters: Instability, Values and Social Payments in the Modern History of West African Communities* (Portsmouth NH, 1994).

87 See esp. Colin Newbury, 'Credit in early nineteenth century West African trade', *JAH*, 13 (1972), 81–5.