An Economic History of West Africa

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The economic basis of imperialism

Once the European powers had decided to abolish the external slave trade, West Africa was faced with the problem of developing alternative exports. The outcome was a period of transition and experimentation, which is customarily referred to as the era of 'legitimate' commerce in order to distinguish it from the illegal trade in slaves. This chapter will try to establish two conclusions about West African history in the nineteenth century. First, it will be argued that the structure of legitimate commerce marked an important break with the past and signified a new phase in the growth of the market, a phase which can be seen as the start of the modern economic history of West Africa. This argument contrasts with the traditional view, which stresses continuities with the past and the ease of the transfer to legitimate trade. Second, it will be suggested that the strains involved in creating this economy, combined with fluctuations in its performance, are central to an understanding of the partition of West Africa in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This proposition, too, is intended to be set against current interpretations, most of which hold that imperialism was the product of political motives stemming from Europe. For these two reasons the analysis of legitimate commerce and partition has been combined in one chapter.

These are large claims, and they require some initial elaboration before the historical evidence is presented. The main structural features of the new commerce will be outlined first of all. The foreign trade statistics will then be used to support the theoretical argument, and to indicate the relationship between commercial fluctuations and the economic and political history of West Africa in the nineteenth century. Finally, the development of legitimate commerce will be considered with reference to specific African and European interests in order to demonstrate how the interaction of these groups produced the partition of West Africa. Two points need to be borne in mind in evaluating the argument of this chapter. First, the economic theme is emphasised here partly because this book is concerned with economic history. It is argued that economic motives are a central and neglected feature of partition, not that they provide a complete explanation of it. Second, in relating the economic theme to the timing of partition, it is important to remember that though the tensions caused by structural change were felt in West Africa from the early nineteenth century, they became acute only in the last quarter of the century, when they were aggravated by a serious downturn in the terms of trade.

1 The economy of 'legitimate' commerce

There is no novelty in saying that slaves and palm oil are commodities with obvious physical differences. What has not been appreciated fully is that these differences had far-reaching consequences for the structure of the export economy. The main features of the new economy can be analysed by making use of staple theory, which has been developed specifically to explain the particular type of growth stemming from diversification around a well-defined export base.[1] Staple theory has grown up and been applied chiefly in North America and Australia.[2] These are countries of recent, European settlement, which at critical stages of their economic growth have relied on primary exports, such as fur, wheat and wool, to stimulate the expansion of the domestic market. The aspects of the theory which are especially relevant to the West African case are those which stress the economic consequences of the physical properties of the staple and the type of linkages which it establishes with the rest of the economy.

The physical properties of the staple are important because they influence the factor combination and the nature of returns to scale. In the case of West Africa the basic point is a simple one, which may explain why it has not engaged much interest: the vegetable oils which became staple exports in the nineteenth century could be produced efficiently and on a small scale by households possessing little capital, employing family labour, and using traditional tools. Palm products and groundnuts, unlike slaves, were divisible into very small units, each of which was of low value per unit of weight, yet was still marketable and yielded a return in the same season. Land, moreover, was cheap and readily available. Admittedly, the new exports could also be produced on sizeable estates, but the few farmers who did so simply increased their inputs of land and labour without securing any of the economies of large scale production because there was little scope for substituting machinery for labour, and few advantages to centralised management. Large producers were not particularly inefficient, but they no longer had a monopoly of the export market.

This change in the structure of export-producing firms was a key event in African history. The capital and labour requirements of slave raiding and trading had encouraged the rise of a relatively small group of large entrepreneurs, many of whom became the rulers or senior officials of great states in the Western Sudan and in the forest. Producing and selling palm oil and groundnuts, on the other hand, were occupations in which there were few barriers to entry. Legitimate commerce therefore enabled small-scale farmers and traders to play an important part in the

[1] A good introduction to staple theory can be found in Melville H. Watkins, 'A Staple Theory of Economic Growth', *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 29, 1963, pp. 141–58.

[2] It should be added that staple theory is generally thought to be inapplicable in cases where export growth occurs in indigenous, subsistence economies. However, the reasons given in support of this view rest on assumptions about 'traditional' societies which have been criticised earlier in this study (Chapter 2).

overseas exchange economy for the first time. 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.

The character of the staple also influences the nature and strength of the linkages between export activities and the domestic economy. In an underdeveloped economy dominated by an indigenous society linkages tend to be weaker than in an area of recent settlement, such as North America, where there were special advantages of capital and modern skills in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the linkages created by legitimate commerce were much stronger than those set up previously by Saharan and Atlantic commerce.[3]

The new export trade saw a marked increase in the commercialisation of labour and land in Africa, instead of, as in the eighteenth century, the export of one factor of production (labour) and the comparative neglect of another (land), except for domestic needs. Support for this contention can be found in the migration of peoples from the Western Sudan to the 'groundnut coast' of Senegambia, and in the influx of newcomers into the forest in search of the wealth which could be won from the palm tree. An idea of the scale of the new, legitimate enterprise is provided by an estimate that in 1892 no less than 15 million palm trees were in production for the export market in Yoruba country alone.[4] The expansion of legitimate commerce also provided additional employment opportunities in export-processing, even though the methods in use remained technically simple.[5] Admittedly, it was not until the coming of railways and roads that areas in the interior could participate in export production. Nevertheless, a start had been made: after 1900 the colonial rulers simply carried further a process which was already under way.

The import trade still consisted of manufactured consumer goods. However, as a result of the industrial revolution, the consumer imports of the nineteenth century were mainly cheap, mass-produced goods, which offered large numbers of inconspicuous Africans opportunities of material improvement and of emulating the superior, inherited status enjoyed by a minority of their compatriots. To the extent that the revolution of rising expectations is an identifiable phenomenon, then it can be said to have started in West Africa early in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, it is worth observing at this point that imports of cheap manufactures provide a more favourable base for the introduction of modern industries than imports which contain a high proportion of luxuries. If the market for imports grows, then there may well come a time when it is feasible and profitable to manufacture some of these goods on the spot instead of buying them from other countries. This time came in parts of West Africa after 1945.

[3] The discussion which follows should be compared with the conclusions reached in the previous chapter, pp. 119–23.

[4] *Kew Bulletin*, 1892, p. 208.

[5] Female labour appears to have been particularly important in preparing groundnuts and palm produce for export. The division of labour between the sexes is a subject which merits further research.

The change in the quality of consumer imports was made possible not only by cost reductions on the supply side, but also by a shift in the distribution of incomes in Africa. As a general proposition, it can be said that the more equal the distribution of incomes, the smaller the demand for luxury items and the greater the demand for cheap, mass-produced goods.[6] Down to the nineteenth century the distribution of incomes from foreign trade had been very uneven, and purchasing power had been concentrated in a relatively few, large units. With the development of exports of vegetable oils, earnings from overseas commerce began to be spread over many small units of consumption, and incomes achieved greater equality.[7] The evidence for the nineteenth century suggests that imports were being distributed more widely, socially as well as geographically. Furthermore, and again in contrast to the period before the nineteenth century, the size of export proceeds increased as a result of the growth of demand for tropical raw materials and of West Africa's ability to meet that demand. Goods other than slaves were exported before the nineteenth century, but were unable to generate much additional income because the demand for them was still limited. The expansion in the volume and value of trade in the nineteenth century also gave a further stimulus to service industries, especially those providing transport and accommodation, and it led to the development of market gardening to supply foodstuffs to the larger commercial centres.

It is necessary now to show that the statistics of overseas trade are consistent with the argument advanced so far. In particular, the value and volume of trade should show an upward trend; the character of staple exports should conform in detail to the specifications which have been outlined in brief; and the dominant European powers on the West Coast should be those best fitted to supply manufactured goods and to process tropical raw materials.

Although the details of the transition to legitimate commerce are not yet known, it would seem that on the whole West Africa did not experience a prolonged period of economic crisis, principally because many areas were able to export legitimate goods and slaves side by side down to about the middle of the nineteenth century. It is clear that there was a remarkable expansion in the value of overseas trade in the second quarter of the century. Newbury, who has carried out some much-needed research on West African trade in the nineteenth century, has estimated that the total value of the overseas commerce of the region in legitimate goods alone amounted to a minimum of £3½ million a year in the early 1850s.[8] This figure may be compared with Fage's estimate that at the end of the eighteenth century, at the height of the Atlantic slave trade, West Africa's overseas commerce was worth about £4

[6] R. E. Baldwin, 'Patterns of Development in Newly Settled Regions', *Manchester School of Economic and Social Studies*, 24, 1956, pp. 161–79.

[7] This change is analogous to the distinction between the cotton economy of the American south, where plantations were dominant in the nineteenth century, and the wheat belt of the west, where the typical unit was the small, family farm. See Douglass C. North, 'Agriculture and Regional Economic Growth', *Journal of Farm Economics*, 41, 1959, pp. 943–51.

[8] C. W. Newbury, 'Trade and Authority in West Africa from 1850 to 1880', in *Colonialism in Africa, 1870–1960*, ed. L. H. Gann and Peter Duignan, 1, *The History and Politics of Colonialism, 1870–1914*, Cambridge 1969, pp. 76–9.

million a year.[9] In the second half of the century trade expanded roughly four times, and by 1901–1905 amounted to about £15 million a year. The rate of growth was not even throughout this period, and it was to be dwarfed by the expansion which occurred during the colonial era. Nevertheless, it was great enough to support the proposition that the new economy was also a much bigger economy. It is worth emphasising that European commercial involvement in West Africa was expanding rather than diminishing, as this is a factor which has not been taken into account by historians who have argued that economic motives were of little significance in the partition of West Africa.

No useful comparison of volumes can be made between legitimate commerce and the slave trade. However, the main point to note with regard to the volume of trade in the nineteenth century is that West African societies had to adjust in a relatively short time to the immense physical task of transporting huge quantities of low value, bulky commodities. Imports of palm oil into the United Kingdom from West Africa reached 1,000 tons in 1810, 10,000 tons in 1830, over 20,000 tons in 1842, over 30,000 tons in 1853, and over 40,000 tons in 1855. Even this expansion was dwarfed in the second half of the century, when there was a rapid growth in shipments of groundnuts, and a still more dramatic rise in overseas trade in palm kernels. Two examples will illustrate the size of the increase. Exports of groundnuts from Senegal rose from virtually nothing in the 1840s to an average of 29,000 tons a year in the period 1886–1890, while exports of palm kernels from Lagos, one of the great slave ports in the 1840s and 1850s, reached an average of 37,000 tons in the same period. The palm oil trade failed to maintain its early rate of progress, but exports still averaged about 50,000 tons a year between 1860 and 1900. The organisation required for moving, let alone producing, tonnages of this magnitude provides some indication of the skill and adaptability of African entrepreneurs.[10] The return trade in imported goods also involved transporting much greater quantities than ever before. For instance, the quantity of cotton goods (measured by the yard) exported from the United Kingdom to West Africa increased thirty times in the short period between 1816–1820 and 1846–1850.[11] The increase was partly a reflection of the rise in the value of trade, but was mainly an outcome of the industrial revolution in Europe and of the shift in the social composition of demand in Africa arising out of the structure of the new export economy. It is safe to conclude that the volume of exports and imports expanded considerably as a result of the rise of legitimate commerce and the decline of the external slave trade.

Vegetable oils, as noted already, became the staples of legitimate commerce. Palm oil was the pioneer export early in the nineteenth century, and it was joined by palm kernels and groundnuts in the second half of the century. The fact that these products already grew in West Africa, where they were traded and consumed as foodstuffs, helps to explain why the end of the Atlantic slave trade did not cause a complete

[9] Fage, *A History of West Africa*, pp. 91–2.

[10] The subject of internal transport in the pre-colonial period still awaits investigation.

[11] Calculated from C. W. Newbury, 'Credit in Early Nineteenth-Century West African Trade', *Journal of African History*, 13, 1972, pp. 83–4.

disruption of overseas commerce, though it does not mean that the transition was entirely smooth. The expansion of exports of palm products and groundnuts was a response to industrial growth in Europe, which led to a rise in the demand for oils and fats. Palm oil was used in the production of soap, lubricants and candles. Soap was required for cleansing the population in the growing urban centres; lubricants were needed to oil the new machinery, especially the railways; and candles were in demand for lighting the expanding towns and factories. Manufacturers, happily uniting material and moral motives, urged the public to 'buy our candles and help stop the slave trade'.[12] Palm kernels, though jointly produced with palm oil, were not exported at first, and a large proportion were not used at all, even in West Africa.[13] This was not because the African producer was fickle, or because his wants could be satisfied from the sale of palm oil alone, but because there was little demand in Europe for palm kernel oil, which had a different chemical composition from the oil extracted from the outer part of the fruit. Only in the late nineteenth century was it found possible to employ kernel oil in the manufacture of margarine, then a new product, and to process the residue for cattle food. Groundnuts were used mainly in the manufacture of cooking oil and soap. Other commodities, many of which had been shipped abroad before the nineteenth century, continued to be exported after abolition. The most important of these were gum from Senegal, gold from the Gold Coast, and timber, ivory and cotton from various parts of the forest zone.

Four items accounted for about three-quarters of the value of all imports into West Africa. These were textiles (a classification covering a wide range of cotton and woollen goods), spirits (especially rum and gin), salt and iron. Other prominent items were hardware, tobacco, guns and gunpowder.[14] Textiles remained the leading commodity, as in the eighteenth century. In Senegal, for example, one popular variety alone (known as 'guinea' cloth) accounted for no less than 25 per cent of the value of total imports during the third quarter of the nineteenth century. At Lagos (about 1,800 miles away) textiles of all kinds averaged 44 per cent of total imports in the period 1880–1892. Similarities between the types of goods imported before and after the end of the external slave trade should not be allowed to disguise some important differences: by the middle of the nineteenth century the quantity had increased greatly, and (as will be pointed out) the price per unit had declined.

On the European side of the trade, Britain and France continued to be the most important foreign powers on the West Coast, as they had been in the eighteenth century. Liverpool dominated the new trade, just as it had the old, and was by far the largest importer of palm oil in Europe. Nantes underwent a decline in the nineteenth century, but Bordeaux and Marseilles, the ports which took its place, both had long-standing connections with Africa. Most of West Africa's groundnut exports were

[12] Quoted in Allan McPhee, *The Economic Revolution in British West Africa*, 1926, p. 31, n. 2.

[13] Though some were used in Africa for fuel.

[14] Rum and tobacco imports dwindled in the last quarter of the nineteenth century following the decline of trade with America and Brazil, the two principal suppliers.

shipped to France, where they enjoyed tariff advantages over certain other vegetable oils, including palm oil. The most striking aspect of the national distribution of trade was the pre-eminence of Britain.[15] In 1868 a French consul estimated that Britain and France shared four-fifths of Europe's trade with West Africa, and that two-thirds to three-quarters of this total was in the hands of Great Britain. Furthermore, as much as 70 per cent of Britain's trade in the period 1860–1880 was conducted with areas outside her few, small colonies. France's trade, by contrast, was centred on her traditional base and colony of Senegal, which accounted for between half and three-quarters of her total trade with West Africa during the same period. A new feature of the second half of the century was the rapid growth of German commerce. By the 1880s Hamburg was said to handle nearly one third of all West Africa's overseas trade.[16] This expansion was the result of three factors: the rise of the palm kernel market, which was dominated by Hamburg because German farmers were the main buyers of cattle cake, and because the Dutch were the largest manufacturers of margarine; the ability of Hamburg to supply cheap liquor; and the development of steamship services between Germany and West Africa.

The abolition of the Atlantic slave trade and the rise of legitimate commerce were events which undoubtedly favoured Britain, the first industrial nation. She, above all others, was in a position to cater for the mass market which was beginning to emerge in West Africa, though her supremacy was being challenged in the late nineteenth century by new competitors. No other foreign powers were of any account in West Africa apart from Britain, France and Germany. The Danes sold their Gold Coast forts to the British in 1850, and the Dutch followed suit in 1872. The Portuguese, once the great innovators of European enterprise in Africa, had difficulty in maintaining even one tiny colony (Portuguese Guinea). All three countries had been overtaken by a world in which industrialisation had become the basis of commercial and political power.[17]

The rapid expansion of overseas commerce has tended to overshadow the history of West Africa's external trade across the Sahara. It is commonly supposed that by the nineteenth century this trade was only a fraction of the value it had attained in the golden age of the sixteenth century. Professor Boahen, for example, has suggested that total trade on the trans-Saharan routes amounted to no more than about £125,000 a year in the first half of the nineteenth century.[18] However, the deficiencies in the evidence for both the sixteenth century and the early nineteenth century are so great as to make calculations and comparisons a matter of guesswork. Recent research indicates that the old caravan routes still had a surprising amount of life left in them in the second half of the nineteenth century. To begin with, it is now apparent that trans-Saharan trade was *not* seriously affected by competition from goods brought by sea until the very end of the century. Indeed, Manchester textiles were carried across the Sahara and achieved a wide distribution. As late as 1869, for example, the town of Ilorin was said to be commercially nearer the Mediterranean (some 2,000 miles to the north) than it was to the Bight of Benin, even though the port of Lagos was only about 150 miles away.[19] Secondly, in the most detailed examination of the trade figures yet attempted, Newbury has shown that the total value of trans-Saharan trade actually increased from the 1840s, and reached a peak in 1875, when it was worth around £1,500,000.[20] It was only after this date that a slow and final decline set in. Thus the Sahara developed its own brand of 'legitimate' commerce. Because of transport limitations, however, the overland routes failed to develop a sizeable export trade in bulky, low value goods, and the boom in the third quarter of the century was based partly on the ephemeral demand of the Victorian world for ostrich feathers.[21] Even with this boost to the trade, trans-Saharan commerce was worth only a fifth of the value of the West Coast's seaborne trade in 1875.

Economic development by way of staple exports can be a precarious and lengthy process. Changes in supply and demand can set back the progress of the staple, retard the development of the economy as a whole, and have serious social and political repercussions. West Africa's raw material exports entered a wide range of manufacturing processes, and the price paid for them and the volume required tended to vary in accordance with the level of business activity in industrial Europe. West African producers had to accept the world price as given because they were unable to control the volume of palm produce and groundnuts placed on the market, and because the industrial countries could buy alternative, competing products from other underdeveloped regions. By the mid-nineteenth century the days when West Africa enjoyed a monopoly as the sole supplier of labour to the plantations of the Americas were over, and the silent imperialism of the steamship was beginning to bring vegetable oils and substitute products from other continents besides Africa.

The identification of fluctuations in West Africa's external trade is a matter of considerable historical importance. The progress of the new economy of legitimate commerce is best charted by changes in the terms of trade of West African export producers: the net barter terms provide an index of the import-purchasing power of a unit of exports, and the income terms measure the import-purchasing power of

[15] Newbury, 'Trade and Authority in West Africa from 1850 to 1880' in *Colonialism in Africa, 1870–1960*, ed. L. H. Gann and Peter Duignan, 1, *The History and Politics of Colonialism, 1870–1914*, Cambridge 1969, pp. 79–80.

[16] K. Vignes, 'Étude sur la rivalité d'influence entre les puissances européennes en Afrique équatoriale et occidentale depuis l'acte général de Berlin jusqu'au seuil du XXe siècle', *Revue Française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer*, 48, 1961, p. 14.

[17] Shortage of space has caused this rather cavalier treatment of minority expatriate interests, each of which is worthy of study in some detail. There was also an interesting trade between North America and West Africa which has been investigated and, indeed, virtually discovered by George E. Brooks, *Yankee Traders, Old Coasters and African Middlemen*, Boston 1970.

[18] A. Adu Boahen, *Britain, the Sahara, and the Western Sudan, 1788–1861*, Oxford, 1961, p. 131.

[19] A. Millson, 'Yoruba', *Manchester Geographical Society Journal*, 7, 1891, p. 92.

[20] C. W. Newbury, 'North African and Western Sudan Trade in the Nineteenth Century: a Re-evaluation', *Journal of African History*, 7, 1966, pp. 233–46.

[21] These decorated the hats of Victorian ladies in much the same way as they had adorned the ostriches themselves. African traders may well have wondered at the strange values of the white man, who was prepared to sell manufactured cloth for such an item, and for such a purpose!

total exports.[22] Insufficient data are available at present to enable precise calculations to be made, but the general trends are clear enough, and are confirmed by the evaluation of contemporary observers. It is hoped that others will find this subject important enough to carry out the research needed to improve the provisional and approximate analysis presented here.[23]

Information on the early nineteenth century is particularly sparse. However, as far as the main staple, palm oil, was concerned, prices on the West Coast and in Europe appear to have pursued an upward trend, with the exception of falls in 1844–1846 and 1851–1852, reaching a peak in 1854–1861, when the Liverpool price stood at around £45 per ton. At the same time, the prices of manufactured goods imported into West Africa fell dramatically as a result of the industrial revolution. By 1850 staple items cost half and in some cases only a quarter of what they had at the start of the century. Consequently, the barter terms of trade moved in favour of primary producers. Since the volume of exports was rising during the first half of the century, the income terms also improved. The result was a period of prosperity for West African trade. Indeed, since 1800 West Africa has experienced only three periods when both barter and income terms have moved sharply in favour of producers for at least ten years. The first period played an important part in establishing the new commerce; the second, from 1900–1913, helped to install the colonial rulers; and the third, from 1945–1955, was a phase of expanding expectations and economic diversification which was associated with the end of the colonial era.

In all situations of historical change there are elements of continuity. During the first half of the nineteenth century, when legitimate commerce was in its infancy and was also comparatively prosperous, producers and traders were encouraged to believe that the transition from the slave trade would be an easy one. Initially, various features of commerce on the West Coast were simply carried over from the eighteenth century. For example, a number of established European traders and African producers managed to adapt from the old trade to the new; some of the minor exports of legitimate commerce continued to be shipped after abolition just as they had been before; the credit or trust 'system' survived and expanded, in spite of repeated complaints from those who thought that it was morally reprehensible and economically risky; sailing ships remained in use on routes between Europe and Africa; and business was still transacted by means of barter and 'transitional' currencies, such as cowries and manillas. Above all, the effort to stop the slave trade and to establish legitimate commerce, though it led to voyages of exploration, to missionary enterprise, and to a slightly greater degree of official activity on the West Coast, did not bring about any major alterations to the political map. Because an adjustment was made to the economy without causing an immediate and total upheaval, traders and officials felt confident that casual and limited political commit-

[22] These terms are introduced here briefly, and are dealt with at greater length in Chapter 5, where the data available are sufficient to justify more extended treatment.

[23] Mention should be made of Patrick Manning's excellent special study, *An Economic History of Southern Dahomey, 1880–1914*, University of Wisconsin Ph.D. thesis 1969, which contains a thorough investigation of the overseas trade of that particular region.

ments could be maintained, much as they had been in the eighteenth century. The European frontier did not extend inland; it did not even cover all parts of the coast. There was no partition of Africa in 1807 or 1833.

The position changed considerably in the second half of the century. The boom came to an end in 1861, and there was a depression between 1862 and 1866, when the European price for palm oil fell to around £32 per ton. Although prices revived in 1866–1867, they never again reached the peaks of 1854–1861. On the contrary, they underwent a serious decline from an average of £37 per ton in 1861–1865 to £20 a ton in 1886–1890, the lowest on record since the early days of the trade. Thus in twenty-five years prices were cut by nearly 50 per cent. There was a very slight improvement in the 1890s, but it was not until 1906 that prices regained the levels achieved in the 1850s. Palm kernel prices fell by about a third from roughly £15 per ton in the 1860s to just over £10 in the period 1886–1890. Groundnut prices at Rufisque in Senegal also fell by roughly a third from 25 to 27½ francs per 100 kilos in the period 1857–1867 to around 15 francs in the period 1877–1900. In both cases, there was no recovery until after the turn of the century. There were two main causes of this fall, though there were several contributory factors, such as reduced ocean freight rates. First, there was an increase in the supply of mineral and vegetable oils following the discovery of petroleum resources in the United States in the 1860s, and the entry into the market of Indian groundnuts and Australian tallow after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Second, European demand for a wide range of raw materials, including oils and fats, was checked in the last quarter of the nineteenth century with the advent of the so-called Great Depression.[24]

There is little systematic information available about the local prices of goods imported into West Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century. The trend was probably a downward one, reflecting the fall in freight rates, an increase in competition on the West Coast, and continuing improvements in industrial efficiency. However, it is certain that the substantial price reductions of the early nineteenth century were not repeated, and that any decline which occurred was relatively slight and also gradual.[25] In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, when export prices fell particularly sharply, the barter terms of trade moved decisively against primary producers.

The question now arises as to what extent and in what sense an increase in the volume of exports can be said to have compensated for this adverse movement in the barter terms of trade. The broad trend, as noted earlier, was a rising one, but with few exceptions expansion levelled off in the late 1870s and in the 1880s, and in some cases the volume of exports actually declined. A few examples will illustrate how widespread this experience was: in the Niger Delta palm produce exports showed no

[24] The best recent analysis of what in some respects was a non-event, is S. B. Saul's *The Myth of the Great Depression, 1873–1896*, 1969, though this study analyses the problem from a British, rather than from a European, point of view.

[25] See Lars G. Sandberg, 'Movements in the Quality of British Cotton Textile Exports, 1815–1913', *Journal of Economic History*, 28, 1968, p. 19.

clear upward movement in the 1870s and 1880s, and there was a decrease at Opobo during the period 1887–1893; at Lagos, one of the major centres of legitimate commerce, there was a slight, but indecisive, trend towards expansion in the 1870s and 1880s; on the Gold Coast oil and kernel exports were almost static from 1886–1900; on the Ivory Coast palm oil exports fell sharply in the mid-1880s; and in Sierra Leone the picture was much the same. The position with regard to groundnuts was very similar; shipments from Gambia declined in the 1870s and 1880s; and in Senegal exports reached a plateau in the late 1870s which was not substantially exceeded until about the turn of the century. Even in cases where the volume of exports rose to the extent that total earnings were maintained, producers were still not as well off in the 1880s as they had been earlier. In the absence of technical improvements in agriculture or in internal transport during the second half of the century, a rise in the volume of exports could be achieved only in one of two ways: first, by existing producers deciding to increase their labour inputs, thus reducing net incomes by cutting down on leisure or other activities, or by paying for additional labour services; and second by expanding the total number of independent producers, thus causing the average per capita incomes of export producers to fall.

It seems likely that the income terms of trade either declined or maintained a precarious stability during the last quarter of the century. Even in the latter case there is a strong probability that the real income of the average export producer was reduced.

The foregoing analysis has referred to the major staples of overseas trade. However, it is important to realise that the late nineteenth century was also a time of crisis for minor staples and for trans-Saharan trade. The Senegalese gum trade declined in the second half of the century as a result of the development of chemical substitutes and the growth of competition from Egyptian gum. Gold exports from the Gold Coast were static, cocoa exports were negligible, and rubber exports did not expand until the 1890s. The Western Sudan was affected in the nineteenth century by a series of political upheavals stemming from the *jihads* (holy wars), which were launched by the protagonists of a revived Islam. The nature of these revivalist movements is still a subject of dispute.[26] Their economic influence appears to have been conservative, except, possibly in the case of Senegal. At best they preserved traditional agricultural and trading activities; at worst they perpetuated archaic economies based on plunder, tribute and slavery. To these troubles was added another, namely the decay of trans-Saharan trade, which declined after 1875, and was reduced to a trickle by 1900. Initially, this slump was the result of slackening demand in Europe, but by the end of the century the desert trade had also been seriously affected by the

[26] The Russian scholar, D. A. Ol'derogge, has argued that the *jihad* in northern Nigeria was primarily a protest of Hausa and Fulani commoners against oppression by the ruling class. So far, this view has not made much impression, at least on British scholars. However, Ol'derogge's interpretation deserves attention, not least because testing his theory involves writing the history of ordinary Africans, as opposed to that of prominent religious and political figures, and this is surely highly desirable. On the *jihad* in Senegambia see Martin A. Klein, *Islam and Imperialism in Senegal*, Edinburgh 1968.

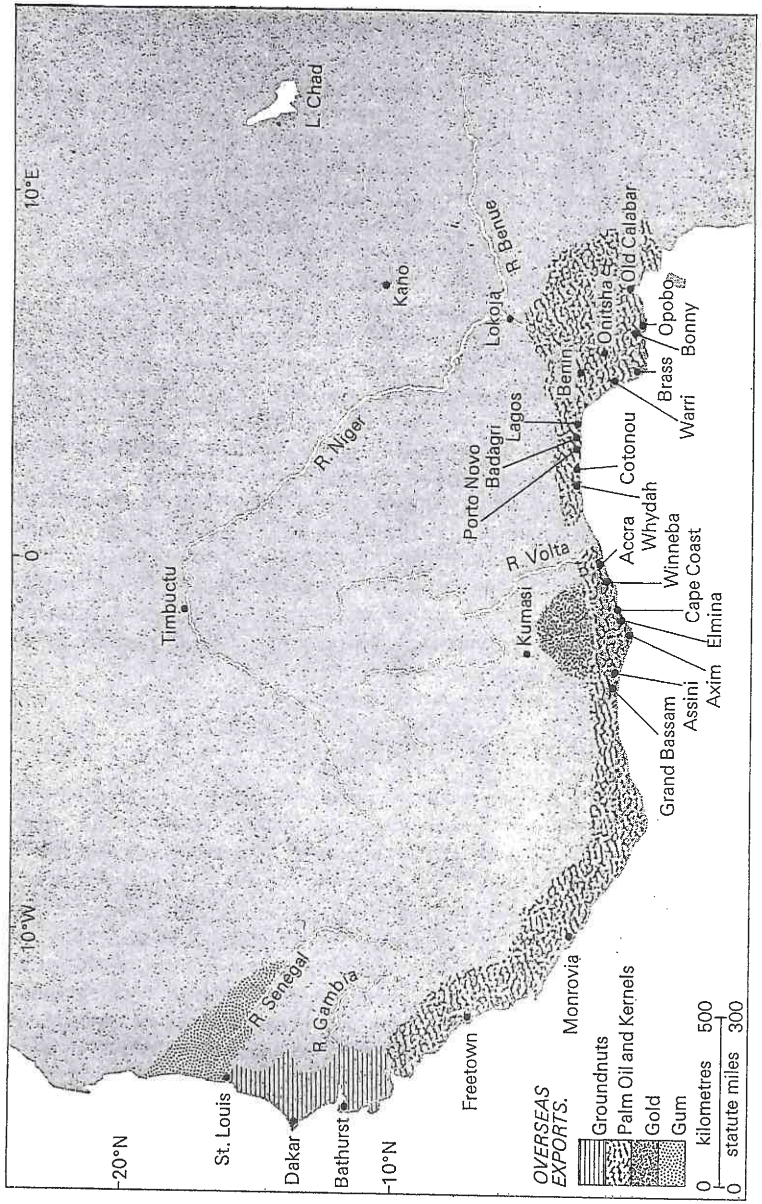
disintegration of the slave system which supported the oases, and by competition from ocean routes, which could deliver manufactured goods more cheaply.

The evidence indicates that West Africa's external trade experienced a crisis in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Export producers had become caught in a staple trap: the barter terms of trade had turned against them, and attempts to increase the volume of exports had either failed or, where successful, had contributed to a further decline in the terms of trade, with the result that growth had become self-defeating. Within a relatively short space of time primary producers and traders came under severe pressure to develop alternative exports and to adopt cost-reducing innovations. This 'general crisis' of the late nineteenth century led to strains, misunderstandings and conflicts between all those, Europeans as well as Africans, who in varying degrees had become dependent on legitimate commerce for their livelihood. The expansion in the volume of overseas commerce in the second half of the nineteenth century, combined with the adverse movement in the terms of trade, led to the modification or abolition of many of the early features of legitimate commerce that had been inherited from the time of the external slave trade, and also caused the European powers to discard the assumptions governing their traditional policy of limited intervention in West Africa. Just as pronounced booms have had a marked effect on the course of West African history, so, too, have serious slumps. Since the beginning of legitimate commerce there have been two periods of ten years or more when the barter terms of trade have moved against export producers *and* when the income terms have either fallen or remained static. The first period of depression was in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and helped to bring the Europeans into Africa. The second period, covering the years 1930–1945, helped create the movement which was to expel them.

2 Economic motives in partition

Imperialism is seen here as a process of interaction and, ultimately, conflict between the industrialised nations and the underdeveloped world. To analyse this process parallel analyses are required, the first dealing with intra-group relations, that is among African producers, traders and politicians on the one hand, and among European manufacturers, traders and politicians on the other; the second covering inter-group strategy, that is between Africans and Europeans at what, broadly, can be called the national level. The principal difficulty, apart from the problem that there is considerable controversy about the role of the Europeans, is that so little is known about the part played by Africans both in assisting and in opposing the invasion of their continent. The argument presented here is by no means complete, but it does try to establish and explore a framework of analysis which it is hoped will lead to further, more detailed research.[27] This framework is in three different

[27] In this respect the analysis is a response to the plea made by J. D. Hargreaves in an important article written more than ten years ago, 'Towards a History of the Partition of Africa', *Journal of African History*, 1, 1960, pp. 97–109. For the most recent statement of Professor



Map 9. The West African Coast in the Nineteenth Century.

sections, all of which are concerned with the implications of the economic structure created by legitimate commerce: the first will consider problems of supply and their effect on intra-group relations on the African side of the frontier; the second will focus on problems of demand and their effect on intra-group relations on the European side of the frontier; and the third section will examine how the economic crisis of the late nineteenth century affected inter-group relations at the national level, and led to the decisions to move the established frontier inland, that is to partition West Africa.

It was by no means easy to develop satisfactory substitutes for the Atlantic slave trade, even though some of the staples of legitimate commerce were already grown in West Africa, and the terms of trade favoured primary producers in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. With the benefit of hindsight, historians have been able to point, justly, to the success of palm produce and groundnuts. For contemporaries, however, legitimate commerce was a long, precarious experiment, an era of fluctuating fortunes which held out no guarantees for the future. This explains why European interests, official and private, thought it necessary to tangle with a series of risky ventures in tropical agriculture. In the 1820s, for example, the French undertook an ambitious agricultural project in Senegal.[28] The main idea behind this scheme was to grow in Africa, and with African labour, the crops which had been produced on slave plantations in the Americas. A model farm was established, several crops, including cotton and indigo, were tried out, and new techniques of irrigation and ploughing were introduced. The experiment was abandoned in 1831 as a result of mismanagement, lack of capital, and ignorance of tropical conditions. In the 1840s British commercial interests established a model farm at Lokoja on the Niger, but this, too, was a failure.

The next important wave of experiments occurred just after the middle of the century, and was prompted by a cotton famine in Europe arising out of the American Civil War. Attempts were made to grow cotton at various points on the West Coast, such as Senegal, southern Nigeria and the Gold Coast.[29] In the 1860s the French still thought that Senegal was destined to become a leading exporter of cotton. Again they were disappointed. Many previous errors were repeated, and American production recovered far more quickly than had been anticipated. Above all, the Senegalese farmer, envisaging a rather different future for his country,

Hargreaves's own view see his contribution 'West African States and the European Conquest', in *Colonialism in Africa, 1870–1960*, ed. L. H. Gann and Peter Duignan, 1, *The History and Politics of Colonialism, 1870–1914*, Cambridge 1969, pp. 199–219. I should like to acknowledge my debt to Dr Martin Klein, Dr Patrick Manning and Dr C. W. Newbury, who (though they may not be fully aware of it) have caused me to re-think my ideas on this subject over the past few years.

[28] Roger Pasquier, 'En marge de la guerre de sécession: les essais de culture du coton au Sénégal', *Annales Africaines*, 1955, pp. 185–202.

[29] Plantation agriculture on the Gold Coast, where experiments sponsored by the Basel Mission were of great importance, has been studied by Kwamina B. Dickson, *A Historical Geography of Ghana*, Cambridge 1969, pp. 120–32.

preferred groundnuts to cotton because they were more profitable. A greater degree of success was achieved at Abeokuta in south-west Nigeria, though there, too, cotton exports dwindled in the 1870s.[30] The promoters found that they were unable to compete in international markets, partly, it is interesting to note, because of the high cost of free African labour. The final phase of experiments came in the 1880s as a result of declining profits in the palm produce trade. Many proposals were put forward to remedy the problem, and several of the more feasible were tried out. Arthur Verdier, a prominent French merchant, began coffee plantations in the Ivory Coast; the Royal Niger Company started plantations of cocoa, coffee and rubber in the Niger Valley; and the colonial administration established botanic stations at Lagos (1887) and on the Gold Coast (1889).

These experiments have implications which extend beyond the local details given above. As a record of early European endeavours in tropical agriculture, they are important for geographers and botanists, as well as for historians. They also represent an interesting stage in the development of economic policy, for they stand mid-way between the mercantilist concept of colonies serving the needs of the mother country, and the realisation of this ideal in the different circumstances of the twentieth century. Furthermore, these nineteenth-century debates over the means of achieving agricultural progress anticipate the controversy which arose in the colonial period between the protagonists of peasant and plantation crops. For historians the schemes are especially noteworthy because they expressed the realisation that the external slave trade would not simply die of its own accord, and that a positive effort was required to find substitute exports. Many of those engaged in this search were energetic and commercially-minded Christians, who were intent on converting the soul of Africa as well as its economy. These men, the militant arm of the abolitionist movement, saw it as their mission to carry the moral convictions and economic optimism of the industrial world into the Dark Continent.

The most important and successful experiments, however, were those undertaken by Africans themselves, without European supervision, indeed frequently without expatriate officials and traders knowing what was happening. It is not always realised just how varied the export economy was in some parts of West Africa during the era of legitimate commerce. At Freetown, for instance, timber accounted for about 70 per cent of all exports by 1829; by 1860 timber exports had almost disappeared, and the main items of overseas trade were gold, palm oil and groundnuts, each of which accounted for about 20 per cent of total exports; by the 1880s these three products had also declined, and palm kernels had become the dominant export.[31] It was in the 1880s, too, and as a direct result of the economic problems of the period, that Africans began cocoa farming in the Gold Coast and southern Nigeria, achieving results which none of the European 'experts' could emulate. These examples

[30] J. B. Webster, 'The Bible and the Plough', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 2, 1963, pp. 418–34.

[31] P. K. Mitchell, 'Trade Routes of the Early Sierra Leone Protectorate', *Sierra Leone Studies*, 16, 1962, pp. 204–17.

illustrate that African responses to changing returns on their exports were flexible and rapid, given the natural resources at their disposal and the technical constraints operating in the nineteenth century, notably in internal transport.

Palm oil, palm kernels and groundnuts, the main staples of legitimate commerce, were produced and delivered to the coast entirely through indigenous enterprise. Yet because of the widespread assumption that the transition to legitimate commerce was easy and uneventful, some basic questions about the historical development of these crops have still to be asked. For example, few historians have appreciated that palm oil was not a homogeneous commodity. Some regions, such as south-west Nigeria, produced a soft quality oil which fetched a high price; others, such as the Gold Coast, supplied a harder oil which was less in demand. These distinctions deserve further consideration, for they are likely to supply much-needed information about the resource base of the various export regions, about differences in methods of preparation, and about the motives for developing alternative exports, such as why the Gold Coast expanded cocoa production at an earlier date than did Nigeria. Similarly, not enough attention has been paid to the fact that palm kernels did not simply join palm oil as an additional export, but were developed largely to compensate for the decline of the latter in the second half of the nineteenth century. Yet some regions exported a much greater proportion of kernels to oil than did others, though both products were in joint supply. This, too, is a difference which needs exploring further, for it may provide a clue to important problems, such as the extent of internal trade in palm oil, and the ability of various parts of the coast to adjust to the decline of staple exports in the late nineteenth century. Finally, more thought needs to be given to the remarkable 'do it yourself' character of staple export production, in which each man became an entrepreneur in his own right, albeit on a modest scale. Traditional economic frontiers were broken down through the initiative of African migrants and settlers, who colonised and developed previously underused land, and in doing so brought about changes in settlement patterns, farming practices, land tenure, and in the role, status and size of the labour force engaged in export production.[32] This is a theme of epic proportions, which still awaits epic treatment.

European demand for vegetable oils had far-reaching economic, social and political consequences in West Africa, though it is important to stress that these were not identical in all parts of the region. Ultimately, it should be possible to define and classify the various areas of West Africa according to the precise type of adaptive challenge which confronted them, and the nature of their responses to it. At present it is hard to do more than sketch the outlines of a complex regional map. Three categories will be suggested here by way of preliminary analysis.

[32] On migration see Marion Johnson, 'Migrants' Progress', *Bulletin of the Ghana Geographical Association*, 9, 1964, pp. 4–27, and 10, 1965, pp. 13–40; and R. K. Udo, 'The Migrant Tenant Farmer of Eastern Nigeria', *Africa*, 34, 1964, pp. 326–39. On land tenure see Akin L. Mabogunje, 'Some Comments on Land Tenure in Egba Division, Western Nigeria', *Africa*, 31, 1961, pp. 258–69. The expansion of 'peasant' exports in the twentieth century is dealt with in Chapter 6.

First, there were areas which experienced a decline in the staple export, slaves, without securing adequate compensation in the form of new products. This was particularly true of those parts of West Africa which were either unsuitable for growing palm trees and groundnuts, or were too far from the coast for export production to be remunerative. The Western Sudan, with its famous trans-Saharan commerce in decline after 1875, was a case in point, for palm produce and groundnuts were bulky items with a low value to weight ratio, unlike slaves, which could be traded profitably over long distances. Second, there were areas which had not been involved in the external slave trade to any great extent, and which were presented with new openings in the export sector. This was the case along parts of the coast between Senegal and the Ivory Coast, which began to export vegetable products in the nineteenth century. Third, there were areas in which the change to legitimate commerce meant a shift from the production of slaves (at least as an export commodity) to the production of vegetable oils. This applied to Senegambia and to most of the forest from the Gold Coast eastwards. There is considerable justification for concentrating on the third category, apart from the convenient fact that it happens to be the best documented. Not only was this extensive region by far the most important supplier of legitimate exports, despite its close involvement with the Atlantic slave trade,[33] but it was also from points within this area that the Europeans launched their invasion of the interior at the close of the century.[34]

Three aspects of the economic history of this region will be considered here. First, its general development as an export centre will be outlined; next, the position of export producers will be investigated with particular reference to the fortunes of the large entrepreneurs who had dominated production during the time of the Atlantic slave trade; finally, the situation of the coastal wholesalers will be examined, using the Niger Delta as a case study.

The supply of West African palm produce came from an area which stretched from Guinea to the Cameroons, though the most important source lay in the eastern section from the Gold Coast to Old Calabar. The prominence of this sub-division was the result of the abundance of its oil-palms, which occurred naturally in a broad belt lying close to the coast,[35] and of the network of lagoons and inland waterways stretching from Porto Novo to Old Calabar, which made it possible to transport produce relatively cheaply. In the period immediately after 1807 the leading centre

[33] In some cases (Old Calabar and Whydah are two obvious examples) it is clear that the overseas slave trade developed entrepreneurial skills and commercial institutions which greatly assisted the rise of legitimate trade. However, it would be wrong to infer that the slave trade was in any sense necessary to the successful expansion of legitimate commerce. Everything that is known about African enterprise in internal trade in the pre-colonial period strongly suggests that indigenous societies would have produced the required number of wholesalers and traders, and in a short space of time, even if the Atlantic slave trade had never existed.

[34] At the same time, it is worth while pointing out that areas in the second category also experienced some of the difficulties of economic transition. See E. A. Ijagbemi, 'The Freetown Colony and the Development of "Legitimate" Commerce in the Adjoining Territories', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 5, 1970, pp. 252–6.

[35] Many palm trees were also planted deliberately.

of production in West Africa was Old Calabar, which shipped well over half the total palm oil imports entering Great Britain. In the 1830s Old Calabar was joined, and for a while overtaken, by Bonny, further west in the mouth of the Niger Delta. In the 1840s exports from the Delta as a whole averaged 15–20,000 tons per annum, which was equivalent to about three-quarters of total oil imports into the United Kingdom. Bonny's supremacy lasted until the 1870s, when its suppliers and outlets were captured by the nearby port of Opobo following a political coup. After the middle of the century other centres sprang up, and the Niger Delta, though still very important, no longer completely dominated the West African oil trade. The geographical and quantitative expansion of legitimate commerce was closely associated with the decline of the Atlantic slave trade, for until about the 1860s slaves still competed successfully with palm oil at several points along the coast, especially at Whydah and Lagos. By the third quarter of the century palm produce was the leading overseas export along a broad stretch of the West Coast. During the last twenty years of the century oil and kernels accounted for over 70 per cent of the value of total exports from the Gold Coast, over 80 per cent at Lagos and over 90 per cent in Dahomey and the Niger Delta. A remarkable transformation of the export economy had been achieved in a comparatively short space of time.

Groundnuts, an annual crop, were grown for export in a region which extended from Senegal to Sierra Leone, though as they prefer sandy soils and a long, reliable dry season, Senegambia became by far the most prominent area of production. Transport costs made it uneconomic to grow the crop for export very far inland, so the main areas of production, as in the case of palm oil, lay near the coast. The small British colony of Gambia was the earliest focal point of the trade, partly, it is interesting to note, as a result of purchases made by American traders.[36] In the 1820s about 90 per cent of Gambia's exports consisted of beeswax and hides. Groundnuts were exported for the first time in the 1830s, and by the middle of the century they accounted for two-thirds of all exports. A proportion of the groundnuts shipped from Gambia were grown in areas which would have made use of ports in neighbouring French territory, except for the fact that an export duty was levied on agricultural exports from Senegal until 1855. With the removal of this duty, exports from Senegal greatly increased. By the last quarter of the century the export trade of Senegambia was as dependent on groundnuts as that of the forest was on palm produce. The main areas of production were Casamance south of Gambia, and Cayor to the north. (However, further north still, around St Louis, the export trade relied principally on gum, as it had in the days of Atlantic commerce.) The groundnut trade, like the palm oil trade, saw the conversion of former slave ports into centres of legitimate commerce. Kaolack, for example, became a large centre for the groundnut trade from the 1860s onwards.[37] A great deal of additional historical research needs to be carried out on most aspects of legitimate commerce, but

[36] Brooks, *Yankee Traders, Old Coasters and African Middlemen*, pp. 184–9.

[37] A. Dessertine, 'Naissance d'un port: Kaolack, des origines à 1900', *Annales Africaines*, 1960, pp. 225–59.

especially on the development of groundnut production. Fouquet, Pelissier, and others have made substantial contributions to the study of Senegalese groundnuts in the modern context, but the economic history of the crop remains to be written.

In some parts of the underdeveloped world the requirements of the industrial nations were consistent with the maintenance of the established social and political order. Britain's demand for Argentinian beef, for example, strengthened the position of an already existing class of large landowners in that area, since cattle rearing was most efficient on sizeable units of land.[38] Peaceful economic integration was also associated with a policy of political neutrality in Latin America, though it was not the only reason for it. In West Africa, on the other hand, the accidents of geography and history which enabled small farmers and traders to participate efficiently in overseas commerce posed acute problems of adaptation for the traditional warrior entrepreneurs who had co-operated so profitably with European slavers during the days of the Atlantic trade. African rulers experimented with a number of modes of adaptation to their new situation, and these can be classified according to their negative or positive character. Four of the most important, which were adopted singly or in conjunction, will be dealt with here.

The first negative response was to continue exporting slaves in defiance of the ban imposed by the European nations. Little is known at present about the relative profits of slaving and legitimate commerce, but it seems that few African slave exporters turned willingly to the new trade, even though the terms of trade were more favourable in the second quarter of the century than they were to become later on. This reluctance may be taken as an indication that for established exporters the costs of legitimate commerce (in terms of diminished political power as well as of cash income) outweighed the returns. The predicament of Ghezo, the ruler of Abomey, was duplicated in other parts of the West Coast:

> The state which he maintained was great; his army was expensive; the ceremonies and customs to be observed annually, which had been handed down to him from his forefathers, entailed upon him a vast outlay of money. These could not be abolished. The form of his government could not be suddenly changed, without causing such a revolution as would deprive him of his throne, and precipitate his kingdom into a state of anarchy.[39]

As for the palm oil trade, that was 'a slow method of making money, and brought only a very small amount of duties into his coffers'. Ghezo's support of the slave trade ceased only with his death in 1858. After the withdrawal of European nations from the Atlantic trade, the shipment of slaves was handled mainly by Brazilian merchants, such as Domingo Martinez, who operated in the Bight of Benin between

[38] H. S. Ferns, 'Latin America and Industrial Capitalism—The First Phase', *Sociological Review Monograph*, 11, 1967, pp. 18–20.

[39] Brodie Cruickshank's report of 1848, quoted in C. W. Newbury, *The Western Slave Coast and its Rulers*, Oxford 1961, p. 51.

1833 and 1864.[40] The Brazilians were eventually eliminated by the naval squadron, by the closure of foreign slave markets, and by their own inability to procure the necessary European trade goods. By the end of the 1860s the overseas slave trade had been reduced to a trickle. Responding to the new trade by trying to perpetuate the old was no longer possible.

Next, African rulers attempted to bolster their fortunes by means which were familiar to pre-industrial governments throughout the world, namely by employing armed strength to plunder and to exact tribute from their neighbours. The kings of Senegambia used this tactic as an outlet for the energies of their hard-drinking, hard-fighting warrior élite (*tyeddo*); Ashanti mixed force with diplomacy in order to control, or secure access to, the wealth of the coastal peoples; the kings of Dahomey made annual incursions into Yoruba country; and the Yoruba states themselves fought a series of wars in which economic goals were prominent. Military operations, and, perhaps more important, the constant threat of them, led to the abandonment of fertile land, and to the creation of broad areas of neutral territory between hostile states. They perpetuated conditions which were inimical to the growth of the petty capitalism that had been fostered by legitimate commerce. They dramatised what may be called the crisis of the aristocracy in nineteenth-century West Africa, a social and political crisis stemming from a contradiction between past and present relations of production. They were a last resort, and, as such, represented the ultimate failure of the *ancien régime* to adapt peacefully and efficiently to the demands of the industrial world.

The first of the two positive modes of adaptation was for former slave suppliers to develop an export trade in legitimate goods. Some of them became employers rather than exporters of slaves, and they used servile labour to harvest palm trees, to grow groundnuts and to transport produce to markets. The rise of legitimate commerce, far from bringing about the abolition of domestic slavery, increased the demand for cheap labour in Africa itself, and so perpetuated a service industry (the supply of slaves) which was detrimental to the long-term development of the natural resources of the region. The result was the growth of a small group of large export producers in areas which were near enough to the coast for the transport of bulky goods to be a feasible proposition. In Dahomey and some of the Yoruba states, for example, the rulers and important chiefs established large palm oil estates worked by slave labour. However, these men now had to face competition at their palace gates from a multiplicity of small, efficient farmers who were only partly committed to the overseas market, but who supplied the greater part of the produce shipped to Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. The large producers found that they were unable to influence local export prices simply by controlling production, as they had done previously, yet at the same time they themselves were highly vulnerable to changes in the prices paid for produce by European merchants on the coast, since a sizeable part of their total incomes was derived from export earnings.

[40] David A. Ross, 'The Career of Domingo Martinez in the Bight of Benin, 1833–64', *Journal of African History*, 6, 1965, pp. 79–90.

States which were not situated close to the coast had great difficulty in making constructive adjustments to legitimate commerce. Ashanti, however, is an interesting example of a partially exceptional case.[41] Faced with a severe crisis early in the nineteenth century, the rulers of Ashanti responded by expanding their export trade to the north, selling kola nuts and buying cattle and slaves. Demand in the Hausa states had grown following the *jihads* of the early nineteenth century because kola was an approved stimulant in Muslim communities, which were denied alcohol. Supplies were increased partly by gathering kola nuts from wild trees, but mainly, it appears, through the establishment of plantations worked by slave labour.[42] Good fortune, commercial skill and a highly efficient system of government helped Ashanti to adjust to the central economic problem which it faced in the nineteenth century. Yet some important questions still have to be answered before the response of Ashanti can be counted as an unqualified success. In the first place, not enough is known about the total value and the rate of profit of the northern trade to say whether its expansion in the nineteenth century fully compensated for the diminution of exports to the south. It has to be remembered that the size of the internal market was still severely limited by transport costs, and that the decline of trans-Saharan trade after 1875 might well have affected purchasing power in the north. Secondly, Ashanti still depended on the coast for supplies of munitions, salt and cotton goods, which came through satellites, such as the Fante states. These states now produced palm oil and kernels for export, and no longer relied on Ashanti for supplies of slaves for shipment overseas. Thus it is likely that there was, from the Ashanti point of view, an unfavourable shift in the balance of economic power. What is certain is that the attempt to reassert control over the Fante in the second half of the century brought Ashanti closer to conflict with the British. Finally, more research is needed into the potentially disintegrative elements within the Ashanti state: the implications for her long-term economic welfare and political stability of the existence of marked inequalities of wealth, the growth of the slave labour force, and the frustration of the merchant class, whose development was deliberately restrained, lest private enterprise should harm the national interest, as conceived by the king.[43]

The second positive mode of adaptation was for traditional rulers to recognise the small producers as a serious new force, and to give them an increased stake in a

[41] Very few historians of Africa can match Ivor Wilks's achievement in reconstructing the history of Ashanti. See, for example, 'Ashanti Government', in *West African Kingdoms in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Daryll Forde and P. M. Kaberry, 1967, pp. 206–38, and his study of the 'war' and 'peace' parties in *Political Bi-polarity in Nineteenth-Century Asante*, Centre of African Studies, Edinburgh 1971.

[42] Ivor Wilks, 'Asante Policy Towards the Hausa Trade in the Nineteenth Century', in *The Development of Indigenous Trade and Markets in West Africa*, ed. Claude Meillassoux, 1971, pp. 124–41.

[43] Some important work on these topics is being undertaken by K. Arhin. See, for example, 'The Structure of Greater Ashanti', *Journal of African History*, 8, 1967, pp. 65–85, and 'Aspects of Ashanti Northern Trade in the Nineteenth Century', *Africa*, 40, 1970, pp. 363–73.

reformed political system. For example, Lat Dior, the ruler of Cayor in Senegal, tried to forge an alliance with the groundnut farmers of his state in the 1870s in an attempt to counterbalance the power of the traditional military estate. However, support could not always be relied on, and aspirations, once encouraged, tended to multiply. The small producers used their new wealth to purchase, among other items, guns, and with these they could threaten the rulers who sought their co-operation.[44] The new generation of export producers in West Africa had every reason to be wary of encouragement from their superiors, for rulers who allowed independent producers to develop did so in the hope of taxing their wealth. Not surprisingly, this aim became a cause of friction, particularly in the last quarter of the century, when profits from the export trade were reduced to a minimum. Furthermore, taxing small producers posed serious practical problems. Collecting tolls from a convoy of slaves travelling on an established route was easy enough, but, as the Aro of south-east Nigeria found, levying duties on palm oil was an entirely different matter, for oil was produced and traded in small quantities at many diverse points. Thus the attempt to accommodate the new capitalist class and secure the incomes of traditional rulers was a difficult operation.

The negative responses may have helped to prevent a sudden decline in incomes, but were ultimately self-defeating. The positive responses achieved better results, but were still not wholly successful. The difficulties of the progressive rulers arose first from an internal conflict of interest stemming from a basic change in the structure of export-producing firms, and second from the fact that they were unable or unwilling to make the necessary adjustments in the time allowed by impatient and often unsympathetic foreigners. For a while it seemed that there was a chance of stabilising the existing frontier between Europeans and Africans on the West Coast, but in the last quarter of the century the indigenous rulers were called on to make concessions over such matters as railways, internal tolls and slavery, which they judged, quite rightly, would undermine their political independence. At that point the dialogue over peaceful coexistence came to an end. Possessing fewer internal assets, and experiencing at the same time greater external pressures, the modernising aristocracies of West Africa were less able to control their future than were their revolutionary counterparts in Japan after 1868.[45]

As a general proposition, it can be said 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. This was because large wholesalers were still necessary, whether the commodities to be handled were slaves or palm oil, whereas large producers were not. Many established entrepôts, such as Whydah, Lagos, Bonny and Old Calabar, substituted palm oil for slaves and survived as major ports right down to partition, and in some cases beyond. Their rulers continued to levy

[44] These developments are discussed by Martin Klein in 'Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Legitimate Commerce in Late Nineteenth-Century Africa', *Études d'Histoire Africaine*, 2, 1971, pp. 22–4.

[45] A brief survey of this aspect of Japanese history is given in Thomas C. Smith, 'Japan's Aristocratic Revolution', *Yale Review*, 5, 1960–1, pp. 370–83.

traditional taxes on visiting ships, and their leading merchants received credit and goods on a larger scale than ever before. Even the old trading premises survived: after abolition, the barracoons (warehouses where slaves were kept pending shipment) were used to store the new, legitimate exports. Although the entrepôts were not affected in precisely the same way as producers in the hinterland, it does not follow that they were not affected at all by the development of legitimate commerce, or that they found it any easier to establish a lasting and satisfactory relationship with their European customers. On the contrary, African rulers had to struggle in the nineteenth century to control destabilising forces which threatened the cohesion of the entrepôts, and sometimes their very existence. Some indication of the nature of these forces is necessary for an understanding of the degrees of solidarity and disunity exhibited by the middlemen states when faced with increased European pressure towards the close of the century. The best illustration of their problems is provided by the history of the area centring on the Niger Delta, which has been the subject of some important research in recent years.[46]

Legitimate commerce presented opportunities to a new generation of traders, as well as producers, because it gave employment to a greater number of intermediaries, who were needed to collect export crops and to distribute manufactured goods. Entry into small scale trade was easy because there were few barriers of capital or skill. The result was that existing wholesalers faced more competition than they had in the past, though this is not to imply that such rivalry was unimportant during the time of the Atlantic slave trade. The new traders won their most striking success in the Niger Delta. Virtually all the 'city states', as Dike has called them, experienced serious political unrest between 1850 and 1875, as slaves and ex-slaves challenged the authority of the established wholesalers and rulers. This movement was personified by Ja Ja, the former slave who rose to a position of economic importance in Bonny in the 1860s, but whose social origins prevented him from attaining the highest political office. In 1869 Ja Ja founded his own state at nearby Opobo, thus conferring on himself the political power which he felt his commercial success deserved. The career of Nana Olomu, the leading figure in Itsekiri trade and politics in the 1880s, provides another striking example of how advancement was becoming based on commercial achievement rather than on inherited status, though Nana's social origins were less humble than Ja Ja's, and he was able to further his political ambitions in his home territory.[47] Ability put a man in a strong position; ability *and* acceptable family connections made him almost unassailable.

Indigenous commercial institutions in the Delta states were not entirely immune from change, and were affected by the alterations in personnel. At Bonny and

[46] The major studies are K. O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830–1885*, Oxford 1956; G. I. Jones, *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers*, Oxford 1963; Obaro Ikime, *Merchant Prince of the Niger Delta*, 1968; and A. J. H. Latham, *Old Calabar, 1600–1861: the Economic Impact of the West upon a Traditional Society*, University of Birmingham Ph.D. thesis, 1970.

[47] On the problems of economic transition among the Itsekiri see P. C. Lloyd, 'The Itsekiri in the Nineteenth Century: an Outline Social History', *Journal of African History*, 4, 1963, pp. 207–31.

Kalabari, for example, the rise of men whose success was a result of trading ability rather than of ascribed social position had repercussions on the traditional canoe 'house' (a compact and well organised trading and fighting corporation capable of maintaining a war canoe) because increased social mobility led to a greater turnover of commercial and political authority. Jones has analysed the history of these states in the nineteenth century in terms of a developmental cycle, which started with the expansion of a canoe house, moved on to a phase of political accretion, in which several houses coalesced, and culminated in varying degrees of disintegration, as unity broke down. For present purposes it might also be useful to think of the economic aspects of this cycle in terms of the theory of the firm, whereby a successful company expands, takes over its rivals, and achieves a local monopoly, only to find that its dominance is undermined from within, as managers leave to start their own businesses, and challenged from outside, as new competitors move in to try and secure a share of the monopoly profit.

Certain qualifications to the foregoing analysis have to be made, even at the risk of complicating the story. In the first place it should be noted that legitimate commerce speeded social change in the trading states, but did not initiate it, for social 'upstarts' had also found scope for their talents during the days of the Atlantic slave trade.[48] Secondly, some states escaped slave revolts, and in others slave risings were not always movements of the downtrodden against their masters. In Kalabari, for example, class conflict was minimised by integrating mechanisms which helped to assimilate slaves into society.[49] In Old Calabar slave risings were partly demonstrations in support of established, rival political factions, and so served a functional purpose in reinforcing the status quo. Finally, care must be taken not to romanticise the careers of the famous Delta traders. Some scholars, understandably anxious to write African rather than Imperial history, have seen in these men the forerunners of the nationalist movements which developed in the colonial period. This interpretation bestows on the actors a motive and sense of purpose which they themselves would have had difficulty in recognising. The leaders of the Delta states were great traders, and they certainly fought hard to maintain their independence, but their world view did not extend much beyond their local commercial interests, their vision of social justice did not include the emancipation of their own slaves, and they resisted African as well as European rivals with the true impartiality of *homo economicus*.

Besides the problem of internally-generated instability, the entrepôts faced an additional complication which did not affect the producers directly, namely the physical presence of commercial agents from the Western world. In the second half of the nineteenth century the growth of a bulk trade, combined with the advent of the steamship, led the European merchants to set up many more shore bases. With

[48] See, for example, Kwame Y. Daaku, *Trade and Politics on the Gold Coast, 1600–1720*, Oxford 1970, ch. 5.

[49] Robin Horton, 'From Fishing Village to City State: a Social History of New Calabar', in *Man in Africa*, ed. Mary Douglas and Phyllis M. Kaberry, 1969, pp. 37–58.

the merchants came missionaries and educated African ex-slaves. This development was a serious threat to the position of the ruling oligarchy in the entrepôts. In contrast to the era of the slave trade, when European visitors tended to be sailors first and traders second, the newcomers were permanent and competitive wholesalers. Furthermore, the presence of an expatriate community, however small, had important political consequences. It acted as a magnet for the disaffected, from slaves seeking freedom to disgruntled members of the local oligarchy looking for external support for battles which they could not win on their own. Since the European merchants were the main suppliers of credit, whatever action they took, whether Machiavellian or innocent in intent, was bound to have repercussions on the internal political situation, either confirming the power of the existing rulers or building up the claims of rivals.

Potentially the most serious destabilising influence was the possibility of a serious trade depression, an event which would have affected the large wholesalers in much the same way as the large producers because both depended on foreign trade for their livelihood. Indeed, it could be argued that the middlemen were even more vulnerable than the producers since some of the entrepôts relied on local imports for their basic supplies of food, and they nearly all lacked an alternative means of maintaining their incomes. A crisis in foreign trade would intensify internal rivalries by fostering disputes over the allocation of shares in the export trade, over the prices to be asked and given, and over the distribution of reduced profits. It would also increase external pressures. On the one hand, European traders would try to pay less for produce and charge more for manufactured goods; they would become more closely concerned as creditors of faltering and bankrupt African wholesalers; and they would be tempted to give support to families and houses which appeared more capable of safeguarding their interests than did the existing rulers. On the other hand, the wholesalers would run into difficulties with their hinterland customers, as they tried to pass on the price changes which they themselves had been forced to accept. While trade remained prosperous these tendencies, though present, were held in check. In the last quarter of the century, however, there was a radical change in the situation.

African producers and wholesalers were not alone in facing problems of adaptation in the nineteenth century. Commercial interests on the European side of the frontier were also profoundly affected by the expansion of overseas trade and by the change in its character following the rise of legitimate exports. Two developments in particular helped to bring about a fundamental reorganisation of West African trade after 1850, resulting in a greater degree of competition, the final liquidation of eighteenth-century commercial practices, and the beginnings of a recognisably modern organisational structure for the expatriate firms. The first development, in terms of chronology, concerned ocean transport, and the second involved alterations to the media of exchange used on the West Coast. Just as there were reactionary, as well as progressive, elements on the African side of the frontier, so, too, contrary to what might be supposed, there were those among the European community who did their best to convince themselves and their customers that the industrial revolution had never occurred.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the products of legitimate commerce were carried to Europe by sailing ships, and the leading trading firms all possessed ocean-going vessels. The Bordeaux firm of Maurel et Prom kept a sizeable fleet of three-masted ships in service on the route to Senegal between the 1830s and the 1880s, and other large merchants, such as the London firm of F. & A. Swanzy, which traded to the Gold Coast, followed this practice. However, shortly after the middle of the century the technical development of the steamship reached a point where it could begin to compete successfully with sail.[50] The African Steam Ship Company was formed in England in 1851 and began a regular service to the West Coast in the following year. This firm was joined by another, the British & African Steam Navigation Company in 1868, first as a rival and then as an associate. The British Lines were the most important serving West Africa, but other European interests were also represented. In France a consortium of Bordeaux and Marseilles firms ran steamships to parts of West Africa in the 1870s before the formation of the Fabre-Fraissinet line in 1889, and in Germany the merchant house of Woermann began to run steamers to the West Coast in the 1870s, before the establishment of the Woermann-Linie in 1886. During the third quarter of the century the West African carrying trade was converted to steam, and by the 1870s the sailing ship was playing a secondary and diminishing role. In 1880 the number of sailing vessels entering Lagos harbour, for example, was about a third of the number of steamers and represented only one sixth of the tonnage of the latter.

The second change centred on the decline of the main transitional currencies, and on an increase in the circulation of modern money (especially British and French silver coins) in the key exporting areas.[51] In the present state of knowledge it is hard to make firm generalisations about this process, but three points can be established. First, the change was under way *before* the advent of colonial rule, though the timing varied at different points along the West Coast. In the second half of the nineteenth century iron and copper currencies and cowries underwent a serious depreciation, and by the close of the century had ceased to play an important part in external trade. Francs were used extensively in the groundnut trade as early as the 1850s, and florins and shillings became the main media of exchange for palm produce during the last quarter of the century. Second, it seems clear that the decline of these currencies was closely associated with a fall in the cost of supplying them to West Africa. In Europe technical advances made it possible to manufacture manillas and iron currencies more cheaply, and in Africa new resources of cowrie shells were

[50] Technical supremacy, however, did not come until the 1880s. See Gerald S. Graham, 'The Ascendancy of the Sailing Ship, 1850–85', *Economic History Review*, 9, 1956, pp. 74–88. Further information about the beginnings of steamship services to West Africa can be found in P. N. Davies, 'The African Steam Ship Company', in *Liverpool and Merseyside*, ed. J. R. Harris, 1969, pp. 212–38, and in a neglected article by Emile Baillet, 'Le rôle de la marine de commerce dans l'implantation de la France en A.O.F.', *Revue Maritime*, 135, 1957, pp. 832–40.

[51] For further details see A. G. Hopkins, 'The Currency Revolution in South-West Nigeria in the Late Nineteenth Century', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 3, 1966, pp. 471–83, and a more comprehensive article by Marion Johnson, 'The Cowrie Currencies of West Africa', *Journal of African History*, 11, 1970, pp. 331–53.

discovered on the East Coast around the middle of the century. Improvements in ocean transport made it possible to deliver all these currencies at reduced cost. European merchants, competing with each other for the purchase of produce, began to flood the West African export market with transitional monies. Over-issue undermined confidence and led to a fall in exchange rates with other currencies. By the 1880s traders in some centres needed porters to headload their small change, in much the same way as workers in Germany needed suitcases to carry home their weekly earnings following the depreciation of the mark in the 1920s. Third, the collapse of transitional currencies undermined the barter system, which was closely associated with it, and the mythical ounce and bar trade too, though again little is known at the moment about this aspect of African monetary history.[52]

In the long run the advent of the steamship and the introduction of modern money brought advantages to those engaged in overseas trade, principally because they assisted the expansion of the market. Without these innovations West Africa would certainly have become uncompetitive in international trade. The steamship was cheaper per ton/mile than sail, and this was a vital consideration at a time when the West African export trade had become centred on bulky vegetable products, which, as noted earlier, were of low value per unit of weight compared with slaves. The steamer was also faster than sail; in the middle of the century sailing ships took about thirty-five days to reach West Africa, but by 1900 the steamer had reduced this time by half. The speed of the steamship made it possible to transport a wider range of perishable goods, and it enabled traders to complete their transactions more quickly, thus helping them to economise on capital. Finally, the steamship, being less dependent on natural conditions than was sail, could guarantee regularity of service. Fore-knowledge of the steamer's arrival enabled traders to purchase and prepare goods for shipment. Greater readiness reduced the time spent in port, and so lowered running costs.

Modern money helped to increase the number and variety of possible transactions. British and French silver coins were almost perfect substitutes, that is to say they were acceptable for virtually all goods and services. Africans who were paid in silver coin for their produce received units of general purchasing power instead of a packet of goods and transitional currencies. Export earnings could be diverted more easily to domestic uses, or could be spent on imported goods supplied by a variety of firms. African producers and traders had more freedom of choice: they were no longer tied to the firm which bought their produce, and they enjoyed greater independence from rulers who previously had exercised a degree of central control over export sales and over the distribution of foreign trade earnings. It was no coincidence that francs and shillings spread in areas where legitimate exports were developing most quickly, and it was no coincidence either that low denomination coins were in great demand, for they were an indication of the growing importance of small producers

[52] Further work is also needed to clarify the consequences of the decline of transitional currencies for African societies, particularly for fixed income groups and those wealthy enough to hold stocks of money. It would also be interesting to know whether a depreciating exchange rate assisted exports in the 1860s and 1870s.

and traders in the new export economy. These men were not innocents who had a modern money economy thrust upon them by rapacious expatriate firms; they embraced the new system willingly because it gave them the means of striking a better bargain.

In the short run, however, the steamship and modern money had a profoundly unsettling effect on West African trade. Essentially, they can be regarded as external economies which made it easier for newcomers to enter West Coast commerce. The result was a marked increase in competition in the second half of the nineteenth century. With the arrival of the steamship, the trader whose resources were very limited could hire a small amount of cargo space for a short period of time. Merchants trading to West Africa did not need to buy a ship of their own, nor did they have to join a consortium to charter one. Few of the established firms, apart from Woermann, were able to convert to steam, partly because the initial capital investment needed to build an ocean-going steamer was much greater than that required for a sailing vessel, and partly because more working capital was needed to finance the expansion of legitimate commerce.[53] The result was that trading and carrying became separate activities, and the established firms were less able to keep control of new entrants than in the days when they also monopolised shipping space. Moreover, and this is a feature which is often overlooked, the steamer also concentrated competition at the ports of call, in contrast to the days of sail, when ships could adapt their schedules to meet varying market conditions. Evidence of increasing concentration was to be seen in the expansion of a few favoured centres, such as Dakar, Freetown and Lagos, and, ultimately, in the decline of well-known trading stations, such as St Louis, Cape Coast, and Opobo.

The commercial effect of the steamship has been commented on by McPhee and subsequent writers, but the consequences of monetary change have not been fully appreciated. The steamer brought new traders to the coast, but it could not help them to trade once they had arrived. As long as barter and transitional currencies remained firmly entrenched, newcomers were at a severe disadvantage, for they had to master the complexities of a pre-industrial monetary system, itself a serious barrier to entry; they had to acquire these strange currencies, in some cases from the established firms; and they had to be prepared to engage both in importing and in exporting. For example, a new trader hoping to sell cotton goods would have to take produce in exchange, since transitional currencies were not an acceptable means of payment in Europe. Cash payments made it possible to separate the two trades, and enabled firms to specialise in one or other if they wished. This specialisation reduced the capital required for entering West African trade and encouraged competition. No wonder the old-established European firms, far from trying to 'entangle Africans in the web of a money economy' strove to maintain the barter system for as long as possible. In this respect some of the 'natives' of Liverpool and Marseilles were far more conservative than those in the hinterlands of Dakar and Lagos!

[53] C. W. Newbury, 'Credit in Early Nineteenth-Century West African Trade', *Journal of African History*, 13, 1972, pp. 81–95.

Evidence of increasing competition can be seen in the appearance of two new groups of traders in the second half of the century. First, there were progressive European merchants who had little or no previous connection with West Africa, but who established themselves by taking advantage of the steamer and of cash transactions. For example, Cheri Peyrissac began as a clerk at St Louis (Senegal) in 1862, and later built up a large independent import and export business based on manufactured goods and groundnuts; the Hamburg industrial concern of G. L. Gaiser expanded into West African trade in 1869 in order to secure supplies of palm produce for its oil mills, and was one of the first firms to develop a cash trade; the Manchester firm of John Walkden & Company started to trade with West Africa in 1868 as a mail order business, supplying manufactured goods on commission; and John Holt, a Liverpool merchant, broke into the Niger Delta trade in the 1870s, and later established branches in other parts of what was to become Nigeria.[54] Many of the older firms tried to adapt to legitimate commerce, but very few lasted until the end of the century. They had every incentive to adjust to the new conditions because they had sunk capital into African trade, they had spent years building up connections, and many of them were creditors of African suppliers. Thus John Tobin, a Liverpool slave trader, pioneered the palm oil trade in the Niger Delta early in the century. However, firms of this type were nearly all eliminated by the steamship and by the collapse of barter. Perhaps the most spectacular rearguard action was that fought by F. & A. Swanzy, which, with Forster & Smith, dominated the overseas trade of the Gold Coast in the early 1850s. Swanzy's reaction to the advent of the steamer was not to modernise their business, but to try to establish a local monopoly of palm oil supplies. Unfortunately for them, the producers retaliated by successfully boycotting the firm between 1858 and 1866.[55] Swanzy's managed to survive, but the firm declined in importance. The steamer, it could be said, had taken all the wind out of their sails.

The second new group of merchants were Africans, consisting mainly of liberated slaves and their descendants, men who grew up in settlements such as Freetown and Libreville, where they were converted to Christianity, took European names, and received some education from expatriate missionaries. These merchants, in sharp contrast to their slave-trading predecessors, were noted for their Victorian dress, bourgeois values and commitment to legitimate commerce. It was intended that they should form the nucleus of an African middle class, which would develop the continent's economy and uplift its spiritual life. Although numerically a small group, these liberated Africans had considerable importance in the second half of the nineteenth century. Many of them returned to their homelands, and so made their presence felt in most of the main urban centres on the West Coast. Furthermore, since they became lawyers, civil servants and missionaries, as well as merchants,

[54] On Gaiser and Holt see Ernst Hieke, *G. L. Gaiser: Hamburg—Westafrica*, Hamburg 1949; and Cherry J. Gertzel, *John Holt: a British Merchant in West Africa in the Era of Imperialism*, University of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1959.

[55] Freda Wolfson, 'A Price Agreement on the Gold Coast—The Krobo Oil Boycott, 1858–1866', *Economic History Review*, 6, 1953, pp. 68–77.

their influence spread over a wide occupational front. Essentially, their role was that of cultural intermediaries, men who straddled the frontier between Europe and Africa, interpreting, in the broadest sense of the word, one to the other. Europeans often referred to them, contemptuously, as 'trousered Africans', and Africans have criticised them for behaving as Uncle Toms. However, thanks to the painstaking work of Christopher Fyfe and others, it is now appreciated (or at least it should now be appreciated) that these were men of genuine dignity and considerable historical significance.[56] They performed an important function in introducing the Western world to Africa, yet they were by no means as alienated from their indigenous culture as has been alleged. They demonstrated to sceptical Europeans that Africans were not barbarians, and they were among the first to proclaim that Africa had a history of its own.

Helped by the steamer and by the transition to cash payments, these merchants mostly became low-cost, import specialists, acting either as independent wholesalers and retailers, or as agents selling goods on commission for manufacturing firms in Europe. Some were involved in the export trade, but the import business was preferred because it required less capital and also spread investments over a wider range of goods than the produce trade, which in addition experienced considerable short-run price fluctuations. Before 1900, when trading conditions once again began to favour large firms, a number of African merchants owned businesses which were as large as some of the European firms, though of course the latter were much smaller than they were to become in the twentieth century. Business profits tended to be attracted into property and education, two assets which continued to appreciate during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries irrespective of political changes.

One of the most outstanding of this new generation of Africans was Richard Blaize (1845–1904), who left Freetown in 1862 and made his business career in Lagos.[57] Blaize reckoned that he had earned the greater part of his fortune during the 1860s and 1870s, and was appalled by the narrow profit margins which ruled towards the end of the century. In the 1880s he built a new house and shop, which still stand on the Marina, and he also acquired 'a landau and pair of greys with which he drives out occasionally—footman and coachman on the box'. In 1896 a European official estimated that Blaize was worth about £150,000, which is a large sum even today, when the value of the pound sterling is far less than it was in the nineteenth century. Blaize's business, like that of most of his African contemporaries, died with him. However, the Blaize Memorial Institute, which was founded soon after his death with money left by him for that purpose, still flourishes, and contributes to what are now regarded as important functions, namely encouraging local manufacturing activities and providing Africans with technical training.

These two groups of merchants will be considered in more detail in Chapter 6. The main point to record in the present context is that there were pronounced

[56] Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone*, Oxford 1962. See also Arthur T. Porter, *Creoledom*, Oxford 1963, and Margaret Priestley, *West African Trade and Coast Society*, 1969.

[57] A. G. Hopkins, 'Richard Beale Blaize, 1854–1904: Merchant Prince of West Africa', *Tarikh*, 1, 1966, pp. 70–9.

economic rivalries among firms on the European side of the frontier, just as there were among African suppliers. Competition between European firms was characterised by bouts of co-operation and conflict which bore some resemblance to the accretion-fission cycle experienced by the canoe houses of the Niger Delta. Typically, a newcomer trying to become established in one of the West African markets would begin by fixing his prices at levels which were more attractive than those of the established firms. These firms retaliated, and a price war followed. If this failed to drive out the new entrant, a compromise was eventually reached which allowed him to trade in the area on the understanding that competition was kept within 'reasonable' bounds. However, usually it was not long before the equilibrium was upset once again, either by the defection of an existing firm, or by the arrival of another outsider.

The trend was undoubtedly towards greater efficiency. In order to survive, firms had to adjust to the advent of the steamship, and to the development of cash transactions, and they also had to make internal improvements, as did John Holt, by employing better staff and by buying manufactures in bulk where possible. By the last quarter of the cen tury evidence from the Gold Coast, Dahomey, Lagos, the Niger Delta and Old Calabar indicates that profit margins had been greatly reduced. The commercial practices of the eighteenth century had finally disappeared, and the merchants, though not all of them realised it, were, in terms of business history, on the brink of the twentieth century, when wholesalers became accustomed to relying on narrower margins and on a much larger turnover. In 1875, however, the import and export market was still confined to a few coastal enclaves, and no additional cost-reducing innovations were possible within the existing political framework.

The adverse movement in the terms of trade in the last quarter of the nineteenth century had a serious effect on those engaged in the difficult process of adapting to legitimate commerce. Normal, non-violent commercial relationships started to break down, and the 'moral community' of traders, already under some strain, began to dissolve. The trade depression intensified rivalries within the various interest groups and between African producers on the one hand, and European firms on the other. Essentially, the dispute was over the distribution of reduced profits. The decline in the barter terms of trade affected the European firms in West Africa as well as primary producers. Initially, it was these firms which received lower prices for produce in Europe, and it was up to them to try and pass on reductions to their African suppliers. The extent to which they were successful depended on the balance of commercial power in individual West African markets. Not surprisingly, there was a fierce struggle in the late nineteenth century as each party sought to control the local market and to dictate terms to the other.

Evidence from various parts of the West Coast suggests that there were five main aspects of this struggle. None was entirely new, but each became more pronounced during the last quarter of the century. First, there were malpractices, such as diluting palm oil and misrepresenting the quality and length of cloth, which both sides adopted in an attempt to secure a better bargain than could be contrived by legitimate

means. Second, there were demarcation disputes over functions and areas of influence. For example, some European firms, such as the Royal Niger Company, tried to move inland in the hope of buying export crops more cheaply from the producers than from the coastal wholesalers.[58] These moves often provoked retaliation, as when traders from Brass destroyed the Niger Company's base at Akassa in 1894. Similarly, some Africans tried to sell their oil direct to Europe. It was Ja Ja's threat to bypass the European middlemen in this way that was largely responsible for his expulsion from Opobo in 1887. Third, there were serious disputes, common everywhere at times of depression, and aggravated in the African case by the depreciation in the value of transitional currencies, about the repayment of the advances which European firms had made to African suppliers. Fourth, there were deliberate interruptions to the supply of produce. The Moors withheld supplies of gum in 1885–1886, the Yoruba closed their export markets at one time or another during the 1880s, and the Itsekiri held up palm oil exports in 1886–1887. The aim in all cases was to force European merchants to accept the suppliers' terms of sale, a policy which was to be repeated in the 1930s, when West Africa's foreign trade underwent its next great crisis. Finally, there were arguments about escaped slaves, many of whom sought refuge in the European colonies on the coast. Large scale African producers and traders resented the loss of their human capital, especially at a time when trade conditions dictated that slave labour should be fully exploited.

The outcome was a compromise which affected both parties adversely, and so satisfied neither. Africans were hit at a time when they were unable to achieve economies in production and transportation, and Europeans were hit at a time when their profit margins had already been reduced by increased competition. In these unprecedented circumstances the merchants, though traditionally suspicious of moves to expand the role of government, which they associated with increased regulations and additional taxes, began to press for a more active policy.[59] What is more, they also displayed an unaccustomed willingness to accept higher taxation to pay for action taken on their behalf. In making this decision, the merchants were undoubtedly influenced by the fact that the cost of coercion had been greatly reduced in the late nineteenth century by the invention of two daunting pieces of military equipment, the Gatling gun and the Maxim gun.

The merchants' call for action was backed, and indeed, often led, by colonial administrators.[60] Ambitious officials were well aware that posts in West Africa were rarely springboards to fame even at the best of times, and that a trade depression was scarcely the ideal setting for a distinguished career. They were charged with the task of protecting trade, yet when diplomacy failed, as it frequently did, they were unable to influence the policies of the African states which were the main trading partners

[58] See J. E. Flint's important study, *Sir George Goldie and the Making of Nigeria*, 1960.

[59] Information about mercantile pressures can be found in many of the items listed in the bibliography: see especially Aderibigbe, Dike, Dumett, Flint, Hopkins (1968), Latham, and Newbury (1959, 1968, 1969 and 1972).

[60] C. W. Newbury and A. S. Kanya-Forstner, 'French Policy and the Origins of the Scramble for West Africa', *Journal of African History*, 10, 1969, pp. 253–76.

of the European colonies. The administration's difficulties were increased at a time of depression because the colonies had overheads (in the shape of public debts and staff) which were fixed, and incomes which, because they were dependent on customs revenues, were either static or declining. In their own career interests and in the cause of duty, local officials decided that a radical change of policy was required. The missionaries, too, acting on their traditional postulate about the relationship between commercial prosperity and the progress of Christianity in Africa, urged the metropolitan governments to adopt more positive policies. Their views were of some significance in the nineteenth century, though ironically the missions were to be overtaken by the rush of events which they had helped to encourage. In the colonial period the missionaries found themselves pushed to one side, and they became, in political terms, mere clerical notes in the margins of empire.

There was some confusion about what was meant by an active policy, and there was a certain lack of realism about what it was expected to achieve. In broad terms, however, the merchants and officials made five main demands, though the stress laid on each varied at different parts of the West Coast. First, there was a call for the imposition of law and order in places such as Senegal, the Gold Coast, Yorubaland and the Niger Delta, where inter-state conflict was thought to be interrupting the supply of produce and the distribution of manufactured goods. Second, there were widespread complaints against the coastal middlemen, who were blamed (in much the same way as Africans were later to blame the expatriate firms) for using their monopolistic powers to impose one-sided trading contracts. Some European firms wanted to end the 'unproductive middleman system'; others were prepared to make use of a reformed trading organisation providing internal free trade was established. Third, there was pressure for the abolition of the tolls levied by African states. This issue was important because the European merchants were concerned not simply to increase the volume of produce on offer, but to see that export crops were delivered to the coast as cheaply as possible.

The last two demands were more positive. The fourth request, for example, was for the construction of railways. The railway, the White Hope of the nineteenth century, was thought to be capable of transforming the economies of West Africa, just as it had those of Europe. In 1879 the French adopted an ambitious scheme for building a railway line from Senegal into the interior, and in the 1890s the British made similar plans for their colonies. Finally, there was a realisation that the time had come to advance the frontier of expatriate trading influence by creating a much larger market for European goods than had ever existed before. Some expatriate firms, as Gertzel has pointed out, were still content to remain on the coast, either because they were willing to work through a reformed middleman system, or because they lacked the capital to set up branches inland.[61] Others, however, and especially the large firms, were now prepared to move inland once the government had cleared the way. A bigger turnover was needed if profits were to grow; firm

[61] Cherry J. Gertzel, 'Relations between African and European Traders in the Niger Delta, 1880–1896', *Journal of African History*, 3, 1962, pp. 361–6.

political boundaries were required to prevent trade from falling into the hands of other European rivals; and new products had to be found to re-establish the prosperity of the export trade. France and Britain hoped that there was more than fool's gold in the interior, and that some of the fabled wealth of the Western Sudan would rub off on them.

It is now necessary to take a closer look at the policies of the three main European nations with interests in West Africa, because ultimately it was decisions made by them which led to the partition of the continent. As far as Great Britain was concerned, her trading success appeared to support the anti-colonial arguments of Adam Smith and his followers, and it was certainly hard to see what Britain could gain by creating colonies in West Africa when she already dominated trade without them. In contrast to a once popular view, Britain's policy makers were not itching to establish colonies throughout the world.[62] Britain's chief aim in West Africa was to maintain free trade without political involvement, and to persuade France and Germany to do the same. Free trade, though sometimes presented as a high-minded principle capable of bringing prosperity with honour to the comity of nations, was in reality a passport to British supremacy. In conditions of 'equal' competition Britain was likely to dominate most world markets because she could produce and transport manufactured goods more cheaply than could any of her rivals. Given this advantage, it is understandable that Britain was unlikely to initiate a forward policy.

At the same time, it is important to remember that the maintenance of the status quo in West Africa depended on factors which were largely beyond Britain's control. If Britain's European rivals decided not to co-operate in upholding her supremacy, or if there was a serious threat to trade as a result of developments on the African side of the frontier, then Britain might be forced to change her traditional policy, for she had a moral obligation to support her traders in international markets. The obligation was not binding in all cases, and it had to be judged in relation to the wider, national interest, but it was a factor to be considered in the formulation of policy. In 1865 a Parliamentary Committee had recommended withdrawing from several parts of the West Coast, but by the 1880s it was realised in the metropolis that Britain's commitments were too large for disengagement to be possible.

Superficially, French policy appeared to have much in common with that of Great Britain. France, like Britain, wanted to develop a flourishing and peaceful trade with West Africa, and she was willing to work through indigenous authorities where possible.[63] From the 1830s she began to move towards a liberal tariff regime on the West Coast, and she also exercised a degree of political restraint which, broadly speaking, kept her in step with Britain. Yet it is now recognised that France

[62] Two of the best studies of British policy towards Africa are Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians*, 1961, and John D. Hargreaves, *Prelude to the Partition of West Africa*, 1963. For a global perspective see D. C. M. Platt, *Finance, Trade and Politics in British Foreign Policy, 1815–1914*, Oxford 1968.

[63] On French policy see Henri Brunschwig, *French Colonialism, 1871–1914: Myths and Realities*, 1966, and, for more detail on West Africa, Bernard Schnapper, *La politique et le commerce français dans le Golfe de Guinée de 1838 à 1871*, Paris 1961.

took the initiative in the 'scramble' for West Africa. Gallagher and Robinson have argued that it was a political crisis in Egypt in 1882, a rebuff for France, which caused her to adopt a more aggressive policy in West Africa, but so far this view, stimulating though it is, has not been confirmed by the research it has helped to inspire. Brunschwig has explained French expansion in terms of a search for national prestige, but this interpretation is not quite as helpful as it seems at first sight, since without close definition the phrase 'national prestige' becomes a vague and all-embracing concept. It will be suggested here that there was an important economic motive in French imperialism, and that France altered her policy not because her basic aims had changed, but because she came to realise that different means were required if they were ever going to be achieved. This conclusion did not come as a sudden flash of insight. It was a gradual acknowledgement of long-standing facts, namely that with the passage of time the disparity between French and British economic progress and global influence had increased rather than diminished, and that France was also being overtaken in Europe by German industrial and military power.

France had long-standing, global commercial ambitions, but few of these had been realised. Where she laboured, it seemed, Great Britain collected the rewards. India and Canada were lost to Britain in the eighteenth century, and France herself was defeated in Europe in 1815 after a series of wars which played a large part in retarding her economic development in the nineteenth century.[64] Britain, by contrast, emerged from the Napoleonic Wars with her industrial revolution already under way. Since the victors of Waterloo then pressed the French into declaring the slave trade illegal, it is not surprising that France viewed abolition as the final move in a British plot to destroy what was left of her Atlantic commerce. Any illusions that France had recovered her former power by the middle of the nineteenth century, at least in Europe, were shattered by the defeat which she suffered at the hands of Germany in 1870.

France was anxious to emulate Britain's industrial progress, which, according to some observers, was closely related to the growth of her trading and political influence overseas. Africa was regarded as a hopeful starting point for a French recovery because it was reasonably close to Europe, it had long-standing connections with France, and, above all, it was still largely unclaimed—except, of course, by Africans. Senegal was re-occupied in 1817, and some fortified posts were established at Assinie, Grand Bassam and Gabon in the 1840s. These moves, together with the conquest of Algeria in the 1830s, gave some momentum to the notion that France had an imperial destiny in Africa: the idea of linking West and North Africa was current in Paris long before the British began talking of joining the Cape to Cairo. Yet France gained no spectacular successes. The fortified posts, as Schnapper has

[64] See two essays by F. Crouzet, 'England and France in the Eighteenth Century: a Comparative Analysis of Two Economic Growths', in *The Causes of the Industrial Revolution in England*, ed. R. M. Hartwell, 1967, pp. 139–74, and 'Wars, Blockade and Economic Change in Europe, 1792–1815', *Journal of Economic History*, 24, 1964, pp. 567–88, which between them revise many of the standard views about the French economy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

shown, achieved very little, and the expansion of legitimate commerce benefited Britain more than any other European power. Only in Senegal was there some basis for optimism. French commercial interests there had been saved by the fortuitous development of the groundnut trade, and also by the adoption of measures which limited the entry of foreign traders. Even in the mid-nineteenth century France had not allowed herself to be mesmerised completely by Britain's advocacy of the free trade cause. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century she was to move even closer to protectionist policies, and in doing so was to undermine the basis of Britain's position in West Africa.

France, unlike Britain, had an incentive to upset the status quo in West Africa. She did not want to provoke Britain by a direct challenge, but she still had plenty of room for manoeuvre, for it was the weakness as well as the strength of the British position that her commercial supremacy had not been accompanied by the large scale annexation of territory. French imperial policy in the late nineteenth century was driven by a potent combination of forces: on the one hand by a fear that British economic expansion, spearheaded by Manchester textiles and backed by the world's strongest navy, would frustrate her ambitions once again; and on the other by an optimism about the wealth of Africa which had not been equalled since the Moroccans trekked hopefully across the desert in 1591.

German interests in West Africa will be noted briefly in order to explain their influence on the policies of the two major powers.[65] The German presence became a factor of some weight in the deliberations of London and Paris during the last quarter of the century, when, as has been pointed out, Hamburg merchants were rapidly expanding their share of West African trade. German firms were concentrated at some sensitive points: in Liberia, which was flanked by British interests in Sierra Leone and French interests in the Ivory Coast; in what was to become Togoland, a thin wedge of territory between the Gold Coast and Dahomey, centres of British and French activity respectively; in Dahomey itself, where they had succeeded in capturing the greater part of the region's overseas trade by the 1880s; and in what were to become Southern Nigeria and the Cameroons, which coincided with Britain's major trading interests in Lagos, the Niger Delta, and Old Calabar. In the 1880s the German government made an increasing show of protecting its traders on the West Coast, partly as a result of direct mercantile pressures, and partly as an offshoot of a campaign for tariff protection started by industrialists in response to the onset of the Great Depression.[66] Britain and France regarded the German presence as a serious threat to their own West African interests, and feared that a forward move by her might result in the exclusion of their trading firms from the unclaimed markets of Africa. For France, already worried about British commercial dominance this new danger appeared to justify a more decisive, forward policy; for Britain

[65] For further information see *Britain and Germany in Africa: Imperial Rivalry and Colonial Rule*, ed. Prosser Gifford and William Roger Louis, New Haven 1967.

[66] Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, 'Germany's Colonial Expansion under Bismarck', *Past & Present*, 42, 1969, pp. 140–59; and Hans-Ulrich Wehler, 'Bismarck's Imperialism 1862–1890', *Past & Present*, 48, 1970, pp. 131–9.

slowly waking up to the fact that the era of *laissez-faire* might not last indefinitely, it meant that she had to consider defensive action against two ambitious rivals, not just one.

The demands made by British and French merchants were very similar, but rivalry between the European powers meant that they did not co-ordinate their policies to produce a joint invasion of Africa, though gentlemen's agreements were occasionally made with regard to specific areas. On the contrary, the economic crisis between 1875 and 1900 intensified the antagonism between Britain and France, and led to competition for African territory. There were two main features of this rivalry. The first was characterised by a more aggressive element in the relationship between British and French firms. The foundation of the Compagnie Française de l'Afrique Équatoriale in 1880 and the Compagnie du Sénégal in the following year marked a new phase in French efforts to break into richer and predominantly British markets in West Africa.[67] These firms started trading in the Niger Delta, quickly established branches as far as the River Benue, and threatened to expand further still into what is now northern Nigeria. This enterprising exercise of the rights of free trade caused Britain some initial embarrassment. However, the French could not compete for long against the might of the National African Company, which bought out the French firms in 1884.[68] This episode demonstrated that British supremacy could not be challenged successfully by purely commercial means, at least by France. The French did not give up their hopes of penetrating the interior from the Guinea coast, but future efforts were to be launched from bases in their own colonies of Dahomey and the Ivory Coast, and were to be directed by soldiers rather than by traders.

The second feature of Anglo-French commercial rivalry was growing friction over areas of customs jurisdiction and levels of tariffs. The economic crisis of the late nineteenth century intensified the search for revenue, and led officials to extend the boundaries of their colonies, sometimes with, but usually without, instructions from the metropolis. These moves caused serious disputes, as rival administrations, expanding laterally along the coast, met each other, as they did for example in the area of Sierra Leone, on the Gold Coast, and at the frontier between Dahomey and Lagos. At the same time France began to adopt differential tariffs in West Africa as a means of increasing revenue and assisting her trade. The shift to a more protectionist policy was mainly a result of pressure from French metallurgical, textile and chemical industries, which had difficulty in competing with British products in world markets.[69] Many of the traders in centres such as Nantes, Bordeaux and Marseilles were opposed to protection to begin with, but were won over in the 1880s. Differential tariffs were imposed in Senegal in 1877 and in the Ivory Coast in 1889. Britain, of course, protested that these actions were contrary to the principles of free trade. The

[67] C. W. Newbury, 'The Development of French Policy on the Lower and Upper Niger, 1880–98', *Journal of Modern History*, 31, 1959, pp. 16–26.

[68] This firm began life as the United African Company in 1879, became the National African Company in 1882, and finally turned itself into the Royal Niger Company in 1886.

[69] C. W. Newbury, 'The Protectionist Revival in French Colonial Trade: the Case of Senegal', *Economic History Review*, 21, 1968, pp. 337–48.

French replied that tariffs in British colonies already had a differential effect because they were high on certain goods, such as brandy and wine, which were mainly French, and low on textiles, which were mainly British. By the 1880s the concept of free trade in West Africa was coming under attack, and the weak spots in Britain's empire of informal rule were being revealed.

In Britain, France and Germany West African affairs were taken up by specialised organisations, such as chambers of commerce, and by an assortment of more broadly-based imperial movements which were developing rapidly in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.[70] The chambers of commerce in Liverpool, Manchester, Bordeaux, Marseilles and Hamburg publicised African problems in the press, lobbied local members of parliament, and made direct contact with leading figures in the government. Outside the chambers of commerce African questions were drawn into a variety of campaigns: some dominated by economic interest groups which, without necessarily having any specific involvement in Africa, were agitating in France for protectionist measures, and in Britain for what, more circumspectly, was called 'fair' trade;[71] others led by politicians who saw imperialism as a means of saving Europe from socialism; and others still, headed by geographers, journalists, intellectuals and sundry eccentrics, who were beginning to talk in somewhat mystical terms about the relationship between empire and national greatness. Of course, the imperial movement was by no means united. Some industrialists wanted colonies in order to create guaranteed markets for their exports, but others were indifferent to colonial expansion because in the late nineteenth century, with the terms of trade moving against primary producers, they were able to buy raw materials cheaply.

It is clear that further research is needed to identify all the channels of communication which existed between the men on the spot in Africa and those who formally announced decisions in London and Paris, and to evaluate the extent to which politicians were susceptible to pressures from pro-imperial interest groups representing what might be called the 'unofficial mind' of imperialism.[72] At present it can be said that governments were subjected to considerable and increasing pressures in the later nineteenth century, and that these pressures were more effective in France than in Britain because French businessmen were less divided by entrenched commitments to free trade, and were more inclined to put their faith, if not always their investments, in imperial expansion.

What seems beyond dispute is that those in power in France were more inclined to take notice of imperial pressure groups than were those in Britain. Under the Third

[70] Bernard Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform*, 1960.

[71] The best general study is still B. H. Brown, *The Tariff Reform Movement in Great Britain, 1881–95*, New York 1943. For a case study of one area see R. J. Ward, *The Tariff Reform Movement in Birmingham, 1877–1906*, University of London M.A. thesis, 1971.

[72] Two interesting local studies are John F. Laffey, 'The Roots of French Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century: the Case of Lyon', *French Historical Studies*, 6, 1969, pp. 78–92, and W. Thompson, *Glasgow and Africa: Connexions and Attitudes, 1870–1900*, University of Strathclyde Ph.D. thesis, 1970.

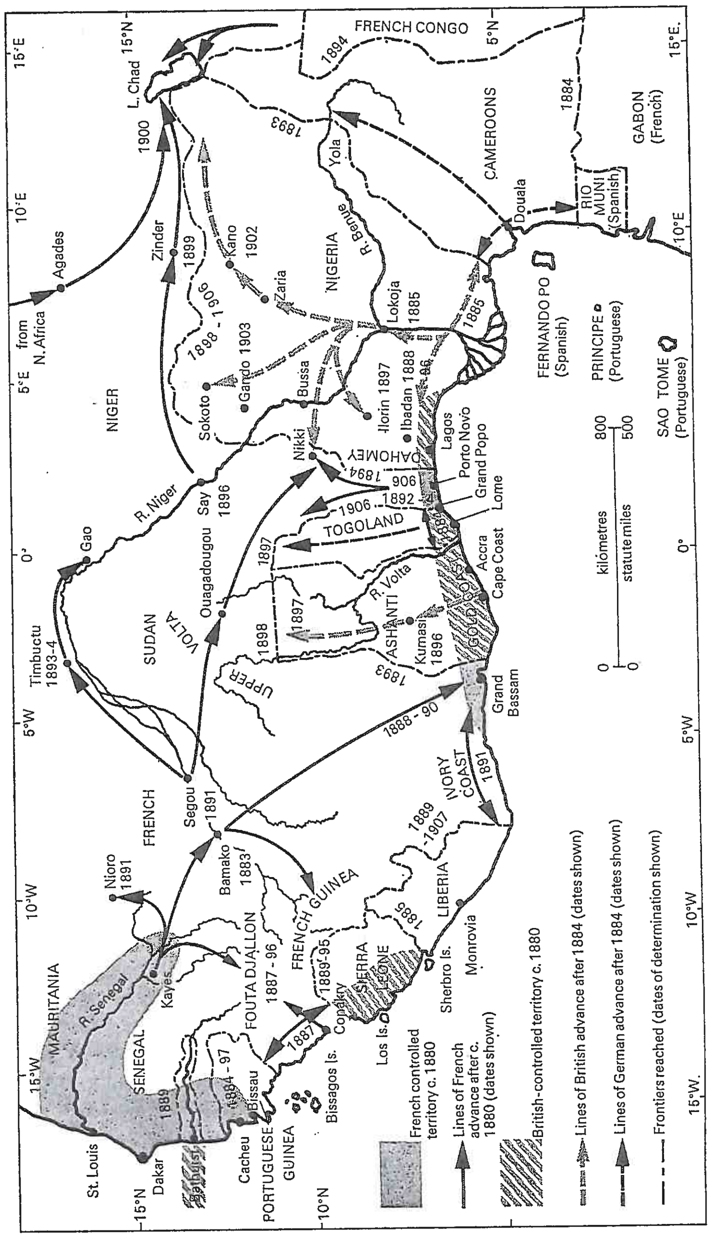
Republic the political influence of provincial businessmen increased, and a group of leaders emerged, such as Freycinet, Jauréguiberry and Rouvier, who were prepared not merely to be influenced by others, but actually to direct the movement for colonial expansion.[73] In Britain, by contrast, policy-makers in both parties were reluctant to admit that circumstances had altered, and that attitudes would have to change too. In the 1880s British policy was still based on two established notions: first, an unrealistic optimism about the possibility of equalising tariffs and preserving free trade, an optimism which France was happy to encourage while her troops advanced inland; and second, a belief in the value of appeasement, that is the distribution of other peoples' territories in the hope of stabilising an inherently unstable situation. Since the facts refused to change, no matter how long British politicians kept their eyes closed, it was the politicians themselves who eventually had to modify their traditional attitudes towards empire. By the 1890s both Liberals and Conservatives were beginning to recognise that a more active policy was required if any of Britain's traditional spheres of influence in West Africa were to be preserved. It would be a mistake to think that Joseph Chamberlain came, like a bolt from the blue, and created, single-handed, a new attitude towards imperial affairs. Nevertheless, it was not until he became Colonial Secretary in 1895 that Britain had a Rouvier of her own.

By the time Britain had decided that a more positive policy was needed, the partition of West Africa was well under way. In 1879 the French began to advance across the Western Sudan from Senegal, reaching Bamako (six hundred miles inland) in 1883, Timbuctu in 1893, and Lake Chad (two thousand miles from Dakar) in 1900. At the same time, the invasion forces branched south, striking deep into the Fouta Djallon (later part of French Guinea), the Ivory Coast and Dahomey, and meeting the northwards advance of French troops from the Guinea coast. As a result of this strategy, tight boundaries were drawn around the coastal settlements of Gambia, Sierra Leone and Liberia. In the mid-1880s Germany made two relatively unambitious forward moves, one into Togo (between the Gold Coast and Dahomey), and one into the Cameroons (on the eastern flank of the Niger Delta). By the mid-1890s France had successfully claimed the greater part of West Africa, and Britain was left with the task of defending her two most important interests; the Gold Coast and what was to become Nigeria. The former, as Dumett has shown, was saved for Britain mainly as a result of mercantile pressure.[74] Kumasi, the Ashanti capital, was captured in 1896, and expansion further north gave Britain a sizeable colony. In the case of Nigeria, it was again successful mercantile agitation in the 1890s that kept the French out of Yorubaland and the Lower Niger.[75] Conspicuous in the latter area

[73] C. M. Andrew and A. S. Kanya-Forstner, 'The French "Colonial Party": its Composition, Aims and Influence, 1885–1914', *The Historical Journal*, 14, 1971, pp. 99–128.

[74] R. A. Dumett, *British Official Attitudes to Economic Development on the Gold Coast, 1874–1905*, University of London Ph.D. thesis, 1966, pp. 149–80.

[75] A. G. Hopkins, 'Economic Imperialism in West Africa: Lagos, 1880–92', *Economic History Review*, 21, 1968, pp. 580–606, and Flint, *Sir George Goldie*, chs 10, 11 and 12.



Map 10. The Partition of West Africa.

was the Royal Niger Company, which, in the classical manner of chartered companies, used administrative as well as commercial weapons to drive out its competitors, English as well as French. By 1900 the partition of West Africa was over.

3 An explanation of imperialism in West Africa

The invasion of West Africa occurred in such a short space of time, and marked such a radical break with past policy, that historians have been tempted to fasten on specific military or diplomatic events as causes. Some writers have emphasised the importance of the Egyptian crisis of 1882, or of the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885. Others have drawn attention to the rise of particular military and political figures, men who were keen to do more than merely chalk hopeful arrows on departmental maps. A number of names come to mind: the French Prime Minister, Freycinet; his Minister of Marine, Admiral Jauréguiberry; the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, Joseph Chamberlain; and men on the spot, such as Archinard, Gallieni, Goldie and Lugard. These events and these men undoubtedly played a part, and in some cases a very important part, in determining the timing and the nature of the partition of West Africa, but their responsibility for causing it was of much the same order as that of the unfortunate Archduke Franz Ferdinand, whose assassination sparked off the First World War. The central problem is to clarify the circumstances which enabled these prominent politicians and soldiers to make a mark on history where others before them, men of similar ambitions, such as Faidherbe and Glover, had been frustrated.

This chapter has tried to show that the solution to this problem lies in the economic history of the nineteenth century. Economic motives do not constitute a complete analysis of imperialism, but there is considerable justification for concentrating on them here because on the whole they have been neglected in the past. This neglect is understandable in view of the current dominance of political and diplomatic interpretations of imperialism, but it has the fundamental disadvantage of abstracting from West African realities. Trade first brought the Europeans to Africa in the fifteenth century, and trade remained the basis of their relations with the continent from then onwards. It is the economic historian's task to see whether, and, if so, in what ways, commercial ties were related to the scramble for Africa.

What happened to Africa was part of a global confrontation between the developing and the underdeveloped countries in the nineteenth century, though the nature of the interaction between them, and its outcome, varied in different parts of the world. The economic expansion of Europe in the nineteenth century had a profound and destabilising effect on West Africa because it changed the structure of export production and involved the region in the trade cycle of the new, industrial economy. The Afro-European alliance which had made the external slave trade possible and profitable started to dissolve early in the nineteenth century. A new generation of African producers and traders began to develop outside the limits of the old, foreign trade enclaves, but was unable to establish a completely satisfactory partnership with

merchants on the European side of the frontier. In some cases difficulties arose because of obstruction from traditional rulers, but even where the indigenous authorities were willing to co-operate, and achieved a measure of success in doing so, there were limits to the concessions which they were prepared to make. In the event, time was also against them. During the early, prosperous phase of 'legitimate' commerce, each side could afford to tolerate the economic imperfections (real and alleged) of the other, and it seemed possible that economic integration could be achieved by informal means. But the serious decline in the terms of trade in the last quarter of the nineteenth century upset the precarious balance which maintained the frontier between Europe and West Africa. Those on the European side of the frontier had no further scope for improving their efficiency, and they now feared that West Africa, with its pre-industrial transport system and its numerous tolls, was in danger of becoming, by international standards, a high-cost producer. Those on the African side of the frontier decided that if modernisation meant railways, the end of internal customs duties and the abolition, for whatever reasons, of slavery, then it also meant the end of their political independence. At that point they decided to resist and to defend their sovereignty, though there were some who, for reasons which have been indicated, were less than wholehearted in their opposition to European demands.

The economic depression transmitted by the industrial nations caused England, France and Germany to come into conflict with each other, as well as with African states. Their rivalry was partly a reflection of shifts in the balance of economic and political power in Europe following industrialisation, and partly the outcome of particular problems which arose during the Great Depression. These problems affected interest groups in the leading industrial states, as well as merchants trading to the West Coast. The extent to which interest groups succeeded in generating a forward policy depended on the strength of the pressure they exerted and on the responsiveness of those in power at the time. Reasons have been advanced under both headings to explain why, in the case of West Africa, it was France rather than Britain which took the initiative. The resolution of the problems which led to partition can be seen in the creation of colonial economies in the first half of the twentieth century.

It is for future research to elaborate and improve the analysis advanced here, and also to modify it, where necessary. The aim of this chapter has been to establish a framework of analysis which contains the main variables, but not, it must be stressed, to rank them in a fixed order of importance applicable to every point on the West Coast. At one extreme it is possible to conceive of areas where the transition from the slave trade was made successfully, where incomes were maintained, and where internal tensions were controlled. In these cases an explanation of partition will need to emphasise external pressures, such as mercantile demands and Anglo-French rivalries. At the other extreme it is possible to envisage cases where the indigenous rulers adopted reactionary attitudes, where attempts were made to maintain incomes by predatory means, and where internal conflicts were pronounced. In these cases an explanation of imperialism will need to place more weight on disintegrative forces on the African side of the frontier, though without neglecting external factors. Current contributions to the study of nineteenth-century imperialism frequently fail either to take adequate account of interests and attitudes on the indigenous side of the frontier with the Western world, or to organise local case studies in such a way as to permit systematic comparisons with other parts of other continents. The typology established here, based on the identification and interaction of interest groups, may prove useful in understanding the decisions which regulated the frontier between the industrial powers and the Third World in the nineteenth century.