

Commercial Agriculture, THE Slave Trade & Slavery IN Atlantic Africa

Edited by ROBIN LAW,
SUZANNE SCHWARZ
& SILKE STRICKRODT

WESTERN AFRICA SERIES

Commercial
Agriculture,
THE
Slave Trade
& Slavery
IN Atlantic
Africa

WESTERN AFRICA SERIES

The Economics of Ethnic Conflict

THE CASE OF BURKINA FASO

Andreas Dafinger

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& Slavery in Atlantic Africa

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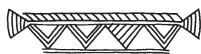
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To the memory of Yaw Bredwa-Mensah



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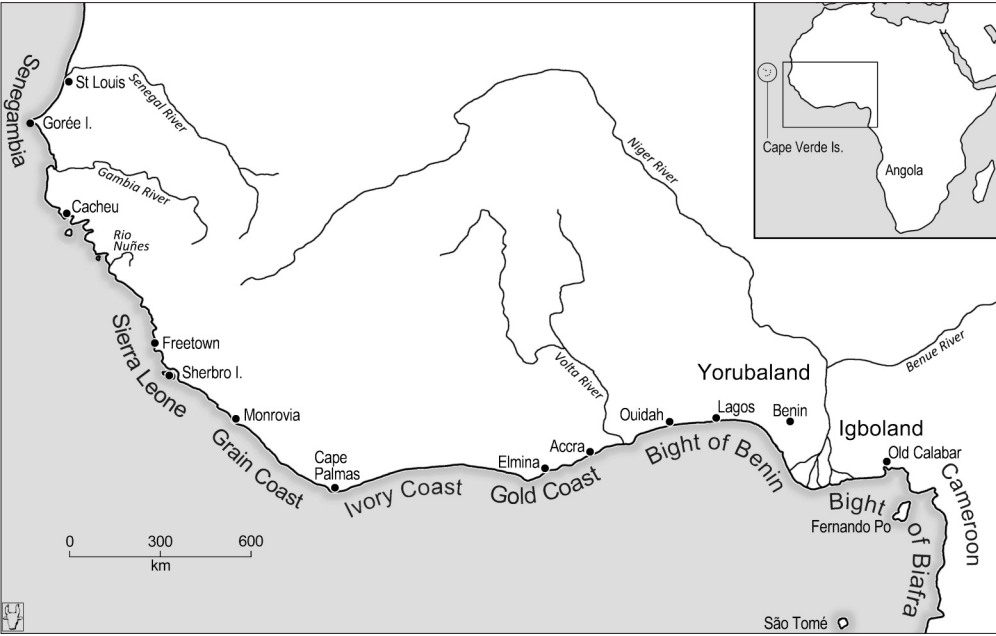
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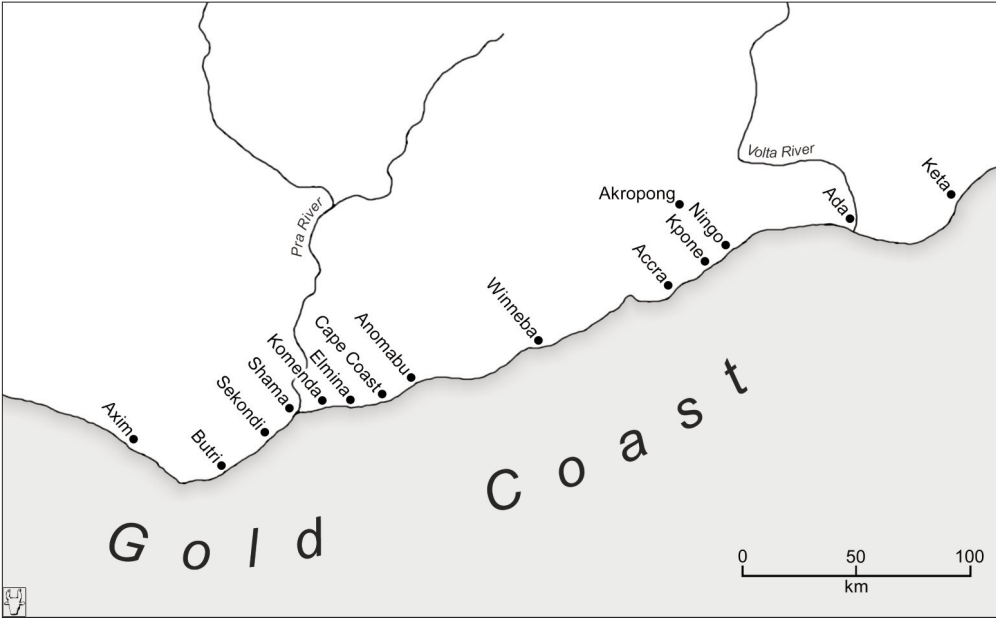
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List of Abbreviations

ACS	American Colonization Society
AEH	<i>African Economic History</i>
AHA	Arquivo Histórico de Angola
AHU	Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Lisbon
AIS	African Improvement Society
CMS	Church Missionary Society
EHR	<i>Economic History Review</i>
GHIL	German Historical Institute London
HA	<i>History in Africa</i>
IJAHS	<i>International Journal of African Historical Studies</i>
JAH	<i>Journal of African History</i>
JEH	<i>Journal of Economic History</i>
JHSN	<i>Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria</i>
JICH	<i>Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History</i>
RAC	Royal African Company
RBGK	Royal Botanical Garden Kew
S&A	<i>Slavery and Abolition</i>
TASTD	Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, ed. David Eltis, Martin Halbert et al. (Emory University, 2008)
THSG	<i>Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana</i>
TNA	The National Archives, London
WIC	West India Company
WMQ	<i>William and Mary Quarterly</i>

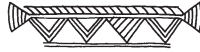


Map 1 West Africa



Map 2 The Gold Coast

Introduction



ROBIN LAW, SUZANNE SCHWARZ
& SILKE STRICKRODT

This volume presents a selection of papers from a conference held at the German Historical Institute London (GHIL), in September 2010, on the topic of ‘Commercial Agriculture in Africa as an Alternative to the Slave Trade’. This Introduction begins by situating this topic in its context within the history and historiography of western Africa.¹

The idea of ‘legitimate commerce’

The idea of promoting the export of agricultural produce from Africa first became central to European thought in the context of the campaign to end the trans-Atlantic slave trade from the late eighteenth century onwards, with actual projects on the ground in West Africa beginning with Danish attempts to establish plantations on the Gold Coast (modern Ghana) from 1788, followed by the British² colony of Sierra Leone, after it was taken over by the Sierra Leone Company in 1791.³ After the legal abolition of the slave trade in the early nineteenth century, proposed commercial alternatives to it became known in contradistinction as ‘legitimate’ (or ‘legal’ or ‘lawful’) commerce (or

¹ The editors thank the contributors to this volume, and also Tony Hopkins, for their comments on a draft of this Introduction.

² This volume covers a period before and after the Act of Union of 1707, which united England (and Wales) with Scotland to become the United Kingdom of Great Britain. As far as is practically possible, therefore, nomenclature is used appropriate to the historical context, though a post-1707 geographical mention may specifically indicate England. That the Royal African Company of England retained that name in full may, on occasion, create apparent inconsistencies.

³ The Danish project is dealt with by Per Hernæs, this volume, chapter 7. For Sierra Leone, see Suzanne Schwarz, ‘Commerce, Civilization and Christianity: The Development of the Sierra Leone Company’, *Liverpool and Transatlantic Slavery*, ed. David Richardson, Suzanne Schwarz and Anthony Tibbles (Liverpool, 2007), 252–76.

trade).⁴ Strictly, the term 'legitimate commerce' designated trade in anything other than slaves, including non-agricultural commodities such as gold and ivory, but in practice interest was mainly concentrated on the promotion of commercial agriculture.

Rationales for this interest in agricultural exports were various. Most immediately, it was thought that West Africa could take the place of the Americas as a supplier of sugar and other tropical products to Europe, with African labour retained and employed locally rather than being transported across the Atlantic, thereby dispensing with the need for the trans-Atlantic slave trade: this was, for example, the thinking behind the Danish project of 1788. Beyond this, there was the desire to develop a form of trade which it was hoped would be more beneficial to Africa itself, given that the impact of the slave trade was commonly assumed to have been negative and destructive. William Wilberforce, for example, proposing abolition of the slave trade to the British Parliament in 1789, argued that the development of alternative forms of trade to replace it would represent a means of compensating for the harm which Europeans, through the slave trade, had done to Africa: 'Let us make reparation to Africa, as far as we can, by establishing a trade upon true commercial principles.'⁵

Further, it was recognized that African rulers and merchants could not be expected to give up the slave trade unless they were offered alternative means of obtaining the imported European and American goods which they had become accustomed to consume. Over time, indeed, the promotion of commercial alternatives came to be seen as a principal means of ending the slave trade, by stimulating a transformation of African societies, diverting their energies from warfare, which was the main source of slaves for sale into export, into productive labour. This idea can already be found in the plans of the Sierra Leone Company in the 1790s,⁶ but gained wider currency after the legal abolition of the slave trade in the early nineteenth century, in the context of the campaign to suppress the now illegal trade. Initially, efforts to end the slave trade, led by Britain, had concentrated on the demand side, in the Americas, by securing the legal prohibition of slave imports by all interested states, and employing naval patrols to police this ban by intercepting illegal slave-ships. But frustration at

⁴ The term was evidently coined only after the slave trade became illegal in 1807. 'Legitimate trade' was already used in *Report of the Committee of the African Institution: Read to the General Meeting on the 15th July 1807* (London, 1807). Even earlier, however, Abolitionists had employed similar terminology, referring e.g. to 'a fair and honourable commerce': Anthony Benezet, *Some Historical Account of Guinea* (2nd edn, London, 1789), 58, 123.

⁵ Speech in the House of Commons, 12 May 1789.

⁶ Schwarz, 'Commerce', 253.

the perceived failure of this approach led to increased interest in action on the supply side, in Africa, persuading Africans to cease to sell slaves by offering them what it was assumed would be a more attractive alternative. This approach achieved its classic formulation in Thomas Fowell Buxton's project of a 'Remedy' for the slave trade, published in 1840, which argued that 'Legitimate trade would put down the Slave Trade, by demonstrating [to Africans] the superior value of man as a labourer on the soil, to man as an object of merchandise.'⁷

From the perspective of European interests, it was also argued that alternative forms of trade might represent a more effective means of realizing the economic potential of Africa, including the possibility that developing export agriculture there might be more profitable than the existing trade in slaves, for Europeans as well as Africans. This argument played a critical role for the Abolitionist campaign in combating the widespread disposition to believe that abolition of the slave trade, even if agreed to be morally desirable, was not practically feasible, given its economic importance. As Chris Brown has persuasively argued, the project of African commercial agriculture served to underwrite the view that ending the slave trade need not be an economic disaster, but might even prove a benefit to Europe: it thus enabled the Abolitionists 'to present a moral case in the language of commercial and national interest', making Abolition 'not merely a humane wish but a viable political project'.⁸

The appeal of the idea was enhanced by the circumstance that it could also be connected to changing perceptions of the nature of British society and its interests, with focus in particular on the developing industrialization of the economy, and consequently on the raw materials and markets which British manufacturers required. In 1789, for example, Olaudah Equiano put forward an economic rationale for Abolition, by pointing to the growth of manufacturing industry: 'If I am not misinformed, the manufacturing interest is equal, if not superior, to the landed interest, as to the value ... The manufacturing interest and the general interests are synonymous.' He argued that this interest would be better served by ending the slave trade, since 'a commercial intercourse with Africa [i.e. other than the slave trade] opens an inexhaustible source of wealth to the manufacturing interests of Great Britain, and to all which the slave-trade is an objection'.⁹

⁷ Thomas Fowell Buxton, *The African Slave Trade and its Remedy* (London, 1840), 306.

⁸ Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill NC, 2006), 322.

⁹ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (London, 1789), II, 250–2.

The Sierra Leone Company in 1791 likewise held out the prospect of 'a continually increasing market for the sale of British industry', as well as a supply of raw materials.¹⁰ This perspective was reflected in the recurrent interest, despite repeated failures, in West Africa's assumed potential as a supplier specifically of cotton, for the British textile industry.¹¹

The idea of commercial agriculture as a potential substitute for the slave trade can be traced in Britain already in the 1730s.¹² By the 1780s it had become widely accepted, in a variety of forms, within the Abolitionist movement. In the mid-nineteenth century, the view that 'legitimate' trade, especially the export of agricultural produce, would help to eradicate the Atlantic slave trade and bring mutual benefits to Britain and Africa was a central tenet of mainstream Abolitionist thought, as represented by Buxton. Buxton's ideas directly inspired the ambitious venture of the British government's expedition up the River Niger in 1841–2, with its project of the establishment of a 'model farm' in the interior (to cultivate cotton), which was intended to serve as an exemplary beacon for indigenous African enterprise.¹³ Despite the catastrophic failure of that expedition, the ideas behind it continued to inform British policy thereafter.¹⁴ When a British Consul was appointed for the Bights of Benin and Biafra (in terms of modern political geography, the West African coast from south-eastern Ghana to Gabon) in 1849, for example, his instructions included the promotion of 'legal commerce' as a means of driving out the slave trade, and more particularly, to 'endeavour to encourage the chiefs and people to till the soil and to produce available exports, so that they may obtain by barter the European commodities of which they may stand in need'.¹⁵ The ambitious scale of the nineteenth-century project of the economic (and, by extension, also social and political) transformation

¹⁰ Schwarz, 'Commerce', 255–6.

¹¹ See e.g. Barrie M. Ratcliffe, 'Cotton Imperialism: Manchester Merchants and Cotton Cultivation in West Africa in the Mid-nineteenth Century', *African Economic History (AEH)*, 11 (1982), 88–113.

¹² John Atkins, *A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil and the West Indies* (London, 1735), 121–2. Strictly, Atkins attributed this policy to an African ruler, King Agaja of Dahomey, who had sent a message to England proposing the establishment of European plantations in his country, which Atkins interpreted as implying a desire to end the slave trade. However, as is noted in Robin Law's contribution to this volume, chapter 5, this view of Agaja's motives was certainly fallacious.

¹³ Howard Temperley, *White Dreams, Black Africa: The Antislavery Expedition to the River Niger, 1841–1842* (New Haven CT, 1991).

¹⁴ Against the conventional view of the Niger Expedition as a failure of no long-term significance, see C.C. Ifemesia, 'The "Civilizing" Mission of 1841', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria (JHSN)* 2/3 (1962), 291–310. On the long-term influence of Buxton's ideas, see also James B. Webster, 'The Bible and the Plough', *JHSN* 2/4 (1963), 418–34.

¹⁵ House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, *Correspondence Relative to the Slave Trade*, 1849/50, Class B, no.11, Viscount Palmerston to Consul Beecroft, 30 June 1849.

of African societies has led to its being characterized as 'Britain's first development plan for Africa'.¹⁶

The idea was also taken up by Christian missionary organizations, which saw the promotion of agricultural exports as closely tied to the prospects of evangelization: they developed, in effect, a sort of proto-Marxist theory of religious conversion, in which change in the ideological sphere depended upon transformation of the economic base. This linkage between the promotion of 'legitimate' trade and Christian evangelization was, again, anticipated in the thinking of the Sierra Leone Company in the 1790s,¹⁷ but became especially influential in the mid-nineteenth century, as reflected in the popular slogans linking 'Commerce and Christianity'¹⁸ and 'the Bible and the Plough'.¹⁹ Perhaps the best-known exponent of this approach was David Livingstone, who in 1857 advocated the promotion of cotton cultivation in East-Central Africa, as a concomitant of evangelization: 'We ought to encourage the Africans to cultivate for our markets, as the most effectual means, next to the Gospel, of their elevation.'²⁰ But such views were also commonplace among missionaries engaged in West Africa, taken up, for example, by Henry Venn, Secretary of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) from 1841 to 1872.²¹ Attempts to put them into practice included the CMS project of cotton cultivation at Abeokuta (in Nigeria), pursued in 1850–63.²² In the Gold Coast, likewise, the Basel Mission promoted agricultural innovation, experimenting with new crops such as coffee, tobacco and cocoa.²³

The idea of commercial agriculture as a tool of Abolition persisted

¹⁶ P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688–1914* (London and New York, 1993), 353–62.

¹⁷ Schwarz, 'Commerce', 265–6. A missionary who had served in Sierra Leone wrote that 'civilization and the arts are united in their plan with religion, and the commercial intercourse ... between [the interior] and Sierra Leone will facilitate the matter': Suzanne Schwarz, "'Apostolick Warfare': the Reverend Melvill Horne and the Development of Missions in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries", *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library of Manchester* 85/1 (2003), 65–94 (see 93).

¹⁸ See Andrew Porter, "'Commerce and Christianity": the Rise and Fall of a Nineteenth-century Missionary Slogan', *Historical Journal* 28/3 (1985), 597–608.

¹⁹ Commonly associated with Buxton, but the phrase was coined earlier, in 1817, by James Read, a missionary in South Africa: J.T. du Bruyn, 'James Read en die Thaping, 1816–1820', *Historia* (Journal of the Historical Association of South Africa) 35/1 (1990), 23–38. (Thanks to Phia Steyn for drawing our attention to this reference.) Buxton himself in fact cites it from Read, *African Slave Trade*, 483.

²⁰ David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (London, 1857), 720.

²¹ J.F. Ade Ajayi, 'Henry Venn and the Policy of Development', *JHSN* 1/4, (1959), 331–42.

²² S.O. Biobaku, *The Egha and their Neighbours 1842–1872* (Oxford, 1957), 57–62; Jean Herskovits Kopytoff, *A Preface to Modern Nigeria: The 'Sierra Leonians' in Yoruba, 1830–1890* (Madison WI, 1965), 117–20.

²³ Edward Reynolds, 'Agricultural Adjustments on the Gold Coast after the End of the Slave Trade, 1807–1874', *Agricultural History* 47/4 (1973), 308–18 (see 315).

even beyond the final ending of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the 1860s. In the later nineteenth century the focus of Abolitionist concern shifted to the slave trade within Africa, to whose suppression the major powers formally committed themselves at the Brussels Congress of 1890. The suppression of the slave trade became a principal element in the rhetorical justification of the extension of European colonial rule over Africa. The term 'legitimate trade', in distinction from slave-trading, thus retained some currency into the colonial period.²⁴ Moreover, the belief that the development of commercial agriculture and the ending of slave-trading were necessarily linked persisted in relation to the internal trade. When the British mounted a military expedition against the Aro, the principal slave-trading community in south-eastern Nigeria, in 1901, for example, its proclaimed objectives included both 'to put a stop to slave dealing' and 'to induce the natives to engage in legitimate trade'; and following the conquest, policy was defined as 'to make the Aro interest himself in the produce trade ... instead of as hitherto slaves'.²⁵

The historiography of the 'commercial transition'

The implications of this commercial transition for the African societies involved have been the subject of a considerable amount of scholarly analysis and debate, beginning with the very first academic monograph in the field of African history, published in 1956, K.O. Dike's study of the trading states of the Niger Delta in the nineteenth century.²⁶ The subject has attracted not only detailed case-studies, but also ambitious attempts at general synthesis, of which the most influential has undoubtedly been that by Tony Hopkins, published in 1973.²⁷ Hopkins' central argument was that the nineteenth-century transition represented a major discontinuity in West African economic structures: whereas the slave trade was by its nature a large-scale business, dominated by a small elite of wealthy entrepreneurs, and more

²⁴ For an instance of its use by a British official as late as 1935, see A.E. Afigbo, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade in Southeastern Nigeria, 1885–1950* (Rochester NY, 2006), 91.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 44, 57.

²⁶ K. Onwuka Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830–1885* (Oxford, 1956).

²⁷ A.G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London, 1973), chapter 4. Alternative perspectives, stressing continuity rather than revolutionary transformation, include Ralph A. Austen, *African Economic History: Internal Development and External Dependency* (London, 1987), chapters 4–5. See also Robin Law, 'The Historiography of the Commercial Transition in Nineteenth-century West Africa', *African Historiography: Essays in Honor of Jacob Ade Ajayi*, ed. Toyin Falola (Harlow, 1993), 91–115.

particularly by rulers and military leaders,²⁸ the production and marketing of agricultural produce were open to small-scale participation, and thus to the mass of ordinary farmers and petty traders. Since such small-scale agricultural production for the export market has continued to characterize West African economies down to the present, Hopkins suggested that the nineteenth-century transition represented 'the start of the modern economic history of West Africa'.²⁹ He also argued that since existing rulers found it difficult to maintain their control over the new trade, and therefore suffered a decline in their incomes, which tended to undermine their effective authority, the transition posed a 'crisis of adaptation' for West African ruling elites.³⁰ Further, the strains of the transition caused conflicts between African suppliers and European merchants, as well as within African societies, which were held to have contributed to the causation of the European Partition of Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. Thus, according to Hopkins, the problems encountered in establishing the new economy of 'legitimate commerce' formed part of 'the economic basis of imperialism'.³¹

The nineteenth-century commercial transition and, more particularly, Hopkins' analysis of it were the subject of a conference held at the University of Stirling, Scotland, in 1993, organized by one of the co-editors of the present volume, papers from which were published in 1995.³² This focused on the period of the legal abolition of the slave trade and its immediate aftermath, with a primary concern in evaluating Hopkins' concept of the 'crisis of adaptation', including its suggested links to the establishment of European colonial rule later in the nineteenth century. The new conference held at the German Historical Institute London in 2010 sought to follow on this earlier discussion, but also to extend and diversify treatment of the subject, both chronologically and thematically. Papers were invited on any aspect of agricultural development and trade in African commodities from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries (and, in practice, the

²⁸ This and similar formulations (by Hopkins and others) were not of course intended to imply (though they have sometimes been misunderstood in this sense) that only states were involved in the supply of slaves. The mechanisms of slave supply in 'stateless' societies evidently differed, but in them also enslavement was dominated by a small number of wealthy and powerful 'big men': see e.g. Walter Hawthorne, *Planting Rice and Harvesting Slaves: Transformations along the Guinea-Bissau Coast, 1400–1900* (Portsmouth NH, 2003), chapters 3–4.

²⁹ Hopkins, *Economic History*, 124.

³⁰ In *Economic History*, 142, Hopkins refers to 'acute problems of adaptation'. The term 'crisis of adaptation', which has gained wider currency, was used in an earlier publication: A.G. Hopkins, 'Economic Imperialism in West Africa: Lagos, 1880–92', *EHR* 21/3 (1968), 580–600.

³¹ This is the title of chapter 4 of the *Economic History*.

³² Robin Law, ed., *From Slave Trade to 'Legitimate' Commerce: The Commercial Transition in Nineteenth-century West Africa* (Cambridge, 1995).

chronological scope of some of those presented extended into the period of European colonial rule in the twentieth century). Eleven (of 24) of these papers are included in this volume, the selection being determined partly by the authors' willingness to make them available, and partly by the editors' judgement of thematic relevance.

The pre-Abolitionist period

One of the priorities of the 2010 conference was to extend consideration of the history of commercial agriculture in West Africa back beyond the late eighteenth century, into the pre-Abolitionist era.³³ Five of the papers in this volume relate to this earlier period: David Eltis offers a general overview, while Gerhard Seibert, Toby Green, Colleen Kriger and Robin Law deal with local case-studies.

The European traders who opened up maritime trade with West Africa from the mid-fifteenth century onwards were not interested in purchasing slaves only, but any commodities which might yield a profit. Indeed, initially it was gold, rather than slaves, which formed the main focus of European interest: exports of gold continued to exceed those of slaves in value until the later seventeenth century.³⁴ In addition to gold, a wide range of other commodities was purchased, such as ivory, hides and bees-wax. These included at least one agricultural product of some significance – pepper, of the indigenous African species, 'malagueta' or 'grains of paradise' (*afframomum melegueta*), purchased mainly on what was called the 'Grain Coast' (modern Liberia):³⁵ some of this pepper may have been gathered from wild plants, but it was also cultivated.³⁶ A distinct species, 'Guinea pepper' (*piper guineense*), was obtained from the kingdom of Benin (in Nigeria).³⁷ There were also items of silvan produce, i.e. items gathered from wild plants, rather than cultivated, such as dyewoods –

³³ There was of course 'commercial agriculture' in West Africa oriented towards internal markets, which was largely independent of, and whose origins predated, the European Atlantic trade. In this Introduction, unless otherwise indicated, 'commercial agriculture' refers specifically to production for sale into overseas markets.

³⁴ David Eltis, 'The Relative Importance of Slaves and Commodities in the Atlantic Trade of Seventeenth-century Africa', *Journal of African History (JAH)* 35/2 (1994), 237–49.

³⁵ Malagueta had reached Europe via the trans-Saharan trade even before the opening of direct maritime contact in the 15th century: Raymond Mauny, *Tableau géographique de l'Ouest africain au moyen âge* (Dakar, 1961), 249–50.

³⁶ It was reportedly 'sown like corn': Pieter de Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea (1602)*, trans. and ed. Albert van Dantzig and Adam Jones (Oxford and New York, 1987), 160. See also J.M. Lock, J.B. Hall and D.K. Abbiw, 'The Cultivation of Melegueta Pepper (*Aframomum melegueta*) in Ghana', *Economic Botany* 31/3 (1977), 321–30.

³⁷ Alan Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans 1485–1897* (London, 1969), 31, etc.

purchased mainly in the Sierra Leone area,³⁸ and gum arabic (secreted from acacia plants, and used in Europe to stiffen cloth) – from the valley of the River Senegal.³⁹ Palm-oil (extracted from the fruit of the oil-palm) was also sometimes imported into Europe, where it was used for medicinal purposes, ‘applied warm, as a treatment for flatulence, chills of the shoulders and dislocation of the limbs’,⁴⁰ but evidently in only trivial quantities, until it became an industrial raw material (for the manufacture of soap and candles) in the second half of the eighteenth century. Europeans also sought African commodities for re-sale elsewhere on the coast, and these also included an important item of agricultural produce, kola nuts, which were purchased mainly in Sierra Leone, and taken for sale at Cacheu and other places in what is today Guinea-Bissau.⁴¹

The importance of these other commodities relative to slaves declined over time, with slaves accounting for over 90 per cent of the value of West Africa’s trans-Atlantic exports by the end of the eighteenth century.⁴² Some historians, including notably Walter Rodney and Joe Inikori, have inferred from these changing relativities that the growth of the slave trade tended to undermine other forms of commerce, both by diverting energies and labour from them and by fomenting disorder which was disruptive of peaceful economic activities.⁴³ In this volume Eltis offers an estimate of the importance of commodities other than slaves in European trade with western Africa, insisting that, despite the overall dominance of slaves, ‘the non-slave component was always significant’. Although slaves exceeded non-human commodities exported in value from the second half of the seventeenth century onwards, the latter still accounted for 16 per cent of total exports from 1681 to 1807, and probably more than a quarter over the entire period from the mid-fifteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Moreover, although the non-slave share of produce in total trade declined, in absolute terms it actually

³⁸ Walter Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545–1800* (Oxford, 1970), 158–60.

³⁹ James L.A. Webb, ‘The Trade in Gum Arabic: Prelude to French Conquest in Senegal’, *JAH* 26 (1985), 149–68.

⁴⁰ Jean Barbot, *Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, 1678–1712*, ed. P.E.H. Hair, Adam Jones and Robin Law (London, 1992), II, 461.

⁴¹ Rodney, *History*, 206–7. Like pepper, kola nuts were collected from wild plants, but the trees were also cultivated, at least in recent times: Edmund Abaka, ‘Kola is God’s Gift’: *Agricultural Production, Export Initiatives and the Kola Industry in Asante and the Gold Coast, c.1820–1950* (Oxford, 2005), 38–40.

⁴² David Eltis, ‘Precolonial Western Africa and the Atlantic Economy’, *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System*, ed. Barbara L. Solow (Cambridge, 1991), 91–119.

⁴³ Walter Rodney, ‘Gold and Slaves on the Gold Coast’, *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana (THSG)* 10 (1969), 13–28; Joseph E. Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England: A Study in International Trade and Economic Development* (Cambridge, 2002), 381–93.

grew (albeit much more slowly than the slave trade), at least to the 1770s: the decline of gold exports was offset by the expansion of trade in gum, dyewoods and hides. This finding casts doubt on the argument that the rise of the slave trade had the effect of undermining that in other commodities. However, as Eltis observes, this had little to do with 'commercial agriculture', strictly defined. Even apart from non-vegetable commodities such as gold and ivory, most of the vegetable produce exported was gathered, rather than cultivated: the principal exception, pepper, amounted to less than 1 per cent of the value of non-slave exports prior to the nineteenth century.

The demonstrable willingness of Europeans to seek and of Africans to supply commodities other than slaves serves, nevertheless, to raise the issue of why it was that in the long run the dominant tendency was to transport labour from Africa to cultivate crops in America, rather than to employ that labour in Africa to produce directly for European markets. Why did Europeans not establish plantations to produce sugar and other tropical crops in Africa, or alternatively purchase these commodities from African producers? Part of the answer is, of course, that to some extent they did. The earliest European plantation colonies, producing sugar, were in fact established on islands in the eastern Atlantic, including those off the African coast, before the system migrated to the Americas. The most successful instance was São Tomé, which is studied by Seibert in this volume. He charts the rise and decline of the island's sugar industry from its establishment in the 1510s to its end in the eighteenth century. Its origins derived from the transfer of personnel, skills and sugar plants from Madeira. With production on Madeira in decline, São Tomé briefly became the world's largest sugar producer, with output reaching a peak in the 1570s, followed by a long decline. Its initial success was due to a combination of fertile soil and the availability of cheap supplies of enslaved African labour from the adjacent mainland. Its decline is attributed mainly to competition from Brazil, which developed as a sugar producer from the 1530s onwards. This was compounded by ecological factors, in the form of drought, pest infestation and impoverishment of the soil by intensive exploitation. There were also destructive raids on the island by other European powers, notably by the Dutch in 1599. Control of the labour force also presented difficulty, the island's mountainous and densely forested interior affording conditions favourable to the maintenance of runaway slave communities. There were several slave rebellions, the most important in 1595, which resulted in the destruction of many of the sugar-mills. In fact, Seibert observes that the sugar industry 'never completely recovered' from the destruction in the 1590s.

There was also recurrent interest in establishing plantations, to produce crops such as sugar, cotton and indigo (used for dyeing cloth), on the West African mainland. Experiments with commercial plantations, employing enslaved Africans locally, were undertaken, for example, by the English Royal African Company (RAC) and the Dutch West India Company (WIC) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The motivation for this was a desire to find alternative or supplementary sources of profit, at a time when conditions in the existing branches of the African trade (in gold, as well as slaves) were becoming increasingly difficult for the established monopoly companies, in competition with independent traders (or 'interlopers'). None of these projects, however, achieved long-term success. Their failure has been attributed by some historians to the political influence of established European planters in the Americas, who feared their competition;⁴⁴ but an alternative interpretation might be that the African plantations were in any case uncompetitive. After all, the trans-Atlantic slave trade – assuming that it was an economically rational enterprise – only makes sense on the assumption that the productivity of labour was greater in America than in Africa.⁴⁵ The causes of this differential in productivity might relate to ecological, social or technical factors, or very likely some combination of the three.

In this volume, these early European projects of West African plantations are studied by Kriger and Law, the former with reference to attempts by the English RAC to cultivate indigo in Sierra Leone from the 1680s onwards, while the latter focuses on Dutch and English attempts to cultivate indigo, cotton and sugar on the Gold Coast between the 1650s and 1780s. Kriger explores the problems encountered in the Sierra Leone indigo project, in unsuitable soils, European lack of expertise, and difficulties in enforcing labour discipline – the last compounded by the more onerous and unpleasant conditions of work which the large-scale processing of indigo involved, by comparison with the indigenous African techniques, with which at least some of the workers were familiar. However, the decisive factor in the abandonment of the project is identified as the 'chronic insecurities' caused by war with France and attacks on the RAC's factories by English interlopers. Law likewise details problems of incompetent management, inconsistent metropolitan support, shortage of labour, and lack of secure tenure of land which dogged the plantation projects on the Gold Coast. He also examines opposition to the African projects by established planters in the West Indies, which played some role at least in the English case, but concludes

⁴⁴ Most recently by Inikori, *ibid.*, 389.

⁴⁵ Hopkins, *Economic History*, 105.

that the basic reason for failure was the unsuitability of local soils for the particular crops upon which European interest centred at this period – as opposed to those which did become successful export crops later, such as palm-oil and cocoa.

Law notes that both Dutch and English companies expressed interest in the purchase of agricultural commodities from Africans, as well as their production on European plantations, but such projects also enjoyed little success. Since they are less well-documented, the reasons for their failure are unclear. In the specific cases of cotton and indigo, however, a relevant factor may have been the existence of a considerable internal demand for these products. The manufacture of cotton textiles was long-established, and cotton cloth widely traded within West Africa. This indigenous cotton textile industry not only survived the impact of the early Atlantic trade (despite the competition it faced from imported European and Indian cloth), but was even stimulated by it, since West African cloth was purchased by Europeans, mainly for re-sale elsewhere on the African coast, although small amounts were also taken to Europe and the Americas.⁴⁶ The project of turning West Africa into a supplier of raw cotton for European industry implied the diversion of local cotton production from the internal market into export (and the substitution of imported for locally made cloth in African consumption), but in practice Europeans encountered great difficulty in achieving this, even later in the colonial period, when reductions in transport costs enhanced their competitiveness.⁴⁷

The provisions trade

Another aspect of the pre-Abolition history of exports of agricultural produce is that the slave trade itself had the effect of stimulating commercial agriculture in parts of western Africa to supply food crops for the provisioning of slave-ships in the Middle Passage to America. Recent research has documented especially the purchase of rice, on the Upper Guinea coast, that is, Senegambia and Sierra Leone.⁴⁸ But other crops were also purchased by European slavers, notably grain

⁴⁶ Colleen E. Kriger, “‘Guinea Cloth’: Production and Consumption of Cotton Textiles in West Africa before and during the Atlantic Slave Trade”, *The Spinning World: A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200–1850*, ed. Giorgio Riello and Prasannan Parthasarathi (Oxford and New York, 2009), 105–26.

⁴⁷ See Marion Johnson, ‘Cotton Imperialism in West Africa’, *African Affairs* 73/291 (1974), 178–87; and for a recent case-study, Richard L. Roberts, *Two Worlds of Cotton: Colonialism and the Regional Economy in the French Soudan, 1800–1946* (Stanford CA, 1996).

⁴⁸ Hawthorne, *Planting Rice*, chapter 5.