

4 - European Contact with West Africa

European sailors first reached sub-Saharan Africa in 1442, when Portuguese ships reached the Senegal river. The Portuguese had been sailing the coasts of Morocco and Western Sahara since 1413, when they captured the Moroccan city of Ceuta [still a Spanish city today]. Between 1413 and the 1440s, the Portuguese established several fortified settlements along the Moroccan coast, especially at Arzila, Mogador (now Essaouira), Safi, and Tangier; they retained a strong presence in Morocco until 1578, when the Portuguese King Sebastião I and much of the Portuguese nobility were killed at the Battle of Alcácer-Quibir. By 1471, West African leaders between the coasts of Senegal and Ghana had established commercial and diplomatic connections with Portuguese traders [major early sites of trade and settlement were on the Gambia river, Bugendo on the São Domingos river in Guinea-Bissau, and Sierra Leone].

For the next 150 years, West African rulers and traders came across the Portuguese more than any other European nation. [There were also smaller trading missions led by the English and the French, but these were less frequent]. In the beginning, the Portuguese main motivations were: 1, an interest in the extensive gold production of Bono-Mansu and the Akan states; 2, competition with the Ottoman Empire to access this gold [the Ottomans had captured Constantinople in 1453, prompting a crisis in Christian Europe]; 3, the desire to find a trade route to markets in India around the Cape of Good Hope; 4, ever increasingly, the trade in enslaved persons.

By the 1590s, the Dutch began to rival the Portuguese as the major European trading nation in Africa. Their ships were bigger and better, and the goods they traded with African political leaders were of much higher quality. The Dutch had captured many of the main Portuguese trading stations in West Africa by 1650, especially at Gorée in Senegal (in 1621), at Elmina in Ghana (in 1637), and at Luanda in Angola (in 1641). Initially the Dutch were mainly interested in textiles, animal hides [for the leather industry], and ivory, but by the middle of the 17th century they too turned to slave trading. The Dutch interest in slave trading dates to the 1620s and the capture of half of the Brazilian colonies from the Portuguese. From 1630 to 1654 the Dutch controlled the northern part of Brazil, and the associated sugar plantations which used the labour of enslaved persons; their growing colonial interests drove their interest in slave trading, which took over in the second half of the 18th century.

In the second half of the 17th century, other European nations would follow this pattern. Danish, English, French, German, and Swedish traders established factories at various points in West Africa, and this pattern of African-European trade and interaction deepened.

This chapter looks especially at the early period of African-European interaction, to 1650, before the trade in enslaved persons came to predominate in trade. The chapter on the trans-Atlantic slave trade then looks at that historical aspect in more detail.

I: Immediate Causes of Portuguese Sailings to Africa

Europe in the 14th century was in a bad way. It is estimated that the spread of Plague between 1346 and 1353 led to the deaths of between 30 and 50% of the European population. Some archaeologists also believe that this Plague had an impact in West African populations [the evidence for this remains challenged, but it is an interesting hypothesis; the archaeologist Gérard Chouin has been the strongest proponent of this idea].

With the population collapse, European nations such as Portugal faced many problems. Their workforce had more than halved, which meant that much farming land was taken over by forests and plants. Interestingly, one of the first sources available on the West African presence in Portugal, from the Portuguese *Cortes* or parliament at Évora in 1471, says that African labourers were vital for clearing wastelands in the country: this suggests a strong labour shortage in Europe after the Plague, and the role of African labour in addressing this. Many of the nobles had lost their labourers [known as serfs], and civil wars resulted in Portugal in the 1380s. There was both a shortage of wheat to make bread, and very high inflation of the Portuguese currency [known as the *escudo*]. Both of these factors prompted the Portuguese interest in Morocco, since, 1, Morocco was a fertile country and a grower of wheat; and 2, the Portuguese hoped that through sailing along the coast of West Africa, they might find access to West African gold supplies and protect their currency.

By contrast to the situation in Europe, many states in West Africa in the 15th century were in a process of expansion and growth. Mossi was established in the 15th century in Burkina Faso, Kano became a major power, and Songhay rose to usurp the power of the Mali Empire. Much of this growth came with increased gold production in the Akan states of Ghana. So much gold was produced that the trans-Saharan trade did not bring enough goods to exchange at Kano, and many gold traders left empty-handed [this is according to the early 16th-century Muslim traveller from southern Spain known generally as Leo Africanus].

The Portuguese were aware of this growth through a number of channels. The Catalan Atlas of c.1375 was a map drawn by a Majorcan Jew called Abraham Cresques, which showed the power of Mali and its gold production in detail.



Catalan Atlas, by Cresques Abraham, Wikicommons; Mansa Musa at bottom - Unknown, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=670189>

The Atlas showed good trade connections between Spain and West Africa via the Sahara, often undertaken by Jewish traders. These traders spread news about West Africa in Spain and Portugal. There were Jewish communities in Saharan settlements such as Tuat, and after riots against Spanish Jews in 1391 more settled in Morocco and worked in the carpet and textile trade to and from the Mali Empire.

Knowing something of the conditions in Africa, therefore, Portuguese leaders were keen to make connections with West African gold producers [Portugal also had a large Jewish population]. They also hoped to meet with a Christian King who they called Prester John, and who they believed lived somewhere in Africa. They wanted a Christian alliance against the Islamic Ottoman Empire, which was growing in power; and to divert some of the gold supply. Prester John probably referred to the Christian King of Ethiopia, but this was not known at the time.

All of these factors shaped the Portuguese voyages to West Africa, and their arrival at the Senegal river in 1442.

II: Portuguese voyages: key dates, patterns, and timelines

After reaching the Senegal river in 1442, the Portuguese voyages continued. By 1448, some of their people had sailed up the Gambia river as far as the major trading town of Kantora, not far east of what is today Basse Santa Su [in the far east of the country; Kantora was then a major centre for the trans-Saharan trade]. By the mid-1450s, there was trade with the

Wolof state of Kajoor on the coast, and the Bijagós Islands off the coast of Guinea-Bissau had entered discussions with European traders. The initial language of communication was probably Arabic: Arabic speakers were many in Portugal in the 15th century, where Granada was still an Islamic kingdom in Spain, and of course was widely spoken in many parts of West Africa. One sailor described in 1456 how the Bijagós was the last place where the African peoples shared a language with the Portuguese sailors, and so this was also probably the southernmost extent of Arab and Trans-Saharan trade at that time. The Cape Verde Islands were first reached probably in 1456 [a lively discussion exists among Capeverdean historians as to whether there was already a population; archaeological evidence is inconclusive, but the islands may have been a salt depot for Saharan states], and the coastline of Ghana followed in around 1471.

The coastline of Ghana was different because it was so close to the gold mines of the Akan forests. Soon Akan traders sold gold informally to the Portuguese. The Portuguese state wanted its share, and so the Portuguese sent a large fleet in 1481 and negotiated with Kwamena Ansa, ruler at Edina [now called Elmina], to build a fortress. When the negotiations were concluded [after a highly tense stand-off, which began when the Portuguese tried to build their fort at the site of a holy shrine], the fortress at Elmina was built, and still remains on what became known as the Gold Coast. It would later change hands and become a Dutch fortress in the 17th century; and in time the Dutch and English would be the main European nations trading in Ghana.

Because there was so much commerce on the Gold Coast, many different Akan rulers were keen to expand their trading connections. The Portuguese built forts in other locations along the Gold Coast, such as Axim and Komenda, many of which were completed by 1500. In time there would be many more forts, almost every few miles along the Gold Coast; some would be specialists in the gold trade, and others, such as Anishan, in exporting the corn which was also in high demand from European ships. It would not be until the 18th century that the slave trade would come to predominate on the Gold Coast.

Meantime, other rulers from West and West-Central Africa were making contact with the Portuguese. Oba Ozolua of Benin received Portuguese visitors in 1485, and the Atlantic trading post of Gwatón was founded around 1490. Benin initially sold malaguetta peppers to the Portuguese, but after the sea route to India was established in 1499, Benin's peppers became less in demand in Europe. The Portuguese tried to establish a trade in enslaved persons from Benin to the gold suppliers in Elmina, but the Oba refused. Over the 16th century, Benin's relations with the Portuguese declined, until in the early 17th century the Obas renewed links with European traders given the Dutch demand for the cloth produced in Benin. Throughout the 17th century cloth remained the main export of Benin, and the *ambassy* cloths were traded regularly to Elmina, and as far afield as Brazil. However demand fell in the late 17th century, as imports of luxury cloths from India grew. This meant that by the 18th century Benin's Obas had finally to turn to the trade in enslaved persons to preserve and renew the power of Edo and the Benin state.

The Portuguese continued to voyage south after Benin, reaching the mouth of the Kongo river and establishing relations with the manikongo at Mbanza Kongo [the capital of Kongo], Nzika Nkuwu. The island of São Tomé was settled by 1485, and many BaKongo peoples were

taken there as enslaved persons to work on the sugar plantations. In 1491, Nzika Nkuwu converted to Christianity and took the name Joao I. This led also to connections between Kongo and Elmina through São Tomé, which traded with both. Indeed, by the 1510s, traders from Benin were mentioned as present at the Kongolesse port of Mpinda in a letter written in Portuguese by the new manikongo Afonso I (1509-46).

By the 1510s, therefore, many different peoples of West Africa and their rulers had established connections with the Portuguese. Some, such as those at Benin and Elmina had connections further south, to Kongo. African rulers hoped to expand their trading contacts; and at times to obtain military support against rivals, as was the case with both Benin (who fought a major battle with Portuguese support against Nupe, in 1516) and in civil wars in Jolof and Kongo.

III: Exchanges of ambassadors

Diplomacy and royal exchanges characterised the first decades of West African relationships with Portugal. It was common for princes of Benin, Jolof and Kongo to spend time studying in Portugal, or to be sent by their royal elders as ambassadors to the Portuguese court. This continued into the 17th century, when Kongo sent ambassadors to the Dutch colonial court in Brazil, to the home of the Catholic Church at the Vatican, as well as to Portugal. In the 1650s, Allada also sent ambassadors to the Spanish court. This pattern continued later, when Dahomey sent ambassadors 5 times to the Portuguese in Brazil and Portugal between 1755 and the 1810s. Indeed, when Brazil declared independence from Portugal in 1811, it was Dahomey which was the first state to recognise its independence.

The Portuguese also saw these relationships as diplomatic. Under the reign of João II (1481-95), the Portuguese sent ambassadors to many royal courts in Africa: to Benin, Kongo, and to the court of the Mandimansa, the emperor of Mali [one envoy was sent as far as Timbuktu, but it is not certain that he arrived]. Letters sent by the Portuguese kings to West African rulers conceived of them as fellow monarchs. In both Africa and Portugal, kingship was a divine gift, creating some commonality.

Fortunately some portraits survive of these ambassadors. The most important were painted in Brazil by a Dutch artist [probably Jasper Beckx], and were of Dom Miguel de Castro. Miguel de Castro was the ambassador of the court of the *manikongo*, Garcia II Ncana a Luquini nzenze atumba, who sent him as an envoy to the Dutch court in Brazil, probably in 1643:



Dom Miguel de Castro, by Jaspas Beckx, sometimes attributed to Albert Eckhout, public domain

The aims of these embassies were quite varied. They can be broadly summarised in three categories:

1) The quest for a military alliance. Two good examples can be given of this.

:- The first dates from 1488, when the Jolof prince Bumi Jeléen came to Portugal. He claimed rightful possession of the throne of Jolof, but had been unseated by his brothers/rivals, and had come to Portugal for assistance. He was received at court by João II, who sent a military fleet to support Bumi Jeléen on his return to the Senegal river. However, Bumi Jeléen was treacherously murdered by the leader of the fleet when they reached West Africa [this individual, Pero Vaz de Cunha, claimed that he suspected Bumi Jeléen of betraying them]. This was an ignominious episode; many of the leaders of this plot against the Jolof prince were put to death by João II, and the followers and relatives of Bumi Jeléen moved to the Cape Verde islands [which by then were under Portuguese control].

:- The second relates to this expedition by Dom Miguel de Castro. In the 1640s, the Kingdom of Kongo had allied with the Dutch against the Portuguese. The Dutch seized Luanda in 1641, and then Kongo armies fought against Portuguese troops stationed at their forts [Ambaca and Massangano] in the interior of Angola. In this embassy, Dom Miguel de Castro had been sent by the *manikongo* to discuss military strategy and how to throw the Portuguese out for good from West-Central Africa. However this alliance was finally defeated in 1648.

2) Interest in Christianity

Another factor in these embassies was the interest which some African peoples had in Christianity. Princes from Benin studied in Portuguese missions, as did those from Kongo. While the interest in Christianity waned in Benin, in Kongo it did not, and ambassadors were sent to the Vatican repeatedly asking for more priests and missionaries, long into the 17th century. In the 1670s, over a dozen members of the Ndongo royal family spent many years studying in a variety of monasteries and convents in Portugal [as new research by the historian José Lingna Nafafé is showing]. Allada, too, sent requests to Spain for missionaries in the middle of the 17th century; by this time the climate was becoming unpredictable, and there were frequent floods, so the king of Allada hoped that the Christian priests might be able to intercede with divinities and prevent these.

3) Commercial activity

Trade was often a motivation in the despatching of ambassadors by West African kings. Access to Atlantic trade was an important way of expanding supplies of money. Just as today there is the Cedi, Dalasi, Leone, and Naira, so in the past many types of money were in use in different parts of West Africa, such as cowries, iron bars, and cloth strips. More specifically, these were: 1, gold, especially on the Niger Bend and in the Akan kingdoms of the Gold Coast; 2, cowries, in Benin, Oyò, on the Niger Bend, and later in Hueda and Dahomey; 3, copper rods, on the Gold Coast and in Calabar; 4, iron bars, in Senegambia, and on the Gold Coast; 5, strips of cloth, used widely in Senegambia, Sierra Leone, and in parts of the Gold Coast and Oyò. These currencies had all been in use before the arrival of European traders. The Atlantic trade then expanded the money supply that was available, and thus also helped to grow market exchanges. By negotiating with European monarchs, many West African rulers hoped to grow their access to currency, and thus the size of their tax revenue, and the power of their state. In the 1620s, this saw smaller kingdoms along the Gold Coast sending embassies to the Dutch; while this was also a clear motivation in the embassies sent by Allada in the 1650s. Five embassies sent by Dahomey to Brazil and Portugal in the later 18th and early 19th century all had commercial aims.

By this time, the royal family of Dahomey had become experts in fine living in the capitals of Brazil and Portugal. The embassies sent in 1795 are a good case in point. Travelling first to Salvador, in Brazil, the two ambassadors spent large sums on fine silk and damask clothing and hats all of it paid for by the Portuguese crown. They then moved on to Lisbon late in the year, and when they arrived they visited the theatre and the opera every night.

The diplomatic element of African-European relations shows that these took place on a scale of grand politics, as well as at a local level. West African rulers' interests were those of many leaders anywhere: commercial and military success, and religious belief. Yet while the Portuguese crown also despatched many embassies initially, by the 1530s the European presence was becoming increasingly "informal", as small-scale traders took over.

IV: European Trading Communities in West Africa

There were two main types of European trading community in West Africa: 1, informal communities, where Europeans settled, married women from the area, and with them formed African families who often became important in local trade networks; 2, more

formal communities which grew up in the fortified trading posts along the coast, or factories [from the Portuguese word *feitoria*] that were especially found along the Gold Coast, in Hueda, and also in the rivers around Gambia and Bissau [especially the Gambia, Casamance, São Domingos, Corubal, Nunez and Pongo rivers].

The fortified factories were often modelled on Elmina, which was the first, oldest, and biggest of these trading posts. This shows the importance of the gold trade to begin with, dating to the 1480s, when Elmina was built. However apart from Elmina and other smaller forts on the Gold Coast, in the 1500s the informal model of trade was more usual. Male Portuguese traders came to areas such as Senegambia, the rivers of Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, and Benin. Here they married, and often acted as trading intermediaries with local rulers, as they, their wives (and their children) were able to speak both African and European languages.

One of these traders became quite famous in Senegambia in the 16th century. Known as “Ganagoga”, this Portuguese man had originally been called João Ferreira. He married the daughter of the ruler of Fùùta Tòòro [on the Senegal river]. His name “Ganagoga” meant “he who speaks all the languages” in the Biafada language of Guinea-Bissau, which shows how important this ability was.

It seems that relations with daughters of the ruling families was not unusual for these traders. In another case in the early 17th century, one Dutch Jewish trader got into problems after having had an affair with the daughter of the *Buur* of Kajoor in Senegal.

Some historians think that these early traders also often took on religious roles. The Portuguese called those of their nation who settled in Africa “*tangomãos*” in the 1500s. This word derived from the name of a shrine in Sierra Leone, *tunguma*. According to one writer in 1506, one of the earliest Portuguese men to settle in Sierra Leone [in the 1480s] had officiated at this shrine at the request of the Temni peoples there [though Sierra Leone’s human communities changed a lot in the 16th century, with the arrival of a wave of Mande-influenced warriors called the Manes, who defeated the warriors of existing communities and then intermarried with them by 1600]. “Tangomão” therefore meant a European person who both settled in West Africa, and adopted West African beliefs and practices.

In many of these communities, it was the African women married to these male traders who ran the trading networks. Their male European spouses were often ill with malaria and other diseases to which they had no physical resistance. These men looked awful, and spent much of their time in bed before dying young. Female traders spoke African languages much better, of course. They could form trading and human networks with their home communities, and run the day to day aspects of the business while their male spouses fought weakly with disease [some historians think that the strong role of women traders in these areas influenced the powerful place that women took in some independence movements against colonial rule in the 20th century, especially in Guinea-Bissau and parts of Nigeria].

A good example of one of these cases comes from Guinea-Bissau in the middle of the 17th century. In the factory of Cacheu, the most powerful traders in the 1660, 1670s, and 1680s

were two women called Bibiana Vaz and Crispina Peres. Peres was married to a Portuguese trader, but he was so ill that she ran the couple's business. She made so many enemies through her business acumen that she was eventually captured by the Portuguese Inquisition and deported to Lisbon, where she was tried in 1664 for "fetishism" as a crime against Catholic Christianity. Vaz, meanwhile, was so powerful that she kept the Portuguese Governor of Cacheu prisoner in the passageway of her house in Farim for 18 months in the 1690s.

These mixed communities were more influenced by African than by European practices and behaviour. It was important to be able to speak European languages and to write to get the best trade terms with Europeans, but marriage and inheritance was carried out according to the local practice of wherever the European had settled. This encouraged the Portuguese to settle where inheritance passed through the female line [matrilineal societies]. In these places, such as Guinea-Bissau and on the Gold Coast, the children which a European had with his African wife would inherit rights, social status, and property according to the laws of that society. However, where inheritance passed through the male line [patrilineal societies], the children of these marriages would inherit no social or property rights, since their fathers had been born with none, being Europeans [a good example is in Senegambia, where very few European men settled after the 1550s].

These informal communities concentrated on trade. They helped African rulers to expand their trading connections. They could help to negotiate with European traders and ships who stopped only for a while, and to get the best price. Some of these families retained the connection to Europe, sending children to study in European countries into the 18th century, and becoming rich merchants of the coastal towns. Most more or less shook off their European past, and became fully integrated into the African societies, where their male European forefathers had settled as stranger-guests of their African landlord kings.

As noted, these informal settlements were in the majority in the 16th century. However, towards the end of that century and in the early 17th century fortified European trading posts became common, especially on the Gold Coast and in Hueda. In Casamance and Guinea-Bissau, they were formed in settlements such as Cacheu (1589), Ziguinchor (1645), and Bissau (1687). The 17th century also saw the establishment of the fort at James Island (1651), at the estuary of the Gambia river. Along the Gold Coast, the Dutch presence saw increasing number of castles being established, the most famous being at Cape Corso (Cape Coast, built in 1610 and expanded in 1652) and Sekondi (1642), as well as those already mentioned at Axim and Elmina.

The huge expansion of the Atlantic slave trade in the late 17th century saw the growth of this model of European settlement. European factories at Offra (1660, the port for Allada) and at Hueda were fortified. By the middle of the 18th century, these communities of European settlers had become more important than the informal ones noted above; by this time, members of these informal communities had by and large settled and fully integrated into their host African communities.

Although these communities were protected militarily, they relied very heavily on African intermediaries in their trade. The military captains of these forts also often attended and

participated in royal ceremonies of the local African state (as often happened in Dahomey, for instance), and also would send gifts for the funeral rites of any deceased person of importance. In practice, this meant that they had to accept and participate in African religious practices, associated with these funerals.

Nevertheless, the communities which grew up around these fortified trading posts were quite different to the informal communities noted above. The military aspect was vital. Although European traders rented the land for their posts, they were as much occupiers as they were tenants. They had armed militias, and often allied with one local ruler or another, which could create problems between them [it is important to remember that by the 18th century, guns were one of the largest imports from the Atlantic trade to Africa; this had changed a lot from previous centuries, where copper, iron, and cloth had also been important]. They were accustomed to slavery, and brought with them the racial animus which became especially bad in Europe from around 1650 onwards. They were therefore used to having “castle slaves” [an idea imported from Europe, via the experience in the New world plantation societies], something which influenced practices of service and dependence in local communities.

Many of the European officials in these forts had families with African women, and their children who grew up around these forts often became traders, as their dual heritage gave them access to both the worlds of their African and European parents. Some of these families became important figures in local politics. In this sense there was a continuity from the more informal communities discussed above. However the military presence and the growth of slavery meant that in many important respects these communities had become very different by the 18th century.

V: The Nature of Trade

Europeans came to Africa mainly for trade, and this was the almost exclusive cause of their coming. By and large they arrived hoping for a short stay and to become rich. Some then realised the many riches to be found beyond material wealth, and stayed to form families who became part of their host communities. But even then, the commercial aspect was always important.

For African rulers, trade brought many opportunities. In the first two centuries, they demanded especially currency materials. Cloth was one of the largest items imported, from India and Europe; some cargoes of Dutch ships in the early 17th century consisted almost entirely of cloth, shipped to Senegambia and the Gold Coast. Indeed, cloth remained important through the 18th and 19th centuries; the so-called *pièce de guinée*, an indigo-dyed blue cloth made near Pondichéry in India, was imported by the French to Senegambia and used as a currency on the Upper Senegal River throughout this time. Cloth was used as money in Senegambia, and also as a currency in parts of Angola and the Gold Coast. Copper was also a major import, especially to Benin and the Gold Coast, and iron bars were also significant [in both the Gold Coast and Senegambia, iron bars needed to be branded with the mark of the European trading company, such as the OWIC (Dutch West Indian Company) or RAC (English Royal African Company), otherwise African traders would give them less value]. Cowries were imported from the Maldives to Benin from as early as 1505.

This period also saw the import of jewels, and some manufactured goods like mirrors and basins. But the value of each imported cargo consisted mainly of goods which could be converted into currency. Evidence suggests that the imported metals such as copper and iron were brought in specific dimensions for trade: copper rings (or manillas) and iron bars of a specified length [especially in Senegambia] which were used then as mediums of exchange. The metals were then melted down by smiths for use in agricultural tools, weapons, and artistic works (in the case of Benin, the Benin bronzes) [there was a large increase in production of the bronzes in the 16th century, when copper imports grew; the bronzes had been important from before, but their production expanded then].



Brass Plaque from Benin depicting Court Official Holding two Copper Manilla. Wikipedia. Public domain.

It is important to recognise the shift that then happened in the second half of the 17th century, when currency imports declined, and were replaced by especially luxury items of consumption such as alcohol and tobacco (especially from Brazil), and also by guns and gunpowder. The Nigerian historian Joseph Inikori sees this change as accompanying a slowing down in African economic growth. The lack of currency imports was symptomatic of a market which had stopped growing, and did not need so much money to function in exchange.

One can say by contrast that until the second half of the 17th century, the trade between Africa and Europe was quite balanced. Until then, while African rulers wanted increased supplies of currency, Europeans did not only focus on the slave trade, as later became the case. They also wanted to import gold and ivory. Places such as Allada, Benin, Cape Verde, Loango, and the rivers of Cameroon and Gabon all exported cloth, and some of this was sold as far afield as Brazil, Curaçao [a Caribbean island near the coast of Venezuela, belonging to the Dutch] and the United States in the 17th century [indeed Oyò cloth was traded to Yorubà communities in Brazil throughout the 18th and into the 19th century, and marketwomen of Yorubà ancestry in Brazil worked as “cloth sellers” (*vendedoras de panos*) into the 19th century in Salvador, Brazil]. When the Dutch invaded Portuguese colonies in Brazil in 1630, the Portuguese colonists formed an army which included many Africans from the Gold Coast and Angola; the Gold Coast contingent demanded particular cloths as part of their payment and apparel, which was sent specially from the Dutch fortress at Elmina.

It was not just the West African textile industry which found markets overseas in the 16th and 17th centuries. Basketwork made by Gold Coast communities was highly prized in Holland in the early 17th century. Ivory carvings made by the Sape peoples of Sierra Leone were found in different parts of Europe, turned into everyday items such as salt cellars and candle holders which were part of the export trade from this part of West Africa [in the 20th century colonial era, some European art historians assumed these ivories came from Benin; however it has now been established by the American art historian Peter Mark that they came from Sierra Leone].



Ivory Salt cellar from Sierra Leone, from the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga (Lisbon), public domain.

In sum, the Europeans who settled in Africa did so as part of a commercial enterprise. Their trading presence in West Africa began as one which was more or less between equal trading partners. As the diplomatic embassies show, each party saw the others as kings and rulers of their lands by divine power. Each, too, imported money from the other (the Europeans importing gold, the Africans importing copper, cowries, cloth, and iron). There was an Atlantic slave trade, but it was not as important as it later became [the Atlantic slave trade remained quite minor in West Africa until the 1640s; it had expanded a lot in Angola after 1580, with a trade to Brazil and the rest of Latin America, but this is in West-Central Africa: it

was only in Senegambia that the slave trade was at all important in West Africa until the 1640s, when it began to grow in Allada and Calabar].

However the later 17th century saw a change, and with that a different pattern in European settlement and trade in West Africa. By this time, the slave trade was dominating, and Europeans were settling in fortified trading positions, and not informally with their African hosts. The economic terms of trade were in general less equal, and that remained the case through the 18th century.

VI: Environmental Change, Competition and Changes in the European Presence

The first half of the 17th century saw many changes in these patterns, as we are seeing. These changes were vital in West Africa. They were also part of changes that were taking place around the world, which saw wars and revolutions in places as different as China and Europe, as well as in Africa.

The main causes of these transformations were: (1), Environmental pressures brought on by the “mini ice age” (reaching a peak in the 1640s); and (2), Political competition brought on by the emergence of the capitalist world system.

(1), The environmental pressures were part of a big change in the world’s climate, generally known as the “mini ice age”. From the 1570s onwards, there was a major cooling in the world’s temperatures. This produced climatic difficulties. In Africa, there were droughts in Angola (from around 1600) and Senegambia (from around 1640), and floods in Yorubà-speaking areas of Nigeria and Benin (in the early 17th century). There were heavy snows in Morocco. When the King of Allada sent ambassadors to Spain in the 1650s, he said that one of the reasons was an attempt to stop the terrible storms which Allada had been experiencing.

Major problems occurred in other parts of the world. The freezing temperatures made harvests of wheat and other crops much worse than before, and food prices rose. Some of the coolest temperatures of all occurred around 1640. This was also when the biggest revolutions began. In China, a civil war began which saw the overthrow of the Ming dynasty. In Europe, Portugal declared independence from Spain also in 1640 and a civil war began which lasted until 1668; a civil war also began in England in 1641, when the King was deposed and executed, and there was also civil conflict in France.

What caused this fall in temperatures, and the political crises? European historians traditionally pointed to different patterns of the sun. A team of archaeologists based in Colombia have a new explanation. The European conquest of the Americas in the 16th century is usually thought to have caused a population collapse of indigenous Americans. Latest estimates suggest 90% of the Native American population died from disease and war – perhaps 10-15% of the entire world population. The fall in the indigenous American population led to, (a), increasing areas of forest taking over settlements and farmland, and (b), less deforestation and burning of fires; the growth of forest absorbed Carbon Dioxide pollution, and there was also less Carbon Dioxide created through the burning of fires [in keeping with today’s analysis of causes of global warming in the 21st century, which

understands this as a relationship of carbon emissions and carbon capture]. According to the Colombian archaeologists, this led to the fall in temperatures.

(2), Political competition rose with growth in trade and the power of the states that could control it. In West Africa, it was becoming important to develop trading relationships with European partners. Those states which did so prospered, but there could also be a cost. With larger kingdoms, such as Jolof and Kongo, their coastal provinces [Kajoor in Jolof and Nsoyo in Kongo] became more powerful and broke away from central control [by the 1550s in Kajoor, and in the early 17th century in Nsoyo]. Meantime rival rulers sought to open trading stations, and struggled with one another for best access to international trade. This created both conflict, and increased demand for European trade, and led to the huge number of fortified trading posts built along the Gold Coast, and the coasts of Hueda and Allada in the second half of the 17th century.

At the same time, there was competition among Europeans, who often struggled with one another for the best access to African trade. It is worth noting that although there was fierce competition between different European nations to trade, this never led to direct military confrontations between them in Africa in this period. Wars fought by European nations were fought in Europe itself, where in Africa European traders were competing as part of a shared cooperative agenda and structure of trade. By the second half of the 17th century, Danish, Dutch, English, French and German trading companies were all seeking to establish a foothold in West Africa, bringing the best and most fashionable trading commodities and negotiating with one another to exchange what they had to make up the best “assortment”.

The competition among European traders meant that African rulers could often strike better bargains. They could play off one against another to get the best price. But it also meant that they had to meet the demands of traders if these were not to move on elsewhere in search of captives, ivory and gold. Mutual dependence of African rulers and European traders grew; and the increasingly fragile environment, in Africa as elsewhere in the world, created frequent problems of food and resources which could often lead to conflict.

Conclusion

In sum, factors of environmental change and economic competition created a difficult situation in many parts of West Africa by the later 17th century. The terms of the European presence changed decisively towards one of slave trading based from fortified castles and trading posts, and away from mutual coexistence within African social structures. This was part of the shift towards the rapid growth in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which will be dealt with in the next chapter.

Factbox

1413: Portuguese troops capture Ceuta in Morocco; their sailors begin to sail down the West African coast.

1442: Portuguese sailors first reach sub-Saharan Africa

1471: Portuguese reach the Gold Coast

1482: Elmina castle founded on the Gold Coast by the Portuguese

1485: Oba Ozolua of Benin received Portuguese visitors; the Portuguese trading post at Gwatón is founded in the kingdom of Benin in 1490

1488: Bumi Jeléen, a Jolof prince, comes to Lisbon in search of a military alliance from the Portuguese against his rivals to the Jolof crown

1491: Nzika Nkuwu, *manikongo* (ruler of Kongo) converts to Christianity

1589: Cacheu founded by the Portuguese in Guinea-Bissau, a fortified post; followed by Ziguinchor (1645) and Bissau (1687).

1621: Gorée (Senegal/Dakar) captured from the Portuguese by the Dutch

1637: Elmina captured by the Dutch from the Portuguese

1641: Luanda and São Tomé captured by the Dutch from the Portuguese; re-taken by a Brazilian army in 1648

1642: Sekondi castle founded by the English

1651: English found a fort at James Island, at the mouth of the Gambia river

1652: Cape Coast castle on the Gold Coast expanded by the English

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