

# Africans

## THE HISTORY OF A CONTINENT

Second Edition

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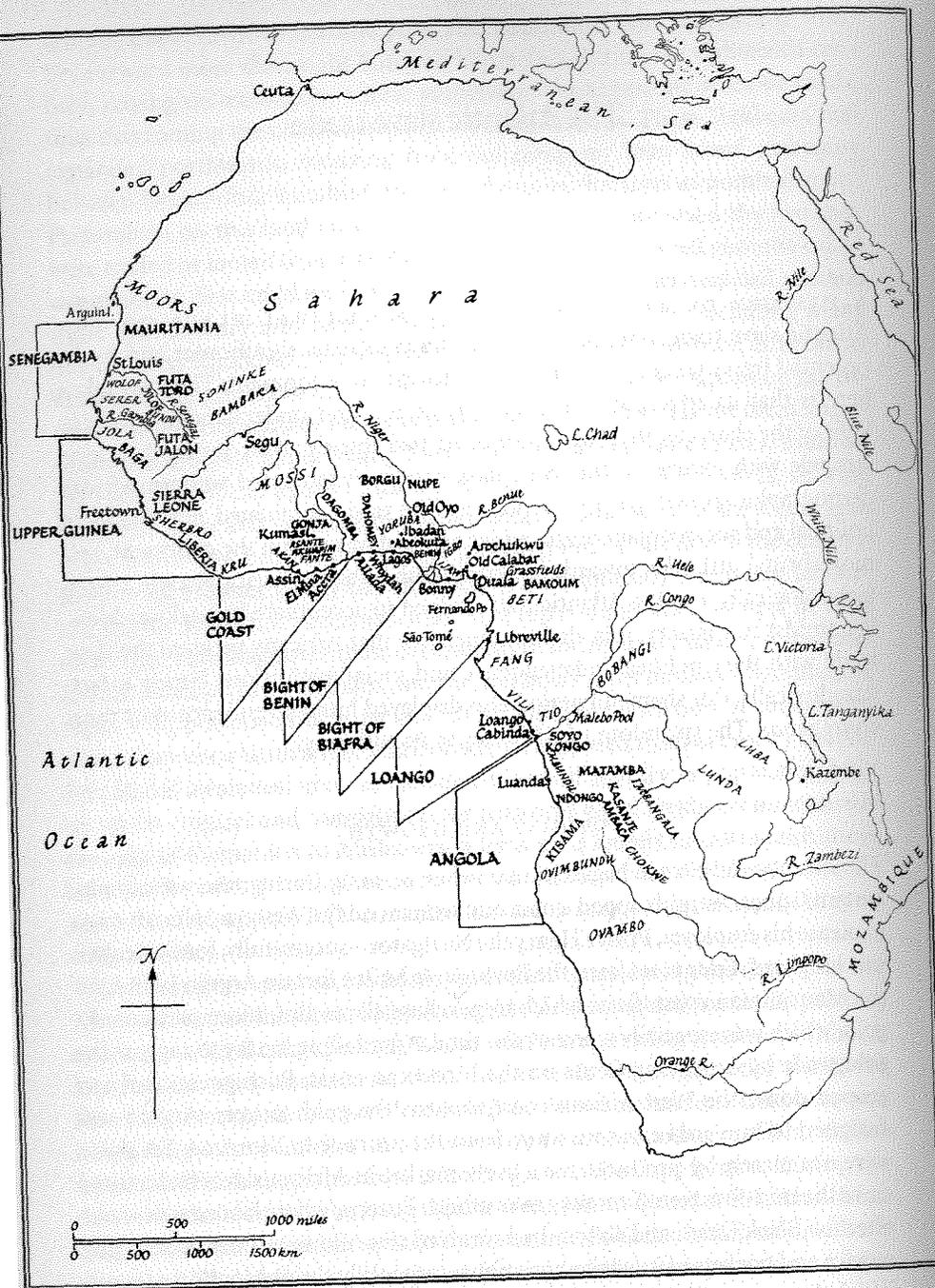
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8. The Atlantic slave trade.

like Madeira and eventually to the Americas, they depended increasingly on slave labour. The Atlantic slave trade was largely a response to their demand.

Yet the trade depended also on Africans being willing to sell slaves. They did so because underpopulation, with the consequent difficulty of commanding labour by purely economic means, had already stimulated slavery and slave-trading among many, but not all, African peoples. At Arguin the Portuguese traded with Moors, long-established suppliers to the Saharan slave trade. When the Portuguese edged southwards to the River Senegal in 1444, they found the people equally integrated into the northern trade. 'The King', a chronicler wrote, 'supports himself by raids, which result in many slaves from his own as well as neighbouring countries. He employs these slaves . . . in cultivating the land . . . but he also sells many to the [Moors] . . . in return for horses and other goods.'<sup>1</sup> Wolof cavalrymen paid the Portuguese between nine and fourteen slaves for each horse. Further south along the coast, however, the Portuguese encountered peoples without powerful chiefs or experience of slavery. The Baga of modern Guinea, for example, refused to participate in the slave trade throughout its history. Like the Kru of modern Liberia and several neighbouring stateless peoples, they resisted enslavement with ferocious courage and, if captured, were so liable to kill their masters or themselves that Europeans stopped enslaving Kru. A disproportionate number of slaves in the Americas who escaped to create 'maroon' communities came from stateless societies.

West African slavery was not confined to the Islamic peoples of the savanna. There was also lineageslavery, where dependents became subordinate members of descent groups. The Portuguese discovered this when they reached the Akan peoples of the Gold Coast, probably in 1471. Here, at last, they outflanked the Saharan trade and gained access to West Africa's main gold supplies. Here, at El Mina (The Mine) in 1482, they built the first European fortress in tropical Africa. Eventually they probably captured about half of West Africa's gold exports. The gold provided about a quarter of the Portuguese Crown's revenue in 1506. That proportion soon declined, but it was not until about 1700 that slaves replaced gold as the West African coast's most valuable export. Portugal's problem on the Gold Coast was how to pay for gold. Horses could not live there. Initially the Portuguese sold firearms, which were eagerly accepted, but the Pope banned them lest they reached hostile Muslims. So the Portuguese sold cloth (mainly from elsewhere in Africa), metals (from Europe) – and slaves. Akan already bought northern slaves with gold. Between 1500 and 1535 they bought between ten thousand and twelve thousand slaves from the Portuguese, using them to carry other imports inland and especially to clear forest for agriculture, their dominant concern. The Portuguese initially brought some slaves from Benin, which was expanding militarily and had captives to sell, but in 1516 Benin ceased to export male slaves, fearing to lose manpower. Thereafter most slaves sold to

Akan apparently came from the Niger Delta and Igbo country to the east. As in Asia, the Portuguese became maritime middlemen in a network of indigenous exchanges.

The early Portuguese discovered one other especially valuable trading partner. In 1482 the King of Kongo learned that unprecedented sea-creatures had been seen off the Congo estuary. Their Portuguese sailors soon established mutually advantageous relations with the kingdom's immigrant rulers, whose uncertain authority rested partly on the concentration of slaves around their capital. Here, as among the Wolof, the slave trade became a business in which rulers and subjects had sharply divergent interests. Eager for new resources and outside support, the King of Kongo accepted baptism, while his son, Afonso Mbemba Nzinga, who usurped the throne in 1506, committed himself fully to Christianity and adopted Portuguese dress, titles, etiquette, technology, and literacy. This strategy prospered for a decade before crisis ensued. From 1500 the Portuguese created sugar plantations on the island of São Tomé, off the coast of modern Gabon, using Kongo as their source of labour. In 1526, when the kingdom was exporting two thousand to three thousand slaves each year, Afonso complained to his Portuguese counterpart:

Many of our subjects eagerly covet Portuguese merchandise, which your people bring into our kingdoms. To satisfy this disordered appetite, they seize numbers of our free or freed black subjects, and even nobles, sons of nobles, even the members of our own family. They sell them to the white people. . . . This corruption and depravity is so widespread that our land is entirely depopulated by it. . . . It is in fact our wish that this kingdom should be a place neither of trade nor of transit for slaves.<sup>2</sup>

The King of Portugal replied that Kongo had nothing else to sell. Afonso did not stop the trade, but he limited and regulated it. His kingdom expanded and survived until the mid-seventeenth century. The Portuguese looked elsewhere for slaves, ultimately in 1576 creating a new entrepôt at Luanda, which became a base for direct European conquest and slave-raiding.

Luanda's foundation was a response to a new phase in the slave trade. The first West African slaves went mainly to Portugal, then to Madeira, and then to São Tomé. Direct shipments from Africa to the Americas began in 1519. As European and African diseases destroyed the Amerindian peoples, African slaves replaced them, because Africans alone were available in the required numbers, they had the unique degree of immunity to both European and African diseases that came from living on the tropical periphery of the Old World, and their relatively narrow moral communities made Africans willing to enslave and sell those outside their own groups, whereas Europeans were no longer prepared to enslave one another. By the late sixteenth century, nearly

Table 7.1. *Slave Departures from Africa to the Atlantic by Centuries, 1519–1867*

1519–1600	266,000
1601–1700	1,252,800
1701–1800	6,096,200
1801–1867	3,446,800
Total	11,061,800

Source: D. Eltis, 'The volume and structure of the transatlantic slave trade: a reassessment', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 58 (2001), 44.

80 percent of all exported West African slaves went to the Americas, especially to Brazil, where plantation sugar took root during the 1550s.

The numbers were still relatively small: about three thousand to four thousand a year, on average, during the last eighty years of the sixteenth century. These figures come from an exhaustive study, made during the 1990s, of the records of 27,233 slaving voyages between 1519 and 1867, about 70 percent of all such voyages, with an estimate added for those not recorded. As Table 7.1 shows, the relatively small trade of the sixteenth century accelerated during the seventeenth, peaked during the eighteenth – the largest number of slaves leaving Africa in any quarter century was 1,921,100 between 1776 and 1800 – and then declined slowly during the nineteenth century. The most important change took place during the mid-seventeenth century. Until then not more than ten thousand slaves had been exported each year, mainly by the Portuguese to Brazil. But in 1630 the Dutch conquered northern Brazil, in 1637 they took El Mina, and in 1641 they briefly occupied Luanda, destroying Portugal's position on the West African coast. From the 1640s, the Dutch supplied many slaves at low prices to new sugar plantations in the British colony of Barbados and the French Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe. This attracted British and French traders who gradually supplanted the Dutch, first through chartered companies – the Royal African Company was chartered in 1672 – and then in the eighteenth century through private merchants based chiefly in Liverpool and Nantes. The initial Caribbean sugar islands were overtaken by Jamaica, the major British slave colony, and especially by the French colony of Saint-Domingue (Haiti), which imported nearly a million slaves during the eighteenth century and was the scene, in 1791, of the only successful major slave revolt in human history. In all, 49 percent of exported slaves went to the Caribbean, 41 percent to Brazil, and fewer than 4 percent to North America, largely because it was further from Africa. The selling price of slaves in the Caribbean rose by 150 percent during the eighteenth century and the share of the price going to West African merchants increased from 25 to 50 percent.<sup>3</sup>

Expressed in terms of imported manufactures, cheapened by advances in European industry, the returns to African slave traders improved dramatically. A slave worth two linen cloths in Dahomey in 1674 fetched seventy cloths in 1750.<sup>4</sup>

The sources of slaves changed over time. The first came chiefly from Senegambia, the Upper Guinea Coast (from modern Guinea-Bissau to Liberia), and West-Central Africa (chiefly Kongo and Angola), which remained a major supplier throughout the trade and provided 44 percent of all slaves exported. The growth points of the mid-seventeenth century were the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin (including the Dahomey and Yoruba kingdoms). Eighteenth-century expansion areas were the Bight of Biafra (especially the Niger Delta) and Mozambique.

Plantations needed young men. 'In slaving our ships,' the Royal African Company told its agents, 'always observe that the negroes be well-liking and healthy from the age of 15 years not exceeding 40; and at least two 3rds. men slaves.' The instructions regarding gender were followed: 63 percent of slaves arriving in the Caribbean during the eighteenth century were males, who generally cost 20 or 30 percent more than females on the West African coast. Since African societies and the Saharan trade both preferred female slaves, the various branches were complementary. But European merchants probably took more children (aged under 15) than they wanted: 21 percent of those reaching the eighteenth-century Caribbean.<sup>5</sup> One reason was European legislation allowing more children than adults to be packed into a ship.

#### OPERATION AND EXPERIENCE

The best way to understand the slave trade is to follow a victim from his (or her) place of enslavement in the West African interior to his arrival in America. We know least about initial enslavement, but a mid-nineteenth century missionary in Sierra Leone, Sigismund Koelle, asked 177 freed male slaves (but only 2 women, who must be omitted) to describe their enslavement.<sup>6</sup> Of these, 34 percent said they had been 'taken in war', either as by-products of warfare between polities or as captives in large-scale slave raids, chiefly the great annual raids that savanna horsemen launched against agricultural peoples. Koelle did not mention captives made by rulers raiding their own subjects, as was common in seventeenth-century Kongo and some other regions, but 30 percent of his informants had been kidnapped, especially among Igbo and other stateless forest peoples. Eighteenth-century Igbo went to farm carrying their weapons and leaving the village children in a locked and guarded stockade. Another 11 percent claimed to have been enslaved by judicial process, chiefly on charges of adultery, suggesting that senior men used the law to rid themselves of younger competitors. 'Since this Slave-Trade has been us'd,' the perceptive slave-trader Francis Moore wrote of the Gambia in the 1730s, 'all Punishments are chang'd

into Slavery; there being an Advantage of such Condemnations, they strain for Crimes very hard, in order to get the Benefit of selling the Criminal.'<sup>7</sup> Two men told Koelle they had been enslaved because their kinsmen had been convicted of witchcraft. The weak were especially vulnerable. Some 30 percent of Koelle's informants had already been slaves of Africans; European traders preferred these as supposedly tougher and less prone to escape. Orphans, widows, poor relations, the idle, the feckless, and the feebleminded were all likely to end in slavery. So were those who defied the powerful. One man 'was sold by a war-chief, because he refused to give him his wife.' Seven percent had been sold to pay debts, mostly family debts rather than their own. None said he had enslaved himself during famine, but it was common, for slave exports peaked during famines and one ship obtained a full cargo merely by offering food.

The slave, then, had been captured, kidnapped, convicted, or otherwise deprived of freedom. A fundamental principle of the slave trade now came into operation. Slaves were a perishable commodity. Profit depended on selling them before they died or, in the case of new slaves still close to home, before they escaped. The traders who bought new slaves and transported them to commercial centres might be small men who added occasional human beings to their stocks of cloth or cattle. One kidnapped Igbo girl was sold six times in less than two hundred kilometres. Generally, however, as a knowledgeable French merchant observed, slaves, as a valuable and risky commodity, were 'the business of kings, rich men, and prime merchants, exclusive of the inferior sort of Blacks.' Prime merchants included the Soninke who transported slaves captured in cavalry raids to the coast of Senegambia or Guinea: 'In front, five or six singing men, all of them belonging to the coffle; these were followed by the other free people; then came the slaves, fastened in the usual way by a rope round their necks, four of them to a rope, and a man with a spear between each four; after them came the domestic slaves, and in the rear the women of free condition.'<sup>8</sup> Further south, three trading groups became famous. Aro traded between Igboland and the Niger Delta, exploiting especially an oracle at Arochukwu near the Cross River which was said to 'eat' those whom it convicted of witchcraft or other offences; in reality they were sold down the river. Bobangi canoemen and traders ranged the seventeen hundred kilometres of the central Congo River, transporting slaves to the Vili traders of Loango in modern Gabon. Afro-Portuguese frontiersmen in Angola led caravans deep into the interior, whereas elsewhere the inland trade was an African monopoly, except along the Senegal and Gambia Rivers. Alongside these prime merchants, rulers also engaged directly in the trade, although as privileged exporters rather than monopolists. Even Asante and Dahomey, the most authoritarian eighteenth-century trading states, operated mixed economies in which chiefs and private merchants exported alongside official traders. Most final sales of slaves to European merchants were by coastal middlemen who strove to prevent either

white men penetrating the interior or inland traders reaching the sea – perhaps by telling each that the others were cannibals. In Senegambia and Upper Guinea, these middlemen were often Afro-Portuguese. Elsewhere they were usually Africans, the best-known group being the Ijaw traders of the Niger Delta who employed an institution, the canoe house, which was a combination of descent group, trading company, and political faction, the core lineage being swollen by slaves and dependents who paddled huge canoes up the Niger to collect slaves:

The Black Traders of Bonny and Calabar, who are very expert at reckoning and talking the different Languages of their own Country and those of the Europeans, come down about once a Fortnight with Slaves; Thursday or Friday is generally their Trading Day. Twenty or Thirty Canoes, sometimes more and sometimes less, come down at a Time. In each Canoe may be Twenty or Thirty Slaves. The Arms of some of them are tied behind their Backs with Twigs, Canes, Grass Rope, or other Ligaments of the Country; and if they happen to be stronger than common, they are pinioned above the Knee also. In this Situation they are thrown into the Bottom of the Canoe, where they lie in great Pain, and often almost covered with Water. On their landing, they are taken to the Traders Houses, where they are oiled, fed, and made up for Sale.<sup>9</sup>

The European merchants who now bought the slaves practised two trading systems. One, known as the factory trade, was in effect a commercial diaspora on African lines where political authorities permitted Europeans to establish permanent coastal settlements to bulk slaves in readiness for ships. These factories were expensive and were founded only by seventeenth-century chartered companies or where slaves were especially numerous, as at Dahomey. Private traders, by contrast, negotiated with the African merchants at a single post or, less often, cruised down the coast purchasing a few slaves at a time until they had full cargoes. Both systems were under ultimate African control and both operated by lengthy and skilful haggling, lubricated by hospitality, bribery, political alliance, copious alcohol, and personal relations as well as institutional mechanisms to secure credit and enforce fulfilment of contracts.

Europeans have often asserted that Africans sold one another for ‘mere baubles or the weapons of war’. Baubles were sometimes part of the deal, especially in the early days. Even in the 1680s, some 40 percent of Senegambian imports were beads and semiprecious stones. Generally, however, Europeans sold to Africans much the same kinds of goods as they sold to American colonists. At least half of West Africa’s imports during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were cloth, initially mostly from India or elsewhere in Africa, later mostly from Europe. Raw iron and copper were also important, as were cowrie shells (as currency) in the Bight of Benin. In the eighteenth century, four items other than cloth each formed about 10 percent of imports: alcohol,

tobacco, miscellaneous manufactures (chiefly metal goods), and firearms and gunpowder. North Europeans began to sell guns in quantity during the late seventeenth century, when cheap and more reliable flintlock muskets led states on the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin to rearm their forces. A century later, sub-Saharan Africa was importing nearly 200,000 muskets a year.

In confronting European traders, the eclecticism and competitiveness of African societies made imported goods fatally attractive. None were essentials, except, in a sense, firearms, but most were consumption goods sufficiently valued to entice African rulers and many ordinary people to sell other Africans towards whom they felt no obligation, much as medieval Venetians and Genoese had sold other Europeans to Muslims. Some Africans opposed this, not necessarily on moral grounds. Several stateless peoples refused to trade in slaves, Benin closed its slave market, King Afonso of Kongo bewailed the trade’s effects, and there are accounts of ordinary people helping slaves to escape. Given African concern to build up numbers, to sell people was uncongenial and tragically ironic. Its logic lay in the divorce between collective and individual interest, for powerful men sold slaves to acquire goods with which to attract still more personal followers. They sold people in order to acquire people.

The haggling was ended and the slave had passed to his new, European owner. The first task was to brand him, as at every change of ownership. The second was to load the slave on a ship for America before he died. There are no reliable statistics of mortality before embarkation. Joseph Miller has estimated that of every one hundred people enslaved for export from Angola in the last decades of the eighteenth century, ten may have died during capture, twenty-two on the way to the coast, ten in coastal towns, six at sea, and three in the Americas before starting work, leaving fewer than half to work as slaves.<sup>10</sup> Higher estimates could be quoted for every stage: in the late seventeenth century, Gambia slaves cost at least five times as much at the coast as at their inland place of enslavement. Nothing more precise is possible, but time spent in coastal slave pens or aboard ship waiting to sail was thought to carry high risks of disease, suicide, or attempted escape:

When our slaves are aboard we shackle the men two and two, while we lie in port, and in sight of their own country, for ’tis then they attempt to make their escape, and mutiny . . . they are fed twice a day . . . which is the time they are aptest to mutiny, being all upon deck; therefore all that time, what of our men are not employ’d in distributing their victuals to them, and settling them, stand to their arms; and some with lighted matches at the great guns that yaun upon them, loaden with partridge, till they have done and gone down to their kennels between decks.<sup>11</sup>

The moment of sailing was traumatic. ‘The slaves all night in a turmoil’, a sailor’s diary recorded. ‘They felt the ship’s movement. A worse howling I

never did hear, like the poor mad souls in Bedlam Hospital. The men shook their fetters which was deafening.<sup>12</sup> The anguish was in part because many West Africans believed that Europeans were sea creatures, cannibals from the land of the dead, whose black shoe-leather was African skin, whose red wine was African blood, and whose gunpowder was burnt and ground African bones. Similar fears existed in Mozambique and among those exposed to the Saharan slave trade. Yet slaves owned by West African masters were also capable of desperate violence, whether suicide or murder, born of offended honour and love of freedom. Revolts may have taken place on some 10 percent of slave voyages. An average of about twenty-five slaves died in each known revolt. The risk of death was perhaps four times as high as the chance of liberation, for of 369 revolts where something is known of the outcome, in only 12 does any slave appear to have returned to Africa as a free person. Taken as a whole, probably fewer than one slave in a thousand of those exported regained freedom before reaching America. The two most successful known revolts took place on the *Marlborough* in 1752 and the *Regina Coeli* in 1858; in each case some 270 slaves escaped after seizing control of the ship while still close to their point of embarkation. Revolt was most common on ships sailing from Senegambia, Upper Guinea, and the Gold Coast – all locations where slaves may have had strong traditions of military honour – and on those with large proportions of female captives, possibly because women were commonly allowed greater freedom of movement.<sup>13</sup> Not that anyone had much freedom in a *tumba*, a coffin, as the Portuguese called their aging slave ships. The average vessel in the eighteenth-century French trade was twenty metres long, six metres wide, and carried about three hundred slaves. In 104 ships measured between 1839 and 1852, the average deck space per slave was about 0.4 square metres. Mortality depended chiefly on place of embarkation, length of voyage – averaging two to three months in the eighteenth century but sometimes much more – and whether an epidemic broke out, usually dysentery, smallpox, or scurvy. Some 12 percent of slaves despatched to the Americas between 1519 and 1867 died at sea.<sup>14</sup> Sharks sometimes followed ships for a month.

Accounts by slaves who survived the Middle Passage generally stressed three memories: the disgusting atmosphere in the slave quarters, where sometimes a candle would not burn; the crew's pervasive brutality; and especially the thirst, for water was the crucial scarce resource: the normal ration was about one litre per day. Olaudah Equiano, who claimed to have been kidnapped in Igbo country at the age of 11 and sold to British slavers in 1756, wrote the most vivid description:

The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air

soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness amongst the slaves, of which many died. . . . This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable.<sup>15</sup>

#### DEMOGRAPHIC CONSEQUENCES

Because the struggle to build up population had hitherto been African history's chief theme, the slave trade's demographic impact was potentially its most important. Unfortunately, it is also the most difficult to investigate. Although the number of slaves exported is now reasonably clear, there is no reliable way of estimating loss of life before embarkation, nor do we know how large West Africa's population was when the trade began, whether and how fast it was increasing, and whether and how fast it might have increased thereafter if the slave trade had not happened. Historians can construct models of the demographic processes involved, as Patrick Manning has done, but many figures fed into the models must be guesses. Manning took census data for 1931, assumed a natural (or intrinsic) population growth rate of 0.5 percent a year for most of the previous centuries, allowed for the slave exports suggested by estimates then current, and concluded that the area of western Africa supplying the Atlantic slave trade contained twenty-five million people in 1700. Using the known age and sex composition of slaves exported, plus estimates of casualties at earlier stages in the trade, he calculated that by 1850 the equivalent population had fallen to about twenty million, with the worst losses in Angola and the Bight of Benin. He also argued, however, that the true demographic cost was to the likely population growth if there had been no slave trade. Using the same assumptions, he reckoned that in 1850, but for the slave trade, the population of all sub-Saharan Africa might have been about 100 million but was in fact about 50 million. This loss of potential population took place during rapid demographic growth elsewhere – China's population doubled in the eighteenth century alone – so that Manning estimated that Africa's proportion of the combined population of Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the New World declined between 1600 and 1900 from about 30 percent to a little over 10 percent.<sup>16</sup>

Most historians would agree that Angola suffered especially severely, for it was quite sparsely populated, its slave exports were continuously high for three centuries, and there is much descriptive evidence of depopulation. Not all would agree that the Bight of Benin suffered so badly, for Manning assumed that most of its exported slaves came from close to the coast, which is disputed. There

is no consensus on whether western Africa's population declined absolutely, nor by how much, although most experts might think any decline to have been relatively small. A few specialists believe that western Africa had little scope for population growth before famine and epidemic would have checked it, but more might point to its large areas of sparse population and agree with Manning that the crucial question is how western Africa's population might have increased but for the slave trade. Unfortunately, two considerations make this question virtually unanswerable. One is that Manning's crucial assumption of a natural growth rate of 0.5 percent a year has no evidential basis and is much higher than normal growth rates in traditional societies. (Between 1550 and 1820, the population of England increased by 0.5 percent a year; that of Western Europe, by 0.24 percent a year.) The second consideration is that two other unquantifiable consequences of European expansion influenced western Africa's population history at this time.

One was the arrival of American crops, especially maize and cassava. In moist savanna regions, maize produces nearly twice as many calories per hectare as millet and 50 percent more than sorghum. Cassava produces 150 percent more calories than maize and is less vulnerable to drought. Maize was easier to integrate into established agricultural systems and spread more quickly. It was a staple grain in the Kongo kingdom by 1640 and was especially successful in forest-savanna borderlands like Asante, where it helped to feed a rapidly expanding population and provided the army with easily transportable rations. Cassava demanded new methods of cultivation and processing, so that it spread more slowly, especially in West African forest areas, but it could be conserved and transported as flour, so that it became the staple food of long-distance traders in western equatorial Africa and was absorbed into agricultural systems along the trade routes as far eastwards as Kazembe's kingdom in modern Zambia, where a visitor in 1831 found 'unending cassava gardens'. These new crops almost certainly made more food available in a region of relatively poor nutrition, although cassava – widely considered a food of the poor – was nutritious only if eaten with a protein-rich accompaniment such as fish. New crops are a major reason for thinking that the potential for population growth at this time was high.

Against this was the fact that Atlantic trade also exposed western Africa to new diseases, although without the devastating effects they wrought in more isolated America. These complaints may have included tuberculosis and bacillary pneumonia, for West Africans show little resistance to these. They probably included plague, from which the Sahara had hitherto protected West Africa; epidemics appear to have affected Kongo and parts of Angola in 1655–60 and the coasts of Senegal and Guinea around 1744. Venereal syphilis, possibly a Latin American disease, was added to the long-established endemic syphilis and yaws, although they were so closely related that early references are difficult

to interpret. The major problem concerns smallpox, for although West Africa probably had its own relatively mild strains, Europeans appear to have introduced the virulent strains that devastated their own continent between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Coexistence of different strains might explain the diverse responses to the disease that European observers reported, ranging from indifference to panic-stricken witch-hunting. Equatorial regions appear to have had least resistance. Smallpox was reported in the Kongo area in 1560 and a major epidemic took place there and in Angola in 1625–8, followed by recurrent epidemics until the early twentieth century, often associated with famine. But regions further north also suffered. The Bight of Benin, for example, experienced several major epidemics from the seventeenth century onwards. There the cult of the smallpox god, Sakpata, was allegedly introduced from the north by the early eighteenth-century King Agaja of Dahomey. Certainly West Africans practised inoculation against smallpox, teaching the skill to their masters in America. In other continents, deathrates among those contracting virulent smallpox averaged 25 percent or more. Accounts of western African epidemics suggest mortality on that scale. Moreover, those in other continents who recovered from smallpox were commonly left sterile. If the effects were similar in western Africa, the disease must have cut deeply into any population growth that American crops permitted.

In sum, we do not know how severely the slave trade affected western Africa's demographic history. Our best hope of assessing it will come from detailed studies of the colonisation or abandonment of land. The most likely answer at present is that the slave trade caused population decline in Angola and severely retarded growth elsewhere, although the potential for growth was substantially less than Manning's model suggested. This happened during rapid demographic expansion in other continents. Given the central importance of underpopulation in African history, the slave trade was a demographic disaster, but not a catastrophe. The people survived.

#### POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

Political consequences are better documented and perhaps easier to summarise. Like merchant capital elsewhere, slave trading could coexist with almost any political system. The Igbo, for example, supplied many slaves but experienced little political change and remained predominantly stateless. Yet most trade was conducted by citizens of major states, which often benefited at the expense of stateless peoples. The chief political consequence was to shape the character of these states in a mercantilist direction, meaning that political and commercial power fused, either by rulers controlling trade or by traders acquiring political power. Such a fusion of power was not previously normal in this region. That it now occurred was probably more a consequence of international trade than

specifically of the slave trade, for similar changes happened along the Asian coastline as European maritime trade concentrated wealth and power there at the expense of land empires ruled by Mughals, Ottomans, or Safavis. Moreover, in western Africa, it was the import and use of firearms rather than the capture and export of slaves that enabled small, well-armed minorities to dominate larger populations. And foreign trade was only one of many forces shaping western Africa's political history at this time, not always the most important.

Three major states in western Africa disintegrated during the slave trade, although not necessarily because of it. The play of forces can be seen in the first important kingdom that the Portuguese contacted, Greater Jolof in Senegal. This was a land empire, based in the inland savanna, ruled by horsemen, deeply engaged in trans-Saharan trade, and exercising only loose suzerainty over its four Wolof units – nuclear Jolof, Waalo, Kajoor, Bawol – and its Serer subjects. By selling a few horses to the Wolof coastal states in return for slaves, Portuguese traders encouraged centrifugal forces, but the northern trade remained more important and Greater Jolof was probably more severely weakened by the creation of a pagan state in Futa Toro to the east during the 1490s, which interrupted its inland trade. Forty years later, the other Wolof states withheld tribute and Greater Jolof disintegrated. Now the Atlantic trade became an important force shaping the successor states, especially when firearms arrived in the seventeenth century. The new Wolof kingdoms were dominated by armies of royal slaves (*ceddo*), hard-drinking warriors with a code of military honour, a deep investment in slaving, and a rough way with peasants. Against them, however, was posed the continuing southward expansion of Islam, a historical process of more enduring significance than the slave trade. During the next three centuries, Wolof politics centred on conflict between the forces of mercantilism – kings, *ceddo*, European traders – and those of Islam, represented by rural-based *marabouts* (clerics) seeking to convert the peasantry and create Islamic theocracies, defying the ancient West African tradition that clerics prayed while warriors ruled. Among the Wolof, the victor was mercantilism. The main revolt here, in 1673, arose from conflict in Mauritania between Berber clerical tribes and their Arab conquerors; the leader, Nasir al-Din, turned southwards and gained control of Waalo, Kajoor, and Futa Toro, but after his death in 1674 the mercantilist forces regained power and slaughtered *marabouts*. Further inland, however, mercantilism was less effective. In c. 1698 a *marabout* named Malik Sy created an Islamic theocracy in Bundu, an area formerly under Soninke rule but recently settled by sedentary Fulbe. In 1725 Fulbe clerics in Futa Jalon rebelled against their Mande-speaking rulers and established a largely Fulbe theocracy, which for the first time in West Africa translated the Koran into the vernacular. Half a century later, the clerical party seized control of the Fulbe state of Futa Toro. Its first ruler banned the sale of Muslim slaves, but the theocracies did not escape the lure of the Atlantic trade.

Futa Jalon, in particular, became a major slave exporter, with the most state-controlled economy in West Africa and exceptional dependence on agricultural slaves, who may have formed a majority of its population. Still further inland, among the Mande-speaking Bambara who now dominated the old nucleus of Mali, mercantilism rather than Islam prevailed. First a young hunter of low birth, Biton Kulibali, expanded his age-set into a military force with which, in precolonial Africa's most dramatic generational revolt, he created the Segu kingdom in c. 1712. Then slave generals overthrew his Muslim successor and established a *ceddo* regime dependent on the slave trade and the use of slave labour in agriculture and craft production.

The second important state to disintegrate during the slave trade was the Kongo kingdom, where the European impact was more crucial because of the proximity of the Portuguese colony in Angola. Yet Kongo's collapse was long delayed. After the crisis of 1526 when slaving threatened to escape royal control, Afonso I reestablished authority and confined slave exports to foreigners and convicts. His long reign (1506–43) secured his close kinsmen a monopoly of provincial governorships. Adoption of Christianity as a state cult provided literate subordinates to staff the administration and ritual resources to set against the indigenous religion. By the seventeenth century, the state also had a standing army of some five thousand, including five hundred mercenary musketeers to whom the king sought to reserve firearms. Aristocrats distinguished themselves from commoners by elements of European culture. They clustered in the capital, renamed São Salvador, which dominated the countryside, where peasants and slaves gradually fused into a single subject population. This reconstructed kingdom survived for nearly a century and a half, but it was weakened by factionalism within the huge royal patrilineage. During one crisis, in 1568, São Salvador was destroyed by the militarised Imbangala. The king needed Portuguese help to regain his throne. Meanwhile trade patterns shifted to his disadvantage. Portuguese trade from Luanda after 1576 gave southern provincial rulers independent access to firearms and other imported goods, while Dutch trade at Soyo from 1600 did the same in the north. A gifted king, Garcia II, struggled to preserve the kingdom during the mid-seventeenth century, but his successor died in 1665 at the Battle of Mbwila, precipitated by Portuguese designs on Kongo's copper deposits. Soyo sacked São Salvador and the Kongo kingdom disintegrated into its component provinces and villages. One spectacular attempt at reunification was made in the early 1700s by a young noblewoman named Beatrix Kimpa Vita, who, in a complex synthesis of indigenous and Christian beliefs, declared herself possessed by St. Anthony and was installed as national leader by her peasant followers at a rebuilt São Salvador, only to be burnt at the stake in 1706.

The third major state in western Africa to collapse during the slave trade was Oyo, the dominant Yoruba kingdom in the southwest of modern Nigeria. Here

too the interaction between indigenous processes and foreign commerce was complex. Oyo was an inland savanna state with a cavalry elite and a political system that dispersed power among structurally opposed groups and institutions in a manner characteristic of ancient Yoruba towns. Power in the capital was shared between the Alafin, a largely secluded ruler with ritual authority, and the Oyo Mesi, a council of eight chiefs from the most important descent groups. By the early seventeenth century, Oyo was an important supplier of slaves to the Atlantic trade. In order to export them, it conquered a savanna corridor to the coast through the Dahomey Gap, making Dahomey itself tributary in 1726–7. Oyo also subjected many Yoruba towns and exerted some predominance over Borgu and Nupe to the north. But the problem of controlling this empire (and not merely the slave trade) destabilised Oyo, just as it had destabilised the Egyptian New Kingdom. Because power was widely dispersed in Oyo, so were the profits of empire. The Alafin gained new administrative functions exercised through royal slaves. The chiefs greatly increased their military power. In the contest for supremacy, the senior chief, the Basorun Gaha, pushed the Alafin aside and dominated the state from c. 1754 to 1774, until his unpopularity enabled Alafin Abiodun to use military forces commanded by the Kakanfo to overthrow Gaha and make himself supreme until 1789. Thereafter conflict tore the political system apart, the subject peoples broke away, and in 1817 a dissident Kakanfo incited a revolt by Oyo's numerous Muslims, which ended with the overrunning of the capital. By c. 1835 it was deserted. Internal structural tensions, imperial expansion, and militant Islam had together destroyed the state.

While old land empires collapsed, new mercantilist states arose, either by merchants gaining political power or by rulers controlling commerce. The most successful merchants were those of the Niger Delta, where the heads of the most powerful canoe houses emerged in the eighteenth century as hereditary 'kings' in several small trading towns. In equatorial Africa, among the Vili traders of Loango on the Gabon coast, a kingdom existed before foreign trade became important, but when its ruler sought to supervise trade, traditionalists insisted that he avoid corruption by eschewing contact with white people and their products; wealth and power therefore passed to merchants, who ousted territorial chiefs from the royal council and eventually overshadowed the monarchy, which had no incumbent for a century after 1787. Away from the coast, among the Tio traders of Malebo (Stanley) Pool on the River Congo, the kingship became purely ceremonial and power passed to provincial trader-chiefs. Leadership by Big Men had long predominated in this equatorial region and dovetailed neatly with the Atlantic trade. Among the Bobangi merchants of the middle Congo, for example, canoe houses were as dominant as in the Niger Delta, except that they had less continuity in this newly commercialised and competitive region.

The most constructive political effects of the Atlantic trade took place among the Akan people of the Gold Coast. By the seventeenth century, their wealth in gold had bred a populous, commercialised, and stratified coastal society dominated by Big Men whom a European trader described as 'wonderful proud and haughty'. Greater power, however, lay with military rulers in the hinterland, who used the new flintlock muskets of the late seventeenth century to create citizen armies, enlarge their states, and control coastal ports in order to secure their arms supply. In 1680 the first of these new states, Akwamu, captured Accra. Eighteen years later, its rival, Denkyira, conquered Assin. But the eventual victor was Asante, a dependency of Denkyira that threw off its control in 1701 under the leadership of Osei Tutu, conquered Denkyira's other dependencies, and became the most powerful of the Akan states.

Asante's underlying wealth lay in agriculture. With its capital at Kumasi, some fifty kilometres south of the northern forest edge, it could draw on both forest and savanna produce. Land was effectively held by lineages but was freely available and was cultivated chiefly by elementary peasant households, whose villages of small, high-gabled, thatched huts in forest clearings contrasted dramatically with the dangerous, competitive, domineering capital, housing perhaps 20,000 to 25,000 people in the early nineteenth century and surrounded by a twenty-kilometre belt of dense agricultural settlement and craft specialisation. Asante was also a major trading state, with four main roads radiating north from Kumasi into the savanna and another four reaching south to the coast. The northern trade, especially in kola nuts, was open to private merchants as well as state agents, but the southern trade in gold, slaves, and firearms was more closely regulated. The main roads also facilitated control of Asante's conquests, made first to the south, between 1701 and 1720, and then northwards between 1730 and 1752. At its peak around 1820, the empire embraced over 250,000 square kilometres divided into three broad regions: the six metropolitan chiefdoms that had made up Osei Tutu's military confederacy; an inner ring of conquered peoples who were mainly Akan and paid tax each year to state officials; and the outlying non-Akan tributaries of Gonja and Dagomba from which Asante residents demanded a thousand slaves a year, repressing frequent rebellions. Asante always remained at root a military society with a citizen army, a harshly militaristic ideology, and great brutality towards the weak.

Ruling an empire presented Asante with the same problems that destabilised Oyo. Its success in meeting them was a measure and a cause of its political sophistication. Like Alafins of Oyo, Asantehenes – especially Osei Kwadwo (1764–77) – created officials to administer conquests, but unlike Alafins they drew them from free matrilineages, appointed them to chieftainships supported from attached grants of land and people, and permitted them to build up administrative departments with specialised skills. Both the Exchequer and the Chancery employed literate Muslims, a rare use of literacy in Asante and

an equally rare reliance on Muslims, who were otherwise kept at a distance. This administration, like Buganda's, was patrimonial: it grew from the royal household, remained subject to the king's favour, became in part hereditary, and earned no regular salaries. Created to administer the empire, however, it became also a means by which kings gradually asserted supremacy over the military chiefs within the metropolitan provinces. Kings also exploited rivalries between provinces, created an internal security force (the *ankobe*), attracted cases into royal courts, established a state cult of the Golden Stool, elaborated an annual Odwira festival dramatising royal power, and built up a richly composite culture that accumulated dances, musical instruments, and medical and other skills from conquered peoples. Yet the kingdom's chief strength lay in its political institutions, which did not counterpose king and chiefs in structured opposition, as in Oyo, but integrated them into an annual national council, the Asantemanhyiamu. Asantehenes were kings in council. They were chosen by the Queen Mother and prominent chiefs from several matrilineal candidates, a system that largely freed Asante from the succession disputes so destructive to African kingdoms.

Asante was the only part of Africa where rich agricultural and mineral resources coincided. Its gold bought firearms and also, initially, slaves, until the high slave prices of the eighteenth century led the state to export them in return for munitions, husbanding its gold for the domestic economy, where even a few bananas had their price in gold dust and every man of substance carried scales and gold weights, often beautifully cast in brass. Gold gave Asante its spectacular opulence. 'There was gold everywhere', a dazzled coastal emissary reported; the Asantehene's morning bath was accompanied by the rattling of the treasury keys. Through loans of gold, the king bound ambitious followers to him. When converted into slave labour, gold defended Asante against the encircling forest. When converted into muskets, it defended the kingdom against its enemies. Gold accumulated by a chief belonged not to his descendants but to his chieftom or the state, which (at least in the nineteenth century) extracted heavy death duties from rich men. Private success was therefore public virtue. Gold gave Asante a means, notably lacking to most Africans, of channelling individual competitiveness into the service of the state, although only within limits set by the established order of rank and royal power.

The second major coastal state created in response to the Atlantic trade was Dahomey, but it had no gold and differed accordingly. In the late fifteenth century the chief polities among the Aja-Ewe peoples of the Bight of Benin were Allada and Whydah. Dahomey was a hinterland state apparently created in the seventeenth century as an offshoot of Allada. When Allada tried to control the intensive trade in slaves and firearms that began at that time, Dahomey conquered Allada in 1724 and became the dominant local power, although tributary to Oyo. Its king was restrained by his major chiefs and by

the practical obstacles to absolutism in any pedestrian society, but Dahomey was nevertheless a more efficiently authoritarian state than its predecessors. Its royal succession, largely by primogeniture, ensured that only ten kings reigned between 1650 and 1889. Raiding its neighbours but never creating an empire, it remained a small kingdom closely administered through commoner chiefs and royal courts. The religious system was under strong royal control. The army consisted largely of regular musketeers, renowned for their brutality and accurate marksmanship. Its famous Amazon corps, probably in origin a palace bodyguard, was one of several means by which the kingdom gave women an important public role, perhaps because such a small and aggressive state needed all its human resources. Rank and etiquette were strict, militarism was strident, all captured slaves belonged to the king, and their treatment was exceptionally cruel.

Mercantilist states also came into being in Angola. The first, Ndongo, had come into existence during the fifteenth century among the Mbundu people in the hinterland of Luanda. When the Portuguese occupied Luanda in 1576 and began to expand inland, Ndongo successfully withstood their attacks until the Mbundu were also assaulted from the rear by Imbangala warbands. Ndongo finally collapsed in 1671, but during the 1620s its queen, Njinga, had adopted Imbangala militarism, retreated inland to Matamba, and established a new state that became a focus of the long-distance slave trade. The most powerful Imbangala chief, the Kasanje, created a similar kingdom over Mbundu subjects during the 1630s. Matamba and Kasanje were Angola's most important mercantilist states and enjoyed a kind of stability after they evolved institutions to contain the violence of the slave trade, enslavement by war giving way to kidnapping and the distortion of judicial procedures. Yet the frontier of violence only moved further inland. During the eighteenth century, the chief supplier of slaves to Angola was Lunda, while the new growth point was further south, where the Ovimbundu people, probably reorganised politically during the seventeenth century by borrowing Mbundu and Imbangala innovations, had, by the 1790s, crossed the continental divide to explore the slaving possibilities of the upper Zambezi.

#### ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

The slave trade's economic impact was as complex as its other effects. Slaving was only one sector in economies that remained overwhelmingly agricultural. Specialists have estimated that in the mid-1780s, at the slave trade's peak, the average value of overseas trade per person in West Africa was only £0.10 per year, compared with £2.30 in Britain and £5.70 in the British West Indies.<sup>17</sup> Imported cloth then amounted to less than half a metre per West African per year. The slave trade was growing much faster than international trade as a

whole and it was, of course, most unevenly distributed within West Africa. But the main point about its economic impact was how little change it stimulated. Western Africa traded with the Atlantic world for over three hundred years without experiencing any significant economic development.

The impact of imported manufactures on West African domestic industries illustrates the point. Only on the coast itself, in Angola, and along the River Senegal – where the slave trade cut deepest – did imported cloth damage indigenous textile industries during the eighteenth century. Elsewhere an expanding market absorbed both local and imported products. Igbo textile production is thought to have increased in the eighteenth century, Yoruba cloth found a market in Brazil, and Asante established a new weaving industry with imported northern skills. Much the same was true of other crafts. On the coast and along the Senegal, iron-smelting – the least competitive African industry – often gave way to imported raw iron, but transport costs and consumer preferences generally protected smelters elsewhere, while blacksmiths were, if anything, encouraged. Imported brass similarly brought Benin's craftsmanship to superb levels and new kingdoms like Asante and Dahomey developed the whole range of court industries. New specialities grew up among boatmen and professional porters. But nothing in the Atlantic trade either encouraged change in the structure of western African industries or improved the transport system that was the crucial bottleneck. Moreover, western Africa exported scarcely any agricultural products, in striking contrast to Caribbean plantations. The main agricultural export was in fact food for slave ships, often grown largely by slave villages; at Allada in 1663 it was reckoned that to feed every eight slaves at sea cost the value of another slave. But plantation production of tropical crops within western Africa, although often mooted, would have needed a cooperation between African authorities and European merchants that was never achieved. One of the slave trade's most destructive effects was to retard African commodity production.

Another effect, with more ambiguous consequences, was to foster slavery within western Africa, especially female slavery. A census of Portugal's Angolan territories in 1777–8 showed twice as many adult women as men because so many young men had been exported. Women were valued, as ever, for both their reproductive capacity and their labour. Food-producing slave villages surrounded the Lunda capital and lined its trade routes. One entrepreneur was said to have 140 plantation slaves at work in mid-eighteenth-century Futa Jalon. In some highly commercialised coastal societies, ownership of slaves became a criterion of full citizenship and most heavy physical labour became 'slave work'. A merchant on the Gold Coast estimated during the 1770s, doubtless with exaggeration, that every Fante free man owned at least one or two slaves. Where slaves were so numerous, some might gain privileged status, like the Alafin's administrators or the royal slaves in Wolof

states who supervised work parties of free peasants. More commonly, however, the proliferation of slaves reduced their status from poor relations towards mere labourers. Slaves probably seldom reproduced themselves. Visitors to Asante and Dahomey noted that male slaves had difficulty in obtaining wives where polygynous masters accumulated women, while research on the nineteenth century suggests that slave wives bore few children, perhaps deliberately. Mass slavery also tended to reduce the status of free peasants, as in Kongo, and this probably affected especially free women because so many slaves were women.

The tensions endemic to slave societies might find release in periods of licensed disorder at festivals such as Asante's Odwira, 'the commonest mechanics and slaves furiously declaiming on state palavers'. Other tensions evoked more open violence. Some ninety-two shore-based attacks on slave ships are recorded, many of them along the Senegal and Gambia Rivers. There were localised slave insurrections against European traders in the Gambia in 1681–2 and Senegal in 1698. Revolts against African slaveholders were particularly common in Futa Jalon, where slaves were an exceptionally large proportion of the population. One in 1756 established an independent slave settlement at Kondeah. A second in 1785 decapitated numerous masters, burned rice fields, and created an autonomous slave community that survived for eleven years. Shortly afterwards, some fifty slaves died in a third conspiracy. In general, however, rebellions were relatively rare before the ending of slave exports left large concentrations of unfree men in coastal settlements. One reason for the rarity was probably the ease of escape, whether to the slave's home or to one of the maroon communities fringing slave-owning regions. In seventeenth-century Angola, for example, the Portuguese were untroubled by slave rebellion but suffered massive slave flight from Luanda and its environs, either to the nearby forest refuge of Nsaka de Casanze, to the still unconquered southern thornbush of Kisama – probably West Africa's most important focus of maroonage – or to join Queen Njinga's resistance in Matamba, where slaves were promised land and freedom.

The ethos of slaving societies was brutally inegalitarian and acquisitive. Benin's art became increasingly elaborate in its decoration, with much emphasis on symbols of Olokun, god of wealth. Legends told with symbolic truth that the cowrie shells imported as currency had grown on the corpses of slaves cast into the sea. Many held, with Bobangi traders, that wealth could be increased only at others' expense, commonly by witchcraft or sorcery, especially by sacrificing a relative's life, much as Asimini, the second king of Bonny in the Niger Delta, was believed to have sacrificed his daughter to the sea gods in order to deepen the estuary for Portuguese ships. Many oracles designed to test the truth of witchcraft accusations now sentenced those convicted to enslavement and sale. Among the Jola people on the southern coast of modern Senegal,

the spirit shrines that in the past had secured prosperity and warded off misfortune were now supplemented both by shrines aiding success in capturing slaves – the rite required a priest who had himself captured a slave to pour blood and palm wine over wooden slave-fetters – and by shrines protecting slaves excluded from the shrines consulted by free people. In the Anlo region of the Gold Coast, similarly, a new cult enabled slaves to communicate with the ancestors whom they could no longer venerate in their home areas. Perhaps the most illuminating response to this social pathology took a medical form, as was so characteristic of African thought. This was the Lemba cult of the middle and lower Congo, created in the seventeenth century. Lemba ('to calm') was a complaint, symptomatised by abdominal pains, difficult breathing, and sterility, which afflicted the mercantilist elite of chiefs, traders, and successful slaves. Perhaps the real disease was anxiety at the envy and sorcery they provoked. The cure was to pay heavily to join the Lemba society of the powerful who could protect one another and ensure, as their rhetoric claimed, that their lineages did not die out. Lemba healers used drums and bracelets marked with cowrie shells. They controlled markets, adjudicated disputes, and policed a trading system traversing political borders across half of equatorial Africa. The cult disappeared early in the twentieth century, along with the slave trade, but like the consequences of that trade, it survived in the Caribbean.

Lemba illustrated the capacity of privileged Africans to create or adapt institutions in order to survive the slave trade. Successful Igbo traders formed similar associations, while the Order of Christ, originally a Portuguese chivalric body, took Lemba's place in Angola. There, as in many regions, senior men also reshaped family systems to give themselves greater control over the behaviour and liberty of their dependants, whom they both exploited and protected. Given the family's central importance in African societies, its destruction was often the slave's most bitter experience. Olaudah Equiano's memoirs, for example, show him attempting throughout his life to create a surrogate kinship network. But for those who remained in Africa, the family was probably the chief defence against the effects of slaving, which may well have strengthened kinship systems. Polygynous marriage, for example, provided for orphans and surplus women. In this sense, their historical experience had equipped Africans to withstand slaving better than other peoples might have managed, just as their codes of honour and their training in the endurance of pain gave them fortitude to withstand cruelty. Africa's previous history helped to make the slave trade not only possible but survivable.

#### THE IMPACT OF ABOLITION

In the 18th century, the abolitionist movement was a small but growing force. It was led by people like William Pitt the Younger, who was a member of the House of Commons. The movement was a response to the growing awareness of the horrors of the slave trade and the need for reform.

Slavery, from the 18th century, was a major source of wealth and power for the British Empire. It was a system of forced labour that provided the raw materials for the Industrial Revolution. The abolitionist movement, however, was a response to the growing awareness of the horrors of the slave trade and the need for reform. The movement was led by people like William Pitt the Younger, who was a member of the House of Commons. The movement was a response to the growing awareness of the horrors of the slave trade and the need for reform.

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