

## *The Atlantic slave trade*

**Technological developments in ship design** At the end of the Middle Ages European society underwent a profound economic and technological transformation, which saw the focus of international trade shift from Genoa and Venice and the Mediterranean to Liverpool, Nantes and the Atlantic. The Atlantic frontier was different from the Saharan and Indian Ocean frontiers, because in this area there was continuous technological development in the design and manufacture of ships, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, culminating in the advent of the steamship in the mid-nineteenth century. Ship design underwent changes, hulls became larger, the ships were faster, sails themselves were improved and made more efficient, ships needed fewer crew members to man, so that by the end of the sailing era they were very much more efficient than either camels or dhows.

**Cheaper transport and goods** This continuing revolution in transport had wide-ranging implications. Cheaper and more efficient transport made it possible to grow sugar, cotton and tobacco in the New World and to transport this to Europe at a profit. By the same token it made it possible to transport slaves from Africa to the Americas to work on the plantations. As time went by it became easier and cheaper to bring trade goods from Europe to the west coast of Africa. As the industrial revolution in Europe gathered momentum in the nineteenth century, the prices of manufactured goods churned out by the new machines and factories fell sharply. The range of goods from Europe steadily increased, while prices steadily declined. Africans developed a taste for European goods and were thus drawn

to the coast where the Europeans were keen to receive African products in return for European manufactures. To chart this trade and its implications for Africa is one of the main themes of the following two chapters.



The Atlantic slave trade in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries

## THE GROWING DEMAND FOR SLAVES

Gold  
and  
other  
export  
trade

When one talks of European trade with Africa along the Atlantic coast of Africa, one immediately thinks of slaves. But as we have seen in chapter 1, Europeans initially showed an interest in Africa because of its gold, not its slaves. Before the plantation economies of the New World took off in a big way, a number of articles besides gold were traded, and even after the greatly increased demand for slaves, they continued to be traded. Thus as late as the seventeenth century, about 40 per cent of the income of the Royal African Company, which had posts in the Gold Coast, Gambia and Sierra Leone, came from sources other than slaves. In Sierra Leone exports in camwood, beeswax and ivory were worth more than slave exports until at least the mid-eighteenth

century. From the seventeenth century Senegal was not involved in the slave trade in a major way, and St Louis in Senegal was prominent in exporting gum. Gum arabic is a hardened resin which comes from acacia trees found in the savanna woodlands. It was used in Europe in the making of coloured dyes in the textile industry and in the manufacture of confectionery. Beeswax was as important as slaves in Casamance (southern Senegal). Both gum and beeswax had pharmaceutical uses. Hardware, mainly in the form of tools and utensils, was also well traded.

**Cloth imports** As far as imports were concerned, cloth was probably the most important item of trade in the eighteenth century. Cotton goods from Bengal were prominent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but by the late eighteenth century Bengal cloth was being replaced by European textiles, especially cottons, which had become more important than woollen goods.

**Importation of firearms** In the eighteenth century the second biggest import to Africa was probably guns, and in this period arms and powder represented about 20 per cent of English exports to Africa. The Dutch were initially the major suppliers of arms but after the mid-eighteenth century the British took over this role. Much has been written about firearms and the effect of their importation on African societies. The view has often been put forward that this was very destructive. There are others who believe that the effect was minimal, and in any discussion about their impact, a clear distinction must be made about the area being discussed as well as the period. It has been pointed out that the eighteenth-century trade musket was not very efficient in the humid tropics, and one historian at any rate maintains that the main result of the introduction of firearms in the eighteenth century was to increase agricultural production, as farmers were better able to scare off birds and wild animals that would otherwise have eaten or damaged their crops!<sup>1</sup>

The impact of the import of some 200 000 firearms a year to West Africa in the eighteenth century cannot be so lightly dismissed, however. The slave trade and the trade in firearms went hand in hand. Fage writes that 'It is probably fair to say that in the circumstances of the slave trade, firearms could serve as a sort of economic multiplier. A society which used labour to purchase firearms could acquire the means to secure more labour than it had lost in the purchase.'<sup>2</sup>

**Origins of slavery and the slave trade** Europeans did not bring slavery to Africa; nor did the Arabs. Slavery is as old as civilisation itself. The keeping of captives taken in war has been practised since the beginning of time – the Assyrians did it, so did the ancient Egyptians, the Phoenicians, the Hebrews, Persians, Indians and the Chinese. In Africa, well before the Christian Era, slaves were being carried across the Sahara to the harbours of the Maghrib. Although slavery was indigenous to much of Africa, there were large areas of the continent not affected by it at all – South Africa being an obvious example. Much of East Africa, from Tanzania northwards to Ethiopia, was not involved very much in the slave trade until the nineteenth century. Even in West Africa, which was most affected by the slave trade, the traffic in slaves was only one element in long-distance trade.

The Atlantic slave trade began with Portugal, but initially this was a by-product of other trade. From 1444, when a Portuguese trading company returned to Portugal from

Arguin with 235 slaves on board, the trade in slaves became a regular feature of Portuguese trading activities along the west coast. Cane sugar had first been discovered by Europeans during the Crusades. After the expulsion of Europe from the Levantine mainland, Europeans produced sugar on Cyprus, and later on plantations in Sicily, southern Spain and Portugal. In 1455 they began planting sugar on Madeira, and then on São Tomé, which greatly increased the demand for slaves; it has been estimated that in the early sixteenth century the islands were probably absorbing some 2 500 slaves a year.

**Ex-change of peoples, plants, diseases** But then the plantation system became established in the New World and African slaves were transported across the Atlantic. Seen in its very broadest perspective, the Atlantic slave trade was part of a general exchange of peoples, plants and diseases that followed the European voyages of discovery in the late fifteenth century. Europeans took a whole new set of diseases to the New World, and within a hundred years many Indian communities had been totally wiped out or at least greatly reduced because of disease. This is one of the reasons why Africans had to be imported to the Americas when demand for labour resulted from the development of the plantation system. Although the death rate for Africans imported into the Americas was twice as high as it had been in Africa, it was much less than the increased death rate for newly arrived Europeans in the Americas. For the planters, the solution lay in imported African labour. Of course the answer would have been to have plantations in Africa. But there was not very much African land that was suitable for sugar, whereas good sugar-growing land was freely available in the New World. Plantations were tried in Africa later, but without much success.

**In-crease in demand** It was the development of the New World of America that resulted in the tremendous increase in the demand for slaves. The plantation system was transferred to Brazil in the sixteenth century and to the Caribbean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The development of the sugar plantations in the West Indies gave the greatest impetus to slaving activities.

The Portuguese opened up Brazil, but other powers soon followed it into the New World. The Dutch, British and French opened up new areas for plantations. By the end of the seventeenth century the export of sugar from Barbados to England was worth more than the combined exports of all the British North American colonies. Trade reached its peak in the eighteenth century: the golden age of the West Indian sugar islands. With their principal centres in Jamaica, which belonged to Britain, and Santo Domingo, a French possession, the West Indies became the main suppliers of sugar to Europe. In the 1770s, 160 000 slaves were employed in the sugar industry of Jamaica.

**In-creased sugar production** The capacity of sugar plantations was increased as producers battled to meet the demands for the sweetener from the ever-growing army of European tea and coffee drinkers. It was only about the middle of the eighteenth century that the supply was able to meet the needs of the thirsty. The slave market was not fuelled by sugar alone and as the tobacco and cotton industries in the New World started mushrooming so the

demand for slaves increased, and by 1760, for example, about half of the Virginia population of 400 000 were slaves.

This great expansion was made possible with the support of the government. Between 1651 and 1854 sugar producers in the British West Indian colonies were protected by heavy duties on the import of foreign sugar. The sugar islands were extremely important to both France and Britain. By 1789 about 60 per cent of French maritime exports went to her West Indian colonies, and sugar was the most valuable commodity France imported from abroad. In the eighteenth century sugar was also the biggest item imported into England. From 1714 to 1773 imports from the West Indies accounted for about 20 per cent of the total annual value of all imports into England. The average value of sugar imports increased almost fourfold from £630 000 in the years 1699–1701 to £2 364 000 in the period 1772–1774.

**Strength of European powers** In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Portugal was the leading European power in West Africa; the seventeenth century saw the Dutch presence dominant, while England and France dominated the eighteenth century. Slave exports from West Africa in the period 1701–1810 reflect the relative strengths of the powers at that stage: England 2 009 700, France 613 100 and Portugal 611 000. In the eighteenth century about two thirds of the slaves from Africa crossed the Atlantic in English ships; one fifth went in French ships.

**Influence on UK** All indications are that for the buyers the profits from slave dealing were very moderate, particularly in the eighteenth century when, despite higher prices for slaves, profits diminished as African traders increased their bargaining power. The slave and sugar trade did, however, bring great wealth to the entrepôts such as Liverpool, Bristol and Nantes, and to a number of individual businessmen. In England the development of Liverpool gave impetus to the production of cotton in Manchester and to the gun trade of Birmingham. The importation of raw sugar also stimulated the development of sugar refineries in Liverpool, Manchester and Bristol. Liverpool's involvement in the slave trade became really significant from the 1730s. By the 1740s Liverpool was the leading slave-trading port in Europe and retained this position until 1807. Liverpool was well situated geographically; it was less vulnerable in times of war to privateers than many other ports. But most important was its position *vis-à-vis* the expanding industrial manufacturing city of Manchester, and also the more distant centres of Sheffield and Birmingham. Up to the middle of the eighteenth century London had been important in the African trade when over half the goods being sent to Africa from England were re-exports from Holland, Sweden and other European countries. This situation changed in the second half of the century, when between two thirds and three quarters of the goods exported to Africa were manufactured in the United Kingdom. None of its competitors could ship cotton goods, hardware and guns more cheaply than Liverpool. Its advantages over competitors were increased with the completion of the Bridgewater canal in 1772. Manchester manufacturers facilitated the operation of slave traders from Liverpool by giving them credit of up to 18 months. The slave trade needed considerable capital outlays, and patience had to be exercised in waiting for the return on one's money. Slave trading was an expensive occupation and as time went on, there was a

tendency for slave-trading firms to become bigger. By the 1780s and 1790s the trade was dominated by about ten firms.

**Economic stimulus** If one adds the impetus which the slave and sugar trade gave to the development of shipping, then it is clear that the slave trade did provide some stimulus for economic growth. People have often speculated about the significance of the slave trade in providing the capital necessary for the industrial revolution in Britain. The slave trade played a role in the accumulation of capital which helped to get the industrial revolution off the ground. Although there is no demonstrable direct link between the slave trade and the process of accumulation, the trade was part of that complex of economic activities that included the plantations and their exports, their consumption of food imported from Europe, as well as textiles, and the development of shipping. But Hopkins argues that the gains from the slave trade affected only certain regions and leading individuals and not the country as a whole. The slave trade did not provide the main fuel for Britain's industrial revolution. One should remember, he says, that in the eighteenth century over 50 per cent of the value of England's foreign commerce went to Europe. He believes that while African and Atlantic commerce did help fuel England's economic growth in the eighteenth century,<sup>3</sup> it was not the only, or even the most important propellant of the industrial revolution.

**Industrial revolution**

**Nantes** In France the development of Nantes gave a great boost to the export industry, and to the production of linen and hardware in Rouen. Imported raw sugar was refined in Nantes and Orleans, while the growth of gum-processing works in Nantes and Paris was also stimulated. The French port of Nantes began slave trading in the 1690s; in 1716 Nantes was one of four French ports permitted to deal freely in slaves, and from the 1720s it became the leading slave trade port in France. By the middle of the century her ships carried about 10 000 slaves a year across the Atlantic, which was over half the total number carried by French vessels.

## THE EFFECT OF THE SLAVE TRADE ON WEST AFRICA

**Slave numbers** In his pioneering study *The Atlantic slave trade: A census* (1969) Philip Curtin estimated that some 9 500 000 slaves were imported into the Americas from Africa. Since then numbers of people have devoted their attention to this question, and more recent evidence has brought to light shortcomings in these estimates. It is now clear that in some areas Curtin underestimated the number of slaves and in other areas he overestimated the number of slaves exported. But these errors largely balance each other out, and of global estimates of the number of slaves brought to the Americas his is still considered the best. Curtin's figures caused quite a stir because previous estimates of the extent of the slave trade had ranged between 15 000 000 and 40 000 000. Curtin's statement that far fewer slaves had been imported into the Americas led some people to suspect that he was in effect saying that the slave trade was not as important as they had thought it was. As Fage writes: 'Obviously the whole issue of a slave trade across the Atlantic and of slave systems in the New World in which whites did all the exploitation and all the suffering was by blacks must be highly emotive.'<sup>4</sup> Paul Lovejoy writes that: 'Some of those who have believed that the slave trade had a devastating

effect on African societies have not welcomed the hard look at facts and statistical probability. A reduction of the figure for slave exports might indicate that the trade had only a marginal impact on Africa. According to this interpretation ... fewer slaves might mean less oppression.<sup>5</sup>

**Mortality rate**

The number of slaves that arrived in the Americas is obviously smaller than the number taken out of Africa. One still has to ask how many slaves were shipped from Africa? How many died on the voyage from Africa to America? The trans-Atlantic run from West Africa took about three months, and during the journey slaves were placed in tiers or layers, separated by movable decks of planks. To fit in as many decks as possible slaves had to lie down on their sides, the head of one resting on the chest of the next. All vital functions had to be performed in this position. Every day, weather permitting, the slaves were brought out onto the top deck for exercise while the holds were washed out. It was said that a slave ship could be smelled from many kilometres away. The loss of life was appalling, although it was probably not quite so bad in the nineteenth century when improvements in ship-building and design enabled ships to make the crossing in less time. Because of these terrible conditions, researchers have always assumed that the loss of life must have been very high indeed. Modern research suggests, however, that although the mortality rate was high, it was on average no higher than the mortality rate for any travellers on long ocean voyages prior to the advent of the steamship, which was in the vicinity of 16 per cent. If we add the probable number of those who died en route to Curtin's 9 500 000, we arrive at a figure of some 11 500 000 slaves shipped out of Africa. The most recent research has revised this figure slightly upwards, to an estimated 11 863 000.<sup>6</sup> We can only guess at the number who perished in the barracoons on the west coast while waiting to be collected, or the number who died in slave-raiding operations.

**Main trade era**

The main slave trade era was from 1750 to 1850. In the sixteenth century it is estimated that about 2 000 slaves a year went to the Americas; in the 1780s (a high point in the trade) over 80 000 slaves a year were making the journey. After that the number declined, but hit a new high in the 1840s, despite the fact that the slave trade was widely outlawed. The ban really came to an end only in the period 1850–1870. In looking at the effect on Africa one should examine not only the numbers but also the time span. Of Curtin's figure of 9 500 000 slaves who arrived at New World destinations, about 1 500 000 were taken in the period between 1601 and 1700, and 6 000 000 in the period between 1701 and 1810, shortly after the 1807 British ban on the slave trade. Close on another 2 000 000 slaves were taken between 1811 and 1870, by which date one can say that the trade had become negligible. So when one considers the impact of the slave trade on the population of Africa and its social and economic effects, one must remember that 80 per cent of all slaves who landed in the New World came there between 1701 and 1850, a relatively short period.

**Figures in perspective**

A few figures to compare estimates of the number of slaves taken out from the North African ports and from the east coast will help to put the above in perspective. From at least the ninth century there was a regular slave trade from Central and East Africa by sea and land to markets in Persia, Turkey, Arabia and India. For hundreds of years

slaves had been taken northwards across the Sahara desert to the Maghrib, down the Nile and to the Red Sea ports. Between 650 and 1600 the trans-Saharan slave trade took about six million slaves to the Islamic world. Between 1600 and 1800 the demand dropped in North Africa as cities and farmlands shrank, but after 1800 it picked up in areas serving the Islamic slave trade because slave supplies from the Caucasus region were cut off by Russian expansion. Between 1600 and 1900 about three million slaves went into the desert slave trade, most of them via the central and eastern Sudan. In the long run the slave trade across the Sahara may have been responsible for taking as many slaves out of Africa as the Atlantic slave trade or even more, because it continued for much longer. But it seems unlikely that more than 10 000 slaves a year ever went to North African markets compared with the 80 000 a year that were being exported on the Atlantic route at its peak.

In East Africa large-scale slave trading began only in the late eighteenth century, and until about 1760 ivory was still the biggest item of trade. Some of the slaves sold from Mozambique and environs went to swell the Atlantic trade, particularly after the campaign against illegal trade in the nineteenth century made it more difficult to conduct slaving operations from west coast ports and harbours. In the first decades of the century it seems likely that between 10 000 and 15 000 slaves a year were being taken from the East African mainland. In 1839 a British observer estimated that between 40 000 and 45 000 slaves were being sold on the Zanzibar market each year. Another contemporary estimate of slaves sold on this market in the 1860s puts the figure at 70 000. Although figures for the period after 1873 are very hard to find, it would seem that there was an increase in the slave trade in the 1870s and 1880s.

**Popula-** What do slave trade figures mean in terms of their effect on West Africa? We do not  
**tion** know the size of the population of West Africa during the slave trade era. One estimate is that it was around 25 million in 1700. If this is anywhere near correct, the loss of people could have been equal to the rate of natural increase, which means that the population could have remained static between 1700 and 1800. But if these slaves had not been taken out of Africa, would their presence have led to major economic development? It does not seem likely. There was a serious shortage of labour in parts of West Africa, however, when the economy began to expand very rapidly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It could be argued that the economy would have grown more quickly had a large labour force been available – in other words, had the slave trade not retarded the rate of population growth. Acceptance of this argument is further complicated in that certain areas were obviously being affected more than others.

**Demographic** The demographic implications of slave trading on West Africa is a subject about which  
**implica-** researchers still argue. The effect of the slave trade on population is difficult to measure.  
**tions** The Ibo hinterland of the Bight of Biafra has always been an exporter of people both in the slave trade era and after it. A heavily slaved area such as the Niger delta today is still one of the most heavily populated areas of Africa, while areas with current low population densities probably always were so, being unattractive for large-scale settlement. Among some areas that were heavily drawn upon, there is evidence of depopulation, as in Dahomey (present-day Benin). It used to be thought that the Kongo

kingdom of northwest Angola had been devastated by direct Portuguese slave raids – it now appears that it actually had slight population gains. It has been suggested that the depopulation of parts of Angola in the last half of the eighteenth century was due to the great number of slaves taken from this region for the Atlantic trade (including those who died in the course of capture plus those who were sent as slaves to other parts of West Central Africa). But other detailed studies suggest that depopulation was a result not so much of the slave trade as of droughts, famines and epidemics. This is true of other places as well. Even where there appears to have been a decline in population, one has to be careful about ascribing this to the slave trade. Natural disasters caused population shifts.

**Nega-  
tive ef-  
fect on  
labour  
supply**

The most negative effect of the slave trade on development was that it deprived many areas of much-needed labour. To understand the significance of this, one must appreciate that labour in Africa was at a premium. Fage writes that: 'The basic factor underlying all African attitudes, not only to slavery and slave trading, but to any form of economic activity, was that people were a very scarce resource in relation to cultivable land and other resources, such as mineral deposits ... In a situation in which there was an abundance of land but a scarcity of people, traditional village societies based on ties of kinship and engaged in subsistence agriculture were unable to take advantage of all the opportunities arising when they were touched by growing external demands for scarce and valuable commodities such as gold, salt, copper or ivory. There was a shortage of people available to act as traders and carriers, to work in the mines, to provide the political organization and military security to enable trade to flow freely, or to provide food and other support from those withdrawn from the subsistence sector to engage in these new activities.' He says that in general slaves 'were valued less as trade goods themselves, than as a resource which needed to be accumulated to produce goods for export, and to support the economic and political superstructures needed for trade to flourish. The prime motive for warfare and raiding in Africa, then, was not to secure slaves for sale and export, but to secure adequate quantities of this resource and to diminish the amounts available to rivals.'<sup>7</sup>

The general increase in European trade, and not merely in slaves, undoubtedly resulted in an increase in domestic slave holding. An increase in foreign trade might mean that a society needed more dependants to act as carriers and traders, to work in mines, or to grow food for those who were withdrawn from the productive sector to engage in the new activities. Thus in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries Africans on the Gold Coast who wanted to extend their mining operations in order to sell more gold dust on the international market bought slaves from the Portuguese, who had obtained them in Benin or elsewhere. As Paul Lovejoy sees it, until late in the nineteenth century enslavement was on the increase, trade grew as new and larger markets opened up, and the internal use of slaves became more common. He accepts estimates that in the early eighteenth century there were between 22 and 25 million people living in those areas of West and West Central Africa from which slaves were being taken. He argues that about 10 per cent or 3 000 000 of this population were slaves, and the proportion was rising. To Lovejoy there was a very close link between slavery in the Americas and the

enslavement, trade and use of slaves in Africa itself. 'The production of slaves for the Americas,' he writes, 'also produced slaves for Africa. It is difficult to prove that the Atlantic slave trade *caused* the transformation of slavery in Africa, but it is likely.'<sup>8</sup> (In the following chapter it will be evident how the ending of the slave trade across the Atlantic witnessed a large increase in internal African slave holdings.)

Categories  
of  
slaves

There were many categories of slaves. Besides prisoners of war and those who had been kidnapped, there was voluntary servitude. In circumstances in which an unprotected person was liable to lose his freedom, submission to the protection of a man of means was a form of insurance against a harsher form of enslavement. People on occasion gave themselves into slavery as a surety for debts. In hard times a person might offer himself as a slave in return for food. This would perhaps be only a temporary state and he would not lose his lineal position, and his family would see that he was not ill-treated. At the core of African slavery was the fact that any man who did not have a definite place in the kinship system and who was not protected by his family ties was liable to be enslaved and indeed regarded himself as a slave in need of protection. Suzanne Miers says that from an African point of view a man was regarded as a slave 'if he had no valid position in his community except as a dependent of a master or kin group with whom he had no true kinship affiliations. His actual condition was immaterial. He could be a high official ... or he might really be oppressed. His master might have rights over him which amounted to little more than a nominal connection or were identical to those of a father over his son or an uncle over his nephew or he might have unlimited rights over both his labour and life.' Slavery, she points out, served various functions in Africa: 'It integrated people into a society, swelling the numbers of a kin group or a community, giving them greater power or security as well as a larger labour force. It disposed of surplus population, unwanted criminals and abnormal children, who might otherwise have died or been killed.'<sup>9</sup>

From an examination of the circumstances under which slaves came into European hands in the nineteenth century, Fage makes a generalisation 'that about one-third of the slaves who passed into the Atlantic trade may have been enslaved as a result of wars and one-third through kidnapping either at home or abroad, while the remainder had become slaves in other, rather less violent ways – for example, as a consequence of indebtedness or judicial condemnation, or because they had been sold by their relatives or superiors. A relatively small proportion originated in the coastal societies which were in direct contact with the Europeans, and it was rarely these societies which had taken active steps to secure the supply. Most slaves had been brought down to the coast by the agents of politically and economically – and sometimes also militarily – aggressive and expansive organizations in the hinterland, with their focuses generally between about fifty and two hundred miles from the sea.'<sup>10</sup>

Euro-  
peans  
use  
existing  
patterns

Pre-existing regional market structures were integrated into the new oceanic frontier. The European traders who came to the West African coast did not suddenly develop elaborate trading structures. They used those that had already been forged by the Africans themselves. Clearly these worked well, for if they had not the Europeans would have had more incentive to penetrate to the interior which they did not. For the

most part they remained at the coast and goods were brought to them by African middlemen. Of course, until the mid-nineteenth century the health hazards of going inland acted as a significant deterrent, but even so the trouble and expense of penetrating to the markets beyond the coastal fringe was hardly worth the effort while African trade practices brought them the products they needed at the prices they liked.

**Popula-  
tion  
around  
Euro-  
pean  
forts** In the vicinity of the European coastal forts there emerged a class of mulatto traders and agents who acted as interpreters and linked buyers and producers, thus depending for their existence on European commerce. These important cultural and trading intermediaries were to be found all along the coast from Senegal to Angola in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Nominally many were Christians, and they often occupied high positions in coastal society. In the areas where the British were predominant a form of pidgin English developed. Because of a much longer period of contact with the Portuguese at the coast, in Angola many of these intermediaries were Portuguese speaking. Portuguese half-caste and African pombeiros (trading agents) from Luanda played an important role in developing trans-continental trade routes from Angola to Mozambique and other East African ports, partly by making use of existing African trade routes and partly by doing some pioneering work of their own.

**Areas  
where  
slaves  
were  
taken** Although most slaves were taken over a short period, they were not taken over a small area. Virtually the whole of West Africa contributed slaves to the Atlantic market, but not in equal shares. Within West Africa the main sources of supply shifted constantly. In the sixteenth century the slaves had come mostly from close to the coast, but as the coastal area became worked out and the price of slaves, which had been static in the seventeenth century, increased rapidly from about 1680 to the 1840s, traders went further inland. By the late eighteenth century many slaves were coming from the western Sudan and from the heart of Central Africa.

**Senegamb-  
bia and  
Sierra  
Leone** In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Portuguese and Spanish took slaves for their island possessions from Senegambia. The slave trade got off to a good start there partly because of the navigability of the Senegal and Gambia rivers. After the sixteenth century Senegambia declined as a major supplier of slaves. In the eighteenth century the only significant trade was through Senegambia, not *from* it. For a while in the middle of the sixteenth century the Sierra Leone region contributed greatly to the slave trade.

**Change  
in bal-  
ance of  
power** From the mid-seventeenth century the centre of the slave trade moved progressively eastwards. Because of the tsetse fly the forest states had become fairly isolated, and the coastal states in the vicinity of the forest areas the most isolated of all. But the rapid growth of the slave trade from the late seventeenth century changed that. By acting as middlemen these states on the coast obtained power. Using guns exchanged for slaves they asserted their independence from the larger inland states. So we have a change in the balance of power between the coastal and inland states.

**Asante** By the 1660s the slave trade began to be important along the Gold Coast. The Asante state, which Osei Tutu founded about 1680, was situated in the Gold Coast interior. In Asante the slaves were a by-product of military expansion, and the level of the slave

trade rose and fell in accordance with Asante military activity in the interior. The Fante of the coast, who were dominated by the Asante, relied on them for slaves to sell to European traders, while on their part the Asante needed to keep this route open in order to obtain firearms. In the latter part of the slave trade era the Fante, with the support and encouragement of Europeans at the coast, were able to assert themselves and to resist Asante dominance. But the price of European support was increasing European control over their affairs. Asante attempts to disrupt trade with the coast and to enforce their dominance over the Fante brought unwelcome European attention and interference. Here too the slave trade was not without its effect.

**Whydah and Dahomey** Whydah became important in the last quarter of the seventeenth century and remained a centre of the slave trade until the mid-nineteenth century. From the 1680s until 1727 English ships took some 14 000 to 15 000 slaves a year from Whydah. In 1776 only about 10 000 slaves a year were exported and by 1800 the figure was down to about 5 000. Whydah was conquered by Dahomey (the modern state of Benin, so called because its coast is in the Bight of Benin). Dahomey had been made a tributary state of the Oyo empire to the east, although it retained its political integrity. The slave trade here became a royal monopoly which was dominated by a small oligarchy headed by the king. The slave trade became such an important part of Dahomey rule that the ban on the trade and attempts to stop it had major consequences for the polity.

**Benin** The ancient state of Benin (which has nothing to do with the modern state of the same name) reached the peak of its military power in the sixteenth century. Benin was not really a coastal state, though the Benin River port of Ughoton could be reached via the land of the Itsekiri and western Ibo. In the early sixteenth century its power extended as far west as Lagos in the one direction and to the Niger delta in the other, but it was generally more concerned with the north – with Nupe and the Yoruba states. It was not involved in large-scale slave trading. It has been suggested that Benin's distance from the coast was partly responsible for its decline, as it could not keep close control over the trade taking place on the coast. Some of Benin's satellites on the coast began to flourish because of the slave trade and started to shake off Benin control. This happened particularly in the west where the Oyo state was rapidly incorporating most of Yorubaland in the seventeenth century. At the other extreme, in the east, the peoples of the Niger delta began rejecting Benin authority as they became stronger and slave traders discovered that the delta was an ideal place to obtain slaves.

**Niger delta** The Niger delta played a vital part in the slave trade and also in the 'legitimate' trade that replaced it early in the nineteenth century. The Niger delta east of the Benin River consists of a myriad of creeks, channels and mangrove swamps. A fairly high sand ridge on the seaward edge of the delta contained the villages in which lived the fishermen and those who panned salt in the creeks. They sold their dried fish and salt to the people in the hinterland, obtaining in exchange vegetables and iron tools. In the upper delta itself there was also some higher land and freshwater swamp that was suitable for agriculture. There had been trade between these two areas long before the Europeans came. Until the second half of the seventeenth century, the slave trade here was very

small, but then the coastal societies changed their organisation and structure to meet the demands of the slave trade. The small independent villages rearranged themselves into a number of small monarchies, each centred on a principal trading town – Bonny, Nembe or Brass, Kalabari or New Calabar. This was so successful that in the eighteenth century they became a major supplier of slaves.

**Bight of Biafra** Recent research shows that more slaves came from the Bight of Biafra than had been previously thought. Earlier historians had believed that the Bight of Benin exported 50 per cent more slaves than the Bight of Biafra, but recent researchers reckon that their contributions were similar. East of the Niger delta in the Bight of Biafra, Old Calabar, founded by Efik settlers in the sixteenth century, was a leading slave port from 1640 to 1841, and as late as 1828 was shipping 6 000 to 8 000 slaves a year. Old Calabar bought slaves mostly from other suppliers. By the eighteenth century she had a network of suppliers extending 320 km inland. The slave trade had a great effect on Efik institutions: it made economic inequalities more pronounced, it led to unequal size of household units, to greater social differentiation as freemen secured their superior status against slaves, and commercial success came to depend very much on access to European credit. Trade and political power came into the hands of a small oligarchy. There were about 12 important slave dealers in Old Calabar in the mid-eighteenth century; by the end of the century there were only three; early in the nineteenth century there was only one.

Cameroon slaves were not greatly sought after, having a reputation for being weak and sickly, but the number of slaves exported was rising in the early nineteenth century, and it became important in the last stages of the Atlantic slave trade.

**Number of slaves contributed by west coast** From the middle of the eighteenth century until about 1830 it is probable that some 2 250 000 slaves were taken on the west coast from south of the Equator and sent to the Americas. Added to the likely figure of about 1 750 000 slaves who probably came from the regions south of the Equator prior to the mid-eighteenth century, this gives a total of 4 000 000 that came from the West African coast south of the Equator. West Africa from Senegal to the Bight of Biafra contributed about 6 500 000 slaves to the Americas. A further 1 000 000 to 1 500 000 slaves for the Atlantic trade came from the east coast south of the Equator. The slaves for the Atlantic trade from this area were taken mainly from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, after the ban, when steps were being taken to stop smuggling on the west coast.

**Loango** From at least the 1740s the British and French were buying slaves in West Central Africa, particularly in the Loango area north of the Congo River. The Loango kingdom was very dependent upon slaves, and wealth and power became synonymous with the size of one's slave holdings. The officials who were responsible for trade negotiations became very powerful, and the pattern of succession was disrupted. As the century advanced the use of slaves internally increased. From the 1860s slaves from the interior no longer supplied the overseas market, but met the Loango demand for domestic slaves.

**West Africa south of Equator** Perhaps as many as 40 per cent of the slaves taken from the West African coast south of the Equator came from the interior of Angola and the Congo River basin. The main importer was Brazil and the main exporters were the Portuguese. Although the Kongo kingdom had long since ceased to be a single empire, the area was still important for trading. It is estimated that by the second quarter of the sixteenth century one third of all slaves taken out of Africa by the Portuguese came from this region. Portuguese slaving activities then shifted southwards to Luanda and Benguela. The Ovimbundu settled on the Benguela plateau between 1500 and 1700, and by the end of the eighteenth century they had established 20 small kingdoms. They were enthusiastic slave raiders and sent armies to the east and south in search of slaves, whom they sold to the Portuguese in Benguela. In the Angolan hinterland, a new people, the Imbangala, came into being in the seventeenth century as a result of the slave trade. They were formed from bands who joined together for slave hunting and trading.

**Slave trade organised by ruling elites** From the above rather brief and selective discussion, it should be clear that the European demand for slaves affected African coastal societies in a number of ways, and that the states behind the coast did not escape its influence. Although the Europeans did not bring slavery to Africa (the institution of slavery in Africa was very old), the extent of slavery in Africa was small until the demand from the West Indies. But it takes two to trade. European slave dealers could not have obtained what they wanted unless African suppliers had agreed to help them to exploit the weaker and more defenceless people of West Africa. As most slaves were obtained through war, raiding and tribute, only people of means could engage in the slave trade. Labour had to be assembled to form a raiding party, which also had to be equipped and maintained. Once captured, transportation of slaves to markets near or on the coast had to be organised, and their safe passage over a considerable distance either negotiated with other rulers, or secured through controlling the intervening country. Slave-trading activities were massive operations, and as such were often state enterprises, controlled by the king, or by a powerful elite from the ruling class.

**Changes in social relations** The expansion of states such as Oyo and Dahomey was given impetus by the demand for slaves for export, which represented a growth in foreign trade. There can also be little doubt that the structure of such states was altered, and that kinship ties that were once so important might take second place to contractual obligations. The gulf between rulers and the masses of their subjects widened – the former made profits from their activities, the latter could become the source of that profit in a number of ways. They could be forced into making raids or wars to obtain a fresh supply of slaves; they might themselves be sold into slavery if they fell foul of the law. In this way too the legal system was changed, and rulers who had traditionally protected their subjects were encouraged to exploit them.

Although slave trading could lead to the expansion and creation of large centralised states, it did not necessarily do so. In the Niger delta, for example, which was a major slave-trading area, there was no tendency towards the creation of large states.

**Benefits** It is often said that foreign trade, and the slave trade in particular, retarded the economic development of Africa. Of course it can be shown that foreign trade brought benefits to

some people in Africa, in particular those who controlled the production and large-scale selling of exports whether gold, gum or slaves. In 1750 the sale of slaves gave the king of Dahomey a gross revenue of about £250 000. Some of the export earnings were undoubtedly used to buy things such as cloth, hardware and salt, and therefore to help raise living standards. But they were not used to develop any local industries. It is clear that far from stimulating local enterprises, foreign trade, including the slave trade, often stifled local initiatives. As dependence on European manufactured imports grew, the development of African craft industries declined.<sup>11</sup>

**Impact of slave trade on African society**

Questions surrounding the impact of the slave trade on African society continue to be hotly debated. We may take a recent debate as an example of the issues at stake. At the one end of the scale there are those like Paul E. Lovejoy who believe that the Atlantic slave trade, although not the only factor, had a major influence on the transformation of African society. At the other end of the scale there are people such as David Eltis and Lawrence Jennings who believe that neither the scale nor the value of the Atlantic trade was extensive enough to have had a significant impact on African history. According to them: 'The majority of Africans ... would have been about as well off, and would have been performing the same tasks in the same socioeconomic environment, if there had been no trading contact' with Europe.<sup>12</sup>

In support of their point of view Eltis and Jennings say that Africa's share of world trade declined relatively between the 1680s and the 1860s, and that in both absolute and relative terms, the value of the Atlantic trade for African societies was not great. In short, it had only a marginal influence on African economies. Using the 1780s, the high point of the Atlantic slave trade, as their example, they maintain that imports in the 1780s accounted for about 5 per cent of West African incomes. In other words, only 5 per cent of a person's income came from overseas trade, which was a very small amount. For his part Lovejoy argues that the per capita income is not an accurate indicator of the impact of the slave trade on Africa. He argues that even if Eltis and Jennings are correct in their estimate of 5 per cent, this is not an insignificant amount. 'Almost any incremental increase over subsistence would have had a disproportionate impact on the economy,' he maintains. Lovejoy turns the tables, using Eltis's figures for his own purposes, stating that 'the low per capita income from the trade indicates that the economic advantages of exporting slaves were nowhere near large enough to offset the social and political costs of participation'.<sup>13</sup>

**Terms of exchange**

Were the sellers cheated and exploited by the terms of trade? It has been argued that in the seventeenth century the Africans were exploited and that European traders made enormous profits by selling cheap, almost worthless, European articles for slaves, but that this changed in the eighteenth century as Africans learned the value of the goods being foisted on to them, and began to demand more value. On the other hand, it could be argued that competition among buyers was too fierce for much exploitation to take place. Besides, in selling slaves, the vendors were on their home ground and could wait for the next buyer, but the buyers were more restricted: they were in a hurry and had to return with another consignment. One must not overdo the theme of exploitation. There is abundant evidence that Africans did not accept any form of goods offered in

exchange for slaves. They were discriminating buyers, and if they were willing to accept cheap European goods it was because for them these goods possessed value.

That is not to deny that European traders imported some very inferior, and faulty guns, some of which burst when fired. But Africans would not have put up with inferior goods indefinitely. Africans were undoubtedly cheated, but on occasion they could also pass off mentally ill or chronically sick slaves as being in good health. One can hardly overstress the fact, to which we have referred on a number of occasions, that until the nineteenth century, Europeans were not imposing new patterns of trade but were fitting into existing African patterns. The only advantage they had in the beginning was that they could bring in scarce articles more cheaply and in greater bulk than had been possible previously. Africans decided if they would trade with Europeans and under what terms. In deciding the effect that selling slaves abroad had on Africa, it is probably true that Africans did not have to part with more slaves than they could afford to in terms of the labour and production needs of their society. In Africa people were the most precious resource, people were always in demand, and African slavery as an indigenous institution, in West Africa at least (as Fage believes) originated in attempts by rulers to use this resource to best advantage and to extend it where they could. Fage does not believe that the word 'slavery' really describes the relationship between many captives and their masters.<sup>14</sup>

## THE END OF THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

### The abolition of the slave trade

**Internal versus external stimuli** Until fairly recently the majority of historians interpreted nineteenth-century African history purely or predominantly in terms of the impact of the abolition of the slave trade. In the last couple of decades African historians have effectively demonstrated that there is far more to African history in the nineteenth century. The question of internal versus external stimuli comes very much to the fore. Professor J. F. A. Ajayi writes that although the abolition of the slave trade may have been the dominant theme in the history of European relations with Africa, this does not mean that it was the dominant theme in African history. In fact he denies this. Western historians, he says, have been so preoccupied with the abolition of the slave trade that they often call the period of West African history from 1807 to 1870 'the anti-slave trade or abolitionist era'. This is a Eurocentric description which he believes 'involves distortion in a number of ways. It seems to project onto the West African peoples the European preoccupation with the slave trade and its abolition. The protagonists of this view suggest or imply that the slave trade dominated the West African economy; that raiding for slaves was the basic cause and purpose of West African wars; that such slave wars or the economic effects of the slave trade were the main factors in the rise and fall of West African states. Accordingly, the issues for and against abolition are treated as the dominant themes of West African history in the nineteenth century, and the impact on West African states and peoples by Europeans preoccupied with the slave trade and its abolition is exaggerated. It is often overlooked that for all the effort of the abolitionists, European influence by 1870 remained limited virtually to the coast. For most West African peoples

and states, the Christian abolitionist factor, if it existed at all, was very marginal in this period.<sup>15</sup>

There is a great deal of truth in this, and external influences should not be elevated to such a level that internal stimuli appear as sideshows. To relegate external determinants to the backstage in all cases is equally a distortion. Ajayi's observation that a distinction should be made between the coast and the interior is valid, although (as has been seen) as the slave trade progressed, the slaves that supplied the Atlantic trade often came from further inland. Where we are dealing with West African states involved in the Atlantic slave trade the external factor looms large. But even in situations such as the collapse of the Oyo empire, the case for explaining it in terms of external factors is by no means clear-cut. It has been argued that the fate of Oyo was more closely related to the expansion of the jihad into the Nupe and Ilorin provinces of that empire and to other internal circumstances than to the slave trade.

**Humanitarianism in Europe**

In the late eighteenth century in Europe the groundswell of humanitarianism was gaining momentum, helped by the fact that political reform in Britain, as well as the democratic revolutions in the United States and France, gave the middle classes political power. And these classes were far more opposed to slavery than were the aristocrats who had hitherto monopolised political power. From the 1780s onwards countries began placing a ban on the slave trade and sometimes on the legal status of slavery itself. Britain declared the slave trade illegal in 1807, although by 1800 her ships were carrying over half of the slaves transported between West Africa and the Americas. France's revolutionary government had banned it earlier, in the 1790s, in the aftermath of the slave revolts in Santo Domingo, but Napoleon lifted the ban and it was reimposed only in 1817. Denmark was also in the forefront of those who took action against this trade and in 1805 banned its citizens from participation. The United States took a similar step in 1808 and Holland followed in 1814. But as we shall see, there was a major gulf between legislation restricting the traffic in slaves and an end to the traffic in reality.

Why was this campaign able to succeed? Historians have made the point that humanitarians alone were not powerful enough to move the government to take steps to abolish the slave trade. Humanitarianism would not have succeeded had the abolition gone against powerful British economic interests. Fortunately for the humanitarians the suppression of the slave traffic fitted in very nicely with other British interests and successive British governments supported the abolition movement for their own reasons. Many other groups outside the government also championed the campaign in order to further their own particular ends.

**Decline of the sugar market**

What allowed the campaign to succeed was that from the middle of the eighteenth century the British sugar islands had been slowly declining. Profits had been falling and there had been some slave rebellions. The biggest reason for this decline was competition as fresh plantations were opened up in the New World to meet the growing consumption of coffee and sugar by Europeans. In the late eighteenth century there was a rapid expansion of the Caribbean sugar plantations. Because of overproduction the price of sugar fell. Using modern machinery, the French had brought vast new plantat-

ions into operation, and had caused a glut on world markets with low sugar prices that undercut their rivals. At the same time West African rulers were demanding and obtaining higher prices for slaves, which put additional pressure on European profit margins. Plantation owners found it difficult to meet their debt repayments with European bankers. The bankers had previously invested very heavily in sugar, but as this became less attractive, they invested more in the new manufacturing industries that sprang up as the industrial revolution took hold. Investment here became a far more attractive proposition. The new industrialists were now very much in favour with British politicians, and plantation owners were relegated to a back seat. By the end of the century the British port of Liverpool was less dependent upon the slave trade, and capital had already begun to move into industry and other branches of trade. Capitalists began to reallocate their resources. By the end of the eighteenth century Bristol, the other major British slaving port, was also in a state of decline. A severe economic crisis in 1793 led to the bankruptcy of a number of slave traders who operated from Bristol.

**Resistance against slavery: Britain** The British West Indies had also relatively declined as a market for British goods, and by the end of the century Latin America had become more important. By the early nineteenth century slavery and the slave trade were becoming uneconomic in many ways. There was a reaction against the use of slave or 'unfree' labour. The new manufacturers said that 'free' labour was less expensive than plantation slavery and also more efficient. Free labourers who earned wages could buy the products churned out by the new machines. As the industrial revolution gained momentum, the production of cheap manufactured goods accelerated and manufacturers were soon looking for markets abroad. They turned their attention to Africa, and in so doing regarded slavery disapprovingly. They argued that if the Africans remained in Africa instead of being sent to the Americas, they would help to supply raw materials for British factories and at the same time provide a market for manufactured goods. Although this reasoning was somewhat vague and idealistic, it added to the growing climate of opinion against the slave trade.

For these reasons slavery became less attractive to many groups of people, and in this climate the campaign of Wilberforce and others was able to succeed. Many British plantation owners considered it unnecessary to maintain the slave trade. In the late eighteenth century slaves had become more expensive so many owners encouraged their slaves to produce children; by 1800 they were no longer so dependent upon fresh imports of slaves. There was a division between those owners who were largely self-sufficient and regarded the restriction of the slave trade as an opportunity to ensure that they would have no new competitors in the future, and those whose activities were expanding and who most desperately needed fresh imports of slaves. Those who favoured restrictions on the sale of slaves seemingly gained the upper hand and in 1805 supported plans in this direction. But the 1807 ban on slave trading went further than they would have wished.

**France; Santo Domingo** Where the French slave trade was concerned, as early as 1748 Montesquieu had agitated against it, but this was translated into something meaningful only when the planters and the French government became estranged in the second half of the eighteenth

century. Planters accused the government of retarding development in the colonies, of being indifferent to the debts of the planters, and of being unwilling to change the French tariff system. In the late eighteenth century the slave trade became less important to the French port of Nantes. Then came the Santo Domingo slave revolts. At the time Santo Domingo was the major sugar-producing island in the Caribbean. By 1800 there were almost 400 000 slaves there. In 1791 in a major rebellion the slaves turned on their white masters and killed a number of them. Despite the cooperation of the British navy, attempts to stamp out the rebellion failed, and in 1803 the island declared itself the independent Republic of Haiti. The success of this rebellion sent shudders through bankers who had money invested in the slave trade, and European governments in general watched events in Santo Domingo uneasily, fearing similar revolts in their colonies. In the aftermath of these bloody riots the support of both bankers and governments in Britain and France for the slave trade waned. But ironically, the economic blow to British sugar interests might have come much sooner, had it not been for the revolution in Santo Domingo which disrupted sugar production.

In a vain bid to bring the revolt under control France abolished slavery in her colonial possessions. Although Napoleon restored the institution of slavery and tried to re-establish the slave trade, the French slave trade did not revive and during the Napoleonic wars French Atlantic commerce was in tatters.

### Fighting the 'illegal' slave trade

#### Abolition didn't end slave trade

The legal banning of the trade did not mean the end of the slave trade. For many years slaves continued to be imported into the southern states of the United States of America. Countries such as Brazil and Cuba, who had been forced by international pressure to pass measures banning the trade, for many years did little to enforce the laws. The export of Brazilian coffee grew tenfold between 1817 and 1835, and by 1850 it had again trebled. Exports of Cuban sugar quadrupled between 1830 and 1864. Because of the industrial revolution there was greater wealth in Europe, so that more people were able to afford coffee and sugar, and their use was no longer confined to the very rich.

#### Campaign to end slave trade

On the West African coast the slave trade therefore continued for some time. The British took the lead in the campaign to end it. They put pressure on African societies to stop the trade at its exporting end. In 1827 the British established a naval squadron on Fernando Po (now Isle Macias Nguema), close to the eastern delta of the Niger, and began the policy of 'gunboat diplomacy', of threatening recalcitrant or unwilling African middlemen with bombardment from gunships. In the 1830s the governor of Fernando Po, Edward Nicholls, began the policy that later British officials followed extensively, of signing treaties with chiefs in which they undertook not to trade in slaves, and in which the conduct of legitimate trade was regulated and the amount of comey or customs dues to be paid by traders prescribed.

#### End of slave trade

The slave trade came to an end at different times. It had ended in Senegal and Gorée in 1824. On the Ivory Coast it lasted for much longer, but the trade here met the internal demand for slaves rather than that of the international market. From Whydah to Lagos

the slave trade persisted until the 1850s and in some places until the 1860s. Britain took formal control of Lagos between 1851 and 1861 in order to stop the export of slaves that came to the island from the mainland.

**Demise of Oyo empire; Yorubaland** The supply of slaves to Lagos was aided by instability. In the early nineteenth century many of the slaves taken from West Africa were Yoruba – this was as a result of the collapse of the Oyo empire. In the Americas slaves from Yorubaland had been unknown before 1750. Yorubaland became a major supplier of slaves particularly from the 1820s, when the Oyo empire was torn apart by civil wars and war captives provided a major new source of slaves for the markets at Lagos and Badagry.

The Oyo empire had been founded early in the fifteenth century and had begun to expand in the following century with the aid of light cavalry. New supplies of horses were obtained from the northern parts of the savanna, which was where Oyo also conducted most of her trade. Oyo coastal trade was not significant, and coastal Yoruba states such as the Ijebu remained independent. Oyo could not expand into the forest because of the tsetse fly, but the 'Benin gap' meant that Oyo could use cavalry against Dahomey. Oyo began its military activities in the gap in 1698 and triumphed over Dahomey in 1730, forcing it to become a tributary state.

By about 1750 Oyo controlled an area from the Volta River in the west to the Niger River in the north; to the east it was bounded by Benin and in the south its authority extended to the lagoons and mangrove swamps near the coast. Around this time the first slaves captured by Oyo began to find their way into the Atlantic slave trade. Oyo's slave dealings increased dramatically in the 1780s, but at the same time its military might was waning, and by the late 1780s and 1790s some of the frontier provinces of the empire were strong enough to break away. Because, like Benin, Old Oyo, the capital, was some distance from the coast, it had little direct contact with the slave traders, and the empire was so spread out that it was difficult to control; here too the coastal people gained strength and confidence from their trade with Europe and acted independently.

The collapse of the Oyo empire was a very important development in nineteenth-century West Africa for it had many implications, not only for the continuance of the slave trade in the first half of the nineteenth century, but also for the development and growth of an African elite. The nineteenth-century slave trade took more Yoruba slaves than any other group. Many of the slaves rescued by British naval patrols and set ashore at Freetown in Sierra Leone were from Yorubaland. Having assimilated European ways and the Christian religion, many of these ex-slaves set out for their old homelands, and these re-immigrants or 'saro', as they were called, had a significant impact on developments in West Africa in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

**Influence of jihad states** There are historians who believe that the collapse of the empire was partly due to the slave trade, but other historians have been at pains to minimise this external element as a major factor in the demise of the Oyo empire. Instead they stress the disruptive influence of the developments in the northern part of the empire, where the jihad that was creating the Sokoto caliphate spilled over into Oyo. Those who stress the primacy of internal developments over external elements aver that, as in the jihad states, internal

dissatisfaction and a desire for reform provided the initial impulse, and the actual collapse owed less to the slave trade and its abolition than to the penetration of Islamic ideas and the impact of the Sokoto jihad. Others see the extension of the jihad of Usuman dan Fodio to Ilorin, from where it spread in other directions, including Borgu, as being a result of the crisis in Oyo rather than a cause of it. But it is difficult to separate cause and effect. An internal crisis between those wanting more military expansion and those wanting peace for the sake of trade has also been put forward as a reason. Whether internal or external factors had primacy, internal crises led to the final collapse of the 1820s. The outer provinces fell away. The collapse of Oyo affected all the states that had been associated with it, such as Dahomey, Borgu and the Benin kingdom. The effect of the collapse was felt mainly in the west, where a situation of more or less general war and insecurity continued for the rest of the century.

**Inter-cine warfare** The wars the Yoruba fought among themselves were devastating. Both Ibadan and Abeokuta were established in the aftermath of these wars, and they were soon locked in competition to fill the vacuum left by Oyo as anarchy continued into the 1840s and 1850s. Although the monarchy was then restored and New Oyo recognised as suzerain over most of northern Yorubaland, real power was in the hands of Ibadan and Abeokuta and a few other new towns. Between the 1850s and 1870s Ibadan looked as if it would establish hegemony over the whole of Yorubaland, but others resisted and there was a period of renewed warfare from 1877 to 1892.

**Independent Dahomey** In the early 1820s Dahomey declared itself independent of the ailing Oyo, and from then on made a number of incursions into Yorubaland. These continued for most of the century. Dahomey had a great need for slaves for many purposes: for the export market, as labour in the palm oil industry, for subsistence agriculture, and for sacrifice. Dahomey's rulers were so dependent on the slave trade that they had to continue engaging in it until such time as the economy could be shifted to one based on palm oil. So Dahomey's export slave trade continued into the 1860s and beyond, Whydah being its main export route. Despite British patrols Whydah and Porto Novo continued to deal in slaves. Even the growth of the palm oil trade did not end the slave trade – captured slaves were now used internally to work in the palm oil industry.

**British interest connected to slave trade** British interest in Lagos and the mainland opposite it was directly connected with the slave trade that resulted from the collapse of the Oyo empire. In the 1840s the British used gunboat diplomacy to convince various rulers along the coast that they should sign treaties forbidding the slave trade in the areas under their control. France in particular looked upon these treaties with the greatest suspicion, convinced that Britain was intent on advancing its interests under cover of fighting the slave trade. In fact Britain had no interest in extending its empire, but as in the Gold Coast it was drawn more and more into the affairs of Lagos. So the French, whose traders were active along the Dahomey coast, watched British moves carefully.

**Capture of Lagos** In a local power struggle in Lagos, one of the parties appealed for British help, promising in return to abolish the slave trade in Lagos. British missionaries working in the hinterland also encouraged intervention; they were convinced that British assump-

tion of power and the stamping out of the slave trade on the Lagos coast would kill the slave trade in the interior and give legitimate trade a chance to develop. British traders in the area, such as Thomas Hutton, were involved in a fierce struggle with 'Brazilian' rivals, who were using the slave trade to undercut them in the palm oil trade, and were also in favour of decisive action. In 1851 a British fleet captured Lagos, steamships playing a crucial role in the naval engagements.

Once Britain had banned the slave trade it was in British interests to see that other nations followed suit. In the first place it did not want other nations and traders to profit from a trade that was no longer open to British subjects. Also, while the slave trade flourished both buyers and sellers were unlikely to turn to trading in other articles. British manufacturers would be unable to open up and penetrate other markets fully while the slave trade remained viable.

**Co-operation with other countries**

Britain attempted to gain the cooperation of these other countries, but it was not easy as the French, Spanish and Portuguese were very suspicious of British motives. The French were convinced that it was all a devious British plan to prevent the revival of French trade after the Napoleonic wars, since it was well known that the British colonies had all the slaves they needed, while the French did not. Influential French sources indicated that they would discuss the abolition of the slave trade when they had stocked up their own colonies with slaves. The slave trade was also important to Portuguese Brazil and Spanish Cuba. Both Spain and Portugal were afraid to take action against the slave trade as this would alienate the colonists, and their hold on their colonies was somewhat precarious.

**Naval patrols**

To give force to the ban Britain began naval patrols, and to a lesser extent so did the French and the United States. Neither the American nor the French squadrons were very effective. American ships were often under the command of Southerners, who were not exactly enthusiastic about rescuing slaves destined for the Americas; in addition, the squadron was based on the Cape Verde Islands, which was a long way from the main centres where the slave traffic was being conducted. In 1818 the French set up their squadron, which was based on Gorée after it had ceased to be a centre for the distribution of slaves from 1823 to 1824. Initially the French had between three and seven warships ready to intercept slavers, but for a number of years they did very little because they were unsure of what their government really wanted them to do. Until 1830 the French government passed anti-slavery legislation and authorised patrols, but did little to make either the laws or the patrols effective. Between 1815 and 1830 French slave dealers organised 729 slaving expeditions from the west and east coasts of Africa. Only when it became clear that French ports were no longer benefiting from this traffic did the French government take meaningful action. The French government of Louis Philippe, which came to power in 1830 and which wished to obtain Britain's goodwill, signed a reciprocal search agreement. In terms of this agreement a ship could be intercepted on the high seas and searched to see if it was carrying slaves. Most of the other nations did not like these agreements. Influential Frenchmen considered Britain's request for the right to search their ships a ploy to interfere with legitimate French shipping, and the agreement was allowed to lapse.

**Treaties of 1817** Agreements were made with Spain and Portugal in 1817. The Portuguese agreement was limited to north of the Equator, from which area the Portuguese in any event took few slaves. Portugal's trade south of the Equator, where most of its slaves came from, was immune to British interference, and it was only with the Anglo-Portuguese Treaty of 1842 that reciprocal search rights south of the Equator were agreed upon. For a while in the early nineteenth century the number of slaves being transported to Cuba and Brazil actually increased rather than declined. In 1826 Brazil signed a suppression treaty in return for a British promise to give *de jure* recognition to Brazil, but this did not have the desired effect.

**Equipment clause of 1835; right of search** These 1817 treaties had serious flaws. Slaves had to be actually on board a slaver before it could be detained. So sometimes Spanish or Portuguese captains would throw slaves overboard to avoid capture and there was nothing the captain of a British ship could do even though he saw slaves being hurled over the side of the ship. Later this loophole was closed when treaties containing the so-called Equipment Clause were signed with Spain in 1835 and with Portugal a few years later. In terms of this clause a ship could be detained if it was equipped for slavery even if there were no slaves on board – in other words if there were extra planks for making slave decks, open gratings instead of closed hatches, and manacles on board. Because France and the United States refused to accept the right of search, the effectiveness of British patrols was reduced. Spanish and Portuguese ships flew French or American flags to escape interception by the British. In 1845 the French did agree that Britain could ascertain whether a ship bearing the French flag was legally entitled to do so, but having satisfied himself that the ship's papers were in order the British captain could do no more.

Even the British patrols did not really become effective until the 1840s, when there was a change in tactics. Instead of cruising the high seas it was decided to blockade coastal markets and to take action ashore. The threat of naval action secured the cooperation of many African coastal rulers and led to the signing of numerous slave trade treaties. With the institution of these blockades for the first time many Africans became aware of the existence of the patrols. But this was only at the coast, and a state such as Dahomey was far enough inland to ignore the naval threat.

**Effectiveness of naval patrols** Although naval patrols could not put an end to the trade, they captured between 1 000 and 1 200 slave ships and rescued some 160 000 slaves, which has been estimated to have been about 7 per cent of those transported out of Africa between 1810 and 1870. Fighting slavers was a frustrating business, however, and of 714 slave ships captured between 1819 and 1845, the joint Hispano-British Commission which had been set up to try such cases condemned only 45. Surveillance and patrols on the west coast caused the centre of slaving activity to move to the east coast. The slave trade from West Africa finally came to an end only when the importing countries enforced the laws they had passed, as Brazil did in the 1850s and Cuba in the late 1860s. In the United States Lincoln decided to cooperate with British requests and finally ended the slave trade in 1862, possibly fearing that if he did not, the southern states might find an ally in Britain. After that, slavers had to use the French flag, but this applied particularly to East African

waters. Ultimately it was shown that the only effective way of ending the traffic was to stop it at its destination.

Naval patrols, attempts to obtain the cooperation of other countries in suppressing the trade, and treaties with African rulers, constituted only one aspect of the campaign. Another was the encouragement of 'legitimate' commerce. And it is the way in which West Africa coped with the banning of the slave trade that now comes under focus.

## Notes

- 1 G. White, 'Firearms in Africa: An introduction', *Journal of African History*, 12, 1971, pp. 173–181.
- 2 J. D. Fage, 'African societies and the Atlantic slave trade', *Past and Present*, 125, November 1989, p. 107.
- 3 A. G. Hopkins, *An economic history of West Africa*, pp. 118–119.
- 4 Fage, 'African societies and the Atlantic slave trade', p. 97.
- 5 P. E. Lovejoy, 'The impact of the Atlantic slave trade on Africa: A review of the literature', *Journal of African History*, 30, 1989, p. 368.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 365–394.
- 7 J. D. Fage, *A history of Africa*, pp. 268–269.
- 8 Lovejoy, 'The impact of the Atlantic slave trade', p. 388.
- 9 S. Miers, *Britain and the ending of the slave trade*, pp. 144–145.
- 10 Fage, 'African societies and the Atlantic slave trade', p. 113.
- 11 For a fuller discussion on this see pp. 71, 110–111.
- 12 D. Eltis & L. C. Jennings, 'Trade between western Africa and the Atlantic world in the pre-colonial era', *The American Historical Review*, 93(4), October 1988, p. 958.
- 13 Lovejoy, 'The impact of the Atlantic slave trade', pp. 387, 393.
- 14 Fage, 'African societies and the Atlantic slave trade', pp. 111–112.
- 15 J. F. A. Ajayi, 'West Africa in the anti-slave trade era', in J. E. Flint (ed.), *The Cambridge history of Africa*, vol. 5, *From c. 1790 to c. 1870*, pp. 200–201.

## 3

## *West Africa in the era of 'legitimate trade'*

### INTERNAL VERSUS EXTERNAL FACTORS

**Popula-  
tion of  
Africa**

Estimates of the population of Africa as a whole at different times vary greatly. The figures given are often based on criteria of doubtful validity. One estimate is that the total population of Africa at the beginning of the nineteenth century was about 100 million. It is an arbitrary figure, and not easy to substantiate. Demographers are on more solid ground when they say that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the population was declining or that at best it was static. They are on less solid ground when they say that this was due to a combination of natural disasters and the slave trade and accompanying wars. The question of the relationship between the slave trade and population statistics is a controversial one.

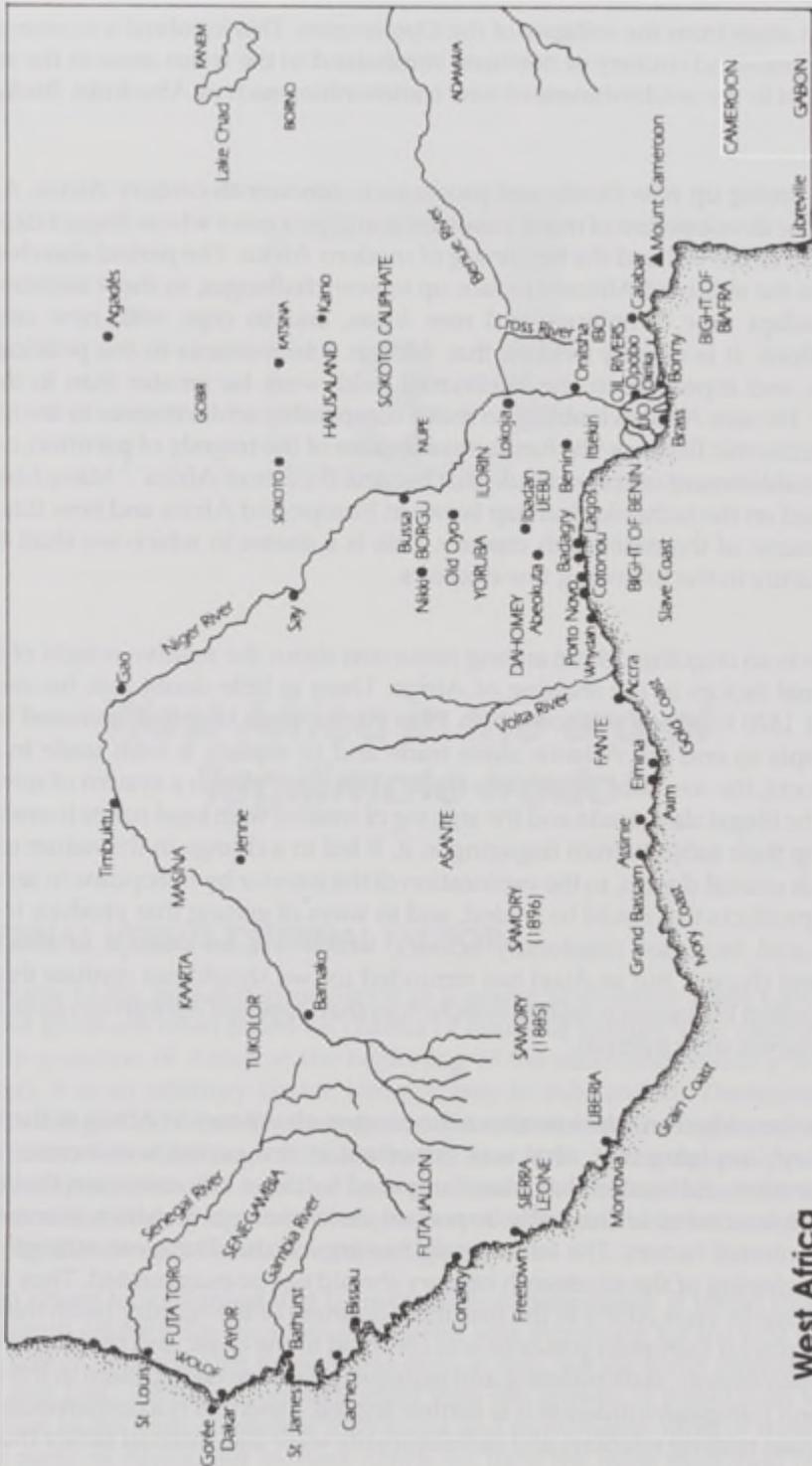
But to return to something that is more easily substantiated. It seems that in the early nineteenth century the population of Africa was increasing for the first time since the seventeenth century. This growth was slow at first, but gathered momentum between 1850 and 1880. Perhaps more important than the growth of population was its redistribution in the form of internal migrations and movements. Most of these occurred in other parts of Africa, but in West Africa we have the mass migration of the Yoruba

which arose from the collapse of the Oyo empire. This involved a movement from the open grassland country of northern Yorubaland to the forest areas in the south, which resulted in the establishment of new communities such as Abeokuta, Ibadan and New Oyo.

**New trends and processes** In summing up new trends and processes in nineteenth-century Africa, A. A. Boahen sees 'the development of many new trends and processes whose impact clearly signifies the end of the old and the beginning of modern Africa. The period also clearly demonstrates the ability of Africans to face up to new challenges, to show initiatives, to adopt and adapt new techniques and new ideas, and to cope with new environmental situations. It is equally evident that African achievements in the political and social fields, and especially in the intellectual field, were far greater than in the economic field.' He sees African inability to make comparable achievements in the technological and economic fields as 'the fundamental cause of the tragedy of partition, conquest and the establishment of colonial rule that became the fate of Africa'.<sup>1</sup> Many historians have focused on the technological gap between Europe and Africa and how this widened in the course of the nineteenth century. This is a theme to which we shall be returning constantly in the following few chapters.

**Internal versus external factors** There is an ongoing debate among historians about the relative weight of internal and external factors in the shaping of Africa. There is little doubt that between 1807 and about 1870 Europe's relations with West Africa were largely dominated by European attempts to end the Atlantic slave trade and to replace it with trade in agricultural products, the so-called 'legitimate trade'. This gave rise to a system of naval patrols to end the illegal slave trade and the signing of treaties with local rulers to encourage them to stop their subjects from engaging in it. It led to a change in the nature of British and French coastal depots, to the exploration of the interior by Europeans in an effort to find new products that could be traded, and to ways of getting that produce to the coast. It produced increased missionary activity, which was an attempt to effect social and cultural change. But as Ajayi has reminded us, we should not confuse the factors that dominated European relations with factors that impelled African developments, which he believes were internal.<sup>2</sup>

**African initiatives** Historians who have spoken about the nineteenth century in Africa as the 'pre-colonial history', implying that what was important in this period was increasing European penetration and control, have been opposed by those who maintain that from 1800 to 1870 at least most of the really important developments in Africa stemmed primarily from internal factors. The latter group has argued that European strength in Africa at the beginning of the nineteenth century should not be exaggerated. They have emphasised that in West Africa in the first three quarters of the century (with the exception of a few places) European presence was confined to the coast, and that important population movements, state building and realignments were taking place in the interior, thus beyond European influence. It is further argued – and this is a controversial issue – that the main trading relations and developments were also internal rather than external.



West Africa

**Existing patterns** Numerous historians, including Professor Ajayi, have stressed that the new trade in agricultural produce that replaced the slave trade was pioneered by Africans during the slave trade era, that European traders in the 'legitimate era' used existing structures, at least in the first half of the nineteenth century, and that they relied on the same system of trust. While European traders remained on the coast and Africans brought goods to them, the trade was organised on pre-existing pre-nineteenth-century structures.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Africans themselves were opening up Africa to European goods. It was only in the second half of the century that this changed. There is a strong case for showing that Europeans were not generally innovators, and that they often fitted into schemes and patterns that had been pioneered and established by Africans. We saw this with the advent of Portugal on the European scene, and certainly during the slave trade era Europeans remained at the coast while the slaves were captured by Africans and transported along routes pioneered by Africans. This pattern did not change in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Those who minimise external stimuli cite evidence that tends to show that (in West and Equatorial Africa at least) from the late eighteenth century long-distance trade within Africa was growing more quickly than foreign trade. This would suggest that the African internal economy was changing rapidly for reasons that had little to do with Europe. Certain researchers have warned against reading too much into the link between the abolition of the slave trade and economic change in West Africa. It is maintained that the economic revolution that people usually identify with the demise of the slave trade and the change to 'legitimate trade' really began at least 50 years before the abolition of the slave trade, and the impetus for it was internal West African development rather than European policies and demands.<sup>4</sup>

**Limited overseas trade** In looking at the issue of internal and external trade, in the majority of countries in sub-Saharan Africa overseas trade amounted to only a small percentage of total trade. Although much has been written and continues to be written about external trade, most ordinary people in West Africa were not involved in anything more than internal trade. Of course for the ruling classes external trade was very important and often critical in giving them the means to power. Here the trade in firearms springs to mind. But for the ordinary people agriculture remained the most important activity.

**Internal trade routes most important** Even in the area of the Niger delta where the European presence became very strong and where there was a good market for slaves, and later for palm oil, 'the internal trade routes and exchange of local produce between groups constituted the basic economic mainstay of the majority of the people throughout the nineteenth century. In political developments even along the coast, internal cultural factors were still pre-eminent: the Itsekiri of the western delta still considered the curse of the oba of Benin a potent determinant of history, in spite of the practical sovereignty and great success in the overseas trade won by the kingdom of Warri by the nineteenth century.'<sup>5</sup> The curse of the oba was believed to have been the cause of the death of the Itsekiri ruler in 1848. So seriously did the Itsekiri take this that they did not appoint another ruler until 1936.

**Perceptions** There is no shortage of perceptions on the nineteenth century. In emphasising African rather than European initiatives, Ajayi has referred to 'the efforts of the various African

leaders in the nineteenth century in different parts of the continent to reform their societies'. He adds that: 'In most cases, the leaders were only too ready to take advantage of opportunities offered by the expanding scope of trade and the activities of Europeans, whether traders or missionaries, hunters of game or hunters of concessions. Another feature that stands out just as prominently was how these efforts of African leaders to reform were systematically being undermined by the very activities of European traders, missionaries and hunters that African leaders tried to exploit.' He believes that this phenomenon 'of internal efforts at reform systematically being aborted by external intervention' is an aspect of historical writing that has been very much neglected and deserves more attention. 'Because of the assumption that colonialism and integration into the world economy were necessary conditions of modernization, most historians have failed to notice how much the nineteenth century represented an African effort at self-development and to what extent European conquest and colonialism was a subversion of that effort.'<sup>6</sup>

**Reform and modernisation**

Reform is linked to the question of modernisation, and here it is difficult to escape the undoubted significance of Europe, which ties up with the technological factor. Attempts to modernise were a feature of nineteenth-century African history in general, although this is most easily seen in the case of North Africa. Although the initiative for much of this may have come from Africa itself, there is little doubt that the European industrial revolution provided the means. Europeans brought not only firearms but also telegraphs, railways, agricultural and mining machinery, printing presses and education. Egypt had its first printing press in 1822, and in 1841 there was one in Luanda as well. In the course of empire and state building there was some modernisation of armies as in Morocco and Ethiopia as well as by Samory. An efficient army was high among the priorities of leaders. In North Africa in particular modernisation was possible only through loans raised in Europe, which had a disastrous effect on the freedom of action of states which contracted loans.

**'Legitimate trade'**

The trade in substitutes for the slave trade has been called 'legitimate trade' in European historical literature. The term does not find favour with many African historians. Boahen writes that the slave trade was replaced 'by export agriculture which has wrongly, but in a typically Eurocentric manner, been termed legitimate trade'.<sup>7</sup>

## **PALM OIL AND SLAVES IN THE ERA OF 'LEGITIMATE TRADE'**

**Palm oil**

Although, as we have seen, there were many products other than slaves being traded locally and internationally, in the export trade there was one crop that eased the transition from the slave trade to 'legitimate trade'. That crop was palm oil. Although this had been exported from West Africa long before then, the great stimulus for production came early in the nineteenth century from the demand for its use in soap, in candles, in oil to lubricate the new industrial machinery, and as a flux in the making of tinplate. Palm oil was not all of the same quality. Southwest Nigeria produced a soft quality oil for which traders were prepared to pay the highest prices, whereas the Gold Coast produced a harder oil, which was less in demand. At first there was little demand for the colourless palm kernel oil, which had a different composition from the thick red

palm oil which came from the outer part of the fruit (the pulp in which the kernels were imbedded), but about 1860 new techniques for removing the kernel were discovered in Germany. The kernel then became an item of export and by the late nineteenth century large quantities were exported for use in the making of margarine, a new product; it was also used for cattle feed, particularly by German farmers. Groundnuts or peanuts, the export of which expanded rapidly in the second half of the nineteenth century, were used to make soap and cooking oil.

**Price of palm oil** The price of palm oil began to rise steadily after 1815; between the 1820s and 1850s it doubled in price. As the palm oil trade became more lucrative, production was increased. Thus whereas England had imported 900 000 kg from West Africa in 1820, in the 1850s some 27 to 36 million kg a year were being imported. The rate of expansion slowed down somewhat from the 1860s but between 1860 and 1900 exports still averaged about 45 million kg a year.

**Groundnuts** In the second half of the century the trade in groundnuts took off. In Senegambia by 1840 peanut production had hardly begun. By the late 1880s 36 million kg a year were being exported. Groundnuts were grown in an area from Senegal to Sierra Leone. They were particularly suited to the light sandy soil and the long dry season in Senegambia. As with palm oil, transport problems made production in the interior unfeasible. One of the first focal points for the export of groundnuts was the Gambia. It was only in the 1830s that groundnuts began to be exported alongside Gambian beeswax and hides, but by the middle of the century they comprised 66 per cent of Gambia's total exports.

**Comparison of export figures** If one looks at estimates of the total value of West African exports in the 1790s and compares this with the value of exports other than slaves in the 1850s, the figure is the same. This suggests that by the 1850s legitimate trade had replaced the slave trade in value. But this does not mean that in all areas profits from slave dealing had been simply replaced by profits arising from the sale of palm products. The areas that had profited from the slave trade were not necessarily the same areas that were making profits from other articles. There were people, for example along parts of the coast between Senegal and the Ivory Coast, who had not been very much involved in the export slave trade, who found themselves taking part in the export trade in the nineteenth century as a result of their vegetable products. After 1807 even illicit slave dealers did not obtain their slaves from sources they had used during the legal slave-trading era. Dahomey did not have a suitable alternative to the slave trade, so she continued to deal in slaves for most of the nineteenth century. But in other areas, such as Senegambia and the Gold Coast, old suppliers dropped out. The collapse of the Oyo empire made this a favoured hunting ground for slaves in the nineteenth century, unlike the seventeenth or first half of the eighteenth century.

**Transition to agricultural trade** There has been some controversy about the smoothness of the transition from the export slave trade to the export agricultural trade. Not all areas could replace slaves with palm oil. Some parts of West Africa were unsuitable for palm trees and groundnuts, and others were too far from the coast to make cultivation worthwhile. The oil palm was found throughout the forest zone, and grew naturally close to the coast

between the Gold Coast and Old Calabar, but the major exporting area was the Niger delta and the Cross River valley, which may well have produced as much as 90 per cent of Britain's palm oil. From 1807 Old Calabar led in oil production, supplying 50 per cent of all palm oil coming in to Britain. But in the 1830s Bonny became a major producer, for a time overtaking Old Calabar. In the delta the change was smooth, or so it appeared on the surface. However, once palm oil prices dropped and competition between African traders, and between African and European traders intensified from the 1860s, all the tensions and contradictions of the changeover were clearly exposed.

But even before that, considerable adaptation was necessary. There were new traders to deal with and new ways of doing business. On the whole economic crises which arose as a result of the change were not prolonged. One of the main reasons was that in many areas slaves and legitimate goods were both being sold until the middle of the nineteenth century. Because these legitimate products were already being traded and consumed, the end of the slave trade did not result in a collapse of overseas trade.

**In-crease in number of slaves** The substitution of palm oil for slaves led to an increase in the number of slaves required to work in palm plantations and to transport oil to the coastal market. Most of the labour involved in oil production on a large scale was undertaken by dependants – women and children, but mostly by slaves. Once the overseas market for slaves had dried up, slaves for domestic use became cheaper and more people could afford them. Slaves were widely used to harvest palm trees in Dahomey and some of the Yoruba states; they were also used to grow groundnuts and to work in kola nut plantations among the Asante. So the growth of export agriculture stimulated the need for cheap labour and led to an increase in the demand for slaves domestically.

**Social problems** On occasion the increased domestic slave population gave rise to serious social problems. In the delta this had significant social repercussions because a slave was regarded as the child of a member of what was called the Household of the purchasing chief. Slaves thus became full members of the Household unit, and could even become head of the House. With the growth of the internal slave market, Households became much bigger, there were more tensions within them, and the tendency to break away from the main House was accelerated. Competition for manpower and trade led to many struggles between Houses. In the 1860s the struggle for power in Bonny led to Jaja, a former slave, leading his followers away to form the new state of Opobo, which in the 1870s captured many of Bonny's markets. Bonny had to find other markets in an area claimed by New Calabar, which led to the widening of the area of friction. In the mid- and late nineteenth century New Calabar fought numerous wars, against Brass to its west, against Bonny to the southeast, and against Okrika to the east.

In places where there were no palms or where they developed only slowly, there were different kinds of problems. In these areas the slave trade continued for much longer. Crops such as coffee and groundnuts developed but slowly, and it was only in the 1860s that groundnuts replaced the slave trade in parts of Senegambia.

**Dahomey** Dahomey provides an example of an initially difficult transition. Its economy had been based almost entirely on the slave trade, so it was very much affected by the ban on the

slave trade. Although a British naval squadron had destroyed the slave trade from Porto Novo by 1851, Whydah, the main Dahomey outlet for slaves, continued to export slaves to Brazil until that country ended the import of human flesh. Trade was facilitated by the settlement on the coast of numerous Portuguese and Brazilian slave dealers who had been chased out of Lagos and Badagry. Whereas small farmers could adapt without too much trouble, the rulers of big states who had relied on raids to obtain slaves found it much more difficult to do so. King Gezo (1818–1858) had an army and a whole ceremonial state to keep up, which was very expensive, and he could not suddenly disband the army or change the form of the state without causing a rebellion. He continued to supply Portuguese dealers with slaves but at the same time he built up the palm oil trade with the encouragement of the French firm Victor Régis. By the time that the French took over Dahomey in 1892 the economy was based on palm oil. By this time palm products accounted for over 90 per cent of Dahomey's total exports. As Dahomey developed its palm oil export market, it sold fewer of its war captives and retained many slaves for work in the palm oil industry.

In Dahomey small farmers had played no part in the slave trade organised by the elite, but with the demand for palm oil, these farmers were able to participate in international trade, and in the second half of the century they shipped a good deal of produce to Europe. As we shall see, it was the advent of the steamship that gave these small farmers the opportunity of doing so. So the rulers of Dahomey had to face competition from these small, independent producers, which made adaptation for them that more difficult.

**The Gambia** There were a number of small independent states along the Gambia River. During the slave trade era the chiefs had been able to keep the sale of slaves in their own hands, as it needed cooperation and joint action to obtain slaves and organise their sale, but the groundnut industry that became important from the 1830s onwards was a different proposition. Individual producers could easily dispose of their produce to a trader without requiring the presence of the chief, who lost his monopoly of trade and his authority. Prominent local men began to act independently of the chiefs.

**Differences in slave and palm oil trade** The above examples demonstrate an important difference between the slave trade and the trade in palm oil. In those palm oil areas where slaves did most of the work collecting the oil, the slave owners, rulers and merchants creamed off the profits. In this case to a certain extent the same people profited from the slave trade and the palm oil trade. But they no longer had the monopoly of trade that they had in the slave trade. Ordinary people could not take part in the slave trade – it needed large-scale organisation to obtain slaves, to negotiate rights of passage and to transport the slaves to the coast. But this was not true of the oil trade. Ordinary farmers could take part in the trade in vegetable products. Peasants sold their products directly and they obtained the profits.

**Shift in incomes** It was this shift in incomes that is widely seen as one of the most significant results of the demise of the slave trade. Boahen writes: 'It was not the change-over from the so-called illegitimate to the so-called legitimate trade but, rather, the fundamental shift

in the distribution of incomes from the ruling aristocratic elite to the ordinary people that was significant. Since the slave trade, which constituted the principal source of income, was a monopoly of the kings and their military leaders and advisers, the bulk of the income went to them. But with its replacement by natural products such as palm oil, groundnuts, cotton, gum, honey, beeswax, kola nuts, etc., which could be produced or collected by ordinary people, and especially those living in the rural areas, a steady redistribution of income ensued, leading to the rise of a new set of rich people in not only the urban and market centres but also in the rural areas.<sup>8</sup>

**Production by small farmers**

Palm oil could be produced and marketed by the household using family labour, traditional tools, and little capital. The key difference was that land was cheap and plentiful. Slave raiding and trading needed capital and labour, and so was in the hands of a small elite group, often rulers of states. But producing and selling palm oil had no such barriers. For the first time small farmers could play an important role in the export market. In the eighteenth century land had been largely ignored, except for domestic use, and the labour had been exported. Now the land was being used for the export market and labour was being used commercially. In 1892 it was estimated that in Yoruba country alone oil for the export market was being obtained from 15 million palm trees. This provided quite a few additional employment opportunities for the people who had access to the coast.

**Nature of the transition**

Under these circumstances it is difficult to make generalisations about the nature of the transition from the slave trade to 'legitimate trade'. Prior to the 1970s the conventional view was that the transition was smooth. In his analysis of the economic history of West Africa, A. G. Hopkins in 1973 took the view that the change-over from the slave trade to legitimate trade in West Africa was not so smooth at all, that tensions existed from the early nineteenth century, but that they became acute only in the late nineteenth century, and were then aggravated by a downturn in trade. He focused on this situation as a vital ingredient in the European partition of the continent.<sup>9</sup>

## FOREIGN TRADE AND AFRICAN ECONOMIES

**Pattern of imports**

How did the pattern of imports change after the abolition of the slave trade? Textiles (cotton and woollen goods), liquor (rum and gin in particular), salt, iron, tobacco, and guns and gunpowder accounted for a large proportion of the imports into West Africa. Although most of these articles had been imported during the slave trade era, by the middle of the nineteenth century the quantity coming in was much greater and the prices had dropped considerably. The quantity of cotton goods coming into West Africa from Britain in the period 1816–1820 had increased 30 times by 1846–1850. More people were participating in and obtaining profits from trade in agricultural products than had ever been the case with the slave trade. This meant that there was a bigger market for European manufactured goods. It is very important to note that while the prices and volumes of certain African products were rising fast, prices of European goods coming into Africa were not increasing nearly as quickly. In the case of cotton textiles, which were now mass-produced by machines, the prices declined. This means that from the late eighteenth century to about 1860 terms of trade shifted in favour of West Africa.

**Effects of imports on local economies**

Africans became increasingly locked into the world economy, but the change did not provide strong points from which African economies could grow. The main European imports, which were cloth, alcohol and firearms, did not help African economies develop local points of growth. Because cheaper manufactured cotton goods flooded the African market (goods that required no re-working) local industry was discouraged. Local producers could not compete with the cheap imported articles. European shipping could bring a range of finished articles ready for consumption to the West African coast, and it could do so at a cost with which indigenous African handicraft could not compete. Of course some imported goods did need re-working. Local craftsmen could use iron and copper bars to make the sort of hoes, handles and implements that were needed locally, or dye cloth certain colours with special designs. In areas where African products could not compete with imported ones, they did not make any technological progress. Thus African blacksmiths made tools from inferior imported iron bars rather than high-quality products from local deposits.

In those parts of West Africa that were drawn more to the trans-Saharan trade routes and markets in North Africa than towards the Atlantic coastline, because of the cost of transporting goods across the Sahara from North Africa, mass-produced goods from Europe were more expensive than in the coastal region of West Africa, so local craft industries were able to flourish. It is ironic that in West Africa, where the contact with Europe was closest, African development should in many ways have been more limited than in the West African Sudan. Local crafts had a better chance of surviving far from the threat of cheap imported goods. They had a measure of protection. One thinks of the flourishing textile industry in Hausaland. Lancashire exports were unable to make much progress here. The local cotton textile industry was both sophisticated and resilient. The peoples of the region had very definite likes and dislikes and these varied from place to place. Local designs and colours were intricate and had been created to meet the specific requirements of the purchasers. Local producers had geared themselves for this market, so that it was difficult for outsiders to break into it.

**Underdevelopment**

Foreign trade did not transform the economy. In general trade with Europe consumed African natural resources – gold, ivory and slaves were among the first. These were replaced with cheap expendable consumer goods, which did not help Africa to develop an infrastructure. Sierra Leone's fine forest trees went to build British ships. Gradually the country became deforested; the secondary bush that grew up was useless for export. By the 1860s there was little suitable wood left. Sierra Leone would in any case have lost its market, because the demand for timber declined as iron ships replaced wooden ones.

**No other industries**

The palm industry did not lead to any new industries either. Oil palm trees grew wild, particularly around cleared areas, so farmers could do the clearing and weeding as they went about their other tasks. The gathering of oil required no new techniques. It took some trouble to extract the oil or kernel but women could do this in addition to their other normal tasks. The major activity connected with the palm oil trade was to bulk it and transport it to the coast. Peanut production required the full attention of farmers in their main cultivation season, but it needed no new techniques. It did not lead to the establishment of any factories or industries. So Africa remained a primary exporter, and

did not enter the field of processing its exports. This was to prove fatal when the terms of trade later turned against primary producers in the second half of the nineteenth century.

**Decline  
in oil  
prices**

But for the moment there seemed no cause for undue concern. By mid-century palm oil prices were still in an upward trend except for falls between 1844 and 1846 and between 1851 and 1852. Prices peaked in 1854–1861 when the Liverpool price for palm oil was around £45 a ton. Because the price of imported goods was decreasing (by 1850 some imported articles cost between a half and a quarter of what they had cost at the beginning of the century) these were prosperous years for West Africa. Then came the drop in oil prices as gas and electric lighting were developed, zinc chloride began to be used as a flux in the manufacturing of tinsplate, peanut oil took over some functions of palm oil, and petroleum resources (which had been discovered in the United States in the 1860s) took over other functions. In the second half of the nineteenth century the Senegalese gum trade declined because of the development of chemical substitutes and the growth of the Egyptian gum trade. In addition, Africa was no longer the only place where vegetable products could be obtained. The steamship opened up new areas of the world. 'By the mid nineteenth century,' Hopkins writes, 'the silent imperialism of the steamship was beginning to bring vegetable oils and substitute products from other continents besides Africa.'<sup>10</sup> After the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which led to a fall in freight rates, Indian groundnuts and Australian tallow came onto the market.

By then steamboats were a regular feature of the lower Niger, trading to its junction with the Benue and beyond. So steamboats came to the palm-producing regions that had hitherto been served by Ibo canoe routes, cutting out African middlemen. In 1862 the price of palm oil began to decline. The European price of palm oil fell to £32 per ton in the depression of 1862–1866. Although prices revived again, they did not reach the peaks of 1854–1861 again until 1906. From the 1870s there was a major depression in Europe, which also meant a reduced demand for oils. In 1886–1890 the price fell to £20 per ton. Palm kernel prices fell by about a third to £10 a ton, and so did groundnut prices, and neither recovered until after the turn of the century.

**Problems of  
primary  
production**

Africans experimented with crops on their own and they were quick to adapt when they were able to do so. Thus Sierra Leone's large timber exports up to the 1830s gave way to gold, groundnuts and palm oil by 1860; by 1880 palm kernels were the main export. In the Gold Coast and Nigeria in the 1880s, cocoa farming was undertaken to overcome economic problems. So they adapted well to the demands of the world market. But the truth was that terms of trade no longer favoured primary producers. And there was little they could do about that. Perhaps if there had been technical improvements in agriculture or improved communications such as railways, it would have been possible to increase the volume of production in an economic way. Without such improvements the only possible increase was through the recruitment of more producers, which would not increase the per capita income, or through the growth of the labour supply, which was an expensive alternative. Ralph Austen asserts that the drop in prices was more critical for the European traders than for the African suppliers of palm oil as the traders 'entire existence depended upon the continuation of such

commerce'.<sup>11</sup> African merchants and producers, on the other hand, could simply drop out of the market until conditions improved. In the 1880s the Yoruba closed their markets on more than one occasion, and in 1886–1887 the Itsekiri withheld palm oil from the market in an attempt to force the Europeans to trade on their terms. Temporary withdrawal from the market was thus possible, but in general African traders were at the mercy of the same market forces as the European traders.

## THE STEAMSHIP

**Advent of the steamship** The decline in prices coincided with another major change in trading relationships between West Africa and Europe. This was the advent of the steamship. The development of the steamship was part of the industrial revolution to which we have referred in various places in this chapter. If there was one single innovation that acted as a catalyst for major change in African trading relationships and ultimately in political relationships as well, it was the steamship. Steamships had first been employed in West Africa by Macgregor Laird when he sent two paddle steamers up the Niger in 1832. Despite this early start the steamship did not quickly replace sail, and for long voyages in areas where there were regular winds, as in the China tea trade, sail remained more popular than steam until late in the century. Steamers began to replace sailing ships in the anti-slavery naval squadron in 1841, but at first they were not so effective because they consumed large quantities of fuel and coaling facilities on the coast were sparse. But technological developments soon made steam a better prospect. About 1860 the high pressure compound engine was developed by Alfred Holt, which significantly reduced the fuel consumption of steamships. In the 1870s the triple expansion engine was developed.

**Services to Africa** Laird's company, the African Steam Ship Company, was formed in England in 1851 and began a regular monthly service to West Africa in 1852 after it had obtained the government's West African mail contract. The British and African Steam Navigation Company was established in 1868. A consortium of Bordeaux and Marseilles firms ran steamships to West Africa in the 1870s, before the Fabre-Fraissinet Line was created in 1889. In the 1870s the German firm of Woermann was also running steamers to West Africa. In 1880 only a third of the ships entering Lagos harbour were under sail, and in terms of the tonnage, sailing ships accounted for only one sixth of the total. A steamship could complete the voyage to West Africa in less than a month, whereas the round trip could often take a sailing ship anything between six and twelve months. Sailing ships spent a good deal of time collecting a cargo in West Africa; beating up the coast in order to call in at a number of ports was a lengthy business. It was much easier for steamships to call in at ports on their way to the Niger delta.

**Changes** The advent of the steamship brought many changes. Goods could be transported more cheaply, so that cargoes did not have to be confined so much to high-value items of low bulk. If necessary, soldiers could be transported more easily to trouble spots. The first result was that more European traders established themselves on the coast. With them came missionaries and educated African ex-slaves who thus swelled the already heterogeneous communities that had developed at the coastal posts. These little expatriate

communities attracted the disaffected of all kinds, whether slaves wanting freedom or cliques needing support in intrigues against rivals or rulers. These little communities had the potential to destabilise the region, and because the Europeans were the main suppliers of capital, and the only source of access to firearms, they became powerful figures.

**Local currencies**

Technological advances in Europe made the production of manillas and iron currencies much cheaper, and in mid-century new sources of cowrie shells were located on the east coast of Africa. Because it made transport of these articles to West Africa so much easier and cheaper, the steamship played a vital role in bringing about a serious devaluation in these articles. European merchants began to flood West Africa with these currencies, which resulted in their depreciation in the second half of the nineteenth century. By the end of the century iron and copper currencies as well as cowrie shells had ceased to play a meaningful role in external trade. They were replaced largely by British and French silver coins.

**British and French coins**

In the long term the change to French francs and British florins and shillings widened the basis of trade. The introduction of the steamship gave more opportunities for small European traders, who had no previous experience of West Africa, to enter the market. Before the steamship the older, established firms had controlled the market because they monopolised cargo space on the sailing ships. With the introduction of regular steamship services, individual traders could hire cargo space, and so enter the West African market. These new traders were assisted by the decline of cowrie shells. The use of cowrie shells had been a bar to entry into this market, because the shells could be obtained only from established firms or by barter, and when the traders went back to Europe they could not exchange the shells.

**New traders**

In the 1840s, before the advent of the steamer, the export of palm oil was in the hands of about ten large-scale Liverpool oil traders, while another 10–15 smaller firms traded in a range of goods, including oil, although not on a regular basis. Large-scale traders used their own sailing ships or chartered ships, relying on the high cost of entry to keep out competitors. The steamship changed this. Trading and transport became separated. African trade was open to any trader who hired cargo space on a steamship. It became much easier for small scale traders to enter the trade. In addition to the new European traders who entered the West African trade scene, the established firms were also fighting competition from small African firms, which included many from Sierra Leone. At this stage some of these firms were as large as European firms. An example of this new generation of trader was Richard Blaize (1845–1904) who left Freetown in 1862 and made his business career in Lagos. Afro-Europeans or Creoles benefited from the opening up of trade by the steamship but they never became wealthy and did not establish bases in Europe. They did not have much capital so they could not really enter the export business. They were engaged mainly in the import and retail trade. These new traders poured into the West African trade in the 1850s. The big-name old traders had a difficult time. They tried to crush the new arrivals, but without much success, and many of the old trading companies collapsed.

**Competition among traders** As prices continued to be subjected to downward pressure and a general depression tightened its grip on Europe from about 1874, there was a great struggle for survival between oil traders. This led to a new development that was eventually to have grave consequences for African traders. As early as 1863 a number of firms had joined together to form the Company of African Merchants. Further amalgamations followed. In 1879 George Taubman (known as George Goldie), an eccentric ex-army officer, succeeded in amalgamating the British firms into the United African Company. In 1889 the nine remaining major oil traders were amalgamated and became the African Association. By the late 1880s these large companies were effectively squeezing out many of the small African traders, who lacked access to European banking circles in order to obtain credit to run large operations.

**Crooked practices** Although the Niger region remained the biggest producer of palm oil, by the 1840s other areas were also exporting more oil. After 1852 the steamship services facilitated this by calling at a greater number of ports on the coast. So competition was increased. As the dispute over reduced profits became increasingly bitter, the incidence of crooked practices mushroomed. There were more instances of palm oil being diluted, and of less cloth being measured out than had actually been sold. European firms tried to move inland and cut out the middlemen, while the latter resisted this. There were also attempts by Africans to sell their products directly to Europe, and it was JaJa's threat to do this that was largely responsible for his expulsion from Opobo in 1887. Africans withheld produce in order to force Europeans to trade on their terms.

**Cutting costs** Primary producers and traders alike found themselves in a desperate search for alternative exports and for ways of cutting down expenses. We have said before that the development of legitimate commerce did not transform trading structures, but followed patterns laid down during the slave trade era. The changed circumstances now caused Europeans to rethink their relationship with West Africa. The policy of limited intervention in West Africa was about to collapse. In order to reduce their own costs European traders tried to cut out African middlemen and also European rivals. They were about to move into the interior to trade directly with the producers. This heightened competition was to prepare the way for the scramble for Africa.

**Political role of the steamship** Besides its effect on revolutionising trading patterns, the steamship also played a role in political developments, although this is not always easy to chart precisely. We can easily show that the steamer played a major role in naval operations as in the invasion of Lagos in 1851, but in other cases its effect is less obvious. Whitehall civil servants promoted the use of steamers, believing that they could help prevent local disasters which could have repercussions on their own careers. The steamer gave increased mobility and fire power, and European officials who used it gained the respect of the locals. The governor's prestige would be far higher if he arrived to negotiate with chiefs in a steamship rather than a decrepit sailing ship.

By the 1840s West African administrators were asking for steam vessels of their own. By 1874 there was a total of ten steamships spread among British administrations of West African settlements. It is difficult to pinpoint the significance of the steamship for the furtherance of European imperial interests in Africa. But there can be little doubt

that it did put some muscle into the hands of the men on the spot. As R. V. Kubicek phrases it: 'Whitehall's enthusiasm for the steamboat placed an effective or potentially effective means of coercion at the disposal of imperial enforcers in the 1840s, 1850s, 1860s and 1870s when the central state itself was unwilling to adopt an expansionist policy. Faced in the 1880s and 1890s by colonial rivals, Whitehall and Westminster simply fell in with, and furthered the initiative of, local agents who, convinced by both the real and imagined potential of this tool of empire, had already begun the conquest decades before.'<sup>12</sup>

## THE GROWING EUROPEAN PRESENCE

### European power limited

By 1800 the European presence was confined largely to a few coastal trading stations or factories. One should not exaggerate European influence at the beginning of the century, and even in military terms they did not enjoy overwhelming superiority. While Europeans may have had superior arms and better military discipline, the Africans had the advantage of numbers as well as an intimate acquaintance with the terrain. Where the Europeans did enjoy great superiority was in naval power on the coast. Later in the century they would venture up the rivers, but in the early nineteenth century their superiority was limited to the coast. Even in the lakes and creeks and rivers, African canoes had an advantage over sailing ships.

### The British in Gambia

After 1815 the European trading posts began to alter their character. In some cases this was because of the campaign to end the illegal slave trade. Thus, although British traders had been active in the Gambia since the seventeenth century, in 1816 the need for a base from which to operate against slavers resulted in the establishment of a more formal British presence with the founding of Bathurst at the mouth of the Gambia River. By the middle of the nineteenth century British traders, prominent among whom were Creoles from Sierra Leone, had developed a solid trade in groundnuts with the river peoples. But the British had no interest in increasing their authority in Gambia. They wanted trade, not colonies. Where they intervened in conflicts they did so purely in order to protect trade.

### Gold Coast

The Danes, Dutch and British had posts on the Gold Coast. Although the British had no real interest in the interior they could not ignore it, because the powerful Asante, in the forest area of central Ghana, wanted to assert their dominance over the small Fante states near the coast close to the British trading stations. During the slave trade era the Fante had relied on the Asante to provide them with slaves to sell. But now they produced kernels and oil for export and thus no longer had to rely on the Asante. The Asante, however, needed access to the coast in order to obtain firearms to conduct slave raids effectively. After the slave trade era they extended their kola nut trade with the north, which meant that they needed additional slaves to work in the plantations. One of the greatest Asantehenes of the Asante, Osei Bonsu (1801–1824), undertook a series of campaigns against the Fante of the coast in 1807, 1811 and 1814 in order to keep Asante lines to the coast open for the firearms they imported.

**British protection of the Fante** Once the Napoleonic wars had ended and Britain could again give its full attention to the region, it extended its protection to the Fante. The Fante relied on the British to protect them, and Asante attacks near the coast disrupted trade by keeping the Fante and the British traders in a state of alarm. For many years British action was half-hearted and until the 1840s the government hesitated about whether to abandon the region to private enterprise or to assume formal control herself. In the meantime the Fante appealed to the British not only for protection against the Asante, but also to arbitrate in their many internal disputes. This increasing British involvement in the affairs of the Fante led to the 1844 treaty in which the Fante chiefs recognised British jurisdiction and agreed that criminal cases should be dealt with by British officials working in conjunction with the chiefs. By the 1870s much of the Fante trade had come into the hands of Europeans who took over ailing Fante concerns.

**British relations with the Asante** British relations with the Asante remained uneasy. The British takeover of the Dutch fort of Elmina in 1871–1872 led to a severe crisis in the Asante economy; an Asante attack on British-controlled territory in 1873 resulted in a British expedition under Sir Garnet Wolseley defeating the Asante in 1874. This was a major blow to the Asante, and outlying parts of the empire took the opportunity of breaking loose. Asante power was not broken, however, and Britain did not assume any authority over the Asante. This position may be contrasted with the situation in the same decade in the Senegal region in which France was involved. The French defeated African polities in order to bring them under French control. But the British did not bring the Asante under their control in 1874. In fact, later in the year when they decided to proclaim the Gold Coast Colony, the new colony did not extend very far inland, and the Asante were not included in its borders. The main reason why Britain formally took over the coastal area was that it had become so involved in Fante affairs, that for some time it had been impossible to conduct trade in the region without also assuming responsibility for Fante affairs. British activity in this region thus illustrates British reluctance to assume formal control; at the same time creeping British intervention in the affairs of the Fante, with Fante encouragement, had led to a situation in which simple withdrawal was hardly an option, given the expanding trade of the region.

**Porto Novo** The British assumption of control in Lagos between 1851 and 1861, together with naval action against Porto Novo in the latter year, galvanised the French into action for they had substantial trading interests in Whydah and Porto Novo and feared that the British had designs on them. With encouragement from Porto Novo itself, the French declared a protectorate over it in 1863 to put a stop to any possible British advance further west along the coast. But neither European power planned any further extension of their territory, and once France was reassured that Britain had no expansionist designs, it allowed its protectorate over Porto Novo to lapse. When Anglo-French rivalry again became acute in the 1880s, Britain resumed its claim over Porto Novo.

**Yorubaland** It did not take the British and French long to find out that the trade of Lagos and Porto Novo depended ultimately on trade with the hinterland. By the 1860s Yorubaland was producing as much palm oil as was being sold in the Niger delta. Yorubaland remained politically unstable and fragmented but this did not really inhibit the growth of the

palm oil trade. One reason was that, while the slave trade depended on large political organisation, the collection of palm oil and its sale did not. But the palm oil trade did lead to greater competition for control of the trade routes to Lagos. The fighting that accompanied this competition disrupted trade so that as time went on officials and traders at Lagos began to think that British control should be extended over the hinterland behind Lagos, and that only by doing this could trade flourish. But for many years such appeals fell on deaf ears.

**The Niger delta**

British interest was particularly strong in the Niger delta, the so-called Oil Rivers, which obtained its name from its dominance in the palm oil trade. Initially European traders, missionaries and explorers went about their daily business without very much reference to national identity. Unlike the French government, which felt that it had a responsibility to take official action to help its traders, the official British government attitude was that British traders had to fend for themselves, and if they could not maintain themselves against local inhabitants or other European rivals, they should leave. But at the same time encouragement of legitimate trade as a way of combatting the slave trade, meant the promotion of British trading interests. Measures against the slave trade and the protection of British trading interests became synonymous in the Niger delta. In practice there was not much difference between the effects of British and French interference in West African affairs. As Professor Fage writes: 'In each case there were two policy objectives; to stop the slave trade, and to establish profitable legitimate trade in its place. If the French officials tended to put rather more emphasis on advancing the interests of French traders, which had as a consequence a reduction in the old slave trade, while the British laid more stress on fighting the slave trade, which had the consequence that British trading interests were advanced, the results from the African point of view were hardly distinguishable.'<sup>13</sup>

**The first British consul**

The appointment in 1849 of John Beecroft as British consul for the Bights of Benin and Bonny (Biafra), stationed on Fernando Po, ushered in a new era in which an official British representative was specifically commissioned to protect British interests against the interests of agents of other European countries and also against Africans. With the appointment of the consul, intervention in the affairs of the delta states became more frequent. A milestone in such interference was the introduction by the British traders, with the help of their consul, of the so-called 'Courts of Equity'. Europeans came to live on the rivers, and hulks moored offshore became a feature of European presence. African traders depended on European capital and credit, which led to disputes which were solved in Afro-European 'Courts of Equity', composed of African and European merchants. Slowly the operation of the courts began to shift in favour of Europeans.

**Unrest and war in the delta**

Unrest and war were widespread in all delta states from 1850s. Some of this pre-dated the fall in oil prices, and was due to tensions arising from the increasingly close competition for markets as new wholesalers came to the fore. The drop in prices exacerbated the situation as did the determination of British traders to penetrate into the interior and reduce prices by cutting out the middlemen. The consuls served as mediators in the making of peace treaties between the various delta states, and consular mediated treaties were signed between New Calabar and Bonny in 1871 and 1879, and

in 1871 between New Calabar and Okrika and Brass (Nembe); the consul had a share too in the peace treaty between Opobo and Bonny in 1873. More direct British intervention was not lacking nor was it confined to the period of the so-called scramble for Africa. In 1847, for example, a Bonny religious official was taken captive after he had incited the local inhabitants to oppose British traders in the area. In 1854 the British used the disturbances caused by local feuds as the excuse for sending King William Pepple of Bonny into exile.

**Penetration of the interior**

The British consuls used the inter-state struggles in the Niger delta to open the way for British traders and missionaries into the hinterland. Even after explorers such as the Lander brothers had in 1830 shown that the Niger was navigable, the fevers that took so high a toll of Europeans venturing into the interior prevented traders from proceeding inland, even had there been an inducement to do so. Until the fall in prices there was not all that much incentive to do so. The trade pattern developed by Africans, and used by Europeans for so many years, was quite adequate. But low prices and the advent of the steamship sharpened competition, and suddenly there was very much of an incentive to proceed inland and cut out the middlemen, in this way reducing costs. At the same time in 1854 Baikie demonstrated the efficacy of quinine as a preventive measure, which made a permanent European presence in the interior possible. Between 1857 and 1860, with the help of British ships in the area, Macgregor Laird opened trading stations on the Niger at Aboh, Onitsha and Lokoja, thus cutting out the middlemen of the coast and making direct contact with the producers. This signalled the beginning of a bitter struggle by the middlemen to retain their position in the trading system. Laird's ships were attacked, and in response to Laird's appeal for help, ships of the anti-slavery patrol bombarded the villages of hostile middlemen. In 1870 the British government moved its consular headquarters to Calabar, and it was the consuls who called upon the fleet for aid, and interfered in the affairs of the city states. The formation of Goldie's company in 1879, and its attempts to establish a trading monopoly on the river, caused renewed resistance from African as well as French traders. As prices fell still further, efforts to penetrate the interior and bypass the middlemen were redoubled. In the increasingly competitive atmosphere African traders were at a disadvantage. They could not do as Goldie had done and combine to obtain funds from Europe to finance large-scale activities, and as the depression worsened in the 1880s African traders began to be pushed out of the market. Despite this increasing intervention it should be stressed that the British government did not want to establish formal control.

**Cameroun**

The forested area of the Atlantic coast had not been visited very much by slave traders in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Because of this Cameroon was one of the few parts of Africa with good supplies of quality ivory near the coast. British traders had begun a pattern of interference in local politics here from 1792 onwards. With the passage of time the freedom of action of Cameroon leaders became more restricted; British interest in the abolition of the slave trade led to the signing of treaties between 1840 and 1844, in which the British obtained the right to intervene in local politics. Gunboat diplomacy was used to ensure that the terms of the treaties were upheld.

**Credit** In Cameroonian trade the system of credit was widespread. European traders supplied the credit. After offloading and valuing, their goods were swept away into the interior and often traders had to wait a long time before they were paid. The risks of this 'trust' system were very high and sometimes no payment arrived. So the oil traders welcomed the appointment of British consuls and the setting up of courts of equity, because these helped to reduce the slave trade which competed with their 'legitimate' trade, and helped them to recover bad debts. A Court of Equity was established at Douala in 1856. Sometimes chiefs asked for intervention, but the most common reason for interference was disputes between European traders and locals about repayment of credit.

French interests in Africa were also growing. By 1843 French firms had trading posts on the Ivory Coast, and French traders were also active at Whydah, Porto Novo and Cotonou on the coast of Dahomey. In 1863, as a result of British action in Lagos, the French declared a protectorate over Porto Novo. By the beginning of the nineteenth century there were about 70 French firms trading on the Gabon coast and there were also a number of French missionaries inland. In 1849 Libreville on the Gabon estuary was established as a home for freed slaves. The Gabon interior was even more heavily forested and thinly populated than that of Cameroon. Here too the growing demand for ivory increased trade, and the general rise in the level of trade saw an escalation in the slave trade. Despite official French contacts and the establishment of Libreville in 1848, until 1875 trade was dominated by British interests – French industrial manufacturers could not compete with cheap cottons and metalware coming in from England and America. The decline in the slave trade was very slow, and the trade shifted away from the well-patrolled Gabon estuary to the many creeks further south. The real end of the slave trade set in only in the 1860s.

A major change came about in Gabon in the 1860s and 1870s when Europeans began exploring the interior to obtain direct access to the commercial hinterland, where the rubber of the Ogowe basin was attracting interest. Slaves were now not much in demand for export, and were used to collect rubber. Groundnut and palm oil trading was also growing. The French were only minor participants in this new commercial growth, and by the early 1870s they were contemplating a total withdrawal. Before the 1880s the French had not regarded any of these places as possible bases from which to build up an empire.

**Senegal** The situation with regard to Senegal was, however, different. Since the seventeenth century the French had had Gorée, an island off the Cape Verde peninsula, and St Louis, on the Senegal River. In the first half of the nineteenth century these settlements were struggling and their only trade was in gum arabic. As a result of Napoleon III's decision to pursue an active colonial policy, Captain Louis Leon Faidherbe was appointed governor of Senegal in 1854. It did not take him long to reach the conclusion that if trade was to be promoted the people of the interior would have to be subjected and French traders protected. He set out to do this. Here we see a major difference between the British and French attitudes. The British believed that informal influence would secure the interests of their traders, and when, for example, the Asante were defeated in 1874, they were not rendered powerless nor were they brought into the Gold Coast Colony.

The French had a different attitude. When they conquered peoples in the interior with the aim of opening up trade, they incorporated them into the French empire.

**Faidherbe's vision of empire**

Faidherbe drew up a blueprint for the establishment of a large French empire in West Africa which would include obtaining the Gambia from Britain in return for French rights in Gabon. This would remove Britain from Senegambia as a rival, and the whole of the region would fall to France. At the same time it would allow Britain to link up the intervening territories between the Gold Coast and Lagos. The empire Faidherbe dreamed about would be not merely a trading empire, it would be a political empire, brought about by conquest and the subjugation of indigenous polities. He was fortunate in that the groundnut trade in Senegal had taken off and provided him with the money to pay for a force of African soldiers, trained and led by Europeans. The first step in the creation of this empire was to secure the course of the Senegal River and the country to the south by building stations as points from which French influence could radiate; by intervening in local conflicts they could increase their hold on the people. He envisaged the building of a chain of forts to Bamako on the Niger, which could then be used as a base for gunboats operating as far as the Bussa rapids. France would then be able to draw the trade of the Niger basin to Senegal after a railway had been constructed. Faidherbe advanced French power in the lower Senegal River valley. By the time that he left Senegal in 1865, the French hold on Futa Toro and Cayor (one of the largest of the Wolof states, which occupied much of the area between Dakar and St Louis) was largely secured.

Although French empire builders would return to Faidherbe's blueprint in later years, nothing came of his plans at the time. Negotiations with Britain concerning the relinquishment of the Gambia continued intermittently until 1875, but were inconclusive. Revolts in the south of Algeria dampened enthusiasm for a possible link-up between French interests in the western Sudan and Algeria. It was also realised that further progress could be made only at the expense of the Tukolor empire, and there was little enthusiasm for what would clearly be a major campaign. Besides this, other considerations pushed Africa to the back of the French official mind. From 1864 its attention was focused on Mexico and Indo-China, and then came the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871, followed by reconstruction.

**Brière de l'Isle**

When Louis-Alexandre Brière de l'Isle became governor of Senegal in 1876, there was a serious economic depression and the price of groundnuts was low; in addition the French government had cut its subsidy to the colony. Brière thus had strict instructions not to embark on any expensive undertakings. To raise the money for the completion of public works already in progress, the government agreed to Brière's plan for a system of differential tariffs on the importation of foreign cloths and for extra duties to be paid by foreign ships, thus taking a major step along the road towards tariff barriers.

**Expansion**

The way in which Brière ignored instructions not to embark on costly ventures illustrates an important aspect of French involvement in the Senegal region, and this is the manner in which local officials, and army officers in particular, managed to do what they wanted, which was to expand the French empire in Africa, despite official disap-

proval from the government. Brière shared Faïdherbe's vision of a large French empire in the western Sudan. Like Faïdherbe he was a military man and would use the military to extend French control. He was well aware of the difficulty of controlling military operations from Paris, particularly when the authorities in France were dependent upon the man on the spot for an assessment of the situation on the frontiers of expansion. In short, Brière knew that it would be extremely difficult for Paris to control him. From the days of the French occupation of Algeria army officers had been extending French power and influence with scant reference to Paris. They had become experts at using fast-moving and small columns to make lightning raids.

In 1877 Brière acted without government authorisation and re-established French control in the Futa Toro region. By carefully selecting the reports that were sent to France he was able to push the government in the direction he wanted. Thus in 1878 the government agreed to his undertaking a campaign in support of friendly tribes at war with the Tukolor, when Brière maintained that this was necessary in order to defend Senegal's eastern frontiers and to forestall a Tukolor invasion. But what Brière really wanted was to prepare the way for a French drive to the upper Niger and the destruction of the Tukolor empire. Brière did not have the backing of the French government for any decisive moves, but he did have the support of an influential group of expansionists in France, who believed that the prestige lost at Sedan and Metz could be restored by military success and glory in Africa. In 1879 Admiral Jean Jauréguibery, a former governor of Senegal, was Minister of Marine and Colonies. He was an enthusiastic expansionist and in 1880 he gave a specially created military command to Gustav Borgnis-Desbordes, who lost no time in driving towards the upper Niger.

**No  
French  
designs  
on West  
Africa**

Apart from French moves from Senegal, which were directed by army officers in Africa rather than the central government in Paris, there was no desire on the part of the French government to build an empire in West Africa any more than there was a desire to do so on the part of the British. But whether it wanted to or not, the French government found itself becoming more and more involved in affairs on the coast, and clearly once an interest had been established in an area it was difficult to stop further involvement. In this sense there was a certain inevitability about European expansion. But by 1880 European interests were confined very much to the coast. By 1880 it was only along the Senegal and lower Niger and one or two other places that Europeans were beginning to penetrate into the interior. The British colonies of Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast did not extend very far inland and there was no inclination to take over the hinterland of Lagos or to expand along the Gambia. The French government likewise had no deep-laid plans for using the isolated and scattered posts as starting points for the creation of a French empire.

**After  
1880**

Much of this was to change after 1880. Indeed, by 1880 the change had already started. The depression that had begun about 1874 and was to continue until 1896 with a few brief spells of prosperity was a powerful motivating force for European penetration of the interior. This penetration was a major catalyst in destabilising relations between the Europeans and the indigenous polities, and in the unstable conditions the pressures on European governments to intervene gathered momentum as traders and missionaries

looked to governments to create a favourable climate for their activities. The pressure on the governments to act came not only from Africa and African conditions, but also from a new climate in Europe, where economic, political and strategic considerations became inextricably intertwined with escalating international rivalry and tension.

## AN AFRICAN ELITE

**Afro-European**

We have referred to African traders and a mixed Afro-European presence around the European trading posts. The European presence was not very large by 1800. But there were many so-called Afro-Europeans, the mixed caste offspring of European fathers and African mothers, and of course many Africans who had been associated with the European posts for a considerable length of time. Thus in 1810 St Louis had a European population of 10, an Afro-European population of 500 and another 500 Africans who had connections with the post, and were to a greater or lesser degree Europeanised. As early as 1800 these mulattoes were more closely connected with the European traders than with the nearby African states. They had been educated at the trading posts or on trading vessels; some had even been educated in Europe, and they held positions associated with the administrative, commercial or military functions of the trading posts. The size of these coastal communities was increased by the advent of the steamship as more traders settled there. These Afro-Europeans played a vital part in the life of the coast, but from the late 1880s onwards they began to be replaced and were pushed aside by Europeans as their numbers increased.

**Sierra Leone**

The growth of an educated African elite was stimulated by the British colony of Sierra Leone. The colony was started before the abolition of the slave trade with 2 089 former slaves and fugitives from England, Nova Scotia and Jamaica who went there voluntarily. They had a difficult time, with unfriendly black neighbours and poor climate, and by 1802 only 1400 of the original pioneers remained. After the institution of naval patrols many slaves were set free in Sierra Leone. By 1850 Freetown had 16 950 inhabitants and in the interior of the country there were close to 40 000 people. With the schools and newspapers which began to appear in the 1840s and 1850s Freetown soon became a centre for the spread of European ideas and culture.

**Creoles**

Many of the slaves freed by British ships and set down in Sierra Leone were Yoruba. The collapse of the Old Oyo kingdom in southern Yorubaland had been accompanied by much disruption and internal fighting which made this an ideal place in which to obtain slaves. In Sierra Leone slaves were isolated from their cultural roots and many of them adopted the language, way of life, morals and religion of the English administrators and missionaries. A new African, the Creole, emerged, at home in both European and African worlds. Creoles were often mulattoes. Taking advantage of the education and religion available in Sierra Leone, many of these Creoles wanted a share in the development and exploitation of Africa. In Sierra Leone itself, which was small, there was not much scope for exercising their talents. Moreover, there was some resistance to them in Sierra Leone and the original settlers and their descendants regarded themselves as a superior caste. Large numbers of Creoles thus left Sierra Leone for other parts of West Africa. Many of the Yoruba wished to return to their original homelands. These

Yoruba re-immigrants were known as saro, and they settled especially in the new city of Abeokuta in Yorubaland, which had been established as a place of refuge from the wars. Everywhere the Creoles went they promoted British ideas and protection. They sought British rule as a means of modernising society and they saw an important role for themselves in the process, once the traditional rulers had been subjected.

**Saro and amaro**

Besides the saro from Sierra Leone, other re-immigrants began to drift back to Yorubaland from Brazil and Cuba. They were known as amaro. These 'Brazilians' were very strong in places such as Lagos, and in Dahomey in the 1890s half the merchants were 'Brazilians'. The amaro, however, were not such a strong merchant body as the saro. There was no formal arrangement about where saro and amaro could work and both were found throughout the area. But the saro tended to operate in areas that were coming under the control of Britain, while the Catholic-oriented amaro felt more comfortable in Porto Novo and Whydah and so made their mark in Dahomey. When the French eventually occupied this region, there was a residue of Latin culture which made this a fairly congenial area for them.

**Christian missions**

In the growth of an African elite, Christian missions became a significant element in the process of change in the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1800 in the whole of West Africa there were only three missionary societies; by 1840 there were some 15 societies operating in West Africa. Mission societies were particularly strongly represented on the Gold Coast. The Church Missionary Society, the Methodists and the Baptists were active in Nigeria in the 1840s and 1850s. The leaders in the Niger delta welcomed the introduction of missionaries into their midst. They hoped that education and knowledge of English would help them in their trading and also improve relations generally with the British government and that they would obtain the support of that government in their internal power struggles and in their rivalry with neighbouring states.

**Spread of Western education**

One of the most conspicuous successes of the missionaries was in the spreading of Western education. In 1827 the Church Missionary Society established Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone to train African clergy. In 1876 it became affiliated to the University of Durham, so that students could receive a degree from a British university. The Fourah Bay College formed the nucleus of an Anglo-African society that was able to assimilate the stream of recaptives which reached a peak in the 1840s. By 1841 the Church Missionary Society had 21 primary schools in the British colony, and in 1842 it founded two secondary schools. By 1846 the Wesleyans had 24 primary schools in the Gold Coast, and the Wesleyan High School was opened there in 1876. Both the Church Missionary Society and the Wesleyans had schools in Lagos.

**Christianity**

Much attention has been given to the Islamic revolution, but this Christian religious revolution also had a major impact on African societies. Besides acquiring technical skills, converted Africans were introduced to Christian and European culture in innumerable ways. Architecture became modified under the influence of Christianity, Western ideas on healing and medicine took root, the wearing of Western-style clothes became common. The traditional basis of African society and family life was weakened

by the rejection by the converts of polygamy, belief in ancestor worship and witchcraft. Largely as a result of the activities of the schools, from the 1850s there began to emerge an educated class of Africans. Instructed mainly through the medium of English or French, members of this educated elite made their appearance in various coastal towns. It was not long before they were also to be found further inland. By 1880 there was a fairly large group of these educated elite in West Africa.

**Edu-  
cated  
elite**

Although more prominent than most of the elite, James Africanus Horton may be taken as an example of this new class of West African. He was born in Sierra Leone in 1835, and trained as a doctor in Britain from 1853 to 1859. He entered the West African Medical Service as a staff assistant surgeon. Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who was enslaved at the age of 15, and then liberated, attended the Fourah Bay College and he became a bishop of the Anglican Church, the first African to do so. Broughton Davies qualified as a doctor in 1859, while Samuel Lewis became a lawyer and was the first African to receive a knighthood. Edward Wilmot Blyden (who was born in the West Indies, but spent most of his life in Liberia) was another early African intellectual and his writings had an impact on the formulation of the Pan-African ideal. Abbé Boilat was an educated African from the French community.

**Occu-  
pations**

Some members of this educated elite entered the teaching profession, while others became ministers and preachers. Thus by 1885 in the Gold Coast the Wesleyans had 15 African ministers, 259 preachers and 79 teachers. But most of the educated elite became independent traders, operating on credit extended by resident traders and foreign companies. A number of them had small ships and traded along the coast. For most of the nineteenth century there was not much European capital involved in the African trade, so African traders with relatively small amounts could do well. They competed successfully with European traders. Some of them even traded with Europe on their own account after the introduction of regular steamship services in the 1850s. But the Creole traders could operate only within the European trading orbit, because they did not have access to such large amounts of credit as some of the European traders with banking connections in Europe. So when a trade depression hit the area in the late 1870s these African traders were at a distinct disadvantage.

**Racial  
discrim-  
ination**

But in the meantime, in mid-century, they pushed the frontiers of the retail trade further inland in the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone and Nigeria. But the hopes of this educated elite of doctors, ministers, teachers, traders and merchants, were soon to be dealt a harsh blow. Until the 1850s educated Africans who went into the professions were treated as equals by the whites and were not discriminated against in appointments in the church, educational institutions or civil administrations. The majority of the elite believed in a future in which Africa would be uplifted by European technology, learning and religion and they saw themselves as playing an important role in this modernising process. But after the 1850s in Europe and America pseudo-scientific theories about race emerged in which Africans were assigned a very inferior place. In both the church and the administration Africans began to be discriminated against in favour of whites.

- Ethiopianism** It was largely as a result of the racial discrimination practised by white missionaries that an African religious and political nationalist movement emerged which became known as Ethiopianism. The term is coined from the biblical verse 'Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God'. Its aim was to establish churches under the control of Africans themselves that would be in tune with African cultures and traditions. The Ethiopian movement began in South Africa, probably in the 1860s. The first African independent church in West Africa was established in Nigeria in 1888 by the Southern Baptist Union, an American missionary society. Its members were urged to retain African names, dress and customs, and to use their own language in worship.
- Pan-Africanism** The educated elite in West Africa had a vigorous political agenda and in articles, books and speeches they took pains to refute charges about black racial inferiority. In the course of their campaign an African racial consciousness was born as well as the concepts of Pan-Africanism and that of the African Personality. Two pioneers in this area were James Africanus Horton (1835–1883) and Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832–1912). Among the works of Horton that dealt with the above issues were *Political economy of British Western Africa* (1865), *West African countries and peoples* (1868) and *Letters on the political condition of the Gold Coast* (1870). He argued that the differences in the stages of civilisation between black and white had nothing at all to do with any supposed racial inferiority of the black man, but were due entirely to their 'external circumstances'. He was also one of the first advocates of Pan-Africanism, and pride in his black ancestry led him, while he was studying in England, to add the name 'Africanus' to his other names. In his later writing he often signed himself 'Africanus Horton'. His writing went beyond cultural and racial issues and he also made a plea for political independence.
- Blyden** Edward Wilmot Blyden was even more prolific and radical than Horton. Although born in the West Indies he spent most of his life in Liberia, working as a lecturer and diplomat. His books include *African colonization* (1862), *Vindication of the Negro Race* (1857), *A voice from bleeding Africa on behalf of her exiled children* (1856), *Hope for Africa* (1861) and *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (1887). He condemned and refuted the racist theories of his time, and was an advocate of Pan-Africanism and of the idea of 'Africa for the Africans'. He believed that Islam and polygamy were more in tune with the African personality than Christianity. He was a firm advocate of racial purity and condemned mixed marriages. He preached racial pride and the necessity of maintaining the integrity of the black race. In a lecture delivered in Freetown in 1893 he used the term 'African personality'.
- James Johnson** The fiery Yoruba-Creole evangelist James Johnson (c. 1836–1917) was born in Sierra Leone and educated at the Freetown Grammar School and Fourah Bay College. After teaching at the college from 1860 to 1863 he joined the Church Missionary Society. In 1876 he was put in charge of their stations in the Yorubaland interior. The way in which he promoted Nigerian nationalism, eulogised the achievements of black men and preached about the struggle for power in the church and civil administration, made many of his fellow white churchmen uneasy. Africa should be evangelised by Africans, he insisted, and the church should be staffed at all levels by Africans as Europeans could

not identify themselves with African ambitions. In 1880 the Church Missionary Society decided that he was too radical and removed him from his post.

## Notes

- 1 A. A. Boahen, 'New trends and processes in Africa in the nineteenth century', in J. F. A. Ajayi (ed.), *Unesco general history of Africa*, vol. 6, *Africa in the nineteenth century until the 1880s*, p. 63.
- 2 See pp. 53–54.
- 3 J. F. A. Ajayi, 'Africa at the beginning of the nineteenth century: Issues and prospects', in *Unesco general history of Africa*, vol. 6, pp. 8–9.
- 4 P. E. Lovejoy, 'Interregional monetary flows in the precolonial trade of Nigeria', *Journal of African History*, 15(4), 1974, pp. 563–585.
- 5 E. J. Alagoa, L. Z. Elango & M. Metegue n'nah, 'The Niger delta and the Cameroon region', in *Unesco general history of Africa*, vol. 6, p. 748.
- 6 J. F. A. Ajayi, 'Conclusion: Africa on the eve of the European conquest', in *Unesco general history of Africa*, vol. 6, p. 774.
- 7 Boahen, 'New trends', p. 61.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 A. G. Hopkins, *An economic history of West Africa*, p. 124.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- 11 R. A. Austen, *African economic history: Internal development and external dependency*, p. 102.
- 12 R. V. Kubicek, 'The colonial steamer and the occupation of West Africa by the Victorian state, 1840–1900', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 18(1), 1990, pp. 9–32. The quote is on p. 27. For an account of the significance of the steamship on trade in West Africa see M. Lynn, 'From sail to steam: The impact of the steamship services on the British palm oil trade with West Africa, 1850–1890', *Journal of African History*, 30, 1989, pp. 227–245.
- 13 J. D. Fage, *A history of Africa*, p. 332.