



'Stunning ... a landmark  
in our understanding'

DAVID OLUSOGA, *NEW STATESMAN*

**TOBY GREEN**

# *A Fistful of Shells*

**WEST AFRICA FROM THE RISE  
OF THE SLAVE TRADE TO THE  
AGE OF REVOLUTION**



PENGUIN BOOKS

A FISTFUL OF SHELLS

‘Astonishing, epic . . . a work of staggering scholarship, drawing on previously untapped sources locked away in European vaults and historical records . . . Green does not fall into the lazy assumption that Africa is one homogenous place . . . lays to rest centuries of biased scholarship’ Ben Okri, *Daily Telegraph*

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‘Dismantles the racist myth of west African “backwardness” . . . The nineteenth-century imperial vision of Africa as somehow outside of history continues to mark even “world” histories, which often privilege the global north. *A Fistful of Shells* is an antidote to these histories, and to the master narrative of Africa as historical object, rather than subject’

Padraic Scanlan, *Guardian*

‘Uniquely valuable . . . represents an extraordinary and admirable archival and bibliographic undertaking’  
Delinda J. Collier, *The Times Literary Supplement*

‘This meticulously researched book, based on archival research in nine countries, lays out a comprehensive overview of the economic history of West Africa and West-Central Africa before and after the slave trade . . . A valuable history written in an accessible style’ *Publishers Weekly*

‘This impressive and welcome book engages with the new wave of studies on African economic history and places African societies at the centre of global events. Green interrogates and historicizes state failure, violence, corruption, military ideologies, commodification, and globalization, convincingly arguing that the roots of many of the current political and economic problems in Africa lie in the past. It is timely, relevant, and necessary in today’s political and economic environment’  
Mariana Candido, University of Notre Dame

‘Toby Green’s book restores the rich African history which she had been denied for too long. Here the author reveals that Africa was never at the margins of global commerce but was in fact a decisive player with the prowess to negotiate and also the goods – ivory, gum, gold – to supply’ Hassoum Ceesay, National Museum, The Gambia

‘Toby Green’s transformative book repositions West African history in an entirely new light. It brings into focus the region’s fundamental place in shaping the modern world as well as the powerful and also difficult legacy of this today’ Paul Reid, Director, Black Cultural Archives

‘Very seldom do I pick up a history book and wish I had written it myself. Toby Green’s *A Fistful of Shells* is one such book. Brilliantly conceptualized, beautifully written, *A Fistful of Shells* breaks with colonially configured regional boundaries – which work to re-create unintended silos of knowledge – to imagine a West and West Central African Atlantic history of money, power, religion, and inequality that is as rich as it is sound’  
Professor Nwando Achebe, Michigan State University

‘Draws on a wide range of sources, from published histories, new statistics and first-hand travel accounts to fiction, poetry, traditional songs and newly discovered oral histories, much of which is revelatory . . . Green concludes by pointing to the lack of history being taught in schools and universities in West Africa and elsewhere; if it is taught at all, it tends to focus on the slave trade. *A Fistful of Shells* shows that there was so much more, and of so much relevance when looking at the issues of our own time’ Anthony Sattin, *Spectator*

‘A remarkable book . . . This original and thoughtful work is based on detailed first-hand knowledge of and collaboration with the cultures and peoples it depicts . . . Each page, even when the horrors are there too (Green doesn’t shy away from them), is full of interest and humanity. The detail, too long and complicated to delineate here, is fascinating. I urge you to read it for yourself . . . this really *is* a “groundbreaking” work’  
Ruth Finnegan, *Times Higher Education*

‘Remarkable . . . *A Fistful of Shells* is principally an attempt to show how West Africa’s precolonial histories are central to an understanding of the dilemmas of the present and to highlight the active role of its peoples in history, thereby transforming our view of the region . . . this is a hugely important book’ *African Business*

‘The range and depth of this book is simply stunning. By masterfully drawing on primary research and secondary sources in multiple languages, Green delivers a provocative book that is also a landmark of historical imagination and craftsmanship’ Roquinaldo Ferreira, Henry Charles Lea Professor of History, University of Pennsylvania

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Toby Green has worked widely with academics, musicians and writers across Africa, organizing events in collaboration with institutions in Angola, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Sierra Leone and the Gambia. He has written a number of previous books, and his work has been translated into twelve languages. Awarded a 2017 Philip Leverhulme Prize in History, he is Senior Lecturer in Lusophone African History and Culture at King's College, London. His 2019 book *A Fistful of Shells* won the Nayef Al-Rodhan Prize for global cultural understanding and was shortlisted for the Cundill History Prize and the inaugural Pius Adesanmi Memorial Award.

TOBY GREEN

A Fistful of Shells

*West Africa from the  
Rise of the Slave Trade to the  
Age of Revolution*



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*This book is dedicated to all those thanked in the  
Foreword, for their humanity and friendship.*

*Especially, it is for Aleida, Fatou and Ruby, and future  
generations of West African feminists; for Ben,  
Hassoum and Sam, and future generations  
of historians in West Africa.*

*It is for my much missed Uncle Niel, who would have  
loved reading and arguing about this book.*

*And it is for my dear wife Emily and my wonderful  
daughters, Lily and Flora – with love and gratitude.*





*A ko kolan siman gwɛliɗi, jatigil'i fela*

*The stranger is like a dish, that the host can blow on*

– Lansiné Diabaté<sup>1</sup>

*I am spending what remains to me of life in investigation of the history of this age, and its turns of fortune, good and ill . . . Readers will derive pleasure from the narration and explanation. I go forward to add some ideas of my own . . . I have not stolen my fire from anyone's lamp.*

– Sultan Mohammed Bello of the Sokoto  
Caliphate, *Infaku'l Maisuri* (1812)<sup>2</sup>



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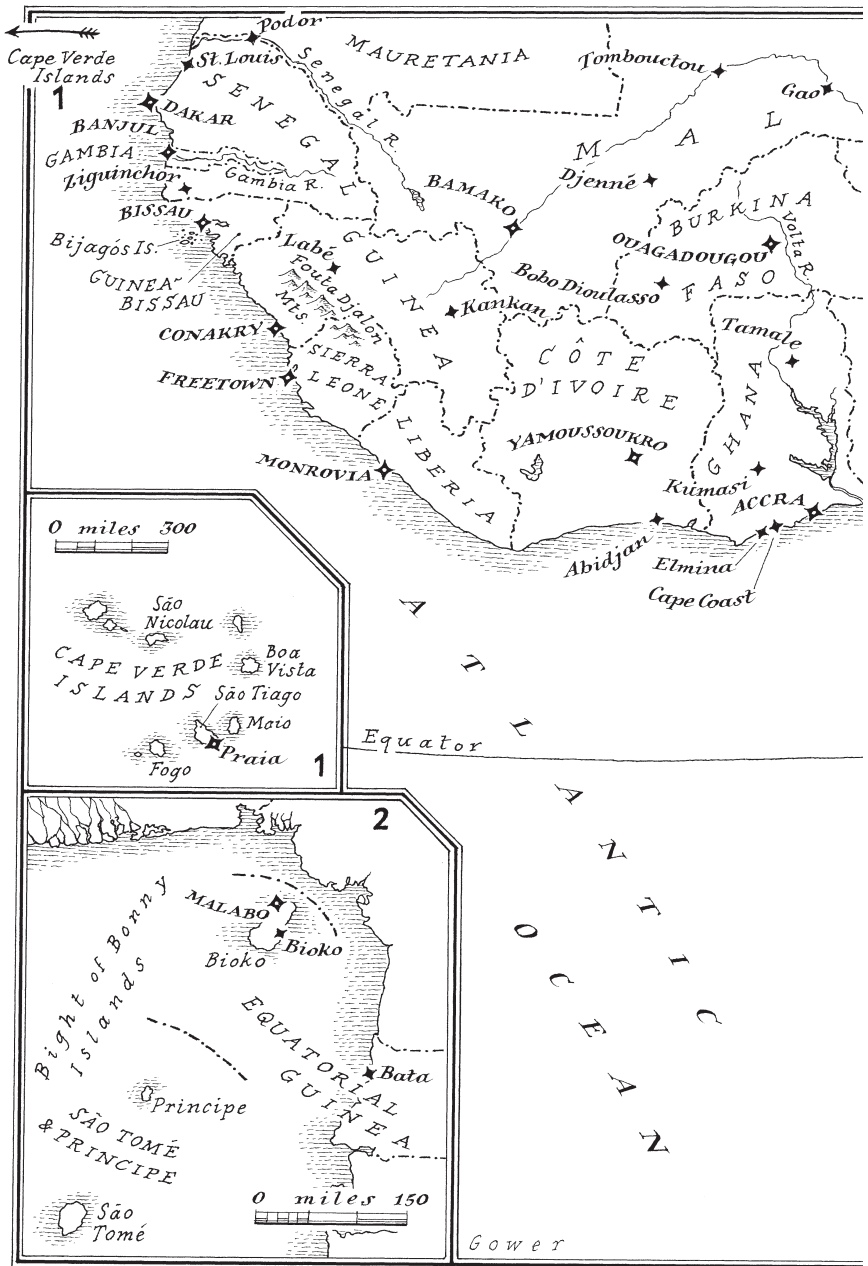
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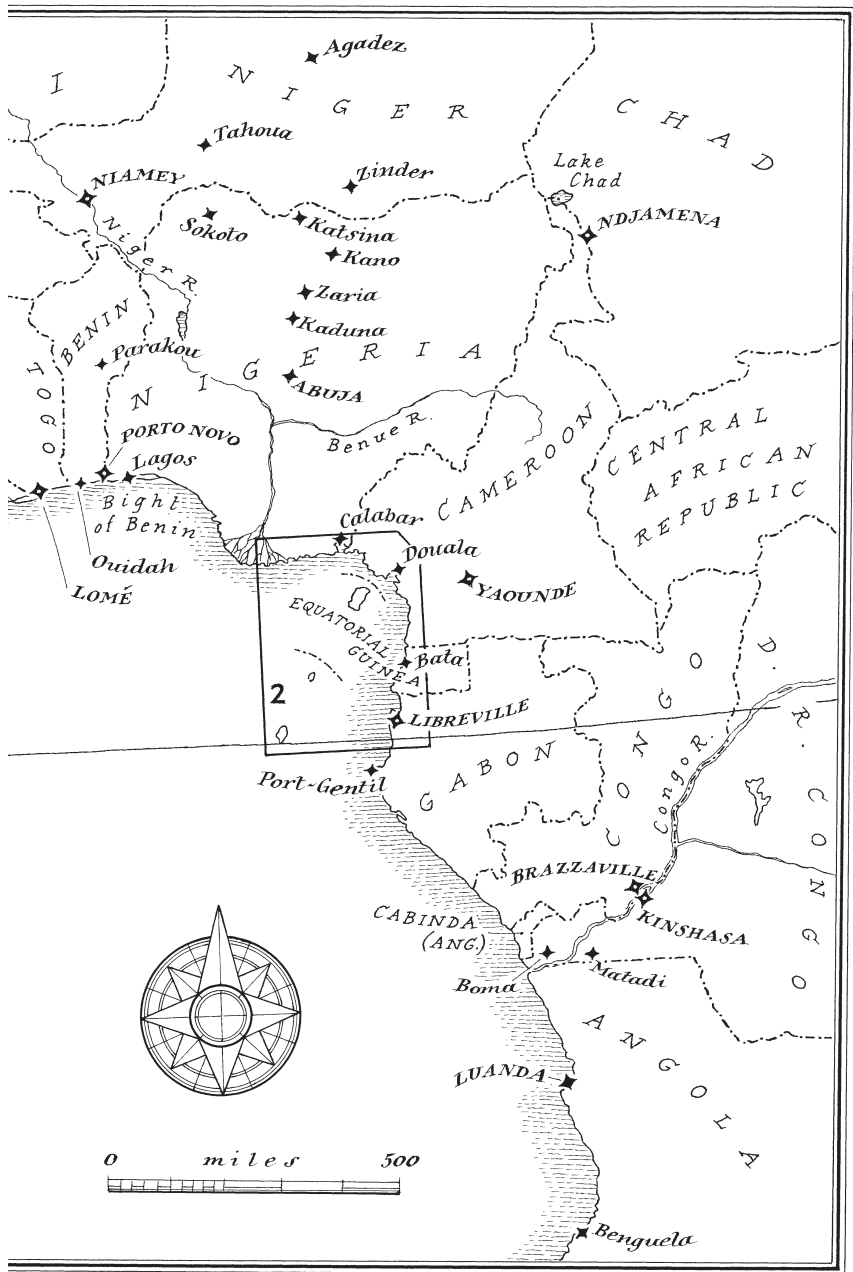
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Modern West Africa







## *Foreword*

On my first visit to West Africa, in 1995, I travelled to the Bijagós Islands off the coast of Guinea-Bissau. After taking a ferry from Bissau to the main Bijagó port of Bubaque, I negotiated a ride with some fishermen to the island of Canogo. We left Bubaque at night, and the sea glowed with phosphorescent algae. I can still remember that glow, and looking up in wonder at the sky salted with stars. Abibu, the Senegalese fisherman who had helped to negotiate my ride, was observing me. He saw my expression and said, 'It's beautiful to discover the world.' Over time, I learnt that that was true; but also that it was not always so beautiful.

Canogo was remote enough for there to be no ferry service nor anything resembling one. The islanders waited for fishermen like Abibu and the crew to come to the island, and then paid to travel back with them to Bubaque, where they could trade for supplies. A few days later, when we returned from Canogo, several islanders joined the boat. We made our way out into the wide channel cutting between mangroves and the neighbouring islands. After several hours' travel, we turned off into a swamp, waded ashore carrying our things, and slept on giant leaves that the fishermen had cut with their machetes from some fantastically shaped plants. The next morning, we resumed our journey, and, as we passed a creek heading off away from the main channel, one of the old women with us grimaced and spat into the water. She said something, and Abibu translated: 'Whoever goes down that creek never returns.'

At the time, although heavily educated in Britain, my knowledge was very limited. I did not understand the problematic forces that had driven Western travellers to go to Africa in the past, and that lay

behind the interest in the West in what these travellers wrote. Worse, I knew little of West African history, and my ignorance made it hard to break through the carapace of exoticism. I had no idea that the Bijagó had been reputed as fearsome warriors and slave traders in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, launching long war canoes to the mainland. I also hadn't read the work of anthropologists such as Rosalind Shaw, who, in a later book on Sierra Leone, argued that metaphors of invisibility in West African discussions of magic had a historical meaning, referring to the disappearance of people in the slave trade. Over the years since, I have often thought back to this exchange, and the histories that may have lain beneath it. The fierce warriors who despatched their canoes from that creek or another just like it, participants in West African history, had not been forgotten on Canogo.

As I became a historian, I wondered how you could tally up these fragments of memory with the documentary evidence that is generally used to construct the historical record. Yet I soon discovered that the problem was not that there were no archives dealing with the West African past; rather, it was that they were spread all over the world, and that they were poorly systematized. In the summer of 2009, I visited the Archive of the Indies in Seville, right next door to the cathedral and royal palace. The archivists asked me what I was researching, and when I told them that it was a history of the Cape Verde Islands, one replied, 'We have no catalogue [*sección*] of documents on Cape Verde.' This was indeed the case. To research Cape Verde in this famous archive that contains many of the holdings of Colonial Spanish America, you had to read material relating to West Africa that the Spanish Council of the Indies had collated from all across South America. But the material was there all right.

This pattern repeats itself in many parts of the world. As a study of the endnotes of this book will show, my research has taken me far beyond Britain's National Archive, to archives in Brazil, Holland, Chile, Colombia, Portugal, Peru and Spain. You can find documents written centuries ago by slave traders, colonial officials and missionaries, often ill-assorted and poorly catalogued. There is detail on dates, officials, trade, warfare between African nations and African-European relations. Most, if not all, of this material was recorded

because of the broader economic rationale of the trade in enslaved persons that saw these chancers (to use a polite noun) come to West Africa in the first place, and so it gives a skewed perspective. It ignores what was precisely most important to so many West Africans at the time: kinship and family, labour and production, religious practice and observance, dress and fashions, food and family, political allegiance and change. To understand these perspectives, one must spend time in West Africa recording oral histories, recovering social memories if possible (such as that of the old woman from Canogo) and consulting precious recordings of these oral histories where they already exist.

In 2010, I had a stroke of luck. The American historian Walter Hawthorne had visited The Gambia to assist in digitizing the endangered collections of the Gambian National Archive in a project funded by the British Library. While there, he had been introduced to an archive of oral histories that he thought had a lot of material on the distant past, and suggested I have a look. I arrived a few months later, the first of many rewarding research trips. I found cassette recordings made in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s by Bakary Sidibé and a number of assistants, and these interviews with people born in the nineteenth century offered a picture of key events in the distant past. There was material here covering Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Senegal, as well as The Gambia. Much of it had been transcribed, and some translated. As other researchers I have met in the ‘mango tree’ archive at Fajara can attest, this is one of the most precious archives in West Africa.

Eventually, the two approaches of oral and written documents began to match up. Visiting Peru’s National Archive in May 2013, I consulted the records of the Inquisition of Lima. Here one finds the account books of Manuel Bautista Pérez, a slave trader who lived in the Guinea-Bissau region in the 1610s before moving to Peru, where he was tried and burned by the Inquisition in 1639. The auto-da-fé took place in the Plaza Mayor itself, within shouting distance of the arcade that today houses the National Archive, where the records of his brutal and sad life remain almost four centuries later. Donning the protective white gloves required for researchers, I pored over his account books, detailing among many other things his own trading

activities in the same Bijagós Islands I had visited eighteen years before. Most of the material was pure numbers, ‘facts and figures’, a reduction of history to data alone. Yet sometimes the emotional connection to this history and the memories I had glimpsed in the Bijagós peeked through. At one point, I paused, moved, when I came upon Bautista Pérez writing in the late 1620s of his daughter Maria, who had been born to a West African mother and still lived in the town of Cacheu (today in Guinea-Bissau). Many years later, when living on the other side of the world, Bautista Pérez still wrote letters to Maria and sent her money to cover her necessities; and in time her descendants (and so his) became part of the community in West Africa that he had left, and from which he had transported captives to the Americas.

Discovering these stories on a regular basis explains how and why I have come to write this book. Here, in these dusty sheaves of paper, are regular accounts of Africa’s global interactions from the very distant past; and yet the traditional Western narrative is of Africa’s ahistoricity. Pretty soon, in fact, the regular visitor realizes the enormous disconnect between preconception and reality. In most Western discourse, either exclusionary language is used for ‘Africa’ (Africa is ‘without history’ or ‘without modernity’); or the language implies that Africa and Africans are somehow historically predisposed to violence and savagery in a way that Europeans and those of European descent are not. Anyone with the slightest knowledge of history knows that this is an extraordinary prejudice to hold; and it is remarkable that it remains still quite widespread one fifth of the way through the twenty-first century.

Every writer approaches their subject with predispositions, and so, of course, do readers. So far as distant West African history goes, one of the deepest-rooted for some people is that there simply are not enough sources to form a coherent historical overview. Spending time in these many different archives has shown me how wrong this view is, but it has also provided its own challenge. I have written one book, but there could have been three or four produced from the sources I have consulted. Inevitably, what results here, rather than being comprehensive, is something written in the light of my own perspectives and interests: those of someone who has been travelling regularly to

West Africa for over twenty years while still, of course, remaining an outsider; someone who has spent long enough in archives around the world to feel a tickle in the throat just at the thought of all those dusty papers. There's so much more to do. Many sources in Arabic, Danish, Dutch, English, French and Portuguese are yet to be properly studied from an African perspective. One of the challenges in the writing has been to balance the sources and their importance with the reality of how historical research on the distant West African past continues to be comparatively scant: there is, therefore, a desire to say as much as possible, but this can make a book unreadable, and the historian intolerable.

What's more, to add to the danger of information overload from written sources is the remarkable oral information that is available. To the Western historical mindset, drawing on oral histories for this period is an anti-historical endeavour. But in West Africa, history is an oral genre, held and recounted by professional historians known as praisesingers, or griots, whose patrons ask them to sing important histories at key public events and commemorations. The Danish traveller Paul Erdmann Isert captured something of this practice on the Gold Coast as long ago as 1783:

Not a day goes by but a War Council (Palaber) is held. It is not a little tedious to sit in the sun like a statue for four to five hours. Most frequently the reason for these meetings is that a newly-arrived group has to be sworn in – a process which we watch, listen to and must keep a written record of, because we Europeans cannot confidently entrust such things to memory, as can the secretaries of the Blacks, who have to keep every public trial in their heads, even 40 years after the event. We know that even though they have not learned to write and cannot read a single letter, they are accurate in recalling their traditions as well as their history.<sup>1</sup>

Many historians today would say that Isert was a little too credulous here. Just as literate historians shape their narratives according to the concerns of every age, so griots are likely to direct their narratives to their patrons, and to their own historical tradition of mediating between rulers and subjects according to the exigencies of the time. He who pays the piper calls the tune, whether in the twenty-first century

or in West African cities, towns and villages through the ages. However, just as older written histories are not discarded because of this, neither should oral accounts be dismissed. Oral sources are important to this book not because of the ‘facts’ that they contain, but because of the discourses that they offer. Oral accounts offer the experience of history, the importance of the past in present memory and a sense of what may have been socially meaningful in distant times. They also offer an incomparable window on to the way that history was performed, its sounds and textures, and what it meant for ordinary men and women. Perhaps most significantly, they offer a different model of history, one that can challenge the dominance of traditional models which have misrepresented the African past.<sup>2</sup>

In the end, we cannot escape the reality that all ‘sources’ on the past represent political projects, and this is something that readers of this book should bear in mind when they encounter what follows. The oral histories I have located are shaped by their own contemporary pressures and experiences. The Arabic sources I have drawn on were written in the main by West African scholars from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, trying to historicize the past within the framework of Islamic religious observance and the political world they inhabited. The European traders’ narratives occupied different phases: in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these slave-trading men produced books, often with a pro-slavery agenda (as is the case with William Snelgrave, for instance); by the later eighteenth century some of the books were produced by naturalists such as Michel Adanson and Adam Afzelius, participating in Enlightenment science; and, by the nineteenth, explorers such as Heinrich Barth and Mungo Park produced their own accounts, funded by European backers with an as yet dimly perceived colonial agenda that was both economic and ideological.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, all sources in all world regions need to be recognized as political or intellectual projects. In the African context, the best way of illustrating how these different types of sources are helpful is through examples, or what historians call ‘microhistories’. In an earlier book, I compared a written external account from the 1570s that discussed how in The Gambia armies of warriors fought alongside a platoon of monkeys with an oral source that describes how some of the warriors

of the Kaabu Empire of this region took monkeys as their totem. This comparison reveals the racism of the original source (believing that Africans could fight alongside monkeys), historicizes the rise of the Kaabu Empire and is revelatory of militarized secret societies\* as they emerged at this time. Language, too, is extremely helpful: that the Bamana† words for ‘market’ and ‘debt/credit’ – *fèère* and *júru* – are derived from the Portuguese words (*feira* and *juro*) is very informative about processes of trade, exchange and credit in precolonial West Africa, and of the role of external trade and money in these processes.<sup>4</sup>

This is such a rich and complex subject. It defies generalization, yet has a universal importance. Africa was not a colonial setting until the nineteenth century, and from the thirteenth century on its peoples and rulers were active participants in shaping the modern world. Precolonial African histories are, indeed, of great relevance to modern dilemmas. Yet this precolonial history is rarely researched, even in history departments in many African universities, let alone in the West. By the time the reader finishes this book, my hope is that it will be clear why this state of affairs should not continue any longer.

The ideas that emerge in this book have been shaped by some special people. Emily, Lily and Flora gave me the generosity of spirit, time and love to take into this study. Simon Winder at Penguin conceived the idea that I should write this book in the first place, and understood at once why it might be interesting, and what were the main themes that should animate it; once I began to write, he was a model of generous and creative support and advice – a reminder of the precious importance of the editorial process. I discussed it at an early stage, too, with Priya Nelson at Chicago University Press, so it has been wonderful also to work with her as the book has neared completion. Maggie Hattersley also made many helpful suggestions, which helped me to clarify how I should approach the final draft. Richard Drayton gave

\* Used rather than ‘sodality’ – in vogue in much anthropological literature today – to assist clarity and descriptive power.

† The language spoken by the Bamana people in the region of Bamako, Mali, and very closely related to other Mande languages such as Maninka.



me enormous encouragement and support especially at the early phase, when I was clarifying in my mind the ideas that would form the core of the book; without his unstinting friendship and belief, it would not exist.

El Hadji Mamadou Ndiaye, El Hadji Omar Ndiaye, Ablai Diallo, Ibrahima Massaly, Carmen Neto, Januário Nascimento, António Leão Correia e Silva, Zelinda Cohen, Hassoum Ceesay, Buba Saho and Ndane Faye all offered me deeply personal and humane introductions to many different parts of West Africa. My PhD students Dorothée Boulanger, Aleida Mendes Borges, Joe da Costa, Patrice Etienne, and Vince Nadeau all gave me many different questions to think about, and broadened the way I think through their own insights and experience; and all the many students I have taught at King's College London helped me to hone my knowledge and think more deeply about everything here.

As should be apparent to anyone who reads this book, I owe enormous debts to those with whom I have conducted interviews in many West African countries; I would like to thank the team managing the Ethics Review process at King's College London for helping me to develop careful formats for these interviews. I am also enormously indebted to the staff of a large number of archives in Africa, Europe and Latin America for their diligence and efficiency in dealing with my requests. My thanks to all of these patient and thoughtful people, whose hard work and dedication, often in very difficult circumstances, has helped to make this book what it is.

Once I set to work writing, my ideas emerged in dialogue with so many fellow scholars. Samuel Adu-Gyamfi, Benjamin Kye Ampadu, Mariana Candido, Hassoum Ceesay, Roquinaldo Ferreira, Vincent Hiribarren, Luis Nicolau Parés, Helen Parr, Assan Sarr and Tatiana Seijas all read drafts of the manuscript and offered me extremely helpful critiques. Many other friends and colleagues discussed ideas in the book and helped me to think through the context in which it had to be written, among others: Nwando Achebe, Gareth Austin, Manuel Barcia, Boubacar Barry, Francisco Bethencourt, Walter Bgoya, Marisa Candotti, Justin Cox, Richard Drayton, Lucy Durán, Marcela Echeverría, Paulo Farias, Jane Guyer, Philip Havik, Walter Hawthorne, Anthony Hopkins, José da Silva Horta, Daniel

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I could not have developed the perspectives in this book without the help and collaboration of colleagues in African institutions. It's been one of the great blessings and privileges in my life to have had the chance to work closely with such wonderful people, and my deep thanks go especially to the following: in Angola, Albano Ferreira, Rector of Katyavala Bwila University in Benguela, Botelho Jimbi and Elsa Rodrigues (also of UKB), and Nick Manuel, Sabino de Nascimento and José Pedro of the Universidade Agostinho Neto in Luanda; in Cape Verde, Zelinda Cohen and António Correia e Silva, of the University of Cabo Verde; in Ghana, Benjamin Kye-Ampadu of the Ghana History Teachers' Association and Samuel Adu-Gyamfi and George Bob-Milliar of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi; in Guinea-Bissau, Leopoldo Amado, Miguel de Barros, Carlos Cardoso and Mamadu Jao currently or formerly of the Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisa; in Mozambique, Marta Mendonça, Xavier Muianga and Adriano Uaciquete of Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, and Aldino André, Pedrito Cambrão and João Salavessa of UniLúrio University; in Senegal, Boubacar Barry and Ibrahima Thiaw of the Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar; in Sierra Leone, Joe Alie, Ishmael Kamara and Stephen Ney of Fourah Bay College; in The Gambia, a particular vote of thanks to Baba Ceesay, Hassoum Ceesay, Siaka Fadera, Marcia Hall, Bakary Sanyang and Lamin Yarbo, currently or formerly of the National Centre of Arts and Culture, and to all the staff of the Research and Documentation Division at Fajara.

Beyond my work in Africa, I have also been very lucky to be supported by many people in the various countries in Europe and Latin America where I have also undertaken research. My research in Brazil in particular has been made much easier by the assistance and

friendship of a number of colleagues, who helped me to locate archival material, arrange picture credits from Museums, and – equally as importantly – have a good time. I would like especially to thank Wladymyra Albuquerque, Urano Andrade, Lisa Earl Castillo, Luis Nicolau Parés and João Reis in Salvador; Alex Gebara and Mariza de Carvalho Soares in Rio de Janeiro; Thiago Mota and Vanicleia Silva Santos in Belo Horizonte; and Marina de Mello e Souza in São Paulo. But I must most especially thank Candido Domingues de Souza and Carlos da Silva Junior, who welcomed me into their lives, showed me the right places to enjoy *bobo de camarão*, *licor* and ice cream, and went far over and above the call of any duty to make sure that I felt at home in Salvador. It has nevertheless been a sadness to see at first hand the encroachment of authoritarian and thinly disguised racist governance onto Brazilian academic life, symbolized most starkly by the devastating fire at Rio's Museo Nacional on 2 September 2018, as this book went to press.

Once I took some of these ideas out into the world, I was offered generous opportunities to road-test them in various presentations: my thanks to Wladymyra Albuquerque and João Reis for coordinating along with Carlos da Silva Junior the conference we hosted in Salvador related to this topic; António de Almeida Mendes at Nantes and Christophe Giudicelli at Rennes; Emily Osborn at Chicago; Henning Schreiber and Katrin Pfeiffer at Hamburg; Karen Graubart and Pat Griffin at Notre Dame; Roquinaldo Ferreira (then at Brown); the late and missed Jan-Georg Deutsch and Jamie Belich at Oxford; Catherine Coquéry-Vidrovitch at the Université Paris Diderot and Gaëlle Beaujean at the Musée du Quai Branly; and Tiraana Bains and Russ Gasdia at Yale.

I was very lucky indeed to be formed intellectually at the University of Birmingham's old Centre of West African Studies. My PhD supervisor, Paulo de Moraes Farias, was an inspiring and wise guide, and I will forever owe a debt of gratitude to him and Karin Barber, and to all my colleagues there for countless kindnesses and a proper education. On leaving Birmingham, a fortuitous change of direction then shaped the work that led to this book. When I started working at King's College in September 2010, Ludmilla Jordanova asked me to teach economic history; and from there I found my way into many of the questions addressed in what follows.

Working at King's, I have been surrounded by people who have all helped to create an atmosphere where thinking matters. As heads of department, Federico Bonaddio, Catherine Boyle, Paul Readman, Adam Sutcliffe, Jon Wilson and Abigail Woods have always been hugely supportive both of this project and of my work in general. My colleagues Hanna-Kristin Arro, Natasha Awais-Dean, Amy Hart, Chris Machut, Alex Nightingale, Dot Pearce, Rob Templing and Lucy Thomas have provided all kinds of support, through which my many complex and often apparently impossible organizational headaches were resolved as if it were all easy. In the History Department, I have been lucky to have the generous friendship and support of Jen Althehenger, Francisco Bethencourt, the late and lamented Patrick Chabal, Chris Dillon, Richard Drayton, Serena Ferente, Laura Gowing, Alana Harris, Vincent Hiribarren, Dan Matlin, Christine Mathias, Sumita Mukherjee, Malyn Newitt, Adrian Pearce, Alex Sapoznik, Simon Sleight, Sarah Stockwell and David Todd; Anne Goldgar encouraged me to learn to read Dutch when I still had the time, and lent me her Shetter's Grammar, from which act of support and generosity this book hugely benefits. In the Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies Department, I have been inspired by the comradeship, ideas and friendship of Almiro de Andrade, María-José Blanco, Italia Boliver, Nagore Calvo Mendizabal, Felipe Botelho Correa, Catarina Fouto, Alicia Kent, Daniela Doneda Mittelstadt, Antonia Moreira-Rodríguez, Daniel Muñoz Sempere, Mariví Rodríguez Quiñones, Elisa Sampson Vera Tudela, Luis Rebaza Soraluz, João Silvestre, David Treece, Alejandro Vega Franco, Jesús Villalta Loro and Julian Weiss. Beyond my home departments, Abiodun Alao, Vinicius de Carvalho, Ruth Craggs, Ekaette Ikpe, Javed Majeed, 'Funmi Olonisakin and Nayanka Perdigao have all provided friendship and collaborative inspiration.

In the end, however, it has only been possible to write this book because of the support of the funding institutions that have enabled it. A brief glance at the archives consulted, and the fieldwork notes scattered through the book, will give a sense of how costly an undertaking this has been. This book itself is thus a mark of the sort of privilege whose origins in part it addresses; it is foreign institutions with financial heft that can currently bankroll such an undertaking – another legacy of the historical inequalities considered in this book.

Some of the research on which this book draws dates back to my PhD at Birmingham, when I was funded by the old Arts and Humanities Research Board from 2003 to 2005; a little more of it then comes from the period when I was in receipt of a British Academy Postdoctoral Research Fellowship at Birmingham (2007–10). However, I first developed the ideas that emerge here in a sustained way as a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at King's (2010–13), when I benefited from the very generous Leverhulme ECF research allowance to conduct much of the archival research for this book for the project *West Africans and Atlantic Empires, 1589–1700*. It was then as an AHRC Leadership Fellow for the project 'Money, Slavery and Political Change in Precolonial West Africa' (2016–18) that I was able to conduct further research and also have the sustained thinking time to write this book. At this stage, support from Mike Goddard and Grant Robertson at the OCR Examinations Board was also fundamental, and I am very grateful to their belief in the importance of the history of precolonial Africa, which has influenced the evolution of this book in a number of ways.

Beyond this vital funding and institutional support, I have also been surrounded by inspirational colleagues at the African Studies Association of the UK (ASAUK), working collectively on a host of important issues. The ASAUK-funded writing workshops have been especially vital in shaping aspects of my work and engagement, and I would especially like to thank for their support and comradeship Reg Cline-Cole, Carli Coetzee, Gemma Haxby, Ambreena Manji, David Maxwell, Steph Newell, Insa Nolte, Ola Oduku, George Ogola and Lizzie Orekoya, all of whom supported these workshops in one way or another.

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this support from many institutions and their review boards, I would never have been able to produce this work: my deepest thanks to all those individuals and funders who thereby made this possible.

I am also enormously indebted to the many colleagues who helped in putting this book together. Simon Winder marshalled both the author and the text with perfect grace and judgement, and gave me the space and the spurs to organize the book into something readable that was yet true to its original conception. Priya Nelson was always committed to the text and the idea, which has also been an inspiration in completing it. Donna Poppy provided an enormously useful and thorough copyediting of the text, saving me from many disasters, and was similarly a model of editorial judgement. Richard Duguid and Ellen Davies oversaw the editorial process and the complexity of the management of the images with great care. And I must at this point also thank Vincent Hiribarren, Daniel Laeomahuma Jatta, Anna de Mutiis, Bala Saho and Carlos da Silva Junior for helping me with the right photographs and granting me permission to reproduce their images in this book.

Finally, I wish to make due acknowledgement of publishers' permission to reproduce selected excerpts as follows:

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I cannot end these acknowledgements without making due recognition of the many other scholars on whose work this book often relies. Consultation of the endnotes reveals that a good proportion of the material here does come from my own archival research and fieldwork. However, much

of it also comes from the written and oral sources collected by a range of scholars, without whose tireless and painstaking labour a comparative book like this would be impossible to produce. So I would like in particular to thank Jan Jansen, Adam Jones and Robin Law; and the late António Brásio, Mervyn Hiskett, John Hunwick, Nehemia Levtzion, S. P. l'Honoré Naber, H. R. Palmer and Klaas Ratelband.

Beyond this time-consuming work, this book is also indebted to fifty years of sustained research in African studies that informs my approach. The immediate post-independence era of the 1960s and 1970s saw an emphasis on precolonial history, to show that there was a long history of independent polities in Africa to which the post-colonial states were now added. The focus on histories of slavery was part of a general approach to 'world systems' and the creation of economic inequality in the world, in which Walter Rodney and Immanuel Wallerstein were very influential. Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (published in 1972 in Dar es Salaam by Walter Bgoya, who it was my great privilege to be published by over forty years later) argued that Africa's economic underdevelopment had to be seen in relation to Europe's development. This coincided with the Civil Rights Era in the US, which created a different direction in historical writing, especially following Alex Haley's *Roots*, seeking to trace influences of African histories in the Americas.

While the historical writing interconnecting Africa and the Americas has grown ever since, from the late 1980s onwards there was a turn away from the economic underdevelopment models of Rodney and Wallerstein. The rise of neoliberal emphases on autonomy and personal responsibility coincided with an increasing focus from historians on showing African 'agency', with Africans as active participants in history and not as passive victims of impersonal economic forces. It is thus the aim of this book to remember the active role and creative participation of Africa and Africans in 'making history', but not to use this (as sometimes can seem the case) as an excuse to pass over rapacious forces and external agencies that eventually magnified economic inequalities between Africa and much of the world. I attempt to reconcile these two tendencies by remembering that agency is also connected intersectionally to class, examining how the agency of the enslaved both in Africa and in the Americas was instrumental

in overthrowing the Atlantic slave trade system; and also through the focus on economic structures in this book, as a reminder that agency in this context is itself a response to a totalizing and unequal system.

Similarly, the emphasis on the core African roots of American cultures has also been modified in recent years to include the reciprocal influence of American transformations in Africa, through political movements (Cuba's role in the Angolan Civil War), music and religious ideas. This movement shows the complexity of African history, and belies any essentialist idea of 'authentic' Africa somehow divorced from world historical movements – another core aim of this book. To my mind, this move can also draw on the writings of the Martinican thinker Frantz Fanon, who saw the fundamental importance of reciprocity in breaking out of colonial patterns of authority. 'There is an absolute reciprocity which must be recognized,' he wrote in *Black Skin, White Masks*. 'If I close the circuit, if I prevent the accomplishment of movement in two directions, I keep the other within himself. Ultimately, I deprive him even of this being-for-itself.'<sup>5</sup>

However, such a rich and complex historiography may be off-putting to those new to this subject. As one of my intentions in writing this book is to engage readers beyond those who already know the importance of the topic, I have chosen in the main not to reference my fellow researchers in the text itself; those who wish to follow these strands of the discussion may do so through the endnotes. By occasionally intruding with some personal experiences, I have also chosen not to adopt the historian's fiction of a comprehensive and impartial objectivity: not to bother to pretend, in the words of the philosopher Achille Mbembe, to be 'able to know the world without being part of that world . . . by all accounts able to produce knowledge that is supposed to be universal and independent of context'.<sup>6</sup>

In short, as should be apparent from all of the foregoing, this book embodies the collective endeavour that is the production of knowledge. That's why it's important for me to stress that the ideas and approaches that are here have emerged through discussion with so many of the people thanked in this foreword. This is so much of a collaborative work that in some ways it makes me feel ashamed that my name is the only one to appear on the title page. Of course, however, I take full responsibility for the contents!





## *Note on Spellings/Names*

In general, I have used the term ‘enslaved person’ rather than ‘slave’. ‘Slave’ was an externalized and largely economic category developed by European plantation owners, inherited from Roman law. Its use and origins, therefore, are very different to contexts found in African institutions that are still often called ‘slavery’ by modern historians. By contrast, the category of an ‘enslaved person’, as Kwame Nimako and the late Glenn Willemsen argue, recognizes the individuality and humanity of the enslaved, and also the violent force which accompanied their captivities.

Where possible, I have tried to use the generally accepted spellings from the relevant modern nation-state; thus, ‘Ouidah’ for the port sometimes spelt ‘Whydah’ in Benin, but ‘Hueda’ for the precolonial kingdom. I have done my best to be accurate, and apologize for any imperfections that may result.



## Glossary

- Abirempon** – wealthy male power-brokers in coastal towns of the Gold Coast
- Abron** – ward of an Akan town
- Abusua** – Fante term for ‘lineage’
- Afahene** – Gold Coast traders
- Ahisinon** – private traders in Dahomey
- Ajo** – Yorùbá form of savings bank, widely developed by the nineteenth century
- Akonting** – stringed instrument played by the Jola of Senegambia, probably one of the influences in the creation of the banjo
- Alafin** – ruler of Oyo
- Almamate** – Islamic state governed by the almamy, a religious and political leader
- Ambasys** – European term for cloths woven in Benin
- Asafo** – Akan paramilitary company
- Asantehemaa** – Queen Mother of Asante
- Asantehene** – Emperor of Asante
- Askia** – Islamized name for the Emperor of Songhay (after 1495)
- Axé** – Yorùbá concept of the life force in all things (also called *aché* in Brazil)
- Barafula** – cloths woven on the Cape Verde Islands from the late fifteenth century onwards for trade on the mainland, in a style imitating that of Fula weaves in the Sahel
- Basorun** – head of the council of Oyo-Mesi, influential in choosing each next alafin
- Benda** – measure of gold on the Gold Coast equivalent to two ounces
- Beta** – female religious novices in Hueda

- Bixirin** – name used in some sources for itinerant Islamic trader clerics in the Senegambia region
- Brafo** – Fante head of state
- Ceddo** – Wolof for ‘warrior’; the warrior class of the old Jolof kingdoms of Senegambia
- Cofó** – currency measure of 20,000 *nzimbu* in Kongo
- Cundi** – Kongo woven cloth
- Da** – King of Segú
- Dadá** – King of Dahomey
- Dakhlo** – queen mother in Dahomey
- Disongo** – annual tribute in Segú
- Dobra** – coin issued in Portugal
- Dyula** – itinerant Mande traders in many parts of West Africa
- Ejumba** – Jola masquerade
- Esusu** – Yorùbá credit union, widely used by the nineteenth century
- Faama** – King of Segú
- Farim** – word used in the Mali Empire to describe a regional governor or administrative overseer
- Funda** – 1,000 *nzimbu* in Kongo
- Griot** – the praisesingers of Greater Senegambia and Mali; thought by some to derive from the Portuguese *criado*, or ‘servant’
- Hassānyī** – warrior class of southern Mauritania
- Hòrònw** – the warrior freemen who fought the wars that helped Segú to expand
- Ile Orí** – household protective shrine using large numbers of cowries, found among Yorùbá peoples
- Jamâ** – rank-and-file troops in Oyo
- Joliba** – local name for the Niger River in Mali
- Jòn** – Bambara for captive or slave, used in Segú
- Kabanko** – taxes paid in Kaabu
- Kackra** – small square pieces of gold used as currency on the Gold Coast
- Kanda** – Kongo lineage
- Kimpassi** – healing society in West-Central Africa
- Kindoki** – sorcery in Kongo
- Kola** – bitter nut given as a gift widely across West and West-Central Africa, and even used as a form of currency – comes either magenta or white; also found in the Americas throughout this period

- Libongo** – cloth woven in Loango used as a currency in seventeenth-century Luanda
- Lijwaet** – Dutch-manufactured cloth, a mainstay of their African trade in the seventeenth century
- Lorrendraiers** – Dutch traders who had settled on the Gold Coast and had families with Fante wives; from second half of the seventeenth century onwards
- Lufuku** – 10,000 *nzimbu* in Kongo
- Maccudo** – word for slave and agricultural worker in Mâssina
- Macuta** – a bundle of 10 cloths, often Kongo *cundis*
- Mai** – name of the ruler of Borno
- Mamelucos** – Brazilians with mixed African and Native American ancestry
- Manikongo** – King of Kongo, *mani* being the Kikongo word for ‘ruler’
- Mansa** – Manding word for ‘ruler’ or ‘emperor’
- Marabout** – Islamic leader; also the word used for a diviner drawing on the Qur’ān in parts of Senegambia and Mali
- Maraka** – Islamic traders of increasing importance in Segou through the eighteenth century
- Maravedí** – the name for the gold coin in Spain from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, and thereafter a unit of account
- Mbanza** – Kongo town(s)
- Migan** – Prime Minister of Dahomey
- Mithqāl** – gold coins in circulation in West Africa by the eighteenth century
- Mpu** – the crown of office in Kongo, woven from raffia palms
- Mwissikongo** – the aristocracy of the Kingdom of Kongo
- Nganga** – spiritual leader in Ndongo and Palmares (Brazil)
- Ngola** – ruler of Ndongo
- Nkisi** – spiritual objects in West-Central Africa, especially Kongo and Loango
- Nomoli** – ancestor-spirit figures from Sierra Leone
- Nsi a Bafwa** – Kongo world of the dead
- Nsibidi** – script found in Calabar and Cross River regions of Nigeria
- Nyantio** – warrior aristocrat in Kaabu
- Nza Yayi** – Kongo world of the living

- Nzumbu** – the shell currency of Kongo, harvested on the island of Luanda and later imported by the Portuguese from Brazil
- Ofo** – staff of office necessary to gain entry to the Ékpè secret society of Calabar
- Orixá** – Yorùbá god(s); also used by Candomblé practitioners in Brazil and Santería practitioners in Cuba
- Oyo-Mesi** – ruling council of Oyo
- Pano** – Portuguese term for ‘cloth’, used in some sources (including African ones)
- Pataca** – silver bar mined in Mexico
- Qadi** – a judge in an Islamic court
- Quilombo** – military brigade of the Imbangala of West-Central Africa, transposed to Brazil, where, by the late seventeenth century, the institution had transformed itself into militarized communities of maroons, especially in Palmares, superseding the earlier *mocambo*
- Quintal** Portuguese weight measure. A *quintal* at this time was equivalent to 128 pounds, or *arráteis* – the *arrátel* was equivalent to 16 ounces, or 1 pound
- Sangamento** – Kongo initiation and military display
- Sarki** – ruler of Kano
- Secret society** – also known in contemporary anthropological literature as a ‘sodality’; a religious confraternity or association, often with secret languages of power and communication, and used to mobilize warfare. Secret societies control matters related to social relations, birth, marriage and death in some societies of West and West-Central Africa. This phrase has been retained, rather than using ‘sodality’, for the sake of clarity and descriptive power
- Simboji** – Dahomey’s royal palace
- Soba** – chief in Ndongo (Angola)
- Sonni** – Emperor of Songhay (before 1492)
- Soro** – cloths woven by Fula people across West Africa
- Tabanka** – fortified settlement in the Guinea-Bissau region
- Terreiro** – temple for Candomblé practice in north-eastern Brazil
- Tònjònw** – military aristocracy of Segu, often former slaves
- Torodbe** – religiously inspired beggars for alms in Senegambia, proliferating in the eighteenth century
- Tsetse** – fly that passes on sleeping sickness

GLOSSARY

**Ugie** – state festivals in Benin

**'Ulamā** – scholarly Islamic class in the Sahel

**Umma** – global Islamic community

**Vata** – Kongo rural areas

**Vodún** – Fon word for 'god' or 'deity' (from Hueda), transferred to the New World (especially Haiti)

**Wangara** – diaspora traders linking up the trans-Saharan trade with cities across the Sahel

**Warri** – board game found throughout West and West-Central Africa involving scooping beads in a board with wooden cups

**Yovogan** – Governor of Dahomey at Ouidah, in charge of trade with Europeans



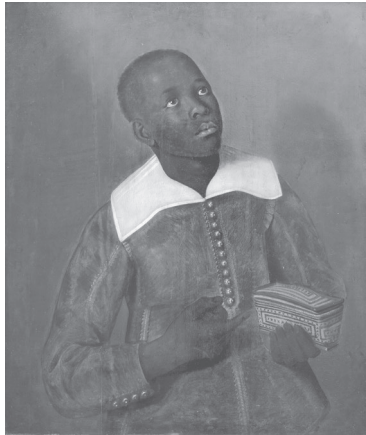


# Introduction

On 28 July 1649, Garcia II, the manikongo, sat down to compose a letter to his counterpart, King João IV of Portugal. The Court of the Kongolesé king was a luxurious affair, rich with carpets and tapestries from Flanders, cloths woven in India and silver-inlaid dining services and religious ornaments made from the ores of the New World. There were pearls fished by enslaved African divers in the Caribbean, and then sold on by Venetian traders. Beyond the high-status foreign imports, the Court was also filled with woven Kongo cloths inlaid with symbolic meanings, and the manikongo and his chief advisers wore strings of coral beads and red sashes in the Kongo style. Secretaries sat at the manikongo's side and inscribed his letters, which he then signed off with a flourish: for he wrote to the Portuguese king as someone whom he saw as an equal in the 'great game', which at that time took in Atlantic African kingdoms such as Allada, Benin, Denkyira and Kongo, as well as China and the rising European powers.<sup>1</sup>

Almost four centuries later, one of the best visual aides for imagining what this vanished world was like comes from across the Atlantic, from Brazil. From 1630 to 1654, half of the provinces of Brazil were under Dutch occupation. Kongo, as an ally of the Dutch, maintained diplomatic ties with the Dutch Brazilian capital of Olinda (near Recife), just as it did with the United Provinces in Amsterdam, and with the cardinals of the Vatican, and just as it had done with Portugal in the sixteenth century. When Dom Miguel de Castro arrived as the ambassador from Kongo to Olinda in 1643 to make representations to the Dutch governor, Johan Maurits of Nassau, a Dutch artist produced a remarkable portrait of two pages. The artist gives us young men of the princely caste, the *mwissikongo*, dressed in

tunics embellished by white collars and fastened by gold buttons, bearing an ivory tusk and a delicate basket.<sup>2</sup>



Pages of the Ambassador of the King of Kongo in Brazil,  
Dom Miguel de Castro

If they look as if they have stepped out of a European Court, it is because this was the artist's intention. Painting at exactly the same time, Albert Eckhout produced sketches in Brazil from life of how the Kongo Ambassador and his retinue appeared that were more on their own terms. Dom Miguel de Castro and his peers were dressed with the bows and arrows, red sashes of office, and the woven *mpu* crown that symbolized power in the Kongo Court. With outsiders presenting them in different registers for different audiences, these African rulers were adept at displaying the multiple languages of power. In time, this subtle and varied performance of power would become a defining feature of political life on the continent.<sup>3</sup>

Just a few years later, when Garcia II sat down to compose his letter to João IV of Portugal in 1649, the context of this world of princely diplomacy and exchanges had been transformed. While both monarchs were besieged by their enemies and the long-term survival of their kingdoms was still in doubt, the Kongolese were in a far

worse position. Although the Portuguese war of independence from Spain (1640–68) still had nineteen years to run, they had thrown out their main imperial rivals, the Dutch, from the slave-trading port of Luanda in Angola the year before, and had also occupied the southern Angolan town of Benguela; five years later, in 1654, Portuguese defeat of the Dutch in Brazil would follow. It was a moment that promised the consolidation of Portuguese imperialism in the South Atlantic – and, with that, the beginning of the end of the old Kongo Kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

Garcia II came out fighting. He was not about to capitulate to a monarch he would never see, who lived thousands of miles away from the Atlantic coast of Africa. ‘In spite of our proximity to the Dutch,’ he declared to João IV, ‘the Catholic Portuguese have done more damage to me in a few months than I received from the Dutch in seven years.’ In truth, he had been actively negotiating with the Dutch and plotting the downfall of the Portuguese. The Portuguese fleet under Salvador Correia de Sá had first defeated the Dutch at Luanda, and then his ragtag army of Luso-Brazilian and Tupinambá soldiers had killed thousands of Garcia II’s men, and captured many more to sell into slavery. Yet, furious as he was at the violence and the disrespect showed to him as manikongo, Garcia managed to conclude with an olive branch: ‘In spite of everything,’ he wrote, ‘let our sovereign Lord desire it, that the past shall be past.’<sup>5</sup>

There was little in Kongo–Portuguese relations that suggested that this could be possible. The Kongolese had been allies with the Dutch on and off ever since the Dutch had appeared in the 1590s, wanting to trade cloths and ivory instead of enslaved persons. By 1610, diplomatic feelers were being sent out to Amsterdam by the Kongolese. Since their first encounter with the Portuguese, 125 years had passed, and they had tired of them. For years, Portuguese traders had been destabilizing the Kongolese currency, the *nzimbu* – a shell harvested traditionally on an island offshore from Luanda – by bringing in shiploads of the stuff from Brazil to use as money for the slave trade. Meanwhile, the Portuguese colonial settlement at Luanda (founded in 1575) was being used as a springboard for mounting slaving raids against people the manikongos saw as their subjects, in the mountains of the Dembos and Matamba.<sup>6</sup>

By the time the Dutch had seized Luanda from the Portuguese in 1641, the Kongolese were strongly opposed to the slave trade, as Garcia II had made clear in a letter of 23 February 1641 to the Rector of the Jesuits:

Nothing is more damaging to human beings than ambition, and this city of Luanda was full of it, and, with things going on like that, there could never be peace between us [Kongo] and them. Instead of wanting gold and silver and other things which are used as money everywhere else, the trade and currency here are slaves, who aren't made of gold or cloth but are creatures.<sup>7</sup>

The king articulated in the strongest words the horror of commodifying human beings, which the Portuguese had encouraged by flooding the market with *nzumbu*. It wasn't that the Kongolese themselves were blameless, of course. Far from it, for the manikongos of the sixteenth century had been happy to trade people as long as they had been dealing with those who were not born Kongos. Outsiders to the kingdom were sold at the big market at Malebo Pool on the Congo River.\* They were exported by what was much the most powerful state in the forests and rivers of Loango, Cacongo, Kongo and Ndongo, the area stretching between what is now the northern bank of the Congo River and the northern part of Angola. But, as Garcia II noted in his letter to the Jesuits, with a touch of forced naivety, 'our disgrace, and that of my ancestors, is that with our lack of worldliness we allowed this trade to grow along with so many evils in our kingdoms.' The trade itself was shameful, but what was worse for Garcia was the loss of Kongo's honour, so that 'most of all, there are people who claim that we never were kings of Angola and Matamba.'<sup>8</sup>

For Garcia, and for people on all sides of the Atlantic ocean, slavery was connected to ideas of honour. In the new Spanish colonies in America in the sixteenth century, it was the length of a colonist's slave retinue that spoke of their position in society; prestige stood or fell according to the number of slaves that a colonist had to clear the way before them. But, as Garcia II suggests here, for Kongo the

\* Between what are now the cities of Brazzaville and Kinshasa.

relationship was flipped on its head: it was the rise of slaving that had damaged Kongo's prestige, and the relentless drive to acquire slaves for Portuguese traders would decisively influence the kingdom's collapse into warring mini statelets by the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, while forms of dependence and slavery were important in many different societies in Atlantic Africa before 1500, their practice was being transformed by the Atlantic trade. In Kongo, enslavement gradually became feared by even the highest-status families. This transformation was huge. In most parts of Africa, war captives, criminals and debtors had often become dependants of a powerful family. This condition of dependence was often related to outsider status, where those who had no kin or connections (such as war captives) were vulnerable. However, over time members of these groups could marry, have their own families, and their children (who by now had kin connections) could enter society. There was rarely at this stage the idea of 'cashing in' these relations of debt or power by selling a person to an Atlantic trader; yet these horrors had grown rapidly, as traders sought to take advantage of an economic and political whirlwind that no one really knew how to control.<sup>10</sup>

Garcia II's letters offer an important window on to how members of the Kongo elite had come to understand their own role in early globalization, and the changes it had wrought. They show that in Kongo, as across West and West-Central Africa in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, globalization was a fundamentally disruptive influence. But, whereas the growth of trade in this period led to decisive benefits for the 'world economy', through the accrual of capital, and the subsequent investment that triggered the Industrial Revolution, in this part of Africa a different picture emerges. Trade of all kinds certainly increased right across the region, not only in enslaved persons, but also in prestige goods such as jewellery and furniture; in cloths both manufactured locally and imported from Europe and India (the latter often via Brazil); in a number of goods such as tobacco, also imported from Brazil; in provisions; and in different types of currencies. However, instead of increasing the region's prosperity, this trade occurred alongside growing political instability and the relative global impoverishment of the region. By

the eighteenth century, some West African states such as Asante and Dahomey were able to reverse this picture, to retain and even to import gold. Others in Senegambia imported large amounts of silver. Yet the picture over the long term was one of the export of ‘hard currencies’ that retained value over time, not imports. There was little by the way of capital accumulated through the trade of raw or finished goods. Capital accumulation became ever more heavily concentrated in other world regions, and West and West-Central Africa were by the early nineteenth century very much disadvantaged in their access to the capital needed to finance investment and economic growth.<sup>11</sup>

This is a finding that stands in opposition to the weight of ascendant economic theories. Curiously, despite all the evidence showing that increasing global trade does not spread wealth equally, conventional economists in the twenty-first century often hold that greater trade leads to increases in prosperity through the growth of ‘the market’, and that eventually such wealth trickles down. It is one of the main purposes of this book both to explore the ways in which a different path unfolded in Africa during the era of the Atlantic slave trade, and to consider what the consequences of this have been.<sup>12</sup>

Setting out to assess the causes and consequences of the cumulative economic disempowerment of West and West-Central Africa over a timespan of three or four centuries may seem like a hubristic undertaking. There is a danger that this book will fall into the trap laid by the griot from Naréna in Mali, Mamadou Keita:

*What is troubling in the narration      Min kè jugu kòròlenfò dò, i tèmìn  
of the past,                                      Nya lòn, i ka to k’o fò.<sup>13</sup>*  
*Is to speak of that which you know  
nothing.*

Grasping the cultural, social, economic and political contours of just one small part of West Africa is a huge undertaking in itself. So why embark on this enterprise, which attempts so much more? One reason is to seek to end the ‘provincializing of Africa’. Historians often write general histories of the Americas, Asia or Europe, in which they deal with anomalies by saying something along the lines

## INTRODUCTION

of ‘Meanwhile, in Portugal/Poland/Italy, it was different.’ Those who research Africa have, by contrast, inherited a field developed by colonial anthropologists, who were instrumental in hardening the artificial barriers of ethnic divisions that still belabour Africa to this day. From this perspective, every society in Africa is different. This is, of course, true, for ‘Africa is not a country.’ But, equally, nor should Africa be exceptionalized so that it cannot be understood through more general connections both within the continent and outside it.

The Dutch portraits from north-eastern Brazil offer a powerful answer as to why the more general approach of this book may be valuable. In addition to the two pages, a remarkable portrait was painted of Dom Miguel de Castro himself, the Ambassador of King Garcia II in Brazil, testament to the diplomatic reach of the Kongo kings in the 1640s.



Dom Miguel de Castro



When we consider these portraits, it is hard not to be brought up short by the almost total failure of mainstream historians to take African kingdoms and their histories seriously when writing about the birth of the modern world. With Africa struck out of ‘History’ by Hegel, most historians have been painfully slow in pushing back against the stereotypes regarding the ‘Africa’ of the nineteenth century and before. For Kongo was far from being the only African kingdom to embark on sustained international diplomatic initiatives. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Jolof ambassadors from Senegambia lived in Portugal, alongside those from the Kingdom of Benin;\* in the 1650s, the King of Allada despatched ambassadors to Spain in search of military and religious envoys; in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, the kingdoms of Dahomey (in modern Benin) and Onim (located around Lagos) despatched ambassadors several times to the Portuguese authorities in north-eastern Brazil, and thence to Lisbon, where they regularly attended the theatre and the opera, and were patrons of Lisbon’s restaurants. Looking north, Borno had regular diplomatic ties with the Ottomans; and there were annual caravans of pilgrims leaving Timbuktu for Mecca into the eighteenth century. Here were collective African diplomatic engagements and geopolitical alliances. Yet their impact has been almost entirely written out of world history.<sup>14</sup>

There have nevertheless been some encouraging signs. The past twenty years have seen a huge boom in studies that show the many different ways in which – even in the shadow of slavery – Africans were decisive actors in building societies in the Americas. Rice-growing technologies from West Africa contributed to the emergence of rice plantations in South Carolina and northern Brazil; livestock and herding skills from West Africa were used by African herders in many parts of the New World, from Louisiana to Argentina; and fencing techniques were imported from West Africa and used in agriculture and in defending communities of runaway slaves (known as maroons). Healing practices from Dahomey and Angola were brought to Brazil and the Spanish Caribbean, and helped to develop new treatments in the colonies; healing practices and medicines were

\* Located in the south of what is now Nigeria.

also borrowed by the Portuguese in Angola in an early form of ‘bio-prospecting’. Warfare techniques learnt in the Kingdom of Kongo and in the Oyo-Yorùbá Kingdom of what is now southern Nigeria were vital to the success of the Haitian revolution in 1804, as well as to the rebellions against slavery in Brazil and Cuba in the early nineteenth century. In short, just as there were shared frameworks of diplomacy through which Atlantic African kingdoms sought political influence, so the modern world emerged from a mixed cultural framework in which many different peoples from West and West-Central Africa played a significant part.<sup>15</sup>

Yet the specialization of academic historical writing can mean that a huge flood in one field may make very few ripples in many others. Knowledge, like most special privileges in life, and, indeed, like money, does not necessarily ‘trickle down’; and knowledge of these studies remains thinly spread. The division into multiple fields and subfields means that people work in splendid isolation; and, in the intellectual silos that result, the wider ramifications of new finds and discoveries for thinking about the historical process are lost. So one key reason for attempting the more general approach envisaged here is precisely to ask what the implications are for the broader picture of both local and world historical change, when we think of the economic history of West and West-Central Africa during the period of the Atlantic slave trade. What are the historical origins of African economic ‘underdevelopment’? How did African states change during this era, and how were these changes connected to early globalization? What are the implications of one of the findings of this book: that broadly analogous historical processes took place simultaneously in Africa, Europe and the Americas at this time, especially during the Age of Revolution? On my reading, one conclusion is that these histories did not somehow evolve separately until the rise of colonialism in the nineteenth century, but rather always grew together.

Offering even partial answers to these questions requires a comparative perspective. The very idea of ‘Africa’ emerged from shared experiences across the continent. The philosopher V. Y. Mudimbe reminds us that ‘Africa’ was a concept invented in the eighteenth century by Europeans through a racialized worldview. Subsequently, the appropriation of this concept in ‘Africa’ itself, and consciousness of

being 'African' as well as a Kikongo-, Kimbundu-, Wolof- or Yorùbá-speaker, emerged alongside colonialism. The continent took shape after colonialism in the 1960s with a shared experience of the construction of inequalities and hierarchies of race, wealth and labour. That is why the economic question is so important.<sup>16</sup>

Yet Africa also emerged in the twentieth century as a place of amazing, myriad, almost bewilderingly creative complexity. African sculpture and masking inspired the emergence of Cubism, while the use across Africa of manufactured objects in religious shrines resonates in the readymades offered by Marcel Duchamps and Andy Warhol to the modern temples of Art. African musical traditions led to Jazz, Blues and Soul, to Samba and Salsa. African religious traditions influenced the rise of Evangelical Churches, and the nature of shrines used by the Afro-Catholic religions in the New World such as Candomblé in Brazil and Santería in Cuba and New York. In the end, therefore, the economic question cannot be separated from the cultural transformations that took place over the very same period. This is why this book also attempts to consider the cultural frameworks that reconfigured and disrupted the patterns of growing economic inequality.

This interwoven relationship of economic and cultural transformation, and the associated issue of inequality, is the broader reason to focus here on the region as a whole. Just as there was a collective experience of political relationships and of the emergence of ideas of 'Africanness' in this period, so the process of economic disempowerment is one of the things that binds together histories of the peoples of the region. To take a contemporary question, for instance, one of the things people across the continent have in common today is their economic reliance on remittances from relatives who have made it to richer places, and the desire they have to try to make it there themselves. To understand this shared perspective, it is necessary to look at the capital underpinnings of this economic relationship, and to try to grasp the economic framework that promoted an increase in trade, at the same time as it promoted an increase not in wealth but in inequality.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond this current resonance, a spotlight on the deeper African past belies enduring prejudices that 'Africa has no history.' This is such

an old canard that it is staggering to realize that such ideas still structure no small part of public discourse. Of course some Western public institutions do increasingly cover broader themes in African history and culture, as recent exhibitions at the British Library (on West Africa), at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (on Kongo) and at Paris's Musée du Quai Branly demonstrate. Henry Louis-Gates Jr's recent TV series on African civilizations also acted as a valuable corrective. Nevertheless, when much of the mainstream Western media turns to Africa, it far too often fixates on war and conflict, on famine or on Africa's 'amazing wildlife', instead of on its creative, resourceful and brilliant people. Both inside and outside the continent, professionalized historians of Africa concentrate mainly on the twentieth century, which means that the ruins of old cities, the evidence of precolonial industry and manufacturing, and the ways in which these then declined in the colonial era are all left untouched.<sup>18</sup>

The cultural framework and older historical questions that structure this book, especially in its second part, ensure that an alternative view of the past can be presented. By looking at cultural transformations in the context of economic inequalities, the idea of a 'static' and 'unchanging' African past can be consigned to the bin. Moreover, this focus is connected to the book's broader economic concerns; as was recognized by Amílcar Cabral, the leader of Guinea-Bissau's War of Independence against the Portuguese (1960–74), a historical view must recognize the 'complementarity existing between the cultural fact and the economic (and political) fact in the functioning of human societies'.<sup>19</sup>

Through this approach, the inequities produced by the slave trade are addressed, but there is also a move beyond a reductive focus on slavery alone. African history must not be reduced to that of slavery; and yet slavery must not be avoided or ignored. Indeed, slavery, of course, affected cultural change, in Europe every bit as much as in Africa. Cycles of slavery were intimately connected to the first cycles of credit and indebtedness. Modern institutional loansharks are inheritors of much earlier forms of predatory proto-capitalism from the past.

Here I am reminded of the observation of the English surgeon Alexander Falconbridge, in the 1780s, who to my eyes anticipated the future of the cycles of debt and credit of modern financial institutions in Africa. Falconbridge wrote of the River Bonny, an arm of the Niger

Delta, one of the major slave-trading zones of the later eighteenth century, that it ‘abounds with sharks of a very large size, which are often seen in almost incredible numbers about the slave ships, devouring with great dispatch the dead bodies of the negroes [*sic*] as they are thrown overboard’. By the time Falconbridge wrote this, these sharks had their own history of eating captives, over countless generations.<sup>20</sup>

The specific origins of this book came from a research trip I made to The Gambia, Senegal and Guinea-Bissau in April and May 2011. Although I had spent long periods in these countries in the late 1990s and early 2000s, in more recent years I had been concentrating my research on the Cape Verde archipelago, and so I was looking forward to my visit. I had not been planning to research the histories of currency and inequality but, on arriving at Banjul, I found myself in the midst of a typical West African economic exchange. In return for three crisp 50-euro notes, my friend sent off for some local money exchangers, and I received so many Gambian dalasi notes in return that I needed a plastic bag to carry them. As my friend passed me the bundles of notes, and I gave him the three notes in return, I remarked fatuously to him that this was not very fair.

I had had similar experiences before, with Guinea-Bissau’s peso currency in the mid 1990s, but this for me was the moment when the direct nature of unequal economic exchanges was foregrounded. The Gambia was a country with dynamic traders, full of energy and ingenuity, but without the potential to realize any capital gains at all. A pump attendant at the petrol station where my friend worked was paid the equivalent of less than 30 dollars per month; and my friend, who managed the forecourt, mini supermarket, mechanic’s workshop and the restaurant, was paid less than 100 dollars per month to supervise these four outlets and the twenty-four staff who worked there. What were the historical processes that had given rise to the type of exchange that it was possible to have in West Africa in 2011, where three banknotes could be exchanged for hundreds? These were exchanges that seemed ‘normal’, ‘the way things were’. Often, though, it is the things that seem most normal that are most worthy of attention. Why were these exchanges normal, and why was it that the access to capital in Africa and Europe was so very different?

As I proceeded with further research, I realized that there was, in fact, a huge amount of archival material related to the exchanges of currencies in the era of the Atlantic trade. The stereotyped view of Africans bartering slaves for baubles could not have been further from the truth. That assumed that money could be only coin, whereas when this trade began people around the world accepted a variety of materials as currency. Europeans brought iron bars, cloths, cowries and copper for trade, all of which were used as currencies in West Africa and were imported as part of a monetary financial exchange; in this way, they mirrored earlier imports across the Sahara of salt, which was also used as a form of currency in the Sahel. That is not to say that these imports ‘invented’ money in West Africa, for in almost all cases these imports from European traders added to an existing monetary base. It is worth stressing that, at the time, these types of currencies were not unheard of in Europe either: Icelandic sagas such as *Njál's Saga* make it clear that cloth was a form of currency in areas of medieval Europe, and, as the English historian Craig Muldrew has shown, many regions of England did not have much coin and resorted to credit currencies to maintain their economies well into the seventeenth century. What was happening with currency in West Africa was, then, a normal aspect of monetary exchanges in this period of history.<sup>21</sup>

Here alone was an interesting story. For it shows that the first economic exchanges between Africa and Europe were not through barter, but were monetized. Indeed, the idea of a ‘primitive’ barter economy has recently been shown to be a myth invented by economists to simplify Western theoretical models of economic growth. Like most myths, it has little grounding in reality, and many West African peoples had complex economic systems in the 1500s, in which credit and multiple currencies intersected. In other words, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, West Africa had long had market economies. However, since the 1980s, the broader question of the relationship of these currency exchanges to Africa’s history of economic underdevelopment has not been properly examined. As I found more material on this question in European and Latin American archives, this seemed to me to be a big mistake.<sup>22</sup>

Just as historians of Africa have in general passed over this question, so, too, have the new wave of ‘global’ historians. The much

debated book by Thomas Piketty not only has no place for Africa before the late twentieth century in it, but it also defines ‘capital’ so as to specifically exclude ‘human capital’, including wealth produced by slavery (‘a special case’). Meanwhile, Sven Beckert’s recent history of global capitalism focuses, like Piketty’s, on the period after the 1780s. Both approaches take the preceding 300 years almost for granted, as if it was inevitable that they would lead to a concentration of wealth and capital in Western countries, which were then able to invest this capital in developing new industrial technologies. By contrast, the approach of this book is to focus on this earlier period, in an attempt to understand the processes by which the capital imbalances between Africa and Western powers came about.<sup>23</sup>

By and by, as I conducted my research on this earlier period, an overall picture emerged. This book focuses on the era before and during the Atlantic slave trade. It looks at those parts of West and West-Central Africa that were connected both to one another and to the Atlantic economy, however distantly in some cases. The first half of this book argues that economic inequality between West and West-Central Africa and the rest of the Western hemisphere arose from inequalities in the exchange of economic value. For several centuries, Western African societies exported what we might call ‘hard currencies’, especially gold; these were currencies that, on a global level, retained their value over time. For the first two centuries of Atlantic trade, these societies also imported large amounts of goods that were used as currencies: cowries, copper, cloth and iron. However, these were what we might call ‘soft currencies’, which were losing their relative value over time, as opposed to gold and silver.<sup>24</sup>

By 1700, therefore, centuries of trade had been grounded in inequalities of the exchange of economic value, with the ‘purchasing power’ of the currencies in use in West and West-Central Africa lagging behind. The capacity for capital accumulation had grown, by contrast, outside the continent, with the rising stocks of ‘hard currencies’. What this meant in practice was that a Chinese, or Mexican, or American trader with access to silver could use that silver in multiple markets, which, of course, helped that currency to retain its value. While many economies did use copper or iron currencies in the 1500s and 1600s, however, this diminished over time; and with this decline

went a comparable decline in the relative purchasing power of African consumers.

A further layer to these inequalities of the exchange of value came through the slave trade – which was anything but a ‘special case’ in this period. As is well known, African societies exported large numbers of enslaved captives, whose labour was therefore both lost to the continent and gained by the European empires of the Atlantic world to aid their economic development. In the mid nineteenth century, it was Karl Marx who showed the connection between surplus labour and the accumulation of capital. For Marx, it was the extraction of surplus labour that allowed the production of ‘surplus value’, and capital accumulation. Thus, the slave trade and its production of labour outside Africa was also a key element of the growing economic differential between Africa and the European empires in the Atlantic world. The exchange value of the goods traded for captives was inevitably lower in real terms than the surplus value that could be produced through slave labour in the New World, and thus to the unequal currency exchanges were added the inequalities in economic development and capital accumulation that can be attributed to the slave trade.<sup>25</sup>

These transformations were especially marked in the first two centuries of the trade with European empires. During that period, the major goods traded by Europeans were not mere ‘baubles’, but currencies such as copper manillas, cowries, cloth and iron. Yet, while the money supply and the market increased, a huge increase in the supply of ‘trade goods’ failed to occur at the same time. Traditional economic theories posit that an increase in currency supply without an increase in the supply of goods for that money to be spent on causes inflation. Inflation meant that the cost of locally manufactured goods made in West Africa increased, and they were often unable to compete with foreign imports that were essentially dumped there. It was only after the 1650s, when large numbers of ‘trade goods’ began to be imported alongside currencies, that this pattern changed; and it was really only in the 1690s that the value of imported trade goods overtook the value of imported currencies in areas such as the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin. However, by this time, the terms of trade had been set; and, indeed, in spite of this, inflation continued in many regions throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>26</sup>



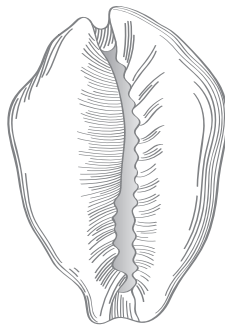
Working through this core argument as I consulted the relevant material, I realized that the book needed to be divided into two parts. My hope is that the structure will allow readers to assimilate so much new material in an accessible way, while allowing the argument as a whole to take shape. The first part of the book looks at five core regions of West and West-Central Africa, between around 1300 and 1680, when the import of trade goods over currencies finally started to predominate: these are the Sahelian zones of Borno, Kano, Mali and Songhay; the Greater Senegambia region; the Gold Coast; the Bights of Benin and Biafra; and the Kingdom of Kongo in West-Central Africa. Each chapter in this part offers a case study, in which new evidence places these dynamics of unequal exchange in the context of the economic and political histories of these regions. Taken as a whole, these cases reveal many of the fundamental causes of economic inequality.

The second part of the book runs from around 1680 to the early nineteenth century. Each chapter is structured thematically, not chronologically, allowing readers to get a better sense of the connections between different regions over a broad span of time. The second part as a whole looks at the consequences of these earlier processes. These emerge through social and cultural transformations, and the rise of the revolutions from below in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. There are strong parallels found here between political changes in Africa and those in Europe. In West Africa, as in Europe, the rise of the 'fiscal-military state' grew in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and, with it, powerful aristocracies. In West Africa, as in Europe, popular forces led by the trading class came to challenge these aristocracies; in both regions, the 1780s and 1790s witnessed decisive revolutionary movements. The book argues that this is not a mere 'coincidence': the transnational connections of West Africa with the Americas, Europe and the Middle East contributed to events in all these world regions, and transformed the world. Yet the unequal economic foundations of this relationship, traced in the first part of the book, meant that the consequences of these revolutions would be very different; and that these processes would pave the way for formal colonialism in the nineteenth century.

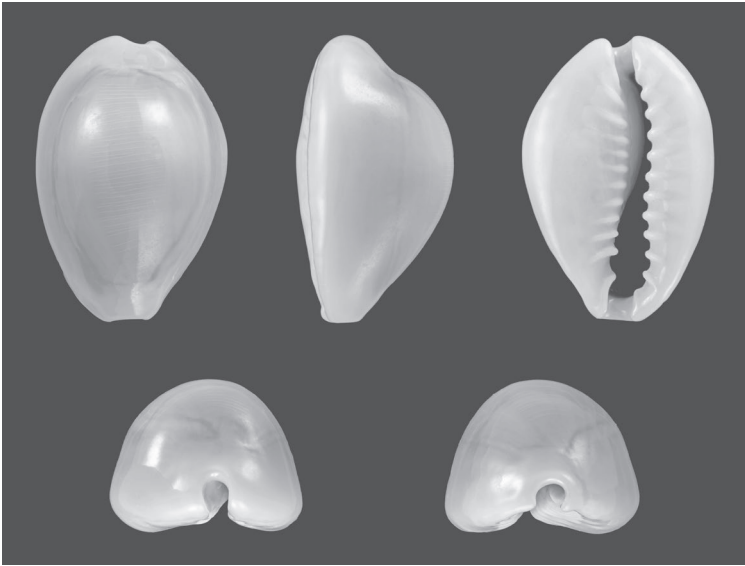
\*

This book, of course, takes its title from cowrie shells. Cowries were one of the major forms of currency across West Africa, from the Niger Delta to the empires of the Sahel, and were used from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries. They were brought from the Maldive Islands on the dhow route to East Africa, as well as through the caravan trade across the Sahara, before the Portuguese began to bring them by sea around the Cape of Good Hope in the sixteenth century. They were an exceptionally practical form of money, because they did not degrade and because they were easily transported, first by sea, and then by porter or mule from the North or West African coasts inland. In the earlier period dealt with in this book the smaller *moneta* cowrie from the Maldive Islands predominated, but in the nineteenth century the larger *annulus* cowrie took over in increasingly large quantities.<sup>27</sup>

Cowrie monies remain deeply inscribed in public memory; the Akan word for ‘cowrie’ as a currency was *sedee*, and the cedi is the currency of Ghana today, while a cloth design widely found in Togo, Benin and Ghana called the *bceao* (the acronym for the Central Bank of Francophone West Africa) is imprinted with a series of cowries.<sup>28</sup> There are, too, other forms of memory. In the Ondo-Yorùbá area of southern Nigeria, the archaeologist Akinwumi Ogundiran describes one origin myth that tells how cowries were brought to the region as a form of money by vultures. As Ogundiran summarizes it, these vultures could represent both European slave traders and African slave raiders: ‘vultures feed mainly on carrion and they symbolize



Linnaeus's drawing of the *moneta* cowrie.



The *annulus* cowrie.

greedy and ruthless people who prey on others, but in the narrative they heralded the introduction of cowries.<sup>29</sup>

Cowries became associated not just with such memories of violence but also with the ritual functions that developed around them. These are well described by the griot historian Lansiné Diabaté in his accounts of the founder of the Empire of Mali, Sunjata Keita. At one point, Diabaté discusses an ‘honest merchant’ of Sunjata’s age, Ase Bilali, and reveals the relationship between cowrie money and religious power:

*When Ase Bilali was leaving  
A hunter also gave him a commission:  
That if he arrived, and went to Sami  
And if he found cowries there  
That he should bring some back  
to him  
So that he could put them on his  
fetish [shrine].*

*Ase Bilali waat əla,  
donsokε də fana y’i sar ’a la  
ko n’a sera . . . a waara Sami  
a ko n’a da koronkisε sərə,  
a ka n’a d’a ma,  
a b’a la a ya fila kan.<sup>30</sup>*

These histories remind us of the danger of adopting a purely capital view of money and power in West African history. Among the Igbo of the Niger Delta, the copper manillas (*armringen* in Dutch) imported through Atlantic trade were not all to be melted down and 'spent' in the local economy, but, on the contrary, had to be accumulated in order to enter the powerful Ékpè secret society. By the early twentieth century, 900 manillas were required to take the first step into the Ékpè, and further fees were required in order to be given an *ofo*, or personal staff of office. Thus, the hoarding of manillas for these purposes created a different economic dynamic in which economic accumulation and religious power were inextricable.<sup>31</sup>

It is also true that some of the economic surplus was used in European cultures to acquire objects of religious value, especially by ruling royal families. This was especially true in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the gold from Africa and silver from the New World found its way into the altarpieces of the Catholic world. Silver also functioned as a way of displaying status in the eighteenth century. However, over time, the growing use of money to acquire status and property through capital accumulation in European societies marked a different approach to economic value from that seen in many parts of West Africa. By the eighteenth century displaying gold in religious spaces was less and less a feature of European religious architecture, and this marked a divergence in economic and religious worldviews.

What was true of the Igbo and the Ékpè cult was true elsewhere with regard to cowries. Cowries became very important to Yorùbá religious practice by the nineteenth century, filling each household's *Ile Ori*, protective shrines hidden from public view. The importance of these shrines was described by the Yorùbá historian Samuel Johnson in the early twentieth century:

[This is] the universal household deity worshipped by both sexes as the god of fate . . . The representing image is 41 cowries strung together in the shape of a crown. This is secreted in a large coffer, the lid of which is of the same form and material. It is called 'Ile Ori' (Ori's house), and in size is as large as the owner can afford to make it. Some usually contain as much as 6 heads (12,000) of cowries.<sup>32</sup>



*Ile Ori.*

An illustration of this religious power is that 20 per cent of cowries found during one dig at Isoya were located in grave goods. Meanwhile, in The Gambia, oral histories recount the important use of cowries as forms of divination. Thus, across West Africa, examples emerge to challenge a second core tenet of economic theory: the ‘rational choice model’. It is the nature of the ‘rational choice’ itself that must be questioned, for what is ‘rational’ in one society is not so in another; and, in West Africa, rational economic activities involved hoarding money and using it not for material accumulation but for the accumulation of ritual prestige. Where there was abundant gold, for instance, as in Katsina in the late eighteenth century, it was

retained in people's houses as a mark of status. Where cloth currencies were used for elaborate royal burials, as in Kongo in the late eighteenth century, illustrations reveal enormous bundles around the body of the deceased member of the elite. What emerges are different worldviews, neither better nor worse than one another, but all able to reveal the potential for difference in these societies' perspectives on value.<sup>33</sup>

The examples above, as well as many others, show that it is simply impossible to gain an accurate and complex understanding of these distant histories without balancing written and oral materials. Over-reliance on oral accounts has its own risks, because these are not fixed and change from generation to generation. But exclusive reliance on written sources will tend to reproduce a purely European view of history, and the assumption that specific European institutional economic frameworks are 'universal', since this is what appears in 'the sources'. The drivers of historical change will then be seen in a traditional manner, as coming from outside Africa rather than emerging from an interplay of external and internal forces.<sup>34</sup>

By contrast, in this book I draw on both sorts of records to explore the dynamism of political change in West Africa as a response to the gathering economic and political inequalities of the slave-trade era. When, in the later eighteenth century, a series of social movements emerged to implement a revolution from below, this resulted in the overthrow of what had become predatory aristocracies grown rich through negotiating with parasitic forces from outside the continent. The reasons for this political transformation did not lie in outside factors, but in the ways in which historical change was experienced locally.

Writing African history in this period does not thus have to present insurmountable problems in terms of sources. Nor does it have to confirm prejudices, because it emerges that both in West and West-Central Africa societies were globalizing, and had complex market economies and global diplomatic links. They were also producing the cultural forms that decisively shaped modern art, religion and music – that were, in fact, key in the formation of the modern world. Nor does such a history have to be negative, concentrating only on the horrors of slavery; it must, of course, acknowledge these, but this

history also shows how oppressed people rose up and overthrew their oppressors, while recognizing how the economic circumstances that accompanied these processes have dealt the inheritors of these histories a bad hand.

Histories are complex, far beyond the simplistic narratives so often presented. How did women respond to the increasing export of men in the slave trade, and did this give them greater autonomy over their lives, or rather lead to heavier workloads and demands? And what drove young men into warfare, raids and the captivity of one another during the slave-trade era? Part of the answers to these questions is economic, and part the political stranglehold of elites; but part also derives from the social consequences of all of this, and how these consequences were experienced. One hunting song of the Manding from Mali expresses the sentiment as well as any, at least insofar as it was experienced by men:

At that time money was a lot heavier, of course! The wind didn't blow it in as quickly as it does today! No, it didn't, of course not! Ever since banknotes arrived, Yes! Their only use is in marrying women . . . That's right! You know, my friend, in the past it was difficult to marry young; ah! It was very difficult.<sup>35</sup>

# PART ONE

## Causes

### Economic Divergence in West and West-Central Africa



