1

Power and Landscape in Atlantic West Africa

J. Cameron Monroe and Akinwumi Ogundiran

INTRODUCTION

The Atlantic Era, which spanned the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, was a period of intense commercial integration linking key economic players in Western Europe, the Americas, the Indian Ocean littorals, and much of West and Central Africa. The period was marked by dramatic increases in the volume of commerce at both the regional and global levels (Curtin 1998), and both the nature and the structure of political organization in all of these core areas was transformed radically. In fact, it is arguable that few communities on earth escaped the wide-reaching effects of commercial expansion and integration in this period (Wolf 1982). In North Atlantic Europe, the rising tides of commerce led to the emergence of a mercantile class, destabilizing feudal power structures and leading to the modern capitalist nation-states of the West. The Americas were transformed into an economic extension of Europe through colonization. Colonial polities thrived in North and South America by exploiting the mineral and agricultural resources that fueled commercial transformations across the entire Atlantic Basin. West Africa was not excluded from these political and economic transformations, the regional manifestations of which are the subject of this volume.

Beginning in the second half of the seventeenth century, as long-distance commerce came to be dominated by the export of human captives in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, West African political economies were transformed dramatically, resulting in a complex network of polities linking coast and interior in new ways

(Eltis, et al. 1999) (Figure 1.1). Within a few decades, between the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, polities and elites whose economic survival rested on specializing in slave raiding and slave trading developed across West Africa. As a result, peer-polity rivalry and bitter conflict intensified, and old regional hierarchies began to give way to new cleavages and political configurations that were characterized by militarism and the intensification of centralized political landscapes in some areas and by decentralized political formations in others.

The impact of Atlantic trade on sociopolitical form in West Africa has been a subject of intense historiographical debate for decades. At the core of this debate is the degree to which the Atlantic slave trade affected political formations, political economies, and ideologies of power that characterized Atlantic West African societies during the seventeenth through the early nineteenth centuries (Barry 1998; Curtin 1975; Fage 1969; Rodney 1970). Until very recently, our understanding of social and political change in the Atlantic Era depended almost exclusively on documentary and oral evidence. In contrast, archaeological research tended to focus on topics relevant to the more distant or ancient African past, an intellectual division of labor that resulted in what Jan Vansina referred to as 'sibling rivalry' between the disciplines of history and archaeology (Vansina 1995). Vansina's comment has resulted in important dialogues of great value amongst archaeologists, and to a lesser degree between historians and historical anthropologists. These dialogues have emphasized how the integration of historical and archaeological data can contribute substantially to our understanding of social, economic, and political processes in West Africa during the Atlantic Era (DeCorse 1996, 2001b; DeCorse and Chouin 2004; Denbow 2003; Falola and Jennings 2003; S. K. McIntosh 2005; Robertshaw 2000; Stahl 2001, 2009; Stahl and LaViolette 2009).[1]

At a primary level, this volume represents an archaeological contribution to our understanding of political culture and sociopolitical relations in the era of Atlantic commercial revolutions. Using both historical and archaeological tools, this collection of essays sheds light on how entanglement in the Atlantic economic sphere shaped West African political processes. The central argument of the book is that the commercial revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries dramatically reshaped the regional contours of political organization across West Africa. The book serves, therefore, to fill some

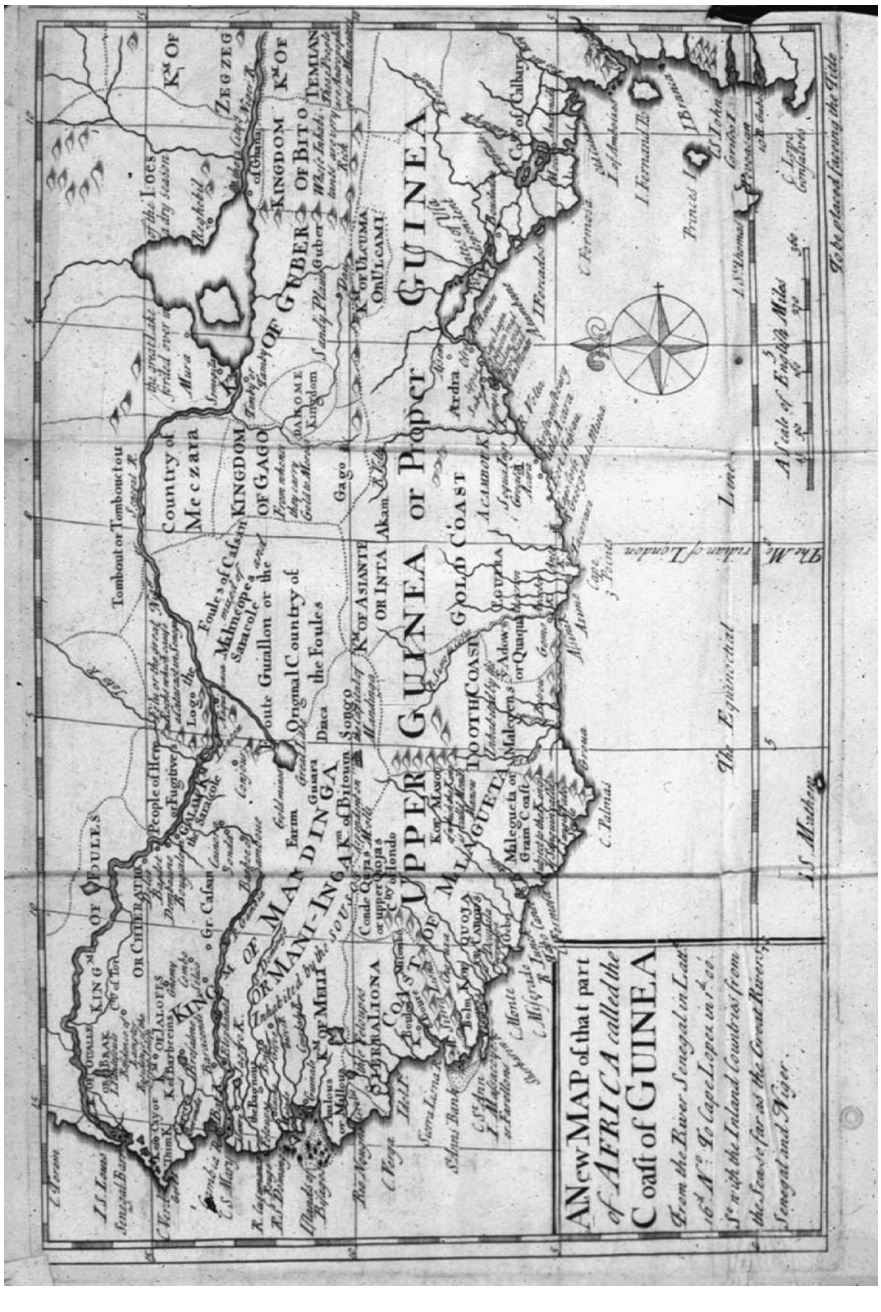

Figure 1.1
Eighteenth-century political map of West Africa, from "A New Map of that Part of Africa called the Coast of Guinea" (Snelgrave 1754).

of the critical gaps in the historiography of Atlantic West Africa's political formations, while at the same time applying an anthropological perspective on the forms of political culture that evolved in this region during the early modern period.

Additionally, however, these insights are important not only to our understanding of the broad political history of West Africa, but also to archaeological perspectives on political culture as a form of meaningful social practice. Atlantic West Africa, as a distinctive historical and regional unit, has been almost entirely absent in the empirical and theoretical understanding of political processes that have characterized the study of complex societies worldwide (S. K. McIntosh 1999b). The study of West African societies, begun long ago by scholars interested in non-Western political systems, identified a range of political forms from centralized states through decentralized lineages (Brown 1951; Fallers 1964; Forde and Kaberry 1967; Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940; Goody 1971; Lloyd 1960, 1971; Southall 1956). Until the last few decades, however, scholars commonly argued that the former were the product of either Islamic or European intervention in the second millennium A.D. The precolonial state in Africa was thus viewed as "a superstructure erected over village communities of peasant cultivators rather than a society which has grown naturally out of them" (Oliver and Fage 1962:36), and it was examined in terms of markers of civilisation introduced from elsewhere (see Connah 2001 and Mitchell 2005 for discussion). In contrast, African decentralized societies were seen as the product of a deep and unchanging past untouched by outside influences, providing ideal staging grounds for building anthropological models of the primitive (Stahl 2001; Wolf 1982).

These assumptions have had deep and long-lasting consequences for anthropological and archaeological conceptualizations of Africa's past. On the one hand, as cultural evolutionists of the 1960s increasingly turned towards archaeology to identify the processes of cultural evolution uncontaminated by outside influences, West African cases were deemed of little comparative value. Indeed, as Elmen Service, author of the extremely influential volume *Origins of the State and Civilization*, once wrote, "the various instances of state-making in West Africa . . . have no direct or focal bearing on the problem of the origin of primary states" (Service 1975:137). Similarly, African case studies were almost entirely absent from the chiefdom debate of the 1980s and early 1990s (S. K. McIntosh 1999b). Viewed within the framework

of cultural evolution, furthermore, nonstate societies were judged 'people without history' (Wolf 1982), rendering the archaeological study of such communities of little value to a discipline devoted to the explanation of processual change. The aforementioned assumptions about West Africa's past thereby lent credence to the marginalization of case studies from the region within anthropological archaeology more broadly.

However, as archaeologists have shifted their objectives from outlining universal evolutionary trajectories to illuminating variable pathways towards social complexity (S. K. McIntosh 1999a, 1999b), West Africa in the era of the expanding modern world system emerges as valuable context in which to explore the dynamics of political organization from a comparative perspective (DeCorse 2001c). Indeed, we believe that the often microhistorical precision with which archaeological research can be conducted in West Africa, reflected in the following essays, makes the region *ideal* for exploring the dynamics of power, social complexity, and political economy unencumbered by threadbare evolutionary typologies (Stahl 1999a).

This volume adopts a *landscape* perspective, outlined in detail here, to contribute to our understanding of the particular nature of social and political change in West Africa in the Atlantic Era, and the relationship between political organization and cultural entanglement more broadly. Rather than promote one particular vision of landscape in this volume, however, each chapter reflects a diverse approach to the archaeology of landscape, examining a plethora of ways in which social and political transformations in West Africa are observable in reference to regionally defined archaeological remains. What were the regional manifestations of power and authority in this period? How were West African communities able to establish or resist dominance in their respective regions? How were the peripheries, frontiers, and boundary zones of states constituted? What forms of political and economic articulation took place between centralized and decentralized polities? What roles did trading entrepôts and trade routes play in contests for authority, power, hegemony, conquest, and resistance? Incorporating perspectives on regional economic networks, population and settlement shifts, and the regional manifestation of cultural values, memory, and ideology, the chapters in this volume seek to answer these and other questions. In all, they cast significant light on how a landscape approach to the

material manifestations of power can advance our understanding of the nature of political authority in Atlantic West Africa.

In this chapter we introduce the problems and prospects in accounting for the nature of West African responses to entanglement within Atlantic commercial spheres. First, we outline the nature of the historiographical and archaeological discussion to date, highlighting the role material culture has played in constructing historical narratives of Atlantic commercial entanglement. Second, we introduce the potential for a landscape perspective to address some of the questions left unanswerable by this approach, illuminating broader issues of social, cultural, and indeed political change in this period. Last, we draw on the case studies presented in this volume to introduce three broadly inclusive landscape forms that resulted from the complex nature of political maneuvering in Atlantic West Africa: *fragmented landscapes*; *state-generated landscapes*; and *internal frontier landscapes.*

WEST AFRICA AND THE ATLANTIC WORLD: MATERIAL NARRATIVES OF CULTURAL ENTANGLEMENT

The impact of Atlantic-Era commercial revolutions on West Africa's domestic economy (particularly in regard to the organization of production, consumption, and exchange of goods and services and their relationships to political organization across the region) has been the focus of a long-standing academic debate (Alpern 1995; Eltis 2000; Inikori 2001; Inikori, et al. 1992; Lovejoy 1989; Rodney 1966; Thornton 1998). Historical and archaeological research on West Africa in the Atlantic Era has brought to the foreground the study of material practices from a variety of perspectives (documentary, archaeological, and art historical), making specific claims about the close relationship between Atlantic commercial processes and both cultural and political transformations across the region. This has resulted in contrasting narratives of West African entanglement within Atlantic commercial spheres (e.g., Stahl 2001). In this section, we explore the sorts of narratives of entanglement that have emerged from this dialogue, suggesting that they represent only one way of understanding the range of responses to Atlantic commercial expansion across West Africa's littoral and hinterland. These observations encourage the inclusion of a broader landscape approach that examines how transformations in material life were positioned within political economies, cultural ideologies, and regional power relationships.

The historiography of the trans-Atlantic economy, viewed through the prism of available documentary sources (merchant records, ships' logs, company account books, and so forth) has primarily offered metahistories of imports and exports, focusing on human and material capital flows within the African littorals of the Atlantic Basin (e.g., Inikori 2002). Some have argued that the volume of both was so great that local industry was diminished, that Africa was drained of necessary labor supplies, that indigenous slavery intensified dramatically, and that the influx of guns and gunpowder triggered the emergence of centralized militaristic states (Austen 1987; Goody 1971; Inikori 1977; Klein 1992; Lovejoy 1983; Rodney 1966). According to this view, the rising demands for human cargo as the dominant African export "retarded the development of market economies in western Africa and kept the region's economies largely out of the integrated commodity production processes of the Atlantic economy until the abolition of that trade in the mid-nineteenth century" (Inikori 2007:86). This resulted in political entities fully dependent on expanding European commercial forces for both their structure and their survival (Rodney 1981; Wallerstein 1974).

In contrast, others have argued that the Atlantic economy, and the commerce that supported it, was of minimal consequence in West Africa because the share of African exports and European imports was insignificant relative to the value of other economic circuits. In this view, European imports were never in significant demand, and were able neither to penetrate African markets nor to threaten domestic industry until the third quarter of the nineteenth century (Eltis and Jennings 1988). The import of exotic trade goods, rather, fulfilled a demand for prestige goods alone, and had minimal impacts on the broader West African economy. Based on his assessment of mercantile patterns on the Gold Coast and in Senegambia, for example, John Thornton has suggested that "Africa's trade with Europe was largely moved by prestige, fancy, changing taste, and a desire for variety – and such whimsical motivations were backed up by a relatively well developed productive economy and substantial purchasing power" (Thornton 1998:45). According to this view, Atlantic exchange was epiphenomenal to local political trajectories.

As a measure of economic impact, this historiographical debate has largely depended on the use of quantitative measures of the *volume* and the *value* of goods and captives traded in the Atlantic Era, measured in terms of European monetary standards and market logic. As such, this debate reflects a decidedly *formalist* approach

to understanding the impact of the slave trade on local community dynamics, depending as it does upon gross assessments of capital flows into and out of the West African littoral, far removed from the immediate social context in which such goods were circulated, used, and discarded. As a result, social and cultural change has been assessed in relatively one-dimensional terms, focusing on whether or not indigenous political economies expanded as a result of contact, at the expense of a more nuanced understanding of the variable responses to local entanglement within Atlantic commercial systems (DeCorse 2001a:11–12).

Scholars are cognizant, however, of the need to explore the social context in which global commerce was operating at the local level in West Africa during the early modern period (DeCorse 2001a; Stahl 2001; Wolf 1982). Long has it been argued, for example, that internal socioeconomic factors were the primary force in determining the paths taken by many African societies in response to the opening of early international trade (Austen 1978; Polanyi 1966). The key question is not how much trade took place, or whether economies were stimulated or retarded along a sliding scale of 'development,' but rather precisely how local economic and political systems were shaped by and also shaped the evolving capitalist world economy. That is, we should be seeking to understand how West African political economies were increasingly articulated into an expanding capitalist commercial system, what Eric Wolf defined long ago as the primary work of historical anthropology (Wolf 1982).

Archaeological research is increasingly central to this debate, drawing from anthropological perspectives on the role of exotic material culture in preindustrial societies. In non-capitalist economies, luxury or wealth goods may serve as the primary social currency for underwriting political legitimacy, expansion, and long-distance trade over broad areas (Earle 1997). For Timothy Champion, 'prestige-goods' economies "seem particularly common on the fringe of early states and empires, and are a regular means of articulating societies with very different structures of economic and social organization" (Champion 1989:12). Rather than economic epiphenomena, therefore, the flow of new exotica into West Africa would have impacted local polities in very powerful ways (Appadurai 1986; Ekholm and Friedman 1979; Kohl 1987; Larsen 1987; Renfrew 1986; Rowlands 1987; Schneider 1977). *Volumetric–valumetric* approaches to Atlantic commerce are ill equipped to address this issue because of the basic

nature of the source material, which is extremely limited in its ability to achieve an understanding of the social context in which such goods were exchanged, consumed, and discarded.

In the past three decades, archaeologists have taken up the daunting challenge of understanding the implications of Atlantic commercial entanglement for both coastal and interior societies in Atlantic Africa. Whereas historians have focused largely on quantitative measures of trade and value, archaeologists, largely working at the household level, have examined patterns in the production, exchange, consumption, and discard of exotic and local material culture (DeCorse 2001a; Goucher 1981; Kelly 1997a; Ogundiran 2002, 2007; Stahl 1999b, 2001). This research has placed high analytical value on understanding the social roles of, and cultural values attributed to, imported trade goods in West African contexts, transforming our understanding of the nature of material practices in West Africa in this period.

For example, excavations within the Fante community surrounding the slave-trading fort of Elmina in Ghana (DeCorse 1992, 1998, 2001a), and within the Huedan palace community of Savi in the Republic of Bénin (Kelly 1995, 1997a, 1997b, 2001), have examined the social and cultural values attached to imported goods in these contexts. Framed in reference to cultural continuity versus change, Christopher DeCorse and Kenneth Kelly examined how European trade goods were used, and indeed displayed, in terms of local cultural and political values, allowing a new appreciation of how European imports were integrated into deeply rooted material practices in West African communities. Ongoing research in the West African interior, furthermore, has shed light on the wide-reaching impacts of global trade in West Africa beyond the reach of coastal enclaves. Ann Stahl, for example, has documented how the Atlantic economy resulted in broad transformations in production, consumption, and taste in smaller-scale hinterland communities in the Banda regions of Ghana, an area on the margins of multiple commercial spheres in the past (Stahl 2001, 2007; Stahl, et al. 2008). This agenda has been carried forward by Akin Ogundiran in the Yoruba hinterlands of the Bight of Benin, with an emphasis on gauging the social value of Atlantic imports at the local level and the transformations in material culture that accompanied the commercial revolutions of the Atlantic Age (Ogundiran 2002, 2003, 2007, 2009).

Importantly, however, these studies are not limited solely to imported goods. Rather, they interrogate the entire corpus of material life – local and exotic – towards a broader understanding of how local commodity production chains were impacted by Atlantic commercial encroachment (Cruz 2003; Ogundiran 2001; Stahl, et al. 2008; Usman 2000). As a result, archaeological research conducted at the household level has provided valuable insights into the dynamic nature of material practices in this period. Such research has had the added benefit of highlighting clear linkages between contact-period communities and their precontact antecedents, lending credence to long-standing attempts by scholars to situate the archaeology of West Africa in the Atlantic Era squarely within a *longue durée* perspective (Stahl 1999a, 2001). Household-level research has thus reframed our understanding of the political economy of West Africa in the Atlantic Era in reference to indigenous social and cultural value systems, enhancing our understanding of the social dynamics of a wide range of communities implicated by Atlantic commercial pressures.

Drawing from their unique methodological strengths, historical and archaeological research on the nature of material life in Atlantic West Africa has gone far in illuminating the relative impact of global trading networks on West African communities in the Atlantic Era. For a number of reasons, however, these approaches can go only so far in addressing the broad impacts of the Atlantic economy on political organization and political process in West Africa.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a bewildering variety of polities developed in Atlantic Africa, whose economic survival rested on complex commercial relationships with the coast. Likewise, the political institutions of several pre-Atlantic polities witnessed significant transformations, from expansive territorial states such as Oyo (Law 1977), Dahomey (Bay 1998; Law 1991), Benin (Ben-Amos 1999; Ryder 1969), Asante (McCaskie 1995; Wilks 1975) and Segu (Roberts 1987), to small-scale polities like the Efik city-states of Old Calabar (Lovejoy and Richardson 1999), the Akwamu, Akyem, Kwaku, and Krepi of the Gold Coast (Daaku 1970), to trading confederacies such as the Aro of the Bight of Biafra (Northrup 1978; Okpoko and Obi-Ani 2005). Some of these polities specialized in slave raiding and slave trading; some served as social networks for slave-trading merchants and as refuge from expansionist slave-raiding polities (Inikori 2003; Klein 2001; Lovejoy 1983). Still others flourished because of their participation in the broad commercial