

INTRODUCTION

Two great divides have marked the last seven millennia in Africa: the transition to food production and the modern revolution in the means of communication. The impact of these innovations was by no means felt simultaneously throughout the continent. A few people living in the most inhospitable areas have yet to participate in the first, but the vast majority of Africans were already pastoralists or agriculturalists long before the end of the first millennium AD. The impact of the second, nineteenth-century revolution was more immediate, though certain aspects of communications were already being influenced by much earlier developments. In successive millennia, trade-links within Africa had been profoundly affected by the Phoenician, Arab and Portuguese explorations of, respectively, the North African, Indian Ocean and Atlantic coasts of Africa. North of the equatorial forests, the camel and the horse had increased man's mobility, and Islam had brought literacy to a restricted few. But until the transformation which began, not with colonial rule, but with the steamers, railways, telegraph, vernacular bibles and newspapers of the nineteenth century, communications throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa had remained largely dependent on oral messages and human portorage. Until the nineteenth century, the pace of change was not dependent on an alien technology. The main lines of communication lay not with the outside world, but within the continent itself.

Compared with these watersheds, the year 1600 marked no noticeable break in continuity; yet in some important respects the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Africa do constitute a period of transition, distinct from both the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. During this period, the import of firearms and the export of slaves foretold, and partly laid the foundations for, the subsequent massive European intrusion. But for most of the continent external forces were still of merely marginal significance. Africa even confined and controlled the immediate impact of the slave trade, and, in the meanwhile, Africans continued to pursue their own inventions, initiatives and interests.

For most of the sixteenth century, black Africa, behind its filter of desert and coastline, could still confront the forces of the outer world on equal terms. Unlike the Americas, it had not succumbed. For nearly

INTRODUCTION

a thousand years, Muslims from north of the Sahara had been by far the most important of these outsiders, and for much of Africa they were to remain the predominant external influence at least until the mid-nineteenth century. Egypt became part of the Ottoman world and was apparently only marginally affected by her contacts with the rest of Africa. Relations with the wider world were of great importance for Morocco, and to a lesser extent Ethiopia, though both were far more deeply influenced by events in the African interior. South of the Sahara, from the Atlantic to the Red Sea, Islam had lost much of its alien nature by acquiring and assimilating African characteristics, or by co-existing alongside local rites and customs. But in 1591, with the Moroccan musketeers at the battle of Tondibi, the heart of this great stretch of Muslim Africa experienced a direct intervention of momentarily overwhelming force.

Subsequent events showed that these early firearms by no means immediately rendered obsolete the cavalries and armies of the medieval Sudan, nor indeed the spearmen and archers of the rest of Africa. For most areas the importance of firearms during these two centuries was primarily symbolic. On the field of battle, save for the comparatively rare occasions when they were used by a practised corps of musketeers, their function remained largely psychological, and they were seldom of permanent, decisive importance. In terms of industrial capacity, however, the increasing imports of firearms into Africa represented a profound shift in the balance of power. Here was a military technology which pre-colonial Africa could not adopt on a scale which matched production in the Ottoman empire; still less could it keep pace with the soaring momentum of western Europe.

Shortly before the Moroccan intervention at Tondibi, another assault was launched on black Africa. The expeditions of Dias to Angola (1575) and Barreto to the Zambezi (1569) changed the cautious, coastal reconnaissance of sub-Saharan Africa, which had been carried out by Portugal for more than a century, into an attempt to penetrate the interior by force. The first dream of conquering a trans-continental stretch of Africa was soon born. The kingdoms of the *ngola* and the *mwene mutapa* became therefore the first of the great sub-Saharan states to face the challenge of European invasion. But the conflict remained confined to those relatively restricted arenas, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the other European invasion directly affected merely the remote, southernmost tip of the continent. On the Guinea coast, Europeans were kept to the coastal fringe where they rented the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-20413-2 - The Cambridge History of Africa: From c. 1600 to c. 1790: Volume 4

Edited by Richard Gray

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

land for their forts as part of a contractual relationship with the local African rulers.

The encounter of ideas and ideologies between Africa and Europe remained similarly marginal throughout this period. The two great initiatives of the sixteenth century, the contacts with the kingdoms of Kongo and Ethiopia, had been checked decisively by the second half of the seventeenth century. Africa therefore had virtually no opportunity of participating in the intellectual discoveries which were challenging the mind of Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Only in the field of trade did contact with Europe affect Africa at all deeply. Already in the fifteenth century the search for labour added slaves to the gold and other products sought by Europeans along the African coast. At first the numbers involved remained small, but with the development of the Brazilian sugar plantations in the latter part of the sixteenth century the forced emigration of Africans to the New World increased rapidly. The plantation system soon spread to the Caribbean and North America, and it is estimated that during the seventeenth century an average of some 13,000 slaves were being shipped every year across the Atlantic. By the mid-eighteenth century the Atlantic trade had reached a plateau estimated at over 60,000 slaves a year, and the plantation system was also established in the Indian Ocean, taking slaves from eastern Africa to the French Mascarene islands.¹

The consequences for Africa of this massive demand for slaves have still to be investigated in detail. The demographic impact is by no means clear, for there are virtually no reliable data on the size of Africa's population at either the beginning or the end of our period, and there is relatively little evidence of population growth or decline in even those areas about which most is known. We cannot therefore ascertain whether the natural growth was sufficient to replace the thousands taken often in the prime of life, nor, on a continental reckoning, is it possible to balance this factor against the recurrence of epidemics, famines and other causes of mortality. It would, however, seem probable that the rate of growth of some of the African communities most involved was at least halted during the eighteenth century, while that of Europe forged ahead. Certainly the demographic impact of the slave trade varied immensely from area to area. The thinly populated hinterland of Luanda may well have been stunted and spoilt,

¹ P. D. Curtin, *The Atlantic slave trade: a census* (Madison, 1969), ch. 9.

INTRODUCTION

but in the other major area of slave exports, from the Gold Coast to the Cameroun, the effect on population growth appears to have been far less serious, this vast region continuing to be one of the most densely populated areas in Africa.

The fact that in the Atlantic hinterland as a whole the direct, demographic impact of the slave trade was confined to less than disastrous proportions can in some respects be considered as the most important of African achievements during this period. Although external demand could drastically distort the pattern of African trade and lead increasingly to the exchange of guns and even baubles against human beings, Africa still retained a large measure of control over the pace and extent of this development. In part this was because the full weight of technological advance, and hence of European and Arab rapacity, had yet to be unleashed against the continent. Latin America and southern Asia attracted far more European attention, and in Africa outsiders remained almost completely dependent on the co-operation of African rulers and middlemen. Even in Angola the proportion of slaves directly taken by Portuguese armies remained modest, while these armies themselves largely consisted of African auxiliaries and allies, whose response to Portuguese demands remained unpredictable. But it was not merely the mosquito or the balance of technology which controlled external demand in these centuries: African resistance was also responsible. For fairly long periods some of the foremost states refused to sell slaves: until the end of the seventeenth century the *oba* of Benin prohibited the export of male slaves; for several decades Loango was able to maintain a flourishing trade in ivory and copper, and to ignore the Dutch and Portuguese requests for slaves; originally the rulers of Dahomey may well have been opponents rather than protagonists of the slave trade. States, however, depended on power rather than family or humanitarian considerations, and, faced with the increasing necessity of acquiring firearms, the rulers' opposition to insistent European demands gradually changed into a measure of compliance. More fundamental, and sometimes more successful, was the resistance of some acephalous societies. Here the traditional ties of kinship and mutual human obligations sometimes retained a vitality sufficient to preserve an indifference to the slave trade and a fierce ability to retaliate when raided.

Temporary refusals and intractable, small-scale resistance could not, however, by themselves protect the majority of Africans from the destructive inroads of the slave trade. In the long run, the fact that those African rulers and middlemen who co-operated with the Euro-

INTRODUCTION

peans or Arabs did so largely at a pace determined by African conditions was far more effective. The power of the rulers and nobility was seldom, if ever, absolute. The constraints of kinship, the need to retain the allegiance of as many people as possible, and the concepts of traditional justice, albeit becoming diluted and twisted by the trade, continued to operate in most societies. Economic calculations were also relevant. Despite the apparent attractions of alien imports, it was often still manifestly more profitable to retain the productive capacities of captives or 'criminals' rather than to export them. Even when a slave passed into the hands of middlemen, these were ever increasingly conscious of his economic value. The sharp bargaining and substantial profits of African traders were yet another effective brake, forcing up the price of slaves. It is impossible to generalize for the whole area and period. As Dr Rodney argues in chapter 4, 'the capture of African institutions and initiative' by alien demands was, by the eighteenth century, already far advanced in some of the worst-affected areas. Here, in the Bight of Benin, the obstacles posed by African resistance and restraints had become but feebly operative. Yet even here the disaster was kept within bounds, and the bounds were set by Africans.

The direct, demographic impact was not, therefore, the most important consequence of the slave trade. For all participants, the psychological consequences were by contrast immeasurable. The experience of suffering is still a keynote in negritude and black consciousness, and, although slavery and the slave trade were by no means the sole occasions of pain and deprivation, they have provided a major component. Again, although the slave ship and plantation were not the sole sources of white racism, they contributed powerfully to the ethos of arrogance and exploitation, the final nemesis of which has yet perhaps to be seen.

More tangibly, though perhaps with less far-reaching implications, the slave trade of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a potent, and peculiarly vicious, means of increasing the integration of black Africa into the evolving Western economy. Vicious, not merely because Africa was robbed of productive potential, but also because her internal economies were distorted. Whereas the major sixteenth-century exports of gold, cloth, timber, pepper and even ivory had stimulated indigenous skills, the subsequent export of slaves and import of fire-arms diverted these energies into violence and set a premium on military power and force. The exact incidence of this distortion has yet to be investigated, but several instances can be adduced of these first steps towards a dependent colonial economy. Some of the roots

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-20413-2 - The Cambridge History of Africa: From c. 1600 to c. 1790: Volume 4

Edited by Richard Gray

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

of contemporary underdevelopment can thus be traced to these centuries. And the distortion was not of course confined to local economies. Social, judicial and religious institutions were twisted to provide victims for export.

So long, however, as the response to external demands was controlled by Africans, the rate of distortion was gradual and even reversible. Nor in these centuries should its extent be exaggerated. Development opportunities were occasioned even by the slave trade. Any commercial link could sometimes help to liberate small-scale societies from the severe limitations which exposed them to the treacheries, not perhaps of man, but of nature. Against the dangers of an increasing dependence on external trade must be set the advantages brought by the inroads into isolation, though, as will be seen, isolation was being eroded by internal trade as much as by the more dangerous and uncertain stimulus of foreign contacts. The glaring examples of distortion were limited to those areas most deeply affected and for Africa as a whole these constituted but the fringe. African vitality, seen here in the resistance to, and large-scale control of, the slave trade, was often manifest elsewhere in continued, ordered, constructive innovations. Politically these centuries were marked by many instances of consolidation, by the expansion and centralization of political institutions, by firmer, closer-knit areas of order and security. Again it is impossible to generalize for the continent as a whole. The period of this volume, which began with Tondibi and the collapse of the last great empire in the western Sudan, also witnessed the decline or temporary eclipse of most of the major states first encountered by the Portuguese: Benin, Kongo, Ndongo, Mutapa and Ethiopia. But against these, as the chapters in this volume show, there were many other examples of growth.

In part this political expansion can be traced to the wider commercial horizons resulting from the increase in overseas trade. Yet the overseas market was only a part, and generally only a marginal part, of total African exchanges. The internal lines of communication were still of overwhelming importance. Even the new states of Dahomey and Asante, closely associated with the Atlantic trade, had important links with the northern interior. Asante, which established an effective control over Dagomba in the course of the eighteenth century, has indeed been described as 'essentially a northward-looking power' for the greater part of its history.¹ The rise of Oyo to power and greatness

¹ Ivor Wilks, in J. F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder, eds., *History of West Africa*, 1 (London, 1971), 381.

INTRODUCTION

was based on its cavalry might, and the supply of horses from the north was always of supreme significance. The export of the kola nut from the forests to the Sudanic area remained of far greater significance than the increasing imports of cheap Dutch gin on the coast. Even slaves, almost everywhere in West Africa and the Sudan, were more important for their internal, domestic roles than as items for export. The internal circulation and consumption of African mineral products continued to have a wide economic significance, sometimes supporting exchanges over enormous distances. Copper from Hofrat en Nahas south of Darfur was carried at least as far as Hausaland, and copper from the Katanga probably reached Buganda. In southern Africa copper again was exchanged over hundreds of miles, and the goldsmiths of the Rozvi empire may well have used as much gold as was exported to the Portuguese. And even if the creations of African goldsmiths were destined to adorn a restricted nobility, salt and iron were essential commodities in the meanest agricultural household. Probably the most widespread indication of the continuing vitality of indigenous skills was the flourishing cloth industries of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Africa. Although some luxury cloths were imported from overseas, the bulk of the cotton, raffia and bark-cloth worn by Africans was still produced, woven and dyed by African craftsmen.

The profits from, and the needs of, trade, whether overseas or internal, often had obvious political implications. Rulers could benefit in many different ways. They could impose a monopoly over the more profitable sectors of trade; they could levy taxes on markets and traders; by turning their capitals into redistributive centres, they could strengthen centripetal forces; and as the economy became more market-oriented an increasing range of people would value the security provided by the state. It is not surprising that by the eighteenth century many of the stateless societies in Africa were situated far from the main lines of trade.

Yet before too close a correlation is drawn between trade and political centralization during this period in Africa, one should remember that the opportunities for investing these profits were limited. Over much of the continent, wealth was still thought of in terms of women and cattle. And there were many ways of mobilizing these resources other than those of trade. Pastoralism seldom formed the economic basis for a state; but when allied with a reliable production of crops, the mobile, royal herds could bind the subjects closely to the rulers, as in some interlacustrine kingdoms, and among the Fulani in Futa Toro, the

INTRODUCTION

Rozvi and many Sotho and Nguni groups in southern Africa, and the Sakalava in Madagascar. In a favourable environment, a single lineage rich in cattle, exploiting polygyny and the broad network of kinship obligations, could rapidly establish ascendancy over very large numbers of people. Again, a favourable set of crops could substantially increase the surplus to support a complex ruling and military institution. Its relatively carefree cultivation of the banana was perhaps one of the advantages which Buganda enjoyed over its rivals. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries much of sub-Saharan Africa benefited from the introduction of American crops, especially cassava and maize, so that by the end of the eighteenth century, even in the farthest north-eastern reaches of the Congo basin, American crops were assisting the expansion of the Azande and were probably already adding to the power of the neighbouring Mangbetu kingdom. The high fertility and dense population of the hill country of Akwapim were as important a factor in the seventeenth-century expansion of the Akwamu state as its acquisition of firearms, and its strategic exploitation of the forest environment gave this new state a decisive advantage over the peoples of the surrounding savanna.¹

In analysing the factors of political change in these centuries, however, one is not inevitably tied to the realm of economic or environmental determinism by the lack of other evidence. Increasingly one can discern the impact of individual personalities, technological advances, and intellectual or ideological innovations. Occasionally from the lands where there were royal chronicles or from those areas in intimate contact with the outside world, there is sufficient contemporary evidence to provide a sharp delineation of character and motive. Iyasu I of Ethiopia, Mai Aloma of Bornu, Garcia II of Kongo and Queen Nzinga of Matamba, or Herry from the Cape, are all clearly recognizable. Elsewhere individuals are known through their exploits and achievements recorded in tradition, or through the second-hand reports of foreigners; but by these centuries these figures are clearly no longer legendary heroes, even if to contemporaries – European or African – they sometimes seemed to be invested with supernatural powers, as in the case of Frei Antonio's description of the sorcery of Changamire Dombo on the southern Zambezian escarpment.

Thus some of the decisive innovations in political structure and ideology during these centuries can confidently be ascribed to individual rulers and their advisers. On opposite flanks of the continent, in

¹ I. Wilks, 'The rise of the Akwamu empire, 1650–1710', *Transactions Historical Society of Ghana*, 1957, 3, 2, 130.

INTRODUCTION

Buganda and Asante, Kabaka Kateregga and Osei Kwadwo took decisive steps towards the establishment of appointive bureaucracies, a radical and highly significant addition to the traditional structure of hereditary offices. The construction of a state which embraced many different ethnic and lineage groups, was achieved in Darfur during these centuries by its rulers, notably Muḥammad Tayrāb and his successor ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Rashīd. By their strict control over the import of horses, by their use of slaves as soldiers and officials, and by enlisting Islamic sanctions against local loyalties, these rulers reduced the power of hereditary title-holders and lineage-heads.¹ In Dahomey, Agaja’s military and diplomatic skill, and his creation of an original and highly-organized intelligence service and system of military apprenticeship, enabled the state to survive the crises of his reign and to emerge as a tightly centralized unit. But the fundamental ideological innovation had been initiated by Wegbaja, the seventeenth-century founder of the kingdom. It was he who re-oriented the ancestral cults and reformed religious practices to centre on the kingship, so that the conceptual image of Dahomey, while remaining thoroughly indigenous in character, represented a definite break with traditional political ideas.

Even where it is impossible to place an individual signature on political innovations, there is abundant evidence during these centuries of institutional engineering and intellectual creativity. The Sakalava development of ancestral rites, the Rozvi *mambos*’ evolving relationships with the cult of Mwari, Rwanda royal manipulation of Ryangombe, the growth of the *ekpe* secret society among the Efik, the widespread and ancient process of combining Islamic and traditional sanctions of political power, all testify to a creative syncretism, a tolerant understanding among rulers, religious leaders and populace of the value of a constructive intellectual response to changing circumstances.

The major, continuing importance of interior lines of communication and of indigenous invention and initiative is, of course, by no means confined to this theme of political centralization. The transmission of language and ideas by the movements of people, sometimes over great distances, with the consequent creation of wider areas of a common culture, is one of the main themes of earlier African history, even if its importance, compared with developments *in situ*, has sometimes been overstressed. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed few

¹ See below, chapter 1, pp. 51–2, and also R. S. O’Fahey, ‘The growth and development of the Keira sultanate of Dār Fūr’, Ph.D. thesis (London, 1972).

INTRODUCTION

large-scale upheavals. One, however, dominated the history of Ethiopia and the Horn throughout this period. The expansion of the Galla and their infiltrations into semitized Ethiopia did not merely bring the disruption and the decline, albeit temporary, of the central institutions of this long-established kingdom; more positively this series of migrations was also marked by creative interaction and assimilation between Galla and Amhara. Indeed, especially where the Galla settled among the Sidama peoples, it sometimes involved a revolutionary restructuring of the traditional egalitarian organization of these powerful invaders. During this period, the irruptions also of the Masai and Kalenjin deeply affected many peoples over a large sector of eastern Africa, and the expansion of the Azande and related peoples involved wide-scale cultural and political changes across the Mbomu basin in North-Central Africa.

Together with these examples of major displacements, the local history of many African peoples during these centuries largely consists of a series of small-scale movements – the expansion, flight or division of individual homesteads, families and lineages. Often this process assumed a more than purely local significance, especially if this cultural diffusion was associated, as in the case of the Lunda or the Akan, with the expansion of a major political power: the present homogeneity of northern and southern Akan-speaking peoples is probably largely the result of the diffusion of southern influences under the aegis of Asante from as late as the eighteenth century onwards. Even where political links were weak or non-existent, the cumulative, small-scale movements of people who retained social and cultural ties with the areas from which they came, could contribute, as in the case of the Ibo, to the massive peaceful expansion of a people's language and culture; while across the great savanna belt of West Africa the slow movements of the Fulani had for long been building up to a point where they were to dominate the immediate subsequent history of a large part of this area. If the day-to-day horizons of most African peoples were extremely limited, the areas in which an individual could find himself at home were far wider than is often envisaged.

In those areas where the long-distance migrations had already occurred, these centuries were often marked by consolidation and the integration of diverse segments into a wider unity. Sometimes, as in the case of Bornu or the interlacustrine kingdoms, this process was directed and encouraged by a central political power. But integration is a theme which embraced far more than mere political initiatives. African