SLAVERY, COLONIALISM AND ECONOMIC GROWTH IN DAHOMEY, 1640–1960

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The Bight of Benin came to the attention of the wider world in the late seventeenth century as it became the leading supplier of slaves for the plantations of the New World.[1] The accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of rulers and merchants proceeded in the eighteenth century with the consolidation of control over the coast by the kingdom of Danhomè, and with the establishment of the broader hegemony over much of the Bight of Benin by the empire of Oyo. Throughout the nineteenth century the impression of wealth and power in the Bight of Benin continued as Danhomè kept European powers at bay. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, colonial Dahomey was wealthier in commerce and tax revenue than all of France's West African colonies but Senegal. Yet the People's Republic of Bénin is now listed among the world's poorest nations, with a 1974 per capita income of $120.[2]

Historians of Dahomey have tended to see a long-term decline in the region's wealth and power, certainly in relative terms, and perhaps in absolute terms.[3] In contrast, however, the quantitative evidence tends to contradict the thesis of long-term decline and to substitute for it a thesis of long-term growth: the economy has grown at a modest rate, with periodic interruptions, over the course of its modern history. Data presenting more than three centuries of trans-Atlantic commerce are summarized, in Figure 1.1, through three related time series. These are (I) annual average value of exports by decade in current pounds sterling, (II) real export revenue or import purchasing power in 1913 pounds, and (III) per capita import purchasing power in 1913 pounds.[4] The region to which these figures refer is the southern portion of the modern People's Republic of Bénin, which encompasses the bulk of modern Bénin's population and economic activity, and which lies centrally located in the Bight of Benin as a whole. I shall use the term Dahomey to refer to this geographic region: while place names and political structures have changed repeatedly over the past three centuries, the region itself has retained its identity.

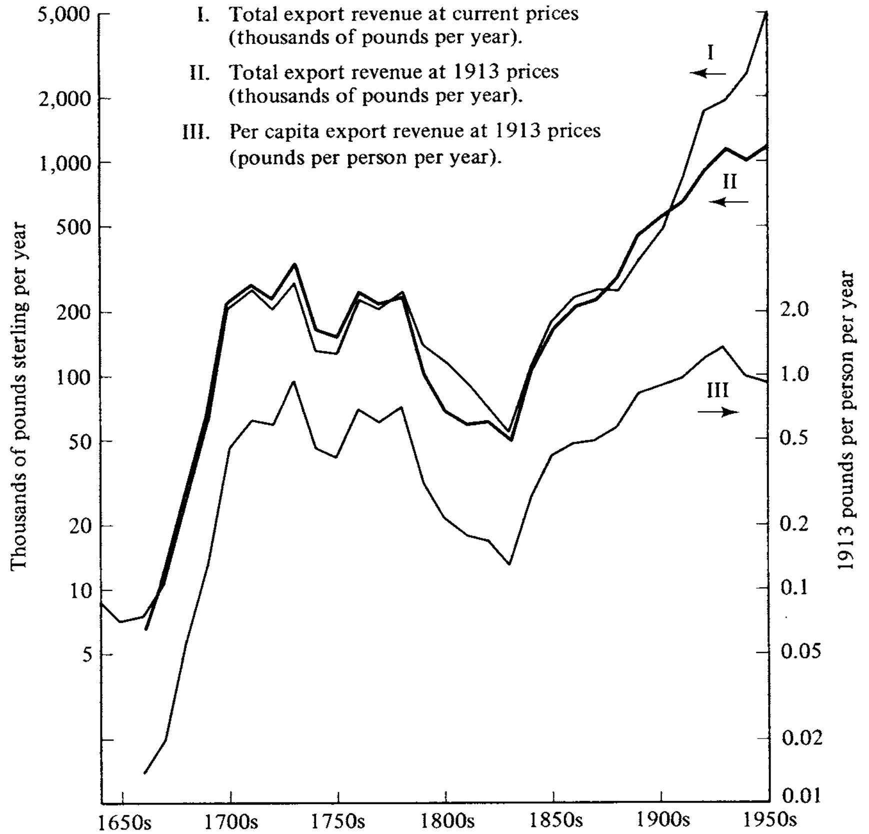

Figure 1.1 Export revenue from Dahomey, 1640–1960.
Source: Table A1.1.

By any measure, Dahomey has been deeply involved in trans-Atlantic trade throughout this period, and its level of participation has grown: from the 1670s through the 1950s, the average annual rate of growth in important purchasing power was 0.9%, or 0.7% per year on a per capita basis.[5] The nineteenth century, for example, brought no sudden impact of Europeans nor of the world market, but only the modification of a long-standing relationship.[6] Average real export revenue (or import purchasing power) in the nineteenth century fell by 10% from that of the eighteenth century in aggregate terms, and declined by 25% in per capita terms. But while export revenue in the eighteenth century fluctuated around a declining trend, in the nineteenth century it grew steadily. In the twentieth century, average real export revenue has been over four times that of the

Table 1.1. *Average annual growth rates (percent) for total exports, at constant (1913) prices*

	Dahomey	Great Britain	USA
A. Short term			
1690s–1730s	4.2	1.5	
1730s–1760s	−1.0	1.3	
1760s–1790s	−2.9	0.8	
1790s–1830s	−1.9	2.8	3.1
1830s–1870s	3.8	4.9	3.6
1870s–1900s	3.0	2.3	4.7
1900s–1930s	2.4	0.4	1.1
1930s–1950s	0.1	1.6	3.4
B. Long term			
1700s–1950s	0.7	2.5	
1790s–1950s	2.1	3.0	3.4

Table 1.2. *Per capita export revenue, in 1913 pounds*

	Dahomey	Great Britain	USA
1700s	0.47	0.69	
1730s	0.95	1.03	
1760s	0.70	1.37	
1790s	0.31	1.42	0.61
1830s	0.13	2.53	0.64
1870s	0.49	11.1	0.86
1900s	0.90	15.7	1.88
1930s	1.36	14.5	1.61
1950s	0.93	18.2	2.60

Sources for Tables 1.1 and 1.2: Appendix 1; Deane and Cole, *British Economic Growth*, 6, 8, 29, 319–21; United States Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics*, 8, 537–8. Details of calculations available on request from the author.

nineteenth century, or more than twice that of the nineteenth century in per capita terms. The rate of growth has been slower in the twentieth century than in the late nineteenth century, and per capita growth has recently been negative.

These estimates of growth in external trade are compared in Tables 1.1 and 1.2 with equivalent estimates for Great Britain and the United States. The relatively high level of per capita exports from Dahomey in the eighteenth century may come as something of a surprise. This results partly from my restricting the population considered to that within Dahomey as I have defined it, while a minority of slaves exported were taken from beyond that region. But any variant of this calculation throws into relief the active participation of Dahomey in world commerce, especially through slave exports.

These same estimates of import purchasing power may be treated as a proxy for the total domestic product of Dahomey; on this assumption, overall economic growth for Dahomey may be compared with growth rates for other economies. This step requires the rather stringent assumption of a long-run correlation between the value of exports and the value of total output. The first defense of this approach is that trans-Atlantic commerce provides the only systematic data we will ever have on this economy before 1890. In addition, the assumption has intuitive plausibility in this case, though only for the long run. For periods of less than four or five decades, the correlation between growth in domestic product and foreign trade can be extremely weak, since increased exports could stem from a mere transferral of effort from the domestic economy. In the extreme case, the astonishing quantity of slave exports from 1690 through 1740 increased export revenue but decreased domestic product because of depopulation. Yet in the longer run the correlation shows up again, as the smaller population led to a reduction of slave exports. Over the last three centuries, exports have been a substantial portion of total output (usually ranging from 10% to 20%, judging from data since 1950), and exports have generally been more than a transfer of effort from the domestic economy. As long as we restrict consideration to the period after Dahomey began heavy participation in trans-Atlantic commerce–after 1670–export revenue can be taken as a proxy for domestic product which, if not precise, is quite instructive.[7] Tables 1.3 and 1.4 show comparisons of this proxy for domestic product with growth rates and per capita levels of domestic product for Great Britain, the United States, Brazil and Mexico.

Table 1.3. *Comparative growth rates (percent) of real national income (with growth of import purchasing power for Dahomey)*

	Mexico	Brazil	Great Britain	USA	Dahomey
1800s–1840s	–0.1	2.1	2.4	4.1	1.1
1840s–1860s	–0.4	2.8	2.0	4.6	3.4
1860s–1890s	3.0	2.1	3.4	4.4	2.7
1890s–1910s	3.7	1.8	1.8	4.2	1.7
1910s–1930s			1.0	2.7	2.8
1930s–1950s			2.0	3.4	0.1

Table 1.4. *Per capita domestic product, in 1913 pounds (with Dahomey per capita export revenue, in 1913 pounds, multiplied by 7)*

	Mexico	Brazil	Great Britain	USA	Dahomey
1800s	4.7	4.0	13	11	1.5
1840s	3.6	4.6	21	18	1.9
1860s	3.2	5.0	24	23	3.4
1870s	4.0	5.4	32	28	3.4
1890s	5.9	5.7	48	47	5.8
1910s	8.5	6.1	52	71	6.7
1930s			60	84	9.5
1950s			81	154	6.5

Note: The final column in Table 1.4 is calculated on the assumption that domestic product averages seven times the level of exports for Dahomey.
Sources for Tables 1.3 and 1.4: Appendix 1; Coatsworth, 'Obstacles to Economic Growth,' 82; Deane and Cole, *British Economic Growth*, 6, 8, 284; US Bureau of Census, *Historical Statistics*, 8, 139.

The rate of growth for Dahomey in the nineteenth century seems not to have been greatly different from those of Mexico or Brazil, nor greatly inferior to that of Great Britain; the level of per capita income for Dahomey may have been roughly on a par with those of Mexico and Brazil. The extreme relative poverty of Dahomey is thus a phenomenon of the twentieth century.

The resolution of the contradiction between theses of growth and decline is, in short, that the economy suffered relative decline when compared with economies outside Africa or with other African regions, yet it experienced absolute growth over the long run. This growth took place because of both domestic and trans-Atlantic factors which were sufficient to overcome the substantial negative influences of slave exports (from 1670 to 1860) and French fiscal policy (from 1900 to 1960).

The fundamental issue under study in the twelve chapters of this book is the elucidation of a dialectic between the forces of growth and the forces of decline. Chapter 1 summarizes the argument. Chapter 2 presents the analysis of long-run economic change up to the beginning of colonial rule in 1890. Chapter 3, in contrast, is cross-sectional: the economic structure revealed there for the 1880s may, to a degree, be projected backwards in time; it also provides a base line against which to measure the analysis of succeeding chapters. Chapters 4 through 8 concentrate on the years 1890–1914 and treat, in succession, production, demand, exchange, the state, and socio-political conflicts. These 25 comprehensively documented years – strategically located at the juncture of the precolonial and colonial eras – permit clarification of the structure and short-run dynamics of the economy, and at the same time throw light on its long-run developments. Chapter 9 draws together the preceding analyses of short-run and long-run change to propose a mechanism of accumulation – a thesis explaining how the forces of domestic growth overcame external constraints – and an historical interpretation posed in terms of counterfactual alternatives. Chapters 10 and 11 extend the analysis of economic changes from 1915 to 1960. Chapter 12, after a brief recapitulation, links developments of the early national period to those of the years before 1960.

Foreign trade provides the most systematic data on Dahomey available to the economic historian, but this study gives primary emphasis to the domestic economy rather than to foreign trade: I have treated foreign trade as a 'window' on the domestic economy, using patterns of foreign trade to imply the structure and changes of the domestic economy. This method is analogous to the work of the archaeologist who, working from the analysis of durable remains of past civilization, seeks to reconstruct an image of the whole society. Further, and again as with the archaeologist, the integration of all other available source material with the basic source is indispensable to the success of the analysis: I have relied on descriptions of the domestic economy, political histories drawn from oral and written sources, data on money and government finance, and anthropological studies.

The method of analysis draws on both Marxian and Neoclassical traditions of economic history. While readers trained in one or the other tradition may experience some discomfort in perusing a work which utilizes both, they may also find advantages in a comprehensive approach which analyzes growth, in Neoclassical terms, and transformation, in Marxian terms. The Neoclassical framework, abstracting from social data, is useful in short-run analysis of economic structure and dynamics, and in analysis of long-run growth; the Marxian framework, by including social data in an analysis couched in terms of modes of production, is appropriate for analysis of long-run economic transformation, and for study of short-run interactions of social, political and economic factors. While the Neoclassical approach is, ultimately, subordinated to the Marxian perspective, both have been important in analyzing such aspects of Dahomey's economic history as its periodization.

Establishing a periodization is important in African economic history, if only to emphasize that the conventional periods of political history, however important in their own right, do not necessarily mark significant economic transitions. The criteria for periodization include not only governments, policies and statesmen, but also modes of production, international economic ties, and levels of economic activity. The periods I have identified include the 'mythic era,' to 1660; the 'era of slave exports,' 1640–1860; the 'era of agricultural exports,' 1840–1960; and the 'capitalist era,' since 1930.[8] As a summary of the results to be developed in detail in succeeding chapters, the remainder of the present chapter is devoted to a chronological review, within this periodization, of the major themes in the economic history of Dahomey.

THE MYTHIC ERA, TO 1660

Although neither written documents nor oral traditions have yet provided detailed evidence on this period, the outlines of Dahomey's early economic conditions are visible.[9] By the fifteenth century, Dahomey had a relatively dense population and a monetized economy based on the cultivation of African yams, on fishing and on manufactures; a network of markets tied the region together under the supervision of small states and enabled it to participate in commerce with neighboring regions. Socio-economic changes from the fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth century took place through the evolution of this system, rather than through migration or other abrupt changes. States were prepared to enter into commercial relations with the earliest Europeans to arrive; although the volume of trans-Atlantic commerce was small, it is conceivable that exports of agricultural produce and manufactures were greater than is now known. Dahomey's Atlantic commerce was oriented toward the Gold Coast and perhaps also toward the kingdom of Benin: Ardra cloth was exported, while cowries were eagerly purchased to supplement the money supply. The agricultural economy shifted in this period to make maize the dominant crop, ahead of yams, and also saw the adoption of other American and Asian crops. The new crops diversified Dahomey's economy, and may also have led to significant population growth.

Stated in terms of modes of production, the economy of the Bight of Benin was dominated in this early period – as, indeed, for all eras since – by the commodity exchange mode of production.[10] In this mode of production or sector of the economy, individuals and family units produced goods for sale, sold them in the local market, and purchased a large portion of the goods they consumed, including food, manufactures, raw materials and luxuries. The familial mode of production, in which families produced goods for their own consumption, probably accounted for a greater volume of goods than that passing through the domestic market.[11] Nevertheless the commodity exchange sector was then and has since remained the leading sector, providing the adjustment mechanism in which the gamut of local, West African and eventually trans-Atlantic influences interacted to determine prices and the allocation of resources. The continuous increase in the circulation of money reflects the historic expansion of this sector.

The commodity exchange mode of production created one social class, and sometimes two. Where land and tools were all owned by producers, the producers formed a single class. Conflicts among members of this class naturally took place, as over access to productive resources such as land, and as with conflicts between buyers and sellers. In cases where some individuals or families owned land while others worked it, two social classes, landlord and tenant, emerged. In such cases, class conflict centered around the portion of the tenant's produce which was taken by the landlord. Surplus over immediate needs in the familial sector could only be held from year to year, or was in part collected as tribute by states. Surplus in the commodity exchange sector, however, was marketed locally or in other regions, and thus gave support to the development of merchants, states and landowners, who in turn appropriated a portion of this surplus.

Long-distance caravans and shipping throughout West Africa and beyond composed the mercantile system: this articulative structure linked the local economies with each other and with economies outside the region. Merchants who performed this function profited from it, which made them both allies and antagonists of the producers and purchasers. In part, those who owned the merchandise and those who carried it were identical, but more generally the owners formed one social class specialized to long-distance trade, with a second class being formed of porters, be they wage-earners, slaves, or junior members of a lineage.

Slavery, while not unknown in the Bight of Benin, was not yet the basis of a separate mode of production: slaves were a part of the familial, commodity exchange or mercantile sectors.

The state, in its economic functions, existed primarily to provide order in the commodity exchange sector, by resolving disputes over land and local exchange. But the state also provided important regulatory and protective functions to the mercantile sector. In large or powerful states – Ardra, the Hueda kingdom, Oyo and perhaps others – taxation of agricultural produce, local and long-distance trade permitted the development of a strong aristocracy, wealthy in land, commerce and slaves. Other states, even including Tado, the ancestral kingdom of many of the Aja states, continued to operate at a minimal level: kings were mediators among lineages and merchants, rather than members and servants of a ruling class. The distinction between large states and small states – with the small states governing half or more of the region's population – was to remain a constant factor in Dahomey's economic history.

This early regional economy – in which coexisted two modes of production, links to other economies and a variety of state structures – may be characterized as a social formation dominated by the commodity exchange mode of production.[12] Even before the major impact of the world market, Dahomey had grown beyond mere subsistence and self-sufficiency. It seems likely that this regional economy grew at a modest pace from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, as a result of new crops, population growth, producer investments in clearing fields, waterways and roads, and perhaps as a result of an expanded money supply and new West African market opportunities.

These were the economic conditions into which the slave trade intruded.

THE ERA OF SLAVE EXPORTS, 1640–1860

In the course of two centuries roughly two million slaves were exported from the Bight of Benin, comprising one fifth of the total Atlantic slave trade. The level of slave exports was remarkably steady – from 7,000 to 15,000 annually, after the 1670s – and most of the slaves came from Dahomey, and hence from within two hundred kilometers of the coast.[13] Through the export of slaves, the Bight of Benin participated in what may be termed the world mercantile economy: in exports, it was linked to the plantation economies of the New World, which in turn were linked to the growing European market from agricultural produce. In imports, the Bight of Benin received tobacco from Brazil and rum from the plantations of Brazil and the Caribbean. But it also received cotton cloth from India, cowries from the Maldives, and manufactures from Europe.

The effective New World demand for slaves began with the expansion of Brazilian plantations in the 1630s. Portuguese and Dutch slave merchants were followed by English and French merchants in the 1650s. The years 1640–70 must therefore be seen as years of decision for Dahomey, for it was at this time that the institutions from exporting slaves were developed. The West African price of slaves declined in this period, while the quantity exported grew sharply beginning in the 1670s, suggesting that a system was developed in those years which could provide a large number of slaves at low cost to slave exporters. In other terms, the slave-catching system was developed in the years 1640–70: this set of institutions corresponded to a mode of reproduction, for it served to reproduce the labor force of New World plantations and later of African plantations, and it further served to expand the families of African slave owners. The institutions, in general, included warfare, raiding, kidnapping, judicial procedures, tribute, and sale of persons by destitute families; these structures further reinforced a willingness to tolerate or justify the enslavement of one's enemies or even one's own.

State power played a crucial role in the collection and delivery of slaves: Danhomè and some other states became quite devoted to the slave-catching sector. The mercantile sector throughout the region became heavily, if not dominantly, oriented toward collaboration with slave-catching activities. While sale of slaves was governed by the state, and while many slaves were exported by the state, the mercantile sector exported the majority of the slaves on private account. The commodity exchange sector also participated in the slave trade, by selling slaves and by buying slaves for integration into families.

The beginnings of a slave-labor mode of production took form in the eighteenth century, as slaves were used in growing numbers to support royal retinues. This did not spread far beyond royalty because the comparison of prices in the trans-Atlantic market with the value of slave produce in either the West African or trans-Atlantic markets favored the export of slaves until roughly the 1830s. Nonetheless, many female slaves were placed in new West African families, slaves were used as porters in commerce and as laborers in coastal factories, and slaves became officials in Oyo and in states drawing on the tradition of Oyo, such as Porto-Novo.

Comparison of the prices and quantities of slave exports over time reveals several distinct periods in the history of slave exports, corresponding to changing political, demographic and market conditions. In most of these periods, the price elasticity of supply of slaves was over 1.5, indicating that an increase in slave prices brought an even larger increase in the quantity of slaves supplied. Slave exporting, hence, was a business – more a cause of war than an effect of it. The exception proves the rule: from the 1700s through the 1730s, the price of slaves skyrocketed, but the quantity of slave exports declined somewhat. The reason, however, was that the slave exporters were running out of people to send.

For the Aja peoples in particular, the heavy drain on population actually led to population decline in the eighteenth century: an average of over 8,500 Aja slaves per year ($\pm$ 40%) were exported for fifty years from 1690 to 1740, which amounted to some three percent of the total population per year. No birth rate would have been high enough to prevent depopulation under these conditions. For the balance of the eighteenth century, Aja slave exports averaged from one to two percent of the population per year. The exports of Eastern Voltaic peoples (mostly Bariba) came to about one percent of population per year all during the eighteenth century. The losses of the Yoruba peoples to the slave trade are better known because they occurred later: Oyo played a modest role in slave exports until late in the eighteenth century, and the Yoruba only became the dominant ethnic group among slave exports in the 1820s with the collapse of Oyo, after which their exports reached 0.6% of the population per year. Two-thirds of the slaves exported were Aja peoples enslaved most commonly through wars among themselves, notably through raids by Danhome on its neighbors. In the Bight of Benin, therefore, the notion of coastal peoples selling slaves obtained from the distant interior is exaggerated.

Figures on slave exports alone underestimate the dislocation caused by slave raiding. Enslaved women tended to be kept by their captors rather than be exported. Weaker peoples tended to suffer preferentially, although military reverses were not uncommon for even the strongest states. And with the nineteenth-century decline in the trans-Atlantic trade, slaves captured in the wars of the Sokoto Caliphate, the Yoruba wars and other battles tended to become domestic slaves.

The loss and dislocation of population because of slave trade were thus a clear detriment to the economy of Dahomey, more so than for most other areas of Africa because of the particular intensity and consistency of slave exports. The exports, on the other hand, provided revenues which were used for the purchase of imports. Nevertheless, while it is sometimes argued that these imports provided access to new goods, new technology, and that they engendered collateral commerce, the cost of foregoing most imports would probably not have been large. Domestic substitutes existed for most imports, a smaller volume of commerce would not have impeded the spread of improved technology to Dahomey, and necessities such as iron could have been imported with the more modest proceeds for agricultural exports. Thus, accounting for exports and imports together, Dahomey would have been better off if it had not participated in the export of slaves.

Growth of Dahomey's economy was arrested and reversed by the export of slaves, and the distribution of the region's wealth was skewed. Population growth was reversed, and wars cut the level of production and producer investment. Refugee groups formed, subsisting at reduced levels of living while the victors enjoyed the spoils of war, harems, and windfall profits from sale of slaves – if only until the next war.

The overall characterization of Dahomey's economy in the era of slave exports – that is, the issue of its social formation – is a complex and controversial issue. Observers have attempted variously to demonstrate that the key element of the economy was state policy, slave exports, tribute, or peasant production; some have argued that Dahomey was isolated from the world economy, and others that its development was determined by the world economy.[14] In fact, none of these factors can be ignored, and no one of them was clearly dominant. The economy of the slave-exporting era remained based on the commodity exchange mode of production which, in intimate association with the familial sector, produced goods and services, reproduced the labor force, and sustained the states and the mercantile system. At the same time, the procuring of slaves and the exporting of most male slaves constituted major economic activities. From a local viewpoint slave exports could be considered as a factor superimposed on the substratum of the commodity exchange economy. Viewed from the outside, in contrast, the region served as a source of slave labor, in which the commodity exchange sector gave support to the reproduction of slaves for export. The commercial value of slave exports was far inferior to the value of all other domestic production, and was presumably less than the value of other domestic production for the market, yet the slave-export sector was important in its own right and did much to shape the whole economy. Slave commerce constricted the commodity exchange system because of war and the export of slaves; on the other hand it expanded the commodity exchange system through the circulation of imported manufactures and imported money. Strong states and governing classes, as in Ardra and Danhomè, facilitated the collection and export of slaves; yet continued political fragmentation of the Bight of Benin as a whole perpetuated the wars which yielded slaves.

The depopulation of Dahomey at the turn of the eighteenth century brought a search for political solutions to the strains of slave exporting. According to I. A. Akinjogbin, Danhomè's rapid expansion in the 1720s was an attempt by King Agaja to put an end to slave exports. This result was achieved in practice at much the same time on the Gold Coast, where the establishment of Asante control over the Akan heartland virtually ended the export of Akan slaves. Whatever Agaja's intentions, the expansion of Danhomè was immediately cut short by the invasions from Oyo which rendered the region tributary; Dahomey remained politically fragmented for another century, during which massive exports of Aja slaves ontinued. Exports of Yoruba slaves, in turn, grew only as Oyo weakened and then collapsed.

THE ERA OF AGRICULTURAL EXPORTS, 1840–1960

With the industrial revolution, the Bight of Benin became linked directly to the industrial economies of Europe.[15] Trade relations with Brazil, which was the major trading partner of the Bight of Benin until the mid-nineteenth century, were gradually reduced to insignificance: palm product exports to Brazil fell off while those to France, Britain and Germany grew; Brazilian tobacco was replaced by US tobacco; European cloth replaced that of India; European distilled liquors competed with New World rum; and the money system saw Maldive cowries successively supplemented and challenged by dollars of varying origins, East African cowries, British sterling, and finally by French francs. Europeans came to dominate Dahomey's nineteenth-century trans-Atlantic commerce in large part