

## Introduction

### *On Gifts and the Atlantic Slave Trade*

In 2015, the Rossini auction house put on sale a large and unusual eighteenth-century silver sword manufactured in France (Figure 4.1). On the false blade of this impressive object is an engraved dedication written in French that reads: “Andris Macaye Mafouque le juste de Cabinde.” The inscription allows us to identify the sword as a present to a righteous (*juste*) dignitary based in Cabinda, a West Central African port in the era of the Atlantic slave trade. At first sight, the object could be seen as any other eighteenth-century silver artifact produced in Europe to be given as a gift to a prominent person. But accompanying the ceremonial sword was a sign covered with red velvet on which there was an ivory plaque stating “1892 souvenir de la campagne du Dahomey” (1892, souvenir from the Dahomey campaign). Whereas the engraved inscription suggests the sword was offered to an African dignitary, the plaque indicates that French officers who fought during the wars that led to the conquest and colonization of the West African Kingdom of Dahomey brought the object to France. The Musée du Nouveau Monde of La Rochelle in France made the highest bid and purchased the object.<sup>1</sup>

Since its acquisition, the silver ceremonial sword has been prominently displayed in one of the museum’s main rooms. The stunning object is also featured in the modest guidebook that describes its permanent exhibitions.<sup>2</sup> How was an eighteenth-century object, given as a gift to a West Central African middleman, looted from Dahomey’s capital at the end of the nineteenth century? This book attempts to answer that question. I use this gift, carried to different places by various peoples at several times, to tell the history of the French trade in enslaved Africans in the kingdoms of the Loango coast in West Central Africa and in the Kingdom of

Dahomey in West Africa. I also seek to understand how the societies of the Loango coast were impacted by a trade in which people were considered as commodities, in other words “objects of economic value ... and social potential.”<sup>3</sup>

*The Gift: How Objects of Prestige Shaped the Atlantic Slave Trade and Colonialism* follows the tortuous trajectory of this silver ceremonial sword and examines its changing significances. Through its displacement, this object became a multilayered repository of words, images, shapes, materials, and meanings embodying the complex dialogues among different peoples and regions in the Atlantic world during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Yet, these exchanges could not exist without the long-distance maritime trade with Asia and the Mediterranean. French slave merchants were part of cosmopolitan networks. Traders from La Rochelle who sailed to the Loango coast, the Bight of Benin, and the French West Indies purchased people with a variety of currencies and goods, including European and Asian textiles, coral from the Mediterranean, and manufactured items made of silver mined in South America and Mexico. Therefore, despite of the small scale of this study, I frame this book as what Francesca Trivellato defines as a “global history in small scale.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, instead of approaching the French silver *kimpaba* only through the lens of micro-history, my analysis is also guided by macrohistory.

Over the following pages, I examine how exchanges of prestige gifts had an impact on societies on the Loango coast and the Bight of Benin during the second half of the eighteenth century and the late nineteenth century. But before going further, it is important to make some distinctions. In the context of the Atlantic slave trade and the commercial exchanges within the African continent, depending on the period and the region, a variety of items such as certain European, African, and Asian textiles and even some kinds of alcohol could be referred to as “gifts” or “presents.”<sup>5</sup> Gifts also included objects of prestige, manufactured items, very often especially created for their recipients. Thus, by using the French silver sword as a framework, I argue that objects of prestige embodied the new power acquired by African agents, because of the intensification of the Atlantic slave trade in the eighteenth-century. Following this artifact’s trajectory allows us to explore how African and European authorities took decisions and how they positioned themselves when negotiating the terms of the Atlantic slave trade. It also permits us to interrogate how societies of the Loango coast and the Kingdom of Dahomey conceived ideas of sovereignty. Ultimately, I contend, the

analysis of objects of prestige offers an opportunity to better understand how material culture shaped the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism, and how cultural artifacts were also modeled by the trade in enslaved peoples and the rise of European colonial rule in Africa.<sup>6</sup>

#### THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE ON THE LOANGO COAST

Travelogues, visual images, ship manifests, ship logs, ship captain journals, correspondence, and artifacts show that in their attempts to control the ports on the Loango coast, such as Cabinda, Malembo, and Loango, European slave traders engaged in close interactions with African rulers and brokers. These European agents acquired enslaved Africans in exchange for a variety of goods such as European and Asian textiles, handguns, iron bars, and cowry shells that served as currencies.<sup>7</sup> In these interactions, African agents developed tastes for specific European, American, and Asian goods, foods, and drinks, as well as for finery and luxurious objects made of precious metals, coral, ivory, glass, and porcelain. European traders sought to please African rulers and their intermediaries in order to obtain the best conditions to conduct the trade in enslaved Africans.

There is a growing scholarship examining the tastes and consuming patterns of West Central Africans and West Africans during the era of the Atlantic slave trade. Still, very few studies examine gifts of prestige among these items.<sup>8</sup> Whereas some goods provided to African traders were labeled as gifts, the nature of these presents is complex as, to both European and African agents, they were conceived as a form of tribute or tax that should be paid to each agent at specific stages of the commercial transactions that took place on the coasts of Atlantic Africa. But in order to obtain the support of local rulers and agents, European traders also offered valuable items, gifts of prestige that were manufactured in Europe, Asia, and sometimes also in the Americas. Shipowners who outfitted slave ships as well as the ship captains they assigned to sail to the ports on the Atlantic coasts of Africa understood the importance of offering presents that embodied symbolic elements that were meaningful to local agents.

Over the past years, several historians have examined the slave trade in the West African ports of Senegambia, the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin, the Bight of Biafra, and the region south of the Congo River in West Central Africa.<sup>9</sup> But the Loango coast, the region north of the Congo River,

remains understudied. Since the publication of Phyllis M. Martin's first research monograph investigating the external trade on the Loango coast five decades ago, very few scholars have studied this region.<sup>10</sup> Exploring the singularities of the ports of Loango, Malembo, and Cabinda allows us to understand how these ports, unlike other ports such as Luanda and Benguela south of the Congo River in twenty-first century's Angola, remained under the control of their respective local rulers, therefore often challenging European attempts to dominate the trade in the region.

The ports controlled by the Portuguese, such as Luanda and Benguela, exported an estimated number of 2,826,000 and 764,000 enslaved Africans, respectively, during the era of the Atlantic slave trade. Approximately 1,843,000 enslaved Africans were boarded on slave ships that left from the three African-controlled ports north of the Loango coast (Map 1). Cabinda, part of the Kingdom of Ngoyo, exported nearly 753,000 persons, and current estimates establish that 672,000 enslaved persons were deported from Malembo (the main harbor of the Kingdom of Kakongo) to the Americas and 418,000 from Loango, in the Kingdom of Loango.<sup>11</sup> The majority of these enslaved men, women, and children were initially sent to the Dutch, French, and British West Indies.

Moving west to the Bight of Benin (Map 2), until the eighteenth century, the French, English, Portuguese, and Dutch kept a sustained presence in the port of Ouidah that was part of the Kingdom of Hueda but was conquered by the Kingdom of Dahomey in 1727. In the eighteenth century, most slave ships trading enslaved Africans on the Loango coast were French. Captains from various French ports sailed to the region to purchase and transport African captives to Saint-Domingue, then France's richest colony in the Americas. But with the rise of the Saint-Domingue Revolution in 1791, the French presence dramatically declined both on the Loango coast and Ouidah, as well as in the other ports of the Bight of Benin such as Porto-Novo and Badagry, today respectively located in the Republic of Benin and Nigeria. At the turn of the nineteenth century, most slave traders acquiring enslaved Africans in these two regions transported these captives to Brazil and Cuba.

*The Gift* illuminates the complex mechanisms of the Atlantic slave trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the rise of colonialism by following the trajectory of an eighteenth-century silver artifact fabricated in the port of La Rochelle, transported to the port of Cabinda (then part of the Kingdom of Ngoyo in twenty-first century Angola), brought to Abomey (the capital of the Kingdom of Dahomey in twenty-first century's Republic of Benin), and then carried back to France. The various chapters

show how material culture and luxurious artifacts produced in Europe facilitated and sometimes also complicated the relations between African and European social actors during the era of the Atlantic slave trade. Through this analysis, the book aims to help readers to grasp how the rise and fall of the Atlantic slave trade in West Africa and West Central Africa paved the way for European conquest and colonization of the continent. Likewise, the book interrogates how the French slave traders from La Rochelle, the African traders from Cabinda, and the rulers of Dahomey invested this object with economic and symbolic value. By fabricating, manipulating, transforming, and displacing the silver sword, these various agents also gave to this object new meanings. The sword embodies Appadurai's approach, and that of many historians, that "we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories."<sup>12</sup> By centering material culture and objects of prestige, a dimension neglected by historians far too often, this book seeks to make two main interventions in the historiography of the Atlantic slave trade. First, it aims to show that gifts of prestige were central components in the economic, cultural, and human exchanges among Europeans and Africans during the period of the trade in enslaved Africans. I argue that gifts of prestige were neither ordinary goods nor currencies. Created and shaped to please the receiver, gifts of prestige changed over time to fulfill new goals and respond to new tastes. Therefore, they became tangible repositories of the tragic cross-cultural exchanges intended to provide an enslaved workforce to the colonies of the Americas. Second, through the study of the displacement of one single object, the silver *kimpaba* given as a gift to the *Mfuka* Andris Pukuta, the book shows that despite having been historically studied as two independent regions, the Loango coast and the Bight of Benin were linked by close and complex ties during the era of the Atlantic slave trade.

#### GIFTS IN CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGES

Gifts have been described as an institution by scholars in Classical studies. Starting in antiquity, the term "gift" could be associated with taxes, dowries, and offerings to the gods. Gift exchanges among rulers and visitors from distant lands have also been documented since antiquity, including in Homer's poem *Odyssey* written in the eighth century BCE. In these ancient accounts, hosts provided gifts to their guests upon their departure. The gift was then a memento of sorts, a keepsake that visitors from distant lands would carry back home. Menelaus, the King of

Sparta, welcomed Telemachus, Odysseus's son, in his palace and also offered him gifts: "Come now, stay with me here in my palace, until eleven days or twelve have passed. Then I will send you off with precious gifts."<sup>13</sup> As Telemachus just wanted treasure as a present, Menelaus enumerated the valued items he would give to his guest:

I will give you different gifts, just as you ask.  
I will give you the finest piece of treasure  
Of all the hoard I have piled up at home;  
A finely crafted bowl, of purest silver,  
With gold around him.<sup>14</sup>

Alcinous, the king of the Phaeacians, pleased by Odysseus's wisdom, offered him gifts, "as hosts should do to guests in friendship."<sup>15</sup> Gifts sealed agreements and relationships. In Homer's *Odyssey*, gift givers were hosts and gift receivers were guests. In his classic work *Essai sur le don* (translated as *The Gift*), French sociologist Marcel Mauss reproduces a verse of *Hávamál*, a thirteenth-century Scandinavian poem that meditates on the problem of gift-exchanging:

With weapons and clothes  
Friends must give pleasure to one another  
Everyone knows that for himself  
Those who exchange presents with one another  
Remain friends the longest  
If things turn out successfully.<sup>16</sup>

The poem emphasizes that presents at least indicate the intention of maintaining long-lasting friendships. Yet it also cautions about the risk that there could be obstacles along the path. In this context, exchanging gifts is a form of contract. Gift exchanges were also part of diplomatic exchanges in later periods, during the Middle Ages and the early modern era in Europe and Africa, as well as in the Mediterranean world more broadly.<sup>17</sup>

Exchanges of luxury objects as gifts also played a central role during the first commercial and diplomatic transactions between Asian and European traders in the Arabian Peninsula in the early modern era.<sup>18</sup> Portuguese explorers and the rulers of Atlantic African societies engaged in similar gift-exchanges as early as the fifteenth century.<sup>19</sup> The rise of the Atlantic slave trade emerged alongside these first contacts, sometimes marked by great violence. Of course, gifts could soothe these conflicts. As in previous periods and other cross-cultural contexts, gifts were treasured for their monetary value. African rulers often appreciated objects



FIGURE 1.1 Crown for the King of Ardra, copper (metal), glass, velvet, h. 11 × d. 7 inches, England, c. 1664. Courtesy: Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

made of precious metals as well as rare items from distant regions. In the exchanges that developed throughout the modern era to this day, unlike in antiquity, foreign guests are usually those who offer gifts to their hosts. Atlantic interactions gave rise to new kinds of objects such as crowns, swords, and scepters, adapted to the new context and using forms and materials that engaged the new African recipients. For example, when the English Royal Company of Adventurers sent an embassy to the Kingdom of Allada (also known as Ardra) in the Bight of Benin in 1664, they sent the king of Allada a magnificent copper crown. Lined with red velvet, the crown is decorated with fleurs-de-lis and four crosses-pattée, with a globe on the top (Figure 1.1). The crown was modeled after the St Edwards Crown made for the coronation of King Charles II in 1661. But instead of a solid gold frame decorated with rubies, amethysts, sapphires, garnet, topazes, and tourmalines, the West African piece was in copper and ornated with colorful glass stones. Although acknowledging the royal status of Allada's ruler, the crown

was not made of gold and diamonds, but rather in materials such as copper and glass, suggesting the West African ruler occupied a different rank than that of the king of England.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, the English crown never reached the Bight of Benin, as the vessel that carried the gift was intercepted by the Dutch in the context of the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1665–1667). Although the king of Allada never received the precious present, today the English-manufactured crown is prominently featured at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

African rulers also offered presents to European rulers and agents. Enslaved African men, women, boys, and girls were considered as objects in the exchanges developed during the Atlantic slave trade, which is why African kings also gave slaves as gifts to European traders. In 1750, for example, King Tegbesu of Dahomey sent an embassy to Brazil to negotiate the terms of the Atlantic slave trade. At that time, before heading to Lisbon, the ambassadors stopped in Bahia, where the colonial government headquarters was located and from where the Portuguese fort of Ouidah in Dahomey was administered. The ambassadors brought with them several gifts to the king of Portugal, including two large boxes covered in iron with ornate locks and four enslaved children. Except for one girl who became blind, the other three children were sent as gifts to Lisbon.<sup>21</sup> Gezo, the king of Dahomey, offered a Yoruba enslaved girl named Aina as a gift to British Navy officer Frederick Edwyn Forbes in 1850 when he was visiting Abomey, the capital of the Kingdom of Dahomey (see Map 1). Forbes renamed her Sarah Forbes Bonetta after himself and the name of his navy vessel. Back in London, Forbes gave the enslaved girl to Queen Victoria, who paid for her expenses as she continued to live with the Forbes family.<sup>22</sup>

During the era of the Atlantic slave trade, gifts were valued for their symbolic meaning as much as for their pecuniary value. Hence, in the context of the trade of enslaved Africans that encompassed three continents, various peoples, and several societies over more than three hundred years, the role of gifts and commodities was not opposed, but rather closely related and often intertwined.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the function of one object or a category of objects or things could also change depending on the agents, the region, and the period. As put by Mauss, although gift exchanges are voluntary, “in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily.”<sup>24</sup> Of course, reciprocity is never guaranteed; therefore, a gift is always a bid, as the giver hopes to gain trust from the recipient.<sup>25</sup>

Drawing on Mauss and other theorists who have debated the position of gifts in global exchanges, I seek to understand how the French gift and



by extension European gifts became prestige objects and royal insignias in African societies such as the Kingdom of Ngoyo and the Kingdom of Dahomey during the era of the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>26</sup> I also explore how stolen gifts became objects of power for African rulers and for European officers who invaded and colonized the African continent at the end of the nineteenth century.

Starting with Mauss, anthropologists have debated for decades the gestures of giving, receiving, and reciprocating as the three obligations associated with the exchanges of gifts.<sup>27</sup> Although these three dimensions are present in the context of the presents exchanged between European and African agents on the coasts of Africa, there is also a form of circularity that characterized these exchanges. In other words, once a present was reciprocated, another one would follow. Mauss also differentiates gifts given to humans and gifts that humans give to gods.<sup>28</sup> Still, in the two African societies studied in this book, kings, and to some extent their representatives, embodied divine qualities. Mauss also insists that the gift carries human attributes, part taken from the giver, giving the giver power or superiority over the recipient, creating a debt, of sorts. But in the context of the specific gift discussed in this book, at least to some degree, the French silver sword invested the West Central African recipient with power. Drawing on Nicholas Thomas, in the conflictual context of the Atlantic slave trade, the sword became a “crucial index of the extent to which those relations are sustained or disfigured.”<sup>29</sup>

#### OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

*The Gift* is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1, “The Loango Coast and the Rise of the Atlantic Slave Trade,” revisits the history of the three kingdoms of the Loango coast: Ngoyo, Kakongo, and Loango. I discuss the main institutions and social structures of these societies in order to explain how the three states, and especially Ngoyo and its port, Cabinda, developed commercial exchanges with the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English agents. I explore how the three states of the Loango coast joined the trade in enslaved Africans through these interactions. I pay particular attention to the role of the *Mfuka*, the king’s agent who oversaw the coastal commercial transactions, by seeking to bring to light his role as a middleman and slave trader. In Chapter 2, “La Rochelle and Atlantic Africa,” I explore the history of the French port city of La Rochelle and its involvement in the Atlantic slave trade. By looking at the city’s position vis-à-vis other French slave-trading ports, I examine

the city's connections to Atlantic Africa and the commerce of enslaved people. I pay particular attention to the commercial activities of the shipowner Daniel Garesché and the ship captain Jean-Amable Lessenne, two important historical actors in the story told in this book. Next, in Chapter 3, "Slave Traders Turned Pirates," I explore the commercial activity associated with the trade of enslaved Africans in Cabinda in the Kingdom of Ngoyo on the Loango coast during the eighteenth century. I look at how European powers such as the English and the French competed to obtain the best conditions for their trade in enslaved people in the region and how wars fought in Europe affected their trade on the Loango coast. In addition, and more importantly, this chapter focuses on the competition among French slave traders in the ports of Cabinda and Malembo. The chapter tells the story of how ship captains from Bordeaux and Le Havre attacked two slave ships from La Rochelle. I explore how this conflict illustrated the enduring clashes among European powers in Cabinda. Here I emphasize that despite their continuous efforts, European states never succeeded in constructing permanent trading structures on the Loango coast, as they did on the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin. Next, Chapter 4, "Deciphering the Gift," follows the conflict among ship captains discussed in Chapter 3 to explain how French traders returned to the Loango coast to offer a special gift, a silver sword, to Cabinda's *Mfuka*. I explore the various dimensions of this sword, its creation, production, migration, reception, and meanings for both the givers and the recipient. In Chapter 5, "A Displaced Gift," I discuss the various possible explanations as to how and when the gift given to Cabinda's *Mfuka* ended up in Abomey, the inland capital of the Kingdom of Dahomey, nearly 2,000 miles away from Cabinda. Chapter 6, "Ngoyo Meets Dahomey," studies how the silver sword was received and incorporated in its new home in the royal palaces of Abomey. The Conclusion, "Objects that Shaped the Slave Trade and Colonialism," discusses how the silver sword embodies the history and the legacies of the Atlantic slave trade and European colonialism in Africa. Thus, spanning West Africa, West Central Africa, France, and to some extent Saint-Domingue, this book aims to show how the study of material culture can complicate and nuance the study of the Atlantic slave trade and the ascent of European colonialism in Africa.