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Merchants of Blood and Gunpowder: The English Arms Trade in West Africa

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**Merchants of Blood and Gunpowder:
The English Arms Trade in West Africa**



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Honors Thesis – History

Colby College

Waterville, ME

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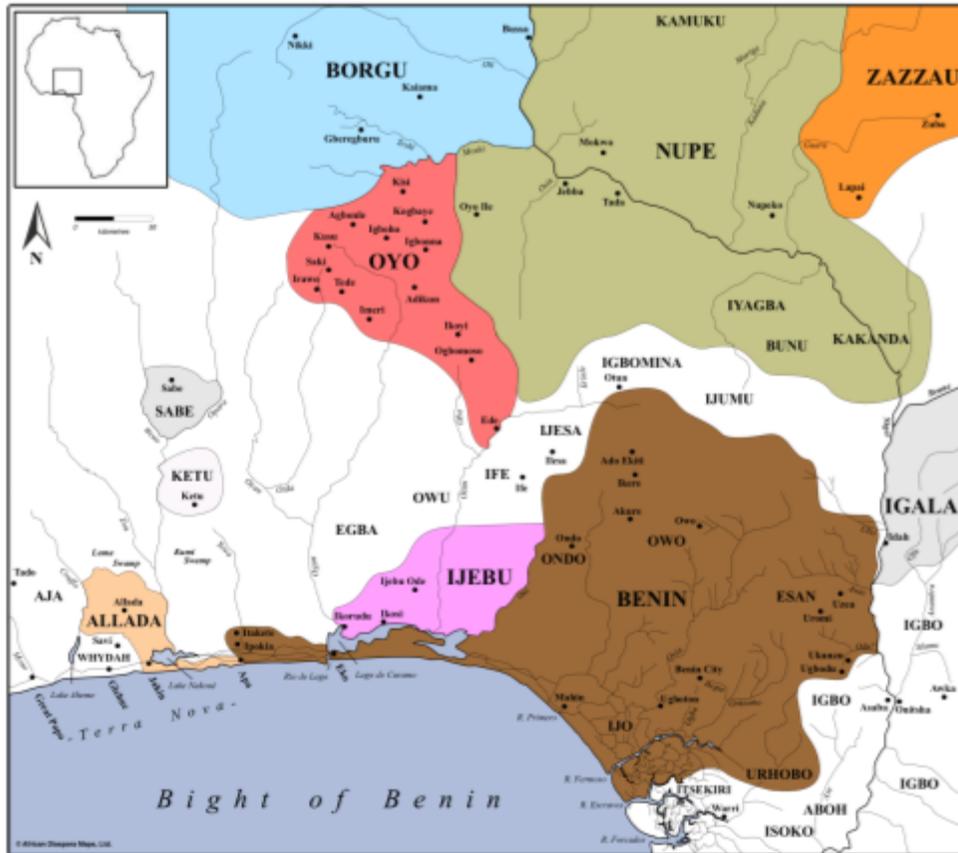
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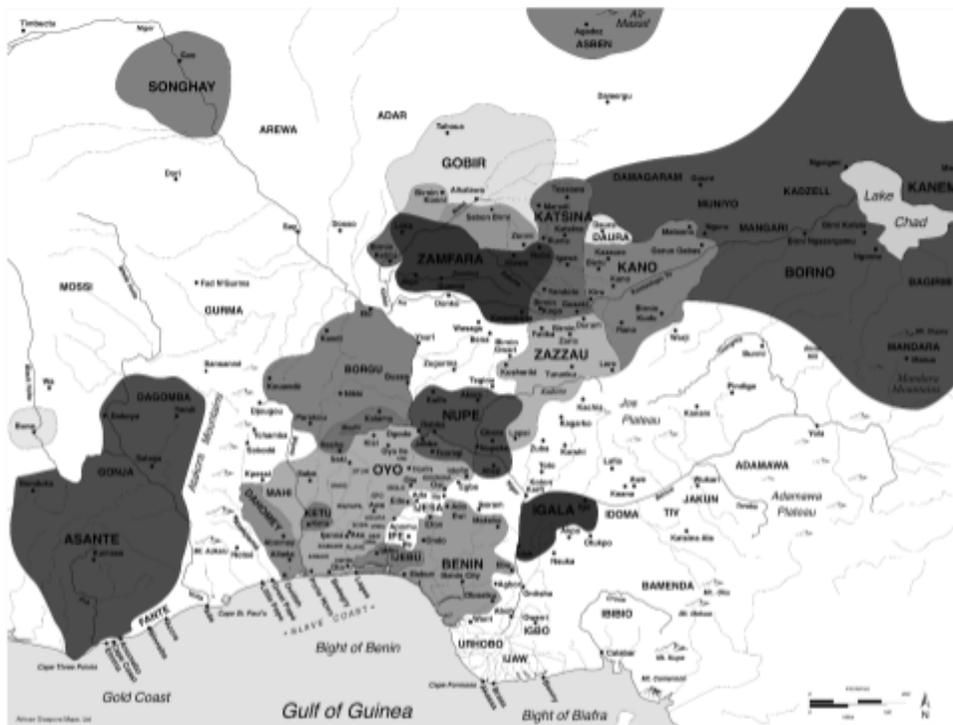
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Map 1: The Bight of Benin, circa 1580.



Map 2: The Bight of Benin, circa 1800.

Literature Review

Introduction

My thesis will focus on the burgeoning transatlantic slave trade's intersection with the newly emerging arms trade to create a "gun-slave cycle" of misery in which African traders sold slaves for guns, which were used to acquire more slaves, to obtain more guns. In particular I want to examine how this "gun-slave cycle" impacted and reshaped West African societies, as well as the accumulation of capital in England which eventually led to the Industrial Revolution. I would also like to determine the degree to which the arms trade and the slave trade mutually reinforced one another, examining, in part, whether or not the arms trade is integral to the transatlantic slave trade. Some of the questions I intend to try to answer include: Did firearms have special status for slave traders, or were they simply another commodity among many? How integral was the arms trade to the growth of the transatlantic slave trade? Where did the arms trade have the most impact in the 17th and 18th centuries? – in West Africa, or England?

I have only been able to find one journal article which directly addresses the gun-slave cycle, namely Warren C. Wheatley's 2018 article "The Gun-slave Hypothesis and the 18th Century British Slave Trade" in the journal *Explorations in Economic History*.¹ The term "gun slave cycle" itself has an unknown provenance but was in common use among academic literature by the 1960s. As such, secondary sources which cover various component parts of the gun-slave cycle abound, and can, for the most part, be divided into three categories. By far the most numerous are books pertaining to West Africa and its integration into the transatlantic slave trade. Quite a few books covering the transatlantic slave trade and its long term impacts include sections which mention West Africa, even if the region is not a focus. Finally, books on the

¹Warren C. Wheatley, "The Gun-slave Hypothesis and the 18th Century British Slave Trade," *Explorations in Economic History* 67 (January 2018): 80-104, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eeh.2017.07.001>.

manufacturing and sale of English weapons between the 17th and 19th centuries are relatively scarce, but do exist and provide useful information to contextualize the arms trade off the coast of West Africa.

Wheatley's article begins with a literature review of prior books and journal articles with relevant contributions to the idea of a gun-slave hypothesis. He notes that many monographs note the dramatic increase in firearms sales to Africa but discount it as a significant factor in the slave trade, referring to it as an "oversimplification" based on "volume." Specifically, scholars ranging from Curtin (1975) to Northup (2002) and Reid (2012) refused to consider firearms as a significant independent factor just because large numbers of firearms were shipped to West Africa and traded for slaves. Wheatley then attempts to construct an economic model to test the impact of arms trading on the West African slave trade, and explains his methodology in doing so. His model implies that a 1% increase in English gunpowder exports alone would fuel a five year long feedback loop of trading which increased the number of slaves traded over that time period by an average of 50%.² Wheatley makes a serious quantitative argument which calls into question prior disregard for the gun-slave cycle among scholarly debate.

Muskets and Mills: The English Side of the Slave Trade

Scholarly monographs and peer reviewed articles on the manufacture and export of weapons by the British do not appear frequently, but enough exist to comment on. *Empire of Guns* discusses the linkages between British manufacturing and export and the Industrial Revolution.³ While not focusing primarily on West Africa, Satia does cover the process of manufacturing weapons, the deep connections between the British state and the arms industry, and how the sale of weapons enabled the accumulation of capital in England. *Arms and the State*

²Whatley, "The Gun-slave," 84-102.

³Pria Satia, *Empire of Guns: The Violent Making of the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018).

instead focuses on the development of the arms trade and how it functioned, with relevant sections on a theoretical model of the arms trade based on the degrees of technology transfer, as well as an overview of the European arms industry and its exports up to 1800.⁴ *British Military Firearms* provides an overview of the types of weapons manufactured at the time and some details pertaining to the manufacturing process during the relevant era.⁵ Joseph E. Inikori's book *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England* offers a comprehensive discussion of the way the slave trade benefitted the British economy and fostered the industrial revolution.⁶ Similarly, the collection *Forced Migration: The Impact of the Export Slave Trade*, edited by Inikori, contains an excellent quantitative and qualitative breakdown of the arms exported to West Africa written by Inikori.⁷

West Africa

Robin Law, in addition to editing several primary source collections of Royal African Company (the state monopoly company established by the English crown to handle trade with West Africa) documents, has also produced a fair number of scholarly articles and monographs about the history of West Africa. His book *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550-1750* provides perhaps the best single overview of the political geography of West Africa in the precolonial era, as the slave trade ramped up in size and intensity.⁸ His other book focuses on the single port of Ouidah, and examines how it grew and evolved in response to the demand for slaves, becoming a major port city on the West African coast.

⁴Keith Krause, *Arms and the State: Patterns of Military Production and Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁵Howard L. Blackmore, *British Military Firearms 1650-1850*, 3rd ed. (London: Cox & Wyman, 1967).

⁶Joseph E. Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁷Joseph E. Inikori, ed., *Forced Migration: The Impact of the Export Slave Trade on African Societies* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1982).

⁸Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550-1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on an African Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).

The Kingdom of Dahomey was a major African beneficiary of the transatlantic slave trade, and as such much ink has been spilled about its history, military, economy, and social structures. *The Precolonial State in West Africa: Building Power in Dahomey* covers how the expansion of state power led to architectural changes in the public structures and marketplaces of the Kingdom of Dahomey.⁹ As a study, it does not directly relate to the gun-slave cycle, but as Dahomey owes its rise to the slave trade and the supply of European firearms, the development of Dahomey as reflected in its buildings in some ways testifies to the impact the slave trade and the arms trade had on West African politics and society. Similarly, *Slavery, Colonialism, and Economic Growth in Dahomey* offers a long term view of the economy of Dahomey, including data on the colonial period and the direct impact of the slave trade on Dahomey's economy.¹⁰ It does not reach any particularly novel conclusions, finding that the slave trade negatively impacted Dahomey's economy and continues to negatively impact Dahomey's economic prospects, now a region of the modern day state of Benin, but is nonetheless a welcome source of data to have on hand.

Yet, Dahomey was not the only African polity to refashion itself under the pressures unleashed by transatlantic slave, or the only one to capitalize on the opportunities it offered. Less prominent groups of people only rarely receive scholarly monographs devoted to them and them alone, and this makes *Gender, Ethnicity and Social Change on the Upper Slave Coast: A History of the Anlo-Ewe* rather unique.¹¹ The Anlo-Ewe, as a subgroup of the larger Ewe people, did not constitute a "conventional" state formation in the same way as Dahomey, but rather an ethnic

⁹J. Cameron Monroe, *The Precolonial State in West Africa: Building Power in Dahomey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹⁰Patrick Manning, *Slavery, Colonialism, and Economic Growth in Dahomey, 1640-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹¹Sandra Greene, *Gender, Ethnicity and Social Change on the Upper Slave Coast: A History of the Anlo-Ewe* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999).

group. Through their trials and tribulations, we come to better understand the impact of slavery on the region as a whole.

Most of the remaining sources dealing with West Africa do so in regards to the region as a whole, and the impact of the slave trade on said region. Histories like *A Fistful of Shells* focus on the African side of the slave trade, and in particular on the commercial desires and consumer preferences of African merchants.¹² Toby Green demonstrates convincingly and comprehensively that African merchants were neither fools nor dupes, and were rational economic actors with substantial influence on the trade itself. Other scholarly monographs such as *Slave Traders by Invitation* and anthologies such as *Reconfiguring Slavery: West African Trajectories* adopt a similar approach, centering West African agency and their role as historical actors¹³. As such, a richer portrait of the region and the transatlantic slave trade emerges, one characterized by a complex web of economic relations, trade, and coercion.

The Slave Trade

The slave trade itself has received extensive academic attention for its scale, enormous economic impact, political importance, and the immense suffering it inflicted on millions of people. Some of the best works dealing with the transatlantic slave trade hone in on the connections enslaved people had to West Africa. *Saltwater Slavery* in particular is a phenomenal and gut-punching analysis of this transatlantic trade in West African slaves, and explores what exactly it means to transform a human being into a commodity.¹⁴ Similarly, microhistories like *The Two Princes of Calabar* track individual enslaved people from West Africa to the Americas,

¹²Toby Green, *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

¹³Finn Fuglestad, *Slave Traders by Invitation: West Africa's Slave Coast in the Precolonial Era* (New York: Oxford University Press., 2018); Benedetta Rossi and Alice Bellagamba, eds., *Reconfiguring Slavery: West African Trajectories*, 2nd ed. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).

¹⁴Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2008).

humanizing the victims of an atrocity whose perpetrators deliberately sought to dehumanize.¹⁵ Finally, the abolition of the slave trade did not bring sudden peace and prosperity, but in many ways functioned as yet another means for the British empire to exert imperial power.

Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic explores how British officials used abolitionism as a wedge to pry open African countries and justify imperial adventures as moral expeditions.¹⁶ The trade's economic dimensions are best covered by books like *Capitalism and Slavery*, explores the connections between slavery and the growth of capitalism, and quantitative data provided by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade database and primary source documents such as shipping ledgers and account books.¹⁷

Conclusion

There is quite a bit of literature regarding the transatlantic slave trade, the development of capitalism in England, the interrelation between slavery and capitalism, and the British arms industry. Yet, few works even attempt to probe a possible connection between British arms exports and the slave trade conducted by British merchants, and this gap in the literature is what my thesis aims to fill. I believe that I can make a meaningful, if limited contribution to ongoing debates. Integrating the latest developments in methodology, I read goods sold in exchange for enslaved people by British traders not only as available products of domestic and colonial industries, but also as commodities demanded by African consumers. Existing secondary sources already provide most of the pieces for this thesis, and when combined with primary sources, put me on a solid foundation to draw conclusions.

¹⁵Randy James Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth Century Atlantic Odyssey* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

¹⁶Derek R. Peterson, *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010).

¹⁷Eric Eustace Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

Historical Context

Introduction

It is the year 1600. England, completely unprepared for a European land war, but with a large shipbuilding industry, wages an undeclared naval war with Spain across the Atlantic. The English can challenge the Spanish on the sea, and ultimately force a stalemate, but the Spanish crown has a distinct economic advantage in its New World colonies. The British crown sees itself as falling behind the Catholic powers of the continent. From Guatlahara (northern Mexico) to Santiago (Chile), Spanish colonial authorities send galleons laden with plundered silver and gold stained with the blood of indigenous slaves back to Madrid. Much of this wealth flows into the pockets of mercenaries as the European powers engage in a seemingly endless series of wars and diplomatic maneuvers over lines of succession, religion, and territory. Seeking to match or even surpass Spain, Britain, the Netherlands, and France turn hungry gazes beyond Europe's borders. Modeling themselves on Portugal and Spain, Britain, the Netherlands, and France sought to find new sources of wealth by establishing new trade routes, colonizing the parts of the New World not already under Spanish control, and constantly searching for new markets and opportunities.

The intense and cutthroat competition for dominance between European powers, formerly confined to Europe, spread across the seas, forging a new world system in the process. Every power wished to expand its colonial possessions and forge new trade routes for access to the raw materials and financial resources necessary to wage wars against other European powers. In the process, competition for colonies and control of trade routes drove further wars, which created a further drive for expansion, in a seemingly endless cycle of violence. European shipbuilders happened to hit upon a combination of sail designs, hull shapes, and rigging capable

of transoceanic voyages with enough cargo space to accommodate the necessary stores for the journey alongside military or civilian goods.¹⁸ These newly designed European ships could carry enough firepower, in the form of cannons and musket armed marines, to outclass almost any other ship afloat, with the possible exception of the Korean navy of the late 1500s.¹⁹ European powers attained near complete naval dominance in the Atlantic World, and set up a series of colonies in the Americas meant to supply the metropole with raw materials. West Africa, with wealthy princes and merchants, who captivated imaginations across Europe, offered to close the economic gap between Spain's massive colonial empire and other aspiring European powers. Yet it would not be the raw materials, the ivory, the gold, or the silver of West Africa that made it integral to the world system, but its people.

The Advent of the Slave Trade

Colonial ventures in the Americas required a steady supply of cheap labor, which in practice meant unfree labor, for successful operation. Initially, the Spanish utilized the indigenous populations of their American colonies as slaves, but horrific mortality rates among those populations as a result of epidemic disease necessitated a switch to imported labor, and Spanish colonial officials hit upon an inexpensive and plentiful labor source in the enslavement of West Africans.²⁰ The transoceanic slave trade which developed formed a central pillar of the 17th and 18th century world system, forcibly displacing millions of enslaved people, utterly transforming West African society, and leaving a permanent mark on the Atlantic world. In particular, the endless appetite of British and French plantations for slaves disrupted West

¹⁸Brian Lavery, *The Arming and Fitting of English Ships of War: 1600-1815* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Inst. Press, 1987).

¹⁹Muskets will also be referred to interchangeably as firearms, arms, musquetts, musketts, snap pans, carbines, matchlocks, and flintlocks throughout this thesis.

²⁰Andrés Reséndez, *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America* (Boston, Mass.: Mariner Books, 2016).

African societies, inducing wars, collapsing economies, making fortunes, and motivating the rise of new empires like Dahomey.

When the Spanish conquered territory, they decided to utilize the native people of the Americas as slave labor in order to extract resources and fulfill the task of working Spanish owned estates. Poor conditions, combined with novel diseases, existing losses from the violence of conquest, meant that in practice Native Americans used as forced laborers perished in droves. The astronomical mortality rate, which horrified religious authorities, rendered the indigenous people a nonviable long term labor force for the Spanish conquerors, and so they turned to the import of African slaves in order to fill the gaps. The British would follow a similar pattern nearly a century later.

The British arrived relatively late to the scene in colonizing the Americas, and even later to the West African coast, but rapidly made up for lost time. Initially, the British attempted to utilize indentured laborers as a source of cheap labor for their colonies, but, to greatly oversimplify, rebellions by indentured laborers against poor conditions and an insufficient supply made the system non-viable. The rebellions in particular could grow to also encompass the poor, but non-indentured, colonists, who shared a language, religion, cultural context, and skin tone with the rebels, alongside shared class interests.²¹ To continue the supply of cheap laborers for colonial plantations, the British, without hesitation, turned to the African slave trade. European traders rarely ranged far beyond the West African coast, and instead relied upon West African merchants to procure slaves for them, usually taken as war captives, in particular from groups of people living further in the interior. West African slave traders, hardly fools, demanded specific goods of high quality in exchange for the humans they provided and played the European powers

²¹Simon P. Newman, "'White Slaves': British Labor in Early Barbados," in *A New World of Labor: The Development of Plantation Slavery in the British Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 71-107.

off of each other. Different European empires, with access to different types of goods, and competing for the same market, found themselves forced to specialize.²² When the English arrived on the West African coast in the mid 1600s, they found the two most profitable goods for them to trade for human chattel were textiles and firearms.

The Development of Gunpowder Weaponry

Before continuing the discussion of the slave trade and the arms trade, it is worth a brief tangent to examine the technical developments which enabled a trade in arms to exist in the first place. Prior to the 16th century, gunpowder weaponry, outside of China, remained difficult to produce and deploy en masse, as it was heavy, not particularly reliable, slow to produce, and often required specialized training to use. First arriving in Europe from China through overland trade routes and the Mongols, by the 14th century the first experimental gunpowder weapons appeared in Europe. Gunpowder weapons remained a curiosity for almost a century. Thereafter improvements in metallurgy, production, and design combined with obvious tactical utility led to rapid proliferation of gunpowder weapons, both cannons and handheld pistols or muskets.²³ Like any technological advancement, the firearm was both a product of social forces and a driver of societal changes. Handheld gunpowder weapons could penetrate more armor and required less intensive physical training to use than bows, but necessitated the development of new military tactics and systems. In order to use firearms to their full potential, military forces needed to deploy them *en masse* and operate in formations which could withstand cavalry charges and melee combat.²⁴ Commanders also needed to prepare for their opponents fielding similar

²²Toby Green, *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 1-22.

²³Clifford J. Rogers, ed., *The Military Revolution Debate: Readings on the Military Transformation of Early Modern Europe* (Boulder City, CO: Westview Press, 1995; New York City: Routledge, 2018), 39-41.

²⁴Rogers, *The Military*, 13-35.

technology, and adjust their battleplans appropriately. Similarly, field artillery reduced the value of fixed fortifications and opened up a whole new spectrum of tactical approaches for commanders, but also closed off prior “winning strategies.”²⁵

The fierce interstate competition and widespread warfare which characterized Europe in the early modern era drove rapid and near constant innovation in military technology and organization. Firearms became more accurate, lighter, more reliable, cheaper to manufacture and easier to use than ever before. These advancements and growing demand made a global arms trade possible and indeed desirable for merchants. Much of the world did not possess firearms or the capacity to make more of them, and prospective arms dealers found that even a relatively small shipment of firearms could turn a decent profit. Although China already developed and put into use the technology in question, muskets and arquebuses arrived in Japan thanks to Portuguese traders, who made a tidy profit selling to Japanese warlords despite laws prohibiting the sale of guns to non-Christians.²⁶ Even decimated by disease and enslaved by European colonists, Native Americans were still considered a threat by European settlers, and laws existed to prevent the proliferation of firearms. Nevertheless, Merchants of every colonial power sold guns to Native American peoples in spite of the likelihood those guns would be used against the colonial powers. Firearms probably first arrived in West Africa by the early 15th century as a result of, once again, Portuguese traders, but the Portuguese and Dutch traders were reluctant to sell their muskets widely in Africa.²⁷ Instead it was the English, who had no such compunctions, that first sold firearms to West Africans on a large scale in the 17th century. It should come as no surprise that African slave traders, who raided villages for victims to sell to both African and

²⁵Rogers, *The Military*, 64-76.

²⁶Keith Krause, *Arms and the State: Patterns of Military Production and Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 49-51.

²⁷W. A. Richards, "The Import of Firearms into West Africa in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of African History* 21, no. 1 (1980): 43-69, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/181483>.

European customers, were particularly eager to purchase more firearms with which to obtain new slaves.

A Few Notes on West Africa

Unfortunately, we know much less about West Africa at this time than we know about Europe. European records, although many have been lost, benefitted from continuity of governance in states like Britain, a favorable climate for conservation, and higher literacy rates. When studying pre colonial West Africa written records are much rarer, most of the political and social groups of this period did not survive intact, colonial regimes did not afford the issue much importance or care, and the region itself would find itself totally destabilized. Even the very climate made document preservation more difficult, and so the majority of the writing that did survive are European perspectives which have very stereotyped views of the African social groups in question. European traders did not make their way inwards from the coast in any meaningful numbers, dealt with only a small slice of the populations in question, and carried substantial pre-existing prejudice. What states and pseudo states historians can identify typically fall into one of three forms, the local powers like the Empire of Benin or the Kingdom of Dahomey, confederations of different people, or ethnic groupings.

In short, the period between 1500 and 1650 saw the development of a transoceanic trade network, multiple European colonial empires in the Americas, and rapid developments in firearms technology. Combined, these factors laid the groundwork for two interrelated phenomena, the transatlantic slave trade, and the emergence of a global trade in arms. The connection of these two seemingly distinct trade networks is the subject of this paper.

Chapter 1 Producing the Arms

Introduction

Despite the arrival of gunpowder weaponry by the fourteenth century, it would take another two centuries for England to establish a true domestic arms industry. Domestic production of both cannons and muskets only began at a substantial scale in the 1500s, when Henry VIII set about acquiring foreign armorers and gunmakers from France and the Low Countries to establish an English arms industry. From these humble beginnings, the newborn British arms industry quickly became a locus of innovation, developing and exporting the cast-iron cannon to much of Western Europe. The fear of enemies using these weapons against the English crown led Queen Elizabeth to declare a cap on production and harshly restrict exports in 1574.²⁸ English export restrictions would only tighten during the 1600s, making it harder and harder to export any sort of gunpowder weaponry at all, and a 1660 law gave the sovereign the right to halt all arms exports at any time. Yet, the English went on to export more firearms to West African states than any other European power, most of which arrived in the holds of slave ships.

The Opening Phase of the Arms Trade

This trade had humble beginnings, for at first, the Royal African Company was granted a total monopoly over English trade in West Africa, including the slave trade, and by extension, the arms trade in West Africa.²⁹ They made the decision to export firearms, despite the concerns

²⁸Keith Krause, *Arms and the State: Patterns of Military Production and Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 36-42.

²⁹Charles II, "Charter granted to the Company of Royal Adventurers of England Trading into Africa," 1663, accessed March 10, 2023, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/charter-granted-to-the-company-of-royal-adventurers-of-england-relating-to-trade-in-africa-1663>.

that they would spread knowledge of firearms manufacture and usage to West Africans and thus erode European advantages, under the logic that if they did not sell firearms, someone else would, and this same logic would drive much of the continuous expansion of arms trading to West Africa. European traders and governments did have concerns about the spread of European weapons technology, but crucially did not regard West Africans as geopolitical rivals. Whereas a sale to the French could be perceived as a zero sum loss to an enemy, Africans had few opportunities to use guns against Europeans.

The Royal African Company purchased many of their guns from the Worshipful Company of Gunmakers, a state-commissioned arms company which brought together some 200 London gunsmiths and supplied state monopoly companies when not supplying the Ordnance Office.³⁰ Most guns sold at this stage were matchlocks or wheellocks, which were relatively

difficult and uncomfortable to operate, albeit far more comfortable than earlier “hand cannons” (Figure 1).

Many of the firearms initially exported to Africa by the Royal African Company were purchased

from Dutch merchants, and it took governmental intervention to force the Royal African Company to wean itself off foreign arms suppliers entirely. The British state, seeking a greater supply of arms, turned to gunsmiths outside of London. Specifically, they turned to the



*Figure 1: German matchlock musket, circa 1610.
Note that there is room to place a match to light the powder.*

³⁰Pria Satia, *Empire of Guns: The Violent Making of the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 27-29.

swordsmiths of Birmingham as a potential alternative to the Worshipful Company or the Dutch gunmakers.³¹ London gunsmiths also improved production time and consistency by switching orders for gun parts which London smiths could not manufacture to Birmingham smiths, reducing interruptions in the production process.³² Quality control at this stage was uneven, and although British guns were thought to have higher standards than Dutch guns, the most stringent standards were reserved for firearms purchased by the Ordinance Office.

The relative scarcity of firearms in West Africa before the British began their trade in arms certainly helped matters, because it not only stimulated demand, but meant that African traders did not inspect the quality of firearms as closely. Muskets were often also used for hunting for ivory or other such utility tasks, and given the price of high-grade gunpowder in the region, which would also have to be imported from the British, lower quality muskets were often preferable. The British would charge less, the local powder's lower quality made the looser tolerances more acceptable, and if potential opponents fielded lower quality firearms, there would be no qualitative gap.³³ For this reason, although some African traders preferred higher quality arms, many of the most active slave traders preferred to purchase cheaper arms in higher quantities than better proofed muskets. Perhaps the merchants wanted greater quantities of lower quality guns to trade with middlemen and the kingdoms which actually captured most of the slaves. Contemporary observers accused the gunmakers of producing weapons of such poor quality half of them would explode when fired, but this seems almost certainly to have been an exaggeration.³⁴ Gunmakers also offered higher quality arms for export to Africa, but the

³¹Satia, *Empire of Guns*, 29-31.

³²Satia, *Empire of Guns*, 31-32.

³³W. A. Richards, "The Import of Firearms into West Africa in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of African History* 21, no. 1 (1980): 52-56, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/181483>.

³⁴Joseph E. Inikori, "The Import of Firearms into West Africa 1750-1807: A Quantitative Analysis," *The Journal of African History* 18, no. 3 (1977): 358-361, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/180637>.

preferences of British slave traders and many African slave traders leaned towards the cheaper but lower quality muskets (see Chapter 2 for more detail on this matter).

At first business was relatively slow, as the British arms industry and the slave trade both remained relatively small scale. Given their assured monopoly of the trade in human flesh in British markets, the Royal African Company also had little incentive to rapidly expand the scale of their operations in West Africa, even as they petitioned the crown for assistance in fighting off their Dutch rivals. In the entire period from 1673-1704, the Royal African Company sold 66,000 muskets in West Africa.³⁵ Despite high demand, in the 1680s, a typical arms shipment of the Royal African Company might have a hundred muskets. Their agents in Africa repeatedly requested more firearms to keep pace with the Dutch in the slave trade, but the log books of the Royal African Company's higher ups betray no urgency regarding muskets. Instead, discussions by the Company's directors are concerned primarily with the sheer number of debts wracked up by the Company, as illegal private slave traders and poor financial decisions took their toll on solvency.³⁶

The Growth of Production

This state of affairs would change due to the growth of the British arms industry, which was struggling to match skyrocketing demands for weapons as Britain fought a series of European and colonial wars. New developments in military technology such as the bayonet, enabling anti-cavalry work with the musket, effective and affordable flintlocks, and generally lighter, more accurate firearms, led to entire European armies re-equipping themselves solely with muskets.³⁷ The Ordinance Office had previously purchased weapons from the Dutch when

³⁵Satia, *Empire of Guns*, 29.

³⁶Court of Assistants of the Royal African Company to James Shipps, July 27, 1720, C 113/272, Chancery: Master Kindersley's Exhibits, National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom.

³⁷Satia, *Empire of Guns*, 31-32.

in a pinch, but Parliament intervened and forced them to buy British arms, increasing the already high demand for domestic production. In 1707, the Ordinance Office changed their system, breaking down gun manufacturing into a select few processes, and then contracted for those processes instead of complete arms.³⁸ While London gunsmiths retained a monopoly of “proofing” firearms, Birmingham’s share of British gunmaking continued to increase.³⁹ The state also oversaw the consolidation of the British gunmaking industry, and Birmingham and the Worshipful Company were now joined by a state run armory in the Tower of London. The quantity and quality of British small arms increased, as well as the consistency of their manufacture, regardless of their intended customer.⁴⁰

At the same time, smaller independent slave traders sought to undercut the Royal African Company’s monopoly on the slave trade, fiercely arguing in favor of free trade and free competition (in enslaving people).⁴¹ In 1712, the government acceded to their demands, deregulating the slave trade and opening it up to independent slave traders.⁴² This created a frenzy of activity which would increase both the number of slaves taken from West Africa and the number of weapons sold to West Africans. By 1730, up to 180,000 muskets were arriving in West Africa per year, meaning three times as many muskets were exported to West Africa in a single year compared to the entire 30 year period between 1673 and 1704.⁴³ The Royal African Company, reduced to relying on government subsidies to just maintain its operations, finally closed its doors in 1752. By that time, even more bloody European wars, now also fought in the colonies, spurred even higher levels of demand for and production of firearms.⁴⁴ The East Indian

³⁸Howard L. Blackmore, *British Military Firearms 1650-1850*, 3rd ed. (London: Cox & Wyman, 1967), 38-40.

³⁹Satia, *Empire of Guns*, 34-35.

⁴⁰Satia, *Empire of Guns*, 38-43.

⁴¹William A. Pettigrew, *Freedom's Debt: The Royal African Company and the Politics of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1672-1752* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 12-36.

⁴²Pettigrew, *Freedom's Debt*, 115-150.

⁴³Krause, *Arms and the State*, 56.

⁴⁴Satia, *Empire of Guns*, 43-65.

Company, the military, slave traders, colonial authorities, and more, demanded ever increasing amounts of guns. By 1780 the British sold 200,000 muskets per year to West Africans alone, and this figure almost doubled when other European sellers were included.⁴⁵

The Birmingham Boom

This veritable flood of arms came not from sophisticated factory complexes, but the work of innumerable artisan producers, who produced guns for just about whoever asked for them. Their muskets, made without machine tools and without assembly lines, exhibited substantial variation, but the vast majority of muskets bore a “proof” of their capacity to fire rounds with an over-large powder charge without suffering failures or damage.⁴⁶ As such, rather than describing a “model” of firearm, one must describe a “type” or “pattern” of gun. The latter term originates

from the method of standardization adopted by European militaries of the 1700s, which consisted of selecting a “pattern musket” which gunsmiths then copied the measurements of and made comparisons to their own product intended for military service.⁴⁷ For



*Figure 2: Refurbished Land Pattern Musket “Brown Bess.”
Note the proof mark below the flintlock.*

instance, the Land Pattern Musket,

commonly known as the “Brown Bess,” saw service as the standard musket of the British Army (Figure 2). The guns sent to Africa, however, had no such standardization measures, and exhibit

⁴⁵Joseph E. Inikori, ed., *Forced Migration: The Impact of the Export Slave Trade on African Societies* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1982), 127-135.

⁴⁶Blackmore, *British Military*, 269.

⁴⁷Blackmore, *British Military*, 43-44.

a dizzying array of variations in quality and name. Some examples include Danish guns, Tower guns, square muskets, musketoons, Bonny muskets, London muskets, Angola muskets, and Gambia muskets.

Most of these arms were manufactured in Birmingham, where the “gun quarter” grew wealthy off the consistent purchases and high volumes needed by slave traders. Birmingham gunsmiths like Samuel Galton would give slave traders an increasingly large discount on arms, starting at around 6% in 1752 and escalating to a 17.5% discount for slave traders by 1771.⁴⁸ Galton also recorded difficulties in obtaining enough workmen to meet the extremely high demand for guns. This same arms industry helped to supply the British Army and British colonists with a steady supply of small arms, enabling further imperial ventures, which in turn necessitated more firearms. Birmingham’s gun quarter would give birth to multiple famous small arms manufacturers such as Birmingham Small Arms, Webley & Scott, and Westley Richards as gunsmiths strived for ever greater productivity and the industrial revolution kicked off.⁴⁹ In other words, an edge in military technology and organization bred an even greater edge in military industry, technology, and organization for Britain. The sale of guns to Africans did not result in the rapid diffusion of British military advantages as its opponents had feared, but rather increased the gap.⁵⁰

Indeed the British arms industry, which had nearly withered on the vine due to overly strict export controls, entered into a boom phase, where supply could barely keep pace with demand let alone match it. One unanticipated issue would prove that slave traders did not always pay up front in cash for their goods in England, and the majority of the balance sheet of some

⁴⁸Joseph E. Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 335-338.

⁴⁹Helen White and Roger Trudgeon, "Birmingham's Gun Quarter: A Skilled Trade in Decline," *Oral History* 11, no. 2 (Fall 1983): 69, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40178771>.

⁵⁰Humphrey J. Fisher and Virginia Rowland, "Firearms in the Central Sudan," *The Journal of African History* 12, no. 2 (1971): 215-239, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/180880>.

Birmingham gun companies became outstanding debts owed to them by the merchants of human flesh.⁵¹ Nevertheless, when Parliament debated ending the slave trade in the late eighteenth century, the gunmakers of Birmingham weighed in to oppose the end of a critical market for the firearms industry, warning of potential damage to their trade by such a ban.⁵² Of course, by that point, the damage to West African societies had been done, and the ban itself only further destabilized economies now reliant on the export of slaves.

Down the line, 2,454,764 people enslaved by British guns would find themselves transported to the Caribbean to work on sugar plantations, and a much smaller fraction of about 255,293 people would arrive on the shores of Mainland America.⁵³ There, they and their descendants would be forced to work for the benefit of the white plantation class, harvesting sugar that would be shipped to England for processing, creating a circuit of capital accumulation that provided the concentration of capital necessary to bring about the industrial revolution.⁵⁴ The trade itself would stimulate British industry, providing not only arms merchants with orders, but shipbuilders with regular business building and servicing slave ships, and ironworkers with a steady stream of requests for chains and restraints. The British would have the last laugh when their military, armed with weapons from the industrialized British arms industry, swept in to take much of West Africa for the British crown in the late 1800s. The Berlin Conference formally carved up West Africa in 1885, and European colonial institutions came to dominate the region.

⁵¹Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial*, 336-338.

⁵²Inikori, *Forced Migration*, 130.

⁵³"Slave ships from 1650-1821 flying the flag of Great Britain," table, 2018, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database#tables>.

⁵⁴Eric Eustace Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

Conclusion

The British “Empire of Guns” did not emerge only from the market incentives of the slave trade, state intervention and state policy played a crucial role, and European warfare already provided some degree of demand. Yet, the slave trade remained perhaps the most consistent and reliable market to which gunsmiths offered their wares, fueling not just a boom, but nearly a century of sustained expansion in the British arms industry. Without the slave trade, English arms production could not have expanded as rapidly or consistently as it did. The weapon manufacturers spoke for themselves, when in a petition to parliament they argued that the slave trade was vital to their business. Yet, when the time came and the slave trade did end in 1807, the arms industry, particularly in Birmingham, already had enough regular business, operated on a large enough scale, and had enough demands from the British empire to supply its military forces and colonial militias that it would easily survive and thrive for another century.

Chapter 2

The Slave Trade and the Gun Trade on the West African Coast

Once trade in slaves had been started in any given part of Africa, it soon became clear that it was beyond the capacity of any single African state to change the situation.

— Walter Rodney, *Radical Historian* (1972)

Introduction

The history of British operations on the coast of West Africa can be periodized into three general periods, two of which will be discussed in this chapter. The first period covers the time period between 1660 and 1712, in which the British first sought to establish forts and traffic in the export of enslaved people from West Africa under the aegis of the state-chartered Royal African Company. The second period constitutes the period between 1712 and 1807, in which the Royal African Company was supplanted by a swarm of new firms, and the slave trade blossomed into its full horrific form. The third period consists of the British policing of the West African coast after abolition in 1807, leading to direct colonization efforts. While the British traded many commodities for the some 3 million enslaved people they spirited away, one of the most profitable and enduring commodities traded would be muskets, exported to West Africa in the hundreds of thousands.

The British, somewhat preoccupied by other concerns (such as the English Civil War of the 1640s) established a presence relatively late on the West African coast, having already been preceded by the Dutch and the Portuguese. The Royal African Company, chartered in 1663, was given total monopoly over “red-wood, elephants’ teeth, negro slaves, hides, wax, gums, grains, or other commodities” that hailed from Africa, and endowed with legal and military powers.⁵⁵ It

⁵⁵Charles II, "Charter granted to the Company of Royal Adventurers of England Trading into Africa," 1663, accessed March 10, 2023. <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/charter-granted-to-the-company-of-royal-adventurers-of-england-relating-to-trade-in-africa-1663>.

would keep this monopoly until 1712, and its slave ships would embark at least 169,443 enslaved people, of which only 133,633, or 78.8% of the people enslaved, would survive the journey, from 1663 to 1712.⁵⁶ Although this period of the slave trade saw the fewest arms sold by British merchants, the letters of the Royal African Company's agents on the West African coast suggest firearms were a particularly valuable commodity. As a corporation which the state granted monopoly power to, the Royal African Company also offers a far more easily accessible central repository of documents and data than the more decentralized trade which followed their loss of monopoly.

The Royal African Company established or usurped a whole constellation of small forts on the coast of West Africa in order to hold goods both for trade with Africans and for later export by English ships. Under the Royal African Company, these forts usually traded with local Africans using canoes and also received supplies from other forts via canoe. European traders did not penetrate very far into the interior and remained, for the most part, on the coasts in their relatively isolated outposts. Additionally, a fort might be abandoned for a few years, then reoccupied, depending on the status of trade in the area, the mood of the local population, and the actions of European rivals, who often raided each other's forts. The local headquarters of the Royal African company, Cape Coast Castle, served as a central communication, transport, and supply hub for the rest of the forts.⁵⁷ While most Slave Forts in West Africa were designed primarily as military installations in the predominant style of continental forts, Cape Coast Castle also had a lavish residence and quarters for holding and processing slaves (Figure 3). The

⁵⁶Slave ships from 1663-1712 belonging to the "Royal African Company," table, 2018, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database#statistics>.

⁵⁷*Entries Relating to the Royal African Company*, 1692, CO 268/1, Records of the Colonial Office, Commonwealth and Foreign and Commonwealth Offices, Empire Marketing Board, and related bodies, National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom.

correspondence between Royal African Company employees (agents) working at the forts and Cape Coast Castle have been compiled in a series of volumes edited by the historian Robin Law.



Figure 3: Cape Coast Castle during President Obama's visit in 2009.

The Primary Sources: The Forts of the Royal African Company

The very first letter James Parris, agent of the Royal African Company, wrote upon arriving at Sekondi in modern day Ghana during April of 1683 narrates that the Adoms (Adome people) demanded “3 perpetuanoes (wool cloth), 4 sheets, 1 carbine, and 1 paper brawle,” in their first encounter.⁵⁸ Two months later, Mark Beford Whiting wrote two successive letters asking for more gunpowder and “snap pans” (muskets) as demand for them was so high and selling them so profitable, despite Whiting also selling plenty of cloth in the same period.⁵⁹ Merely looking at Whiting’s list of goods sold and his demands that “wee want much” gunpowder and good Indian cloth to sell to local Africans gives a sense of his priorities.⁶⁰ Quite

⁵⁸Robin Law, ed., *The English in West Africa, 1681-1683*, vol. 1, *The Local Correspondence of the Royal African Company of England 1681-1699*, Sources of African History 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 2-3.

⁵⁹Law, *The English*, vol. 1, 3-4.

⁶⁰Law, *The English*, vol. 1, 4-6.

literally the next day, he sent another letter asking for more gunpowder, and three days later sent a third letter angrily mentioning that a Dutch “interloper” was selling snap pans and thereby outcompeting the British efforts.⁶¹ Whiting continues grouching about the Dutch being able to outcompete him by virtue of offering firearms and gunpowder in large quantities and making a hefty profit in return for the rest of 1683, repeatedly requesting more powder and snap pans of his own. He further claims that the local Adom would only trade slaves in return for snap pans, and that unless sent some he could not purchase slaves at all.⁶² His glee when he received a shipment containing snap pans and powder is palpable, but he also nonetheless evaluated that cloth was the most profitable good to sell at Sekondi.⁶³

East of Sekondi and two years earlier, James Nightingale returned to re-establish a fort at Komenda, also located in present day Ghana. A conventional military star fort, the fort at

Komenda was within eyeshot of the rival Dutch fortification (Figure 4). For almost two years no real mention was made of trading in firearms in letters from Komenda, but on March 11, 1683, David Harper, located at the same fort,

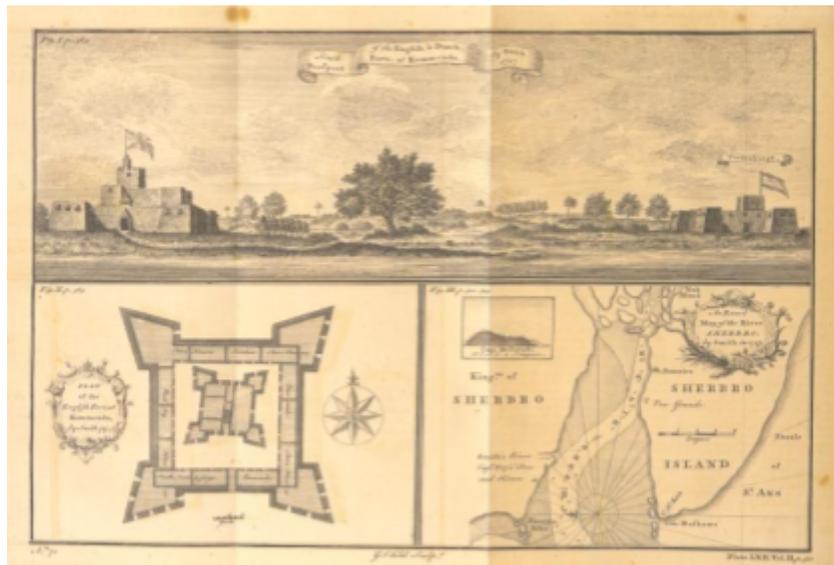


Figure 4:
Drawing of the Royal African Company Fort at Komenda from 1727.

described in his dispatch how the nearby Dutch outpost managed to sell all their beads and guns despite failure to sell their

⁶¹Law, *The English*, vol. 1, 6-7.

⁶²Law, *The English*, vol. 1, 20.

⁶³Law, *The English*, vol. 1, 20-21.

other goods.⁶⁴ In contrast, in the same time period, 19 of 84 letters specifically mention the sale of gunpowder by the British, appearing regularly in the Komenda letters.⁶⁵ From 1685-1688 the fort's letters do not mention guns being sold by the British despite frequent mentions of gunpowder and the efforts to sell it.⁶⁶ The only mention of the sale of muskets is in a letter written by Robert Elwes on November 18th, 1687 reporting that the French supplied arms to the local people, while the Dutch, fearing the interlopers, acquired "many Negro soldiers" from their local allies.

From 1691-1699, Komenda's letters, written by a succession and variety of people, contain several notable revelations. First of all, at least one letter makes mention of paying the slaves used to perform work on the fort, and another letter defends against complaints that the slaves at Komenda were too well fed.⁶⁷ Secondly, another letter explains how the Royal African Company sealed a treaty with a local leader by giving him three muskets, suggesting that the trade in firearms also had a diplomatic and symbolic role in West Africa.⁶⁸ Third, further mentions of muskets all revolve around the requirements to defend the fort from potentially hostile locals at war with British allies, not in the slave trade, which while initially distant seems to increasingly grow in prominence.⁶⁹ Finally the fort's inhabitants write repeatedly about the essential nature of gunpowder in conducting trade around Komenda in response to criticism from higher authorities about the amount of powder they required.⁷⁰ Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the native people of the region already possessed firearms and likely purchased them

⁶⁴Law, *The English*, vol. 1, 56.

⁶⁵Law, *The English*, vol. 1, 22-63.

⁶⁶Robin Law, ed., *The English in West Africa: 1685-1688*, vol. 2, *The Local Correspondence of the Royal African Company of England 1681-1699*, Sources of African History 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 76-140.

⁶⁷Robin Law, ed., *The English in West Africa, 1691-1699*, vol. 3, *Local Correspondence of the Royal African Company of England, 1681-1699*, Sources of African History 8 (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2006), 159-160.

⁶⁸Law, *The English*, vol. 3, 144.

⁶⁹Law, *The English*, vol. 3, 136-240.

⁷⁰Law, *The English*, vol. 3, 136-240.

from the oft-mentioned Dutch. From this fact we can see that the prominence of firearms in the British slave trade varied depending upon location, but unfortunately I did not have the time or language skills to peruse Dutch records and cross-reference accounts.

To the west of Komenda, Sekondi's letters from 1685-1688 include a letter from one Thomas Bucknell, written on the 28th of July, 1686. In it, Bucknell describes how Ahanta, now under the effective control of Adom, seemed on a collision course for war with their neighbors, and details how Captain Assum, leader of the Adom asked him repeatedly for muskets in light of tensions.⁷¹ Another letter from Bucknell, written on the 6th of November, 1686, expresses concern that a Dutch trader had begun supplying arms to a rival of Adom, and requesting orders from his superiors as to how to approach the situation.⁷² Unfortunately, their reply, if any, does not appear in the collection, and I have been unable to locate it. The Dutch and English clearly supplied native proxies with weapons for use against other political actors who might be aligned with European rivals, but the extent of this trade remains unclear in the primary sources. Otherwise the correspondence from 1685-1688 makes no mention of guns, but the letters discuss the sale of powder eighteen times out of a hundred thirty nine letters.⁷³ It seems that the English may have temporarily accepted a niche selling gunpowder but not firearms themselves in West Africa in light of relative Dutch dominance and difficulty procuring guns.

The main Royal African Company fort on the coast, once again located in present day Ghana, was located at Anombu, and despite the fort's central importance, its letters show no particular concern for the trade in guns. The fort does not record any substantial trade in arms from 1681-1683, and from 1685-1688, the only mentions of gunpowder weaponry in the log

⁷¹Law, *The English*, vol. 2, 27.

⁷²Law, *The English*, vol. 2, 34.

⁷³Law, *The English*, vol. 2, 5-72.

books are for the defense of the fort against possible native raiders.⁷⁴ From 1691-1699, the only records mentioning muskets are from an inventory which discovered firearms just sitting in a warehouse, alongside a host of other trade goods.⁷⁵ In contrast, gunpowder appears fourteen times in the letters from the fort between 1681 and 1683, twenty eight times between 1685 and 1688, and eighteen times between 1691 and 1699. Clearly, the fort at Anombu was trading gunpowder on a regular basis, similar to textiles, but it also seemingly had little regard for the guns themselves.

The Primary Sources: Letters from Ships of the Royal African Company

The ships of the Royal African Company were a different matter, as the correspondence from 1681-1683 indicates. The third letter sent from the ship *African Merchant* to Cape Town describes the sheer number of muskets local leaders requested for their wares, a whole “12 musketts per bendy (2 ounces of gold).”⁷⁶ On the 30th of January 1681, Hugh Shears wrote from the ship *John* that he had traded one barrel of powder and 13 muskets for 26 enslaved men, 23 enslaved women, and one enslaved child near Anombu and that he planned on returning to Cape Coast Castle.⁷⁷ Either guns were simply more valuable at this stage due to their rarity, or a barrel of gunpowder was extremely valuable on its own. On September 30th of 1682, Hugh Shears once again sent a letter, this time from the ship *Cape Coast*, that he had obtained nearly 65 slaves, but complained about the quality of the muskets he was tasked with selling, as “they are soe very bad.”⁷⁸ It appears that muskets and cloth were his usual wares traded in exchange for enslaved people. Finally, Hugh Sheares reported on July 29th, 1683, that he had purchased 14

⁷⁴Law, *The English*, vol. 2, 153-236.

⁷⁵Law, *The English*, vol. 3, 294-295.

⁷⁶Law, *The English*, vol. 1, 260.

⁷⁷Law, *The English*, vol. 1, 269.

⁷⁸Law, *The English*, vol. 1, 276.

enslaved people for 13 muskets, one and a half barrels of powder, and a variety of textiles and iron bars.⁷⁹ Most of his letters do not mention specific trade goods at all, but those that do seem to indicate that muskets were an integral part of his regular slaving runs on the West African coast alongside gunpowder and textiles.

On June 30th of 1683, David Harper, aboard the *Merchant's Adventure*, complained to his superiors that the Portuguese were buying more slaves than him because the goods in greatest demand were muskets and gunpowder, and he did not have enough of either.⁸⁰ John Groome, writing from the exact same ship on the same day, made a similar complaint that the only goods local traders would take were muskets or gunpowder, and he didn't have enough gunpowder, or any firearms on hand. On the 25th of March, 1681, James Nightingale wrote a letter from the ship *Edgar* complaining that half of the wares provided to him were unsuitable for sale and that he needed muskets if he was to trade for slaves successfully.⁸¹ Nightingale followed this up on April 6th by once again complaining that he had the incorrect goods and that the Dutch, who had muskets, were buying more slaves than him, and that he had to resort to spending gold for slaves. Nightingale continued his campaign for muskets to trade for slaves on April 25th, 1681, writing once more that while he had procured 200 slaves, he would have to trade goods for gold instead of slaves and then trade the gold for slaves, because they had not yet received muskets.⁸² Nightingale once again decided to plead for muskets because of difficulties obtaining slaves without them on the 11th of May, 1681, before his ceaseless requests were answered on the 15th of May in the form of a "chest of musquetts" from his superiors.⁸³ Daniell Gates, of the ship *Allapeen*, also complained about the severe difficulties he encountered procuring slaves on the

⁷⁹Law, *The English*, vol. 1, 280-281.

⁸⁰Law, *The English*, vol. 1, 289-290.

⁸¹Law, *The English*, vol. 1, 298-300.

⁸²Law, *The English*, vol. 1, 301.

⁸³Law, *The English*, vol. 1, 303-306.

6th of March 1682, for “nothing goes off at present but musketts and I could wish all my pintados (cloth from the East Indies) was in musketts for I cannot sell one nor doe know what to do with them. I have bought but 8 Negroes since I came here.”⁸⁴ Evidently firearms were in short supply but in high demand for the purchase of slaves along the West African coast between 1681 and 1683.

Between 1685 and 1688, the sheer number of letters sent from ships demanding gunpowder and guns decreased, but similar themes continued to appear in the correspondence. On September 14th of 1686, Hugh Hilling of the sloop *Ann* wrote a letter requesting that he receive powder and muskets for “powder and musquets are a great commodity here” due to mounting tensions that might lead to war in the region.⁸⁵ Six days later, he wrote a letter thanking “Mr. Baily” for supplying sixty nine matchlock muskets, twenty five firelock muskets, and ten barrels of gunpowder, a much more rapid turnaround time, which suggests firearms may have been easier to procure at this point in time.⁸⁶ On September 29th, Hugh Hailing once again requested muskets in light of Dutch competition, and four days later reported that he had received forty muskets which he planned to immediately sell. A month later, Hailing reported that the type of trade had shifted somewhat and muskets were no longer in demand, but gunpowder for said muskets was still in high demand.⁸⁷ Presumably the end of hostilities and the need to keep previously purchased guns operational overrode the acquisition of new firearms as a priority among local traders.

Between 1691 and 1699, the number of letters from ships dropped precipitously, and mentions of firearms themselves entirely vanished from them. At the same time, correspondence

⁸⁴Law, *The English*, vol. 1, 315-316.

⁸⁵Law, *The English*, vol. 2, 368.

⁸⁶Law, *The English*, vol. 2, 368-9.

⁸⁷Law, *The English*, vol. 2, 371.

from John Wortley at Ouidah, penned on January 5th, 1692, argues that guns and powder are both eminently “vendible” in the region.⁸⁸ Other correspondents such as Edward Barter, writing from Adangme on the 24th of August 1694, emphasized powder and types of clothes instead, mentioning firearms only in the context of Dutch “interlopers,” who plied them for slaves.⁸⁹ It seems eminently reasonable to assume that the majority of English slave traders did not consider muskets their primary goods at this point in time. Given the documented instability and warfare occurring on both the Slave Coast and Gold Coast, which would have provided ample demand, it seems likely that the English were outcompeted by the Dutch, or that production and purchase of firearms was inadequate to make up a major section of the slave trade at the time.

The final issue may have some relevance given the British crown’s efforts to bolster an inadequate arms industry around this time. Simply put, demand alone does not magically generate supply. Without a sufficient supply of arms for export, the British traders would have difficulty securing enough arms to make it a cornerstone of the slave trade. Consulting *Slave Voyages*, it becomes apparent that this period also saw a sharp fall-off in the number of enslaved people taken by the Royal African Company compared to the previous decade (Graph 1).⁹⁰



Graph 1: Total number of slaves embarked by ships registered to the Royal African Company.

⁸⁸Law, *The English*, vol. 3, 570-572.

⁸⁹Law, *The English*, vol. 3, 567.

⁹⁰“Slave ships from 1663-1712 belonging to the Royal African Company,” table.

Similarly, the share of enslaved people trafficked by British people other than the Royal African Company in spite of an official monopoly for the Royal African Company was double that of the Royal African Company.⁹¹ The Company's peak in terms of the slave trade came in 1686, the same year that the British government prohibited them from purchasing weapons from the Dutch, and from there their fortunes only declined, until the final collapse of their monopoly in 1712.

The Royal African Company's downfall came not from any one debilitating crisis, but from a seemingly endless series of small cuts, many of them self-inflicted by the Company's organizational and commercial failings. Local agents complained of goods coming in insufficient numbers and of being given prices to sell their goods at which did not reflect reality in letters to Cape Coast Castle. The centralized purchase and distribution of trade goods within the company made for an overly complex system which proved inflexible compared to the provisioning of individual ships performed by smaller slave traders. Similarly, the Royal African Company, as a large company granted total monopoly by the state, required far more trade goods (in particular guns and powder) per order than a smaller independent trader. Information asymmetry and lack of flexibility ultimately outweighed economies of scale, and as such the collapse of the Royal African Company began even before the law caught up with the facts on the ground.

After the Royal African Company

When the Royal African Company found itself eclipsed by independent slave traders after it lost its monopoly in 1712, the pattern of the transatlantic slave trade had already begun shifting. Firearms became much more common as a trade good, as opposed to the already prevalent textiles and gunpowder, which both continued to arrive in large quantities. As we have

⁹¹"Slave ships from 1690-1700 flying the flag of Great Britain," table, 2018, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database#tables>.

seen in Chapter 1, arms production expanded rapidly in England around the turn of the 18th century, as the government took steps to promote domestic production. As late as 1686, the Royal African Company had to be directly instructed by the Ordinance office to cease purchasing weapons from the Dutch, who were the Royal African Company's direct competitors!⁹² From this point onwards, the number of guns shipped to Africa exploded in number at the same time that the number of people shipped out of Africa did not immediately increase. Guns in particular became associated with the transatlantic slave trade, including in illustrated depictions of the trade (Figure 5). The database Slave Voyages shows that even before the end of the Royal African Company's monopoly, the vast majority of slaves shipped under the British flag belonged to smaller slave trading companies such as James Rogers & Co, and as the Royal African Company's share further collapsed, the smaller traders devoured its share of the market.⁹³

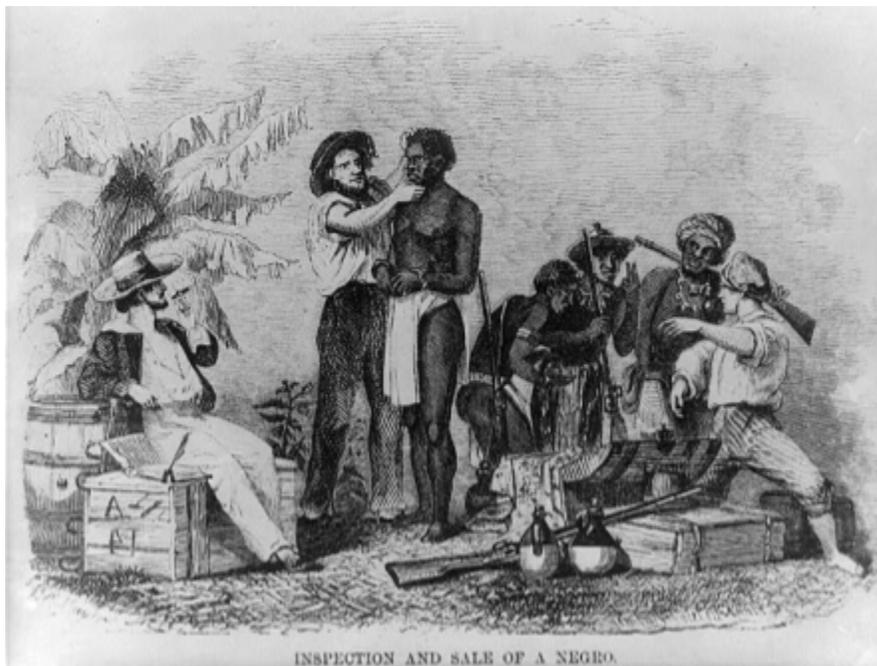


Figure 5: 1854 wood carving from the memoirs of Captain Theodore Canot. Note the alcohol and firearms in the foreground.

⁹²Pria Satia, *Empire of Guns: The Violent Making of the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 29.

⁹³“Slave ships from 1700-1720 flying the flag of Great Britain,” table, 2018, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database#timeline>.

The free market brought about a steady increase in the scale of the British trans-atlantic slave trade, as although yearly variations continued, the yearly number of victims rose from 10,973 in the year 1712 to 45,685 in 1775, a fourfold increase.⁹⁴ This increase also led to a decentralization of records, making research somewhat more difficult. Nevertheless, quite a few secondary sources exist to fill the gaps, and many of them discuss the arms trade as well as the slave trade to at least some degree. As British slavers swarmed over West Africa, the British arms industry underwent substantial change, as new arms manufacturers opened their doors and production increased (see Chapter 1). The resultant surplus of arms would come right as the legal floodgates opened for those Englishmen seeking to get a piece of the lucrative transatlantic slave trade, with predictable results.

Regional Differences: Quantity and Quality of Arms

The greatest expansions of the slave trade in West African slaves coincided with the greatest expansions in the trade in arms to West Africa. Yet, as demonstrated by the records of the Royal African Company, the demand for guns varied depending on the region. Additionally, as slaves were the primary commodity traded for guns, the English exported the most firearms to those regions (Bight of Biafra/Bight of Bonny), which exported the greatest number of slaves. Regional variations in the number of guns traded for one slave also impacted the flow of British arms into West Africa. In 1806, for instance, the captain of the slave ship *Frederick*, traded five guns for every two enslaved people on the Gold Coast.⁹⁵ In contrast, between 1792 and 1793, the slave ship *Jupiter* traded 5.1 guns per slave at Bonny.⁹⁶ The Bight of Bonny possessed the

⁹⁴"Slave ships from 1700-1800 flying the flag of Great Britain," table, 2018, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database#timeline>.

⁹⁵Joseph E. Inikori, ed., *Forced Migration: The Impact of the Export Slave Trade on African Societies* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1982), 139.

⁹⁶Inikori, *Forced Migration*, 147-150.

highest general ratio of guns traded per slave, and on average a slave ship visiting Bonny carried at least 1,286 muskets in its hold for the purpose of trade.⁹⁷ Slave Voyages further indicates that the Gulf of Guinea and Bight of Biafra produced the largest percentage (24.5%) of slaves shipped across the Atlantic under a British flag.⁹⁸ Sierra Leone and the Windward coast were the only regions which matched Bonny in the number of guns traded per slave, but combined they only exported 262,731 slaves over the course of the transatlantic slave trade (4.2% and 4.6% of the total number of enslaved people transported by the British), contrasted with 744,628 enslaved people taken from the Bonny region.⁹⁹ As such, the Bight of Bonny operated as the effective center of the West African arms trade and West African slave trade.

This correlation supports the thesis that European firearms functioned as a key “enabler” of the slave trade in West Africa, lubricating the process that ripped people from their homes and sold them to traders who would ferry them into a life of backbreaking plantation labor. It is a correlation supported by anecdotal evidence, such as the hunger of local African rulers for firearms to wage war that appears in the letters of the Royal African company, and the connection between the slave trade and arms trade appears impossible to contest. What little modern economic modeling has been performed on the arms trade to West Africa also suggests the existence of a gun-slave cycle and a strong link between the slave trade and the gun trade, but the question of degrees remains open.¹⁰⁰ The Gold Coast offers an alternative look at a region where the slave trade proved extremely vital for the British but the arms trade never reached the levels it did in Bonny, Sierra Leone, or the Windward Coast.

⁹⁷Inikori, *Forced Migration*, 138.

⁹⁸"Slave ships from 1650-1821 flying the flag of Great Britain," table, 2018, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database#timeline>.

⁹⁹"Slave ships from 1650-1821 flying the flag of Great Britain," table.

¹⁰⁰Warren C. Whatley, "The Gun-slave Hypothesis and the 18th Century British Slave Trade," *Explorations in Economic History* 67 (January 2018): 80-104, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eeh.2017.07.001>.

The vast majority of muskets imported by traders in Bonny were of a low cost and low quality type, often labeled the “Bonny Musket” in English primary sources, which caused no small amount of consternation among gunmakers afraid for their reputations. Yet, African buyers assuredly had choices, gunmakers were eager to make higher quality guns for slave-trading companies if requested, and as the Gold Coast shows, buyers in many regions preferred the higher quality British arms. Why then, did the Bonny buyers prefer muskets disparaged by English observers, which often lacked the proofing of more expensive muskets? One answer lies in the quality of the powder available in Bonny, which had more impurities and thus generated less explosive force, leading to lower tolerances required for muskets, and more or less negating the advantages of the more expensive muskets.¹⁰¹ Yet, the English also imported thousands of pounds of gunpowder to West Africa every year, and the people of the Gold Coast had no such qualms with purchasing higher quality guns.¹⁰² Unfortunately, the issue of powder, how sufficient British imports would actually be to supply West African states, and to where powder typically flowed in West Africa, are outside the scope of this paper.

The Gold Coast witnessed a much smaller trade in arms than the Bight of Bonny/Biafra despite the British transporting at least 447,445 people from the region before the official end of the transatlantic slave trade.¹⁰³ This in part derived from the lower number of guns traded per slave obtained from the Gold Coast, but this neglects the issue of the quality of the muskets required to trade for slaves in different regions. The Gold Coast did import a good number of the low-quality “square muskets,” but the majority of the types sold on the Gold Coast were expensive muskets of higher quality, usually costing upwards of nine shillings to buy in England.

¹⁰¹W. A. Richards, "The Import of Firearms into West Africa in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of African History* 21, no. 1 (1980): 52-56, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/181483>.

¹⁰²Inikori, *Forced Migration*, 131.

¹⁰³"Slave ships from 1650-1821 flying the flag of Great Britain," table.

From this, it may seem logical that the preference for higher quality guns on the Gold Coast might have reduced the profit margins on firearms for British slave traders operating despite needing fewer guns per enslaved person than elsewhere. Yet, the math alone does not necessarily support this conclusion, five guns which cost six shillings each are still more expensive than three guns which cost nine shillings each, and the five guns will take up more room in the hold. If the price of the guns sent to Bonny increases by even one shilling, then the price differential necessary to make selling guns on the Gold Coast more costly only grows. As a result, another explanation for this phenomenon is needed.

The most likely explanation for this has to do with a lower demand for British firearms on the Gold Coast. The British sold fewer muskets on the Gold Coast because local people did not want as many of them, potentially because they had other suppliers. The Royal African Company's letters and logs do suggest that the Dutch and Portuguese were very active in the region, despite the British slowly coming to dominate the trade there. Perhaps British arms could have been preferred as a high quality commodity, due to better proofing, in comparison to the workhorse Dutch and Portuguese guns. Alternatively, the time needed to prepare a higher quality firearm and proof it to ensure higher tolerances might have potentially been unappealing for slave traders looking to head to Africa as soon as possible. Regardless of the reason, both the states of the Bonny Blight and the regions to the west of the Gold Coast such as the Windward Coast and Sierra Leone both imported far more gunpowder weapons, and imported lower quality weapons.

Conclusion

Slave traders may have often traded in textiles, but the firearm operated as one of the bedrocks of the transatlantic slave trade. Firearms had a higher purchasing power than any other

good in relation to their cost to procure in England, they had undeniable utility even when not traded for slaves, given the need to secure trading forts against attack from local people and competitors. I have discovered over the course of my research that even if the British sold the most firearms, every European power to some extent incorporated the arms trade into their trade in human beings. If the British did not sell firearms, the Dutch did, if the French did not, the British did, and thus why wouldn't one trade arms for slaves? Once begun, the process had an inexorable logic which pulled its key actors forwards, and only external intervention to break the gun-slave cycle could stop its work. Of course, the people of West Africa perceived things a little differently than the European slave traders, and it is the view from West Africa that the next chapter covers.

Chapter 3

The West African Buyers

Because he who does not rest on anyone cannot sleep:

In the bush the birds rest on one another,

With them, the sons of Adam rest on one another;

As for power, it rests on gunpowder:

Without gunpowder, power is never certain!

– Oral tradition of Segu (in modern day Mali)

Introduction

The people who purchased British firearms and sold slaves to the British did not do so because they had no sense of business acumen or self interest. As we have seen, African merchants could be very particular about the goods they chose to purchase, refusing to sell slaves without receiving their preferred goods or gold in exchange. Both Europeans and Africans reacted to market pressures, on the African side, the slave trade rapidly expanded in response to European demand, on the European side, they scrambled to procure goods befitting the tastes of African consumers. Africans purchased firearms because they wanted gunpowder weaponry, and planned on using them, and this chapter will focus on the economic, political, and to a lesser extent cultural impact of Africans trading slaves for firearms.

The firearm did not immediately transform African society. In the way that many technological advancements arise from social needs or desires, those same technologies leave their own imprints on society as a whole. In this case, the introduction of firearms to West Africa altered the balance of power among West African states. Coastal rulers, who could readily acquire gunpowder weapons and gunpowder itself from European traders, gained a noticeable advantage not just in purely material terms, but also psychologically. Warfare on the pre-colonial West African coast, much like warfare elsewhere, depended heavily on cultivating confidence

and the will to fight among warriors and demoralizing the enemy. This included spiritual rituals, as described by the English trader Ralph Hassell at Anomabu on February 3rd of 1687: “they sent from Fanteen to command all able men to bear up arms thither and hung a fittish (fetish) at the gate that no man should come to trade to sell any corn or any other thing, butt immediately to repara with arms to Ffannteen.”¹⁰⁴ In the initial stage of their introduction to West Africa, firearms functioned as much as a demonstration of military might as they did actual weapons. While they certainly saw use in conflicts between West African rulers, simply having firearms denoted a certain advantage in warfare, opening up non-kinetic means of spreading influence.

The Slave Coast in the 1600s

The “Slave Coast” of West Africa (the coastline between the Volta River and the Lagos Lagoon) provides an instructive example of the political changes wrought by the transatlantic trade in slaves and arms. When the British arrived, the kingdom of Allada dominated the slave coast of West Africa. The region already engaged in some trade with Europeans, but difficulty of landing around Allada and the unwillingness / incapacity of African traders in the region to venture out to the European ships kept trade small scale until the mid-16th century, when the Portuguese initiated regular trade.¹⁰⁵ The Dutch, who had recently occupied Portuguese slave plantations in the Americas and supplanted Portuguese presence on the Slave Coast, decided to jump into the transatlantic slave trade.¹⁰⁶ The English and the French, seeking slaves for their own Caribbean sugar plantations, first attempted to muscle in on the slave coast’s trade in slaves in the 1660s with their Royal African and East Indies companies respectively.¹⁰⁷ Although the

¹⁰⁴Robin Law, ed., *The English in West Africa: 1685-1688*, vol. 2, *The Local Correspondence of the Royal African Company of England 1681-1699*, Sources of African History 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 196.

¹⁰⁵Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550-1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on an African Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 116-118.

¹⁰⁶Law, *The Slave*, 120-123.

¹⁰⁷Joseph E. Inikori, ed., *Forced Migration: The Impact of the Export Slave Trade on African Societies* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1982), 190-193.

English initially saw little success, the French chose to move their operations to the nearby Kingdom of Whydah (also known as Hueda, and which gave its name to the “port” of Ouidah), at the time a vassal of Allada and the English followed suit.

The kings of the region generally reserved their right to have their slaves sold first, before other private sellers could trade slaves for European goods, and the king’s own slave trading occupied about a tenth of the overall market at Whydah.¹⁰⁸ The monarchy also exercised control of who slaves could be sold to, and where, although illicit trading continued in spite of efforts to crack down on it. Furthermore, the state imposed customs on all slave purchases and thus derived revenue from every slave sold, and the lower customs of Whydah likely helped pull trade there.¹⁰⁹ Prices were fixed by the monarchy in Offra and later Jakin, but in Whydah the authorities happily allowed a relatively free market in spite of vigorous European complaints.¹¹⁰ Monarchs actively sought to engage in the slave trade and monopolize European trading as much as possible, but also fiercely resisted European efforts to try and force more favorable terms of trade for European slave traders.

A series of unfortunate events befell the French East Indies Company and Dutch traders, including a war against the rebellious port of Offra, where the Dutch maintained their primary fort, which totally destroyed the Dutch fort and forced them to evacuate the region.¹¹¹ As a result, the British solidified control over the trade in slaves at Whydah, which rapidly grew in importance until it became the key nexus of the slave trade on the Slave Coast.¹¹² The flow of slaves greatly empowered the Kingdom of Whydah, whose rulers grew extremely wealthy and broke free of Allada. Yet, Allada remained a key supplier of slaves to Whydah, and the King of

¹⁰⁸Law, *The Slave*, 210-214.

¹⁰⁹Law, *The Slave*, 208-210.

¹¹⁰Fuglestad, *Slave Traders*, 155-156.

¹¹¹Law, *The Slave*, 130-132.

¹¹²Finn Fuglestad, *Slave Traders by Invitation: West Africa's Slave Coast in the Precolonial Era* (New York: Oxford University Press., 2018), 148-149.

Allada made every effort to divert European trade back to his kingdom, with some success, particularly with French slave traders.¹¹³ As the Royal African Company's monopoly finally evaporated in 1712, Whydah and Allada would soon face a new challenger for dominance of the Slave Coast, the infamous Kingdom of Dahomey. The supply of arms and the lure of profits would spark a conflagration that would burn the existing political order of the Slave Coast to the ground.

The Rise of Dahomey

The Kingdom of Dahomey was an inland African kingdom centered around the city of Abomey, and a tributary of Allada. It is of particular note because it exemplifies the tendencies among West African states as a whole to reorientate themselves around both warfare and the slave trade. Dahomey's greatest advantage lay in its semi-professional standing army, armed entirely with imported firearms and swords, which far outclassed Allada's and Whydah's armies.¹¹⁴ Said firearms were obtained through trading poor souls enslaved in Dahomey's wars to traders in the coastal ports in return for European arms. It was also more centralized, with a greater concentration of power in the hands of the king, who received all war captives, and utilized women empowered by royal authority as a buffer mechanism to lessen the influence of the chiefs. Allada experienced significant difficulties near the tail end of the 1600s, losing its position in the slave trade to Whydah, and losing ground to the Gold Coast powerhouse of Akwamu.¹¹⁵ Hemmed in, Allada resorted to economic warfare against Whydah, which sparked armed conflict between the two states, weakening them both. During this period, Dahomey successfully fought and conquered the Kingdom of Weme, and managed to continue to profit

¹¹³Fuglestad, *Slave Traders*, 151-153.

¹¹⁴Law, *The Slave*, 270-273.

¹¹⁵Fuglestad, *Slave Traders*, 171-175.

from the slave trade by avoiding the blockade imposed by Allada.¹¹⁶ In 1718, King Agaja ascended to the throne after a short but bloody power struggle, and immediately set about expanding Dahomey's influence further in the South through conquest.

Agaja first marched on Allada in 1724, and after a three day battle, seized the city of Allada, burning it to the ground and installing a puppet ruler subordinate to Dahomey.¹¹⁷ The deposed princes of Allada pleaded with the Oyo Empire to intervene, and the Oyo did so in 1726. The Oyo, located to the Northwest of Dahomey and Allada, had previously maintained ties with the rulers of Allada, and they saw the Dahomians as a threat to the balance of power in the region. Despite Dahomey's fearsome reputation, the battle hardened Oyo army, comprised entirely of cavalry, proved

more than a match for the Dahomian regulars (Figure 6).

The Oyo demolished the army of Dahomey, and occupied the region, but failed to capture or kill Agaja, and they eventually withdrew, leaving Agaja to claim victory by not suffering total defeat, but he was forced to pay tribute to Oyo in return

for peace.¹¹⁸ Now Agaja, having rebuilt a (much smaller) army, attacked Whydah in 1727 with the goal of taking their share of the transatlantic slave trade. Whydah mobilized to stop him, only



Denkary et son escorte. — Denis de Bière, d'après les documents de l'auteur.

Figure 6: The Cavalry of the Mossi Kingdom, circa 1892. The Oyo army was entirely composed of similar cavalry.

¹¹⁶Law, *The Slave*, 263-267.

¹¹⁷Fuglestad, *Slave Traders*, 199-201.

¹¹⁸Law, *The Slave*, 280-282.

to suffer a humiliating defeat near the village of Paon, and two days later once again lost to Agaja, near Gome. Three days later, an advance party of 200 Dahomian soldiers captured the Whydah capital of Savi without a fight as its rulers fled.¹¹⁹ Agaja ordered the city burnt down, and much of Whydah's population found themselves executed, sacrificed, or sold into slavery. The Dahomians even managed to annihilate the local Portuguese fort, but a punitive campaign against the polity of Tofo prevented them from finishing off the kings of Whydah.¹²⁰ In 1728, the Oyo once again mobilized for war against Dahomey, this time at the request of the fugitive King Huffon of Whydah.

This time, Agaja did not even try to offer battle, and instead fled with his army to the coast, and after plundering what they could over the course of twelve days, the Oyo withdrew from Dahomey, leaving Agaja to once again claim glorious victory.¹²¹ In April of 1728, a force of 1,500 Dahomian warriors marched on King Huffon of Whydah's encampment at Glehue, and the Whydah promptly dispersed and fled, some of them into the local French fort. The Dahomians attacked the French fort on May 1, and came close to taking it after fires detonated the fort's magazine, only to be driven off by cannonfire from the nearby English fort. After a failed pursuit of King Huffon, the Dahomians openly declared that they would have no further business with Whydah, then proceeded to capture and sell into slavery the perhaps 3,000 Whydah who believed them and emerged from hiding.¹²² 1729 saw yet another Oyo invasion, and once again Agaja fled into the forests with the bulk of his army, by now including armed women, this time remaining there for two months amid food shortages, before the Oyo withdrew. At the same time, Huffon marched on Whydah with an army, intending to retake his kingdom, only to flee

¹¹⁹Law, *The Slave*, 282-286.

¹²⁰Fuglestad, *Slave Traders*, 206-210.

¹²¹Robin Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving 'Port', 1727-1892* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), 52-53.

¹²²Law, *The Slave*, 288-289.

ignominiously when Agaja returned with an army.¹²³ Once again, the Dahomians repeated the ruse about leaving Allada, and when people returned, they found themselves sold into slavery by Dahomian troops.

The Oyo found themselves temporarily distracted by internal politicking, and Dahomey once again marched to war. A Dutchman by the name of Hertogh had attempted to build an anti-Dahomey coalition in Jakin, and Agaja, after declaring his intention to campaign elsewhere, seized the city by storm on April 2, 1732, while its leader and Hertogh fled. The Jakin king would attempt to retake the city in 1733, but after his repulse, Agaja resolved to destroy the city, and in 1734 burned it to the ground.¹²⁴ He also attempted to resolve the conflict with the exile Whydah by placing a puppet Whydah on the throne, but failed in his efforts.¹²⁵ By this point, Dahomey seemed well entrenched as the dominant power on the Slave Coast. In the course of a decade, Agaja had transformed the balance of power and established his Kingdom as the undisputed hegemon of the Slave Coast.

Dahomey waged its wars to gain control of the slave trade, a crucial question remained to be answered: what did all this warfare mean for the slave trade? The reactions of Europeans proved telling, as initially despite assaults on their forts by Dahomian warriors, the vast majority of European actors showed little concern, and indeed, some, like the local French and the Portuguese officials, went so far as to opine that a Dahomian victory would be preferable.¹²⁶ This opinion soon changed as the sheer scale and brutality of the warfare disrupted the smooth flow of enslaved people onto European ships, and the insistence of the Dahomians on payment in gold instead of in kind.¹²⁷ To make matters worse for the slavers, Dahomey sought to consolidate

¹²³Law, *The Slave*, 291-294.

¹²⁴Fuglestad, *Slave Traders*, 217-220.

¹²⁵Law, *The Slave*, 298-300.

¹²⁶Law, *The Slave*, 305-308.

¹²⁷Fuglestad, *Slave Traders*, 224.

more centralized control over the slave trade, making it the sole domain of the monarchy itself, but crucially, at no point did Dahomey seek the end of the slave trade. The trade continued, even as Europeans continued to chafe at the limitations imposed by the new hegemon on the number of slaves they could purchase and from whom.

Consolidation of Dahomey under Tegbesu

By 1735, Dahomey ceased its expansion, and attempted to consolidate its gains and secure its standing in the region, facing challenges from new states to Dahomey's east and west. The Eastern states, formed from the refugees and exiles displaced by Dahomey's conquests, tried to entice European slave trading away from Dahomey. Dahomey lacked the capability to conquer them, and its efforts to replicate Allada's economic warfare against Whydah did not see much success, as slaves from the Oyo continued to flow to these Eastern ports.¹²⁸ To the West, the power of Akwamu collapsed in 1730 after defeat at the hands of the kingdom of Akim, and Ashangmo, formerly of the Dahomian army, seized control of the Little Popo. A punitive expedition meant to crush Ashangmo succeeded in destroying a Dutch fort at Keta, but found itself cut off, trapped, and annihilated by Ashangmo, who successfully destroyed the Dahomian canoes, cut off their supply lines, and closed their escape routes (Figure 7).¹²⁹ Ashangmo established himself as not only a



Figure 7: A West African war canoe, 1832.

¹²⁸Law, *The Slave*, 309-314.

¹²⁹Law, *The Slave*, 315-318.

military threat, but sought to compete with Dahomey for their share of the transatlantic slave trade, thus posing an economic threat.

When Agaja died in 1740, Dahomey once again faced an invasion by the Oyo Empire, which had recovered from the internal power struggles which followed the death of their monarch, although the reasons for the invasion remain unclear. In 1742, the Oyo marched against Dahomey, and although the Dahomians tried to make a stand in front of their capital, they once again suffered a crushing defeat, and once again the king and his retinue fled into the forests, waiting for the Oyo to leave before declaring victory.¹³⁰ When the Oyo invaded again the following year, the Dahomians simply hid and refused battle with the superior Oyo forces, allowing the invaders to loot, plunder, and burn as they pleased. At the same time, the exiled Whydah chose this moment to raid the Dahomian ports, possibly supported by Ashangmo, and in light of this, the new king Tegbesu attempted to negotiate peace with Oyo. He made no progress until a threatened Oyo invasion in 1748 preemptively forced him into hiding, and he finally offered up a large enough tribute to satisfy the Oyo.¹³¹ Dahomey would remain a tributary state of the Oyo until 1823, which, while costly, enabled them to focus their energies on their eastern and western rivals.

In the period between 1731 and 1750, Dahomian rulers also fought to overcome internal crises of legitimacy and embark upon what a modern viewer might call statebuilding in their occupied territories. The death of Agaja led to a nearly ten year power struggle among the Dahomian elite, which Tegbesu eventually won decisively, exiling or killing rival claimants and even opposing religious leaders.¹³² At the same time, Tegbesu set about usurping the legitimacy of the conquered Allada kings, fabricating a claim of descent from the royal dynasty of Allada,

¹³⁰Law, *The Slave*, 319-321.

¹³¹Law, *The Slave*, 323-324.

¹³²Fuglestad, *Slave Traders*, 225-228.

reestablishing royal institutions in Allada, and began a policy of religious assimilation.¹³³

Tegbesu crowned his policies by implementing an appointed bureaucracy throughout Dahomey, regularizing and standardizing the administrative apparatus and greatly increasing state control.¹³⁴ If before the Dahomians had sought to conquer and exterminate, now they sought to incorporate their subjugated peoples into a unified Dahomian state.

The impact of this period of consolidation on the slave trade can be summarized as a period which saw great disruption but also the first openings of the Dahomian slave trade to the kingdom's private traders. The European traders initially fretted over the paucity of slaves flowing into coastal ports, and agonized at the monopoly exercised by Dahomey's kings. During the 1740s, Tegbesu decided to partially liberalize the slave trade and changed policies to accept a status as middleman, buying slaves from states further inland and selling them to the Europeans rather than only selling slaves taken as war captives by Dahomey.¹³⁵ This attracted European powers back to Dahomey and reduced the damage done by years of constant warfare to Dahomey's economy, making the kingdom less reliant on warfare alone. Yet, continued restrictions made the European slavers increasingly seek their slaves elsewhere despite vigorous efforts by the Dahomeians to maintain their prominence within the slave trade.

What to Make of Dahomey?

From 1700-1750, Dahomey's rise was driven by the desire to monopolize the slave trade, and its conquests were fueled by imported European firearms. The slave trade and the guns it brought created an enormous incentive for states to fight wars of conquest for control over who could sell others into slavery, with the loser often being sold into slavery. Wars were the primary

¹³³Law, *The Slave*, 325-334.

¹³⁴Fuglestad, *Slave Traders*, 242-244.

¹³⁵Fuglestad, *Slave Traders*, 238-239.

mechanism to supply fresh slaves, and while it did not suit the slave traders for war to interrupt their trade in human flesh, the economic competition did benefit them. Similarly, even in times of peace on the Slave Coast, the enslaved people sold to Europeans originated from wars further into the interior. The assertion that the transatlantic slave trade had little impact on the societies of the West African coast appears borderline absurd given the slave trade's centrality to economic power and warfare in the region. Similarly, the claim made by anti-abolitionists that the slave trade already existed beforehand and the Europeans just tapped into it falls flat against the sheer singleminded focus which went into contesting shares of the trade with Europeans. British slave traders did not create Dahomey, but their activities created the impetus for bloody warfare and Dahomey's rise depended on its early adoption and adaptation to European firearms, sold in exchange for slaves.¹³⁶

States like Dahomey built their entire *raison d'être* around the slave trade. It was not a coincidence that when Tegbesu sought to consolidate the Dahomian state, he chose to focus on improving Dahomey's position as a middleman in the slave trade instead of reorienting away from the slave trade altogether. To not endorse the slave trade was tantamount to throwing away the single greatest possible source of income for a state, and rejecting a potent source of arms, ammunition, and powder. Yet, although the slave trade assisted in short term economic gains for African kingdoms, it crippled the region's long term economic prospects and created what might be called "path dependency" in West African economies.¹³⁷ It not only ruined the lives of the people who found themselves enslaved and shipped across the world, it also undermined the long term sustainability of the states which sold them into slavery, and made them dependent on the European powers. The slave trade and the sheer amount of violence it entailed depopulated much

¹³⁶Law, *The Slave*, 345-350.

¹³⁷Law, *The Slave*, 219-224.

of West Africa to the extent that elephants, which had disappeared from much of the region due to human encroachment, rebounded and reclaimed much of their former habitats.¹³⁸ The enrichment of the elite and the enhancement of the power of new kings did not compensate for the endemic warfare, the relentless brutality, and the immense human suffering inflicted on millions of people.

The “Port” of Ouidah: Gateway to the Slave Coast

Ouidah operated as the central trading port of both Whydah and later Dahomey, a critical hub for the slave trade on the Slave Coast, but as Robin Law notes, Ouidah was not actually a port. Instead, it was a coastal city just a few kilometers inland from the sea, so ships stood several kilometers off shore and used canoes to reach the city.¹³⁹ The name of Ouidah was derived from the kingdom which owned it, the Kingdom of Whydah (or Hueda, depending on transliteration), which actually had its capital of Savi another 11 kilometers to the north. The date and details of Ouidah’s founding remain shrouded in mystery, but evidently by the 1680s a settlement existed and involved in the business of trading enslaved people to Europeans.¹⁴⁰ As previously noted, lower customs likely enticed European traders to move their business to Ouidah from Offra and its controller Allada, and vastly enriched the rulers of Ouidah. During the early 1700s, Ouidah consisted of Tové (the original settlement) and three quarters associated with European forts, namely the French, Portuguese, and English forts.¹⁴¹ Exporting 10,000-15,000 enslaved people per year between 1690 and 1724, it accounted for perhaps half of all slaves exported from all of Africa in those years.¹⁴²

¹³⁸Inikori, *Forced Migration*, 199-201.

¹³⁹Law, *Ouidah: The Social*, 18-19.

¹⁴⁰Law, *Ouidah: The Social*, 20-25.

¹⁴¹Law, *Ouidah: The Social*, 41.

¹⁴²Law, *Ouidah: The Social*, 26-30.

To comprehend the sheer profitability of the slave trade for Whydah, it should be noted that the annual income from selling 10,000 slaves in the 1690s equaled 320 million cowries, and the average porter earned maybe 120 cowries per day of work. This wealth did not flow to the common person, and instead accrued to the officials and merchants of the capital Savi, and the largest sector of the domestic economy, fishing, was perhaps a fifth of the size of the slave trade.¹⁴³ The sheer value of the slave trade to rulers obviously made it central to the state's psyche and economic well being, but the majority of Whydah's military power came from its ability to hire mercenaries, and it did not import European firearms like Dahomey. As such, when Dahomey came marching against Whydah, the Whydah had no effective domestic army with which to respond, and Whydah, outclassed technologically, riven by internal divisions, and far less organized, fell easily to Agaja's disciplined soldiers.¹⁴⁴ Trade in slaves and the consequent wealth on their own did not make a state capable of surviving on the West African coast, but they did provide a powerful incentive to attempt to usurp its position.

Once the Dahomians occupied Whydah, they set about establishing their own administration and attempting to placate local customs, including establishing the office of "Tegan" to govern the town and attempting to crown a puppet Whydah king, while crushing any resistance with brutal force. Indeed, after a 1743 invasion attempt by Whydah exiles, the Dahomians not only accused the Portuguese of harboring fugitive Whydah, but attacked the Portuguese fort in Ouidah on July 21st 1743, overrunning it and massacring the defenders, before dragging the fort's cannons into the interior.¹⁴⁵ As a result, no European fort attempted to meddle with the Dahomian occupation from this point on, and when the Dahomians finally crushed the Whydah exiles in 1775, the threats to Dahomey's control of Ouidah vanished. Now Ouidah

¹⁴³Law, *Ouidah: The Social*, 44-46.

¹⁴⁴Law, *Ouidah: The Social*, 48-49.

¹⁴⁵Law, *Ouidah: The Social*, 57-60.

solidified its position as Dahomey's main slave "port" and the Kingdom's rulers made every effort to repopulate the region, inviting people back, settling slaves in the town, and soliciting migration from Dahomey's interior holdings. The result, a population that grew to be majority Fon, still did not remove the feeling of being oppressed by the kings in Abomey, and the inhabitants still thought of themselves as somehow distinct from Dahomey despite their origins.¹⁴⁶

Although Ouidah declined in prominence as a stop for European traders in contrast to the now thriving alternatives, it continued to export slaves and serve as the primary conduit for European goods entering Dahomey. Yet, its short stint as an independent port reinforces the central reason why states wanted to buy guns and sell slaves on the West African coast, to accumulate capital and thus power, and to accrue military power and thus secure the state against victimization. The main cause of interruption of the transatlantic slave trade before its abolition was not European warfare, as the various states often demanded that Europeans not commit violence against one another as a precondition to trade. Instead, trade became disrupted when the flow of wars in the interior stopped or key coastal states themselves fell victim to wars, imperiling the merchants of human flesh. States which did not adapt to this cutthroat environment found their people captured and sold for the slave ships. To buy a gun was not just a mechanism by which a slave trader could earn a profit or gather more slaves, but a necessary measure to ensure you remained a slave trader and not a slave.

The Gold Coast Bloodletting

Of course the Slave Coast was merely one region of many along the West African coast, and the Gold Coast had its own history of instability and competition. Although less of a

¹⁴⁶Law, *Ouidah: The Social*, 69-70.

bloodbath than the Slave Coast, the Gold Coast remained a site of intense interstate competition for control over European trade in gold and slaves. Initial trade in the region, with Portuguese merchants, almost entirely consisted of gold in exchange for manufactured goods and copper, with a strong hesitancy to sell people as slaves.¹⁴⁷ Yet, as soon as the Europeans overcame their hesitation with selling guns, muskets immediately became a favorite of trading on the Gold Coast. In this case, the muskets preceded the slave trade, and if anything generated it. Three factors lay behind the emergence a full scale export slave trade on the Gold Coast: the widespread sale of weapons, pressure from other regions where the European traders traded in slaves, and a desire to control the extremely profitable trade with the Europeans.¹⁴⁸ The widespread introduction of muskets, when combined with a desire to monopolize trade with Europeans provoked political fragmentation and warfare in the 1640s which rapidly generated large numbers of war captives who were disposed of by selling them to the Europeans¹⁴⁹ The resultant warfare tipped the balance of power in the region towards European traders and solidified a gun-slave cycle on the Gold Coast as well.

The warfare and instability of the mid to late 1600s, when combined with the increasing prominence of the slave trade on the Gold Coast led to the creation of what might be termed “military-fiscal states” such as the Asante Empire. Like Dahomey, these states centralized the power of taxation and expanded their administrative capacities in order to finance strong centralized armies, which could then be used to defend the state and plunder opposing states.¹⁵⁰ Similar developments had already occurred in Europe due to intense inter-state competition, but here no transition to “cabinet wars” took place. Those states which did not adopt the slave trade

¹⁴⁷Green, *A Fistful*, 114-118.

¹⁴⁸Green, *A Fistful*, 141-148.

¹⁴⁹Green, *A Fistful*, 118-120.

¹⁵⁰Green, *A Fistful*, 296-301.

found themselves marginalized and soon threatened with military destruction by states willing to trade slaves for guns. The Kingdom of Benin, on the coast of Nigeria, offers an instructive example; it experienced a pronounced decline in the late 17th century due to the near termination of European trade, as Benin refused to trade in enslaved men. The decision to capitulate and begin large scale slave trading revived the kingdom's fortunes and enabled it to rebuild its military might.¹⁵¹ By the late 1700s, such was Benin's strength as a regional power that Dahomey sought to ally with the Kingdom.

If Dahomey grew to dominate the Slave Coast, the aforementioned Asante Empire grew to dominate the Gold Coast, with its centralized military apparatus and control of the gold trade, plundering smaller powers for slaves and holding out as an independent state until the end of the 19th century in spite of British colonial efforts. The British had a healthy respect for the Asante Empire's martial prowess and skill at using firearms, especially after the utter



Figure 8: Illustration of Asante soldiers in combat with British troops in 1874.

annihilation of the first British military expedition. It would take until 1874 for British troops, by now armed with dramatically superior arms, to finally break the power of the Asante (Figure 8). Over the course of the slave trade, British flagged ships would spirit away at least 447,445 people from the from the Gold Coast, and as previously noted, the states of the Gold Coast

¹⁵¹Green, *A Fistful*, 331-333.

developed particular tastes in armament.¹⁵² Across West Africa, warfare became a simple fact of life, and states which lacked military supremacy or access to trade soon found themselves falling apart, as Eguafó's slow collapse demonstrates.¹⁵³ Even though Eguafó did not suffer from total annihilation via conquest or slave raids, its control and ability to project power outside of a few villages declined until it became merely a collection of villages helpless to assert itself. The archeological evidence chronicles a grim toll of states and settlements which simply could not "make the cut" and found themselves quickly or slowly ruined, their surviving people dispersing or consolidating into a new, smaller settlement. Fortifications sprung up around villages and towns in response to the threat of slave raids, and a new class of middlemen developed, as warfare and mass export of slaves became a fact of life.

Antera Duke and His World

East of the Kingdom of Benin lay the city state of Atakpa, or as it was commonly known to European traders, Calabar, now also part of modern day Nigeria. Calabar operated as a significant center of the slave trade in the 1700s, and like many slaving ports, developed a strata of professional "middlemen" or slave traders who purchased slaves and resold them to the European traders.¹⁵⁴ One of these slave traders, Antera Duke, kept a personal diary, written in pidgin English, and unlike the vast majority of similar documents, it survived. Duke's diary presents a relatively rare West African perspective on events, on the relative importance of goods at Old Calabar, and the regular operation of the transatlantic slave trade. His diary records his time drinking, socializing, procuring slaves, and negotiating with Europeans, who he emulated in

¹⁵²"Slave ships from 1650-1821 flying the flag of Great Britain," table, 2018, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database#tables>.

¹⁵³J. Cameron Monroe and Akinwumi Ogundiran, *Power and Landscape in Atlantic West Africa: Archaeological Perspectives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 115-136.

¹⁵⁴Stephen D. Behrendt, Anthony J. H. Latham, and David Northrup, eds., *The Diary of Antera Duke, an Eighteenth-century African Slave Trader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 46-52.

dress to improve his business prospects. It reveals an unsettling level of normalcy and routine for someone engaged in the business of selling living human beings as chattel.

Most of the diary concerns the day to day activities of a slave trader, but some pages stand out for what they reveal about the culture of Calabar at the time, and the ways in which European trade affected practices and customs there. On January 25th of 1785, Duke wrote about how in the afternoon everyone came to “dash” Willy Honesty’s daughter (Willy Honesty was a local leader known for beheading his foes), in what is assumed to be a celebration of her wearing her first cloth and/or emerging from seclusion. As such, gifts were required, and he recorded that he gave 1,496 rods of iron alongside cloth, gunpowder, and iron to her.¹⁵⁵ On February 5th of 1785, Duke describes both sharing kegs of gunpowder with another merchant, and upon hearing that a ship was approaching, preparing a coastal battery of five cannons to fire if necessary.¹⁵⁶ This implies both that some trader at one point decided to sell the people of Calabar cannons, that it was common practice to share gunpowder between merchants, and that gunpowder was considered a suitable gift for a party among the slave vendors of Calabar. Many of his other entries mostly focus on who he was partying with, so he clearly saw nothing unusual about giving people gunpowder as a gift or at parties.

The other times guns or gunpowder are mentioned almost invariably revolve around either a disturbance occurring around Calabar, firing cannons as a salute, or attacking a slave ship which had violated the rules of the port. For instance, on September 19th of 1787, Duke records that a local man had tried to shoot his wife with a musket, but failed to hit her, indicating that firearms were common enough in town to be used in domestic violence.¹⁵⁷ Yet otherwise Duke mostly relates trading slaves in exchange for copper, iron, or cloth, not guns, or just does

¹⁵⁵Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup, *The Diary*, 136-137.

¹⁵⁶Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup, *The Diary*, 138-139.

¹⁵⁷Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup, *The Diary*, 208-209.

not mention the goods he traded for at all. He also was not directly involved in procuring slaves, but rather in purchasing them from the people who actually enslaved people, and then selling them, alongside yams, to the Europeans. To a middleman such as Duke, firearms are common enough to be background radiation, something commonplace and normal, not an exotic European good. His truly unfortunate lack of accurate and precise record keeping in a personal diary cripples any accounting of what goods he most often traded aside from what he thought to mention at any given point, and often he just mentions goods being advanced for him to procure slaves.

We can draw some conclusions about the society that had developed in Calabar from Antera Duke's diary. First of all, it was a society in which a privileged strata of slave traders grew wealthy at the expense of countless others, partying and socializing while routinely beheading slaves seemingly simply as a show of respect for another slave trader. Second, death was pervasive and common, many of the diary entries merely describe the death of a family member or friend or prominent leader, and one entry mentions a slave deal gone bad which ended with Antera Duke hiding from 30 men armed with muskets.¹⁵⁸ Third, no weapon is mentioned except muskets and cannons, which implies a certain saturation of gunpowder weaponry in the city-state. Finally, we can safely assume that a degree of violent extrajudicial conflict was endemic, as one early diary entry describes the process of scaring off a group of people who were "catching wives" on the way to the market by ambushing canoes, and no mention is made of law enforcement or courts.¹⁵⁹ Yet, as a society, Calabar seems free of the sort of intensive warfare that characterized other regions of West Africa perhaps in part due to relative political decentralization, although violent competition did exist. Most significantly, in

¹⁵⁸Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup, *The Diary*, 178-179.

¹⁵⁹Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup, *The Diary*, 152-153.

1767 the leading families of New Town/Duke Town conspired with British slavers to kidnap and enslave two of the “princes” of Old Town, but this did not escalate to total war.¹⁶⁰

Luckily, some of the logs of slave ships which stopped at Calabar survived, and can be cross-referenced with Duke’s diary, giving us a slightly fuller picture of how trade operated at Calabar. In 1769, the slave ship *Dobson*, under the command of Captain James Potter, sailed for Calabar, carrying a cargo composed of 36% textiles by value, 15% hardware 14% bar iron, 10% firearms and gunpowder, 7% beads, and 5% alcohol.¹⁶¹ Trading in Calabar often involved a series of “rounds” which consisted of a piece of cloth, a musket, and a keg of gunpowder, with a preference for gunpowder and iron bars.¹⁶² Potter averaged about 6.4 rounds per transaction, and so in order to obtain two slaves from Willy Honesty, he traded 3 gunpowder kegs, and one trade gun.¹⁶³ When Potter traded with Duke over a period of twenty three weeks, he purchased fifty slaves at the cost of 782 copper and brass rods (the local currency), 500 yards of cloth, 15,000 beads, 88 kegs of gunpowder, 68 arm and leg manilas, 62 gallons of brandy, 36 muskets, 11 flagons, and 12 knives.¹⁶⁴ A comparison of his other purchases shows that Potter most often traded textiles and gunpowder, but that textiles overwhelmingly made up the cost of the goods he traded. Despite usually trading muskets and gunpowder in substantial quantities, to the point where he sold both in almost every trade, they still only amounted to a tenth of the value of the goods he traded. This absurd cost efficiency highlights that while textiles were clearly a preferred good, gunpowder and muskets were ludicrously cost effective to trade in Calabar and that gunpowder in particular was in high demand. In total, the *Dobson*’s holds would swallow 309 captives before making the transatlantic voyage to Barbados.

¹⁶⁰Randy James Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth Century Atlantic Odyssey* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 10-32.

¹⁶¹Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup, *The Diary*, 58.

¹⁶²Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup, *The Diary*, 59.

¹⁶³Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup, *The Diary*, 60.

¹⁶⁴Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup, *The Diary*, 61.

The Kingdom of Lagos and the Creation of a Slave Port

Between Dahomey with its captured “port” of Ouidah and the Kingdom of Benin lies the Lagos Lagoon, and in it a two mile square island, sandy and swampy. This island hosts the city of Lagos in the modern day, and in the 1700s, Lagos sat at the center of the eastern Slave Coast kingdom known as the Kingdom of Lagos (Figure 9). The name Lagos did not come from the

island’s residents, but from the Portuguese traders who marked the Lagoon as “lagos” (lit. lake).¹⁶⁵ The settlements dotting the island of Lagos in Lagos Lagoon had not yet consolidated into the city of Lagos in the 1500s, and the first major step in that direction came from the arrival of a Beninese military expedition looking for a base of operations. Nearly a century passed, during which the Kingdom of Benin experienced

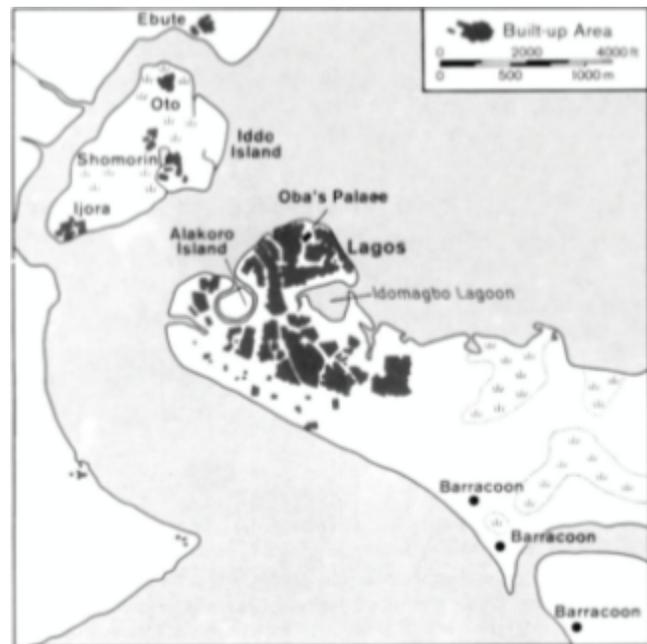


Figure 9: The City of Lagos in 1850

substantial difficulties due to its lack of a slave trade, until sometime around 1682, when Benin’s monarch sent a viceroy to oversee the island and extract tribute. Ironically, this led to functional independence under descendants of the first Viceroy, now considered the monarchs of the Kingdom of Lagos around the turn of the 18th century.¹⁶⁶ As the embryonic transatlantic slave trade developed, the Lagos Lagoon became a more important area of operations for European traders.

¹⁶⁵Kristin Mann, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City: Lagos, 1760-1900* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 26-27.

¹⁶⁶Mann, *Slavery and the Birth*, 28-29.

The rise of Dahomey and subsequent disruption of the slave trade at Ouidah, when combined with the rise of new states to the east of Dahomey composed of refugees, led many European slave traders to shift the focus of their trade in human beings on the Slave Coast eastward from Ouidah. In light of these developments the Lagosians began a small scale export slave trade in 1740, but it would take another two decades for Lagos to develop a full scale slave trade. In the 1760s, British, French, and Portuguese ships began to arrive at Lagos and purchase slaves for transport to the Americas, but Lagos also served as a hub for slavers, transporting enslaved people across the lagoon or even to the Gold Coast to sell elsewhere.¹⁶⁷ Lagos, as a nexus of Portuguese trading, actually reached its height as a slave port from 1841-1850, after Britain had already formally abolished the slave trade, but its rise began in the 1780s as traders formerly headed to Ouidah diverted eastwards. The city's most rapid expansion came in the 1800s though, as warfare between Dahomey and Oyo left it untouched and pre existing ties with the Portuguese helped facilitate the so-called "second slavery" in Brazil, Cuba, and the Portuguese colonies.¹⁶⁸ Lagos should be noted because it shows how the decline of the slave trade in one area did not constitute cessation of the trade or seriously impact its functioning, as other actors simply moved to take up the slack.

Even without the threat of being consumed by a state which did participate in the slave trade and had access to British guns, at any time European traders could shift the location of their trade in human beings to improve their profit margins and reduce risk. Lagos, now the most populous city in Africa and former capital of post-colonial Nigeria, developed extremely rapidly from a series of villages to a major urban center entirely because of the slave trade. To not embrace the slave trade was not merely to threaten your military power, but to forgo the potential

¹⁶⁷Mann, *Slavery and the Birth*, 36-37.

¹⁶⁸Mann, *Slavery and the Birth*, 38-42.

for enormous economic gains at the small cost of selling human beings as property. It should come as no surprise that cannibalism became a common West African metaphor for slavery, as one could eat another person's body and devour their soul in exchange for power.¹⁶⁹ Either one participated in the carnage, or one would soon find themselves a victim of it. Either way, once unleashed, market forces operated as ruthlessly as any conspiracy in ripping apart the fabric of West African societies.

Conclusion

Narratives of the slave trade on the West African Coast, especially those presented in popular media, typically have a moralistic and simplistic divide to them. The slave traders who sought to legitimize their trade almost always fell back on the notion that Africans would always war with each other and enslave each other anyways, so there really wasn't any harm to the slave trade. The anti-slavery crusaders would allege that the slave trade had ruined West Africa, which previously had been a model of peace and harmony. In the present day, the narratives often echo these trends, with the apologist argument that "Africans enslaved Africans" warring with an image of a formless and victimized Africa under assault by European powers. The latter vision is perhaps best exemplified by the recent movie *The Woman King*, in which the women warriors of Dahomey fight valiantly against the Oyo and evil European slavers, with the promise that they will end the slave trade as soon as the war ends. Similarly, British nationalist narratives usually present the British as the central actor in abolishing slavery and that this was an unqualified moral good.

All of these narratives, popular in the public sphere, tend to deny West Africans real agency and strip those societies of their real historical context and aspirations, or distort history

¹⁶⁹Green, *A Fistful*, 276-278.

by giving the people of West Africa total responsibility for all bad things which happened to “Africans”. In reality, both Europeans and West Africans were subject to the oft quoted Marxist maxim that “men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please.”¹⁷⁰ European traders, constrained by the availability of goods and the preferences of African consumers, bitterly complained about their lack of control, even as they bought thousands of human beings and shipped them abroad as slaves in exchange for guns. African kingdoms on the other hand, exercised notable power, but lost much of their power as interstate competition led to a race to the bottom and undermined the negotiating power of the various West African states. The impersonal forces of trade, when mixed with a cutthroat and violent political environment with the potential for enormous profit, created strong incentives to militarize and wage war.

Once open warfare for control of European trade began, it inevitably led to the breakdown of restrictions against trading slaves to the Europeans, as states competed to obtain advantage over one another. Even without open warfare, the ability of the European traders to “take their business elsewhere” when combined with the political fragmentation of the West African coast steadily drove African rulers to move to accommodate European economic preferences. At the beginning of the slave trade, the relationship between Africans and Europeans was one of African strength and European weakness. By the time the British formally abolished their slave trade in 1807, the dynamic had reversed, and Africans found themselves at the mercy of capricious European powers. When British Victorian moral and economic concerns finally brought the transatlantic slave trade low, West African rulers whose entire societies had adapted to the trade either found themselves ruined, or managed to prolong their existence via trading slaves to other European powers.

¹⁷⁰Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: Die Revolution, 1852; Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1937), accessed March 24, 2023, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/index.htm>.

Chapter 4

Aftershocks

Introduction

When the parliament of Britain moved to abolish the transatlantic slave trade, the British government soon tasked the Royal Navy with enforcing its abolition on the high seas. The ships of the Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron would intercept suspected slave ships, at first ships belonging to nations at war with Britain and force them to allow British inspectors aboard to confiscate their "contraband." The United States, France, and Spain would sign bilateral treaties of cooperation on this matter with Britain after the Napoleonic Wars, despite continued use of slavery in British and Spanish colonies, and the extent of "slave power" in the United States. This obviously did some damage to economies centered around the export slave trade, which just so happened to be most of West Africa's preeminent powers. Once the British formally abolished slavery in 1833, the British military also supported and protected diplomats attempting to end slavery in West Africa.

This "moral crusade" would also lead to some of the best primary source documents available regarding the state of West African Kingdoms after the British formally ceased to trade in human flesh. In particular, the documents of those envoys which traveled to Dahomey in an unsuccessful bid to end slavery there can testify to the changes and continuities from the era of Dahomey's triumphs. John Beecroft and Louis Fraser, Consul and Vice-Consul of Britain's efforts to suppress the slave trade in West Africa, both left voluminous journals and correspondence behind, which Robin Law edited, compiled, and published. Both visited Dahomey personally, and while their opinions must be taken with an enormous grain of salt, they substantially enrich our understanding of Dahomey in the 1800s.

The West African Coast After the End of the Slave Trade

Consul John Beecroft possessed what could be described as “prejudiced attitudes” towards African people, and openly held the Dahomians in contempt.¹⁷¹ Beecroft set out in May of 1850 to convince Dahomey to abolish the slave trade, and first noted the continued Portuguese presence on the slave coast, as previously noted, Portugal had become the main customer for West African slaves.¹⁷² He goes on to describe the journey to Abomey, traveling on stretchers borne by African servants, and marveling at how beautiful the countryside is, while lamenting the state of its human population decimated by Dahomian conquest. After four days of travel, Beecroft arrived in Dahomey, and after a day, participated in a ceremony in which he estimates some five hundred “caboceers” (chiefs/high officers) approached, circled them, fired guns in the air, and saluted before leading them to the king, where once again mention is made of guns fired into the air.¹⁷³ Either this was an adaptation of a European ceremonial salute, as was used to welcome ships to the coast of Whydah, or guns had independently been integrated into state rituals in Dahomey.

Much of Beecroft’s journal is devoted to disgust at the “barbarians,” but he is exceptionally thorough in describing the “annual custom” of Dahomey as performed in 1850, in particular the repeated use of guns. Nearly every group he describes as processing is preceded by or followed by armed women and armed men, who both fired their guns in salute, and there is also mention of female “caboceers” among the procession.¹⁷⁴ Beecroft, then describes how not only did thousands of soldiers, many of them “amazons” process past the king and form up for inspection, but then conducted a simulated attack on an enemy position for the observers in good

¹⁷¹In 1851 Beecroft would also heavily promote British military intervention in Lagos, beginning the process of colonization which would lead to British rule over modern day Nigeria.

¹⁷²John Beecroft, *Consul John Beecroft's Journal of His Mission to Dahomey, 1850*, ed. Robin Law, *Sources of African History* 17 (Oxford: Published for The British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2019), 4-6.

¹⁷³Beecroft, *Consul John*, 22-25.

¹⁷⁴Beecroft, *Consul John*, 33-40.

order.¹⁷⁵ Lieutenant Forbes, who was accompanying Beecroft, relates that there were perhaps 6,800 soldiers in the procession, and that they sang songs thanking Europeans who had sold them powder and muskets, while the king and his wives dressed in a hybrid of African and European military uniform.¹⁷⁶ It seems likely, given the repeated entreaties for the British visitors to also witness human sacrifice, and how Forbes also claims that the King attempted to enlarge his army's numbers by having some regiments march by twice, that the entire affair was a show of force and intimidation. At the same time, every subsequent day of the “annual custom” also includes firing of muskets into the air and some manner of military drill, indicative of the supremacy of warfare and the firearm within Dahomian culture.

While attributing meaning to particular customs is difficult, it seems apparent that the musket had become integral to Dahomian public ritual by the 1850s as part of an overall militarist posture and an intentional cultivation of a brutal reputation. Muskets appear nonstop throughout Beecroft’s description of the “annual customs” and are nearly ubiquitous as weapons borne by soldiers. It is also worth noting that similar military rituals were also carried out by European monarchies, such that both Beecroft and Forbes had the language to describe what they were seeing as a review. Dahomian militarism, while extreme, was thus not an entirely out of context phenomenon or something contained to the West African coast. Yet, the European trade in arms had fueled and encouraged the rise of states like Dahomey, with well disciplined armies and economies founded upon warfare and slavery. The gun-slave cycle created dependency and fostered militarism, forging political, military, and economic tendencies which then became embodied in the cultural practice of West Africans, and would later be used to condemn West Africans as barbarians incapable of governing themselves. Suffice to say, Beecroft failed to end

¹⁷⁵Beecroft, *Consul John*, 45-53.

¹⁷⁶Beecroft, *Consul John*, 167-169.

Dahomey's participation in the slave trade, in spite of his best efforts, and while he certainly seemed impressed by Dahomey's military might, it seems doubtful this dissuaded him in the slightest.

The Vice-Consul Louis Fraser, posted to Dahomey from 1851 to 1852, was somehow a far worse diplomat than Beecroft, as not only was he racist, but also rude, abrasive, and arrogant, incapable of controlling himself. Yet, his journal, filled with prejudice and bile, also confirms the usage of firearms in rituals in Dahomey. During his time in Whydah during July of 1851, he writes about the continuous firing of muskets which preceded his entrance into the town, and on the fifth of August he records the same occurring when a Dahomian chief arrived.¹⁷⁷ En route to Abomey, Fraser also describes a recent gift to Dahomey by the French as consisting of 800 muskets and 600 quarter barrels of powder, alongside no less than three cannons and the ammunition to use them.¹⁷⁸ After long monotony and repeated notations of the weather, finally on September 3rd and September 4th, Fraser describes both how he visited an area where the French representative had demonstrated his cannon, and a military review which he witnessed. Said review he claims consisted of five to six thousand people, all armed with muskets, that the women were the best trained of them, and that his interpreter informed him that the women talked about how they had lost friends at Egba in recent conflicts and that they ought to destroy it.¹⁷⁹ Although Fraser hardly breaks new ground compared to Beecroft, he confirms the continued gifting of arms to Dahomey by European powers, and his journaling does reveal that military ritual was normal, not merely part of the "Annual Custom." His descriptions of Dahomey once

¹⁷⁷Louis Fraser, *Dahomey and the Ending of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: The Journals and Correspondence of Vice-Consul Louis Fraser, 1851-1852*, ed. Robin Law (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 43-45.

¹⁷⁸Fraser, *Dahomey and the Ending*, 58.

¹⁷⁹Fraser, *Dahomey and the Ending*, 95-100.

again highlight the extent to which West African states reorganized themselves around the firearm.

What have I learned from my research?

The end of the slave trade did not magically solve the issues facing West African societies, and those that had flourished during the slave trade were ill-adapted for a future without the slave trade. To use a poor analogy, the trade in human beings had similar effects to those that one might see with oil extraction in the present day, creating profits so massive that the entire economy necessarily warped around the slave trade. Those states which did not exploit this “natural resource” could not purchase the European goods, and in particular the weapons, they needed to survive and thrive in the cutthroat environment of West Africa. To assert that the gun-slave cycle did not exist or was unimportant, as did David Northup, seems foolish after conducting my research, because even when African kingdoms did not directly buy guns, they financed military expansionism through the slave trade. The gun-slave cycle matters, because said gun-slave cycle played a key role in destabilizing West Africa and when combined with the slave trade, depopulating much of the region, as attested to in contemporary accounts.

Both domestic desire for power and international market forces would drive West African leaders to further extremes, incentivizing actions that hurt the stability of the region as a whole and which produced more slaves for export. In other words, the desire to control the slave trade and the need to obtain more slaves for said slave trade both required waging war, which required European guns. These guns could only be obtained by trading slaves, otherwise, like in Benin, the Europeans might refuse to sell guns to a polity, and furthermore, the only way to maintain a large enough army to achieve these goals, or even just avoid conquest, was to participate in the slave trade. This should all sound familiar, and I intellectually understood some of this dynamic

before I began my research, but I have discovered several factors which have significantly altered my understanding of the West African coast between 1650 and 1807.

The first of my misconceptions to fall was the idea that European traders and African traders held consistent positions of power towards one another. The gun-slave cycle and interstate competition dramatically shifted the terms of trade towards the European powers, who could choose their markets much more easily than the African states scrambling for survival and dominance and dependent on European imports. Whereas before African states could negotiate from a position of strength, they increasingly negotiated from a position of dependency with European slave traders. The Europeans may have needed slaves, but they could obtain slaves all along the coast, and each West African kingdom did not want to lose its share of the slave trade. Complicating factors include the desire by Europeans for consistent and stable trading partners, preferences for staying in one place, and the uneven adoption of firearms by West African states. These reduced the degree of dependence, but did not reverse the overall trend. Yet, I also misunderstood how those kingdoms operated within the larger “interstate system” of West Africa.

Before I began research, I assumed that the slave traders needed guns in order to go after slaves themselves, but my reading has revealed that the majority of kingdoms directly on the West African coast primarily acted as middlemen. Kingdoms like Dahomey, which made a livelihood off of acquiring slaves to sell to Europeans, were more prevalent further inland, creating a “division of labor” that was necessary in order to meet European demand for enslaved people. The Dahomians themselves, when they had “cut out the middlemen” and occupied the coastal cities of the slave coast, in turn found it unsustainable to rely solely on slaves captured through warfare, and became a middleman themselves. In Old Calabar, merchants such as Antera

Duke occasionally collected slaves themselves, but more often than not, they used their monopoly over sale to the Europeans to profit off of people enslaved in the interior. This specialization did not reduce warfare, it outsourced it to states in the interior who otherwise would not be able to trade with the Europeans.

The third challenge to my starting hypothesis came with the connection between the West African state structures that developed as a result of the slave trade and the contemporary development of the European fiscal-military state. Whereas before I had conceived of West Africa as a deviation from the norm, in reality developments in state structure and warfare there operated along similar lines as in Europe, but crucially, with far more devastating warfare and a dependence on foreign supply. This lack of “self-sufficiency” and dependence on an outside global system meant that while states optimized for slaving and warfare might have dominated West Africa during the period of the slave trade, their institutions were unprepared to lose those connections. Furthermore, such an environment creates a cultural zeitgeist which meant that states like Dahomey grew to place enormous importance on war ensured that the instability continued even after the slave trade ended.

Finally, I underestimated the extent to which market forces dominated the trade itself, and the degree to which impersonal factors tore apart West Africa. The Europeans which appeared in the papers and correspondence I read were detestable slavers, but they were slavers constantly worried about their competition for market share, and anxious to pander to West African consumers. Similarly, while I understood the “prisoner’s dilemma” aspect of the export slave trade in West Africa, I did not realize the extent to which warfare over control of trade with Europeans underpinned the dilemmas of West African rulers. I had a working conception of the role warfare played in acquiring slaves, but I had not realized that a major impetus for said

warfare was control over who could sell slaves to the Europeans. Whereas before I started this project I had only the bare outlines of a theoretical model, now I feel more confident in my ability to accurately describe the dynamics of both the slave trade and the arms trade in West Africa.

What conclusions can we draw?

My conclusions remain largely unchanged from my original hypothesis in some regards. I have found enough evidence to say with confidence that there existed a “gun-slave cycle” which involved the sale of British guns to West African traders in exchange for slaves. Firearms may not have made up a majority of the goods carried on British ships, but they made up a substantial and vital section of the slave trade, and had far more immediate geopolitical ramifications than other goods. The British arms industry, in turn, relied heavily on the slave trade for much of the 18th century as a reliable source of customers and profits. While this may be of less world-historical significance than the role of the slave trade in textile production, the arms trade matters more in the context of West Africa itself. If the impact on the British economy was pronounced but limited to a sector which was not central to the Industrial Revolution, the impact on West African stability when combined with the slave trade was nothing short of apocalyptic.

The transatlantic slave trade on its own posed a risk to the stability and long term growth of the West African coast, but the sale of firearms in exchange for slaves transformed a cheap source of riches into a matter of survival for West African states. Those states which did not embrace the slave trade, as Benin initially tried to do, faced not only being economically eclipsed but also totally outgunned in engagements with rival polities. Similarly, states which embraced the slave trade but not the arms trade found themselves crushed by centralized and militarized

kingdoms armed with European weapons. The result was an arms race among West African rulers and the emergence of a brutal series of wars which only further honed the West African “military-fiscal state” with a distinct reliance on the export of slaves and the import of European arms. Unlike the contemporary European military states, these West African states depended on outside supply of arms and capital to continue functioning, and systematically stripped the region of its human capital in order to finance more arms purchases.

My central conclusion thus can be summarized as follows: the transatlantic slave trade was vital for the development of the British arms industry, and the trade in British arms for slaves contributed significantly to the destabilization and devastation of West Africa. No single person or entity can be held responsible, as we have seen, the deregulation and decentralization of the slave trade was crucial to the boom in the arms trade. Instead, the atrocity which unfolded over centuries, mind boggling in its scope, operated on a cruel and dispassionate economic logic. This is not to downplay the visceral and emotional impact of slavery on the enslaved and the enslavers, or how it created entire patterns of thought (a topic outside the scope of this thesis). Instead, recognizing the economic logic at play should help us better understand how the very humanity of enslaved people was stripped away in the name of enriching and empowering a specific set of elite actors in Europe, the Americas, and West Africa. The metaphor of cannibalism describes the essence of the slave trade well: the destruction and consumption of human life in order to grant extraordinary the perpetrator. Whether that power was the power of firearms, the power of control over another human life, or the power of hoarded wealth, the motivation remained the same, to gain power at the expense of the people treated as commodities.

Why does any of this matter?

In the present epoch, I believe that a critical and through examination of the transatlantic slave trade and its effects not just on enslaved people and the United States, but West Africa and Europe must be conducted. When researching for this thesis, most of the literature concerning firearms in West Africa dated back to the 1970s, when interest in the topic first arose. Possibly the most extensive literature base published in English revolves around British abolition of the slave trade. Too often even otherwise excellent works of scholarship reduce West Africans to little more than a backdrop to the European slave trade or portray them as helpless victims of the Europeans. I believe that any minor contribution to the scholarship that I can make is worthwhile, because although the slave trade, with its three centers in West Africa, the Caribbean, and European ports, significantly affected enormous numbers of people with serious societal consequences. Yet the literature focusing on the trade in West Africa itself, the source of the vast majority of enslaved people remains appallingly neglected. Research regarding West Africa presents many challenges to a modern historian, due to a lack of written records conducive to social history and/or written from a non-colonial perspective, and the slow divergence between oral memory and reality. But this is no excuse for the gaps that persist in existing scholarship. This is why I believe my research and my imperfect examination of the transatlantic slave trade's intresection with the arms trade, in particular in West Africa, has value.

The value of both my research and any similar research is limited in scope until the research is effectively communicated to the general public. Examinations of the slave trade, the arms trade, and the West African coast exist within academia to a degree, but have not percolated into the public sphere to the extent necessary to create a broader understanding. We live in an era in which newspaper broadsides face the condemnation of state legislatures, where journalists,

authors, and scholars face a bewildering array of attacks for asserting a central role for slavery in American history. Since 2010, the history of slavery in the United States (US) has once again become a major political battleground and bone of contention. State governors and legislatures rant and rail against “Critical Race Theory” and “The 1619 Project” while public intellectuals and activists promote the idea of reparations for slavery. All this fervor, fury, and rancor has centered around slavery’s place in US history to the exclusion of the broader historical context.

The number of people taken from West Africa and shipped to North America as slaves is dwarfed by the sheer number of people consumed by the sugar plantations of the Caribbean and Spanish and Portuguese South America, especially Brazil. The self-absorbed nature of US political discourse minimizes the broader importance of the slave trade as well as the agency of West Africans themselves. US citizens interact with the horrors of the slave trade, but its sheer scope, and the number of places it touched remain out of view, while West Africa remains an amorphous and homogenized blob. The arguments currently put forth in US debates about slavery neglect the role of West Africans in the slave trade, except in the form of pitiful “whataboutism” by apologists for chattel slavery. Movies like *The Woman King* do not apologize or minimize the horrors of the slave trade, but they harm public understanding of precolonial West Africa by replacing its complexities with comforting Hollywood cliches. Even the term precolonial defines West African history by its relationship to European colonization, as if the region’s victimization is the only method of periodization. It follows that there is a dire need for historians to address gaps in public understanding of the monumental, world historic system that was the transatlantic slave trade, and in particular how it operated within Africa itself. As scholars, our job should be to serve the public good and foster public knowledge, for what use is the pursuit of knowledge if the knowledge acquired never sees the light of day?

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