

# From slave trade to 'legitimate' commerce

*The commercial transition in nineteenth-  
century West Africa*

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Papers from a conference of the  
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*Edited by*

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# Introduction

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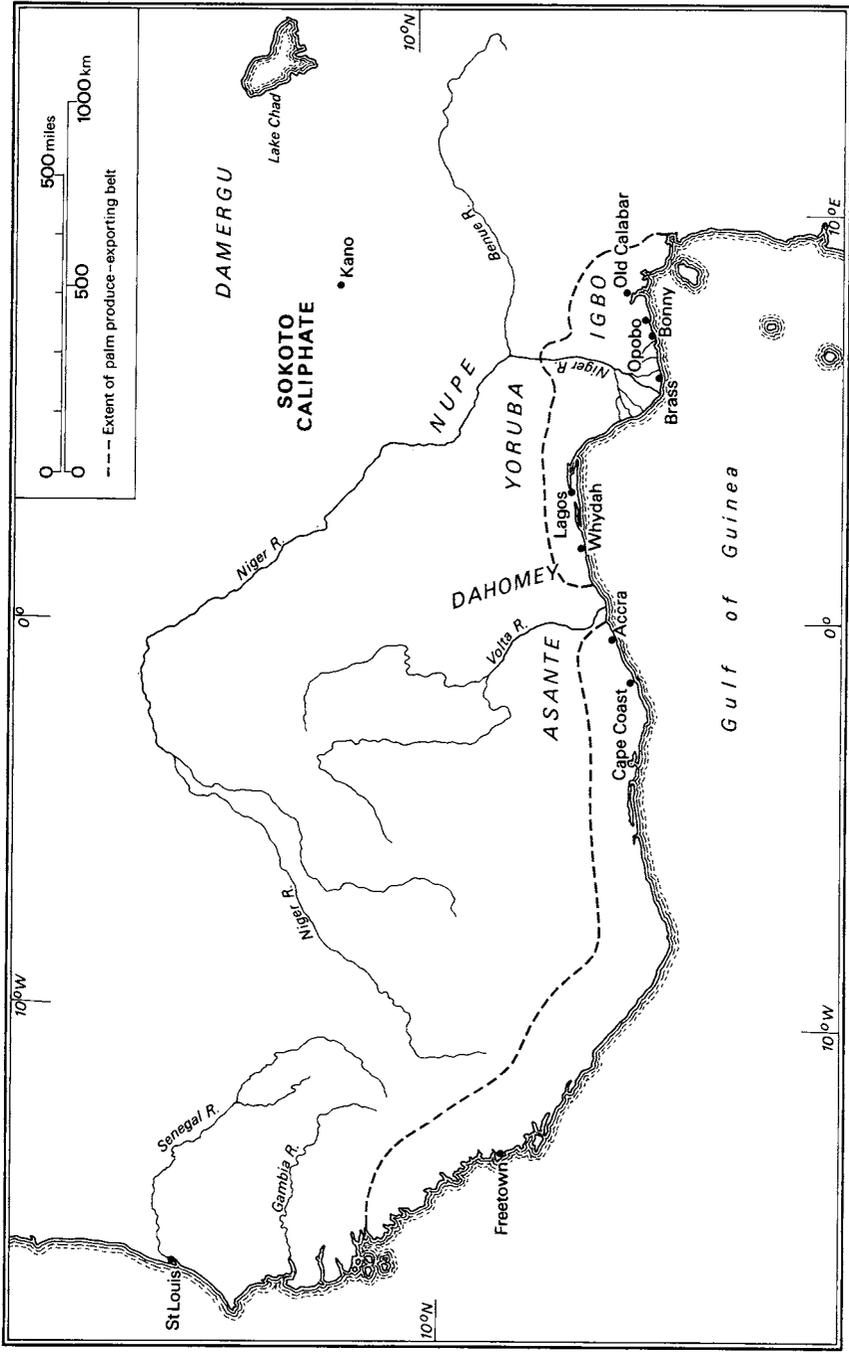
*Robin Law*

The ending of the Atlantic slave trade and its replacement by what contemporaries called 'legitimate' (i.e. non-slave) trade – principally in agricultural produce, such as palm oil and groundnuts<sup>1</sup> – during the nineteenth century has been one of the central themes in the historiography of western Africa since the beginnings of serious academic study of African history in the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> Basil Davidson, in his classic study of the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on Africa, published originally in 1961, held that the slave trade had had a profound and essentially destructive effect on the African societies involved in it. Paradoxically, however, he argued that the ending of the trade in the nineteenth century was also negative and disruptive in its impact:

The ending of the trade was of tremendous significance for Africans and Europeans on the Guinea Coast. It upset the trading habits of four full centuries, undermined systems of government, disrupted social customs and opened the way for European intervention.

In Davidson's analysis, the ending of the slave trade caused an 'economic crisis' for African societies, leading to 'political upheaval' in them, which in turn provoked imperialist intervention and ultimately annexation.<sup>3</sup>

When Davidson was writing in 1961, there was little detailed research on the impact of the ending of the slave trade in Africa to sustain the apocalyptic picture which he painted. Essentially, he generalized from the one specific case-study which was then available, Kenneth Dike's pioneering monograph on the trading states of the Niger Delta (and more especially Bonny), published in 1956.<sup>4</sup> Dike argued that the shift from slaves to palm oil in this region's export trade had politically and socially disruptive effects on the African communities involved in it, weakening the authority of existing ruling elites and enabling men of slave origin (such as the famous Jaja, who eventually seceded from Bonny to establish his own kingdom at Opobo) to acquire wealth and bid for political power. These tensions were allegedly reflected in the civil wars (interpreted by Dike as 'slave revolts') which occurred in Bonny in



Map 1 West Africa in the nineteenth century, showing the extent of the palm produce exporting belt.

1855 and 1869. Dike himself, however, while noting the growth of consular interference in the troubled politics of these states, did not very clearly link the strains of the commercial transition to the ultimate annexation of the area by Britain in the 1880s.

The development of the historiography of this issue since the 1960s has been surveyed elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> Detailed rehearsal would be out of place in the present context, but some of the salient steps in the progression of the debate may be noted. In the early stages, the tendency was to extend the scope of the argument geographically, identifying more or less analogous processes of social and political upheaval in other West African societies. Especially critical was the extension of the argument from the coastal middleman states studied by Dike to societies in the hinterland which were involved in the actual production, as well as marketing, of goods for export. Tony Hopkins, in an article published in 1968 dealing with Yorubaland, sought to link the endemic wars of that area in the nineteenth century, and especially their final phase in 1877–93, to the shift from slaves to palm oil, arguing that this commercial transition had undermined the wealth and power of existing rulers, causing them to resort to warfare and plunder to maintain their incomes. Since these wars in turn, by disrupting the export trade, provoked the British annexation of Yorubaland in the 1890s, the strains of the commercial transition were held to have contributed to the European Partition of Africa. This article was also noteworthy for coining the phrase ‘crisis of adaptation’ to refer to these problems.<sup>6</sup> A similar analysis was subsequently applied by Martin Klein to the rise of groundnut exports from Senegambia, where the commercial transition was held to have contributed to the overthrow of the existing political order in the ‘Muslim Revolution’ which occurred there from the 1860s onwards.<sup>7</sup>

More clearly than Dike, both Hopkins and Klein explained that the military chiefs who had dominated the slave trade were less able to control the new trade in agricultural produce, because the latter was readily open to participation by small-scale traders and farmers. In a notable epigram of Klein (much quoted or adapted for examination questions in African history courses), ‘whereas the slave trade strengthened the elite, the peanut trade put money, and thus guns, in the hands of peasants’.<sup>8</sup> Hopkins also stressed the significance of the collapse of West African produce prices in the ‘Great Depression’ of 1873–96, which compounded the problems facing local rulers by reducing their income from exports, and also created conflicts between African suppliers and European merchants. Both the ‘crisis of adaptation’ and the origins of Partition, therefore, were to be sought not in the strains arising from structural change in West Africa’s export trade alone, but in their

exacerbation by the adverse movement in the terms of trade in the late nineteenth century. In his *Economic History of West Africa* published in 1973, Hopkins generalized his analysis of the 'crisis of adaptation' and its relevance to European imperialism to the whole of coastal West Africa. Again emphasizing the opening-up of the export trade to small-scale enterprise, he now added the reflection that this development could be regarded as

the start of the modern economic history of West Africa . . . In so far as firms of this type and size are the basis of the export economies of most West African states today, it can be said that modernity dates not from the imposition of colonial rule, as used to be thought, but from the early nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

This view has not, of course, commanded universal support among historians of Africa. It has been contested in two rather different ways, which need to be distinguished (although they are not mutually incompatible, and may be combined). On the one hand, some historians have argued that the Atlantic trade was, in fact, of only marginal significance for the African societies involved in it, with the implication that the transformation of the character of that trade in the nineteenth century can likewise have had little effect on their development: the most systematically argued case along these lines has been made by David Eltis.<sup>10</sup> Alternatively (or additionally), it has been argued that, in fact, existing ruling elites were able to dominate the new trade, as they had the old; this view has been propounded perhaps most influentially by Ralph Austen, originally in an article published in 1970.<sup>11</sup> According to this view, West African economic and political structures remained substantially intact until they were destroyed by the European colonial conquest at the end of the nineteenth century; 'modernity' (in Hopkins' terminology) thus came only with colonial rule. The breakdown of indigenous structures is seen as a consequence rather than a cause of the European Partition; implicitly, indeed, it was the continued resilience of these indigenous structures, seen as inimical to European capitalist interests, rather than their weakening (as Hopkins proposed) which required the European colonial takeover.

Although many aspects of the debate remain contested, something of a consensus may be said to have emerged on at least one central point, the need to distinguish between conditions in the coastal middleman states (such as Bonny) and the hinterland producing societies (such as Yorubaland). Although often presented as a criticism of Hopkins' concept of a 'crisis of adaptation', this distinction was, in fact, incorporated by him into the revised (and generalized) version of his thesis propounded in the *Economic History* of 1973, which conceded that 'the traditional unit of

trade was less affected by the structural changes brought about by legitimate commerce than was the traditional unit of production'.<sup>12</sup> The critical contribution in this area was the research conducted (under Hopkins' supervision) by John Latham on the case of Old Calabar, which argued that the existing ruling elite there retained their dominance of the new trade in palm oil; although some ex-slaves in Calabar (as in Bonny) were able to become substantial merchants, they rose through the patronage of their masters rather than in competition with them, effectively from within the existing political and commercial structure rather than through its overthrow.<sup>13</sup> Other research showed that this was also true of the rise of ex-slaves such as Jaja in Bonny itself.<sup>14</sup> Dike's argument linking the rise of such ex-slaves, and political disorder in the Delta states more generally, to the shift from slaves to palm oil, is now generally held to be unsustainable – though there remain questions about the degree to which, in practice, existing merchants faced small-scale competition, elsewhere on the coast if not in Bonny itself, as will be seen later in this introduction.

While a 'crisis of adaptation' is generally held not to have materialized (or at least to have been successfully surmounted) in the coastal middleman communities, the subsequent extension of the argument to areas of palm oil and groundnut production in the hinterland, associated with Hopkins and Klein, although criticized, has not been so decisively refuted.<sup>15</sup> Some recent research on the case of Dahomey, for example, tends to support the idea of a 'crisis of adaptation' arising from the inability of the ruling elite to control and profit from the new 'legitimate' trade to the same extent as they had from the earlier trade in slaves.<sup>16</sup>

It also seems clear that distinctions have to be made between different periods within the nineteenth century, as well as between different societies within West Africa. Patrick Manning, in particular, has stressed the need to periodize the development of 'legitimate' trade, in order to grasp its impact upon social and political structures. On his view, conditions in the early nineteenth century, when the slave trade was in decline and the palm oil trade, although expanding, remained limited, 'favoured powerful monarchs and wealthy slave merchants'; the middle decades, when the volume and price of oil exports soared, were marked by 'free-swinging competition and unusual upward social mobility'; but the later nineteenth century, when the trade was stagnant (because of the collapse of oil prices) again saw a trend towards 'consolidation' of political and economic power.<sup>17</sup>

A conference organized by the Centre of Commonwealth Studies of the University of Stirling in April 1993 provided an opportunity both to take

stock of the state of the debate on the impact of the ending of the Atlantic slave trade, and to present new detailed research bearing upon that debate. Revised versions of the papers from that conference are presented in the present volume. Where, then, does the debate now stand, after over twenty years of discussion and research? And more particularly, how do the contributions assembled in this collection advance understanding of these issues? This seems best approached not through summary and assessment of each individual contribution, but rather through consideration of certain general aspects of the commercial transition which were highlighted in the discussions, as well as in the papers presented, at the conference.

### **The market for slaves**

Although the decline of the trans-Atlantic slave trade broadly coincided with the rise of 'legitimate' trade in agricultural produce, analytically these two processes have to some degree to be considered separately. As Hopkins pointed out, not all West African societies experienced a transition from exporting slaves to exporting 'legitimate' products, since some former slave-supplying societies were unable to get involved in the new trade in agricultural produce, and others which had been marginal to the slave trade became significant suppliers for 'legitimate' commerce.<sup>18</sup> The distinction is especially important in considering those societies in the West African interior (represented in this volume by Ann McDougall's study of the western Sahel region), which had supplied slaves for the Atlantic trade but were effectively excluded (by the high cost of transport) from the new trade in agricultural produce.

Assessment of the impact of the decline of trans-Atlantic exports of slaves is complicated, first, by the fact that this decline was a very protracted process: despite the legal abolition of the trade in the early nineteenth century, trans-Atlantic exports remained at a high level until at least the mid nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> This persistence of slave exports involved, not only straightforwardly illegal trade, but also legal evasions promoted by some European governments, such as the scheme for the recruitment of supposedly 'free emigrants' from Africa to the West Indies pursued by the French government in 1857–61, discussed in Elisée Soumonni's contribution to this volume.<sup>20</sup> There was, moreover, an alternative export market for slaves, across the Sahara to northern Africa: although smaller in scale than the Atlantic trade, the trans-Saharan slave trade probably did not suffer significant decline until the end of the nineteenth century, and may indeed even have been increasing in volume.<sup>21</sup>

Even more critically, account has to be taken of the demand for slaves within West Africa itself, which was also expanding at this period. The general study of slavery in Africa by Paul Lovejoy, published in 1983, documents a growth of the use of slaves throughout West Africa (and in other regions of the continent) during the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> In part, this growth of slavery within West Africa reflected the increased use of slave labour in the production and transport of exports for the growing 'legitimate' trade. In addition to their use in production directly for export, slaves were also employed extensively, in coastal areas of West Africa, to produce food for the commercial and urban centres involved in overseas trade. In Old Calabar, for example, as Latham showed, slaves on agricultural plantations were producing for local consumption rather than for export,<sup>23</sup> and in this volume, Ray Kea's study of plantations on the south-eastern Gold Coast shows that many of these were likewise oriented to the local market. To a large degree, therefore, directly or indirectly, the growing demand for slaves was a consequence of the growth and transformation of the character of the Atlantic trade. Since, however, the expansion of slavery also occurred in areas relatively uninvolved in exports of 'legitimate' produce, such as the West African interior, this cannot be a complete explanation.

The existence of this growing demand for slaves within West Africa tended to cushion the effects of the ending of the overseas trade, since slaves could be diverted from export to the local market (as noted, for example, in the case of Asante, in Gareth Austin's contribution to this volume). It may even be argued on this basis, as is done by Ralph Austen, that the ending of overseas exports in practice posed 'little problem' for slave suppliers, since 'it did not diminish the total regional market for servile labour'.<sup>24</sup> Against Austen, it has generally been held that the price of slaves in West Africa fell in the early nineteenth century, reflecting a glut in local markets caused by the collapse of overseas exports.<sup>25</sup> It has commonly been supposed, indeed, that the expansion of slavery in West Africa during the nineteenth century was largely supply-driven, as slaves became cheaper to acquire. This was certainly an observation often made by contemporary observers: the missionary Samuel Crowther in the 1850s, for example, noting the 'accumulation of slaves' by wealthy persons in the the towns of Aboh, Idah and Igbegbe on the lower Niger, explained that 'since the slave-trade has been abolished in the Bight of Biafra, slaves have become very cheap; and ... they have the means of purchasing a great many slaves'.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, however, the supply of slaves within West Africa may well have been increased by factors not directly related to the ending of the overseas slave trade,

such as the wars occasioned by the *jihads* or 'Islamic Revolutions' in the interior.<sup>27</sup>

Whatever its causes, a fall in the price of slaves must be presumed to have reduced the profitability of slave-raiding and slave-trading, and undermined the incomes of those involved in them. There have been different views as to the likely consequences of this. The more usual assumption has been that the reduced profitability of slaving would have encouraged those involved to withdraw from it, and seek alternative sources of income – as Ivor Wilks, for example, argued for Asante.<sup>28</sup> Claude Meillassoux, however, with regard to the West African interior, suggested that the effect there was quite the contrary, the response of local rulers being to increase the scale of their slaving activities, in order to offset the decline in price.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps these alternative analyses are not, strictly, contradictory, but may each be applicable to different cases, depending on the degree to which viable alternatives to slaving were available. Withdrawal from the slave trade would have been a rational option for those who could transfer their energies into other forms of exports, while an increase in output to compensate for falling prices would have made sense for those for whom no such alternative was on offer.

The basic assumption that slave prices fell in the nineteenth century is, however, now seen to be more problematical than hitherto appreciated. This question is treated, in this volume, by Paul Lovejoy and David Richardson, who argue that the evidence for falling slave prices in the early nineteenth century is, in fact, far from clear-cut. The ostensible decline in slave prices, as expressed in European currencies, appears to have reflected falls in the cost of the imported goods exchanged for slaves (in part, a consequence of the cost-reducing changes associated with the 'Industrial Revolution' in Western Europe); the real price of slaves, in terms of quantities of imports, shows little sign of long-term decrease, at least down to the mid nineteenth century. Although there was indeed a collapse of slave prices (and to that extent, presumably a 'crisis of adaptation' for West African slave suppliers) in the years immediately following the legal abolition of the British and USA slave trades in 1807/8, this was only temporary, with slave prices in real terms recovering by the 1820s. These findings are complemented by McDougall's contribution to this volume, which examines slave prices in the Sahelian interior, and likewise concludes that, far from declining, if anything they probably increased during the course of the nineteenth century.

If this evidence for the continued buoyancy of slave prices is accepted, how does it affect assessment of the impact of the ending of the overseas

slave trade? One possible inference is that the Atlantic trade was, in fact, of only marginal significance for West African societies, the major market for slaves (and therefore the major determinant of slave prices) residing within the domestic economy. Alternatively, however, the rapid recovery of slave prices after the initial impact of declining overseas sales might reflect the expansion of local demand for slaves arising from the expansion of 'legitimate' exports. Such an inference can be supported by at least some contemporary comment, which recorded rising rather than falling slave prices: in Sierra Leone in the 1860s, for example, an officer of the British navy engaged in anti-slave trade patrols reported that the local price of slaves had risen to a level where it was more profitable to sell them on the local market than for export:

The reason is the great increase of trade, and all labour being required for the cultivation principally of ground nuts, palm nuts, and palm oil . . . the legal trade and the increasing communication has made the slaves much more valuable, so many being required for home slavery that the increased price would not pay any one exporting slaves from this part of the coast.<sup>30</sup>

If this was so, the recovery of slave prices would illustrate the continuing importance, rather than the marginality, of trans-Atlantic demand for West African domestic economies.

### **Comparative profitability**

Whatever the explanation for the recovery of slave prices, the implication remains that West African slave suppliers, although certainly from time to time suffering severe temporary price falls due to localized gluts of slaves caused by disruption of overseas exports, may not have faced any substantial long-term decline in profitability. Since, however, nominal prices for palm oil in the first half of the nineteenth century were actually increasing, the *relative* profitability of slave-trading, by comparison with 'legitimate' alternatives, was presumably falling. In this context, as Lovejoy and Richardson note, it may have become more profitable for African slave-holders to employ their slaves in production for export than to sell them. Such calculations were already being made in the Sierra Leone area, at least, by the 1830s, where a chief of the Bulom, who was using slave labour on his farms (to produce rice for the Freetown market, rather than strictly for export), declared that each of his slaves earned him, over and above the cost of their subsistence, about £7 10s. annually, whereas the average selling price of a slave was only £10, suggesting that greater profits might be obtained by retaining than by exporting slaves.<sup>31</sup>

The question remains whether, more generally and in the long run, 'legitimate' trade was an adequate substitute for the slave trade. Part of Hopkins' argument for a 'crisis of adaptation' is that the new forms of trade were generally less remunerative than the export of slaves.<sup>32</sup> Although this issue is not addressed in detail in any of the contributions to this volume, it warrants some further comment here.

This is not, it should be stressed, merely a question of aggregate export earnings, but also of relative profit rates, since the costs of gathering/producing slaves and agricultural produce and delivering them to the coast probably differed substantially. On this, it must be conceded that there has as yet still been little detailed research. There is, however, an abundance of impressionistic evidence, in the form of statements reported from West African traders and rulers, most of which tends to support the suggestion that the new trade was less profitable. The trading chiefs of Abeokuta, inland from Lagos, in 1855, for example, complained that

From that time [when] they began to sell this oil, those that have 300 slaves, now [have] left 50; and they that have 200, left 40; and that of 100, left 20; that of 50, left 5. So they remember that it would have been better if they have been trading slaves as they used to.<sup>33</sup>

Such self-interested testimony, of course, is clearly not by itself decisive. One area, however, in which it does seem possible to demonstrate that costs were higher in the new trade is that of transport, especially where goods had to be moved overland. Slaves required feeding in transit, but were themselves self-transporting, needing only to be guarded. On the basis admittedly of a single illustrative example, it may be suggested that one armed guard could supervise around five slaves.<sup>34</sup> Agricultural produce, on the other hand, had to be transported, which in the absence of wheeled vehicles or (in most coastal areas of West Africa) of pack animals, meant that it was carried on human heads. The normal head-load (of around 40–50 lbs), corresponded to only about 5 gallons of palm oil.<sup>35</sup> A rough comparison of transport costs can be based on the statement that in the Niger Delta in the 1830s a slave commanded the same price as a ton of palm oil, or 320 gallons.<sup>36</sup> To deliver five slaves to the coast would involve the cost of subsistence for six persons (five slaves + one guard); but to deliver five tons of oil would require over 300 porters, incurring subsistence costs over fifty times as great.<sup>37</sup>

The difference was less where, as in the Niger Delta, waterborne transport was available, since both slaves and palm oil were carried in canoes. Even here, however, the transport costs for oil were clearly significantly greater than for slaves. The great trading canoes of Bonny,

requiring up to 40 rowers, could carry probably up to 80 slaves each.<sup>38</sup> By contrast, in the oil trade the great canoes carried only around 12 puncheons (equivalent to 9 tons) of palm oil.<sup>39</sup> In order to deliver oil in quantities which would realize the same gross return as in the slave trade, a trader in oil would therefore need nine times as many canoes (or, of course, the substitution of larger for smaller canoes). In terms of subsistence costs, while transporting 80 slaves required subsistence for 120 persons (80 slaves + 40 rowers), oil of an equivalent value (80 tons, or 106–7 puncheons) would require 360 paddlers in 9 canoes, and costs around three times greater.

The profitability of the oil trade varied, of course, from area to area within West Africa, reflecting differential yields of palm trees in different regions as well as differing transport costs. Two modern estimates of the labour required to produce a ton of palm oil in pre-colonial conditions give around 315 person/days per ton in Dahomey, but only around 250 in Igboland, suggesting that oil was nearly 20 per cent cheaper to produce in the latter.<sup>40</sup> Profitability also varied through time, with fluctuations in palm oil prices. If the profits from 'legitimate' trade were considered insufficient in the early stages of the trade, when European prices for palm oil were rising, they presumably became even less adequate with the fall in prices which set in from the 1860s onwards and reached catastrophic proportions in the 'Great Depression' of the 1880s. On Hopkins' view, the profit margins and incomes of African suppliers were then significantly eroded, compounding the already existing problems of the commercial transition and bringing the 'crisis of adaptation' to a head.<sup>41</sup> On this, however, some caution is needed, since the precise relationship between European and local prices of West African produce is not yet wholly clear. It has been suggested that, at least in the Lagos area, prices paid for oil in West Africa did not fall in line with those in Europe, thus squeezing the profit margins of the European purchasers but leaving those of African suppliers relatively intact.<sup>42</sup> African resistance to European attempts to force down prices in the Depression of the 1880s, and European merchants' inability to overcome it, was one of the factors which brought the latter to favour imperialist annexation.

### **Large-scale and small-scale enterprise**

The central element in Hopkins' conception of the 'crisis of adaptation' was that the slave trade had been effectively monopolized by a small number of large entrepreneurs, often the political and military chiefs of West African societies, whereas the new trade in agricultural produce was open to the generality of the populace. The argument was partly

related to economies of scale: it was suggested that whereas slave-trading was most profitably carried out on a large scale, in agricultural production large-scale enterprise enjoyed no competitive advantage. The domination of large-scale enterprise in the slave trade was not absolute, since records of slave-ships document many purchases of slaves in ones and twos, which presumably implies the involvement of relatively small-scale traders;<sup>43</sup> but the validity of the general point does not seem in doubt. In any case, quite apart from the question of economies of scale, a trader selling even a single slave was dealing in a relatively large unit of value. As Hopkins noted, by their physical natures, whereas a slave is indivisible, oil could be produced and marketed in small quantities.<sup>44</sup> If (as noted earlier) a slave was equivalent in value to 320 gallons of oil, and if we take the pot of 5 gallons which formed the normal head-load as the smallest unit in which oil was likely to be marketed, oil could be traded in units of less than one-sixtieth of the value of a single slave.

The involvement of small-scale producers and traders in the new 'legitimate' trade, and the contrast with conditions under the slave trade, was frequently noted by contemporary observers of the nineteenth century. For example, in the hearings of the Select Committee of the British Parliament on the Slave Trade in 1848, the question was put to some of the witnesses, whether the oil trade was done with the chiefs, or with the generality of their subjects. A naval officer of the anti-slavery patrol, Commander Matson, replied that 'it is sold by the different families; different families cultivate the berry'. Pressed as to whether he meant that 'each family trades in palm oil on its own account', he agreed: 'Yes; sometimes they come down with a canoe with a small quantity, and they come alongside a vessel laying in the river to sell it for anything they can get'. The trader William Hutton likewise deposed that whereas 'it is only the chiefs and better classes of the inhabitants of the coast of Africa that can be slave merchants', on the contrary 'the palm oil trade is pursued by all classes; whoever takes a pot of palm oil into a factory gets an equivalent for it in the shape of British goods'.<sup>45</sup>

Despite such contemporary testimony, as was noted earlier, it has generally been held, following Latham's study of the case of Old Calabar, that the coastal marketing (as opposed to the hinterland production) of agricultural produce continued to be dominated by existing large-scale traders. The distinction was, in fact, clearly made in some contemporary accounts of trade in the Delta, which noted that, although the palm oil was originally purchased (at least in large part) from small-scale producers, it was bulked up by the coastal traders before being transported to the coast. A British trader at Bonny in the early 1840s, for example, noted that 'The Bonny men buy the oil in small

quantities from the growers, and sell it by the puncheon to the masters of the ships.<sup>46</sup> Likewise in the 1860s, Winwood Reade described the collection of oil up-country by the Bonny traders in similar terms: 'The oil is brought to them little by little in calabashes. This they pour off into barrels.'<sup>47</sup> The smallest unit in which oil was normally traded at Bonny was evidently the 'puncheon', of 240 gallons, or three-quarters of a ton of palm oil. It is not entirely clear, however, whether this was true of trading conditions elsewhere on the coast. At Old Calabar to the east also, oil seems normally to have been traded in puncheons.<sup>48</sup> At Brass, however, the smallest unit in which oil was traded was apparently the 'angbar', of only 30 gallons.<sup>49</sup> A standard measure of 30 gallons was also employed at Badagry, west of Lagos; but at Lagos itself the measure was even smaller, of only 10 gallons.<sup>50</sup> In Dahomey, it was 18 gallons.<sup>51</sup> Outside Bonny and Old Calabar, therefore, it was possible to trade palm oil on a relatively small scale, in units which were (at the rate cited earlier, of one slave to one ton, or 320 gallons, of oil) equivalent to between about one-thirtieth (10 gallons) and one-tenth (30 gallons) of the value of a slave.

Even in places such as Bonny and Calabar, in so far as larger-scale trading remained dominant, this did not reflect merely the superior competitive efficiency of large-scale merchants (or the preference of European traders for dealing with them), but was enforced through prohibitions on small-scale enterprise. In Old Calabar, it is explicitly reported that the slaves in charge of the trading canoes, while receiving a commission on their trade, were not permitted to trade on their own account in palm oil.<sup>52</sup> In the last resort, small-scale enterprise could be excluded by legislative action. The best-known instance of this in Calabar was in 1862 when, after 'young men and boy [i.e. slave?] traders' had begun selling oil in smaller measures – barrels (i.e. 32 gallons), hogsheads (63 gallons) and rum puncheons (72 gallons?) – the governing Ekpe society decreed that oil should not be sold in smaller quantities than 'the usual trade-cask or puncheon'. The British traders complained that this measure discriminated against 'the young traders, many of whom are at present unable to command the requisite means for conducting a wholesale trade, but if allowed to go on gradually would in time become useful and extensive traders', and served the interests only of 'the King and a few men of position, who thus monopolize the whole trade of the interior markets to the exclusion of all others'. The British Consul Richard Burton intervened to negotiate a treaty which stipulated that anybody should be free to trade 'in any quantities whatever . . . in his own name'.<sup>53</sup> It is doubtful whether this removal of restrictions was wholly effective, but the provision was reiterated in a second treaty