Brokers of Change

Atlantic Commerce and Cultures in Precolonial Western Africa
Introduction:
Brokerage and the Role of Western Africa in the Atlantic World

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The theme of brokerage in Western African history

The Atlantic has long been seen as a pivotal site for understanding the way in which local and regional economies and cultural frameworks gradually became integrated into a global system during the early modern era. Following the pioneering work of Braudel on the Mediterranean, the attractions of studies shaped by oceans, which thereby transcended national boundaries and the nationalist calling of earlier historiographies, became manifest. Work by the Chaunus on Seville and the Atlantic world catalysed sustained interest in the processes of both cultural and economic exchange that have underpinned global histories since the later fifteenth century, and since the 1970s the study of such interconnected histories has seen an explosion which shows no sign of abating. Works by scholars including Dubois, Elliott, Miller, Heywood, and Thornton took a global view of transatlantic connections, revealing interconnections of trade and diasporas that spanned Africa, the Americas, and Europe.


The rise of this transnational—or perhaps, to be more precise here, transnationalist—history was accompanied by a range of new theoretical approaches. For sociologists, anthropologists, and historians of the contemporary era, transnationalism itself became a key concern. Meanwhile, for those whose interests extended beyond the European expansion period, key concepts came to be that of brokerage, where, in Eric Wolf’s classic 1956 definition, brokers are “individuals who stand guard over the critical junctures and synapses of a relationship which connects the local system to the larger whole.” Importantly, these novel insights in the social sciences brought to the fore the question of social change, the fluidity of relationships, and the opportunities that they created for mediation. Since the 1950s, the ongoing debate on the issue has identified a range of fields and modalities involving brokerage, associated with patronage, clientelism, innovation, entrepreneurial knowledge, migration, cultural competence, conflict resolution, transculturation, syncretism, hybridity, and creolization. In other words, brokers were people who linked up different worlds, who made connections where before there had been none. Brokers were necessarily at ease in a variety of cultural milieus and possessed a sort of flexibility of outlook and cultural identification that not everyone was able to achieve. While Wolf’s and Irwin Press’s work was devoted to Latin America, many Africans saw the explanatory opportunities of the idea of brokerage, and how it could explain and add nuance to the multiple cultural worlds and intense trade that are and have been characteristic of so many regions of West Africa.

Most studies linking the theme of brokerage to African societies have concentrated on the colonial era. The reasons for this were clearly established by Barber and Farias, who described the emergence of a pioneering West African elite tied to colonial economies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an elite “poised between the African hinterland and the tiny but powerful class of white administrators, missionaries and traders, [who] lived out in every detail of their existence their role as mediators.” In this important statement of the place of brokerage in colonial African histories, every aspect of the lives of these individuals involved contested identities and the transsystematic synthesis of aspects of African and European cultural forms. By holding a ‘two-sided allegiance’, they were conduits of African and European practices and values, and became key intermediaries in the formation of the colonial states of twentieth-century Africa.

Scholars of the colonial era have shown how this sort of brokerage worked at the cultural and the economic level. Practitioners of the Yoruba religion known as Ifa, the babalawo, sought to appropriate the materials of Christianity and Islam and convert them into extensions of the Ifa corpus; in doing so, the babalawo radically transformed the practice of Ifa, and yet at the same time, whilst this was thus incorporative of alien traditions, it was in itself a changing religious practice indexical to the time and place of its reception. Similarly, Asante and Yoruba cultural nationalists sought to privilege some idealized ‘inmate’ cultural pasts, but in doing so, themselves drew on European ideas of culture and society. On the economic level, meanwhile, for some scholars, the colonial cocoa economy of the twentieth-century Gold Coast was seen as predicated on a complicated network of brokerage based on credit, as brokers both took payment for cocoa to individual farmers, and did so on the basis of credit from the colonial authorities. Others used the idea of brokerage to examine the role of landlords in markets in recently independent Ghana, or in more distant times,
to examine the role of brokers in the palm oil business during the transition to jungle ‘legitimate’ trade in the nineteenth century.14 In the case of nineteenth-century Angola, the changing power relations in the Luanda hinterland, as analysed by The Kafo Liu, the background for the loss of influence of (Ambakista) intermediaries as a result of the penetration of plantations, markets, and colonial administration.15 Meanwhile, the question of brokerage has also emerged as an important theme for study in the case of East Africa and the Indian Ocean with respect to the role of Swahili traders as mercantile and cultural brokers between the interior and the coast, while bridging Islamic and non-Islamic worlds.16 Most recently, also, the importance of the idea of ‘brokers’ to narratives of colonial and postcolonial African societies has been made clear. Afeadie’s work on African political agents in colonial northern Nigeria and Beck’s work on political powerbrokers in contemporary Senegal both draw strongly on these traditions of ideas of brokerage.17

This centrality of the idea of brokerage in studies of African societies has multiple origins. One, surely, is the desire to write decentered histories of Africa, where the importance of African agency in the shaping of African economies and societies, even under colonial rule, is not ignored. However, in the historical context in which it emerges in this book, the importance of the idea of brokerage reasserts Africa’s long-standing interconnections with the rest of the world in a context where, as Bayart has written, even as early as the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it could be argued that Africa was part of a globalizing system of international exchange in which Europe as yet had no significant role.18

This perspective is of particular importance given the focus of this book, which is the interaction between Western Africa and the Atlantic world from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, or what can broadly be termed ‘precolonial Atlantic Western Africa’; by ‘Western Africa’, we take the term first used by Brooks as encompassing the region stretching from what is today modern Sierra Leone north to Senegal, including the Cape Verde islands.19 Exchanges between Africans and Atlantic traders are therefore at the heart of this book, for such exchanges connected the societies of the region with economies and societies in both America and Europe. To return to Wolf’s definition of brokerage for a moment, such exchanges were very much the province of commercial and cultural brokers.

It is clear that this process of brokerage was of fundamental importance in shaping the nature of the political economies and social structures of societies on the eve of the onset of colonialism in the nineteenth century. In Western Africa, brokers acted as conduits for new institutions emerged in the region, particularly in relation to labour and production.20 They thus mediated American influences in Africa, but also helped to shape the sustained African role in the Atlantic through the transfer of African production techniques, foodstuffs, and cultural and ritual worlds to the Americas.21 It was through the role of these Atlantic coastal brokers that Western Africa’s orientation became ever more directed towards coastal trades. Understanding the nature of the societies they formed, the interactions between them and existing African societies, and the commercial and cultural influences that derived from them, is thus fundamental in piecing together the process that led to the formation of the societies that existed on the eve of the Berlin Conference and the colonial partition of Africa in 1884. It is to provide a deep contextualization for the study of the colonial and postcolonial African histories that is the prime interest of most scholars of African societies today.

It is surprising, therefore, that there has been less focus on the question of brokerage in what we may term the ‘precolonial’ era than is the case for both colonial and postcolonial Africa. This is, however, in keeping with a general picture in which the sustained historical study of precolonial African societies has been in decline for several decades. The dearth of such histories has led to a situation in which there has been very little engagement either by Atlantic historians with West Africa, or by Africanists with the question of Atlantic slavery.


histories. It is in order to remedy this lack, and to begin the difficult work of reassessing Atlantic Africa's role both in the wider emergence of Atlantic histories and in the construction of models of 'pre-globalization' which scholars such as Gruzinski have developed for the Americas, that the present volume has been conceived. By tying the key questions of social change in pre-colonial Western Africa over the longue durée to the question of brokerage, we hope both to provide new perspectives on social change in the region and also to emphasize the role of brokers and the ways in which they tied changes in African societies to Atlantic factors for many centuries before the advent of colonialism. By understanding the multiple spheres and contexts in which systems of brokerage operated, be they within an African, insular Atlantic or pan-Atlantic context, the way in which brokers in Western Africa tied this region to the globalizing world becomes apparent.

Moreover, it should be noted that this volume takes its place within these debates at an auspicious moment for such a reassessment. Whilst study of pre-colonial African history has been in decline for some time, there are signs that this is beginning to change. New publications by Green, Havik, Hawthorne and Mark and Horta on Upper Guinea, and forthcoming publications by Candido and Ferreira on Angola, promise a radical reassessment of the place of Africa in wider Atlantic and global histories. This contribution therefore hopes to expand and reorient these discussions by placing the role of brokers in pre-colonial Western African history firmly in the foreground.

The chapters of this book first took shape at an international conference which was held from 11 to 13 June 2009 at the Centre of West African Studies at the University of Birmingham. The conference brought together twenty-one scholars from Germany, Guinea Bissau, the Netherlands, Portugal, Senegal, the UK, and the USA. For the reasons outlined above, the conference was centred on the theme of brokerage in Western Africa, and the papers presented covered a broad range of subjects and chronologies, and were based upon archival records, oral data, archaeological research, and linguistic studies. As we have seen, brokerage constituted a crucial element for more than five centuries of Afro-Atlantic commerce and interaction in Western Africa. Indeed, brokers influenced events to such a large extent during this period that scholars' research since the 1950s essentially moulded the historiography of the region on their agency and its impact. The meeting confirmed the validity of this perspective by showing that the related issues of commercial networks and cultural interaction that have largely dominated the research agenda since the 1950s retain their importance.

The different sections of this volume reflect upon the thematic diversity that characterized the meeting, that is, relations between Europeans and Africans, Atlantic perspectives, the slave and commodity trade, and the era of legitimate trade. The timeframe of author contributions spans over four centuries from first contact in the mid-fifteenth century to the late nineteenth century. Much has been written about these issues but rarely does such work surface jointly in a conference or in a publication of proceedings, which is usually restricted to one or two key themes. The fact that they are all interlinked and overlapping heightens the relevance of the interdisciplinary nature not only of the event, but also of research on Africa and the Atlantic. Indeed, the papers underline to what extent 'Africa' and the 'Atlantic' have become the focus of debate in the social sciences over the past two decades, following early overtures undertaken by Baily and Gilroy. The paradigm shift from studies on imperial seaborne history to the posting of the middle passage as a space of encounter, exchange, communication, and interaction has had a considerable impact on research and analysis. The Atlantic as a site of transport, the slave trade, and cultural communication have since taken on lives of their own and become the subjects of an ample and fascinating debate in the postmodern era, to which this volume intends to contribute.

But rather than figuring as a 'Black Atlantic' that owes much to the multiple identities assumed by diasporas in the New World, the papers evoke a material and metaphorical continuity between 'Africa', 'Europe', and the 'Atlantic'. Just as the expansion of European commerce in the Atlantic is unthinkable without African agency, the expansion of African politics (such

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as Kaábú) is inconceivable without the emergence of the Atlantic as a space for exchange. In this respect, the theme of brokerage constitutes a key tool for a broader perception and signification of how Africa and the Atlantic actually intertwined and interacted, while the focus on Western Africa functions as a frame for illustrating the fine detail regarding the actors, practices, and objects that entered into that equation. The essays on brokers show that they were freepersons and slaves, acting as traders, agents, partners, power and culture brokers, as carriers of novel, hybrid identities, linking a variety of kinship and client networks across geographical and social boundaries. These multifaceted chapters clearly demonstrate that Western Africa forms a region par excellence to study the question of brokerage and mediation, something which allows the importance of the subject to transcend regional boundaries and become of interest not only to Africanists but also to those who seek to construct new pictures of the Atlantic as a whole.

The present volume includes fifteen chapters which have been organized into five parts. The parts of the book reflect both the principal issues that emerged during the conference and the different facets of brokerage at both local and international levels which, when taken as a whole, explore in unusual depth both the significance of the role of brokerage to Western Africa and, as a correlation, the significance of Western Africa to the wider Atlantic.

Part 1 addresses African-European relations, with chapters by Gerhard Seibert, Natalie Everts, and José Lingna Nañafé, who examine the themes of the formation of mixed societies and languages, and interrogate the roles played by African and European actors in the formation of these social environments. Brokers had to mediate these two different contexts, the African and the European, and they could only do so by having a foot in both worlds. Understanding the manifold ways in which such flexible cultural and commercial roles could develop is thus fundamental to grasping both how brokerage emerged and why it was so influential. For this reason, this part of the book takes a broad view, looking at events both in the region of Western Africa and in zones related by geopolitics (São Tomé, where similar Portuguese and Atlantic pressures persisted as in the situation in Cape Verde and the 'Rivers of Guinea') or context (Elmina, where many useful analogies emerge as to the role of mixed-race brokers). In Seibert’s chapter, we see how, while the rise of Creole-speaking societies in Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe appeared to correspond to Caribbean dynamics, being associated with plantations (sugar, coffee, cacao), the emergence of Creole strata and dialects in trading settlements on the continent was a function of the riverine relay trade, and in this context African lineage heads retained considerable power and brokerage was conducted under their auspices. Similarly, we see in Everts’ chapter how along the Gold Coast, where trade and kinship ties developed between incoming strangers and African societies, Creole-speaking communities did not emerge either, mainly owing to the powerful matrilineal position of Akan. However, the process of miscegenation involving Dutch officials and Akan women did produce brokers (e.g. the tapoeiers or tapoeers) who played an important role in mediating transactions between Elmina castle and the surrounding Akan community. Nañafé’s chapter concludes this first part of the book with a strong focus on Western Africa, consolidating the argument made by Seibert in Chapter 1 through showing how African kings and the Luso-African trading class were able to assert their own autonomy in trading relations with Portuguese partners, and also arguing strongly that ritual factors as well as the nature of economic exchanges need to be taken into account when conceptualizing these exchanges.

Part 2 of the book places this broad context of African-European relations within the specific international contexts within which they operated in Western Africa, with chapters by Heather Dalton, Filipa Ribeiro da Silva, and Ib Arrra Seck. By grasping the Atlantic commercial circuits within which brokerage emerged in Western Africa, the relevance of this regional history to broader Atlantic themes becomes clear, along with the multiple European imperial trajectories within which these interactions occurred. Therefore, this part of the book deliberately offers multiple Dutch, English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish perspectives on the African-European relations discussed in Part 1. For the establishment of English, Dutch, French, and Portuguese trading companies and private traders on the West African coast initiated an intensive and lucrative trade in slaves and commodities throughout the Atlantic region, and what emerges here is the great complexity of trade networks mediated by brokerage, illustrated by the involvement of English merchants in the southern, Iberian Atlantic, the activities of Dutch entrepreneurs along the African coast, and the commercial and cultural roles of both French soldiers and traders and their Wolof counterparts in both Senegal and the wider Atlantic.

The study of these commercial networks furthers the identification of the different groups and strata involved, their organization, the commodities transacted, and the relations between them and the coastal societies of Western Africa. As Dalton shows, early travel accounts were a great help in connecting both these societies and the Atlantic trade networks, providing important details that drew attention to certain regions such as the Rivers of Guinea, linking them to interests beyond Iberian circuits. The transfer of knowledge and the modus operandi of partnerships and alliances, their assets, revenues, and investments, are brought forward by a careful comparison of accounts and documents that reveal novel connections in the early sixteenth century between
different European (e.g. English, Spanish, and Genoese) trade networks regarding slave trafficking in the Iberian Atlantic and settlements in the New World. This picture is fundamental to understanding the broader context of early patterns of brokerage analysed in this book, since it was from Western Africa that the vast majority of slaves travelled to the New World in the first half of the sixteenth century.

As Ribeiro da Silva shows, however, by the early seventeenth century the activities of Dutch, Flemish, and German private traders, and of Sephardic Jewish merchants along the Upper Guinea coast in the middle of the century, took on new dimensions when viewed in terms of commercial strategies, including the economic intricacies of risk insurance, shipping, cargo, and labour contracts. The complex relations with monopoly companies, the trading in ‘forbidden’ commodities, and the evasion of taxes and controls, were facilitated by Portuguese Sephardi traders based in Northern Europe who dealt directly with intermediaries based on the coast (e.g. the Petite Côte) and had connections to both the Old World and the new. New work by Horta and Mark connects these exchanges between Northern Europeans and Jewish traders with Western Africans and the broader direction of the seventeenth-century Atlantic, again emphasizing the importance of the role of Atlantic brokers in this region to understanding wider Atlantic trajectories.26

By the early eighteenth century, however, the orientation of the region—and especially of Senegambia—was increasingly directed towards the French Atlantic, and this is the context for the exchanges and brokerage studied by Seck. Operating from trade settlements such as St Louis in Senegal, French traders and officials reconnoitred the region from the 1660s, reporting on peoples, customs, and language. While evoking the notion of francité, or French influence, amongst local communities, these observers also provided evidence for the inverse, that is, the impact of African culture upon European settlements whose raison d’être was brokerage for the Atlantic trade. The evidence uncovered by Seck also extends to the Americas and the French settlement of Louisiana where many Wolof were taken as slaves, and to the formation of Afro-Creole dialects in the region, thus providing a refreshing ‘pan-Atlantic’ angle on reciprocal influences within the context of empire in Western Africa.

Part 3 of the book takes these broad contexts and begins to localize them in specific processes in Western Africa through what we call ‘the insular Atlantic’. Here, chapters by Chris Evans, Konstantin Richter, and Marie-Louise Sørensen, Bart Jacobs, and Toby Green stress the special role of the Cape Verde islands in mediating the patterns of brokerage that emerged both on the islands and on the continent itself. For as recent work has shown, initial patterns of cultural and linguistic exchange in Western Africa began on the Cape Verde islands, before being transferred to Western Africa.27 Moreover, the archipelago acted as a bridge between African circuits of brokerage and exchange and their Atlantic counterparts. Many brokers resident in Africa were themselves Cape Verdian.28 Thus understanding the society that emerged in Cape Verde in the early modern era is fundamental to understanding the broader framework of brokerage in Western Africa.

In the chapter by Evans, Sorensen, and Richter, the beginnings of the town of Ribeira Grande on the island of Santiago in Cape Verde in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries gain new dimensions as a result of the excavations carried out by an international team of archaeologists with UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) support. The material recovered from the site showing the remains of a church provides important evidence on the settlement, which was the capital of Cape Verde until the eighteenth century, and, with time, will undoubtedly shed more light on the settlement’s layout and architecture, as well as the early demography, social structure, lifestyles, and religious worship and practices in the archipelago. By employing additional archival data and travel accounts, the authors reveal the contours of a town and an urban experience in a phase of rapid European expansion that was to serve as an example for later colonization efforts in insular and continental settings, and where the development of a mixed culture from African and European elements could offer some sort of paradigm for later patterns of brokerage on the continent. Jacobs moves this perspective to the early seventeenth century, placing the islands within a transatlantic perspective, and attempting to show that the middle passage played a decisive role in the processes of creolization and the development of Creole languages on both sides of the Atlantic, by positing that Upper Guinea Creole (or kriol) impacted on the formation of papantente in the Dutch Antilles. The simultaneous Dutch presence in the Senegambia region and in the Antilles thus provided a channel for the export of slaves and for the cross-fertilization of a continental Creole which had already become a lingua franca along the said coast, with a burgeoning insular pidgin in the Dutch Caribbean. Thus here, the linguistic processes that accompanied some of the patterns of

26 Horta and Mark, The Forgotten Diaspora.
brokerage witnessed in the first part of the book are given a broader footing. In the final chapter of Part 3, Green shows how the process analysed by Jacob went with the rise of a dominant Creole society in the Cape Verde islands. Creole society in the archipelago was consolidated in the seventeenth century during a transitional phase as the Cape Verdean economy declined after the archipelago lost its pivotal position in the transatlantic slave trade. As an insular, latifundio elite became influential brokers at local level, an intersection of local and transnational contexts proved key in forging Cape Verdean Creole identity. This third part of the volume thereby illuminates how local patterns of brokerage had assumed global influence by the end of the seventeenth century.

Part 4 of the book shifts the focus from the insular Atlantic to continental Africa and analyses the patterns of brokerage that accompanied the trading exchanges of the era, with chapters by António de Almeida Mendes, Linda Newson, and Michael Tuck. Here, we assess the impact of the early Atlantic slave trade, the role of Portuguese traders based in the New World in the transatlantic slave trade, and the importance of non-slave commodities for Afro-Atlantic exchange. The commercial orientation that underpinned the work of brokers is emphasized, and the patterns of both trade and social change that went with this emerge in unusual depth.

In Mendes' chapter, we are offered a reassessment of what has been called the Iberian Atlantic based largely on an exploration of hitherto unpublished archival data, thereby changing existing perspectives and assumptions on its operation and evolution. Portuguese archives provide ample data for rethinking with regard to the transport of slaves to Europe and the demography of the trade, in which women and children accounted for almost three-quarters of the total, thus contrasting with the general trend in transatlantic fluxes. Preceding the latter, these early shipments, their large numbers and composition, reinforce the idea that the Iberian economy came to depend to a much greater extent on African labour than had previously been thought, while at the same time showing how the significance of this trade was accompanied by highly successful brokerage strategies. For the seventeenth century, meanwhile, Newson shows how the unpublished information supplied by Portuguese merchants operating from Peru forms an invaluable source for a detailed insight into the organization of transatlantic trade networks, the commodities exchanged, and the actors involved. The records demonstrate not only the impressive range of clients and commodities, but also the prime importance of cloth, besides iron and wine/spirits, in transactions; being the principal barter good in the Rivers of Guinea, it is highly significant that half of the textiles traded were of African origin (from Senegambia and Cape Verde). These data appear to indicate that,

at least on the Upper Guinea coast, Africans had a considerable impact upon the production, consumption, and exchange of commodities in Atlantic networks in the 1600s, and were anything but passive partners in the formation of these communities of brokerage. In the final chapter of Part 4, Tuck shows how the trade in non-slave commodities in the Atlantic provides an alternative perspective on these brokerage networks that has been somewhat neglected in the intense debate surrounding the slave trade. Commodity case studies not only enrich the texture of networks, but also throw new light on the everyday trading and bargaining that went on between African producers, coastal intermediaries, and Atlantic traders, and on the regional spread of factories and trading posts. Research on the trade in a common good such as beeswax, which gained a growing importance in the Euro-African trade along the Upper Guinea coast from the 1500s onwards, suggests that it formed an alternative for local, stateless societies to slave trafficking for the acquisition of European barter goods (such as iron, brandy, and beads), including weapons (firearms, gunpowder, and flint) which may have been used to reap political advantages (i.e. resist the frequent slave raids affecting the region or even undertake forays themselves). Thereby, we gain an unusual insight into how different societies may have forged their own strategies to gain access to the 'necessary evil' that was the Atlantic market, and how the flexibility of commercial brokers allowed them to do this.

In the volume's final part, the question of the changes affecting African trade and agriculture during the nineteenth century, which eventually led to the scramble for Africa and the advent of colonialism, is addressed in chapters by George Brooks, Philip Havik, and Marika Sherwood. The after-effects of abolition and the transition from slave trafficking to 'legitimate' commerce triggered complex changes in African societies, as a result of the introduction of cash/export crops, (out) migration, indentured plantation labour, and sharecropping. Thus the 1800s were fraught with tensions and conflicts that provided opportunities for 'legitimate' traders to skillfully exploit loopholes and lacunae in their own favour, while at the same time acting as, or interacting with, slave traffickers subject to checks and patrols by the British Royal Naval Squadron based in Sierra Leone.

As Brooks shows, a case in point regarding this grey area were American private traders and diplomatic officials who, under protection of the American flag, collaborated with European and Afro-Atlantic slave traders operating from the Cape Verde islands and the Upper Guinea coast keen to obtain American products such as tobacco, rum, and firearms. Rather than leading to a decline in the slave trade, the rapid growth of crop exports (peanuts) from the coast in the 1830s actually increased demand for slave labour to work
plantations. Afro-European and European slave traders and planters operating on the coast and adjacent islands profited from these networks in order to obtain credit in the form of exchange goods advanced by American traders (i.e., until the civil war) and continue trafficking, thus rendering measures to suppress the trade largely ineffective. This picture of the ingenuity of coastal brokers in ensuring that the new nineteenth-century panorama worked in their favour is consolidated by Havik, who shows how the expansion of cash crop production on the Upper Guinea coast during the 1800s not only caused increasing tensions between European nations such as France, Britain, and Portugal vying for territorial control over the areas they claimed, but also between local actors such as private traders, planters, and indigenous communities in the region. Rival diplomatic conflicts between Britain and Portugal over territorial claims (e.g. over Bolama Island in the Guinea Bissau region) have largely overshadowed discussion of the underlying local dynamics, such as the formation of a trader-planter stratum, the continued use of slave indentured labour, the migration of (free) indigenous labour, and significant changes in crop farming techniques. The cash crop (peanut) monoculture that emerged, and which continued well into the twentieth century, raises questions about the local impact and sustainability of colonial schemes based upon the triple notion of commerce, cultivation, and civilization which emerged during the transition from slave to ‘legitimate’ trade. And finally, in Sherwood’s chapter, this picture is placed in both metropolitan and local contexts through her analysis of the activities of British merchants during the nineteenth century who attempted to circumvent British anti-slave trade regulations. The dealings between legitimate and slave traders rendered the distinctions regarding ‘merchants of eminence’ and ‘traffickers’ rather opaque and inoperative, with the connivance of British authorities along the coast. The problems arising from the more or less obscure nature of the transactions, thus thwarting possible controls and scandals at the time, also affect current day research into the legitimacy of the cash crops produced on African soil and an assessment of the longer-term impact of such colonial practices on the development of the continent. And thus, as the final part of the book is concluded, we see how the patterns of brokerage that had characterized the precolonial Atlantic exchanges of Western Africa began to shift towards increasingly coercive patterns of labour as the colonial era approached.

The presentation in this book of manifold perspectives on the brokerage that in many ways defined the engagement of Western Africa with Atlantic societies thus offers a complex recasting of a crucial theme. For the first time in many years, a variety of previously unexplored sources are assessed by multiple authors, and the new evidence offers important new interpretations both of the ways in which societies and commodity trades changed in precolonial Western Africa, and of why these patterns mattered when the colonial system emerged. However, in order to understand why this is relevant to both Western African and broader Atlantic historiographies, a deeper understanding is required of the many particularities of the region’s cultural and physical settings, and it is to this that we now turn.

Precolonial Western Africa in regional and Atlantic perspectives

The significance of Western Africa to the early Atlantic emerges in the fact that it was the site of the first encounters between Africans and Europeans on African soil in the mid-fifteenth century. This situation meant that Western Africa was the initial focus of European governments and commercial interests regarding Africa. At first, its enormous potential on account of its fertile soils, mineral wealth, and abundant labour served as the main motivation for the Portuguese Crown’s policy to establish trade relations with the region’s many and diverse peoples. At the same time, while Angola was to become the key point of connection to Portuguese interests in Brazil, the arid and unpopulated Cape Verde islands would become the hub of Portugal’s North Atlantic networks linking Africa to the Iberian Peninsula and the trade in slaves to the Spanish Americas, as well as the seat of its government in Western Africa.

Herein lies an apparent contradiction that requires some additional explanation if the complexities of the region are to be fully understood. The evolution of the region defined in this book as Western Africa in a precolonial context from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century depended on commercial and geopolitical fluxes. As the centuries unwound, and Portuguese power declined while that of the Dutch, English, and French rose, the exchanges between the archipelago and the continental mainland shifted. The changes in the region in question can be divided into three phases: first, from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century based upon the interaction between the Cape Verdean archipelago and coastal areas between the Senegal and the Sorencies River; second, from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, centred upon the rise of trading communities in coastal areas, the decline of Cape Verde in the transatlantic trade, and the increased competition between European interests for the spoils of coastal trade; and third, from the nineteenth to the twentieth century when the link between the Cape Verde islands

and the continent was re-established, while the colonial powers (Britain, well suited to navigation in smaller craft such as dugout canoes. But then France, and Portugal) vied for territorial control of the latter, established colonial again, the tidal impact allows for upstream navigation, ranging between 50 administrations, and ‘divided the spoils’.

Over this long period of five centuries, the configuration of the region, the other relevant key sites of Portuguese–African interactions in precolonial changed considerably, in geopolitical and geoeconomic terms. From the 1450s, Africa, Angola and Mozambique, also offered considerable possibilities for to the early 1600s Portugal’s initial claims to the area that became known as upstream navigation along the Kwanza and Zambezi rivers, respectively, the ‘Rivers of Guinea of Cape Verde’ extended from the Gambia River to the it is therefore by no means coincidental that the area between the Gambia Sherbro peninsula, while also including Gorée island (until 1588). However, and the Sherbro River, being most favourable to riverine navigation, became the territorial extension of the area claimed by the Portuguese Crown, on the principal focus of Afro-Atlantic trade and settlement along the Western regarded as Portuguese, diminished considerably thereafter, owing to growing African coast from the fifteenth century, thereafter followed by Angola and European (Dutch, British, and French) competition to the extent that by the other regions in the course of the seventeenth century.32

At the same time, the limits of the tidal bore also determined the extent of European presence in the region, which remained circumscribed to the coastal lowlands. This in turn meant that the peoples living in these coastal zones became the centre of attention of incoming actors, be they traders, missionaries, or officials, seeking new trading opportunities and regional brokers. The contacts between Atlantic outsiders and African populations, which grew in intensity during the period under consideration, deeply affected these societies. Whereas in some circumstances strata or communities of brokers emerged as a result of different forms of accommodation (e.g. miscegenation and acculturation), in others passive or active and sometimes violent resistance of African societies was the norm. African allies and brokers would increasingly drive hard bargains or turn into enemies, depending on external threats, political infighting, economic competition, or cultural changes. As a result the history of the region differs from that of the peoples living in the savannas and highlands in the interior (i.e., the Soninke and Mandé in Kaabu and the Gambian states, and the Fulbe in the Futa Tooro and Futa Djallon), who retained a greater autonomy than their coastal counterparts regarding European incursions, and benefited from a stronger political and military organization. Thus, the limits of the tidal constitute an economic, social, and cultural borderline that defines the distinctive characteristics of the region that came to be called the ‘Guinea of Cape Verde’, and which we call here ‘Western Africa’.33

However, it would be a mistake to take this as meaning that Atlantic Africa was divorced from its landlocked hinterlands. One of the significances, indeed, of the pattern of coastal brokerage is precisely that it mediated between

32 Philip D. Curtin, Economic Change in Pre-colonial Africa, 155.
both worlds from deep within Western Africa and the Atlantic, and helped to bring Atlantic influences far into the continent and a variety of African peoples to produce, and culture to the coast. For, owing to the high spatial mobility of actors and communities, these areas were all linked to one degree or another to the broader networks. The continued presence of Creole, Cape Verdean trading lineages (mainly from the islands of Santiago and Fogo) acting as coastal brokers had a lasting influence on local, regional, and Atlantic trade well into the nineteenth century. Therefore, the archipelago needs to be included in this framework, in the wider context of West Africa. Expanding politics such as that of Mande, which made its presence felt from the thirteenth century, that is, two centuries before European arrival on the scene, would effectively link the coastal zone to a new hinterland, the upper Niger River, and bring the former into a military and commercial orbit while promoting cross-cultural relations between the two. The intersection of physical geographies and cultural realities has also influenced the emergence of the two main vectors that hitherto have largely determined themes and approaches in the literature on Western Africa. The River and the upper reaches of the Gambia River, created a new political and economic context that would serve as an incentive to European forges on the Guinea coast from the 1400s. The formation of the Kumbu federation founded by Mali on its westernmost edge in the thirteenth century, and which became independent in the 1500s following Mali’s decline, consolidated the power of interaction. However, in the case of West Africa, the twain do seem to and influence of Mandé-speaking peoples in the region. Located along the Gambia River and on the outer edge of the tidal bore in what is now Senegal and Guinea-Bissau, Kaabu thus became an African counterpart to European maritime empires; and Mandé influence in Western Africa subsequently spread to the interior of the Manes in Sierra Leone in the early contact. Parallels can be made with other areas of Euro-African contact, mid-sixteenth century. Although Mandé influence would also extend across other regions such as the Gold Coast, Dahomey, and the Bight of Benin, not least in owing to its West Africa as a result of exchange relations with Atlantic networks, the region’s predominance of Kaabu would diminish after the first quarter of the eighteenth century. In addition, Muslim revolutions and the rise of theocratic states such as São Tomé and Príncipe, Fernando Pó, Amboim, and Bioko. In the eighteenth century. Muslim revolutions and the rise of theocratic states such as these West African regions all maintained relations with the Americas (e.g., Futa Tooro and Futa Djallon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) had the Caribbean and Brazil) with the aid of trade diasporas bridging both sides of the Atlantic; these linkages resulted in diffusion of terminology associated with new Atlantic markets emerged along the Rivière du Sud (i.e., the Congo, commercial and cultural brokers. These areas were all destinations for a curious Nunez, and Mellacqueré rivers). Moreover, within this picture of an integrated, cosmopolitan amalgam of adventurers, exiles, refugees, trader-settlers, officials, and coast and hinterland, the Cape Verde islands play a curious role—on a par with missionaries who for a variety of reasons ventured onto African shores. With São Tomé and Principe, for example, and those islands’ transactions, the activities of these actors, although predicated on European expansion, are now regarded as an essential part of the history and anthropology of these mainland, with Portugal, and on account of their function as a hub in Atlantic regions. Despite the distance that separates them, it is only a small step from the ‘Euro-Africans’ or ‘Afro-Europeans’ in and around Elmina to the

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‘Euro-Africans’ in Cacheu or Gorée. What is important to note in this respect is that these groups emerged at the crossroads of expanding European maritime and continental African empires, that is, the Grand-Wolof, Mali/Kaabs, Futa-Djallon, Mané on the Upper Guinea coast, and Ashanti, Dahomey and Oyo on the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin. In the case of Western Africa, the Kaabú federation, originally established as a result of Mandé expansion into Mali, but playing an autonomous role in the region from the sixteenth century, was central to the political and economic development of the region. The interaction between Mandé dignitaries and traders on the one hand, and African and Afro-European brokers on the other, was crucial to the redirection of trans-Saharan trade routes from the hinterland to the coast, by means of the thriving riverine riverine trade along the Gambia, Casamance, Cacheu, and Geba rivers.

However, the nature of these coastal communities varied greatly, and depended upon a number of conditions that influenced patterns of settlement, trade relations, and social interaction. In the case of Western Africa, rather than forming around European fortifications such as Elmina or Ajudia on the Gold Coast, these communities emerged in what Conrad Appel called ‘settlements some centuries old and still no bigger than pinheads’ in the untamed expanses of their background. The Guinea coast’s marshlands covered in mangroves hardly seemed inviting to the European outsider, but provided convenient shelter for those who wished to trade with African suppliers without being watched over by zealous customs officers or coastal patrols. The notable presence of private traders such as the lançados and tangomais, who settled along the coast and challenged the largely fictional monopoly of European crowns over the slave, gold, and ivory market, illustrated the lack of power and authority of European states. Differing from the smugglers and pirates such as the Dutch torrendaanders operating along the Gold Coast, these seaborne mavericks of the coastal trade ensconced themselves in the hamlets, negotiating directly with local populations and often assimilating themselves to local customs and languages. They have been regarded as the forerunners of the Euro- or Luso-African communities that became mainstays of the Upper Guinea coast. Their emergence as an influential commercial network of brokers in Western Africa was associated with the formation of a Sephardic Jewish and New Christian diaspora in the Atlantic, as a result of religious persecution in the Iberian peninsula from the second half of the 1400s in Spain and the early 1500s in Portugal. These commercial networks based upon kinship, wardship, clientelism, and intermarriage extended not only along the coast but also to the archipelagos off the coast (such as the Cape Verde islands and São Tomé and Príncipe), which in turn formed a part of the triangular, transatlantic slave and commodity trade. Given that conditions for permanent settlement on the coast were generally precarious, these islands served as ‘placetas giratórias’, or ‘pivot platforms’, linking commercial forts and settlements such as Elmina and Cacheu and their hinterland to Atlantic outlets.

The emergence of these communities in Western Africa from the late fifteenth century onwards contributed towards another marked characteristic of the region, namely the role played by women such as the signaress, harsas, seanças, and harsas, seanças, and harsas in these communities, and the commercial networks they managed from their coastal towns. The connection between commercial brokers and female traders emerged through the partnerships that these women developed with men of men of men of...
European or Creole descent. Their position in these sea and riverine ports as intermediaries in a variety of social, economic, cultural, and political contexts brings to the fore the intricate cross-cultural relations that underpinned these Afro-Atlantic networks. The social and economic entrepreneurship the practised was based upon the formation and skilful use of alliances between local kinship networks, above all matrilineal, and the partnerships with maloutsiders, whether native or creolized Europeans, in different coastal areas. The pivotal role of these women in coastal and insular communities underlay the importance of brokerage and the hybrid identities and practices associated with it, which form a key characteristic of Afro-Atlantic communities at large and the social, commercial, and cultural networks they developed along the shores of the Upper Guinea Coast.

The foregoing discussion illustrates how brokering the gradual integration of African and Atlantic economies had an inevitably strong cultural component. At the same time, however, this should not encourage us to think that commercial settlement on the coast was a uniform affair. In fact, trade-based settlement on the coast can be divided into two periods, the first based upon small trading posts built by private traders, and the second centered on factories erected by state-sponsored trading companies. While the state-run trading posts at Goreé and Elmina followed the building of forts by royal emissaries or contractors in the course of the fifteenth century, most settlements that emerged during the fifteenth and sixteenth century along the Guinea coast, such as Sta Cruz de Biguba, Geba, Kassan, Bintan, Geregia, Goreé, Porto Fresco/Rufisque, Joal, Portudal, Tancrowale, Cacheu, and Bissau, were originally negotiated through pawns between private slave traders and local African communities. They were, in other words, classic products of brokerage. Surrounded by mud walls and stockades, very similar to those built by Africans around their compounds and villages, these riverine settlements differed little from local villages. Owing to the proximity between traders, village heads and chiefs, and the population at large, intermarriage was common, leading to the emergence of small creolized communities along the banks of the region's rivers. While the bulk of the population of these posts were slaves, they also attracted free persons from different ethnic origins, who lived and worked in these settlements and operated the riverine trade. The latter formed local trading strata in these strategic locations in estuaries and along river banks, characterized by a remarkable spatial and social mobility, flexible social institutions, and linguistic pidginization. Thus, transethnic groups formed in these coastal towns, constituting the dynamic core of these communities that formed part of commercial, coastal, and riverine relay networks, and connected the African hinterland to the Atlantic, and vice versa. In this way, brokerage accentuated the mixed nature of Atlantic trading communities in West Africa which also came to characterize more largely the creolization of the Atlantic world.

Once some of these makeshift trade settlements such as Farim, Ziguinchor, St Louis, St James, Albreda, Bissau, Farim, Ziguinchor, and Bunce Island were transformed into towns and factories in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by—or with the support of—trading companies (e.g. West Indische Compagnie, 1621; Royal African Company, 1672; Compagnie du Sénégal, 1673; Compagnie de Cacheu, 1676; Compagnie de Grão Pará e Maranhão, 1750), relations between African suppliers and incoming traders changed. Although the dynamics of creolization continued, the relations of power shifted as settlements were gradually transformed into towns in the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (e.g. St Louis, Banjul, Bissau, Freetown). As a result, in the nineteenth century these sites were to become

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the launching pads for territorial expansion, the progress of which largely
depended upon the political and economic inputs to back up military campaigns
and colonization projects. At the same time, local support was essential to
the initial success of these ventures, and thus the small communities living in
trade settlements, essentially, formed the most advanced outposts of empire.
However, given that these Afro-Atlantic communities in St Louis and Gorée,
the Petite Côte, the Gambia, the Guinea Bissau region, the Rivières du Sud, and
Sierra Leone pursued their own interests, which did not necessarily coincide with
European designs, relations were often tense. These ‘tensions of empire’
became more intense as the transatlantic slave trade petered out in the 1860s
after sustained British pressure, reinforcing the quest for alternatives for
‘legitimate’ commercial ventures, above all in the export crop trade.48

Thus the trajectory of these trading communities in Western Africa over
the longue durée of Atlantic history is one of moving from localized and indi-
vidual patterns of brokerage and exchange to a more institutionalized setting
which formed the platform for colonialism. In reality, however, the ‘localized
nature of these communities of brokerage had always been moderated by
local networks, which made their development of wider significance. The
fact that these coastal communities evolved against the background of the
transatlantic slave trade, from the 1520s to the 1860s, meant that Afro-Atlantic
brokers formed part of long-standing, complex networks that stretched along
the coast to the Cape Verde islands, as well as to São Tomé and other islands in
the Bight of Benin, and across the Atlantic to the Caribbean and the Americas. Thus
their activities were directly linked to mercantile interests and well adapted to
the changing economic winds that affected the fortunes of coastal and insular
intermediaries. Strategies developed by traders and intermediaries in Western
Africa could be transplanted, along with languages and cultural practices, to
the Americas, and the same process could happen in reverse. Thus emerged
what we could call a globalizing space influenced by brokers in Western
Africa and elsewhere in Atlantic Africa.

Of course, the perspective offered by this volume should not be seen to
nullify the significance of imperial, metropolitan Atlantics in the emergence
of this globalizing space. In the Western African context, the importance of
the rivalries between European states was reflected in the growing competi-
tion on African shores, to the extent that after an initial period of Portuguese
hegemony, until the late 1500s, Dutch, French, and British interests began
to make inroads on the Upper Guinea coast. Given that the expansion of
the Atlantic trade is closely related to the growing interaction between Euro-
peans and Africans, the changes that occurred in the former naturally
had a profound impact upon the latter. But the chapters in this volume make
the case that the inverse is also true, owing to the extension of Euro-African
networks across the Atlantic in the Americas and the Caribbean, operated from
different locations in the triangular trade. The itinerancy and interaction of
people, commodities, and knowledge systems engendered the emergence of a
transatlantic cultural mosaic, including agriculture, cosmology, language, and
music, composed of a great variety of African, American, and Creole elements.49

The formation of interrelated pidgins and Creole languages on both sides of
the Atlantic testifies to the wide-ranging influences indissolubly linked to the
presence of trade and cultural diasporas and their global impact. Despite the
violent uprooting of individuals, kin networks, and entire communities that it
entailed, the transformations that the Atlantic as a mercantile space worked
upon the African coast and its hinterland in precolonial Western Africa were
also translated and mediated into new expressions and experiences transmitted
by local actors through ‘a river called the Atlantic’, a space of human interaction
that survives to the present day.50

Accordingly, the chapters that this volume comprises testify to the
dynamic and innovative nature of research on Western Africa as well as to the
great diversity of themes and issues that are approached by Africanists from
a broad, inter-disciplinary perspective. They also contribute to the important
project of offering a significant African perspective on Atlantic histories. And
finally, they provide perspectives on the brokerage of African and Atlantic
linkages that can be applied to other regions affected by economic, political,
and cultural changes in the longue durée. Fundamentally, the book shows how
the histories of Atlantic Africa and the Atlantic as a whole need to be studied
together, and not in separation. Though this is a difficult and painstaking task,
it also offers an opportunity and a challenge to those who care about the many
facets of these complex histories. For the chapters here offer some avenues as
to how furthering these studies could be achieved, as well as illustrating the
importance of the perspective of brokerage, the agency of traders, planters and

49 Peter Mark, Portuguese 'Skule' and Luso-African Identity: Pre-Colonial Senegambia, Sixteenth-
Nineteenth Centuries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Nancy P. Naro, Roger
Samsi-Roca, and David H. Treete (eds), Cultures of the Lusophone Black Atlantic (New York and
London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Philip J. Havik and Malyn Newitt (eds), Creole Societies in
the Portuguese Colonial Empire (Bristol: Lusophone Studies 6, 2007); Caroline Williams, Bridging
the Early Modern Atlantic World.
50 Alberto Costa e Silva, Um Rio Chamao Atlântico: A Africa no Brasil e o Brasil na Africa (Rio de
brokers, and the variety of people who could adopt this pivotal role. What emerges here from these diverse contributions is that many gaps in our knowledge still remain, and that multidisciplinary research is essential if we are to understand how the worlds of Western Africa and the Atlantic became so deeply intertwined in the long period of Atlantic exchanges that presaged the traumas of colonialism.