

CONCISE  
HISTORY  
OF  
MODERN  
WORLD



A HISTORY OF  
**MODERN AFRICA**

1800 TO THE PRESENT

*Second Edition*

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## *Part I*

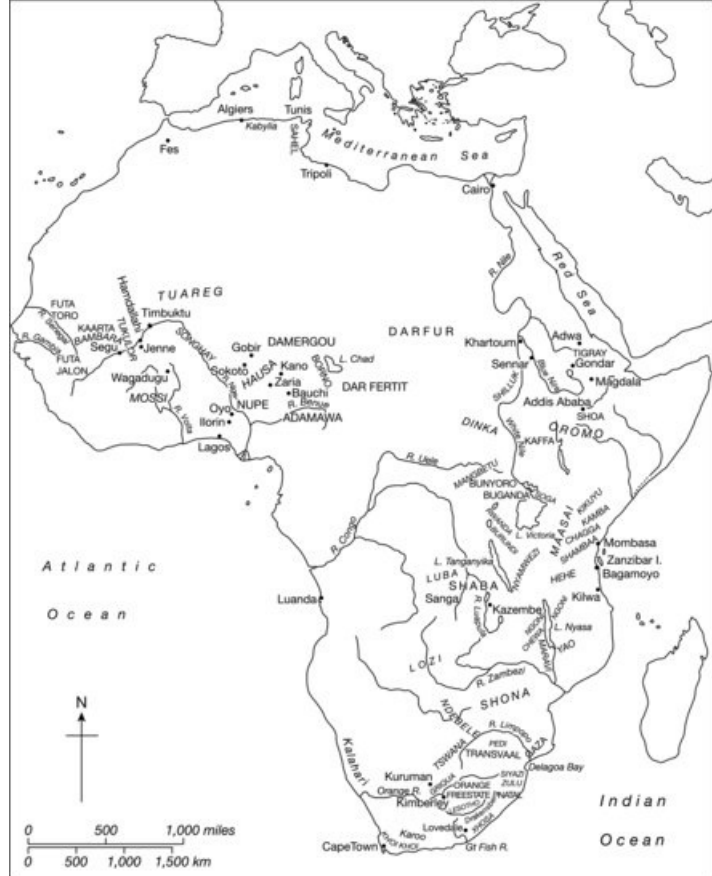
# ***Polity, Society, and Economy: Ingenuity and Violence in the Nineteenth Century***

Several broad themes are crucial to understanding much of Africa's nineteenth-century development, including the expansion of global commerce, the rapidly changing shape of African political structures, transformations in social structures and social relations, and – binding these together – the changing patterns of warfare. Violence in nineteenth-century Africa was both destructive and constructive; a military revolution, which took different forms across the continent, both drove, and was in turn driven by, rapid political, economic and social change. The dynamism and creativity of the century between the 1790s and the 1890s needs to be understood in order to fully appreciate the distinctive patterns of the twentieth century.

Long-distance and overseas trade changed the very nature of society and polity, presenting opportunities for the accumulation of wealth which did not necessarily exist in rather simpler agricultural systems of local production and exchange. Global commerce brought about social mobility, both upwards and downwards, and this in turn involved shifts in the balance of political power. At the same time, the distribution of “luxury” or prestige goods by ruling elites was one of the most important means of securing political support in the nineteenth century: in Dahomey, the elaborate “annual customs” involved the distribution of such goods to the king's followers, and in Buganda there existed a similar patronage and distribution system at the kingdom's political center. Imported goods, of course, had practical utility: political and commercial elites nearer the coast used foreign imports to exchange for horses further north, for example, as among the Yoruba. Commercial power, in other words, could be converted into military or political power. Those able to accumulate wealth in this way were also in a position to buy people – and in much of Africa “power” was directly linked to the number of people either owned or over whom influence was exercised. Commercial power brought with it the power to expand one's following, the power to buy slaves, wives, or both – female slaves playing a particularly important role in the perpetuation of households and political establishments. The wealth derived from trade, therefore, could be transformed directly into political power, and this brought about dramatic transformations in terms of social mobility.

These themes are common across the continent; in other respects, however, there was a marked contrast in the experiences of West and East Africa. Fundamentally, in East Africa the slave trade was expanding in the nineteenth century as it was declining in West Africa. In West Africa, the slave trade had facilitated – indeed had depended upon – the rise of hierarchical, political-military complexes, dominated by elites able to monopolize the import–export trade through their control of slaving and slave-trading. War was an economic as well as a political activity, representing an investment on the part of the state which – while not without risk, in terms of defeat and heavy casualties – could bring considerable returns, and which ensured the dominance of extant elites. The nineteenth century saw this thrown into flux, following the abolition of the slave trade by most of the key European participants between the 1800s and the 1830s. A number of states continued to trade in slaves “illegally” until the 1860s; but these kinds of elites were increasingly undermined by the gradual decline of the commerce in human beings – and in some areas it was *very* gradual – and the rise of the so-called “legitimate” commerce in raw materials and agricultural produce; they lost significant political and economic privileges as they lost control of both trade and markets, and smaller producers could now compete with the “big men” as both groups moved into agricultural production. In some areas, however, although ruling elites found their positions weakened, they could use their political power to compensate for the dilution of their economic bases. In 1862 in Old Calabar, in the Niger Delta, for example, trade in small amounts of palm oil was prohibited by the chiefs, in an attempt to retain at least an oligopoly; and in mid-nineteenth century Dahomey, heavy taxes were imposed on the sale of palm oil.

[Map 3](#) Africa in the nineteenth century: key peoples and places.



Social change also resulted from the increased use of slaves within Atlantic African states and communities, itself the direct consequence of the expansion in agricultural production. In general, prices for slaves fell through the nineteenth century, making it easier for ordinary producers to acquire slaves; they were employed in farming, for transporting goods, as military followers, sometimes even as junior traders. There is some evidence to suggest that the treatment and general well-being of slaves deteriorated with the rise of “legitimate” commerce, owing to the comparative cheapness of slaves and the ability of their owners to work them harder than previously. Yet there were also opportunities for slaves: some responded violently to misuse, and indeed ever greater numbers of slaves in the economy gave them greater collective strength. Perhaps more importantly, however, the commercial changes of the nineteenth century meant that slaves themselves might accumulate wealth, buy their freedom, and build up political authority of their own.

On the other side of the continent, there was, rather, a tendency toward military rule, the direct result of the expanding slave and ivory trades. Warfare was the main source of slaves, involving the rise of warrior chiefs who gathered captives, built highly personalized armies, and created personal power. Commercial expansion in East Africa led to centralized authority, which was itself often rooted in the import of firearms and a range of prestige commodities. Heightened insecurity and increased levels of violence, together with the opportunities presented by commercial and military adventure, led to a breakdown in older forms of social structure, changing political forms, and in some areas the emergence of new identities – for example across central and northern Tanzania – or the strengthening of existing identities and political structures, as in Buganda and in the Ethiopian highlands.

On both sides of the continent, the relationship between new commercial and political patterns and warfare was an intimate one. Much nineteenth-century African violence was concerned with the struggle to control trade, and to gain access to its supposed benefits, among which was the firearm. The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of mercantilism – the linking of economic and political power – within many African societies, and the clearest manifestation of mercantilism was the use of war as an instrument of policy. Violent conflict certainly attended many of the changes taking place across the continent. When the Yoruba empire of Oyo, formerly a major slave-exporting state, collapsed in the 1820s and 1830s, it heralded the onset of several decades of conflict among the Yoruba themselves. The Yoruba competed for access to trade, as well as fighting with Muslim forces further north; the violence produced significant numbers of slaves for “illegal” export, a phenomenon which would at length prompt British intervention in the region, in the form of the annexation of the lagoon city-state of Lagos. Further west, Dahomey remained a powerful military presence, for whom the slave trade remained crucial, and for whom militarism was a core component in the hierarchical political structure of the state; war was a critical activity in the exercise of power, and had profound cultural significance, too. In eastern Africa, dynamic and expansionist – if often short-lived – mercantilist and militaristic states appeared in response to expanding commercial networks, for example among the Nyamwezi and the Kimbu in the 1870s, under Mirambo and Nyungu-ya-Mawe respectively. Further north, the comparatively ancient kingdom of Buganda seized its commercial opportunities aggressively, and through the nineteenth century sought to use military power as a means to commercial hegemony; like Dahomey, Buganda also incorporated a potent militarism into its political structures and its cultural makeup more broadly. The same is true of the *habesha* polities of the Ethiopian highlands, particularly Shoa and Tigray, which were well positioned to exploit commercial axes based on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, and which used warfare in part (though only in part) as a means to securing economic dominance. Nor is it possible to discuss these processes only in terms of centralized statehood: in the central Rift Valley, among the Turkana and Maasai, for example, there was a tendency through the nineteenth century toward more specialized military leadership and new forms of age regimentation – though here, trade was marginal compared to the struggle for local resources, notably pastureland, often prompted by climatic change.

In southern Africa, too, political and economic change was violent in the nineteenth century, as the Zulu state emerged from the several decades of conflict among the Ngoni to become, by the 1820s, one of the most successful military empires in the region, and indeed in sub-Saharan Africa as a whole. It was based on a ruthlessly efficient system of age regimentation, not unlike that found in the Rift Valley of East Africa. The repercussions of the military revolution which the Zulu represented were profound: refugees from these conflicts scattered as far north as the

southern shore of Lake Victoria, to where they carried new models of political and military organization. In southern Africa, too, ever longer-distance trade was important, though here the regional scene was complicated by the growing presence of white settlers, both at Cape Colony and in the Boer “republics” in the interior, creating what has been seen as a three-cornered struggle for political and economic space between the British, the Boers, and Africans themselves.

Each of these polities, of course, had distinctive cultural approaches to conflict, different means of military organization and leadership, different objectives in the use of war as an extension of policy. The permanent armies of the Zulu, or of the pastoral societies of the Rift Valley, were relatively rare, with most states and societies relying on part-time militias called up in time of need (or desire). Buganda had no permanent professional army, but it did have a profound military culture and ethos; Mirambo’s state relied on *ruga ruga*, young men equipped with guns, ambition, and a drive for commercial gain, their emotions heightened by the consumption of a local narcotic. Many of these societies, indeed, relied increasingly on the import of firearms, although the real impact of guns on warfare was variable across the continent; the states of coastal West Africa accumulated large numbers of them, as did those of the East African interior. In Ethiopia, successive emperors – Tewodros, Yohannes, and Menelik – were able to acquire quantities of modern or almost-modern weapons. Firearms were also the symbols of commercial, social, and political success, while also facilitating war itself; but again regional differences need to be acknowledged. In many parts of West Africa, guns were effectively adopted and utilized over time and through experience, and this was true in Ethiopia, too; but in Buganda, where guns were introduced only in the second half of the nineteenth century, they actually served to weaken the army’s performance, owing to a lack of training and a misguided emphasis on the symbolic value of the weapon rather than the tangible contribution it might make. Across the continent, indeed, guns were often sub-standard, unreliable, and even dangerous; this placed African societies at a great disadvantage in the face of European encroachment in the closing years of the nineteenth century.

The history of African polity, society, and economy in the nineteenth century, then, is to a considerable degree concerned with the struggle to reformulate political and economic structures, with war frequently playing a major role as an instrument of policy. Expansionist centers clashed with armed frontiers, and new political and military cultures resulted, some of which were consolidating, despite the enormous flux around them, on the eve of the European partition of Africa. Much of this change was linked to the opportunities presented by overseas commerce, and this was true of the small trading states of the Niger Delta as it was of the centralized mercantilist kingdoms of the Ganda and the Zulu. For western, southern, and eastern Africa, ultimately, European imperialism was itself related to commercial and political developments within those regions. As we shall see, the belief that African society was inherently unstable meant that trade would be protected, if necessary by the forceful suppression of disorder and occupation of territory. Europeans saw internal disorder, strife, and warfare as impediments to commerce, while the slave trade continued “illegally” well into the nineteenth century; even those rulers who *did* maintain order would come to be seen as dangerous and unstable potentates who had to be removed in order to secure the operation of trade. We will return to these themes in Part III.

## ***Western Transitions***

### ***Slave Trade and “Legitimate” Commerce in Atlantic Africa***

One of the key themes in the history of Africa in the nineteenth century concerns the changing patterns of international trade. It is important to note at the outset that Africans' experience of trade was by no means uniform across the continent, but that there was, rather, considerable regional diversity, from the regions of coastal West Africa that were comparatively commercially developed, with a long history of involvement in global trade, to swathes of the eastern and central African interior which in the course of the nineteenth century were only beginning to experience long-distance commerce and its wide-ranging implications. Looking at sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, however, it is possible to make some preliminary statements on the manner in which international trade had a profound impact on African political, economic, and social development, influencing both political structures and social formation; it is also true that, at least in terms of the commercial relationship between Africa and Europe, the early nineteenth century in many ways marks the beginning of Africa's modern economic history. The very nature of this relationship, and of the patterns of trade themselves, led ultimately to the European partition of the continent in the final decades of the century: commercial and other economic interests were a powerful motive behind the “scramble” for Africa, as we shall see later in the book.

Africa had been, of course, part of a global economy for several centuries prior to 1800. The trans-Saharan trade had linked swathes of West Africa to the Mediterranean and Europe, via North Africa which since antiquity had been an integral part of the Mediterranean commercial basin, while on the other side of the continent the Indian Ocean had formed an enormous arena of commercial interaction which linked the eastern African Swahili coast with western and central Asia. Most dramatically, of course, the slave trade from the fifteenth century onwards – and particularly the transatlantic system from the middle of the sixteenth century – had tied swathes of coastal western and central Africa, and their hinterlands, to western Europe and the Americas, to where millions of Africans were forcibly transported. Trade networks, moreover, ran across Africa by 1800, connecting forest and woodland, savannah and desert. Many parts of the continent, therefore, had experienced several centuries of commercial relations with Europe, Asia, and the Americas; the nineteenth century, however, witnessed new developments in those relations and the incorporation of new regions into those trade networks.

Moreover, many of the key characteristics of Africa's modern relationship with Europe can be most powerfully demonstrated in the Atlantic zone, which is defined here as stretching from Senegal to Angola. In many respects Atlantic Africa was something of a testing ground for European ideas about African culture, polity, and, perhaps most dramatically, economy; this was a zone which experienced enormous change in the course of the nineteenth century, faster in some areas than in others, but traumatic and permanent nonetheless. For our purposes, the most important “transition” – in fact the nineteenth century witnessed a series of “transitions” – was that from the slave trade to so-called “legitimate commerce” in Atlantic Africa. There was no single or sudden transformation: an export trade in human beings, much to the despair of European humanitarians as well as, of course, millions of Africans, continued down to the 1860s. The difference between this phase of the slave trade, and that which endured between the fifteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was that it was held to be “illegal” in much of Europe, and inimical to the advance of economic “modernity.”

Finally, throughout this era of great creativity, Africans responded to external, and drove internal, change in a myriad of ways, despite experiencing what has been referred to as a global “reversal of fortune,” as the result of which the continent fell behind Europe in economic terms. The nineteenth century witnessed an escalation of the struggle to gain advantage from the burgeoning global economy, and to influence that system, despite the fact that the engines of industrial and financial control were now located outside Africa itself. In an era of destruction and construction, the processes which unfolded as Africans attempted to do so were frequently misunderstood by foreign observers.

### **States and Societies during the Atlantic Slave Trade**

The slave trade had been devastating in many parts of Atlantic Africa, notably in terms of economic development – there can be little doubt that in some areas the trade stunted economic growth and diversification – and demographic growth, with population levels at least remaining the same, if not declining, as a result of the systematic export of people. But it is important to observe that the slave trade had not been absolutely catastrophic: Africa survived. At the same time, the uncomfortable truth must be acknowledged that many Africans profited from the slave trade, mostly at the level of elites who built some of the most successful and dynamic state systems in sub-Saharan Africa on the basis of slavery and slave export. The institution of slavery, moreover, was of considerable antiquity in Africa, and in this sense, in some areas at least, it was no dramatic leap to sell slaves outside the community.

**Map 4** Atlantic Africa in the nineteenth century.

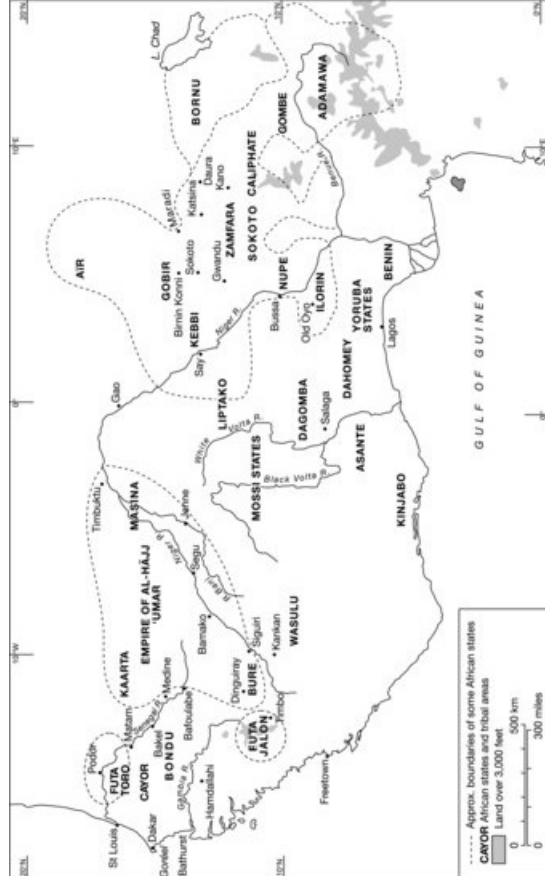


Atlantic and internal long-distance commercial systems had brought about major political, social, and economic changes among African states and societies by the end of the eighteenth century. It is also true, of course, that many of the societies involved in long-distance trade, exporting either slaves or other commodities, remained essentially *stateless* and decentralized; the Igbo of modern southeast Nigeria are one such example. Nonetheless, in general, the major political consequence of such involvement was the creation of centralized, essentially mercantilist states, characterized by their fusing of political and economic power, and territorial expansion at the expense of smaller, weaker or stateless communities. Political elites either controlled commerce, or traders acquired political power. Across swathes of western and central Africa between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, militarized states arose, while imported firearms often facilitated the rise of small, well-armed minorities capable of dominating larger populations. In broad terms, the slave trade resulted in an increased level of violence; wars were often fought deliberately for slaves, and such violence might be extremely destructive, sometimes involving the systematic devastation of weaker communities. This is demonstrable for the area of modern Angola, for example, where Ndongo and the Lunda empire became deeply involved in slave-raiding violence across swathes of central Africa, violence which continued well into the nineteenth century. Angola, indeed, was one of the few areas where European traders – in this case Portuguese – were directly involved in the procurement of slaves, becoming permanently settled in the area of Luanda and its hinterland. By the middle of the eighteenth century, ten thousand slaves a year were being exported through the port of Luanda. Yet slaves were just as often the product of wars fought for other reasons, as states formed and expanded. Benin, for example, sold slaves to the Portuguese in the fifteenth century while it was undergoing military expansion; once the process of expansion had run its course, Benin eschewed the selling of slaves, and the trade only resumed in the eighteenth century as Benin disintegrated. Similarly, wars waged by expanding states such as Oyo, Dahomey, and Asante in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced supplies of captives for the coast. Ruling elites sold slaves when it suited them, often becoming wealthy in the process; as for the “logic” of participation in the trade, it is clear that the sale of people was deeply ironic given the concern of African rulers to maximize population growth. Powerful men sold slaves to acquire goods, goods with which to attract more personal followers: they sold people in order to acquire people, and from this perspective there was clearly a separation of the collective from the individual interest.

One of the key areas of debate with regard to the impact of the slave trade relates to demography and endogenous economic growth. The former may be regarded as particularly important, given that one of the continent’s core themes has been the attempt to build up its population. The slave trade clearly involved a serious loss to Africa’s productive potential. Labor was exported for a fraction of its value: slaves tended to be young, the most productive members of society. It is virtually impossible, however, to assess the demographic impact in any detail. The population of Atlantic Africa at the beginning of the slave trade is unknown, and likewise we have no way of knowing how fast (if at all) the population was growing, or how fast it might have grown if the slave trade had not happened. We can only speak in terms of general impressions. It is widely accepted that the area of modern Angola experienced depopulation, while other areas which were deeply involved – such as the Slave Coast and its hinterland – suffered retarded population growth at the very least.

**Map 5** Central Africa in the nineteenth century. From J. E. Flint (ed.) *Cambridge History of Africa*. Vol. 5: c.1790–c.1870 (Cambridge, 1976), © 1976 by Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.





One of the enduring outcomes of the slave-trade argument, apart from abolition itself, was the objectification of Africa, an imagined entity lying at the feet of the debaters with little (individuals such as Equiano excepted) to say for itself. Africa had become an “object,” an issue or a question to exercise the great philanthropic and political minds of the day, and not a few lesser ones, too; and herein do we see a process by which “Africa” was being invented according to the concerns and the agenda of outsiders. It was a process which was to gather momentum through the nineteenth and indeed the twentieth centuries. As we shall see in a later chapter, the African Association was founded in London at the same time – the 1780s – as the slave-trade debate was gathering public momentum, and one of the stated aims of the Association was to wean the continent off the slave trade, diversify commerce and bring about a mutually beneficial, progressive, civilizing relationship which would “improve” Africa, heighten knowledge of it, and of course lead to commercial gains for Britain itself.

The Association sought tangible gain in arguing for a change in the economic relationship between Europe and Africa. Moving and powerful though the broadly “humanitarian” arguments were, there can be little doubt that shifts in economic thinking, as well as in the profits to be had from the slave-based economy, also led to a more hard-headed reconsideration of the viability of the trade. Slave resistance, of course, had long made investors uneasy: mutinies on board ship were common enough, while the most notable slave revolt was that on the island of Haiti in 1791, under Toussaint l’Ouverture. It is also the case that the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars which had engulfed Europe between the early 1790s and 1815 had repercussions for international trade. Global shipping lanes were severely disrupted, including those linking Africa and the Americas, and the slave trade never fully recovered. More broadly, however, slave labor was no longer viewed as profitable by many western European economists: future economic growth, it was argued, lay in industrialized systems making use of free, waged labor, while profits from slave-based sugar production in the Caribbean, for example, had declined significantly in the second half of the eighteenth century. Investment in manufacturing industry at home continued apace, particularly in Britain, and at the expense of plantation slavery overseas. This was not, of course, universally accepted, at least not immediately: slave labor would continue in the United States until the 1860s, and in Brazil, which was the single largest “illegal” importer of slaves in the nineteenth century. Slavery itself would remain legal in the British empire until the 1830s. This said, however, the abolition of the slave trade by the major European powers ushered in a new age of economic and political change, which is again why “c.1800” can be usefully employed as a notional watershed. There had been an important shift in economic thinking about Africa, which was increasingly regarded as a source of raw materials, and indeed a market for manufactured goods, rather than simply a source of slave labor. Industrialization in the northern hemisphere would be further fuelled by the vegetable oil and rubber of “the tropics,” while European manufacturers – many of whose companies had originally made their money in the slave trade – searched for markets abroad in which to sell cheaply-made commodities.

Denmark and Britain, two of the biggest slave carriers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were among the first to prohibit their citizens from participating in the trade, in 1803 and 1807 respectively; they were followed by the United States (1808), Holland (1814), and France (1817), although the last had toyed with abolition during the revolutionary years of the 1790s. At the Congress of Vienna in 1815, there was a general agreement among most European states that the slave trade should be abolished, although Portugal had argued for a ban only on the trade north of the equator. By the mid-1830s, most European states had outlawed the trade, but it was extremely difficult to enforce. The Atlantic slave trade died hard, and continued through much of the nineteenth century, with several West African coastal states, for example Dahomey, refusing to abandon what was seen as an essential economic and indeed political activity. Widespread warfare among the Yoruba, too – examined below – produced large numbers of people for export. Swathes of central Africa, notably the region of modern Angola, also continued to be involved in the export of slaves, as it had been throughout the earlier period of the trade. The main destination for slaves in the nineteenth century was Latin America, although smaller numbers found their way further north. The Atlantic trade did, however, gradually decline in the course of the century, and had largely disappeared by the 1870s and 1880s. This was in part due to the efforts of the British anti-slavery squadrons patrolling Africa’s Atlantic coastline, but the real impact of such activity should not be exaggerated. Dwindling demand for slaves in the Americas, particularly from the middle of the century, and the expansion of “legitimate” commerce, were ultimately more important factors.

One of the fundamental misjudgments made by European politicians, humanitarians, and philanthropists alike was the notion that slavery and



“legitimate” commerce was mutually exclusive. In fact, they could not co-exist. At any rate, African rulers pleaded that the slave trade was so deeply embedded in the political and social makeup of their states that it was impossible to stop, or at least to do so without bringing about major social and political upheaval. Gezo, the king of Dahomey, told a British official in 1848 that he could not possibly give up the slave trade: the army had to be kept active, and if Gezo himself tried to alter “the sentiments of a whole people” Dahomey would be thrown into anarchy and revolution, which “would deprive him of his throne.”<sup>2</sup> These comments may have been rather disingenuous; in Dahomey, it was not in the interests of the ruling class to abolish the slave trade – over which it had complete control – and lose the privileges that went with it, and encourage production of palm oil, which would open up access to the lucrative overseas market to ordinary peasant producers. The struggle to suppress the slave trade along certain stretches of the Atlantic coast, and to spread the gospel of “legitimate” production, clearly led to increased European involvement in African politics across the region. Gezo was an example of the kind of recalcitrant ruler who in the 1840s and 1850s became the focus of much attention in the British Foreign Office; his refusal (or inability) to stop trading in slaves led to diplomatic missions and heightened political pressure. In other areas, the British used military force, or the threat of it, to compel African rulers to accept their abolitionist demands. Gunboats might create favorable commercial conditions, the British discovered, but it also meant a usually unwelcome extension of formal political control, as in Lagos, a persistent slave-exporting city-state on the Yoruba coast, which was bombarded in 1851 and eventually annexed in 1861. Thus the increase in scale of European economic interest in Atlantic Africa led to growing levels of political and military intervention: this was limited at first, but it nonetheless laid the foundations for later outright partition.

## Mineral and Vegetable: “Legitimate” Commerce

“Legitimate” commerce, as it has become known, increasingly supplanted the export of human beings, and involved European demand for raw materials, natural resources, and agricultural produce from western and central Africa. Yet it was far more than an economic system: it had moral and political implications, too, and indeed it has relevance for more recent debates concerning Africa’s “modernization.” This was trade which – like the slave trade before it – was of considerable economic benefit to Europe at a time of industrialization, and which, moreover, humanitarians hoped would bring economic and social progress to Africa. A great many African societies along the Atlantic coast, and to a rather lesser extent in the hinterland, participated in the export of such commodities as palm oil, groundnuts, and rubber; but in this era of transition, a number of societies experienced what have been called “crises of adaptation.” States whose socioeconomic and political structures were so geared toward the capture and export of slaves, or whose military ethos demanded the kind of cyclical military activity which resulted in the seizure of war captives, struggled to make the transition to agricultural exports. The era of the slave trade had produced, or at least strengthened, ruling warrior elites at the head of centralized political and economic systems; these elites now faced crises of adaptation in the era of “legitimate” commerce, in large part because they could not as easily control such trade or monopolize the supposed benefits coming from it. The very nature of the new economic system tended to undermine their internal power bases. While many states and societies did indeed make the transition successfully – with warrior elites finding new ways of controlling and adapting to the new economic reality, and indeed surviving until the onset of colonialism – others underwent profound social and political change or even collapse, with new groups becoming involved in overseas commerce and in some places challenging for political power. Everywhere, innovation and entrepreneurialism, often violent, was much in evidence. Ultimately, it is clear that in contrast to other parts of the continent, parts of Atlantic Africa experienced much greater continuity between the nineteenth century and the colonial era in terms of export economies based on agricultural produce and other raw materials.

Demand for vegetable oils, notably palm oil, increased in line with the quickening pace of industrialization. The demand for palm oil in Britain, for example, had been on the increase since the 1770s, with production spanning much of the West African coastal forest from Sierra Leone to the Niger delta. Groundnuts were cultivated north of the palm-oil regions, and production was especially significant in the Senegal–Gambia region. Some societies attempted to grow and export cotton – in present-day southern Nigeria, in the Gold Coast, and in Senegal, notably – and these were certainly able to capitalize on the disruption of the world’s cotton supply brought about by the American civil war in the 1860s. Rubber was also of growing importance: the demand for rubber was at first confined to European textile industries, but later tire manufacturers became involved. Wild rubber was being exported from parts of western and central Africa from the middle of the nineteenth century. Some peoples were ideally positioned to take advantage of the central African rubber trade, as well as the commerce in ivory; the Chokwe and Ovimbundu, for example, were successful as both producers and middlemen, and the Chokwe in particular were notable for making extensive use of slave labor in their commercial activity. Some cocoa was grown, at first on the offshore islands and then, toward century’s end, on the mainland, while in Atlantic central Africa the export of beeswax was also significant.

The coastal zone in particular benefited from legitimate commerce, and this in itself denoted major socioeconomic, and thus political, changes. The transport of slaves from the interior to the coast had been relatively cheap, and straightforward – slaves, clearly, are self-transporting – but the transport of relatively bulky, low-value commodities such as groundnuts and palm oil was rather more expensive from the deeper hinterland, and so most of the production took place along the coast, where the best profits were also to be had. One long-term consequence of this economic-geographical imbalance was the migration of people from the interior to the littoral. Only in the colonial era was it possible for the West African interior to participate fully in the international economy, largely as a result of railway and later road construction.

Essentially, however, production techniques did not change, the expansion of legitimate commerce simply involving the cultivation of more land, using more labor. In fact, across West Africa, there was something of a labor shortage, as palm oil, for example, required larger amounts of labor in terms of both production and transportation to the market areas. The result – ironically, in view of humanitarian visions in Europe – was an increase across the region in the use of slave labor. The number of female slaves in particular expanded considerably across Atlantic Africa. Slaves were needed to meet demand for “legitimate” produce; they were also used in domestic food production. In the Congo–Angola region, the loss of large numbers of young men – the cumulative effect of several centuries’ involvement in the slave trade – had resulted in a gender imbalance in many societies; local populations just about managed to reproduce themselves. With a decline in slave exports, population levels began to recover, and this in turn placed a strain on existing food resources, which meant using more domestic slaves to expand food production. Something similar occurred in the United States in the nineteenth century, where increased demand for cotton led to a dramatic expansion in the use of slave labor across the southern states. European humanitarians were uncomfortably aware that “legitimate” commerce had led to an increased use of slavery across Atlantic Africa; in time they would come to attribute this to the backward and brutal nature of African society itself, rather than explaining it in terms of Africa’s economic relationship with Europe.

For those who owned slaves, however, the export trade opened up greater opportunities for participation than had been the case previously. In broad terms, the slave trade was organized by large-scale operators at the level of a monopoly; slave sellers or “producers” constituted a small number of elite entrepreneurs. In general, the people best placed to trade in slaves were indeed political and military elites, especially as slaves themselves were usually generated through warfare, while slave-ownership was a crucial component in the exercise of political authority. Thus, what

we can broadly term “warrior elites” had developed across Atlantic Africa, strengthening centralized political leadership. This was not necessarily true, however, of legitimate commerce, in which there were no special favors or advantages for centralized political or military authority. Unlike the slave trade, carried on largely at the level of the state, the very nature of legitimate commerce meant that it was rather easier to trade in small amounts; simply put, anyone with access to a small plot of land and family labor – again, often supplemented by domestic slavery, particularly women – could participate in the export trade. At the same time, free women were able to become involved in small-scale commerce in the course of the nineteenth century. Overall, there was arguably a greatly heightened level of social mobility where overseas commerce was most intense. West African warrior elites sometimes found their political and economic monopolies weakened and their revenues reduced; alternative pockets of power developed as access to the export trade widened, and the supposed benefits it bestowed, such as firearms and other “luxury” commodities, became more widely distributed. Sociopolitical disruption, even collapse, ensued in a number of states and societies as the nineteenth century progressed.

In general, trade in “legitimate” produce tended to increase steadily – and in some cases dramatically – until the middle of the nineteenth century, when demand evened out somewhat; prices collapsed during the so-called “great depression” between the 1870s and the 1890s. Again very broadly, it can be argued that from the early nineteenth century until the 1870s, African producers enjoyed reasonably favorable terms of trade and a certain amount of economic power; with the collapse of prices in the 1870s and 1880s, however, there was a marked escalation in tension between Europeans and Africans, the latter feeling increasingly at the mercy of the former, and these commercial hostilities were to be a crucial factor in the European partition of West Africa, for example. Ultimately, Europe sought to protect its commercial interests from what were regarded as over-powerful African merchant-chiefs; and indeed relations between Europeans and Africans had become increasingly problematic in the course of the nineteenth century, as a direct result of the changing economic structures brought about by the “new” commerce.

Although the terms of trade did indeed tend to be more favorable to African producers than previously, at least for the first half of the nineteenth century, the new commercial system in effect implied the economic empowerment of Europe at the expense of Africa over the longer term. Connected to the global economy, Atlantic Africa was now subjected to periodic shifts in demand and prices beyond its control. Indebtedness among African producers increased, with many coastal traders dependent on the credit advanced by European merchants; violence was often used to recover debts. To Europeans, moreover, over-powerful and ambitious African middlemen were becoming obstacles to the flow of trade and the realization of profit. Gradually, but with increasing frequency in the second half of the century, European traders – sometimes with the official backing of their governments – began to penetrate beyond the coast into the hinterland in an effort to bypass middlemen and buy direct from producers. Often the most efficient means of doing so was by river, and thus did the Niger, navigable in places, become increasingly important to British commercial concerns. Combined with the anti-slave-trade activity noted above, all of this denoted ever greater European intervention in Atlantic African polity and economy, a process which formed the prelude to the actual partition of the region in the 1880s.

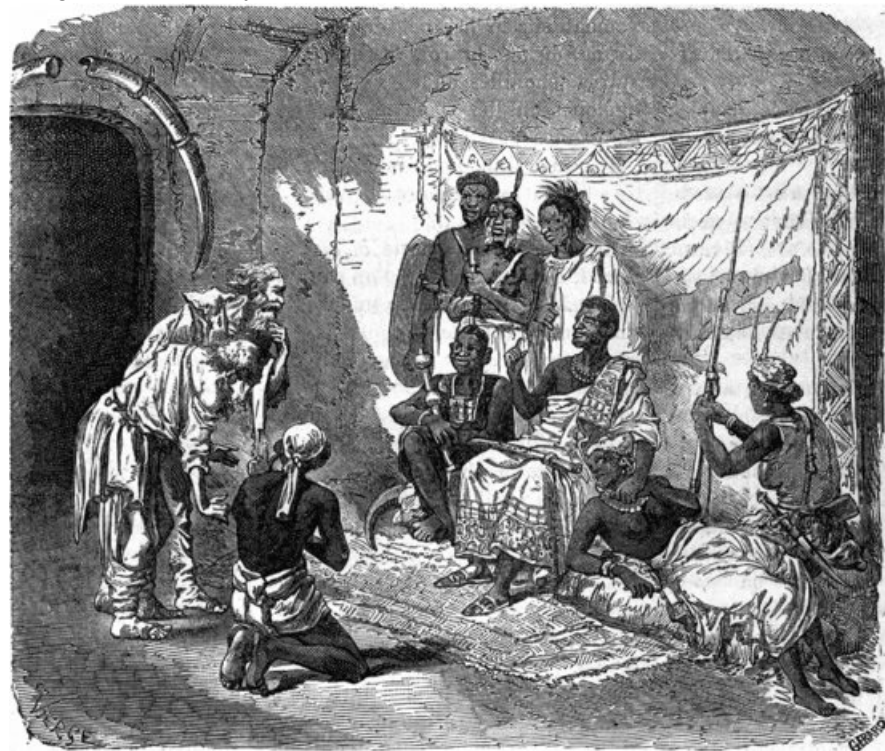
Ultimately, then, “legitimate” commerce did little to facilitate African economic growth, and many of the patterns of trade between Africa and Europe emerging in the first half of the nineteenth century in fact persist to the present day. This was the beginning of Africa’s modern economic history, an era usually characterized as one of “underdevelopment.” Legitimate commerce was about the export of raw materials rather than finished products; the continent was never an equal partner in the global trading network. Three broad observations are worth making. Firstly, levels of personal freedom declined as domestic slavery increased, while labor both free and unfree was now harnessed to the export trade rather than internal development and diversification. Secondly, European imports – these included a dizzying array of goods, but the most important were cloth, sundry manufactures, alcohol, and guns – did little to strengthen indigenous economies and indeed in many respects weakened them over the longer term. And thirdly, the independence of successful exporting societies was soon threatened by the interference of their European trading partners: commerce, ultimately, would lead to conquest.

## Change and Continuity in Forest and Savannah

Change took many forms during the gradual transition from one commercial era to the next. While large empires such as Oyo and Kongo collapsed – though only partly, it must be said, as the result of explicitly commercial change – new states and communities came to prominence in the coastal forest and savannah zones. The small trading states of the Niger delta saw the emergence of powerful merchants as hereditary “kings,” while among the Tio traders on the Congo River, kingship became largely ceremonial as real power passed to local merchant-chiefs. Centralized states such as Dahomey and Asante, however, survived through the nineteenth century, and to some degree beyond; here, proto-national identities, potent military cultures, and monarchical systems of government strove to adapt in the face of threats both local and foreign.

A great many Yoruba had entered the nineteenth century united within the Oyo empire, but Oyo was a state on the brink of collapse. It had been politically weakened by internal division and the dilution of the authority of the *alafin*, or king, while in economic terms it was in a precarious position following the abolition of the slave trade: European buyers at the coast had dried up, as had the goods with which Oyo traders had purchased horses from northern merchants. Meanwhile, the Islamic jihad which had erupted in 1804 among the Hausa and Fulani further north – examined in Chapter 6 – posed a major threat to the empire. Whether Oyo was already in terminal decline, and the jihad merely hastened the process, or whether the empire might have recovered had it not been for the Muslim revolution, there can be little doubt that the latter was a significant factor in the destruction of a polity which had dominated the area of the Benin Gap and a swathe of the southern savannah for the previous two centuries. In 1817, a provincial revolt in Ilorin, in the north of the empire, erupted with the assistance of some Fulani jihadists, precipitating not simply the collapse of Oyo but a series of wars which would engulf the Yoruba for much of the nineteenth century. Muslim forces would continue to push south deep into Oyo territory.

As conflict between the Oyo heartlands and Ilorin escalated, war broke out between Owu on the one hand, and Ife and Ijebu on the other, primarily over control of commerce. These wars combined to generate large numbers of displaced people, who themselves became a source of regional instability, living by plunder and carrying destruction over a wide area. The Oyo–Ilorin war reached its height in the early 1830s, when the old capital of Oyo was overrun, and largely destroyed; the empire’s poor successor, “New Oyo,” based in the forests to the south, ceased to play an active role in Yoruba politics. The empire’s demise left a vacuum within which a series of Yoruba states competed violently with one another, while also attempting to defend Yoruba territory from Muslim encroachments from the north. There were principally four such states. Ijaye was frequently engaged in conflict with Dahomey to the west, which in making incursions into Yorubaland sought to take advantage of the collapse of its former overlord, the Oyo empire; Ibadan to the south of Ijaye was an important military power, engaged in conflict with the Fulani. The Egba, with their capital at Abeokuta, also fought Dahomey, and for this reason sought access to the coast in order to acquire the necessary firepower; and the Ijebu, located close to the coast north of Lagos, were transit handlers of firearms bound for the north, and this commercially dominant people were also heavily involved in the “illegal” slave trade, exporting the hapless victims of the violence. Indeed it was this which prompted the British to annex Lagos in 1861.



Thus the Yoruba fought with one another, as well as with foreign invaders, and the internecine conflict can be divided into approximately two phases. Between the end of the 1830s and 1878, Ibadan emerged as the single most powerful Yoruba state, following prolonged wars with the Egba and the Ijaye, the latter being largely destroyed in the early 1860s. Ibadan also benefited from British support, based on the notion that it offered the best chance for political and commercial stability. During the second phase, from 1878 to 1893, several Yoruba states coalesced in order to prevent a further expansion of Ibadan's power, but when no clear advantage accrued on either side, negotiations began – in 1886 – with a view to establishing a permanent settlement. Diplomacy was interspersed with outbreaks of violence, and it was only in 1892–3 when the British, still based at Lagos, imposed a *pax* on the warring parties.

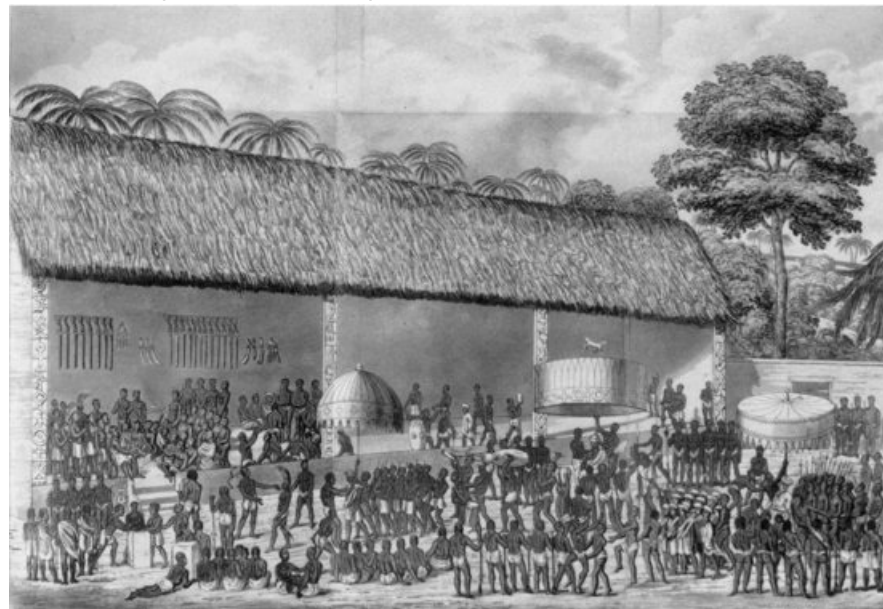
The violence of Yorubaland brought about dramatic changes, changes which to some extent can be used to highlight the impact of war in other parts of the continent. There was demographic change, involving massive shifts in population as the Fulani advanced southward from Ilorin; people moved from the more open savannah southward into the forest, as indeed they had always done in the search for protection against men on horseback. Now, however, there occurred permanent migration, resulting in urban expansion, both the growth of extant towns and the creation of new, often fortified settlements. At the same time, the slave trade escalated dramatically along the coast of modern southwest Nigeria, marking a significant change from previous patterns of slave export in the area. In the eighteenth century, slaving among the Yoruba had been limited, owing largely to the fact that Oyo acquired most of its captives from further north, and slave exports had come from the areas adjacent to Yoruba country, notably the Niger delta to the east, and Dahomey and Asante to the west. But the jihad and the resulting Sokoto caliphate closed off supplies of slaves from the north, while the collapse of Oyo led to rather more systematic slave-gathering among the Yoruba themselves: war was a lucrative business. But war had other side-effects. Islam spread into the region, following the expansion of Sokoto into Ilorin. Recurrent conflict engendered what can be acceptably be described as a military revolution, evident, too, in other parts of the continent for many of the same reasons: the use of firearms became common, and a professional soldiery emerged, involving more systematic training and the development of complex tactics and strategy. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, the violence provided the British in particular with a justification for intervention, and indeed the Yoruba in some ways offered the best instance of a troubled, war-stricken people crying out for redemption and security, which only Albion could provide. Missionaries had already introduced a degree of British culture into coastal society, and collected souls from among the displaced and defenseless; they helped shape official attitudes toward particular groups across the region, and lobbied for intervention. In the early 1890s, the British government answered the call, and local rivalries would now be played out in the context of the colonial experiment.

Missionary propaganda, moreover, targeted Dahomey as the source of much evil in the area. The beginning of the nineteenth century found Dahomey a dynamic and expansionist state, able at last to throw off its long-standing subordination to Oyo – a relationship dating to the early eighteenth century – and, as noted above, to launch incursions into Yoruba territory. These incursions were very largely economic in objective. Dahomey had been a successful slave-owning and slave-exporting state since at least the end of the seventeenth century: slaves were used extensively within the domestic economy, while others were exported, and others again were sacrificed according to ceremonies designed to honor the king and his ancestors. Slavery, thus, was central to Dahomey's economic, political, and social systems, and the result was a deep-rooted military culture, reflected in the fact that the army – using the firearms which were acquired through the actual export of slaves – was almost continually in action. While the kingdom's traditional raiding grounds lay to the north and west, the collapse of Oyo facilitated manhunts among the Yoruba to the east – a strategy necessitated, indeed, by depopulation north and west of Dahomey. The kingdom was one of the most important "illegal" exporters of slaves along the nineteenth-century Atlantic coast: between the 1810s and the 1850s, under King Gezo, Dahomey financed wars of expansion through its dealings with slave-buyers at the coast, Brazilians among them, and defied British pressure to embrace the "legitimate" commerce being vigorously promoted on other parts of the coast. Gezo also took advantage of relative *lack* of pressure from the French, the efforts of whose own anti-slavery squadron were frequently undermined by official ambivalence – and indeed by the presence of French slave dealers on the coast itself. In the 1850s and 1860s, however, the slave trade finally went into steep decline, and Dahomey found itself compelled to consider alternatives; the result was palm-oil production, ironically using slave labor which thus expanded dramatically in the second half of the nineteenth century. Commercial rivalry fuelled further conflict across the region, as states competed for access to the coast in the quest for the guns and ammunition vital to political and economic dominance. The wars between Dahomey and the Egba, beginning in the early 1840s

and fought over control of key trade routes, demonstrate this; Dahomean forces were unsuccessful in their attempts to seize Abeokuta, the Egba capital, in 1851 and again in 1864, and indeed missionaries based at Abeokuta lobbied effectively for British moral, and some material, support for the Egba. Nonetheless, Dahomey remained powerful and active on the eve of the French invasion in the mid-1890s.

In Asante, another powerful territorial state, a highly centralized administration took advantage of commercial opportunities during the eighteenth century; but although expansionist wars, as with Oyo, produced captives for export, Asante was never as dependent on the slave trade, and its underlying wealth lay in agriculture and gold production. There was competition in the course of the nineteenth century between two rival groups among the political elite. The “imperialist” party sought the generation of wealth through military aggression, while a “peace” party argued for the pursuit of the same goal through commerce. The decline of the slave trade along this stretch of coast, in evidence by the 1820s, propelled the “peace” party into a position of dominance, and by mid-century wealthy traders, engaged in “legitimate” commerce, had become honored and respected by the state. Asante had long been a successful commercial power, sitting astride a trade network which linked the savannah and the desert to the north with the Atlantic system, from whence, like Dahomey, Asante acquired firearms. The demise of the slave trade notwithstanding, guns were used for territorial expansion, and against the provincial rebellions which became endemic in an empire only loosely governed from the centre by the nineteenth century. To the south, along the coast, lay the Fante states, a source of trouble to Asante as they often instigated rebellion within the empire as well as blocking its access to European trading forts along the “Gold Coast.” The Fante also had the British as allies, and the British themselves adopted an attitude to Asante similar to that toward Dahomey: Asante was a savage, tyrannical, slave-dealing empire, against whom the Fante must be protected, and while for much of the nineteenth century Britain was not interested in the acquisition of coastal colonies, it was prepared to become involved in local politics in order to protect commercial interests.

**Plate 2** An aspect of Kumasi, capital of Asante, in the 1820s. Private Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library.



The area of what would become the British Gold Coast colony thus provides a good example of “creeping imperialism,” the term used to describe the piecemeal process by which European governments sometimes found themselves inextricably caught up in local politics. The British fought a series of wars with Asante through the nineteenth century, conflicts which were usually sparked by an Asante invasion of the coastal districts. The British government was reluctant, however, to extend responsibility over the coastal forts, as in the 1820s, when following a brief period of colonial administration it withdrew, considering such responsibility expensive and troublesome. Later in the century, Britain adopted an increasingly hostile stance toward Asante: after the successful invasion of Asante in 1873–4, Britain formally annexed the Fante states with a view to stabilizing trade, thus establishing the Gold Coast colony; they withdrew from Asante itself, however, and only in the 1890s would they return, this time on a rather more permanent basis.

Dahomey and Asante were examples of highly militarized, centralized, and territorial states with expansionist foreign policies driven to a very real extent by commercial interests. But in the Niger delta, or the “Oil Rivers,” there was a number of much smaller states which relied on overseas trade perhaps even more heavily than the big polities further west. States such as Bonny, Calabar, and – later in the nineteenth century – Opobo were compact communities scattered among the innumerable mouths of the Niger, structured around trading “houses” which became the basic units of social and commercial organization. Each had its own informal area of commercial and political influence, which was used to gain access to European merchants; slaves had been important earlier in the century, but palm oil soon took their place, and indeed the delta became synonymous with oil for the European (and especially British) trading companies which did business there. The social mobility made possible by commerce led to considerable instability: ex-slaves, for example, worked their way into the ranks of traders and demanded sociopolitical status commensurate with the wealth thus acquired. Wealth funded revolt, too, and this was common across the delta from the middle of the nineteenth century: most dramatically, perhaps, a swathe of Bonny’s population migrated to found the new state of Opobo in 1869. Nigerian palm oil lubricated European machinery and fuelled European industrialization; yet, while the delta states had made the successful transition from slave trade to “legitimate” commerce, they were increasingly vulnerable to external developments over which they had no control. From the 1850s, antimalarial quinine and steam-powered gunboats facilitated the European advance up the Niger, and in so doing they were increasingly able to bypass the delta trading-states, undermining the commercial power of the latter; moreover, in the early 1860s, the international price of palm oil began a gradual descent, while cheaper substitutes for palm oil were being found elsewhere during the last third of the nineteenth century.

The experience of the Niger delta states highlights a key theme in the history of Atlantic Africa, and indeed of other parts of the continent, namely growing powerlessness in the face of global commerce. It is clear that Africans responded dynamically and creatively – if often violently – to the opportunities offered by overseas trade; it is also the case that African exports – whether in the form of human labor, or later in terms of agricultural produce and raw materials – made an ineffable contribution to economic growth in Europe and the Americas, and to cultural enrichment there, too. Yet they had less and less control over the system in which they increasingly invested in the course of the nineteenth century; the power to change it lay beyond the continent, and most of the real benefits flowed that way, too. It was a relationship between zones of the world characterized by a lack of both balance and equity, rooted above all in an economic mismatch between North and South which was becoming all the more marked by the

late nineteenth century. From economic imbalance flowed political and cultural misunderstanding, and in many respects colonial invasion signified the crystallization of all of these. Colonial rule may in some ways have represented a dramatic change in the relationship between Europe and Africa; but in fact the core components of the relationship were present by the early nineteenth century, and remained in place deep into the twentieth, indeed beyond.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Olaudah Equiano, ed. V. Carretta, *The Interesting Narrative and other writings* (London, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> See for example C. Newbury, *The Western Slave Coast and its Rulers* (Oxford, 1961) p.51.

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## *Eastern Intrusions*

### *Slaves and Ivory in Eastern Africa*

While Atlantic Africa was undergoing the kinds of transformation described in the previous chapter, the experience on the other side of the continent was different in a number of respects. The period from the late eighteenth century onward witnessed the linking up of the eastern African interior with the international trade of the Indian Ocean, the Arabian peninsula and the Persian Gulf via the Swahili city-states of the coast. In this period, at the same time as the Atlantic slave trade was in gradual decline, the eastern African slave and ivory trades were actually expanding rapidly. In large part, the escalation of these trades was closely linked to the economic system controlled by the sultanate of Zanzibar, which through the nineteenth century was the dominant commercial power on the Kenyan and Tanzanian coasts. Serving as a transit handler for ivory and slave exports, as well as employing slaves on its own spice plantations, Zanzibar's influence stretched chiefly along the coast, but from the early nineteenth century Zanzibari merchant caravans were also beginning to penetrate inland in search of sources of slaves and ivory. By the 1840s they had reached Lakes Tanganyika and Victoria, and some penetrated even further, into the forests of eastern Congo where they carved out loose trading-and-raiding commercial "empires." A number of African states and societies became deeply involved in this rapid commercial expansion – which, indeed, could scarcely have happened without them – including the kingdom of Buganda north of Lake Victoria, which became a base for Arab traders and a major supplier of slaves and ivory; the Nyamwezi people of central northern Tanzania, who became renowned as caravan porters, guides, and traders in their own right; and the Kamba of southern central Kenya, who were important middlemen along a trade route of growing importance. Central-eastern African commerce was for much of the nineteenth century linked mostly to the Indian Ocean and western and central Asia, although after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 trade was also directed toward Europe.

East African societies, like their counterparts in the western and central parts of the continent, were profoundly affected by trade. While Atlantic Africa in general saw the undermining of warrior elites, eastern Africa witnessed their emergence, with the appearance of military states and charismatic rulers who sought to control trade routes and benefit from commerce. Access to trade served to undermine extant ruling elites and social forms. At the same time, the nature of the commerce itself meant increased levels of violence, insecurity, and upheaval across swathes of the central east African interior. Some peoples, notably the Yao of southern Tanzania, Malawi, and Mozambique, themselves became notorious slave raiders. In very general terms, however, it needs to be borne in mind that the central-eastern African interior was less commercially developed than West Africa, notwithstanding the increasingly complex regional trading networks which emerged in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Low population densities inhibited the growth of sophisticated commercial systems like those of Atlantic Africa, although there were important exceptions, notably the interlacustrine zone. Nonetheless, across the entire region, the African response to long-distance trade was dynamic and interventionist, on the part of both relatively ancient states and the more recent products of this new age. As in the Atlantic zone, this was a violently creative era, involving new economic and political forms and a revolution in military affairs.

Trade was important further north, too, as commerce along the Red Sea expanded dramatically in the course of the nineteenth century and linked the Ethiopian region ever more closely with Europe, Arabia, and southern Asia. Firearms were increasingly important in deciding political strength, and they help explain – at least in part – the growing significance of the area of central and northern Ethiopia ("Abyssinia" according to an older designation) from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards. The benefits to be had from access to commerce through Massawa, in particular, and Zeila were a factor in the heightened and violent competition between several states in the highlands. Between the 1770s and the 1850s, the unified highland Christian empire was an ideal only, as the centralized state disintegrated and several polities jostled for access to land, resources, and commerce; in the meantime, there was pressure from the south, as the Oromo migrated onto the plateau and became a political and military force to be reckoned with, even though many became assimilated into Amhara culture and society. Only in the 1850s, largely through brute force, did Tewodros bring about a kind of unity, and even then he spent most of his reign on campaign; but he laid the foundations for a larger, more stable empire-state which would continue to grow between the 1870s and 1890s under his two immediate successors, Yohannes and Menelik.

[Map 7](#) Eastern and southern Africa in the nineteenth century.



Ivory was also in demand for the late eighteenth century, but East African ivory was sought in Europe and North America, too, and throughout the nineteenth century the European trade became ever more important, especially after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. It was, however, a “wasting process,” according to one scholar, for supplies dwindled as the century wore on; year on year, thousands of elephants were killed to meet demand, and the search for ivory was pushed ever deeper into the central African interior.

While the kinds of goods being brought into Africa were fairly uniform across the continent, there was considerable dissimilarity in economic development between Atlantic Africa on the one hand, and eastern Africa on the other. In the latter region, the export of slaves and ivory represented, as one historian has put it, “progress towards an inevitable dead end.”<sup>2</sup> These were activities which were inimical to the region’s long-term economic development: ivory was becoming increasingly scarce as the “elephant frontier” was pushed deeper and deeper into the interior, while slaves had no future as an export commodity as long as the region fell increasingly under European influence. This meant that as the nineteenth century drew to a close, central-eastern Africa faced a massive rupture with its economic past: slaves and ivory were abandoned, and export agriculture – representing the kind of “legitimate” commerce long practiced on the other side of the continent – was abruptly introduced under the auspices of newly established colonial regimes. Although ivory could be transported relatively easily through the organization of large caravans, only with railway construction could the eastern African interior be linked to the global economy in the way that the coast had been for several centuries.

The slave trade was arguably less widespread and less devastating in the Ethiopian region, although as the centre of political gravity shifted north in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Amhara and Tigrayans were dispatching up to 10,000 slaves per year through Massawa on the coast. Highlanders sometimes moved merchandise in their own caravans; but, loath as highlanders frequently were to travel to the hot coastal lowlands, increasingly the trade was in the hands of a distinct class of merchants, usually Muslim. In the nineteenth century, some slaves were themselves from the highlands, fetching high prices in Arabia; but increasingly captives were brought from the western Ethiopian lowlands and eastern Sudan, and were known derogatively as *shankalla*. Slaves were exported to the Arabian peninsula, the Persian Gulf area and to a lesser extent the wider Middle East. In addition to slaves, gold, ivory, skins, and spices were exported from the Ethiopian region, in exchange for firearms in particular; yet unlike in central-eastern Africa, firearms generally strengthened extant Amhara and Tigrayan political elites, largely through their ability to maintain commercial monopolies and control of trade routes between the coast and plateau; even so, as the nineteenth century progressed and commerce fanned out to some extent, a range of groups were better able to challenge states than previously. Criminality and rebellion flourished even as Tewodros and subsequently Yohannes unified the Ethiopian state.

**Map 8** East Africa c.1870. From J. E. Flint (ed.) *Cambridge History of Africa*. Vol. 5: c.1790–c.1870 (Cambridge, 1976), p.281, Map 10; © 1976 by Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.



The states and societies of lacustrine east Africa and the Ethiopian highlands alike were confronted with the problem that in order to gain access to global commerce, they had to do business with coastal communities which were frequently their adversaries. Nineteenth-century Ethiopian emperors may have laid claim to the Red Sea coast, based on some imaginative manipulations of the past, but the reality was that Massawa was administered by the Ottomans through the Egyptians. The latter had the power to bring trade to a halt, or otherwise to control it; increasingly obsessed with the idea of their isolation, ruling elites in the later nineteenth century would seek other means of accumulating firearms, as in the case of Menelik, who as king of Shoa traded with Europeans through Djibouti. As emperor, Yohannes was forced to come to terms with his episodic religious tormentors at Massawa, Orthodox Christian supplier jostling with his Muslim buyers. Likewise, Mutesa, and, rather more dramatically, Mirambo were increasingly conscious of the fact that they were hostage to prevailing attitudes at Zanzibar, on which they depended for their guns, ammunition, and cloth. Participation in global commerce, Mirambo realized, required compromise and diplomacy, as well as force and bluster; the merchants of Zanzibar had rather more options in a stand-off than did their Nyamwezi suppliers.



# Maritime Empire: Zanzibar

The East African coast has as long an international commercial history as anywhere on the Atlantic littoral. Overseas contacts along the coast can be dated back centuries and perhaps millennia: the alternating patterns of the monsoon in the Indian Ocean facilitated seasonal journeys within an approximate triangle, linking India, Arabia, and East Africa. From central East Africa – by which is meant here modern Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, and the Zambezi valley – came ivory, gold, and slaves: trade in the latter, as we have noted, was of considerable antiquity, but remained limited in scale until the late eighteenth century. This ancient commerce gave rise to Swahili culture along the coast, inspiring the foundation of a series of major coastal towns – for example Mogadishu and Mombasa – which were first and foremost trading settlements, combining African, Arabic, and Islamic culture, characterized by a high level of architectural achievement and enjoying considerable wealth. The arrival of the Portuguese at the end of the fifteenth century spelled the end of what had been something of a “golden age”: the Portuguese attacked and subdued much of the Swahili coast, and in so doing destroyed much of the rich commerce which was their lifeblood, although trade continued on a reduced scale with India and Arabia.

But the Portuguese conquest proved ephemeral. At the end of the seventeenth century, a fleet from Oman drove the Portuguese from most of the coastal settlements, with the exception of the southerly Mozambique littoral, and from this point the Swahili coast was very loosely under the suzerainty of the Omani sultans. The latter began to assert their authority rather more vigorously toward the end of the eighteenth century, however, with a view to capitalizing on the Indian Ocean commerce which was once more burgeoning; and the base of Omani expansion was the island of Zanzibar. The process is particularly associated with Sultan Seyyid Said, the energetic potentate who in the 1830s went so far as to move his capital to Zanzibar permanently. Under him, the Omani–Zanzibari sphere of influence increased substantially, and began to penetrate beyond the coast and into the interior: he organized both local and newly arrived merchant immigrants for the economic penetration and exploitation of the interior, and Zanzibari caravans had reached Lakes Victoria and Tanganyika by the end of the 1840s. When Seyyid died in 1856, his domains were basically split in two, and Oman and Zanzibar became to all intents and purposes independent of one another. The government of Zanzibar strove to control the entire East Africa trade network along the coast of modern Kenya and Tanzania, and Zanzibar itself became the dominant force in East African commerce until the 1880s, when the European partition destroyed its sovereignty and its *raison d'être*.

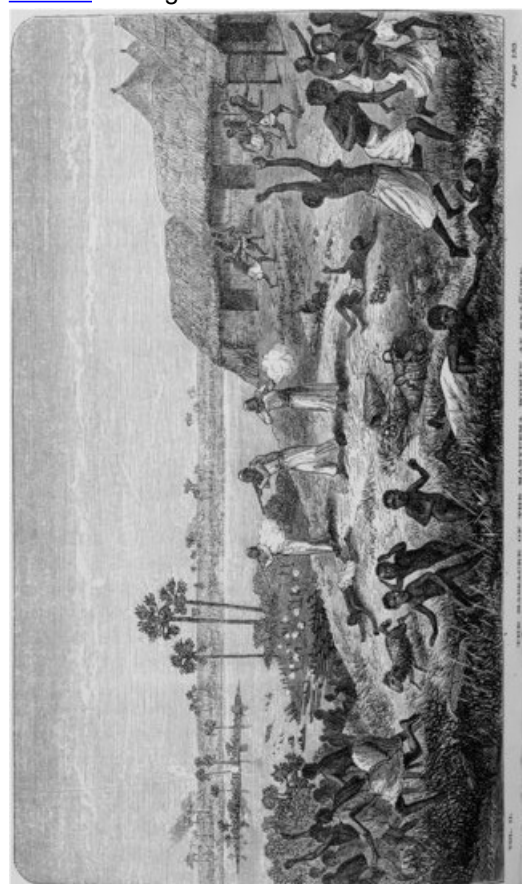
**Plate 3** An East African ivory porter in the mid-nineteenth century. Private Collection/The Stapleton Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library.



**Plate 4** Commercial pioneers: Seyyid Barghash, Sultan of Zanzibar (1870–88), with his advisors. Photograph courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum. Neg 13462.



**Plate 5** Slaving violence in East Africa: the massacre of Manyema women at Nyangwe, c.1870. By permission of the British Library, B 224 DSC.



Up until the early nineteenth century, then, Zanzibari and Omani merchants had operated mainly on the coast, dependent on African middlemen, among the most successful of whom were the Nyamwezi of modern west-central Tanzania. But it was only a matter of time before adventurous coastmen themselves began to follow the trade routes into the interior; wealthy coastal entrepreneurs financed caravans which traveled hundreds of miles west, often comprising several hundred people, and employing Africans as porters and guides. Their security was based largely on the Arabs' possession of firearms. Between the 1830s and the 1850s, Arab merchants established permanent entrepôts at Tabora, in the chiefdom of Unyamwebe, Ujiji on Lake Tanganyika, and at the capital of Buganda, at the north end of Lake Victoria. Among the most successful, and notorious, of these traders was "Tippu Tip", so named, apparently, after the retort of his firearms, who covered a vast area of modern Tanzania and Congo from the 1860s, raiding and trading, and establishing a considerable if short-lived sphere of influence. Tippu Tip was particularly successful in imposing himself politically on a number of societies; more generally, although this kind of penetration was essentially commercial in character,

Arab traders in the second half of the nineteenth century attempted to assert political influence over African rulers, in order to secure commercial interests. They had some success in comparatively decentralized and acephalous communities, but in others, powerful political establishments kept resident Arab traders under close supervision. In any case Zanzibar itself exercised only the loosest control over these coastal adventurers, many of whom acted very much on their own accounts, Tippu Tip among them. But they all, to a greater or lesser degree, spread coastal culture, as well as Islam, into the interior: dress, architecture, and language were all influenced as representatives of heterogeneous Swahili civilization advanced across a broad zone bounded approximately by Lakes Malawi, Tanganyika, and Victoria.

## Statehood, Conflict, and Trade (1): The Lacustrine Zone

The area of the Great Lakes – in particular the northern interlacustrine zone around Lakes Tanganyika, Victoria, Edward, and Albert – was home to some of sub-Saharan Africa's most complex civilizations. The kingdoms of Buganda, Bunyoro, Toro, Ankole, Rwanda, and Burundi all had their origins before the nineteenth century, and shared certain basic characteristics. They were the products of good rainfall and rich soil, facilitating a denser and more permanent level of population than is normally possible in Africa south of the Sahara. They shared much in the way of political culture, too, including the principle of strong, centralized kingship, which also had important symbolic and ritual dimensions. Kings of the lacustrine zone frequently ruled through provincial chiefs appointed directly by royal authority; and while chiefly lineages did indeed emerge, in addition to royal genealogies, appointments to such offices were often made according to merit, and certainly loyalty was rewarded. A key feature of kingship, moreover, was the absence (normally) of an obvious heir – royal kinsmen, for example, were often imprisoned or killed – which meant that succession was frequently a violent affair. Women generally enjoyed a higher economic and cultural status across eastern Africa than they did in the southern or western zones. In most of the kingdoms across the region, ruling dynasties claimed descent from migrating groups, with varying degrees of accuracy: the immigrant Nilotes, arriving in the area between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, did indeed spawn, or contribute to, a number of ruling lineages. Some would also come to claim divine status. Complex elite oral traditions developed around privileged status, underpinning the separateness of ruling classes and lineages, while privilege itself was maintained through elaborate systems of taxation and tribute. Immigrant pastoralists developed such systems in Rwanda and Burundi, where they became known as Tutsi, and in Ankole, where they were Hima; in these societies they were patrons to agriculturalist clients, the Bantu-speaking farmers known as Hutu in Rwanda and Burundi, and Iru in Ankole. In reality, there was a great deal of both cultural and economic interaction between these groups; but in many ways cattle-keeping came to be regarded as something of an elite activity, associated with elevated status, and pastoralists as a superior caste. Only in the early twentieth century would these socioeconomic identities become solidified into "tribal" ones.

The dominant kingdoms of the northern lake region were Buganda and Bunyoro, two states with a history of intimate relations, both violent and otherwise. Bunyoro, which had evolved out of the earlier state of Kitara from the fifteenth century, had been the leading power in the region until, in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it had steadily lost ground to the expansionist and dynamic kingdom of Buganda, which enjoyed high levels of moisture, considerable agricultural fertility, and thus a dense and comparatively large population. A complex, competitive society, at the apex of which was the largely secular king or *kabaka*, who accumulated powers of appointment over the major chieftaincies in the kingdom, Buganda was characterized by a highly mercantilist foreign policy, which sought control of the region's economic resources, and was driven by an advanced military culture. War was an instrument of policy in the reach for commercial, economic, and territorial hegemony. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Buganda dominated the region north and west of Lake Victoria, and would be – as we see below – in a strong position to meet the challenges of the age. Bunyoro was weakened by internal political turmoil in this period, and steadily lost territory in the course of the eighteenth century; it would, however, experience a period of resurgence from the 1860s and 1870s onward. Further south, in the extremely fertile and well-watered hills north of Lake Tanganyika, lay the kingdoms of Rwanda and Burundi, also highly militarized, although Rwanda was the more successful, expanding aggressively in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of course, different political systems existed side by side: to the east of the centralized militarism of Buganda lay a loose confederacy of small principalities, the Soga; and likewise, to the north of Buganda and Bunyoro lay smaller, often "stateless", societies, peoples who lived along, and indeed in some ways represented, the fluid frontiers between expanding, hegemonic polities.

In the nineteenth century, states engaged with one another in the context of both warfare and trade. Buganda's relations with its neighbors, for example, were pragmatic: trade and economic influence where possible, conflict when necessary, as the kingdom sought to build both a territorial and an "informal" empire. Despite recurrent conflict, Buganda depended on healthy economic relations with Bunyoro, the Soga to the east, the pastoral states to the west, and a host of smaller states and societies to the south. However, inter-state relations across the region became rather more volatile, more intense, and – in general – more violent with the expansion of long-distance, coastal-oriented commerce, the commercial network directed by Zanzibar. Control of trade and its benefits would increasingly drive interlacustrine relations, while trade itself – as in Atlantic Africa – would have major social and political consequences from the 1840s onward. Most of the states noted above would strive to become involved in this commerce: only Rwanda and Burundi resisted the temptation for much of the nineteenth century, giving rise to their contemporary reputations for self-imposed isolation and hostility to all outsiders.

If some of the more remarkable developments in the lacustrine region involved political centralization and the predominance of the territorial state, the opposite was true in other parts of central-eastern Africa. Across modern Kenya and Tanzania, there were few centralized states of the interlacustrine model before the middle of the nineteenth century, while even ethnic identities were still fragile and continually evolving during the period under examination. Across much of this vast area, soils were thin and rainfall unreliable, and thus agriculture was difficult and precarious: in the last decades of the nineteenth century, communities were still engaged in the struggle to colonize the land. In contrast to the interlacustrine zone, population densities were low, and settlement tended to be scattered – unlike in the area of Buganda and Bunyoro, where urban patterns had appeared long before 1800 – and therefore the conditions for elaborate state formation were absent in many areas. With a tendency to live in small groups, people were able to move when land became infertile, or when political disputes arose; thus, while small chieftainships did emerge across Tanzania through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these were flexible, and characterized by continual movement.

Nonetheless, the nineteenth century witnessed the arrival of new pressures, as the coastal commercial network spread inland; the result was the emergence within many societies of new forms of political organization in order to meet the new challenges and take advantage of the new opportunities, and leaders appeared – usually military, with much greater personal power than had been the case previously – to shape as well as to exploit new structures. This was most famously true among the Nyamwezi and the Kimbu. A similar situation developed in Kenya, where state formation had been likewise virtually absent before the nineteenth century: among the Nilotic pastoralists of the Kenyan interior (and of northern Tanzania), including the Maasai, age-regiment organization was more important than any centralized political control or personalized hierarchies. Alongside the Nilotes were smaller agricultural communities – notably the Kamba and Kikuyu – who both fought the Maasai over land and water, but who also intermarried and traded with them, and borrowed culturally from them. Yet as the nineteenth century progressed, a number of societies

underwent the same kinds of changes experienced in Tanzania: new forms of social and political structure emerged stronger, more centralized systems of leadership. Like the Nyamwezi, the Kamba, too, would become energetic participants in global trade.

The themes of local entrepreneurship and the fluidity of identities are most dramatically manifest in the Nyamwezi, who did not exist as a “people” before the commercial and political dynamics of the mid-nineteenth century. These dryland grain farmers were, in cultural and linguistic terms, a loosely affiliated population group across western and northern Tanzania when they began to travel ever further afield, taking advantage of growing commercial opportunities; to people on or near the coast, they came from the west, and thus became “the people of the new moon.” As the nineteenth century dawned, the Nyamwezi had already developed trade routes which linked Buganda at the north end of Lake Victoria, Katanga to the south, and Zanzibar at the coast; they dominated this commercial network until the middle decades of the nineteenth century, when coastal traders began to penetrate the interior with their own caravans, discussed above. Many Nyamwezi became porters for the wealthy Arab and Indian merchants; but conflict was inevitable with the newcomers, especially as the movement of large coastal caravans inland placed strains on local communities in terms of food supply, while antagonism also arose by the 1840s and 1850s over the establishment of customs duties by chiefs through whose territories the commercial highways ran.

As conflict escalated, coastal merchants sought increasingly to involve themselves in Nyamwezi politics – relatively straightforward, given the fragmented character of those politics – and backed one clan against another, or took up the cause of the politically disaffected, who were only too willing to accept such comparatively well-armed patronage. Through possession of firearms and the promise of commercial advantage, Arabs interfered in chieftaincy disputes and began to wield considerable power within chiefdoms. The process is exemplified by the case of Unyanyembe, on the main highway between the lakes and the coast, where civil war in the early 1860s saw heavy-handed Arab intervention, as merchant-adventurers backed first one *mtemi*, or chief, then another, in the pursuit of the best commercial arrangement. The Arab community was able to secure control of Tabora, which began to take on the character of a military garrison, especially as regional warfare, sparked by the sociopolitical breakdown and reconstruction brought about by commercial change, became more intense in the 1870s.

Meanwhile, a violent new element was entering the region from the south, representing the far-flung effects of politico-military events in southern Africa examined in the next chapter. By the 1850s, groups of Ngoni, refugees from the Zulu revolution far to the south, were penetrating into the area of modern Tanzania, bringing destruction and a transformation in patterns of warfare and statehood. They attacked and pillaged across a wide area, living by plunder, although after a few years some had settled down to a more sedentary existence. Ujiji, for example, was attacked in the 1850s, while in the course of the 1860s and 1870s Ngoni moved in various directions across central Tanzania. It is important to note, of course, that while the term “Ngoni” is commonly used to describe these groups, by the 1850s and 1860s they were amalgamations of various absorbed and conquered peoples, imbued with the Ngoni military ethos. While some communities scattered on the approach of the Ngoni, others were absorbed, and others again copied the Ngoni model in order to survive, and thus became as militarized as the immigrants. Across the region, then, the Ngoni and their imitators brought about a revolution in terms of political structure and militarization and, just as new forces for commercial and social change were also entering the region from the coast, demonstrated the transformative power of violence. The changes which resulted, between *circa* 1850 and 1890, were often violent indeed.

Rising levels of violence and endemic insecurity both gave rise to, and were exacerbated by, wandering gangs of desperate, cannabis-smoking young men, heavily armed, driven by the search for plunder and adventure. This was perhaps the single most important social phenomenon of the second half of the nineteenth century. These young men were the cause and the effect of social, political, and economic change, the symptom of both the destruction of old orders and the reconstruction of new ones. They came to be known generically as *ruga ruga*, a problematic term in so far as it denotes a young, unmarried, “professional” soldier, and one that is therefore rather more proscriptive than the phenomenon deserves. *Ruga ruga* might be petty criminals, living off plunder in the bush, or they might attach themselves to commercial caravans or the entourages of coastal merchants as mercenaries; crucially, they formed the backbone of the emerging military states which dominated swathes of the interior during the 1870s and 1880s.

One of the most successful of these new states was that created by the Nyamwezi chief Mirambo. Born around 1840, Mirambo spent his youth as a caravan porter traveling to the coast before succeeding to a small chieftainship northwest of Tabora; he amalgamated this with another, overcoming his brother’s claim in the process, building an army of *ruga ruga* with which to widen his political and military base, which was almost certainly at least partially inspired by the Ngoni. From the end of the 1860s onward, he incorporated surrounding chiefdoms by force and thus created a single unified state, with the urban and peri-urban district of “Urambo” at its centre; gathering ivory and livestock in tribute, he took control of the northern lacustrine trade routes and used his growing commercial power to accumulate firearms. Mirambo was a man of extraordinary talent: his state, which dominated a triangular section of territory between Unyanyembe, Ujiji, and Lake Victoria, was his personal creation; he usually led his army personally; and his ambition appears to have been the unity of the interior. In this sense his violence, while it often appeared to the outside to resemble the general lawlessness of the age, was constructive and creative; he believed in the supplanting of dozens of small chiefdoms with a handful of large, powerful states – of which his was to be one – in large part to counter the growing power of the Arab merchants, the Zanzibar sultanate, and, later, the European presence at the coast. To this end he sought alliances with other major regional players, notably Mutesa of Buganda, although his very presence was a threat to the Arabs of Unyanyembe, with whom he was at war for much of the 1870s and early 1880s. The strength of Mirambo’s “empire” was, however, simultaneously its greatest weakness, namely its overdependence on Mirambo himself, and when he died in late 1884, the problem of lack of internal cohesion was one that his successor, Mpandoshalo, ultimately proved unable to address. By the end of the 1880s, on the eve of the German invasion, the state had largely disintegrated, disappearing as quickly as it had been created.

**Plate 6** The state-builder: Mirambo of the Nyamwezi, in the early 1880s. Reproduced from London Missionary Society/Council for World Mission Archives.

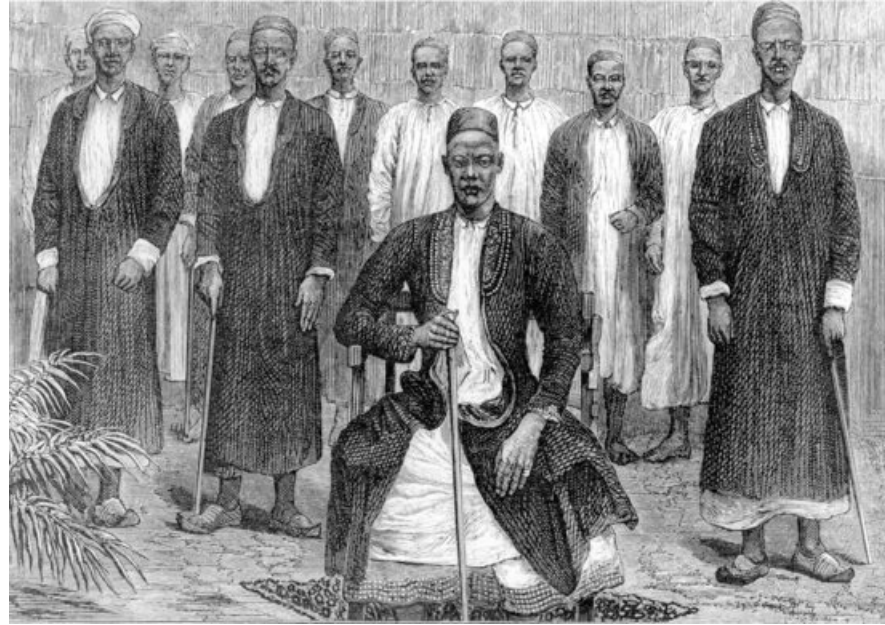


Brilliant though Mirambo's career had been, it was not wholly unique, even if his peculiar vision for East Africa's political future may be considered as such. Another Nyamwezi leader, Msiri, built the commercial and military power of Garenganze, southwest of Lake Tanganyika, during the 1860s and 1870s, sitting astride a trade network which linked eastern to south-central Africa. Among the Kimbu, to the southeast of Mirambo, Nyungu-ya-Mawe carved out a loose hegemony in much the same manner as his rather more famous contemporary. These states were innovative, dynamic, and violent responses to the opportunities of the age; yet they were as much rooted in criminality as political creativity, and therein lay the causes of their inherent instability. The forces that assisted their construction – in particular, a generation of youth able and willing to reject the values and patterns of behavior of its fathers, and driven by a new set of social, political, and economic aspirations – were also those that rendered these new states unsustainable in the longer term. Individual leaders might command immense loyalty for a time, but the creation of stable state-systems in which a wider community might invest proved rather more problematic. Despite Mirambo's attempts to historicize his warfare, and claim for Urambo a deeper political heritage, he was ultimately unable to do what Shaka had done for the Zulu, for example. The *raison d'être* of the new states, in any case, was commercial freedom and military adventurism, neither of which would have been possible in the face of European hegemony. Nonetheless, the energy with which Africans engaged in global commerce and attempted to invent new political structures to channel these forces was an indication of what was to come under colonial rule.

While new African states were emerging, coastal traders were penetrating beyond Lake Tanganyika and into the eastern Congo, and through the 1860s and 1870s they were carving out spheres of influence based on trading and raiding across swathes of the rainforest. The quest for ivory and slaves caused widespread disruption, as Arabs preyed on dislocated communities and built personal armies of armed slaves and retainers, in the process weakening extant sources of political authority. The region to the west of Lake Tanganyika was engulfed in violence, although some degree of order was imposed on the predatory chaos by the greatest predator of them all, Hamed bin Muhammad, otherwise known as "Tippu Tip". Tippu Tip epitomized the ruthless caravan merchant of the age: born in Zanzibar of Arab-African parentage around 1830, he was based at Tabora in the 1860s before moving into the ivory-rich region of Tetela in the eastern Congo in the 1870s. He carved out a considerable sphere of influence based on violence and sent caravans laden with ivory east to Zanzibar, passing through the territory of Mirambo with whom he generally had good relations. Tippu Tip became a wealthy man on the back of his commercial and military endeavors, and was only undermined with the Belgian partition of the Congo, whereupon he retired to Zanzibar.

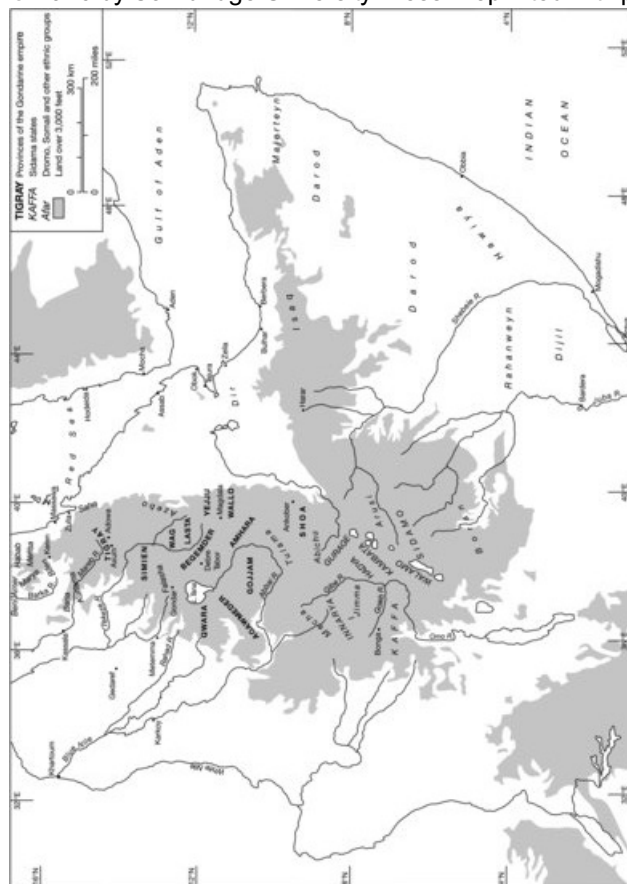
Tippu Tip operated in areas where there was an absence of large, centralized states, and was therefore able to impose himself and bend societies to his will; his respectful attitude toward Mirambo, however, indicates how even he needed to approach the stronger polity with considerable circumspection. Elsewhere in the region, indeed, Arab traders had markedly different experiences from those in Unyanyembe or eastern Congo. In the Kenyan interior of the 1860s, the Maasai, Kikuyu, and Nandi successfully resisted the penetration of Arab caravans, the latter attempting to bypass Kamba middlemen; indeed, the stereotype of the frightful Maasai in the interior was to a very real degree perpetuated by those African merchants wishing to discourage Swahili would-be entrepreneurs. Around Lake Victoria, Arab traders were able to exercise a certain amount of political leverage in Karagwe, but at the north end of the lake they encountered the Buganda kingdom, which they first reached in 1844. They traded successfully here, but generally on Ganda terms: they were closely supervised by Ganda authorities and were confined to the royal capital, where they had a residential quarter. They were generally not permitted to travel within or beyond Buganda, and when they were, they were accompanied by a Ganda escort. The two kabakas of the age, Suna (c.1830–57) and Mutesa (1857–84), profitably traded slaves and ivory in exchange for guns, cloth and other commodities, which were highly prized in Buganda's competitive commercialized and militarized culture. Imported cotton cloth changed elite fashion as well as symbolizing changing socioeconomic aspirations, while guns found their way quickly into the military establishment, and Mutesa was particularly enthusiastic about the firearm's potential. Competition for control of trade across the Lake Victoria region prompted the Ganda to use military means to secure commercial interests; slave gathering was an increasingly important activity for the army itself, bringing the kingdom into conflict with its neighbors, such as Bunyoro, Busoga, and the other states to the west.

**Plate 7** Mutesa, kabaka of Buganda (c.1857–84), with his court, late 1870s. Private Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library.



The Ganda response to commercial opportunities, like that of the Nyamwezi, was dynamic and aggressive; by the 1870s, however, the army was beginning to overreach itself through territorial over-ambition. The Ganda military ethos was weakened by political tensions at the kingdom's centre – generational conflict was in part reflected in allegiance to foreign faiths – while there is evidence that the increased use of guns by ill-trained soldiers was undermining the kingdom's military capacity. From the 1840s and 1850s onward, the Ganda sought to dominate lacustrine commerce by developing a fleet of canoes capable of traversing the lake from north to south. By the 1870s, Buganda had become one of the major exporters of slaves in the region, and its "navy" was a remarkable innovation, but the kingdom was unable to impose itself as firmly on the external political and economic landscape as Mutesa clearly hoped. By the end of the 1880s, Mutesa had been succeeded by Mwanga, a young man of little experience, and Buganda was experiencing heightened conflict with a resurgent Bunyoro, as well as internal religious and political tensions. Ultimately, the Ganda would ally themselves with the British in the colonial subjugation of the surrounding region, and indeed the name "Uganda" would be applied to the future colonial territory.

**Map 9** The Horn of Africa in the nineteenth century. From J. E. Flint (ed.) *Cambridge History of Africa*. Vol. 5: c.1790–c.1870 (Cambridge, 1976), © 1976 by Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.



## Statehood, Conflict, and Trade (2): Northeastern Africa

Through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Christian kingdom steadily shifted its centre of political gravity northward, with a permanent capital established at Gondar, and the province of Tigray more fully incorporated into the state. In large part the expansion of trade on the Red Sea

the nucleus of the modern Ethiopian state northward; but the migrations of the Oromo also constituted a mounting pressure from the south, and as the Oromo moved onto the highland plateau they became a political, economic, and cultural force to be reckoned with, changing the very nature of *habesha* society. Many were Muslim; but many others adopted the Orthodox Christianity that constituted the very foundation of Amhara and Tigrayan civilization, and were both absorbed into, and came to influence, Amhara culture. Some Oromo communities founded their own states, rubbing up against the *habesha* polities of Shoa and the eastern escarpment; in time, other individual Oromo would attain positions of considerable political and military power among the Amhara.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, central authority in the fragile empire collapsed, and the Solomonic rulers – so-called because of the genealogical descent they claimed from King Solomon, a myth central to imperial ideology – were reduced to mere figureheads. To some extent the political disintegration of the 1760s and 1770s was the culmination of a process stretching back several centuries. Ever since the decline of the ancient empire of Axum, the major commercial and military power in modern-day northern Ethiopia and central Eritrea between the first and eighth centuries AD, central government in the region had undergone periods of expansion and contraction; but political and military power had always been provincially rooted, with autonomous districts and principalities and largely independent kingdoms periodically paying tribute as much to an idea (the myth of Solomonic provenance) as to a physical centre of authority. Between the 1770s and the 1850s – the era known as the *Zemene Mesafint*, Amharic for “the age of the princes” – provincial rulers were wholly independent of the Solomonic centre, and engaged in cyclical conflict with one another, struggling to control regional trade, resources, and the signs and symbols of central authority. It was during this period that Tigray, ideally located to exploit burgeoning long-distance trade, became a major power in the region of northern Ethiopia, exercising control over Gondar during the governorship of Ras (“prince”) Mikael in the late eighteenth century, and reaching northwards into the area of the Eritrean highlands toward the coast from the early decades of the nineteenth century onward. While Tigray amassed a considerable arsenal of firearms, further south the kingdom of Shoa struggled with the incursions of the Oromo, recapturing territory from the latter in the first half of the nineteenth century; indeed over several decades Shoa, particularly under Sahle Selassie, positioned itself to take advantage of commerce across the region, and the Amhara laid the foundations for what would later become the modern empire of Ethiopia.

Violent regionalism – though not violence itself – was brought to an end by a young provincial renegade and member of a junior princely line, Kassa, from the district of Qwara on the edge of Amhara territory. In the 1840s Kassa built up a reputation as an inspirational leader of men, his band of soldiers expanding to become an army capable of taking on the ruling elites of the region; renaming himself Tewodros, he claimed (rather dubiously) the Solomonic inheritance, and following a series of decisive battles in the early 1850s he had himself proclaimed emperor in 1855, the year in which the *Zemene Mesafint* is regarded as having ended. Tewodros achieved a greater degree of unity across central and northern Ethiopia than had been possible for a century, albeit through sheer force, and indeed much of his reign was spent suppressing insurrection. For several years, however, Tewodros attempted to regularize land tenure and taxation, clip the wings of an over-powerful Orthodox Church, and instill a greater degree of professionalism and discipline in his army. Not unlike some of his North African contemporaries, he envisaged transforming Ethiopia into an industrial, commercial power, based on his understanding of what evidently made Europe “great”, and to this end he welcomed Europeans whose expertise he sought to utilize in “modernizing” his army – largely through the ultimately unsuccessful import of artillery. In foreign policy, too, his vision was extensive – though somewhat less realistic than his domestic aspirations – and he sought religious, commercial, and political alliances with the European powers he considered his equals. Tewodros perceived Islam – embodied in the Egyptians and the Ottoman empire – as Christian Ethiopia’s ancient enemy, and he demanded, among other things, the restoration of the Eritrean coast to Ethiopia, and laid claim (based on the supposed Solomonic inheritance) to Jerusalem, which he bitterly lamented had fallen into the hands of the cursed Muslim.

By the early 1860s, regional rebellion – often backed by a resentful clergy – was commonplace, notably in the north, where Tewodros lost control of much of Tigray and the Eritrean plateau. It was a vicious cycle of violence, for the harsher Tewodros became in attempting to suppress insurrection, the more stubborn and widespread such insurrection became, particularly among a peasantry increasingly hostile to the predations of the emperor’s army. By 1866–7, an increasingly unstable Tewodros was confronted by an array of political enemies, including the young Menelik, king of Shoa, and his domain had shrunk to an area around the “fortress” of Magdala, on the eastern edge of the plateau. In the end, however, it was foreign intervention rather than internal uprising which destroyed him. In the mid-1860s, irritated and insulted by a perceived slight on the part of Queen Victoria – a reply to his letter had not arrived – he imprisoned a number of Europeans, including some Britons, and kept them in chains until amends could be made. In 1867–8, the British government dispatched an army – at a cost of some £9 million to the taxpayer, an enormous sum at the time – which landed at the Gulf of Zula on the Eritrean coast, marched into the highlands, and defeated Tewodros’ dwindling army. The emperor shot himself rather than fall into British hands. During a remarkable expedition, the British had been greatly assisted by the fact that Tewodros had so many enemies; their relatively uneventful march through potentially hostile Tigrayan territory, notably, had been facilitated by the cooperation of its governor, Ras Kassa, now a pretender to the Solomonic throne. The British released the European hostages and swiftly withdrew, taking Tewodros’ young son, Alemayu, with them; after an unhappy education at Rugby school in England, the young man died mysteriously in 1879.

After a brief interregnum and a regional power-struggle, the Tigrayan Ras Kassa became emperor of Ethiopia as Yohannes IV in 1872, and continued the process begun by Tewodros in building a unified, expansionist state. Unlike Tewodros, however, Yohannes complemented military force with diplomacy, and employed the age-old mechanism of intermarriage between regional ruling families to achieve political stability, in this case establishing a marriage alliance with Menelik, who aspired to the imperial throne but who now decided to bide his time. Yohannes did indeed bring about a degree of internal stability, but his horizons were clouded by the Egyptians on the coast. It was an uneasy, though symbiotic, relationship, made fraught by Yohannes’ territorial claim over much of modern Eritrea and its littoral; the Egyptians evacuated under the auspices of the British in the mid-1880s, only to be swiftly replaced by the Italians, who already had a foothold further south on the coast, at Assab. Yet Yohannes’ northern frontier, watched over by his faithful lieutenant Ras Alula, was only one of his causes for concern; another was the rise of the Mahdist state in the Sudan, in the northwest, and indeed Yohannes himself was killed in 1889 while fighting the Mahdists.

With Yohannes’ unexpected death came an end to Tigray’s preeminence in the Ethiopian empire – Tigrayans would not claim leadership of Ethiopia again for another century – as power passed relatively smoothly to Menelik of Shoa. Between 1889 and 1906, when he suffered a crippling stroke (although he remained on the throne until his death in 1913), Menelik created modern Ethiopia. He immediately withdrew Ethiopian claims to the coast and ceded Eritrea to the Italians, and even after he overwhelmed an ill-planned Italian invasion at the battle of Adwa in 1896 – becoming the only African leader to permanently defeat an invading European army in the era of partition – he was unable or unwilling to continue into Eritrea and realize the ambitions of his predecessors. Nonetheless, victory at Adwa secured his northern frontier, and ensured European recognition of Ethiopian sovereignty; not only did Menelik spare his state the colonial experience endured by the rest of the region, but he actively participated in the carving up of vast tracts of land to the south and east, demarcating his new empire with the agreement of the European colonial authorities in the territories adjacent to it. Amhara hegemony was extended into the rich agricultural Oromo lands to the south, and into the Somali Ogaden; the new empire was controlled through the strategic garrisoning of troops, and ruled through the careful distribution of territorial governorships. Like Tewodros before him, but rather more successfully, Menelik aspired to a “modern” Ethiopia, and oversaw the building of a

railway, a modern capital city in Addis Ababa, a banking system and a communications infrastructure. He employed European advisors and sent Ethiopians abroad for training. Menelik's new state may have been an urban rather than a rural creation; but above all it was the swift appearance of European embassies in Addis Ababa which signaled the recognition of an African sovereignty, a feat which no other polity in eastern Africa or beyond managed to achieve during this era of creeping foreign hegemony.

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## ***Southern Frontiers***

### ***Colony and Revolution in Southern Africa***

Nineteenth-century southern Africa has much in common with the broadly defined “Atlantic” and “Indian Ocean” zones in the same period, not least in terms of expanding commercial networks, linking the region with a global economy, and increasing European influence. Yet southern Africa also had a markedly different experience in that the European presence there – which would eventually come to define the modern history of the region – was not merely commercial. Whites came to the temperate coastal strip around the Cape of Good Hope as settlers, not just as traders; and at length they would drift onto the inland plateau, an area of excellent pastureland free of the tsetse fly, where they encountered some of the most dynamic, expansionist African polities anywhere in sub-Saharan Africa in the nineteenth century. Cooperation as well as conflict resulted; but in time, as foreign colony interacted with local politico-military revolution, it was conflict which would come to define the relationship between white and black south of the Limpopo River.

### **African State and Society to around 1800**

Cattle were central to the growth of states, the creation of wealth, and the stratification of society south of the Zambezi before the nineteenth century. Cattle ownership meant political power, and provided the material basis of early chieftainship; societies were based on polygamy and economic systems depended on the extensive use of female labor, particularly in agriculture. The dry open grassland of modern Botswana witnessed the emergence of some of the earliest chiefdoms, characterized by hilltop settlements which were based on a combination of cattle-keeping and cultivation. A similar socioeconomic system was responsible for the growth of Great Zimbabwe, a Shona state noted for its stone structures (“Zimbabwe” is Shona for “place of stone”) which reached its apex in the early fifteenth century. The prosperity of Great Zimbabwe was also based on gold-mining, which was a crucial activity on the plateau between the tenth and the eighteenth centuries. Great Zimbabwe would in time be supplanted by Mutapa, possibly founded by Zimbabwean emigrants, which would also take advantage of gold and regional trade networks, the latter linking the states and societies of central southern Africa with the Indian Ocean. Gold from the interior plateau financed the more southerly Swahili city-states, and aroused the avarice of the Portuguese, whose attempts during the sixteenth century to capture the central Zambezi valley from the direction of the coast were defeated by the resistance offered by Mutapa, and by disease.

The southeastern lowveld would become the political powerhouse of the region, as far as African state and society was concerned, through much of the nineteenth century. Before about 1700, Ngoni-speakers – members of the Bantu language group – tended to organize themselves in small chiefdoms, a political pattern doubtless shaped by terrain: the numerous hills of the area are separated by valleys through which rivers, fed by relatively high rainfall on the plateau, flow into the Indian Ocean. A wide variety of grazing and farming resources characterizes the region, and this enabled small family homesteads to exist largely independent of one another, loosely related homesteads coalescing into small-scale chiefdoms; large numbers of neighboring Khoisan were also incorporated into these chiefdoms. However, the northern Ngoni in particular underwent significant changes in the course of the eighteenth century.

After about 1700, a number of northern Ngoni chiefdoms expanded and absorbed smaller ones. The causes of this expansion in political scale remain a matter of speculation, but almost certainly the process was connected to heightened competition over scarce resources. The introduction of maize into the area by the Portuguese at a time of unusually high rainfall probably led to a rise in population, and an ever greater area of land was brought under cultivation. Improved pasture, in turn, resulted in an increase in the size of herds of livestock, while the expansion of commerce – again with the Portuguese at the coast – doubtless acted, as it did in eastern Africa, as a force for state-formation. Ever wealthier, more stable, and more populous chiefdoms sought to dominate increasingly lucrative trade routes to the Indian Ocean, and in particular the struggle to control the export of ivory led to increased competition over the rich hunting grounds close to the coast.

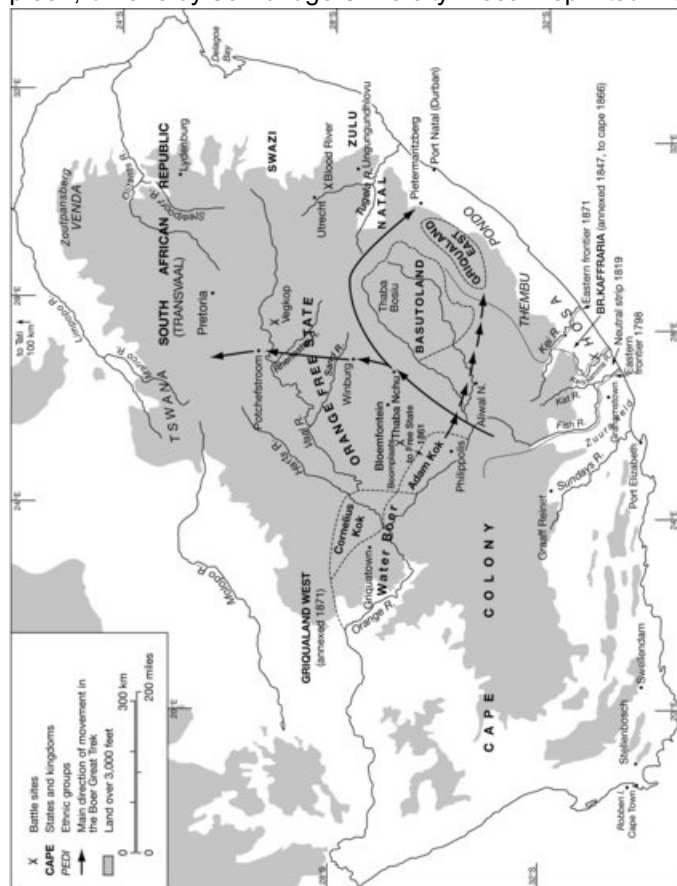
As the eighteenth century drew on, greater competition and enlarged political scale meant increased levels of militarism within the expanding chiefdoms. Age-sets, notably, long an integral part of Ngoni society, became more significant: the system by which childhood, adulthood (which usually meant warriorhood) and elder status were defined became one which in effect organized society into regiments, with standing armies created to aggressively pursue the objectives of the wider community. By the late eighteenth century, the northern Ngoni had amalgamated into three dominant, and increasingly centralized, chiefdoms, namely the Ngwane under the chief Sobhuza, the Ndwandwe under Zwide, and Mthethwa under Dingiswayo. This last, a federation of smaller groupings, included the relatively obscure chiefdom of the Zulu. Whatever uneasy balance of power had been achieved between these three states, however, was shattered as the eighteenth century drew to a close: the period of prolonged high rainfall came to an end, and appears to have been rather abruptly replaced by one of drought and famine. Control of scarce resources – chiefly in the form of well-watered pastureland and good farmland – now became critical to survival, and conflict increased sharply in the early years of the nineteenth century. The struggle which ensued among the Ngoni led to dramatic new developments in the ongoing political and military revolution which would have profound repercussions throughout the southern African interior, and indeed beyond.

### **War, Revolution, and the Zulu Impact**

Much has been made – in contemporary literature, the European popular imagination, academic scholarship, and, more recently, television and film – of the rise of the Zulu and in particular of their most famous leader, and in some ways founding father, Shaka. As we will see, there is much in nineteenth-century Zulu history to justify this feverish fascination, and in Shaka’s personal history to support the various claims made for his political and military genius; but it is important to keep in mind the degree to which the Ngoni revolution began in the eighteenth century, when the Zulu were only a small part (and a relatively unimportant one at that) of a much wider process of political change. Shaka and the Zulu state which was in many ways his personal creation took the changes in age-regimentation, battle-formation, weaponry, and political scale, and utilized these to stunning

effect; but they were not Zulu innovations *per se*. It is also important to recognize that the events of the early-nineteenth-century southern African interior have been the subject of some controversy. It has been suggested, for example, that the series of wars which engulfed the interior – known as the *mfecane*, derived from the Xhosa term meaning destitution and hunger, or *difaqane* (“scattering”) in Sotho – and its effects were deliberately exaggerated by Europeans in order to justify colonialism, and, indeed, later the *apartheid* state itself. Nonetheless, the consensus of historical opinion accepts that the *mfecane* which eventually led to the emergence of the Zulu state originated among the Ngoni kingdoms of the Mthethwa, Ndwandwe, and Ngwane in the southeastern lowveld, and involved a virtually permanent state of war over limited resources, the absorption of smaller chiefdoms across a wide area, and increasingly centralized and militarized kingship.

**Map 10** Southern Africa in the nineteenth century. From J. E. Flint (ed.) *Cambridge History of Africa*. Vol. 5: c.1790–c.1870 (Cambridge, 1976), p.354; © 1976 by Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.



The *mfecane* reached its height between approximately 1816 and 1819, during which period Sobhuza's Ngwane were expelled northwards, and in the ensuing conflict between the Ndwandwe and the Mthethwa, the former initially appeared to have the advantage following the death of the Mthethwa leader Dingiswayo. But a commander in Dingiswayo's army, Shaka, of the small chiefdom of the Zulu, rose to take control, defeating the Ndwandwe in a series of encounters which saw them, and several other Ngoni groups, fleeing north out of the area. These refugees scattered throughout southern-central and eastern Africa: Mzilikazi, leader of the Ndebele, crossed the Limpopo to settle in modern-day Zimbabwe, and others moved across the Zambezi into the area of modern Malawi; here, they were a major influence on the Chewa in terms of culture and military organization. Other groups again wandered as far north as Tanzania by the 1840s and 1850s, reaching the shores of Lakes Tanganyika and Victoria having left considerable upheaval and destruction in their wake. These groups would have a profound influence wherever they went, often becoming active in slave-raiding across the region, and coming into conflict with peoples already settled between the Limpopo and the Great Lakes. Emigrant Ngoni communities, fleeing the Zulu victory further south, would offer new models of state-building and the prosecution of warfare across the region in the decades following the *mfecane*. Other states and societies arose out of the need to defend themselves against the Zulu threat, notably the Sotho, led by Moshoeshe, who established a mountain stronghold in the area of modern Lesotho and attracted a number of refugee groups. His diplomatic skills, moreover, were proverbial, and he retained the independence of his state through marital alliances with neighboring chiefs, and by playing the British and the Boers off one another, as we see below.

The significance of the Zulu was out of all proportion to their actual number, at least initially; yet the fact remained that by 1819, Shaka was established as the ruler of a highly centralized state which would be the dominant power in the region until its defeat and destruction at the hands of the British in 1879. Even following their conquest by the British, however, the Zulu would retain a powerful sense of “national” identity into the colonial period and beyond. The rise of the Zulu represented, again, a continuation and indeed escalation of the political and military revolution begun several decades earlier, which involved a new model of political organization. The Zulu state was larger than anything in the region previously, transcending kinship and developing a new identity based on political and military power, and territorial unity; this was simultaneously a highly cohesive and aggressively expansionist society, as Shaka dispatched his regiments to prey on surrounding peoples by collecting tribute, or absorbing them completely into the kingdom. Newly conquered districts were assigned to chiefs appointed directly by Shaka, and eligible youth were conscripted; communities which continued to resist were either wiped out, or forced to migrate out of reach of Zulu armies. Military innovations, based on those begun in the Ndwandwe and Mthethwa armies, included the creation of permanent regiments (the *amabutho*), highly disciplined and rigorously trained; the introduction of the short stabbing spear, which was put to more efficient use than the throwing spear; and the employment of speed and surprise in attack, together with the development of the “bull’s horns” maneuver which involved the envelopment and destruction of enemies from the flanks. The system was highly centralized, with Shaka wielding direct control over active regiments. These regiments also had economic utility, with young men involved in herding cattle and hunting for ivory, while women cultivated for the state; regimental villages in the service of the state were established across the kingdom, and only when the members of the particular age-set had reached marriageable age was the village disbanded, the former warriors settling elsewhere to work their own farms. In sum, the Zulu regimental system

served to inculcate a larger “national” identity, eroding older regional and kin-based loyalties and facilitating a remarkable Zulu consciousness, based, at least initially, on a powerful royal cult centered on Shaka himself. Shaka was an authoritarian ruler, clearly, and much cruelty was attributed to him; he died as he had lived, murdered in 1828 at the instigation, if not by the hand, of his half-brother Dingane, who succeeded him. The standard view is that he had become deeply unstable, overseeing a veritable reign of terror characterized by periodic mass executions, and that the power concentrated in his hands was such that he could only be removed by assassination.

**Plate 8** Vision of African genius: Shaka, king of the Zulu, c.1816–28. British Library/HIP/Topfoto.



The *mfecane* and the rise of the Zulu state have been interpreted in a variety of ways. The questions of why the *mfecane* happened when it did, and why it took the form it did, are vexed, as is the issue, noted above, of the degree to which the whole notion of a region engulfed in violent conflict was a racist construct used to justify later white dominance. Some observers suggested that the patterns of warfare of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the emergence of the Zulu state itself, could be attributed to European influence, and that Africans were imitating European models of command and battle. This racist assumption – which demonstrated a fundamental incredulity that Africans alone could be responsible for such an expansion of political scale, and such a revolution in military organization – was wholly groundless, and there is certainly no evidence that leaders such as Zwide, Dingiswayo, and Shaka were somehow exposed to and inspired by European models, even if the Portuguese at the coast had been able to provide them. Rather more seriously, interpretations which have aimed to explain the escalation of warfare in terms of competition for land and commerce are compelling. Population growth and consequent land shortage led to competition for pastureland and livestock, and this in itself was exacerbated by drought conditions. At the same time, although the role of trade should not be exaggerated – it was probably not as important a dynamic among the Ngoni as it was among the Nyamwezi or the Yoruba, for example – there can be little doubt that the *mfecane* cannot be fully understood without recognition of the role of commerce in ivory and slaves. This was growing in importance toward the end of the eighteenth century, and as other parts of Africa in the nineteenth century demonstrate, where there was growing global trade, there were attempts to monopolize it. Finally, the role of exceptionally talented individuals – most famously Shaka himself – must be acknowledged, and certainly contemporary Europeans tended to attribute much to Shaka personally. While the events of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries must be understood in the context of long-term socioeconomic processes, Shaka’s own contribution was not inconsiderable: brilliant, opportunist, and ultimately unstable, he captured the imagination and built a state, and an identity, where none had existed previously. Yet the stories which proliferated about him – his supposed fear of old age, his extreme attachment to his mother, his sexuality (he never married) – were very often apocryphal, and no doubt designed to entertain Europeans around campfires in the decades following his death.

Shaka’s achievements look all the more dramatic considering the problems which came after; his successors, Dingane (1828–40) and Mpande (1840–72), had to contend with a greatly altered political environment. It is true that Dingane in particular lacked the military acumen and leadership talents of his half-brother, but this needs to be set alongside the advance of white settlement, which by the end of the 1830s had become a serious challenge to the Zulu. As the *voortrekkers* moved onto the interior plateau from the direction of Cape Colony, they grew in strength and confidence, and a clash became inevitable.

## Cape Colonialism: White Settlement and the “Native Question”

The modern history of southern Africa has been characterized by a clash between Africans and Europeans, and the hegemony of the latter in the twentieth century served for many years to distort understanding of the region’s past. Specifically, the “white” version of southern African history was that Bantu-speaking, iron-working farmers only crossed into what would become South Africa in the course of the seventeenth century, roughly the same time that the first Dutch settlers were beginning to arrive. Thus, according to this thesis, Europeans encountered an “empty land,” inhabited only by a few Khoisan, contemptuously dismissed as “Bushmen” and “Hottentots.” Historically inaccurate but politically convenient, the “empty land”

thesis later provided the white minority with the justification they needed for claiming authority over a vast area. In fact, as we have seen, by the time the first European settlers had arrived, an array of African states and societies inhabited the region, from the Ovambo and Herero in Namibia and the Khoisan in southern Namibia and the southwest Cape, to the Sotho and Tswana of the central highveld, to the Ngoni-speakers of the southeast.

White settlement in southern Africa dates to the middle of the seventeenth century, when the Dutch East India Company established a small provisioning station in Table Bay. Over the ensuing century and a half, the “Boers” (Dutch for farmers) – or “Afrikaners,” as they would become known – developed a distinctive identity, language and culture. The frontier Boers in particular were tough, independent-minded and Calvinist, and later developed a trenchant anti-Britishness; they came to regard the area around Cape Town, later Cape Colony, as theirs by right, claims underpinned by a distinctive racial and religious ideology. Initially trading with the Khoisan for food and water, they soon came into conflict with the African population, chiefly over access to grazing land which the Boers tended to occupy according to the principle of “right of conquest.” Such conflict had become increasingly common by the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, as ever greater numbers of Boers – *trekboers* – moved into the interior in search of good pastureland, particularly to the east. The Khoisan, confronted with Boer military superiority and introduced diseases (especially smallpox, carried by passing ships), responded either by becoming hunter-raiders attacking Boer farms, or by withdrawing far to the north, away from the line of Boer advance, where they rebuilt their societies and retrieved a measure of independence. This policy was favored by those of mixed Khoi and European parentage especially. Many Khoisan, of course, accepted servile status within European society, working for Boers as herdsmen, hunters, and servants; very much a part of colonial society, they were nevertheless never accorded the rights of citizens.

Although initially interracial relations in the Dutch Cape Colony were flexible and indeed common, racial attitudes hardened in time, and particularly during the eighteenth century. There may not yet have been a rigid system of racial classification, but there was a strong sense of hierarchy and relative privilege based on color; in large part, increasingly trenchant racialism was the result of clashes between European and African on the expanding frontier over resources, while within the Colony itself status became increasingly linked to color and occupation. Most starkly, slave status was influenced by color: while slaves of “mixed” parentage were generally skilled labor, and indeed might even occupy positions of some responsibility, the worst, unskilled positions were filled by Africans themselves, or by those imported from Indonesia. Manual labor was undertaken by the lowliest of slaves, usually Africans, and this was rigidified from the late eighteenth century onwards; slavery underpinned Cape Colony society and economy, while slavery itself was increasingly defined by race – a portent for the future shape of South African state and society.

Cape Colony remained under Dutch control until 1795, when it was seized by Britain during the French revolutionary wars, and was permanently under British control from 1806. From the 1820s, settlers of Dutch descent were joined by the first British emigrants, and tensions would quickly heighten between two white communities with markedly different sets of cultural values, languages, and visions for the future of the Colony. Boer hostility toward central colonial authority was already intensifying: in 1795, in the last weeks of Dutch control, there had been a brief trekboer rebellion, followed by another, suppressed by the British, in 1799. Both were motivated by the belief that the Cape government had failed to address trekboer concerns about land and security, a sense of betrayal and detachment which was an omen for the future of the region. In large part, clearly, the escalating tensions between two white communities stemmed from the fact of British administration, and Boer resentment of this would have dramatic consequences for the wider region. In the meantime, the question of the expansion and settlement of the eastern frontier of the Colony remained unresolved: white settlers had been gradually pushing the frontier eastwards, pressing in on the Xhosa people who, with their close-knit social structures and extensive herds, were becoming something of an obstacle, despite earlier economic cooperation and social interaction. Conflict became particularly intense from the 1770s as the Boers moved into the Zuurveld, an important Xhosa grazing area. However, the sporadic so-called “frontier wars” of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries failed to produce a lasting settlement.

As the *mfecane* was unfolding in the deeper interior, important changes were taking place in the relationship between the Boer settlers and the newly arrived British administration. Boer government officials were replaced by British officials; and English was introduced into the education and legal systems. Further tensions mounted over the issue of African labor, toward which British policy was comparatively liberal. The granting of certain basic rights to African workers – such as the right to legally binding contracts, and the right to take employers to court for breach of contract – horrified most Boers, who had long regarded Africans as little more than chattel labor, particularly important for poor white communities scarcely existing beyond the level of subsistence. At worst Africans were vermin to be exterminated or at least driven out of view, as happened to many Khoisan; the British at the Cape were mere interlopers, urbanites whose “enlightened” and “liberal” views of “the native” were wholly unconnected to the realities of frontier life. Moreover, the British introduced a system of private land ownership, replacing the previous loan-farm system by which many Boers had occupied land on loan from the government; comparatively few could afford to hold land under the new rules instituted by an insensitive, English-speaking class of metropolitan administrators.

In addition to interference in long-standing practice at the official level, British missionaries increasingly found the Cape a field of great potential. They further alienated the Boer community by becoming the champions of the oppressed Khoisan, encouraging peasant farming at mission stations and involving themselves in court cases; missionaries also wielded increasing influence over government in their promotion of African causes, again notably in the sphere of labor. Perhaps the biggest blow to Boer sensibilities and economic requirements came in 1834, when slavery was abolished by the British administration in Cape Colony. This, again, was particularly disastrous to those poor white farmers struggling at the subsistence end of the colonial economy, who could not afford to pay competitive wages to free laborers. The problem of “poor whites,” indeed, would be a key dynamic in the shaping of South African society in the decades to come.

By this time, many Boers were beginning to consider the possibility of northward migration, of escaping beyond the frontier of the Colony, “into Africa” as it was known, away from British oppression. Indeed, those in the eastern Cape had been lobbying for government support in clearing the Xhosa from the area in order to make room for Boer settlement. But while the British demonstrated a willingness to interfere in Boer affairs within the Colony, they were not willing to assist those on its edges who complained of land shortage and of incursions by the Xhosa. The government refused to become involved in expensive wars, or to countenance the equally troublesome extension of administration which successful campaigns would inevitably entail. Thus were land-hungry Boers compelled to consider crossing the frontier into the interior, in search of pasture and political freedom.

## Voortrekkers: White Communities in the Interior

In the mid- and late 1830s, several thousand Boer families began moving north, in a process which later on became known as the “Great Trek.” It was the stuff of mythology, the idea of a unified and cohesive migration – a kind of “exodus” – later becoming a cornerstone in emergent Afrikaner nationalism, celebrated in songs, poetry, and remembered heroism. In reality, it involved a host of small, unconnected movements, hundreds of separate groups with little cohesion in terms of direction, and bound together only in their antipathy to the British and their desire for land. The

voortrekkers of the 1830s and 1840s were mostly from the eastern Cape, and their migrations led to permanent white settlement in the interior of southern Africa. Yet the location of these “Boer republics” was influenced by concentrations of African population, or the absence of these: much early Boer settlement, for example, occurred in areas which had been temporarily vacated following the upheavals of the *mfecane*. In other areas, cooperation between Boer and African took place. In the region of the middle Vaal river, for example, the Rolong cautiously welcomed the voortrekkers as well-armed allies against the Ndebele; indeed it was a joint attack by the Boers and the Rolong against the Ndebele in 1837 which prompted the withdrawal of the latter north of the Limpopo. The Boers settled around the middle Vaal, and as they grew in confidence and strength, they were able to extract labor and tribute from the Rolong and the Tswana.

To the north and east, small groups of voortrekkers lived nervously among rather stronger states and societies, notably the Swazi, and of course the Zulu themselves, whose presence was an obstacle to the acquisition of the attractive pastureland in the area. The relationship between Boer and Zulu was thus problematic from the outset, despite Dingane’s initial attempts to convince the white newcomers that they could come to terms, and live in peace; whether he ever really believed this is difficult to know, but he acted precipitously in 1838 when he launched an attack on the Boers. A great many of the latter were killed; but Dingane now discovered, as many African rulers would after him, the significance of the new weaponry carried by the whites, who regrouped and inflicted a telling defeat on the Zulu at the so-called “Battle of Blood River” – the blood, that is, of the African. Nonetheless, it is important not to overestimate the actual strength of the tiny Boer “republic” on the edge of the Zulu kingdom. Chary of unnecessary clashes with the Zulu, the Boers demonstrated a grudging respect for them and moved somewhat further south, establishing the “republic” of Natal. The Zulu themselves had been rocked by their initial conflict with the voortrekkers, and suffered a civil war which saw the death of the hapless Dingane and his replacement by Mpande. Under Mpande, however, the kingdom recovered, and continued to represent a significant obstacle to white domination in the area until much later in the nineteenth century.

## Balances of Power to around 1870

The migration of the Boers out of Cape Colony had presented the British with a problem: should the recalcitrant voortrekkers be left to their own devices, or should some attempt be made to control them, or at least keep an eye on them? Initially, the British decided that control was necessary, annexing Natal in 1843 – an act which prompted the further movement of some Boers out of the area – and briefly taking control of the neighboring newly named Orange River zone in 1848. This was, however, considered too expensive, and indeed to all intents and purposes impracticable; and by the mid-1850s, Britain had recognized the political independence of the Boer “republics” of “Transvaal” and the “Orange Free State.” As Boers continued to expand into the highveld, they came up against the Sotho, who resisted but proved less troublesome than the Zulu, and in a series of conflicts through the 1850s and 1860s, the Sotho kingdom was greatly reduced in territorial extent; only a request for British protection, which was granted, apparently saved the kingdom from complete annihilation.

The British had also been renewing older conflicts with the Xhosa further south. By the 1850s, the boundary had been extended to incorporate a considerable swathe of Xhosa territory, the Xhosa themselves being settled in the reserves which would later become a core feature of white-dominated southern Africa. Large numbers of Xhosa found themselves compelled to work on white farms across Cape Colony, an experience shared by the Africans of Natal. African peasant farmers were often tenants on white farms, either paying rent or handing over a percentage of their produce; in highland Boer territory, Africans might farm and keep livestock, in return for which they provided unpaid labor for their white landowners.

Yet by the 1860s, overall, some degree of political and economic balance had been established across southern Africa between Africans and Europeans. White settlement had clearly advanced, and aggressively so in many areas, and Boers had taken advantage of areas depopulated or otherwise weakened by the *mfecane*. But in other areas strong African states and societies successfully resisted European incursion, and indeed often intimidated the vulnerable frontier communities which scratched a living from farming and herding, or those white traders who did business with Africans. Africans also imported firearms as part of an increasingly lucrative interior trade, exporting such commodities as skins and ivory; they were thus greatly strengthened, and British merchants found they had little need or desire to interfere in the internal affairs of states as long as such trade continued to flow unimpeded. Indeed the British government was singularly uninterested in extending its territorial reach – whether into African or Boer territory – any more than was strictly necessary, which it was not. This, then, was the situation on the eve of the discovery of diamonds north of the Orange River at the beginning of the 1870s, and of gold in the Transvaal in the mid-1880s. These finds would dramatically alter the balance of power, transforming southern African history and bringing about a veritable economic revolution which would ultimately destroy African self-sufficiency and lead to the creation of a capitalist economy by the end of the nineteenth century. It would lead, too, to the destruction of African political independence, at least temporarily.

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