carried as far as Bamako on the Niger, but the polity was fundamentally weak, a domination by juula over ethnically diverse populations spread over a large area. It was also divided between juula Muslims and the mass of the population who were not Muslim. Asante and the Bambara kingdom of Segu finally defeated it in battle, and it fell back into its constituent units after about 1740.

It is not clear what role the fall of Kong may have played in the flow of trade through the forest to the coast, but that trade declined abruptly after the end of the eighteenth century. The Windward Coast as a whole simply dropped out of the slave trade, even though the illegal slave trade continued to flourish elsewhere. It is likely, however, that the trade that once passed through to Cape Mesurado went to Sierra Leone instead, while that of the Bandama route was diverted to Asante and then down to the Gold Coast.

The Gold Coast

The Gold Coast had the greatest density of European military architecture and trading posts anywhere on the coast of Africa. It was the gold trade, however, and not the slave trade that made for all these forts. At least in West Africa, European trading posts were rarely fortified unless they traded in gold, and they were designed for defense against Europeans, not Africans. (The African authorities had the easy option of simply cutting off trade if their guests became too demanding.) Slaves were an inconvenient mark for raiders, and other African products were hardly better, but gold was easy to carry off and easy to dispose of. This is one reason why the first Portuguese fortification, begun in 1481, was called simply Elmina, "the castle of the mine." Rival trade forts began to rise in the neighborhood only in the seventeenth century, but, by the eighteenth, the coast was dotted with twenty-five major stone forts, separated from one another by an average of only ten miles – and even less if the numerous lightly fortified or unfortified factories and out-stations are taken into account. There was, of course, no real need for that many forts, but each European power felt that it had to have its own set, as the Dutch, English, Danes, Swedes, and Brandenburgers all tried to follow in the footsteps of the Portuguese.

The goldfields also influenced the pace and character of political change in African society. Gold was a magnet that attracted traders from the north, and Juula had reached as far as the coast by the fifteenth century. In addition, kola from the Gold Coast forest was especially choice, and the value of the kola exports to the north may have been even greater than that of the gold trade. The new commerce made a larger scale of political organization desirable. The forest had been mainly organized in tiny states, while stateless societies were more common in the savanna immediately to the north. One of the first Akan states to reach a larger order of magnitude was Bono, which grew up in the early fifteenth century in the gold-producing area. It lay near the frontier between forest and savanna, and it was closely associated with the Juula town of Begho, then the principal commercial center serving the Akan goldfield.

Other state formation just north of the forest was even more closely associated with the pull of the goldfields. Gonja was founded in the early sixteenth century by the commanding officer of a cavalry force sent into the region from Mali. He broke away

Map 7.4 The Gold Coast in the eighteenth century

with some of the troops and set himself up as an independent ruler. Later, in the mid seventeenth century, Gonja expanded further, conquering nearby micro-kingdoms an stateless peoples until it became a major force in the region between the Akan states o the south and the Mossi complex to the north.

On the coast itself, the gold trade drew the Europeans, so that the Gold Coast became one of the first African territories to use crops from America. Maize and manioc quickly became important food crops in the Akan forest. These new crops made denser population possible throughout the forest in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

New trade to the coast during the seventeenth century also encouraged a larger scale of political organization. Akwamu appeared about 1600 in the hinterland of Accra, founded by Akan people. At first, they were clients of the Ga-speaking rulers of Accra; but their territory lay across the trade route from the interior, and they were able to combine military and commercial pressures to force trade through their own territory. By the late 1670s, Akwamu had become wealthy enough to begin conquering its neighbors. By the 1690s, its dominance extended over most of the coastal region from Cape Coast in the west to the frontiers of Dahomey in the east. Only the core area around Accra, however, was closely integrated with the state. The outlying conquests were autonomous regions that could break away again at the first sign of military weakness. Akwamu's control of these peripheral territories was, indeed, too weak to prevent ambitious local magnates from taking slaves within the empire itself. At a period when the gold trade was giving way to a larger trade in slaves, Akwamu weakened and disappeared about 1730.

The rise of Akwamu represented a general pattern of first controlling trade and then moving on to military conquest. Denkyera, lying behind the western Gold Coast, and Allada in the present-day Republic of Bénin, rose to power with similar timing, and Asante followed only a little later.

The Asante state was founded about 1680 with the election of a certain Osei Tutu to the leadership of a number of matrilineages around the present city of Kumasi and the region immediately to the south. By 1700, after Osei Tutu defeated Denkyera, Asante became a major power. More important still, Osei Tutu (or his advisers) made a series of creative innovations to help build political integration among the kinship-oriented micro-kingdoms of the Akan forest. One change was to set up a new, all-Asante, council, the Kotoko council, as the ruling body. Another was to create new judicial institutions, with a wider sphere of jurisdiction than ever before. A third was to found a new national identity. Each of the formerly independent divisions of the kingdom, including Kumasi itself, had a ceremonial stool of office, which was far more than a throne; each stool represented the ties of kinship that gave ultimate sanction to the authority of the ruler. Osei Tutu introduced a new stool, "the golden stool," which stood for the national unity of the whole Asante people. In effect, it was a fictitious extension of kinship so that a temporary alliance could become a permanent kingdom, incorporating some of the territory it conquered.

One continuing theme of Asante history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the struggle to consolidate the larger unit, and Asante territorial expansion compounded the problem. In practice, the Asante rulers tried to incorporate only those conquered states that were Akan in culture, but even these were sometimes reluctant to join. Several provinces in the Akan culture-area tried to secede and had to be reannexed by force. Non-Akan states, like Gonja and Dagomba in the north, were left their separate identities but had to pay tribute. Others, like the Ga states and a few outlying

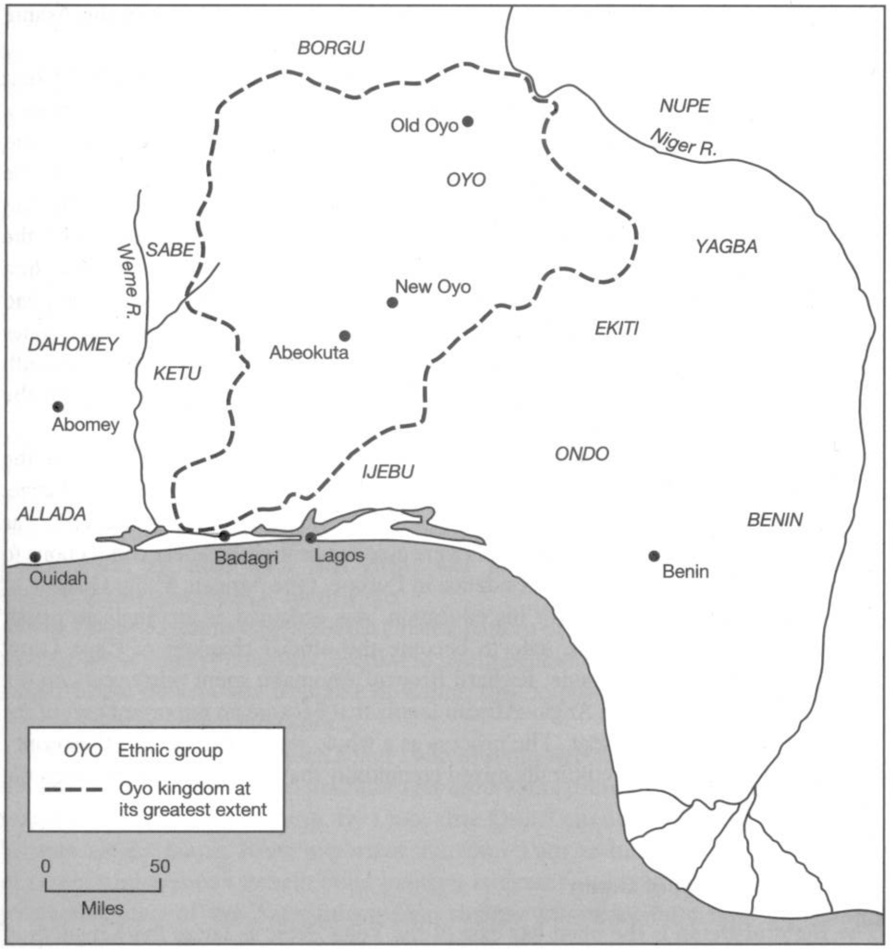
Akan states, were under Asante domination but were not invited to join the A union.

The period just before 1700 was also one of crucial change for the Gold economy. Ever since the opening of maritime trade in 1481, this region had b source of gold, but only rarely of slaves. In the second half of the fifteenth centur far into the sixteenth, the Portuguese had sold slaves on the Gold Coast fro kingdoms of Benin and Kongo. Later on, the Portuguese, and then the Dutch discouraged and even prohibited the export of slaves for fear of interfering wit gold trade. By the 1660s, however, the slave trade began to grow in importance from Accra and associated with the rise of Akwamu. By the 1680s, slave export risen to 75 per cent of total export value. By the 1720s, the Gold Coast some imported gold in exchange for slaves, though the main pattern of the eight century was to export both, as the volume of the slave trade rose and fell wit rhythm of the Asante military activity in the hinterland.

Meanwhile, the long contact between European and African merchants ne coastal trade castles produced a network of personal relations and cultural interch Western education, at least to the level of literacy and commercial arithmetic important for traders, and many Africans were able to use their business connecti secure hospitality for a few years' residence in Europe. One African, Philip Qua Cape Coast, went to England for his education, was ordained as an Anglican and returned with an English wife to become the official chaplain of Cape Castle. From the European side, Richard Brew of Anomabu spent thirty years Gold Coast and founded an Anglo-African family that became an important part local elite down to the present. The process as a whole was not so much "West ation" as the creation of a culturally mixed community that could mediate betwe two parent societies.

The Bight of Benin

The Bight of Benin is the open bay east of the Volta River as far as the Kingd Benin in present-day Nigeria. It was sometimes called the slave coast and it ta what is now the coastal part of Togo, the Benin Republic, and western Nigeria. part of a cultural continuum that reached from the Gold Coast to eastern Ni Recent language reclassification considers the dividing line between Kwa lang spoken along most of the Gold Coast, and the Benue-Congo languages spoken f east lies between the Aja of the Benin Republic and the Yoruba of southe Nigeria. The Ewe and associated peoples of Togo and eastern Ghana are thus s in many respects to their Akan neighbors, and in others to the Aja peoples of so Dahomey. In spite of linguistic difference, these Aja had even more in commo the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, including centuries of historical interactio most important recent Aja state, the kingdom of Dahomey, was an outlying part Yoruba Oyo empire during much of its history. To the east of the Yoruba stat Edo kingdom of Benin has been ruled for most of the past four centuries by a d claiming Yoruba origin. Benin also fits into the pattern of urbanization th common to the Yoruba and Aja alike, though in other respects Edo culture



Map 7.5 Yorubaland and Oyo

closer to that of the Ibo to the east or the Igala to the northeast. Authorities may differ in pointing out the important discontinuities in this sequence, but contact over thousands of years has produced a marked cultural continuity.

This continuity also stretches into the interior. The sharp environmental change from forest to savanna has no counterpart in most aspects of culture. All of the language families now found in this part of the forest zone are also found in the savanna north of the forest. It is usually assumed that they were originally spoken by savanna people, some of whom moved into the forest after the coming of agriculture. Other aspects of culture also suggest ancient ties to the north. Yoruba sculpture, for example, has strong stylistic similarities to the Nok figurines made to the north of the Benue River before the birth of Christ. Some deities of the Aja religion are strikingly similar to those worshipped among the non-Muslim Hausa. These and other traits

found both north and south of the forest-savanna frontier may reflect an ancie southward movement of settlers, or they may simply be the result of cultural diffusi along the trade routes. A developed flow of trade connecting the coastal region with t Hausa states and the Songhai portion of the Niger valley was already present when t Portuguese arrived in the fifteenth century. It was certainly much older, if only becau the distinct resource endowment on either side of the line between forest and savan created natural conditions for trade.

This coastal region had larger and more elaborate states, and at an earlier date, th any other coastal region short of Senegambia in one direction and the kingdom Kongo in the other. For the Yoruba and Edo, states may go back to the eleven century or earlier, and the elaborate technology necessary for the Ife and Benin bron statuary suggests an even earlier date for the introduction of advanced metallurgy in the forest zone. The older view that the savanna peoples were somehow "mo advanced" than those of the forest cannot be sustained, even though the existence states was not necessarily a sign of advancement, and this is one part of Africa whe large states, small states, micro-kingdoms, and stateless societies have existed side side for centuries.

Our best historical information nevertheless concerns the larger states, and three them – Benin, Dahomey, and Oyo – illustrate part of the range of options available an African state responding to European trade. The lack of correspondence betwe the former and present names for these countries is a serious problem. The Afric kingdom of Dahomey gave its name first to the French colony and then to t independent republic of Dahomey, but in 1975 the republic changed its name to Ben – after the Bight of Benin, not the kingdom further east. To avoid confusion, we w use the terms Benin and Dahomey for the long-standing kingdoms, and the Ben Republic for the state that took that name in 1975.

Benin was the first to attract serious attention in Europe, partly because it reached peak of military power in the sixteenth century and attracted Portuguese missiona efforts. Edo relations with the Europeans were not especially close. Benin was n really a coastal state at all, though its port of Ughoton on the Benin River could reached by sailing inland through the territory of the Itsekiri and western Ijo. Benin one time made itself overlord of the coast as far west as Lagos, but the Edo we normally far more concerned with the north – with Nupe, Igala, and the Yoruba state

Benin also stayed out of the large-scale slave trade. In 1516, the *Oba* (or king) bega to restrict the export of male slaves, and the restriction soon became a comple embargo on exporting males – an embargo that lasted until nearly the end of t seventeenth century. Because the Europeans wanted mainly male workers for t American plantations, the embargo confined Benin's maritime trade to the export pepper, cotton textiles, beads, and ivory. Even this trade was a royal monopoly, whic may have made Benin less attractive to Europeans than other ports were, though t monopoly became harder to enforce as the power of the Oba declined during t seventeenth century. By that period, the royal officials appointed to trade with t Europeans had come to be more like brokers, who helped the European traders (for fee) in the conduct of their business.

In the eighteenth century, the embargo on male slaves was lifted, but the slave trad nevertheless remained a minor current. Slave prices were high in Benin, and the Europeans had cheaper sources elsewhere. From time to time, the Oba forced the Europeans to buy a batch of prisoners of war or political prisoners as a condition for being allowed to trade in other goods, but the total exports over the years were very low. In the late eighteenth century, when the slave trade as a whole reached its peak, exports from the whole region of the Benin River reached only about a thousand slaves a year, and most of these were supplied by the Itsekiri. In the early nineteenth century, Benin dropped out of the slave trade altogether. It nevertheless survived as a major state until almost the end of the century. Benin's experience over four centuries suggests that a major African state could decide whether or not to participate in the slave trade at all. Firearms were important in inter-state competition, but they could be paid for by selling other goods.

Dahomey, on the other hand, apparently tried to make the slave trade pay, even to make it the principal support of the state. The formation of large states was comparatively late with the Aja, the first trading state, Allada, being founded only about 1575. The Dutch began to trade there toward the end of the century, and Allada soon became the chief center for European trade to the Bight of Benin. In the second half of the seventeenth century, however, Ouidah began to compete for trade while Dahomey rose in the hinterland with a position equivalent to that of Akwamu in regard to Accra. In this location it was only natural for Dahomey to consider the possibility of controlling trade for the profit of the state.

The original Dahomean constitution was similar to those of the Yoruba states. That is, the *oba*, or ruler, was the supreme official, but his powers were circumscribed by a set of councils, some representing lineages, others professional groups. One council normally chose the oba from among the eligible members of the royal lineage. Another usually had the power to order the oba to commit suicide. Once in office, an oba could appoint some officials and councilors, but these royal appointees were always balanced by others who represented particular interests or particular lineages. The personal ties that counted most in this society were first of all the ties of kinship, and secondly the ties to fellow members of a professional or occupational group. Only then was the individual bound to give loyalty and obedience to the oba.

The Dahomean constitution began to depart from this pattern early in the eighteenth century, intentionally subverted by a succession of rulers who used their control over firearms to convert the state into a despotism. By the 1730s or so, they had created a new political order in which each individual was directly and personally subordinate to an all-powerful ruler. This new regime was not originally designed to serve the slave trade. But, in the 1720s, Agaja, the oba, led Dahomey in its most successful drive toward the coast, capturing Allada and Ouidah and giving Dahomey its first direct contact with the European slave dealers. For a time, the slave exports from Dahomey were a royal monopoly.

Just when Agaja had succeeded in dominating the coast, Oyo began to threaten the independence of Dahomey itself. Oyo had a strong cavalry force, which turned out to be superior to the Dahomean musketeers. In 1730, Oyo forced Dahomey into a tributary relationship, though Dahomey kept its political integrity and Agaja remained in power. Dahomey was even allowed to keep some of its coastal conquests, although

Oyo took others away and organized them as a new tributary state of Ajashe, or I Novo, which then became Oyo's principal outlet to the sea.

The continuing threat of Oyo posed a problem that might have been dealt successfully in one of several different ways. One option was to continue along the of centralized government and tighter administration, waiting until Oyo might we Another would have been to use state power to secure slaves by force and to sell through the royal monopoly. This was tried for a time, but under Tegbesu (1740–74), the Dahomean state played down the alternative of using its military p to capture slaves and turned instead to a policy of building up its position as mi man between the northern suppliers and the European merchants on the coast. royal monopoly became a theoretical claim only, or a way of regulating the trade ca mainly by private merchants. The Dahomean merchant community became rich o trade passing through to the coast and Dahomean government revenue also ca depend on the slave trade. This was in marked contrast to the usual Asante poli selling only the slaves that came as a by-product of their military expansion – still so to the Benin policy of selling few or no slaves at all.

Oyo's position was quite different from that of the kingdoms nearer the coast the problem of responding to the opportunities of the slave trade came with a diff timing and consequence. The metropolitan province of Oyo was well out i savanna, where its connections lay mainly to the north and with states along the N River. It was one of the most northerly of the Yoruba states, and not the most impo until the seventeenth century. It was then that the Oyo cavalry was perfected. army required a supply of horses from the northern savanna, strengthening Oyo' to the north. Oyo then began to expand, generally toward the south and amon other Yoruba kingdoms. In time, it annexed thirteen other kingdoms, which became provinces of the Oyo empire, stretching into the Egba forest to the sout west of the present city of Ibadan. Coastal Yoruba states like Ijebu remained inde dent, and Oyo had only indirect commercial contact with the coast until her desce Dahomey. Even then, coastal trade was comparatively unimportant, and Oyo's r trade lay either with the Hausa states or northwest along the Niger toward the These were the strategic sources of remounts, and Oyo still depended on cavalry into the nineteenth century.

One can only speculate about the motives and directions of Oyo aggression. A southernmost cavalry-using power, its advantage lay in moving still further against states whose archers could often be overwhelmed. Movement into the fore a place like Ijebu, would have been very dangerous to the horses on account c tsetse fly, but the "Benin gap," a corridor of savanna breaking through the forest b the sea in Togo and Dahomey, opened the way to the use of cavalry against Dahc Oyo military activities in the Benin gap began in 1698 with an attack on Allada, an next half century saw not only Oyo's triumph over Dahomey, but a similar hege extending as far west as the frontiers of Asante.

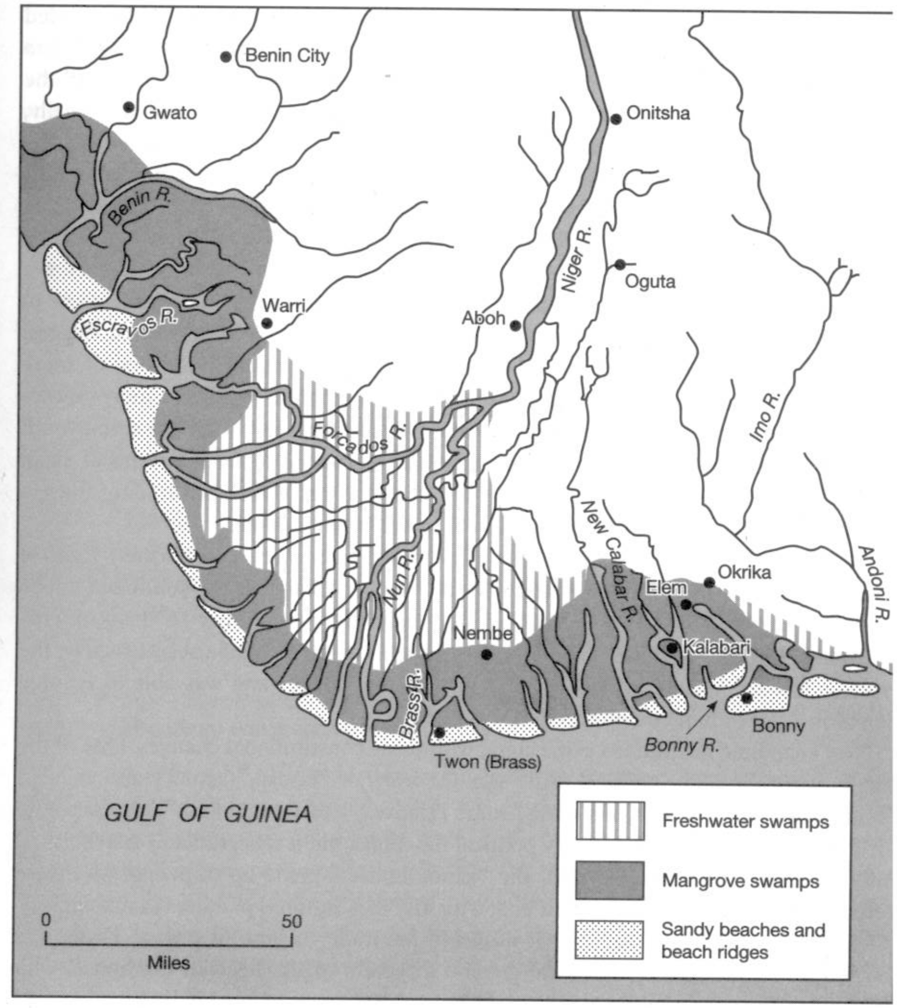
With the eighteenth century, the first slaves captured by Oyo began to find thei into the Atlantic slave trade, and Oyo began to face the possibilities and dange getting caught up in the trade. Oral traditions reflect some of the tensions betwee military and the merchant's council – one arguing for still more military expansion other wanting to pursue peace for the sake of trade. In fact, neither of these possibilities seems to have been pursued consistently. For several decades before 1774, the *bashorun*, or supreme military commander, became more important than the *alafin*, whose powers were so circumscribed by councils he was in danger of becoming a mere figurehead. Then, in 1774, the Alafin Abiodun won a brief civil war and built new power for his office. Abiodun had once been a merchant and he apparently sought to develop his power on the basis of the slave trade, which increased enormously in the 1780s, while Oyo's military power declined. By the late 1780s and early 1790s, some frontier provinces began to break away. In 1796, following a series of military failures, a council required Alafin Awole to commit suicide, as the constitution provided. This time, however, they were unable to agree on a new alafin, and a long interregnum followed, with increasing military weakness and decreasing power over the subject provinces, lasting far into the nineteenth century.

With Oyo, imperial expansion began and continued for many decades before military aggression came to be linked to the slave trade, but once the link was made, the decade of the 1780s was both the peak decade for Oyo's export of slaves and the beginning of its internal crisis. The slave trade was at least one element contributing to decline, but it was not alone.

Comparisons with the political development of Dahomey and Asante suggest that other causes were more fundamental. During the eighteenth century, both Asante and Dahomey were struggling in their own ways to adapt old political institutions to the new challenge posed by European trade. The Asante choice was to create a new and larger national unit and to articulate that nationality through a newly developed political structure. In Dahomey, the first change of direction was a constitutional revolution abolishing the old way of balancing lineages through councils. This, in turn, cleared the way for a second set of moves integrating Dahomean economic policy into its position as middle-man for the slave trade. The evidence is less firm for eighteenth-century Oyo than it is for Dahomey or Asante. Oyo appears to have first built an empire and then to have begun the large-scale export of slaves without first changing its forms of government. As a result, the checks and balances of the traditional Oyo constitution failed to work, and Oyo was unable to respond adequately to the new commerce, to the rebellious provinces, or (in the longer run) to the threat of militant Islam beyond the northern frontiers. Where Asante and Dahomey were to continue as viable states until the European conquest at the end of the nineteenth century, Oyo collapsed so completely in the early nineteenth-century that the slave trade drew more heavily on Yoruba than on any other nationality, though Yoruba slaves had been practically unheard of in the Americas before 1750.

The Niger delta and the Cameroons

East of the Benin River lies the delta of the Niger, a land of myriad channels, creeks, and mangrove swamps. At the seaward fringe, the delta forms a sand ridge, high enough for villages of fishermen and salt gatherers. In the upper delta, inland beyond the salt water and mangrove swamps, is a region of freshwater swamp with some higher land suitable for agriculture. Long before the beginning of European trade, conditions



Map 7.6 The Niger Delta

in the delta itself encouraged trade between the seaward settlements and the agricultural areas of the upper delta and its hinterland. By 1500, one of the towns at the lower fringe of the delta had a population of 2000 people and an active commerce through the system of creeks and lagoons. (Two thousand people would hardly count as a big town today, but Oporto, the second largest city in Portugal, had only 8000 people at that time.) Similar conditions existed further east, where the estuary of the Cross River provided a similar opportunity to trade coastal products with the hinterland. In spite of ethnic differences between the Ijo of the Niger Delta proper and the Ibibio, Efik, and others to the east, political and historical circumstances were similar as far east as Mount Cameroon.

People along this coast had been trading with the interior in their large boats having up to fifty paddlers, even before the Europeans appeared on the coast. They traded occasionally with the Europeans in the sixteenth century, though the Europeans had no regular shore establishments, and the slave trade here was very small indeed until the second half of the seventeenth century. The coastal societies then changed radically, adapted to the demands of the slave trade, and made contact with others in the hinterland who were making similar adjustments. The result was a commercial organization that supplied far more slaves per mile of coast or square mile of economic hinterland than any other part of eighteenth-century Africa.

Some of these adaptations were political. At the beginning of maritime contact, the eastern Ijo of the delta were divided into a series of lineages, each bearing the name of an eponymous ancestor. Members of a lineage lived in a series of interrelated villages, but each village was independent of the rest with its own council and one or more headmen exercising minimal executive powers. Growing trade required a more powerful organization, capable of defending the routes to the interior. By the late seventeenth century, these formerly independent villages had regrouped to form a series of small monarchies, each under a royal lineage and centered on a principal trading town – Bonny, Nembe or Brass, Kalabari or New Calabar, among others.

The Efik of the lower Cross River also turned to a more consolidated form of government, but in a different way. There, the separate villages continued to be independent, each ruled by a chief and council and constituting so many micro-kingdoms. But they also had a common government in the form of a secret society, the *ekpe*, or leopard society, which reached into all the villages and was able to enforce common action when common action was needed.

New economic institutions came along with these constitutional changes. One of the sub-units in the older political order was the *wari*, or "house," actually an extended family made up of a man, his wives, some relatives, and their slaves. This corporate kinship unit at first performed only political functions, but it was gradually transformed into a military and economic unit, the "canoe house," made up of people who were responsible for supplying an armed boat with fifty to a hundred paddlers in time of war. They obviously had the same boat available for trade in time of peace. Trade was carried on by the house under the general direction of the head of the house, who distributed the profits to the members. In time, the element of kinship became less and less important. New members of the house were normally recruited by purchase, but, once a member of the house, a slave could rise within the organization and might even become its head if he were especially skilled in trade and war.

Neither the Ijo nor the Efik trade, however, could reach beyond the maze of creeks that ran along the coast. Both peoples were specialized navigators, like the Afro-French of Saint Louis or Afro-Portuguese of the Senegambia; they depended on other traders to bring slaves from the further interior. On the Niger River itself, other river traders brought goods down the river to markets a little above the delta, along the stretch of river between present-day Onitsha and Aboh. The trade of the densely populated Iboland to the east of the Niger was more important still. This region was almost entirely stateless, with the village group serving as the largest political unit, yet lacking the central authority that justified calling it a micro-state. Local trade took place within the village group, but long-distance trade was left to outside specialists.

One such group of long-distance traders were the people of Awka, who began t as priests and diviners connected with their Agbala deity. Their religious role easier for them to pass safely through a variety of jurisdictions, and they later de a network of fictitious kinship ties with a host in each of the village groups they

Another Ibo group, the Aro, worked with similar religious protectio Ebinokpabi, their great oracle. And theirs was a closely coordinated network colonies stretched out as a trade diaspora along the trade routes. Some of th settlements go back to the seventeenth century, and by the nineteenth they ha to be almost a hundred separate trading-post colonies. These were linked tog Aro who moved along the trade routes, and they were further linked by four-d fairs, alternately held at two central points every twenty-four days.

Both the Aro and the Awka trade networks were beyond the range of E observation during the period of the slave trade, and Ibo oral traditions are too to be of much help. It may therefore be impossible to explore the detailed histo trade. The Ijo and Efik dealers on the coast, and their suppliers from the interi exceptional in their ability to maintain a numerous and steady supply of slave Atlantic trade one decade after another. The supply from most other regions flu widely in response to political or military changes in the hinterland. Somewh tered evidence suggests that the dominant form of slave catching in this region warfare but kidnapping combined with the manipulation of oracles, so that sacrifices could be called for and the victims then quietly shipped off to the A

The slave trade in African history

One of the ironies of African history is the fact that maritime contact, whicl Africa's long isolation and brought all coasts of the continent into contact intercommunicating part of the world, should also have led so rapidly to a situ which Africa's main export was its people. The full impact of the slave trade on history remains hard to assess. It is obvious that enslavement and exile to the Ne were terrible experiences, and that the dehumanizing institutions of plantatio were worse still. The violence of capture and the dangers along the way surely m at least as many were killed as were delivered to the plantations, and the waste i life continued as the plantations failed to achieve an excess of births over dea terrible as these consequences were for the people who were enslaved, they t about the impact of the slave trade on African societies themselves.

That assessment is even harder to make, because the incidence of the trad uneven. Some small ethnic groups were completely wiped out. Others suffered for a time – a few decades of political instability – but were otherwise untouche trade: most Yoruba and most Wolof had this kind of experience. Other societ Benin, were very lightly involved for centuries on end, but too lightly for the have made a really serious impact. Still others, like Dahomey, may have profit the slave trade, at the expense of its African neighbors. Elsewhere on the co large regions, like most of the present-day Republic of South Africa, were sin involved in the Atlantic trade at all. With these differences, it is virtually impos strike a balance. But some things appear to be clear. The sheer physical dest ness of the trade was not significant enough to produce a general and striking difference in social health and progress between areas where the slave trade was prevalent and those where people suffered only from the usual run of war, plague, and famine. Its most serious damage to African society was probably not physical destruction and loss of life, nor the drain of population but rather a warping of social purposes to serve destructive ends. The total impact of the trade therefore has to be measured not by what actually happened, but against the might-have-been if Africa's creative energy had been turned instead to some other end than that of building a commercial system capable of capturing and exporting as many as eighty thousand people a year.

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EQUATORIAL AFRICA BEFORE THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Equatorial Africa, a portion of the world far larger than Europe, comprises the lands between the Atlantic ocean and the Great Lakes and between the *sahel* of Chad and the dry lands running from northern Namibia to the middle Zambezi. This vast area contains several major climatic and ecological regions. Its heart, between roughly the fourth degree north and south of the Equator, is occupied by a variety of rainforests which form very complex and quite diverse environments. In many places a canopy of the giant trees towers over two levels of lower canopies and the sunlight reaches the ground only in small golden specks, as hungry leaves above drink it up. Flora and fauna are adapted to the ever-humid shadows or to the various canopies. In other places the forests are broken up in patches of open savanna (*esobe*) on poorer soils, especially in the western two thirds of the area. Many animals and plants are adapted to the forest edges there and some villagers also prefer to live there. But most people prefer to dwell near the placid, meandering rivers that cut a majestic swath through the forest, ultimately to rejoin the father of them all, the mighty Zaire (Congo), for these provide not only fish and a specially rich environment near their banks but also easy transportation. Similar advantages are found along the beaches facing the Atlantic ocean. Yet, in the past, other major landscapes were not very amenable to human settlement. Such were large marshes near the Equator, the wild relief of some mountainous lands in Gabon and Congo, the mountain forest of eastern Zaire, and tracts of land without permanent surface waters.

North and south of the forests savannas take over. From the hills or plateaus, as far as the eye can see, an ocean of grasses bends with the wind, but then most of the year the eye does not see far, for the grasses are too high. Rainforests in the valleys hide the rivers from view and nearer the Equator copses crown the ridges. The savannas were rich environments for animals and people whose flourishing villages were dotted all over the landscape and linked to each other by a myriad of paths.

Traveling south through the grasslands yet another major set of environments occurs: dry woodlands. Woods first appear on the heights and then fill the whole land. They cover all of Central Africa between the ninth and sixteenth degree south. Here the landscape is cluttered by relatively low trees. Yet there are gaps and in a blur