

FROM CHAINS TO COMMERCE: AFRICAN AGENCY AND ECONOMIC ADAPTATION IN THE 19TH CENTURY

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Abstract

This paper examines the transformation of West Africa's economy in the 19th century, challenging Eurocentric narratives that credit European influence as the primary driver of change. It argues that African societies actively shaped their economic futures by adapting trade practices, negotiating favorable terms, and diversifying their economies. Using case studies from the Bight of Biafra, Dahomey, and Asante, the study highlights how leaders like King Ghezo of Dahomey leveraged European rivalries to sustain both the slave and palm oil trades, while the Asante strategically shifted to gold and kola nut exports. The findings demonstrate that internal dynamics, including governance structures and local economic priorities, played a critical role in the transition to legitimate commerce. This study underscores African agency and innovation, contributing to a more balanced historiography of the African economic history of this period.

Keywords: Chains to commerce, African agency, economic adaptation, 19th century

Introduction

The 19th century marked a profound transformation in West Africa's economic landscape, as the decline of the transatlantic slave trade gave rise to legitimate commerce, with agricultural exports such as palm oil, groundnuts, and other goods becoming central. This shift coincided with significant social and political changes, often called the "crisis of adaptation." Historically, this crisis has been framed primarily in terms of European influence, with European powers portrayed as the main agents driving change in Africa. Still, Substantial evidence from the historiography supports the notion of African agency during this transition. In his analysis of British policy in West Africa, A.G. Hopkins disputes the simplistic view that Britain's intervention was aimed solely at replacing the slave trade with other commodities. Instead, he characterizes Britain's actions as part of a broader development plan to integrate Africa into a new global economy.¹ Hopkins emphasizes that African societies were not mere spectators in this process; they played crucial roles in negotiating and adapting to these changes, shaping the structure of legitimate commerce on their terms. This view highlights the importance of African agency, particularly that of African leaders and merchants, in determining their participation in the evolving global economic system.

¹ A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London: Routledge, 2020). P. 173

Similarly, Martin Lynn's work on the palm oil trade stressed the importance of internal dynamics within African societies in understanding this transition. Lynn argued that while external pressures from Europe were influential, local conditions, priorities, and internal social and political structures profoundly shaped African responses.² His work highlights the need to examine the regional and chronological variations in African strategies, further affirming Africans' active role in navigating the shift toward legitimate commerce.

Through case studies of specific regions—the Bight of Biafra, Dahomey, and Asante, this paper challenges that Eurocentric narrative by arguing that African societies were not passive recipients of European policies; rather, they actively shaped their responses to the evolving global order, exercising significant agency during this period of economic transformation. Chima Korieh's research on the Bight of Biafra hinterland reveals that the transition to palm oil production as a major export did not merely replicate previous economic systems. Instead, it generated new opportunities and challenges, which African societies met by adapting their institutions and production methods to capitalize on the shifting financial landscape. Similarly, Robin Law's examination of the Asante demonstrates how African rulers, like the Asantehene, strategically expanded the gold and kola nut trade to compensate for the decline in slave exports.³ This illustrates the proactive economic planning in response to global market shifts. In Dahomey, Robin Law's analysis reveals how King Ghezo skillfully navigated British pressure to end the slave trade while exploiting French involvement in maintaining Dahomey's economic power.⁴ Robin Law opined that:

Even more critically, King Ghezo of Dahomey was able to resist or evade British pressure for the abolition of the slave trade, in large part because the French, although theoretically also committed to abolition, in practice adopted a much less demanding attitude on this issue, and Ghezo was, therefore, able to develop trade in palm oil with them while still continuing the slave trade.⁵

This demonstrates the close link between political strategies and economic changes. By centering African actions and decisions, this study seeks to reveal the diverse ways in which African leaders and communities shaped their economic trajectories. In doing so, it challenges the dominant Eurocentric narrative and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of African agency during this pivotal period.

² Martin Lynn, *Commerce and Economic Change in West Africa: The Palm Oil Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

³ Robin Law, ed., *From Slave Trade to "Legitimate" Commerce: The Commercial Transition in Nineteenth-Century West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁴ Robin Law, ed., *From Slave Trade to "Legitimate" Commerce: The Commercial Transition in Nineteenth-Century West Africa*, pg. 20

⁵ Robin Law, ed., *From Slave Trade to "Legitimate" Commerce*:pg. 20

Historiographical Background

The early historiography of Africa's transition from the slave trade to legitimate commerce heavily emphasized European intervention as the primary driver of change. This narrative was built on British consular reports, missionary accounts, and travelogues that framed abolition and agricultural expansion as outcomes of European moral action. In these accounts, Africans were depicted as unprepared for modern commerce, with European traders and missionaries portrayed as civilizers who opened Africa to legitimate trade. David Livingstone's writings, for instance, reflect this perception. His missionary travels and research focus on the dual mission of eradicating slavery and introducing commerce, framing Africans as people needing guidance. He believes that Commerce is not only how the souls are saved from spiritual darkness but also how people are raised from barbarity into civilization.⁶ Livingstone portrays his missionary work as spreading Christianity and opening new trade avenues to replace slavery with legitimate commerce. This reflects the Euro-centric narrative by referring to his efforts to civilize and integrate Africa into global markets through agriculture. This portrays Africans as people living at the mercy of European powers for survival after the abolishment of slavery. His account encouraged an end to slavery but illustrates how European actors viewed their interventions as transformative, with little regard for pre-existing African trade practices. Similarly, Philip Curtin's *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex* argues on the structural collapse of the Atlantic slave trade and how European colonial policies reshaped African trade networks. He used archival evidence and consular reports to argue that Britain's economic policies, not African initiatives, drove the shift to palm oil and other agricultural products.⁷ Curtin states that the transition required intervention to reorganize the chaotic indigenous systems into productive economies. This approach neglected the relevance of African agency, placing Europe at the center of the transition from the slave trade to legitimate commerce. Such narratives, drawn from missionary and consular sources, dominated early historiography, treating African responses as disorganized or incomplete without European guidance. This approach downplayed African political strategies and reduced the economic transition to a by-product of European abolitionist efforts.

However, by the late 20th century, historians began to challenge the passive portrayal of African societies, shifting the focus toward African agency in shaping their economic futures. Scholars like A.G. Hopkins, Martin Lynn, and Robin Law argued that African leaders and merchants actively negotiated with European powers and adapted their economies to align with shifting global markets. These scholars built their arguments on local trade records, oral histories, and diplomatic correspondence,

⁶ David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (London: John Murray, 1857. P. 87

⁷ Philip Curtin, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 45.

revealing a much more nuanced narrative of the transition. A.G. Hopkins offered one of the most influential reinterpretations by emphasizing that African leaders were not passive recipients of British trade policies.⁸ Drawing on colonial records and trade correspondence, Hopkins argued that African rulers engaged in development planning that integrated their interests with global markets. He noted that African rulers were far from mere spectators; they played active roles in navigating the transition, using agricultural exports not only to replace slave income but to enhance their political and economic standing.⁹ He highlighted the strategic decisions made by African rulers to selectively align with British development plans, ensuring that their participation in legitimate commerce was mutually beneficial. His research revealed that African economies were not stagnant before European intervention but saw the new trade dynamics as opportunities for local economic growth.

Building on Hopkin's reinterpretation, Martin Lynn's work shifted the focus to the palm oil trade in the Bight of Biafra, arguing that African merchants played a central role in shaping this new agricultural economy.¹⁰ Lynn's analysis relies on oral histories, local market records, and trade data to show that African producers-maintained control over trade networks. He argued that Palm oil was not simply an European demand met by local producers; it was an African-led economic enterprise that capitalized on existing trade routes and structures, adapting to external market needs without surrendering control.¹¹ He noted that:

The figures involved in these trades — the coastal brokers who bought the oil from the inland markets — were as central to the rapid growth of exports in this era as the numerous producers who processed oil in the interior. The success of such brokers in the transporting and marketing of palm oil were seen in the way African brokers — in this period at least — largely determined the practices of the trade with the Europeans. "Whether they liked it or not", Jones noted, 'European traders had . . . to conform to the African trading organization.'¹²

This statement demonstrated that African merchants set the terms for palm oil prices and negotiated with European traders from a position of strength. His research demonstrates that the success of agricultural exports was driven mainly by the internal dynamics of African economies rather than solely by external European pressure. Robin Law's analysis of Dahomey and Asante further supports the narrative of African agency. Drawing on diplomatic correspondence, consular reports, and treaties, Law

⁸ Hopkins, A. G. *An Economic History of West Africa*. London: Longman, 1973. P. 262

⁹ Hopkins, A. G. *An Economic History of West Africa*. P. 262

¹⁰ Lynn, Martin. *Commerce and Economic Change in West Africa: The Palm Oil Trade in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

¹¹ Lynn, Martin. *Commerce and Economic Change in West Africa*. P. 60

¹² Lynn, Martin. *Commerce and Economic Change in West Africa*. P. 60

argues that African leaders like King Ghezo of Dahomey and the Asantehene actively diversified their economies to remain competitive.¹³ He explains that Dahomey's shift from the slave trade to palm oil was a political strategy aimed at preserving autonomy by taking advantage of European rivalries. This highlighted how African leaders negotiated to balance local interests with European expectations and maintain their sovereignty.

Joseph Inikori takes this argument further, placing Africa within the global economic framework. Using export records and industrial production data, Inikori demonstrated that African agricultural exports were not peripheral but essential to European industrialization.¹⁴ He argued that African production supported the growth of European industry, creating economic interdependencies that shaped global trade dynamics. In his analysis, he noted that:

The main thrust of the analysis and discussion in this chapter is directed at the contribution of African-produced raw materials to the overall supply of raw materials for the industrialization process in England from the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁵

His research countered the notion that Africa was a marginal player in the global economy, emphasizing that African agency was integral to shaping African and European markets.

While these newer works, such as AG Hopskin, Robin Law, Chima Korieh, and others, reclaim African agency, they often treat African responses as uniform across the continent. Still, I argue that internal dynamics and regional variations were key in shaping African responses to transitioning from the slave trade to legitimate commerce. The Bight of Biafra, as explored by Chima Korieh, reveals how local actors adapted palm oil production to meet market demands while retaining control over trade networks.¹⁶ Korieh used oral accounts and local records to demonstrate that this economic shift was not imposed by Europeans but initiated and directed by African producers. On the other hand, the case of Dahomey highlights the political acumen of King Ghezo, who exploited European rivalries to maintain economic independence.¹⁷ Robin Law's analysis of diplomatic correspondence reveals that Ghezo's policies were rooted in local governance practices, ensuring that trade expansion aligned with Dahomey's political goal. Similarly, the Asante Kingdom's diversification into gold and

¹³ Robin Law, ed., *From Slave Trade to "Legitimate" Commerce*. P. 20

¹⁴ Inikori, Joseph E. *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England: A Study in International Trade and Economic Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

¹⁵ Inikori, Joseph E. *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England*. P. 363

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Korieh, Chima J. *The Bight of Biafra: From Export Slavery to Slave Production*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

¹⁷ Robin Law, ed., *From Slave Trade to "Legitimate" Commerce*:

kola nuts reflected strategic foresight.¹⁸ By building on pre-existing trade networks, the Asante leadership ensured the region's resilience despite the abolition of slavery. This paper emphasizes that these regional differences were not incidental but central to understanding African agency during the economic transition.

The historiographical shift from Eurocentric narratives to a focus on African agency has reshaped the study of Africa's economic history. However, there is a need for a more nuanced understanding that requires recognizing regional variations and internal dynamics. By focusing on Dahomey, Asante, and the Bight of Biafra, this paper reveals that African societies were not merely reacting to external pressures but actively shaping their economic future through innovation, negotiation, and strategic adaptation.

The Bight of Biafra – Palm Oil Trade and Economic Adaptation

The Bight of Biafra offered a compelling example of African agency during the transition from the slave trade to legitimate commerce. As the demand for slaves declined, African societies in this region resorted to palm oil production, which became a key export for European industries. Scholars such as Martin Lynn and Chima Korieh emphasized that the shift to palm oil was not merely a reaction to European pressure but a deliberate strategy by African merchants and producers to maintain economic stability and control over trade networks. Lynn argued that African merchants in the Bight of Biafra maintained significant control over the production and pricing of palm oil, resisting European efforts to dominate the trade. He noted that palm oil production was rooted in pre-existing trade structures and did not fundamentally alter the internal dynamics of the region's economy.¹⁹ He stated that "the Bight of Biafra ports remained the heart of the trade from its first growth in the 1810s to the middle of the century and beyond."²⁰ On the central role of African brokers and their dominance in the trade, he asserts that:

African brokers remained the determinants of the trading relationship with Europeans in this period. They decided the oil trade's methods and where the frontier between broker and trader lay; European traders conformed to the patterns established by brokers over trust, barter, charges and even anchorages, though it would be wrong to see this as being at the expense of European interests.²¹

Rather than being passive participants, African merchants negotiated favourable trade terms with European traders, ensuring they retained agency in the new commercial system. Similarly, Korieh's analysis of the Biafra hinterland highlighted how the

¹⁸ Robin Law, ed., *From Slave Trade to "Legitimate" Commerce*:

¹⁹ Lynn, Martin. *Commerce and Economic Change in West Africa*. pg 21

²⁰ Lynn, Martin. *Commerce and Economic Change in West Africa*. Pg 21

²¹ Lynn, Martin. *Commerce and Economic Change in West Africa*. Pg 73

transition to palm oil production created challenges and opportunities for African communities. His research demonstrated that local actors actively adapted their practices, adjusting labour systems and production methods to meet the growing European demand for palm oil while preserving internal trade networks. In his position, he maintained that legitimate trade did not alter the earlier economic system of the people. In an attempt to position the Biafra hinterland as people who were already built with the economy of palm oil, he used Ngwaland as a case study to posit that:

The introduction of legitimate commerce did not alter the earlier method of administration of palm trees in Ngwa region, which was interwoven with the land tenure system. Within each compound, every adult male was allowed to harvest the few palm trees that were located near his house, but the palm trees that grew in the communal land were administered by lineage and village head.²²

This underscores that the introduction of legitimate commerce did not alter the earlier method of administration and economic structure of the people, which supported the argument that the trade of palm oil in the bight of Biafra hinterland was initiated and directed by African producers. Both Lynn and Korieh argue that the success of palm oil exports from the Bight of Biafra was driven primarily by internal dynamics, such as local political priorities and social structures, rather than by external European forces. African merchants leveraged existing institutions and networks, ensuring that the transition to legitimate commerce was not a disruption but a reconfiguration of the existing economy. This case study demonstrates that African agency during the 19th-century economic transformation involved strategic adaptation rather than mere reaction. Merchants and producers in the Bight of Biafra ensured that the shift to palm oil was not simply an externally driven process but aligned with local needs and priorities. This challenges the Eurocentric narrative that economic change in Africa was primarily the result of European intervention and highlights the central role of African actors in shaping their economic futures.

Dahomey – Political Strategy and Economic Diversification

The Kingdom of Dahomey exemplifies how African political strategy was central in navigating the economic transition from the slave trade to legitimate commerce. During the reign of King Ghezo, Dahomey faced growing pressure from British abolitionist policies, yet Ghezo skillfully leveraged European rivalries to maintain his political and economic independence. In particular, France's more lenient approach to abolition allowed Ghezo to balance between the slave trade and emerging palm oil markets, ensuring that Dahomey's economy remained stable.²³ Robin Law's research

²²Korieh, Chima J. "The Nineteenth Century Commercial Transition in West Africa: The Case of the Biafra Hinterland." *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2000, pp. 600

²³Robin Law, ed., *From Slave Trade to "Legitimate" Commerce*: pp 20

highlights that Dahomey's shift to palm oil was not simply an economic adjustment but a political strategy to preserve sovereignty. Law explains that while Britain pushed for an end to the slave trade, France's enforcement was less strict, giving Ghezo the flexibility to sustain both trades for a time. Law asserts that:

Even more critically, King Ghezo of Dahomey was able to resist or evade British pressure for the abolition of the slave trade, in large part because the French, although theoretically also committed to abolition, in practice adopted a much less demanding attitude on this issue, and Ghezo was, therefore, able to develop trade in palm oil with them while still continuing the slave trade.²⁴

This dual trade strategy demonstrated that Dahomey's shift to palm oil production was not simply an economic necessity but a deliberate strategy to diversify the economy without abandoning pre-existing systems. This suggests that the transition to legitimate commerce was not an external imposition but a process shaped by African agency. However, this transition was carefully aligned with Dahomey's political interests, ensuring the kingdom retained control over its internal trade networks and governance structures. The case of Dahomey demonstrated that African agency during this period went beyond economic adaptation—it involved complex political manoeuvring. Ghezo's leadership showed the complexity of African responses, as the move to palm oil production was closely connected to local politics and foreign relations. This challenged the idea that African economies were controlled by European powers, showing instead how Dahomey actively balanced both traditional and new trade opportunities. Ghezo's ability to balance local interests with European pressures highlights the complexity of African agency, reinforcing the paper's central argument that African societies were not passive but proactively navigated the challenges of global economic shifts.

Asante – Gold, Kola Nuts, and Trade Networks

The Asante Kingdom provides a powerful example of African agency during the transition from the slave trade to legitimate commerce. As the transatlantic slave trade declined, Asante leaders strategically diversified their economy by expanding the gold trade and intensifying their participation in the kola nut trade. This economic diversification was closely tied to Asante's governance and political stability, ensuring the kingdom's resilience despite shifting global trade patterns. According to Ivor Wilks, Asante's involvement in the gold trade dates back centuries, and as the slave trade became less profitable, the kingdom reoriented its economy around gold production. Wilks explains that gold served as both a political tool and a commercial asset, which reinforced Asante's influence over neighbouring regions and maintained its standing in

²⁴ Robin Law, ed., *From Slave Trade to "Legitimate" Commerce*: pp 20

global trade networks. He argued that Gold was not simply a commodity for export but a medium through which Asante projected its influence and sustained political authority. He also noted that Asantehene used gold revenue to strengthen the kingdom's military and administrative structures, thereby ensuring Asante's dominance in the region even after the decline of the slave trade.²⁵ This underscored how Asante leaders adapted existing trade networks to align with the new economic realities, showing that the transition to legitimate commerce involved internal agency rather than external imposition.

In addition to gold, Asante intensified its participation in the kola nut trade, connecting the kingdom to Northern African Islamic markets via trans-Saharan trade routes. T.C. McCaskie highlighted that kola nuts were more than a commodity; they were culturally significant and played a key role in regional exchange networks. He noted that the trade in kola nut was deeply rooted in social customs, and its expansion reflected Asante's ability to integrate cultural practices with economic needs.²⁶ This involvement in trans-Saharan trade ensured that Asante's economy was not dependent solely on European markets, providing economic independence. It also highlighted Asante's proactive efforts to manage her economic transition and maintain control over her commercial networks during the shift to legitimate commerce. The economic diversification into gold and kola nuts were closely tied to Asante's political structure. Robin Law points out that the Asantehene (king) played a crucial role in directing Asante's economic response to the declining slave trade. The Asantehene and his advisors leveraged the region's natural resources—especially its abundant gold deposits—to remain economically viable. At the same time, Asante intensified her involvement in the kola nut trade, which connected the kingdom to Islamic markets in Northern Africa.²⁷ In his words regarding the economic place of Asante in gold export before and after the slave trade, he noted that:

In the eighteenth century, as the overseas demand for slaves increased, Asante sold less gold at the coast. Now the trend was reversed, with gold exports being redirected from the savanna market. In addition, the indications are that the overall level of gold exports rose.²⁸

The highlights revealed Ashanti's dominant role in gold trading as an African agency in the transatlantic slave trade era. Asante leadership's decision to prioritize these resources reflects a proactive economic strategy rather than a reactive shift imposed by European powers. Asante exercised agency in trade negotiations, maintaining

²⁵ Ivor Wilks, *Forests of Gold: Essays on the Akan and the Kingdom of Asante* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1993).

²⁶ T. C. McCaskie, *Asante Identities: History and Modernity in an African Village, 1850-1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

²⁷ Robin Law, *From Slave Trade to 'Legitimate' Commerce: 23*

²⁸ Robin Law, *From Slave Trade to 'Legitimate' Commerce: 96*

autonomy by dictating the exchange conditions and ensuring that external actors did not dominate the local economy. The case of Asante demonstrated that strategic decisions made by African leaders shaped the economic transition from the slave trade to legitimate commerce. The Asantehehe ensured the kingdom's economic resilience and political stability by expanding gold production and intensifying the kola nut trade. This challenges the narrative that European intervention overwhelmed African economies, instead revealing a complex engagement with internal and external trade networks. Asante's ability to balance relations with European and trans-Saharan markets reinforced the central argument of this paper: that African societies actively shaped their economic futures, adapting to new market conditions while safeguarding their sovereignty. In alignment with the other case studies of the Bight of Biafra and Dahomey, Asante's experience illustrates African societies' diverse strategies to navigate the challenges of the 19th-century economic transformation. This paper emphasizes that these regional differences were not incidental but central to understanding African agency during the economic transition.

Comparative Analysis and Conclusion

The case studies of the Bight of Biafra, Dahomey, and Asante highlight the diverse ways African societies adapted to the decline of the slave trade and engaged in legitimate commerce. While each region faced similar external pressures from European abolitionist policies and shifting global markets, their responses reflect distinct strategies shaped by internal dynamics, political priorities, and available resources. Together, these examples underscore the central argument of this paper: African societies were proactive agents in reshaping their economic futures, actively navigating global economic changes rather than passively submitting to European interventions.

Each region pursued economic diversification as a way to maintain control over trade networks and sustain political stability. The Bight of Biafra pivoted to palm oil production, capitalizing on existing trade structures to integrate into European markets while maintaining local control. Merchants negotiated trade terms directly with European traders, ensuring that they retained influence over production and distribution. Under King Ghezo, Dahomey adopted a dual trade strategy, balancing palm oil exports and the slave trade. This economic flexibility, supported by diplomatic manipulation of European rivalries, allowed Ghezo to sustain the kingdom's economy while resisting British abolitionist pressure. Moreover, Asante diversified into gold and kola nut trade, leveraging trans-Saharan networks alongside European markets. This strategy enabled Asante to reduce dependence on European demand while using profits to support local governance and military infrastructure. These diverse strategies demonstrate that African societies exercised agency through economic adaptation, ensuring their resilience in shifting global trade patterns.

Political leadership was central to how these societies navigated the transition to legitimate commerce. Dahomey's Ghezo exemplified the use of political diplomacy and exploiting divisions between Britain and France to preserve autonomy and ensure the kingdom could benefit from both the slave trade and palm oil exports. Asante's political system integrated commerce with governance, ensuring that the Asantehene and his advisors maintained tight control over trade networks and negotiated favorable trade terms with European and Islamic merchants. In the Bight of Biafra, while political structures were more decentralized, merchants and local leaders exercised trade autonomy, directly engaging with European traders and regulating the flow of commodities to maintain economic leverage. These examples highlight how political strategies and trade control were intertwined, enabling African leaders to maintain sovereignty and negotiate favorable trade conditions despite growing European influence.

While European abolitionist policies and industrial demand influenced the shift toward legitimate commerce, the case studies reveal that internal dynamics played an equally, if not more significant, role. In Asante, the availability of gold and the development of kola nut trade with Islamic markets shaped the kingdom's economic focus and reduced dependence on European trade partners. Dahomey's leadership prioritized political stability by managing internal governance and external trade relationships through diplomatic flexibility. The Bight of Biafra illustrates that pre-existing trade networks could be adapted to fit new economic realities, exemplified by palm oil production. These internal dynamics challenge the Eurocentric narrative that external pressures primarily shaped African economies and demonstrate the agency of African societies in responding to global economic change.

The comparison of the Bight of Biafra, Dahomey, and Asante demonstrates that African agency was a decisive factor in transitioning from the slave trade to legitimate commerce. From being passive recipients of European policies, African leaders, merchants, and communities actively shaped their economic trajectories by leveraging internal resources, adapting trade networks, and negotiating with external actors. Each region employed distinct strategies that reflected their local priorities and opportunities, whether through economic diversification, political diplomacy, or strategic trade control. This study challenges the dominant Eurocentric narrative, which tends to portray African societies as overwhelmed by European intervention. Instead, the case studies reveal a more nuanced understanding of how African societies engaged with global markets while safeguarding local autonomy and sovereignty. African agency was not monolithic but took many forms—whether through economic adaptation in the Bight of Biafra, diplomatic manoeuvring in Dahomey, or trade diversification in Asante.

While this paper has explored key examples of African agencies, further research could expand the scope to include other regions of West Africa to provide a broader understanding of the transition to legitimate commerce. Explore archival consular and

missionary records in greater detail to uncover additional primary evidence of African trade practices. Investigate the long-term impacts of these trade strategies on the political and economic development of post-colonial African states. By centering African actions and decisions, this paper contributes to a more balanced understanding of Africa's economic history, which recognizes the African agency during the 19th-century transition to legitimate commerce.

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