

Portuguese. By the 1640s, both Dutch and English had become engaged in a trade that would extract maximum 'capital value': the Dutch for gold, in exchange for mass-produced cloth from their looms; the English for enslaved persons whose labour would accrue value in the sugar plantations of the Indies, in exchange for iron and homemade copper. During their crossing of the Middle Passage to the Americas these enslaved persons would also consume large amounts of grain produced on the Gold Coast, with as many as 200,000 pounds of grain carried on some ships.⁸³

At the same time, the import of copper, cloth and iron as items of exchange would extend the market for commercial trade far inland. As one 1602 report put it, 'although there are so many Basons brought thither, and no one that weareth so much as Linnen, yet you see but few old Copper things there, and therefore you must thinke, that there is great store of people inhabiting further within the land, which use so great quantitie of such things.'⁸⁴

The cumulative impact of all these processes was large. With the growing import of firearms stoking instability, only a kingdom that could entrench its economic position in a global context of the exchange of values would prosper. Such a kingdom would rise in the eighteenth century in the Asante Empire, building on structures of previous Akan powers such as Denkyira and Bono-Mansu. Asante would prove able initially to retain, rather than export, gold, and thus develop not unfavourable currency exchanges. It consolidated its administration and army. As an intermediary between the Atlantic and Saharan trades, balancing warfare, enslavement and currency exchanges, Asante would survive long into the nineteenth century as the 'kingdom of gold'.

4

Rivers of Cloth, Masks of Bronze: The Bights of Benin and Biafra

The upmarket suburb of Rio Vermelho lies a short way from the downtown of Salvador da Bahia, beyond the apartments and beaches of Barra. Long the colonial capital of Brazil, Salvador's history breaks out in sad, lively clusters, unexpectedly, a little like Brazil itself: dilapidated mansions selling local-made tiles in the Moorish style squat beside ice-cream parlours, while Baroque eighteenth-century churches stand high above the sea, fronting squares where hippies gather to sell each other necklaces.

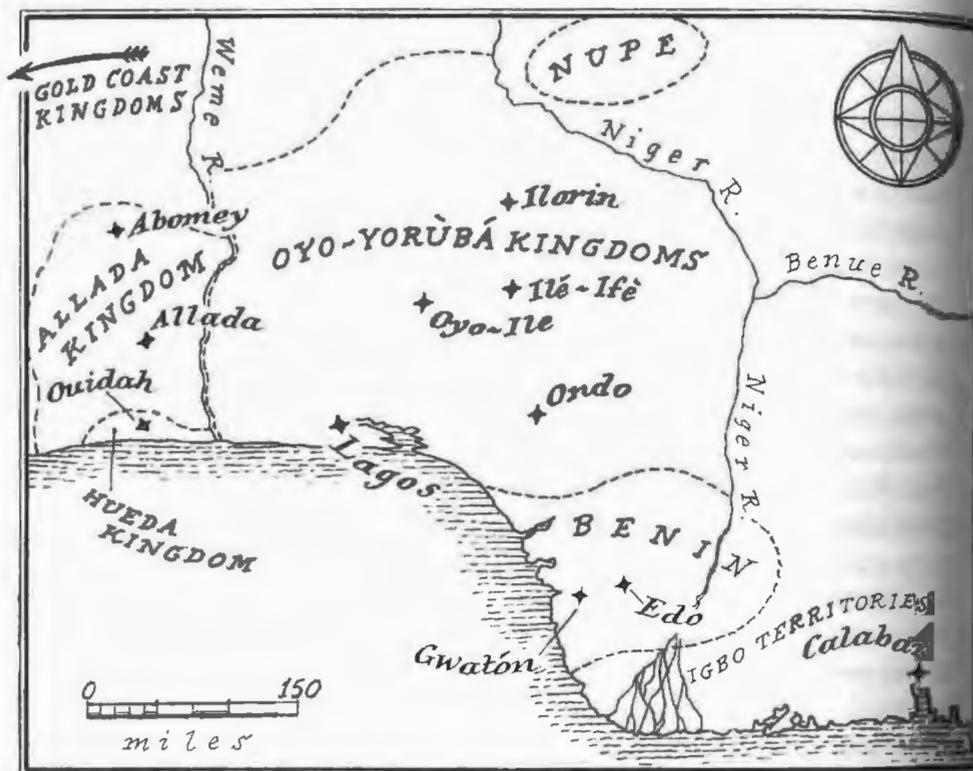
In Rio Vermelho the history emerges differently. On the waterfront, as the beach curves around towards a cluster of restaurants, is the Casa das Orixás de Iemanjá, a centre for worship in the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé. All day, members of Bahia's large population of Candomblé worshippers descend on the site, praying, performing ritual ablutions and staring out at the sea, at once a place of loss and memory. The ancestors of many came from what are now Benin and Nigeria, from the ports of Badagry, Ouidah and Porto Novo, and this is why the Yorùbá term *orixá* (spirit-deity) is used in Brazil. The connections between what Bahians call the Costa da Mina and Salvador run deep, in the palm oil (*aceite dendê*) and cassava-leaf stew (*manisoba*), the *acarajé* and *bobo de camarão* that make Bahian food far and away the best in Brazil. And they are there in the Candomblé stalls that have been set up outside iconic churches in the city, selling the wherewithal for the shrines and practice of a religion that was born in the Bights of Benin and Biafra, and then transformed in Brazil.

Though most of these connections took shape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they had begun by the end of the seventeenth.

Bahian ships increasingly sought out the Costa da Mina from the late 1670s onwards. This coastline east of the Gold Coast fragments into long, coastal lagoons interspersed with sandbars and river estuaries, making it a good location to transport supplies and persons for the trade in captives. But, as with all the regions we have looked at so far, this part of West Africa had a long history predating the rise of the Atlantic. Inland, where the coastal lagoons and forests give way to the savannah, many important states arose from the fourteenth century onwards: Allada, Hueda and, in time, Dahomey, all in present-day Benin to the west; and then Benin, Nupe and Oyo to the east of Lagos, in modern Nigeria.¹

To the south and east of the Kingdom of Benin, the coastline fragments further into a maze of creeks and swamps, and a patchwork of rivers. Here Igala and Igbo peoples developed complex trading systems along the many rivers of the Niger Delta, related to exchanges of forest products and the weaving of cloth. In time, the important centres of Calabar and Bonny would grow around the maze of creeks and rivers curling inland from the Atlantic coast. Further north, Igbo-Ukwu was a major civilizational centre, site of the forging of sophisticated bronzes since at least the ninth century. Igbo and Igala peoples shared various technologies and practices, including farming, fishing and iron-smelting techniques, and religious artefacts. A matrilineal people, the Igbo gave great importance to the role of women in society; and, as the times of raiding for captives increased, people often would return to their mother's village, which was (and is) seen as a place of sanctuary.²

In this chapter, the origins of the different peoples and states of this important part of West Africa are traced, along with the pattern of economic change we have been following. Yorùbá, Fon, Gbe and Igbo peoples in particular would make central contributions, not only in their own homelands, but also to world history and cultures. Their foods, religious beliefs, ideas and military techniques would have a major part to play in the shaping of the New World. Yet meanwhile, in their West African homelands, major changes were under way that would alter their worlds forever. The import of large amounts of copper and cowries changed economies and ideas of self-expression, reflecting transformations of identity in the era of a violent modernity.



Aja, Benin, Igbo and Yorùbá polities

ART, BELIEF AND POWER BEFORE THE ATLANTIC ERA

The first person to write a history of the Yorùbá, Samuel Johnson, saw Yorùbá peoples as migrants who had arrived from outside the region and founded the sacred Yorùbá centre of Ilé-Ifè. Archaeological evidence shows that this had certainly happened before 1000 CE, as glass beads existed by that time, alongside forges that melted them down and refashioned them into the insignia of high office at Ilé-Ifè. The grove of Olókun, just two miles from Ilé-Ifè, contained fired crucibles that were blended with beads in a beautiful array of colours. Beads remained core insignia of office throughout the next centuries.³

It is unclear whether some of these beads may have been imported through the trans-Saharan trade, but certainly the peoples who lived in the region of Ilé-Ifè developed their own technologies to fire beads. Glass beads found here have a higher lime and alumina content than those of European or Islamic production. Of 13,000 beads recently excavated by the archaeologist Abidemi Babatunde Babalola, 75 per cent are blue, while some also are red. Colour was a vital signifier of power and status with these beads, which may have been an early form of currency. Given the spiritual role that these beads held, it is again clear that currencies had more than a merely economic role in the pre-Atlantic era, but were also valued for their religious power.⁴

Manufacture and craftwork were thus deeply rooted in what was an integrated network of city states from the twelfth or the thirteenth century. To the north of Ilé-Ifè, Nupe's urban structure grew from around 1200 onwards. At Ilé-Ifè itself, potsherd pavements were laid by the late twelfth or the early thirteenth century. Some of the evidence for the shared social structure among these different states is precisely in a common pattern of urban life, where pavements in Benin, Ilé-Ifè and Osògbò were all made with potsherd.⁵

There was here a strong tradition of manufacturing for trade. Beyond the importance of iron in Nupe, and brass in Benin, there was a very old tradition of cloth-weaving. The manufacturing of loom-patterned cotton was long-standing, with archaeological evidence showing that it



Brass head with a beaded crown and plume, Ifè, Nigeria.

was widespread by the eleventh century in the savannah regions north of what became Oyo. There was also extremely skilled weaving in the northern part of Igbo country, where a strong craft base developed that endured for many centuries. Indeed, cloth from these areas was highly valued as far afield as Brazil during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Igbo societies developed trade networks in the maze of rivers and creeks around the Niger Delta; the fame they developed as traders remained with them into the twentieth century, and is there to this day in postcolonial Nigeria.⁶

Igbo political structures, language and religious practice were different, therefore, from those of the peoples who lived further north, but they were not totally separated from these societies. Indeed, some Igbo origin myths suggest close connections, stating for instance that the settlements around Enugu were founded by someone from Benin. Thus, across a very wide territory, the peoples in the savannah and forest regions between the Niger Delta and Hueda were interconnected, with

clear linguistic, religious and political links that cut across modern nation-state boundaries. Such commonalities then extended with migrations from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, and were easier to see in the years after decolonization.⁷

Contact, where it did exist, was based on trade. In time, this led to intermarriage and other levels of mutual identification. The first Bishop of Nigeria, Samuel Crowther (himself a Yorùbá), described it thus in the mid-nineteenth century: 'This country comprises many tribes governed by their own chiefs and having their own laws. At one time they were all tributaries to one Sovereign, the King of Yorùbá [by which Crowther meant Oyo], including Benin on the East and Dahomey on the West, but are now independent.'⁸

Benin was the major kingdom in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Though it remained intact until 1897, over time its power waned and it became subject to the Yorùbá state of Oyo, which flourished from its rise in the seventeenth century to its fall in 1835. In the western part, there were small independent states in the fifteenth century such as existed on the Gold Coast. By the early seventeenth century Allada had arisen, most likely following migration of Aja peoples from Tado, in the north-east of what became Dahomey.* Allada was centred in what is now the Republic of Benin but with influence stretching into southern Nigeria and Togo. Allada's power would eventually be supplanted, first by Hueda, and then by Dahomey, from the 1720s onwards. Like Benin, Dahomey would remain a major political force until European colonial invasion in the late nineteenth century. Its military power would in time trigger the creation of new communities, formed by bands of refugees fleeing from its wars.⁹

In spite of the multiplicity of states that rose and fell from 1500 to 1900 west of the Niger Delta, one feature that united them was a shared spiritual practice. As new kingdoms arose, such as Benin, they retained a very close connection to the original heartland of Ilé-Ifè. One oral history recounts that in the late thirteenth century bronze casting was taught to the Bini at Edo (the capital of Benin) from a master brass caster sent from Ifè. Moreover, heads of deceased obas (kings) of Benin were sent for burial to Ilé-Ifè for centuries. With a

* In what is now the Republic of Togo.

Common spiritual heritage and shared political structures, very close connections would develop right across the region, over a span of hundreds of years; and so it should be no surprise that the earliest currencies, such as the glass beads mentioned above, had a religious value above any reductive economic rate of exchange.¹⁰

These connections were described by the Portuguese chronicler João de Barros. Writing in the 1540s, Barros wrote of an embassy sent from Benin to João II of Portugal (1481-95), where the Bini ambassador described the relationship to Ilé-Ifè in the fifteenth century: '[250 leagues distant] there was a King, the most powerful of those parts, which they call Ogané [the Ooni of Ilé-Ifè]; who among the principal peoples of the region of Beni was held in the same esteem and veneration as the Popes are among us.'¹¹ Barros focused on Benin because it was where the Portuguese developed the most complex trading relations in this period. It is certainly one of the best-known states of precolonial West Africa. The Benin Bronze casts collected in the British Museum and many museums outside Africa offer a challenging face to a world which has usually doubted the complexity and potential of early-West African kingdoms. Thus, on taking possession of the Benin capital of Edo, during the colonial conquest of 1897, British troops were amazed to find exquisite ancient bronze carvings adorning the royal palace. These were looted for the benefit of European museums then developing their collections of 'primitive art'.

The bronzes were commissioned by obas to commemorate key events in their rule, and during the reigns of their predecessors. They functioned, therefore, as official histories of the kingdom and mnemonics for successive generations of the Benin Court chroniclers, the Ihogbe and Ogboka. However, while early generations of Western art historians saw the bronzes as reflecting early Portuguese influence, they embody entirely Bini aesthetics and skills. The necklaces in the bronzes are often of leopards' teeth, while symbols of royal power and status such as kings mounted on horseback and the place of royal slaves are widespread.¹²

Indeed, when describing the connection of Edo to Ilé-Ifè, João de Barros also offered a precious description of the variety of bronze manufactures of these kingdoms: 'As a sign of confirmation [of the new Oba of Benin], this Prince Ogané sends them a staff and a cap . . . all



Brass cast of the Oba of Benin with adjutants, sixteenth century.

made of shining bronze, in place of a sceptre and crown, and they also send them a cross made of the same bronze to wear around the neck.¹³

Casters in Ilé-Ifè and Edo use a method known to Western art historians as 'lost wax', in which an intricate wax model is constructed over a clay core. Clay is then diligently layered upon the wax and heated, and the wax melts through a furrow. Molten metal is poured into the mould left behind, and the hardened clay prised away, with the image revealed now cast in the mould. These firing techniques show the sophistication of manufacturing in Benin and neighbouring areas before the fifteenth century. They were likely also related to the methods of firing beads into royal insignia that, as we have seen, date back to at least 1000 CE.¹⁴

This region thus shows the strength of West African kingdoms throughout the medieval period. However, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were a time of transition, when the strength of this network of connected states was eroded. Major wars at some point between 1450 and 1575 (known as the Ókìpò Wars) pitted the states against one another. They may be connected to the construction of the fortified ditches around Ijebu, the *eredos*, built at some point in the late-fourteenth or early-fifteenth century. The power of Benin, Ilé-Ifè, Nupe and smaller kingdoms such as Ìjèsà had begun to decline by the end of the sixteenth century. The centralized state of Oyo arose, with a powerful cavalry and far-reaching trade networks, and Oyo was to be a major force throughout this part of West Africa, until its fall in 1835.¹⁵

TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

While Benin, Nupe and Ilé-Ifè had long histories before 1500, it is important that – just as in the other parts of West Africa we have looked at – major changes were afoot in the fifteenth century. At this time Nupe and Oyo to the north were expanding; and Nupe's growth was related to the ascending power of Kano, where, as we saw in Chapter 1, the Kano Chronicle notes a link between the two at this time. The Bini oba, Ewuare (enthroned c. 1440), responded by strengthening political structures and expanding the road networks. The role of town chiefs was enhanced, and three associations of palace chiefs were founded. Though threatened by Nupe, Benin extended itself eastwards to the lands of the Igbo and Ijo on the right bank of the Niger, and west towards the Lagos lagoon from which today's megacity derives its name.¹⁶

What had led to Benin's expansion in the decades prior to the Portuguese arrival in the 1480s? Again, the way in which the whole West African subregion influenced the trans-Saharan trading system and thereby Europe offers a persuasive answer. Nupe's rise was linked to Kano, a major centre for gold exports as we have seen. Benin's flourishing trading system, and the growth of cloth production, encouraged

the consolidation of political and administrative structures. It was precisely the West African 'booms' of the fifteenth century that in their turn had influenced the desire of the Portuguese to explore southwards and led to their arrival at the coastal port of Gwatón in 1486; and in this boom, Benin had its part to play, just like Mali, Songhay, Kano, Mossi and the gold-producers of Bono-Mansu alongside them.¹⁷

Thus, the Portuguese found a newly confident state when they arrived. Early connections were amicable. Aiming to find a route to the spice trade of India, the Portuguese were thrilled with the pepper that grew in Benin; on arriving at Gwatón, they returned with it to the spice markets of Flanders, where it was very well received. Also returning to Portugal in the fleet was a Bini ambassador, who was welcomed at Court in Portugal and presented with a gift of rich clothing. Bini ambassadors continued to attend the Court at Lisbon and Oba Ozolua sent another embassy in 1514; one of them, known as Dom Jorge to the Portuguese, was given a velvet cape and shoes and a camlet waistcoat by King Manoel I, with the same being given to his companion, 'dom Antonio'.¹⁸

The main settlement of the Portuguese was at Gwatón, but relations with the Bini were good enough for them to go frequently to the capital at Edo. The best description of Benin at this time is by Duarte Pacheco Pereira, from c. 1506. Gwatón was a town of around 2,000 adult male residents (*vezinhos*), perhaps 10,000 people in all therefore. It was around 30 miles from Edo by a good road, and Edo itself was surrounded by a large and deep ditch, and was big enough to be about three miles across from gate to gate of the city. Benin's territory, meanwhile, was extensive, being around 250 miles wide and 125 long.¹⁹

However, the Portuguese soon ran into trouble. Following the 1514 embassy to Lisbon, in 1515 some Portuguese gave military assistance to Benin, in a conflict that was probably against Igala invaders, and linked to the Ókipò Wars; after it, the oba promised to convert to Christianity and allow easy terms of trade. But this was impossible given that the spiritual centre at Ilé-Ifè was so strongly connected to the political power of the Bini kings. In 1539, the Portuguese sent a mission to Benin, but their missionaries soon gave up, writing to

João III of Portugal that there was no 'confidence whatever nor indications to suggest that the said King [of Benin] will convert'. When the missionaries had given the oba a letter from João III, the oba had put it in a box and failed to open it for three months. Moreover, the land 'was very dangerous, full of illnesses, and not as profitable as had been hoped'. Once again, the missionaries and traders were doubtless yellow and feverish with malaria, weak, ragged and incapacitated.²⁰

There was, in fact, little to tempt Benin from the Portuguese side, beyond money (as we shall see). The Portuguese brought cloths, but very fine cloths were already available locally. They offered luxury items, but these the Bini could easily do without. They could also offer military support, which was useful, but the price asked was too high; the obas could not countenance a conversion to the outsiders' religion when the basis of their political power was spiritual. The core of Benin was expanding towards Lagos, and the obas had seen off Nupe. After the victories of 1516, the Bini began to withdraw from the Portuguese, and that remained the pattern throughout the rest of the sixteenth century.

To judge from Pieter de Marees's 1600 description of the oba's Court, this was a state confident in its own power and unlikely to be deflected from this by any mere baubles offered by the new traders:

The [king]'s Court is very big and has inside it many large, square courtyards surrounded by galleries, in which one always finds guards. I have gone so far into that Court that I have passed through four such courtyards . . . [And] when a nobleman comes to Court, he comes on horseback . . . they have as many servants walking behind them as befits their status. Some Servants have great Shields with which they protect the Nobleman against the Sun . . . the others follow behind, making some music: some play Drums, others Horns and Flutes.²¹

Such descriptions, and the huge expansion of bronze-cast-making that seems to have occurred in the sixteenth century, suggest that this was a time of great cultural flowering. This was the era of Benin's most famous obas, Ewuare, Ozolua and Esigie. Yet, while Benin's power and majesty grew, oral recollections of the arrival of the Portuguese (known as the Ikpotoki by the Bini) imply that other, longer-term

changes were also at work. One oral account, taken down in the 1890s, describes very well the relationships that emerged:

This is how the white men came to [E]do. King Esigie was very old . . . [he] sent messengers with some tusks as presents to the country by the big water [the Benin River] where the white men used to come to trade, and they told the messengers to go and salute any white men they found there and beg them to come, which they did, and ever since then white men have come to Benin. The white men stayed long, many many years they came to trade, and if a man comes to trade he must sit down and sell his things softly softly; they used to buy ivory, redwood, oil, gum, and slaves; then there was a different white man who used to come, but he only bought slaves . . . These white men used to sit down at Gwato and there they built houses, big houses, with big doors, in which they kept their goods and slaves. We never heard of these white men bringing white women here, but the King could dash them for some girl to wife.²²

Some of the Benin Bronzes, too, capture the Bini response to the Portuguese arrival. There are depictions of the Portuguese, often alongside some of the trappings of their trade: books, manufactured objects (such as jugs and cups) and horses. Aspects of the Portuguese language were also imported, as was also the case in Senegambia; the Edo for 'ball' is *ibolu* and the Portuguese *bola*; the Edo for 'coconut palms' is *ekoka* and the Portuguese *coqueiro*;^{*} and the Edo for 'store' is *amagazemi* and the Portuguese *armazem*. In short, when the Portuguese presence brought useful objects, these were adopted along with the Portuguese vocabulary; but Edo culture was far too strong and connected to the long-standing spiritual practices tied to Ilé-Ifé to be overcome by Portuguese influences.²³

There is one other aspect of this oral history of early Edo-Portuguese relations that is worth noting, in the longer term. The account makes plain – very accurately – the diverse nature of the early trade, where goods from Benin (pepper, especially) were as prized as enslaved persons. Over time, however, the account tells us, the diversity of the

* While palm trees producing nuts were native to Africa, the coconut palm was imported by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century from Asia.



Portrait of a Portuguese trader, differentiated by long hair, beard and differently shaped sword.

trade disappeared, until enslaved persons were the main demand of the solitary, feverish male Portuguese traders, who – reversing traditional gender roles in societies where usually it was the women who traded – came and expected the Bini king to 'dash them a girl for wife'. And it was these changes that would come to embody the economic and political relationships of the region with the wider world.

A COPPER RENAISSANCE: BENIN'S ARTISTIC AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

A mid-sixteenth-century account from a Portuguese ship's pilot gives an interesting perspective on the ritual power at the heart of royal

majesty in Benin. The pilot described how, when an oba died, a large cavity was dug out of the ground to create a royal mausoleum, in which the deceased oba was placed with his most loyal and trusted followers to keep him company. A large rock was then placed above the grave, so that none of the followers could escape, until they died one by one, keeping the king company in his journey beyond this world. Then the new oba was informed, and was able to begin his reign.²⁴

Such accounts may well be more symbolic than factual. They show that much 'written history' about West Africa in this period is, in fact, based on oral history, which is why these texts need to be understood through the lens of other accounts and not seen as repositories of 'fact'. For this account and others like it were clearly recounted by African traders and go-betweens to the Europeans, who then wrote them down as they understood them. The pilot who wrote this account visited the island of São Tomé frequently, and would have heard this tale from traders there who sailed back and forth to Benin. These traders would never have been permitted by the Bini to observe these funeral rites; nor did they understand the oral cultures of Bini traders and their metaphorical framing of narratives, which meant that such stories may have been intended mainly to reflect the power and ritual importance of the oba. Certainly, these complexities mean that we cannot know if they are accurate.

Another account of this royal power was given by Andreas Ulzheimer who became heavily involved during a visit of 1604, when the crew of the sloop in which he was travelling was called on by the oba to help quell an uprising near Lagos. After their victory, the oba offered to hold his annual festivities, 'when, for once in the year, he lets himself be seen by the people'. The festival was designed to show off the oba's majesty, religious power and political authority to the full:

[The oba] comes riding out into the town on a horse decorated with red scarlet and draped with red corals . . . imposingly dressed after their fashion in red scarlet cloth [*ododo*] and draped not only with fine red corals but also with other strange things. In addition he hangs over his head and back, down to his heels, a white horse-tail, in such a way that anyone who see it is frightened . . . six thousand men march

in front of him, and when he comes, all the people fall down on their knees and clap their hands.²⁵

The extraordinary pomp of these festivities was confirmed by some Capuchin missionaries who were able to see them in 1651, and wrote later that 'they would never have believed that there were so many so finely dressed people' in Benin, coming across them dancing and playing musical instruments in the oba's court.²⁶

The religious power inherent in these festivals evoked the spiritual strength that saw the obas spurn the Catholic missionaries. A large number of different Ugie, or state festivals, were introduced by obas from the later fifteenth century onwards. This began with Oba Ewuare's installation of the shrine his royal ancestors, known as the Ugie Erha Oba. It was followed in the sixteenth century by the fertility festival of Eko Ikurhe (related to clearing farmland) and festivals to deities of the royal palace known as the Ugie Azama. A religious and cultural renewal was under way, prompted by Benin's political expansion, and by the confidence and power that went with this.²⁷

By 1600, this growth was everywhere apparent. Arriving at Lagos, Ulzheimer found that the town 'belongs to the King of Benin', while Allada, too, was said to be subject to Benin. But Lagos itself was a frontier town, where only soldiers and four military commanders were resident. This alone would have been enough, though, to create a lively economy. Many traders went to Lagos by canoe and over land with 'their wares, which consist of beautiful cotton cloths woven in all kinds of colours and patterns'. Finally, when Ulzheimer and his crewmen went to help the oba against the rebels, the oba's army numbered 10,000, which suggests that Benin's expansion west to Lagos had been considerable. The oba had built a formidable fighting machine: when they conquered the town, 'they struck down all the men fit for military service.'²⁸

This militarized expansion went with state and urban consolidation. When the Dutch geographer Olfert Dapper compiled an account of Africa from various sources (many of which he plagiarized, never having set foot on the continent himself), he described how Benin 'boasts many good towns . . . lying eight or nine days' journey beyond [Edo]'. By this time a city wall had been built, rising to a height of 10 feet; it

was 'double Pallisado'd with thick Trees, with spans of five or six Foot, laid Crossways, fasten'd together, and Palister'd over with Red Clay. Edo itself had very wide streets. The houses stood in rows, 'with slop'd roofs, covered with Palm leaves'; they were very spacious, with long galleries, and different rooms and apartments. The roofs were held together with iron nails, which were also used to weld together door panels.²⁹

Just as Edo had grown and become more elaborate and impressive (from the wood-lined ditch that surrounded it in 1500 to the wall of the seventeenth century), so had Benin's administrative structure. The complex military hierarchies required to raise an army of 10,000 were replicated in the organization of the state. Each town had a council of chiefs or nobles that ran it on a day-to-day basis, with Gwatón having five chiefs by the seventeenth century and other towns seven or more. Minor civil disputes were settled in the smaller towns, while a higher court sat daily at Edo for criminal cases.³⁰

In other words, what emerged in Benin by the early seventeenth century was a state whose expansion was underpinned by many of the same features of what are considered normative to political history in Europe during the same period. In Benin, as in many other African and European nations, there was a close relationship between the expansion of the state and that of the military, and a significant increase in long-distance trade. Moreover, as in Europe, these political changes went with what the historian José Lingna Nafafé has described as a 'transformation in subjectivities' (or what in Europe is seen as the Renaissance, which, of course, was under way at the same time). Whereas among the Sape of Sierra Leone this was represented in their ivory carvings, and among many peoples in Senegambia it could be seen through the transformation of existing musical and masking styles, in Benin the way in which people changed their sense of identity can be viewed today through the famous bronzes. The huge expansion in bronze casting, the choosing of new subjects such as the Portuguese traders and their trade goods, and the historicization of each succeeding oba on the palace walls – all reflected a new awareness of Bini identity. This was grounded in militarized strength, with symbols of power through the representations of horses and weaponry, and the importance of relations with outsiders through the depiction of the Portuguese.³¹

Bronze casters also had an important military function. Bini casters soon drew on Portuguese designs of helmets and armour plating, and even attempted to reproduce cannons, as the oba's army grew. Thus, the bronzes had a role both in expressing new identities and in advancing Benin's power. The significance of bronze casting to Bini identity was emphasized through the fact that it was the casters (Igun Bronmwon) who were the highest-ranking craft guild within Edo, above the ironsmiths (Igun Ematon), ivory and wood carvers (Igbe-nmwan), leather workers (Iskepori) and weavers (Owina n'Ido).³²

As in Europe, underpinning all of this was an economic transformation. In Benin, as elsewhere, the sixteenth century saw an enormous growth in the currency base, and thereby in the market and in trade. The key currency initially was copper, and imports grew rapidly. An early account described how copper was used in the first trade between the Bini and the Portuguese. The Portuguese bought enslaved persons from the Bini, Duarte Pacheco Pereira wrote around 1506, with each war captive selling for 15 manillas of copper. This, of course, was not very much, and documents from 1517 show that already the number required for the purchase of captives had risen to 57. By 1522, manillas were also being used to buy basic provisions in Benin, such as yams, wood and water, all of which were needed to feed enslaved persons on ships for the return voyage to the new sugar plantations of São Tomé. Manillas would become a currency widely used throughout this part of West Africa long into the nineteenth century.³³

The acquisition of these manillas was important, as they increased the circulation of an object of value that had predated European trade. Archaeological digs undertaken in Benin in the 1970s showed that copper and its alloys had been used in casting and for other artistic purposes from around the thirteenth century, that's to say, for 200 years before the arrival of the Portuguese. Thus, by importing large numbers of manillas, Benin obas were adding hugely to their stock of this precious symbolic metal. However, these digs also threw up a remarkable conundrum: while all the sources show that huge amounts of copper were imported to Benin during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the archaeologists found just seven manillas, most of which were not of European design. The others, tellingly, predated European arrival.³⁴



Manilla currency, Bende, Niger Delta region.

So what on earth were the imported manillas used for? Beyond the melting down of copper for recasting in military hardware, as shields and helmets, Dapper's compilation of existing accounts in the seventeenth century provides a significant clue. When describing the oba's palace, he noted that it had innumerable courts and apartments, 'containing within fair and long Galleries, one larger than the other, but all supported on Pillars of Wood, cover'd from the top to the bottom with melted copper, whereon are Ingraven their Warlike Deeds and Battels and are kept with exceeding Curiosity'. In other words, quite a large part of the manillas would appear to have been melted down to construct the famous bronzes. Thus, what distinguished this use of currency from the use of gold in Europe and silver in China to accrue surplus value at this time was that Benin appears to have employed much of the new currency base to refashion self-images and identities.³⁵

Alongside the use of copper manillas as something that was highly valued came the cowrie shell. By as early as 1520, cowries were being brought annually by the Portuguese, who stockpiled them in São

Tomé; the cowries were used mainly to purchase captives in Gwatón, who were then taken to Elmina to be sold. This was easy for the Portuguese, as they simply loaded up their India ships sailing to and from Goa with cowries from the Maldives, which they brought back as ballast around the Cape of Good Hope, ready to trade with West Africa. As with copper, the trade was marked by rapid inflation. From 1522 to 1527, the price of an enslaved captive at Benin, paid for in cowries, rose by 15 per cent, while the number of cowries used to buy a standard load of yams increased from 8,000 to 89,000. As the historian Robert Garfield has noted, whereas in the 1520s cowrie imports were still described according to how many shells were carried, by the 1530s they were assessed according to weight, with 27 *quintais** of cowries carried in one ship of 1529 and as many as 400 *quintais* in one of 1540.

Sources produced in Benin also reveal the significance of cowries. An oral account from the 1890s of the first Bini–European trade noted above also captured the reality of the rising stocks of cowries, even at this very early time; this account specifically describes slave trading conducted with the cowrie currency: the white man came and 'only bought slaves . . . only paid a poor price: one to four bags [of cowries]'.³⁶

Throughout the sixteenth century, the cowrie shell grew as the everyday currency of Benin, and also in Yorùbá areas to the north. Schreier described, around 1600, how 'as money they use little shells . . . one can buy any thing one wants with them, too'. According to Dapper, by the later seventeenth century, judges in legal disputes could be bribed with them. Archaeological finds from the seventeenth century reveal cowries stored in jars in Yorùbá areas, just as a jar of loose change might be found in households in many countries in the twenty-first century. The hugely expanding currency base that the imports of cowries through the Portuguese had created thus had many impacts: it allowed for the collection of tolls and taxes, the expanding of Benin's state infrastructure, and also, of course, the

* The Portuguese *quintal* at this time was equivalent to 128 *arráteis*, or pounds – the *arrátel* was equivalent to 16 ounces, or 1 pound. So 400 *quintais* was equivalent to more than 50,000 pounds in weight.

financing of the growing army. It also provided the money that allowed markets to thrive, as people spent all this loose change; by the seventeenth century, there were many markets on the road between Gwatón and Edo, where all kinds of iron tools and weapons, woodwork, foods and household goods were for sale.³⁷

Benin's transformations in the sixteenth century are, in the end, best described as the rapid acceleration of a pre-existing process of economic and political change. Copper was already accepted as a form of value, and cowries already existed as a form of money; they were known as *igos*, according to Pacheco Pereira, and cowrie-shell reliefs have been found dating from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries on pottery from Ilé-Ifè to the north, suggesting that the shells were known, if not in widespread use, before 1500. Perhaps the most enduring element of the transformation of the sixteenth century would not, therefore, be in the creation of new forms of exchange but in their expansion. What emerged from this in Benin was the creation of new identities and subjectivities, reflected in the rapid increase of bronze casting. Four hundred years later, Pablo Picasso found inspiration in the newly 'discovered' bronzes, alongside other African art and masks on display in European museums, and drew on them to produce his new vision of a landscape of fractured identities and violent change – something much akin to what Benin had experienced and found ways to express since the start of the sixteenth century.³⁸

Alongside these aesthetic transformations of personhood came the broader economic changes catalysed by the rapid influx of currencies brought in by the Portuguese. The currency trade drove these new changes in the sixteenth century. It provided the copper to be melted down for the bronzes in the oba's palace, and the cowries that expanded exchangeability in markets in Benin and Yorùbá land. State infrastructure and the money supply grew, along with the oba's power as his growing army was strengthened. This confidence and strength enabled the obas to reject the slave trade in the 1530s, and their refusal to sell male captives saw the official Portuguese presence decline. However, clamping down on the trade in enslaved persons was not something that Benin could do in isolation. As on the Gold Coast, the advent of rival European powers competing for trade would change the ways in which rulers related to one another, and to

the outside world. As neighbouring states began to participate in the slave trade by 1600, the attitude of the obas would change.

Thus, when Ulsheimer assisted the oba in 1604 in the campaign near Lagos, he noted that, after the prisoners of war had been press-ganged into the oba's army, they 'took the women and children as captives'. At first, this was merely for use within the kingdom, but, as the seventeenth century unwound, the whole region would come to participate in the trade in enslaved persons. Indeed, for the Europeans, it became the 'Slave Coast' – thus neatly ignoring the many political, cultural and aesthetic transformations also taking place there at this time.

ALLADA AND THE RISE OF SLAVE TRADING

Once Benin had expanded west to Lagos, it bordered on to the other major kingdom along this part of the West African coast, that of Allada. Like Benin, Allada already existed as a centre of power in the 1480s, marked on a Portuguese map of 1485 as between Lagos and the Volta River on the Gold Coast. In time, its extent ran from Lagos in the east to Great Popo in the west, in what is now the Republic of Benin.³⁹

The peoples of the region around Allada were the Aja. By the sixteenth century, they had already been heavily influenced by the Yorùbá migrations that had led to the foundation of Ilé-Ifè and the network of city-states near there. Yorùbá was the lingua franca of Allada and the surrounding areas by the 1600s, and the Aja had adopted Yorùbá customs and some Yorùbá political organization: there were hereditary chiefs with specific duties, a kingdom with one principal town and subject towns and markets, and a monarch with tax-raising and judicial powers. Many religious shrines of the Aja had clear Yorùbá origins, such as the Fá divination (from Ifa) and the Sakpata shrine of Dahomey, in the eighteenth century, which still today uses an archaic form of Yorùbá as a liturgical language. It's probable that many of the Aja had originally lived in the region of what is now central and southern Nigeria, before being pushed westwards by the Yorùbá migrations.⁴⁰

Visiting the Candomblé *terreiros* (meeting places) of the north-east

of Brazil, or the shrines to the Lucumí *orixás* (spirit-deities) of the Afro-Cuban religion of Santería, the wide power and spread of this religious idiom makes more sense in the light of the early history of this region of West Africa. The spiritual centre of Ilé-Ifè had already developed a strong power, taken by waves of migrations beyond southern Nigeria into Benin and Togo. Religious shrines such as Sakpata and the Fá divination had been shared, and the power of this influence as an interpreting force of life had already bound together new communities. When in time peoples from this area came to the New World, this historical experience would offer a powerful example of how to remake a world, and a life, again.

The peoples who lived in the region of Allada and what was later Dahomey became known as Fon. Fon identities were fairly defined by the seventeenth century. Important traces of the language spoken in Allada exist in a catechism produced by Capuchin missionaries in 1660. When the King of Allada, Tojonu, sent a mission to Madrid in 1658 with a servant from his palace known in documents as 'Bans', the Allada ambassador returned in 1660 with some missionaries who developed a catechism for use in the Kingdom of Allada. The language used in this catechism is heavily related to Fon: the word for God (*Vodu*) and that for power (*popo*) are both clearly connected to Fon counterparts, which shows the emergence of a strong Fon identity in Allada by this time.⁴¹

Like Benin, Allada grew in power during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. With a good port at Offra, where all the Europeans lived while they traded, it offered major advantages for European traders. Once the obas had turned away from the trade in captives, the attention of slavers from the island of São Tomé shifted from Benin to Allada, with significant consequences for the whole region by 1600. But why was it that Allada saw the Portuguese slave traders as useful commercial allies? Like Grand Jolof's coastal province of Cayor in Senegambia, and (as we shall see) Kongo's coastal province of Nsoyo, Allada's rulers may have hoped that, through trade with the Portuguese, they would achieve greater independence in their relationship with the Yorùbá. The arrival of new routes for trade created an opportunity, at the expense of rising tensions with those who had been overlords.⁴²

By the second half of the sixteenth century, the trade in enslaved persons was taking root. By the 1570s at the latest, a trans-Atlantic dimension had begun: an enslaved person from 'Arda' was recorded in Bogotá in 1579, and another in nearby Tunja in 1582. The push towards this influence grew all the time. The first contract permitting enslaved persons to be shipped direct from São Tomé to Brazil was signed in 1582. And so many factors pushed slave traders to open up new slaving markets such as that of Allada.⁴³

Though in the sources produced in Latin America such enslaved persons are said to have come from 'Allada' or 'Arda', it is not certain that they were taken from this state itself. There is little evidence at this time of Allada fighting aggressive wars against its neighbours, such as might have produced captives. Thus, some may, indeed, have been criminals or perceived enemies of the rulers, who sold them into captivity; but others most likely came from smaller and more decentralized areas such as Great Popo, which had yet to rise to prominence as a centre for the trade in enslaved persons.⁴⁴

By 1600 at the latest, Allada had grown out of this loose Aja federation and turned into a more centralized state. At the time of the visit from the Capuchin missionaries in 1660, Allada had already seen impressive growth. The missionaries said that the Court at the capital had 30,000 adult male residents (*vecinos*), which could indicate a total population of 100,000 people or more. Another visitor ten years later said that, while the kingdom did not have a large coastline, 'it penetrated deep into the hinterland, and spread out greatly there.' As in Benin, this political expansion went with a heavy militarization, with an army that was reputed to be able to reach 40,000 when the king demanded it. Political centralization had brought a standing army and urban growth to Allada. In this state, as in so many, West Africa exemplified the standard models of state formation in many parts of the world.⁴⁵

There was, however, a very important difference between Benin's political growth in the sixteenth century and that of Allada. Benin's political infrastructure had grown before the Portuguese arrival, and the use of Edo titles had been maintained, while Portuguese influence was confined to a vocabulary of imported luxuries; but the same was not true of Allada. Officers who negotiated with European traders at

Offra were required to speak Portuguese, and even the son of the King of Allada conversed with visitors in Portuguese in the 1670s – something conceivable in Benin only during the first years of exchange. Nobles in Allada bore the Portuguese name of *fidalgos*; while it may also have been through the influence of people from Allada that maize flour bread known as *kenkey* grew as a staple dish as far away as the Gold Coast, with maize originally imported by the Portuguese through São Tomé. Thus, the opportunity offered by the Portuguese traders from São Tomé to create some independence from the Yorùbá came at a price: adaptation to external economic and political demands.⁴⁶

All the same, while Portuguese (and in time other European) influences were significant, Aja worldviews remained paramount. The significance of Aja spiritual beliefs in a deity, or *vodún*, would be crucial in the development of African religious practice in the New World, among the *vodumun* shrines of Haiti and alongside the *Candomblé terreiros* of north-eastern Brazil. Cultural memories were not inscribed through writing: the French official Sieur Delbée wrote in 1671 that, in order to ‘communicate certain things that they wish to make known’ [the Aja of Allada] use little knotted ropes, in which each knot has a meaning, such as the time of a meeting or the place where one is to meet, or the price of a piece of merchandise’. As Delbée noted, this was like the much better-known *quipus*, or ‘talking knots’, of the Incas, since ‘this usage is not only common along the coast of Africa, but is also practised by all the Indians [*sic*] of the mainland of the Americas.’⁴⁷

But, although Allada retained key aspects of its indigenous Aja culture, its adoption of products from the Atlantic was important. It was, as one anonymous 1602 account noted, just 10 miles from the entry into the Lagos lagoon to the waterway that led to Allada. Cross-cultural influences spread from Portugal to Africa and then back out into the Atlantic world. Indeed, many of the traders Ulsheimer found at Lagos in 1604 probably came from Allada, since markets often spring up at border areas.⁴⁸

These commercial influences meant not only the spread of new crops such as maize, but also a growing demand for enslaved persons coming from the slavers from São Tomé. For by around this time, Allada itself was becoming a major market for the trading of captives, as the 1602 account made clear:

This River is much used to be entered into by the Portugals, and is well knowne, not because of any great commoditie that is there to be had; but because of the great number of slaves that are bought there, to carry to other places, as Saint Thomas, and to Brasília, to labour there and refine Sugar: for they are very strong men, and can labour stoutly . . . There the Portugals Traffique much with Barkes [boats] to buy slaves . . . no other Nations come to buy slaves there, but the Portugals onely. And there are some Portugals dwelling there, which buy much wares and Merchandizes, such as there are to be had.⁴⁹

Certainly, by the seventeenth century, there were large numbers of enslaved persons being taken from Allada to the Americas. This source mentions that the slaves were shipped to São Tomé and Brazil, and in Spanish America, too, the Allada influence grew. While a roster of forty-five ships arriving in Cartagena and the Mexican port of San Juan de Ulúa* in 1600 and 1601 did not include any from Allada, the three ships noted as originating from São Tomé probably traded there. Meanwhile, two Allada slaves were included in the inventory of goods belonging to the prisoner Jorge Fernandez Gramajo in Cartagena in 1611, and throughout this decade many enslaved persons from Allada were appearing in what was then the biggest slave-trading port of the Americas. By the 1620s, there was an active trade here, with Damião Ramires shipping two vessels for Cartagena from Allada annually between 1619 and 1625, trading heavily for slaves in return for cowries.⁵⁰

Thus, the ‘globalization’ of Allada emerged alongside the rise of a trade in enslaved persons. By the 1640s, enslaved Africans named as ‘Alladas’ were regularly mentioned in Brazil. At Offra, meanwhile, Dutch and Portuguese ships were joined by English ships set for Barbados. Those persons called ‘Allada’ in the Americas did not represent any particular ‘ethnic’ designation; rather, the term simply indicated where they had been procured. According to Delbée, captives in Allada were prisoners of war, foreigners, those who had been judicially enslaved or those who had inherited the status of the enslaved by birth.⁵¹

* Near the modern city of Veracruz, on the Atlantic coast of central Mexico.



Ifa divination tray, early seventeenth century, Aja-Fon region.

All the same, while the growth of European economic demand for labour had important economic and political consequences along the coast, the traffic between Allada and the European empires of the Atlantic world was not one-way. Cotton cloths were also exported from Allada in the seventeenth century, both to Brazil and also south to Luanda in Angola. Some of these Aja products found their way out into the Atlantic communities, like the woven handicrafts of Fetu before them, and even today give tantalizing glimpses of the complex world views and industries that had arisen here by the seventeenth century.⁵²

What was it, then, that drove the political transformation of Allada? In the early sixteenth century, this had been a small decentralized federation nestled between the lagoons and the savannah, with sacred forests and a variety of shrines to *vodunun*. How did this small polity become a centralized slave-trading kingdom in the seventeenth century, able to send embassies to Spain and to export its cloths as far afield as Brazil and Angola? External demand for enslaved persons

and the growth of a political infrastructure were, of course, important, but two other key factors must be considered.

First is the place of the cloth trade. While Allada's cloth was originally in demand, by the 1660s the local trade was becoming undermined by cloth imports. Writing in 1660, the Capuchin missionaries noted that when they reached Offra, they spent four days on board ship, waiting for the captain of the ship to land his cargo of cloth, which was what they [the people of Allada] anticipated most keenly, and was their principal concern'. As on the Gold Coast, the import of cloth began to pose a challenge to local production. It was true that Allada cloths were traded by the English to the Gold Coast into the 1670s and 1680s, but the volumes mentioned were very small, which suggests that they were increasingly challenged by the imports. Yet why were the kings of Allada so ready to import local cloth at the expense of their own production? This may relate to the markets at Lagos, where cloth was the main item traded among the market vendors; by moving to import from Europe, as well as from their neighbours and rivals in Benin at Lagos, Allada was further able to advance its interests ahead of its neighbour, keeping purchases from their potential rivals to a minimum. Rulers could also control the import of cloth through diplomatic exchanges and official tallies in a way that local production may have been harder to micromanage. Thus, to increase the value of imported cloth was also a means of increasing the ruler's own power. But, in doing so, they would begin to undermine local industry.⁵³

A second crucial catalyst was a changing climate. When the Capuchin missionaries returned from Spain to Allada in 1660 with the Allada ambassador known as 'Bans', and proposed conversion to the king, they were met with a response that they had not been expecting:

He took some time to answer and at length told the missionaries that he was very grateful for the favourable offer which his brother the King of Spain had made him, but that the embassy which he had sent with Bans, a gateman of his palace, was not so that he should change beliefs and adopt a different faith to that which he professed and which had been that of his ancestors; but rather so that they should send him some Christian priests who would be able to conjure away

the thick clouds, which were causing great damage in that land, with innumerable bolts of lightning and thunderstorms falling with which many people and animals were dying, and crops and houses were being destroyed.⁵⁴

This was during the period known more widely as the mini ice age, whose peak cold years began around 1640, at the time of the collapse of the Ming Dynasty in China, the English Civil War, and the war of independence between Portugal and Spain, which saw the restoration of the Portuguese monarchy. As we have seen, these were also years of rapid climatic change in Senegambia and in the Sahel. In Allada, too, this evidence shows that the changing temperature had led to variations in the rainy seasons, and uncertainties with regard to harvests and the security of people's homes. This was an important driver of accelerating conflicts, and contributed to the growth in the supply of enslaved persons into the Middle Passage by the end of the seventeenth century.

Climatic insecurity was indeed a vital feature of changes in West and West-Central Africa at this time. It was apparent everywhere, in the alternation of droughts and floods, in plagues of locusts and in the destruction of crops. Food insecurity grew in spite of the new crops of maize and manioc imported from Mexico and Brazil. In São Tomé, there was a famine around 1660 as a result of irregular rains. Climatic insecurity was also widespread in Kongo and Angola: a drought around 1640 caused a crisis in provisions from Kongo, and, from 1646 onwards, a series of locust swarms devastated the province of Nsundi. Epidemics spread, noted around the rivers of what is now Gabon, in Loango and in Angola; they reportedly decimated Kongo in 1655. Evidence of the impact of this instability is retained in oral traditions, as the archaeologist Akinwumi Ogundiran notes for the formation of Osògbò in the period around 1600: oral accounts say that at that time the 'rain refused to fall and yam refused to grow; and . . . rivers, brooks and streams dried up.' Thus, climatic change and associated disease were major causes of the instability that provoked conflict, warfare and an increase in captives.⁵⁵

Yet were these changes natural or induced by human conflict? Most environmental historians have pointed to sun-spot movements

rather than human activity as the key to the mini ice age. This consensus has been challenged in recent years by a team of archaeologists, who have noted how the collapse in temperatures coincides precisely with the decline in the Native American population of the sixteenth century, which is widely recognized as having fallen by 90 per cent, allowing for extensive reforestation. While this is generally agreed, the controversial ideas of this team suggest that the population fall led to a large decline in the burning of woods for fuel. With both reforestation and reduced CO₂ emissions, this surprisingly modern account of the distant past suggests that carbon capture was the result. Whether this or the sun-spot shift caused the climatic shifts we have seen remains debated; both may have been relevant, certainly with a huge impact on human experiences right around the world.⁵⁶

By the 1650s, this had led the King of Allada to seek outside intervention from the Capuchin missionaries with the forces of nature. This was symptomatic not only of the growing climatic instability, but of the relationship with the outside world in Allada. As the number of competing European ships began to grow in the region, the nature of political rivalries, power and majesty also began to change. Benin's position on slave trading had become less and less tenable; at the same time, slave-trading states like Allada became ever more powerful, and yet also ever more dependent on their European allies, as this mission to Spain shows. An **economic shift began to take hold** that turned states such as Benin and Allada **away from exporting** their fine cloths and towards the slave trade.

THE RISE OF OYO AND THE DECLINE OF BENIN IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

By the early seventeenth century, Benin's capital at Edo was a town that impressed visitors, such as the Dutch traveller Dierick Ruyters, who described it in 1623:

At first the town seems very large; when one enters it one comes into a great broad street, which seems to be seven or eight times broader than

the Warne Street in Amsterdam; this extends straight out, and when one has walked a quarter of an hour along it he still does not see the end of the street, but he sees a big tall tree as far from him as the eyes can reach, and some Netherlanders say that the street stretches still so much further, that if one had been as far as that tree he would still see no end to the street . . . Houses in which well-to-do people such as gentlemen dwell, have two or three steps to go up, and in front have an ante-court where one may sit dry, which court or gallery is closed every morning by their slaves, with straw mats for sitting on . . . the houses are all alike red, and were surrounded by walls . . . they make the walls about two feet thick, so that these are not easily upset [by a heavy rain].⁵⁷

The nobility of Benin wore fine clothes, as befitted their status. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, the rich men wore 'a white Calico or Cotton Cloth about one Yard long and half so broad . . . over that they wear a finer white cotton dress, that is commonly about fifteen or twenty Yards long, which they ornament with a pleat in the middle, casting over it a Scarf of about a Yard long and two Spans broad, the End of which is adorn'd with Fringe or lace'. Women wore cloths woven in Benin, which were 'very fine and beautifully Chequered with several Colours'.⁵⁸

Yet Benin was in decline in the seventeenth century. By the 1690s, though there were daily markets in Edo selling ivory, cloth and European trade goods, there were also the 'ruins of half-remaining Houses . . . at present the Houses stand like poor men's corn, widely distant from each other'; whereas in the 1620s Ruyters had said that 'the houses in this town stand in good order, one close to the other, like houses in Holland.' By the end of the seventeenth century, Benin's population was said to be low compared to Allada, while Gwatón, though 'formerly a considerable trading place . . . hath suffer'd so much by the Wars, that it lies in a manner waste at present'.⁵⁹

Why was it that Benin's power had declined? The answer lay in a combination of internal political competition and the impact of European trade. Benin in the seventeenth century was eclipsed by the rise of the great Yorùbá Kingdom of Oyo, with its capital at Oyo-Ile. Though Oyo had risen as early as the fourteenth century, and, like Benin, had a strong spiritual dependence on Ilé-Ifè, during the

seventeenth century it had been immersed in the Ókìpò Wars with Nupe to the north. Nupe invaders crossed the Niger River in the early sixteenth century and sacked the Oyo capital at Oyo-Ile, founding many towns in the northern part of what would become the Kingdom of Oyo. However, by 1600, Oyo had checked the Nupe advance and begun to become the regional powerhouse.⁶⁰

Oyo's growing power in the seventeenth century can be deduced especially from archaeological evidence, as Aribidesi Usman has shown. Excavating the area of Igbominaland, on the northern fringe of Oyo, Usman found that the Oyo centre there was probably founded around 1600. During the seventeenth century, defensive walls were constructed around towns and villages, many of them very high and built with deep ditches; by the end of the century, some stone embankments were used, all suggestive of a centralized state and the ongoing threat from Nupe to the north. Settlements grew bigger throughout this time, and there is increased evidence of ironworking, through furnaces, slagheaps and quarries. There was growing industry, and the migration of specialized craftspeople to work in these areas, all of which followed Oyo's defeat of Nupe and its emergence as the most powerful state in this region.⁶¹

Written sources produced by outsiders from the later seventeenth century confirm this picture. One described the use of cavalry by Oyo in 1698 in a conflict with Allada, and Oyo's military power was, indeed, grounded in the use of cavalry. The importance of Oyo's cavalry is beautifully expressed in the following Yorùbá proverb:

<i>One cannot beat a warrior who is a swimmer in the river,</i>	<i>A ki. i ba onwe jagun odo</i>
<i>Who shall beat a warrior who is a horseman in the plain?</i>	<i>Tana i ba eḷe sin jagun papa?</i> ⁶²

The Alafin (King) of Oyo who reconquered Oyo-Ile from Nupe in the early seventeenth century was Abipa. In his authoritative written history, constructed drawing exclusively on oral accounts, the Yorùbá historian Samuel Johnson wrote that it was Abipa who moved the capital of Oyo from Gboho to Oyo-Ile, and introduced new taxes. During the time of Benin's decline in the seventeenth century, Oyo was developing a complex administration: provincial rulers had a

coronet of office, the *akoro*, and were invested with their titles by the alafin at Oyo-Ile. At the capital, a royal guard of Esos with seventy military captains protected the alafin and his council, the Oyo-Mesi, which was headed by the basorun. The political stability went with social stability for those who lived there; archaeological finds indicate a great deal of care taken with food, which suggests stability and meals as a focus for social life, as Oyo grew.⁶³

The rising strength of Oyo as a savannah state certainly would have acted as a pressure on Benin, contributing to its relative political and economic decline. Willem Bosman's mention of the wars that laid waste to Gwatón by the 1690s implies that there may well have been a fierce military battle for political supremacy between the two. However, beyond this strong internal factor in Benin's political decline, the economic impact of the European trading presence along the coast from Allada to Calabar must be considered.

As we have seen in this chapter, the early relationship between Benin and the Portuguese had soon foundered on disputes over the trade in enslaved persons. The Portuguese wanted to be able to export male slaves to Elmina for use in the gold trade, but Benin refused to export male slaves. This had prompted withdrawal, though towards 1700 a series of obas emerged who sought to strengthen the kingdom: rulers such as Akengboi (1669–75), Ahenkpaye (1675–84), Akengbede (1684–89) and Oreoghene (1689–1700) found a place in Benin history. Indeed, under them, the refusal to export male slaves remained Benin's royal policy right until the end of the seventeenth century, according to Bosman, who wrote that, 'all Male Slaves here are Foreigners; for the Natives cannot be sold for Slaves . . . nor is it allow'd to export any Male Slaves that are sold in this Country, for they must stay there.'⁶⁴

Benin's refusal to sell male slaves and thereby participate in the Atlantic slave trade nevertheless placed it at a disadvantage with its neighbouring states. By the 1640s if not earlier, a slave trade had resumed from the ports closest to Gwatón in the neighbouring Bight. Dutch accounts from their factory at Elmina show that by this time the English were sending ships into the Bight of Benin to purchase captives. Further south and east, among the Kalabari Igbo of the Niger Delta, a trade in captives was also growing: English ships went there frequently and returned laden with as many as 400 enslaved

persons at a time. By the 1650s, missionaries noted that neighbouring towns that were traditionally subject to Benin had set up independent settlements for European traders from which to sell captives. But, while surrounding states grew their stocks of currencies, weapons and manufactured goods, throughout this period Benin persisted in its policy of exporting only its very fine woven cloths (known as *ambasys*) into the Atlantic trade.⁶⁵

The production of *ambasys* and their sale at Lagos was already apparent in Ulsheimer's account of 1604. A French report from 1671 said of Benin that 'the only trade there is in small cloths of Benin, for local consumption . . . a yacht is sent two or three times a year, to go and get these cloths, then taking them to trade along the [coast of the Gulf] as far as the Equator.' However, this export trade in cloths was becoming less and less economically viable, as the gathering profits from the trade in captives grew everywhere else. One serious problem was that, as we have seen in Chapter 3, the Dutch trade in this period was overwhelmingly in imported cloths from Flanders and Gujarat: the sturdy Flanders cloths and the satin, silk and damask alongside the finely woven cloths known as *kannekins* from India provided exotic and cheap competition to the locally made cloth of Benin; indeed, even the oba preferred to have his throne as an 'Ivory Couch, under a Canopy of Indian Silk' by 1700. The demand for foreign fashions and styles was such that, by this time, Bini weavers had to use imported cotton and dyes brought by European traders to make cloth. But how could they compete against Dutch ships, which, by as early as 1645, might transport 300,000 ells of cloth annually to Elmina alone? The competition thus undermined the profitability of cloth production and therefore Benin's power against the rising strength of Oyo in the hinterland.⁶⁶

The key decade for this transformation was the 1680s. Until this time the *ambasys* had still been traded to Elmina and the surrounding area, but in 1684 the Dutch director-general at Elmina wrote that 'the trade in [Benin] cloths is nowadays of little importance, as they are not much in demand . . . also there is still a considerable stock of them here, and that several thousands are still expected from Benyn.' By January 1685 the Dutch West India Company was considering withdrawing its factor from Benin altogether, 'in view of the fact that the company has in stock over 12,000 [Benin] cloths, and that the boat

De Liefde has added to this number another 5,000 on its arrival [last month], leaving 4,000 more in the Rio de Benyn'. In truth, it was no surprise that the Dutch took this decision, for where the cloths were supposed to be sold at 40 per *benda* of gold, 'there [were] no buyers'. Though there were still Benin cloths traded by the English to the Gold Coast in 1687, it was clear that this was a trade under threat.⁶⁷

What had caused this sudden collapse in the stock of Benin cloth on the Gold Coast? Again, it does not take much to work out that this was largely due to the huge imports of cloth with which the Dutch had flooded the market since the 1640s. By the 1680s, the English had joined in, and the country was 'extraordinarily full of merchandise'. The availability of luxury Indian cloths, and the rich variety of European cloths imported, meant that the human taste for variety and novelty made it very hard for Benin to compete. As we have seen, weavers tried to innovate through using imported cotton and dyes, but already by this time Benin was in decline, faced with the rising success of those kingdoms such as Oyo and Allada that grew in power as their dependence on warfare and the trade in enslaved persons correspondingly increased.⁶⁸

CONCLUSION: MONEY, POWER AND POLITICAL CHANGE TO THE LATE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Benin is rightly one of the most famous precolonial West African states. Its bronzes are testament to sophisticated craftsmanship, evolving identities, and a powerful aesthetic of majesty that evolved in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The obas of Benin were wary of trade with Europeans. They were only rarely seen by them. According to one account of the 1650s, they refused to see European visitors face to face because of an augury saying that one of the obas would die at the hands of the Europeans – as indeed would happen when the kingdom was finally conquered by the British in 1897.⁶⁹

Partly through careful management of its relationship with European traders, Benin grew its institutions as well as the interdependence of Edo and its surrounding settlements. A large tax base developed in the principal Benin currency of cowries, which had existed before the

Portuguese arrival. The armchair geographer Olfert Dapper wrote in the 1660s that one third of all goods traded to Arda, Benin and Lagos had to take the form of cowries. By 1700, Bosman noted the efficiency with which this system of tax and government worked, which was testament to its longevity, having endured since the fifteenth century: '[Benin's] Territories are very large and full of Governors, and each knows how many Bags of Boesies [cowries] (the Money of this Country) he must annually raise to the King, which amounts to a vast Sum.'⁷⁰

The existence of ready coin in the form of the cowries imported by the Portuguese had greatly grown the markets of Benin. Government institutions grew along with the ability to tax. It was an analogous process to the way in which a powerful bureaucratic state had arisen in Spain in the sixteenth century, bolstered by the massive expansion of coinage facilitated by the mines of the New World. For a long period this was all to Benin's advantage as the state grew. But, in the later seventeenth century, the cumulative effect of various pressures had significant effects on the cowrie currency in the kingdom, and serious inflation set in. As the 'sugar revolution' took off in the Dutch and English Caribbean, captive labour was in very high demand, and between 1685 and 1703 the price of captive persons rose by as much as 200 per cent across Atlantic Africa, from Hueda and Offra to Angola. As the number of enslaved persons exported increased, so, too, did the amount charged per person: at Offra one captive cost 35 guilders in 1685, but 100 guilders and more by 1703.⁷¹

As Dapper had rightly noted, the use of cowries as a currency had spread along the coast to Hueda, which by this time was supplanting Allada as the major slave-trading state to the west of Lagos. Just as the Portuguese had imported their cowries from the Maldives as part of their East India trade, so, too, did the Dutch once they had supplanted the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean.⁷²

One account of 1705 gave a vivid picture of the volumes of cowries required by the Dutch now to trade there: 'Before one is allowed to start trade, one is compelled to pay the King 720 lbs cowries customary duties, 200 lbs to the Captain, and 30 to the town-crier . . . Furthermore one has to pay 120 lbs cowries for the [slave camp] with which they guarantee that the slaves will not run away . . . [and] 400 lbs cowries [also] for the carrying of the goods to the ship.'⁷³ The

dependence on external trade for the money supply was thus a key factor in the transition of political power from east to west. When Benin was the major regional power, it accrued large supplies of cowries, and was able to build governmental and fiscal institutions. But once the interest of European traders passed from the cloth to the slave trade, the supplies of cowries dried up, as the Dutch lost interest in the Benin cloth trade. Indeed, it is notable that Benin oral histories suggest that the kingdom at length began to participate in the slave trade by the 1730s: the realities of accessing the money supply to keep institutions viable could not, by this time, be avoided.⁷⁴

Hueda's power, therefore, grew at this time, along with its stocks of money and the access it offered to European traders. It was then beautifully verdant country, with the villages said to be as populous as whole kingdoms on the Gold Coast. European travel narratives written for an increasingly racist public at home focused on trade, slavery and war, but that is surely not what was at the centre of everyone's concerns all the time. People were interested in what they would wear, new fashions coming in by sea and the attempts of local weavers to innovate to compete. They wondered whether their neighbours had a good catch of fish; what the unstable rainfall patterns were doing to the cycle of harvests; and what were the demands and auguries of the keepers of the major shrines. However, since none of this was of interest to the slave traders whose journals have shaped much historical discourse, these are not aspects of the region's history that are often discussed. Yet it is also true enough that alongside these social changes which came with the Atlantic trade, European ships flocked and the trade in captives boomed. By 1693 the palace of Hueda was built partly of stone, and the king's throne was draped with red silk cloths while behind it was a scene of elephant hunting such as would not have been out of place in a European imperial drawing room.⁷⁵

Hueda's rise ahead of Allada, and Benin's decline alongside Oyo's rise, spoke to wider truths about economic and political change. Though cowries had been a global currency, in use in parts of China and in Arabia and the Indian Ocean, its perceived value was declining to European traders, who equated these shells with ballast and the trade in African captives. The relationship that cowries had to the gold exports from the Gold Coast (exchanged for captives and cloths

which were resold at Elmina for gold) tied the cowrie currency to the relative decline in value of monies in use in Africa, just as 'hard' currencies that held value over time developed in Europe and Asia. The increasing volume of cowries imported as part of the exchange, in fact, merely exacerbated the tendency. Meanwhile, the dumping of cheap cloth from Asia and Europe was part of the process that saw the growth of manufacturing industries in those continents at the expense of manufacturers in Allada, Benin and elsewhere in Atlantic Africa, who could not compete.⁷⁶

Cowries were part of a global currency, of course, while the other currencies imported helped to shape new and strong identities. Both sides in these exchanges knew that they were engaged in a form of exchange of value. When the English slave ship *The Arthur* arrived at Calabar in February 1677, the first thing its crew did was to negotiate a price with the King of New Calabar, who came aboard with some of his nobles, 'and after a long discourse came to Agreement for Current for negro [*sic*] man 36 copper Barrs for one negro woman 30'. Copper and iron bars and manillas remained the currencies of choice here: copper was used to add to existing stocks, which might then be used to fashion art, or in war, while iron could add to the growing industries at work across the region, including the manufacture of weapons and agricultural tools.⁷⁷

In economic terms, West African states lost out in the accrual of surplus value. Yet they also acquired currencies that would help to deepen identities and cultural force, later so important in shaping modern cultures in West Africa, the Americas and Europe. The members of the Igun Eronmwon guild of Bini bronze casters were part of the process of exchanging cultural for economic capital, working their art from the copper manillas that were exchanged by those such as the crew of the *Morning Star* in 1677 for captive persons. As manufactured items and material accumulation characterized the shrines of the powerful, so the religious traditions of this and surrounding kingdoms shaped ideas in the Americas. Thus, those Bahians worshipping today in the Casa de Iemanjá in Rio Vermelho are the direct inheritors of the renewed idioms of belief and identity acquired in the 'Costa da Mina', at the same time as the region's economic heft began to be undermined.