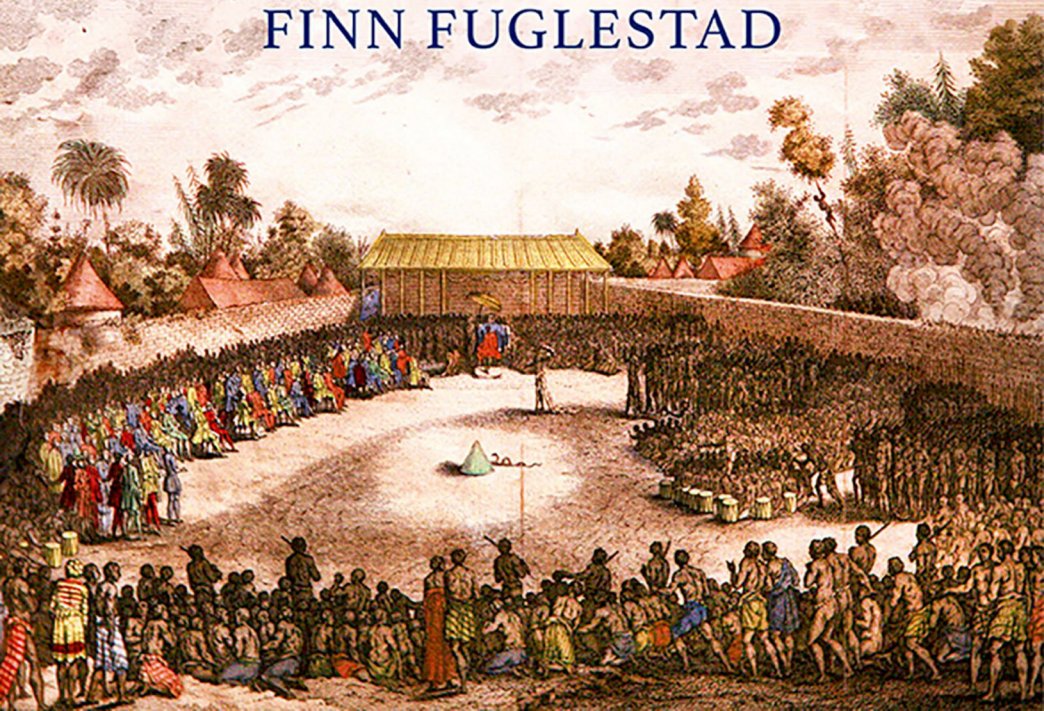
SLAVE TRADERS BY INVITATION

West Africa's Slave Coast in the Precolonial Era

FINN FUGLESTAD



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Dedicated to the memory of Stephen Ellis (1953–2015)

Y para Elisa Pérez-González de la Barreda

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PART C
CHRONOLOGICAL OVERVIEW: THE 1720s –1850/51

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author of the present manuscript written in English is a Norwegian whose first foreign language is French, and who took up residence in Spain many years ago. The implication is that if the manuscript has become at all readable, it is thanks to the toiling of my good friend Ms Juliet Wrightson who has done a tremendous job in correcting my English. My debt and gratitude to her are beyond words. Juliet agreed to take over after her sister, the late Penelope Wrightson, who had offered to help me out with my English, was struck down by a terminal disease.

Another friend of mine who has left us is Selena Axelrod Winsnes, with whom I have had many inspiring conversations, and who provided me with many hints and suggestions with regard to the Danish sources especially.

After completing the first version of the present manuscript, I most fortunately succeeded in persuading fellow-Africanists Adam Jones and Edna G. Bay into reading parts of it: the former read the Introduction, the latter the Introduction and Part A. Those two sections contain the ideas and viewpoints developed in the rest of the manuscript. Ms Bay in particular has saved me from some embarrassing misinterpretations, plus a number of errors. Her endeavour is all the more admirable since she and I continue to part company on certain fundamental matters, as will become clear later on.

I have also had the honour and pleasure to discuss some of the ideas expressed in the following with the legendary Professor John Donnelly Fage (1921–2002). I still hear his voice.

I would like finally to express my gratitude to all those archivists and librarians in many countries and on three continents who assisted me during my research, which I initiated, if my memory does not fail me, nearly forty years ago.

If these acknowledgements are unusually short, it is because the present manuscript belongs, for many reasons, to the "in-spite-of" category, rather than the "thanks-to" one.

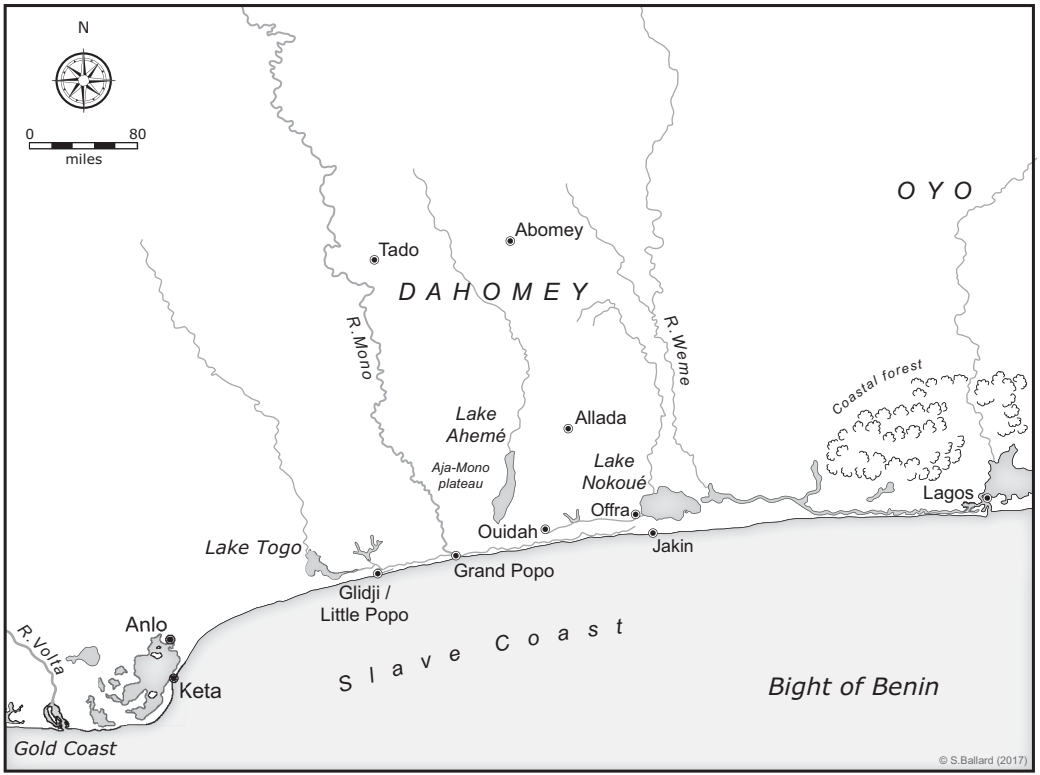
As for the rest, the usual disclaimers pertain.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAP/EB or Anais	*Anais/Annaes do Archivo Público/do Arquivo do Estado da Bahia* (Salvador da Bahia, Brazil)[1]
AAR	*African Archaeological Review*
AD	Archives Départementales
ADM	Admiralty
AEH	*African Economic History*
AHR	*American Historical Review*
AHU	Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Lisbon
AM	Archives Municipales
AN	Archives Nationales, Paris
APEB	Arquivo (Público) do Estado da Bahia
BCEHSAOF	*Bulletin du Comité d'Études Historiques et Scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française* (predecessor of *BIFAN*)
BIFAN	*Bulletin de l'Institut Français/Fondamental d'Afrique Noire*
BNE	Biblioteca Nacional de España
BT	Board of Trade (UK)
CAOM-DFC	Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence Dépôt des Fortifications des Colonies, Côtes d'Afrique
CÉA	*Cahiers d'Études Africaines*
CO	Colonial Office records
CUP	Cambridge University Press
ÉD	*Études Dahoméennes*

EHR	*Economic History Review*
HA	*History in Africa. A Journal of Method*
HAHR	*Hispanic American Historical Review*
IAI	International African Institute
IFAN	Institut Français/Fondamental d'Afrique Noire
IJAHS	*International Journal of African Historical Studies*
JAH	*Journal of African History*
JHSN	*Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*
NA	The National Archives (formerly Public Record Office), Kew
NS	Nouvelle série/New series
OR	Ordens régias/regiaes[2]
O.s.	Old style (to 1751)[3]
PRO	Public Record Office, Chancery Lane (later renamed The National Archives and transferred to Kew)
RAC	Royal African Company
SA	*Slavery and Abolition*
SFHOM	Société Française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer
T (as for instance T70)	Treasury records in NA
THSG	*Transactions of the Historical Society of the Gold Coast and Togoland/of Ghana*
UP	University Press
WIC	Generaele/Geoctroyeerde West-Indische Compagnie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Lake
Nokoué
Lagos
Offra
Ouidah
Lake Togo
Jakin
Grand Popo
Glidji /
Little Popo
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R. Volta
S l a v e C o a s t
Keta
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Gold Coast
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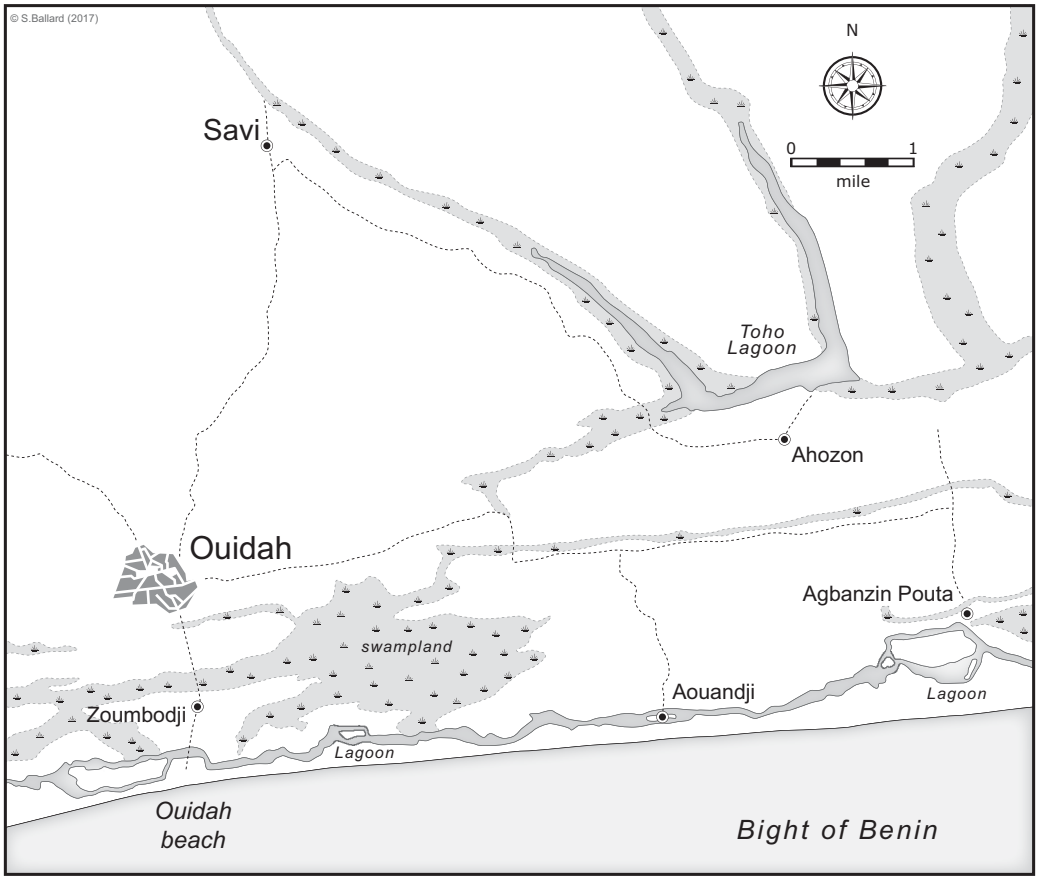
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Lagoon
Zoumbodji
Lagoon
Ouidah
beach
Bight of Benin

INTRODUCTION

Common sense may tell us that trade on a significant scale cannot flourish for long on a heavily surf-ridden beach without any permanent human settlement. But if so, common sense turns out to be a poor guide to the past of that part of the coast of Guinea that we call the Slave Coast. In fact, the Slave Coast, whose shore line corresponds to the description above, was the site of a considerable trade for more than 240 years, between around 1616 and 1850/51, before it petered out during the next 12–13 years. This was a very special trade, a trade in human beings, a slave trade.[1]

Indeed, the 320 km long beach between the River Volta and Lagos known as the Slave Coast, and especially the central part around the towns of Ouidah and Offra, ranks as one of the major epicentres of the Atlantic slave trade, and as the leading West African centre. The Slave Coast "exported", according to the best available estimates (but veering probably on the low side), some two million slaves: that is, about sixteen per cent of the (probably) twelve and a half million human beings (or more) sent from Africa to America in the era of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. It means that on average some 20 slaves were embarked from the Slave Coast each and every day for more than two centuries. Of those two million, probably more than half transited at one single spot, the beach south of Ouidah[2] – an open roadstead with no port facilities whatsoever. Note that the figures above refer to the slaves who were *alive* by the time the ships set sail, and who had survived the notorious loading and waiting time, of which more later.

The paradox then is that this large-scale trade in human beings took place in a particularly inhospitable, even dangerous environment. To quote an employee of the company in charge of the upkeep of the English forts,

Justly Watson, who went ashore on the beach south of Ouidah on 20 December 1755:

> The landing is the worst I ever saw, and I believe one of the worst in the whole world (yet we arrived in the best season). I was informed, sometimes ships have been four or five weeks before anybody could get ashore, or any boat go off to them. There is a bar before the shore, in which the sea breaks prodigiously, & the canoes frequently overset in what is called good weather. After one gets ashore there are several rivers to pass over, which makes it very tiresome & dangerous[3]

to reach the town of Ouidah, Watson's destination, some four kilometres *inland*.

Watson was certainly not exaggerating, quite the contrary. In fact, he noticed only one bar, whereas there were actually two moving underwater sandbars which ran parallel to the coast, implying that the surf broke three times during most seasons, the third time over the shoreline itself.[4] It has been described by other visitors as a wall of water, with waves reaching truly impressive heights, altogether not bereft of majesty.[5] It has also been described as a dangerous belt of death owing to the frequent capsizing of canoes and the presence of man-eating and reputedly enormous and "gluttonous" sharks, sharks that there is every reason to believe were well fed in the era of the slave trade.[6] It is claimed that during certain periods human lives, and not exclusively slave lives, were lost nearly every day.[7] As for the average loss of goods (other than slaves, who were regarded as goods), it has been estimated at five per cent of the cargo by Patrick Manning.[8]

We can deduce from the existence of the exceptionally heavy surf and the sandbars that the European ocean-going ships could not go anywhere near the coast in what were also shallow waters. In fact, they always had to stand 2–3 km off the coast[9] in what was called the "roads", for example, the Ouidah road.

The references and quotations listed above have been chosen at random from many available sources. The forbidding conditions under which the slave trade was conducted on the Slave Coast loom in fact large in our sources.[10] Obviously, those conditions functioned as an effective barrier against intruders coming from the sea, which was where the Europeans came from in our period. But there was an additional barrier inland south of Ouidah behind the kilometre-deep beach – a natural moat in the shape of a lagoon. Its width varied according to the season, but was never less than two to three hundred metres at Ouidah. The lagoon ran parallel to the coast for several hundred kilometres. It was mostly shallow, generally less than one metre, but in several

places reached a depth of three to four metres, and hence was not always possible to ford.[11] Behind the lagoon there were wetlands, swampy grounds and streams (Watson's "rivers") whose extension obviously also varied according to the seasons. As for the town of Ouidah and the region of permanent human settlement, that is, the area of permanently dry and therefore cultivable land, that, as can be deduced from the above, was some three kilometres north of the lagoon.[12]

So there was a total of a distance of seven to eight kilometres between the ships and Ouidah. One question is how it was possible to drive unwilling and underfed slaves from Ouidah town, the centre of the slave trade, to the beach via the lagoon, where no bridge existed, and then out to the waiting ships. Another is how it was possible to carry goods in the opposite direction, and the Europeans in both – Europeans who usually travelled in hammocks once on shore,[13] in this country where no wheeled carriage existed and where horses were few, small and condemned to an early death due to trypanosomiasis borne by the tsetse fly[14] (horses were reserved in theory for the king and the Europeans).[15] As for the canoe crossings between the ships and the beach, it goes without saying that one was almost guaranteed to reach one's destination soaking wet. Thus many Europeans confronted the surf wearing only the minimum.[16] But then, if we are to believe a local proverb, even the water is dry in Guinea.[17]

Actually, what we have described above is the situation that came to prevail after about 1727 and the famous but long drawn-out Dahomean conquest of the coast (in fact the beginning of a long, chaotic period, as we shall see). However, before 1727 the slaves were gathered together not at Ouidah, but at Savi, some nine kilometres further north (about 16–17 km from the ships), and driven from thence down to the shore and the ships. Savi was the palatial capital of the pre-1727 and rather Lilliputian polity ("kingdom") of Hueda.[18] As for the question of how the slaves arrived at Savi, later at Ouidah, in the first place, it is formally outside the scope of this book, but will nevertheless be touched upon later.

We do not really need any sources to convey to us the near-absurdity of it all. Anyone who has set foot on the small melancholy backwater town of Ouidah[19] before the (modest) transformations of the 1990s (about which more in the Epilogue), and who made at that time the short but difficult journey – still no road then, although there was a bridge – down to the absolutely desolate and empty but imposing beach, would have had considerable difficulty in imagining that he found himself right in the middle

of the old epicentre of the slave trade in West Africa. That is especially true if he had been to the Gold Coast and contemplated the many imposing European forts that grace its seashore, forts that were *not* constructed originally for the purpose of the slave trade. On the Slave Coast he would have encountered only what is presented as one of the original three, the not very impressive Portuguese fort as it now stands (the present layout dating from 1865, that is, long after the end of the slave trade).[20] He would have wondered anyway what that fort was doing some four kilometres inland. The point is that what some call "visible memory" is near-absent from the Slave Coast. Given all this, our visitor must be forgiven for expressing incredulity when told that Ouidah was often, and frequently still is, referred to as a port in the literature.[21]

But apart from the "how-was-it-possible" question, here we must draw a number of preliminary conclusions. The first is that although the local conditions functioned as an efficient barrier against foreign intruders, they also functioned as a barrier in the opposite direction. We have explained then why the local people turned their back on the ocean, why they never developed a maritime tradition. They did not have to, since the lagoon and the extensive wetlands were overflowing with not only fish and other aquatic animals, but also all sorts of wildlife, even big game.[22] The lagoon is in fact part of a vast inland aquatic ecosystem. The paradox here is that the locals' lack of navigational skills contributed to guarantee, in a sense, the success of the slave trade.

The next and really crucial point is that for a slave trade, or for that matter any sort of trade over time on a substantial scale to develop between the Africans and the Europeans in this very special environment, one basic requisite had to be met: a strong determination on the part of the former to overcome the natural barrier that protected them against the latter, that is, a strong determination to enter into contact with the Europeans, and to maintain that contact. The locals also needed to guarantee the safety of the European slave traders to a certain extent. The conclusion is that the Europeans could not and would not have got anywhere without the very active collaboration of the locals (not that they ever tried), without having been invited ashore, so to speak.[23] Indeed, the Europeans were and remained totally dependent on the local inhabitants: that is, the few Europeans *stationed* on the Slave Coast, no more than a hundred most of the time and frequently far less. The hostility that Joseph Inikori believes characterized the inhabitants of the coast towards the Europeans[24] is nowhere evident on the Slave Coast.

The Europeans erected all told, and long after the beginning of the slave trade, three forts grouped together within a short distance of each other in Ouidah town,[25] that is, we repeat, about four kilometres inland (from the English William's fort one could at least glimpse the sea, because of the down-sloping configuration of the land).[26] This is to be contrasted with the situation on the Gold Coast where there were some 26–27 forts, all built with solid material (not the case in Ouidah), and all situated on the seashore or close to it.[27] The Europeans began constructing those forts some two centuries before the first emerged from the ground at Ouidah. The implication is that the Slave Coast forts, as opposed to those on the Gold Coast, were out of artillery range of the European ships. The implication is also that they could not command the landing places for their own supplies, which in turn meant that they could be starved to surrender any time if the local population so decided. In fact, the Slave Coast forts, constructed of dried earth[28] – it was said that not a single pebble could be found on the Slave Coast – and with thatched roofs, were simply indefensible, as the Europeans knew full well (the forts also caught fire easily and were constantly in need of repair). This was true even though they may have looked imposing enough in the local context: two-storey quadrangular buildings of considerable size (100 by 80 metres) surrounded by dry moats, across which were moveable bridges of boards in the manner of their medieval predecessors in Europe, and provided with a number of cannon.[29] But if they were not defendable, the cannon notwithstanding, what then exactly was their purpose? We suggest that they may have served as embassies of sort, plus information centres – and finally as social clubs for the captains and officers of the ships in the roads.[30] Or, if one prefers, forts served the function of facilitating contacts and organizing services for visiting traders and to some extent also as warehouses, or barracoons for slaves.[31]

But the forts may also have been considered valuable markers for the various companies' ongoing trade at particular places on the African coast. That is, they may have been built to defend and to maintain the interests of those who constructed them against European competitors.[32] That being said, the forts turned out to perform, unexpectedly, a crucial, even strategic, role in many circumstances from especially 1727 onwards, as a result of wars between Africans, serving for instance as refuges. Ouidah became, as we shall see, the object of a long drawn out local internecine war with the Europeans caught in the middle not always knowing which party to support.

We add however that there could also be at any time a number of factories or lodges (the difference between the two, if any, is not clear – the French

word is *comptoirs*); these were much less imposing edifices, unfortified, and in many cases simply temporary installations. For instance, the Dutch never had forts on the Slave Coast, but they were very much present nevertheless until the 1750s, thanks in part to their factories[33] (the same also applies, but to a far lesser extent, to the Danes and the Germans of Brandenburg-Prussia).

In any case, many Europeans began early to question the usefulness of forts or even of factories, that is, of permanent land bases.[34] The point is that land bases were not a necessary requisite for trade. Many Europeans did without, especially the private traders, those we call interlopers in the period of the monopolistic companies.

To return to the main track, the active collaboration of the locals was not enough. Somehow some people would have to be able to go through the surf both ways. And since the European light boats were totally inadequate for the purpose, and the locals had, as noted, no maritime tradition, the question was where to find such people. They were recruited from two of the three known maritime communities along the coast of Guinea: the Ga and especially the Fante of the neighbouring and very different Gold Coast west of the river Volta (the third such community were the Kru of Liberia).[35] But although the coastal Fante people did have a tradition of venturing into the open sea, it must have taken the first generations of them quite some time, and a considerable number of casualties, to master the surf, the likes of which they cannot have been familiar with from home. What is certain is that they had to be, and became in fact, accomplished athletes, and especially excellent swimmers and divers.[36]

That, then, is the short answer. However, it begs a number of unanswerable questions. The central one is simply why the Fante canoemen volunteered at all. But more generally, those canoemen, the famous *remaderos* or *remidors* of the sources,[37] present us with a problem of some magnitude: we know next to nothing about them. We are well informed about the ethnic group we call Fante, but not about the Fante (also called Mina) canoemen. The latter have been severely neglected by historians, formally for the same reason that there remain so many other blanks in the past of the Slave Coast: the dearth of sources. But even so, the very fact that historians (the present author included) have not even given it a try calls for attention. As it is, we can only state the obvious, that the Fante and their occasionally enormous flat-bottomed dugout canoes, manned by from seven up to over 30 paddlers,[38] were absolutely indispensable. In fact, the Europeans had no alternative but to entrust them with all that they needed,[39] and indeed with their very lives,[40] which

incidentally not a few of the Europeans lost in the venture.[41] The bitter complaints that the Europeans occasionally lodged in their reports in the early days[42] against the canoemen obviously served no practical purpose.

The only certain information that the present author has been able to glean about the Fante canoemen is, first, that they were very religious[43] – as everyone was, but obviously it was very understandable in their case since they put their lives on the line on each and every trip; second, that the best and most expensive were from the region of Shama;[44] and third, that some of them (probably a minority) were formally slaves,[45] a fact which does not make much sense, although we presume they would have been very privileged slaves. Fourth, and finally, since many Fante canoemen settled down on the Slave Coast, it seems legitimate to speak of a sort of Fante colonization of the coast east of the Volta.[46]

Were the Fante canoemen ever conscious of their power and what they were actually doing? To give an idea of that power, here is a quotation from the famous slave trader Thomas Phillips, who wrote in the 1690s:

> the canoes frequently over-setting, but the canoe-men are such excellent divers & swimmers, that they preserve the lives of those they have any kindness for, but such as they have any displeasure to...(so) very prudent for all commanders to be kind & obliging to them, their lives lying in their hands, which they can make them lose at pleasure, & impute all to accident, and they could not help it.[47]

Another European, the Portuguese Father Vicente Ferreira Pires, claimed a century later that the canoemen were occasionally paid by Europeans to get rid of fellow Europeans.[48]

If more proof were needed of the Europeans' total dependence on the local population and on the Fante canoemen, we can turn to the period of the so-called illegal slave trade after 1807/8, that is, after Europeans, principally the British, abolished and then tried to stop the slave trade. And here the point is that the Commodore of no less a force than the anti-slave-trade squadron of the Royal Navy, amounting to one-tenth of British warships on active service, found it impossible to bring the main slave-trading mart, Ouidah and its beach, under his control.[49] Britannia never ruled the waves off Ouidah. The reason was that the local population was opposed to abolition, and the Fante canoemen were uncooperative.

Since the picture drawn above refers primarily to the region of Ouidah, we need to add a few qualifications. The first is that, in order to avoid any misunderstanding, the slave trade did not get under way first at Ouidah, but

some 30 kilometres further east, at Offra in the kingdom of Allada. However, Ouidah (in the kingdom of Hueda) took over very quickly as the leading emporium.[50] Furthermore, if we are correct in believing, as most do, that Offra, which has disappeared as such, corresponds to modern Godomey, then it was situated slightly further away from the sea than Ouidah, and with equally forbidding landing conditions. There were other centres on the Slave Coast which were situated closer to the coastline, and several, such as Little Popo-Aneho and Keta (or Kitto), even on the shore itself. But they were always statistically insignificant compared with Offra, and later Ouidah, as far as the slave trade is concerned.

Our second qualification is that the surf was not uniformly as strong as implied above all the year round or even on the whole of the Slave Coast. The best period seems to have been between January and March, that is, towards the end of the dry season[51] (our source Watson was wrong, he arrived not in the best season, but slightly too early). But the surf could be formidable even in calm weather (see below).

There is in any case no doubt that the worst surf-ridden part of the Slave Coast was precisely and surprisingly that of Offra-Ouidah,[52] that is, the Central Slave Coast, where it really happened.

Our next qualification is that the figures above refer, strictly speaking, to the export of slaves from the Bight of Benin, of which in geographical terms the Slave Coast constitutes only the small western part. But there is reason to believe, as we shall see, that during the period we are interested in the export of slaves from the rest of the Bight of Benin, that is, east of the Slave Coast, was close to negligible.

Let us add finally that the beach was certainly not empty all along the coast, as the previously mentioned examples of Little Popo-Aneho and Keta indicate. In the more general case of Anlo in the west, the beach was at places much larger in depth than at Ouidah (but in others actually smaller), and in fact inhabited far in the past.[53] But again, the slave trade from Anlo, and from the Western Slave Coast generally, was on a modest scale compared with what went on further east.

* * *

It is important to bear in mind what we have hinted at already, namely that the Slave Coast was (and is) unique compared with the other coasts of Guinea, and in particular with that of the neighbouring Gold Coast (now Ghana). About the Gold Coast we need to know first that, as its name indicates, it was

gold that attracted the Europeans, not slaves. However, the Gold Coast did eventually become what has been described as a second Slave Coast – from the early 1700s, as we shall see. We also need to know that the Gold Coast was always the epicentre of European activities on the coast of West Africa during the precolonial era – as the many forts still standing along the coast bear witness. The Europeans in question were first the Portuguese, who arrived in 1471,[54] and later especially the Dutch and the English, but also the French, plus the Danes and the Germans from Brandenburg-Prussia,[55] and finally the Swedes for a short period.[56] The oldest section of the presidential palace of the present-day Republic of Ghana in Accra is actually a former Danish fort (Christiansborg) that dates to 1661. Christiansborg, in its time reputedly one of the most impressive forts on the coast, together with the Dutch (originally Portuguese) Elmina and the English Cape Coast Castle, was for long the only Danish establishment on the whole of the coast.[57] It was also the easternmost of all the Gold Coast forts. Hence, if the Danes wanted to expand – which they did, especially towards the end of the eighteenth century – they could do so only eastwards, aided by the fact that between Christiansborg and Ouidah, a stretch of some 280 km, there was for most of the period no fort and little European activity. In brief, the Danes always took a keen interest and dabbled increasingly in the affairs of the Western or Little Slave Coast, as they called it.[58] In the process they converted themselves into privileged observers of the Slave Coast scene, for which reason they will appear frequently in this work.[59] Actually, the Danes erected the only known fort on the Western Slave Coast; but that happened rather late in the day, in 1784, and the Danish fort was and remained of very marginal importance.

The three nations that erected forts where it really mattered, on the Central Slave Coast, were the English, the French and the Portuguese, in chronological order. Among them, only the English had permanent establishments on the Gold Coast throughout our period. The French tried hard for a long time to establish a permanent base on the latter coast, but never really succeeded.[60] Neither did the Portuguese. In their case it was a question of trying to *return* to a coast from which they had been ousted by the Dutch in the 1640s, a fact that did not stop Portuguese vessels from trafficking on the Gold Coast.[61]

The reasons for the Gold Coast's central position are many, one having to do with the fact that all the indispensable canoemen came from there; but the other reasons are purely physical. Its coastline was characterized by inlets, bays, rocky promontories and pronounced headlands where it was easy to construct, and which gave shelter from prevailing winds and currents and allowed for

relatively safe anchorage.[62] There was then no beach of the Slave Coast type, and no lagoon. That said, conditions on the Gold Coast were far from optimal.[63] There were in particular no genuinely natural harbours (except possibly at the Shama river).[64] And the surf could be occasionally a problem on the Gold Coast too.[65] Nevertheless, the Dane Erick Tilleman was certainly correct when he noted in 1697 that "the land of the Slave Coast is different in every way" to the Gold Coast.[66]

What then about the coast to the east and the south-east between Lagos and the Niger Delta where the Europeans never erected forts, and whose centre was the old kingdom of Benin? (Not to be confused with the present-day Republic of the same name much further west.) Here the conditions were different again, owing to the swamp vegetation and the problem of navigating the many rivers characteristic of the region. But the central point for our purpose is that the slave trade was statistically close to insignificant in that part of West Africa.[67] The Slave Coast, and especially the central part, was the main exporter of slaves in West Africa west of the Niger Delta, followed by the Gold Coast, and – far behind – Senegambia with the famous islet of Gorée.

* * *

One obvious conclusion that can be drawn from the above is that along the Slave Coast Africans played a very active role in the emergence of what we call the South Atlantic system. Hence the sad but inevitable contention summed up in the title of this work: slave traders by invitation.

But is this contention based exclusively on the physical conditions under which the slave trade was conducted, or do we know of any genuine invitation that was actually extended, formally or otherwise, to the Europeans? The European sources are not very eloquent. We know, though, that the Portuguese had a good idea of the configuration of the Slave Coast by the middle of the sixteenth century.[68] Nevertheless, for a long time they simply sailed past it on their way to Lagos with its very dangerous bar, or regions further to the south-east:[69] perhaps while waiting for an invitation.

According to the local traditions from Ouidah (those of Offra have disappeared along with the town itself), the first locals who spotted the Portuguese and managed to persuade and/or lure them to venture ashore were later elevated to the dignity of divinities (they are so worshipped to the present). And they were so elevated because they were considered as benefactors to society.[70] The trouble was, however, that the locals had nothing

to offer but slaves, and the Portuguese at that early stage were not particularly interested (it was gold, not slaves, that originally attracted the Europeans to the coast of Guinea).

According to one version, Kpatè, the one who spotted the Portuguese became the divinity of shipwrecks – that is, the divinity to which one offered sacrifices to make ships run aground. Indeed, according to the custom on the coast the locals had the right to loot any ship wrecked on the beach[71] (a custom not unknown elsewhere, including parts of Western Europe). That happened with some frequency in the following centuries. It is tempting to argue that the Kpatè story testifies to the difficulties of establishing contact, and more generally to the dangers the Europeans were confronted with in these waters.

Whatever the case, we suppose that there was a considerable time lag between the first contact and the time when regular trade relations developed, an extensive period of trials and failings. The Slave Coast was in fact the last region of coastal West Africa to establish regular relations with the Europeans.

It is at this juncture that we must lament the disappearance of the oral traditions of the Offra region, since we suspect that they may have had a somewhat different story to tell. We know for certain that the polity of Allada, which included Offra, exported in the early days considerable quantities of cloth, and cotton cloth at that, to the Gold Coast, as well as other "normal" merchandise.[72] This trade went on until at least the 1680s and co-existed for some time with the slave trade.[73] Why and how that non-slave trade disappeared, and why Offra-Allada was superseded rapidly by the neighbouring region of Ouidah, are questions which still await answers.

The next point is that the invitation (we consider it as such) to trade in slaves, once extended, was never withdrawn. Indeed, in the end it was, as we shall see, the slave trade that abandoned the Slave Coast, not the other way around.[74] It is significant in this respect that when the region was rocked by warfare, the slave trade does not seem ever to have been an issue, all sides vying for the control of that trade – for the very simple reason that it constituted a major source of material enrichment, and all sides tried to enlist the Europeans as allies, while attempting at the same time, and with success, to keep those same Europeans in their place. Regarding warfare, there was a contradiction inherent in the slave trade, which was certainly not like any other trade. It is true that like all trade, it needed peaceful conditions (and predictability) to thrive. But, to state the obvious, it needed also exactly the opposite, namely violence, since violence in whatever form was clearly an important way of procuring slaves. The question

was, however, *where* that violence took place. It had to take place away from those centres where the trade as such was conducted.

As for the Europeans, although possibly lukewarm initially, they quickly proved themselves to be over-eager to respond to the invitation. The so-called sugar revolution in the Caribbean around the 1670s (see later) had created an insatiable demand for slaves. But why slaves from *Africa*? The short answer is, because that was where slaves could be had (apart from obvious climatic and microparasitic-epidemiological reasons). But how so? J.D. Fage suggested some time ago that "the possession of men and women was both the source and symbol of wealth and power, particularly perhaps because they seem to have been a scarce resource in relation to...land".[75] In other words, wealth and power were rooted not in ownership of land (a non-existent notion anyway), but in control of people – the wealth-in-people paradigm. Hence Fage posits the emergence of an important group of dependents, and the temptation to use those dependents as money with which to purchase the commodities the Europeans had to offer.[76] Convincing or not, Fage's theory remains to date the only one on offer. But if the selling of dependents was how it all began, it does not explain the continuation, that is, how and why it developed into a large-scale enterprise and why it lasted for so long. Clearly dependents constituted only a small fraction of the totality of slaves sold. The question is where the others came from, how they were "produced", so to speak. And as we shall see, the answer is far from evident.

An important point in this context is that from the European side it was in a sense "safe" to fetch slaves in Africa, and especially so on the Slave Coast. For as Seymour Drescher has underlined,[77] the slaves had no sailing skills, so that in case of a successful revolt they could not steer a ship back to Africa, where there was no safe haven waiting for them anyway, since most of the people living along the coast were involved in the slave trade one way or the other. In addition, there was no risk that anyone would come after the slave ships in order to liberate the slaves, or for that matter to mount a rescue expedition to the Americas. In brief, the slaves, once the Middle Passage had begun, had nowhere to go and no-one to turn to. They were absolutely alone in the world.

* * *

As we have seen, the slave trade on the Central Slave Coast was conducted under extremely adverse physical conditions. The wider theme is what happened to the slaves from the moment they came into the purview of the Europeans up to the moment the slave ships, after having set sail, lost sight of

the coast. We call it the loading and waiting time and we consider it to be a neglected theme in the history of the slave trade. The contention here is first, that it was a very long-lasting stage; and second, that it was a stage during which a frightful number of human lives was lost, not only because of the physical conditions, but also because of what some sources refer to as the local "ill usages" and "ill conducts",[78] which were certainly deadly, whatever they may have consisted of exactly – our sources do not really tell.

The casualties during the waiting and loading time on the Slave Coast far exceeded, we suspect, those on the better-known Middle Passage – the Atlantic crossing.[79] The loss of life during that crossing was due in large part precisely to the conditions endured by the slaves during the waiting and loading time. Indeed, the squandering of human life on the Slave Coast must have been on a scale not seen anywhere else on the coast, or perhaps even anywhere else in the context of the history of slavery and the slave trade. That, at least, is the contention. To prove it, we would have had to conduct a vast comparative study, complete with reliable figures, and this we cannot do. We cannot even quantify what happened on the Slave Coast (can archaeology help?). Yet the evidence, circumstantial and as presumptive as it may be, does point unequivocally in the direction suggested.

* * *

All this brings us to the epistemological and especially philosophical-ethical problems at hand, problems we can no longer avoid. They are like the proverbial hobgoblins of Nordic folklore, impossible to ignore and impossible to get rid of. The epistemological problem (which will be investigated in depth later) is multi-dimensional, one dimension having to do with the problem of imbalance in the sources, those sources being certainly voluminous but nevertheless vastly inadequate in many ways and, in particular, terribly one-sided. Hence the tentative and incomplete nature of the history we present to the reader. Another dimension is whether the past of Africa can be fully understood in terms of our Western conceptual categories, unsatisfactory but so far the only ones we have at our disposal.[80]

As for the philosophical-ethical problem, the sources, for all their shortcomings, are more than adequate in one particular aspect. They provide us with an idea of the practical day-to-day functioning, the routine as it were, of the slave trade. The inescapable impression we are left with is that we are confronted with an authentic horror story in which the superlatives become quickly exhausted. Hence the problem for the historian who looks into

precisely the day-to-day functioning, as opposed to the more abstract quantitative dimension, is how to maintain the required clinical detachment from the subject, what is known as academic restraint.

The point is that there is something very special about the slave trade. For it went on day in, day out, year after year, decade after decade, and indeed century after century, in a routinely, not to say monotonous-bureaucratic and starkly callous fashion, and on an unrivalled scale, and even in the teeth of formidable natural barriers, as in the case of the Central Slave Coast.[81]

In fact, the routine aspect, the very long time span and the enormous distances involved, and the gigantic infrastructural apparatus and logistical organization necessary, tempt one to ask if there is really anything comparable in the history of mankind. If we add the genocide-like fate which awaited the majority of the slaves, those who ended up in the Caribbean and Brazil,[82] it seems entirely possible to suppose, that no, there may not have been anything like it in the past. (Note that we are talking here exclusively about the Atlantic slave trade. Had we added the little-studied but obviously statistically significant Trans-Saharan slave trade,[83] we would have ended up with an even bleaker picture.)

It is this unremitting, large-scale, mass-production aspect, this big-business, capitalist, modern, or industrial dimension, which is particularly striking, and which in our opinion sets the Atlantic slave trade apart from whatever may have occurred earlier, later, or elsewhere.

While we are at it, and in relation to the possibly un-academic "how-could-they" question, and at the risk of falling into several traps, including that of anachronism, we may as well go on to wonder what would have happened if the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury and/or some leading Lutheran and Calvinist theologians (plus, say, an influential rabbi) had promised the slavers eternal doom and damnation. They never did, quite the contrary, as is well known.[84] Can we take refuge in the argument that the Atlantic slave trade happened a long time ago, that the world and what the Germans call our *Weltanschauung*, have changed radically since then – if they have so changed?

It is true that many Europeans considered the slave trade and slavery to be a problem, moral or otherwise, that its supporters were often on the defensive,[85] and that something akin to bad conscience among the direct participants surfaces occasionally in our sources. One of those participants, the Frenchman Antoine Pruneau de Pommegeorge, even went as far as to pray for the Almighty's forgiveness for what he had taken part in. He went on to label the slave trade as a profanation of the Christian religion.[86] But Pruneau,

who was stationed in Ouidah in the 1750s and 1760s – ending his local career as director-governor of the French fort, and as such directly responsible for the slave trade – had no success in convincing his superiors.

It is equally true that the Europeans, and especially the British, did in the end conclude that the slave trade (and later slavery) was incompatible with their own basic values and norms (in 1807 in the British case).[87] But not with those of capitalism. To paraphrase a sarcastic historian, one gets at times the impression that the slave trade and slavery were and are perceived as some sort of regrettable but "inevitable" collateral damage of capitalism's triumphant – and applauded – progress.[88] However, the British "were a long time finding it out to be wrong", as noted ironically by none other than possibly the leading African slave-trader of the day, King Gezo of Dahomey on the Slave Coast.[89] The other Europeans were even slower in finding it out.[90]

On the African side, one cannot but wonder what would have happened if the local rulers had followed the example of a certain seventeenth-century Hindu warlord on the Coromandel coast of India who refused to supply the Dutch with slaves, in spite of the latter's insistence. His argument was that to do so would have been a great sin in the eyes of the gods. As a result, the slave trade from that coast never took off, and in fact petered out quickly, much to the disappointment of the Dutch.[91] Actually, we do know of at least one African ruler who did something of the sort, as we shall see – the king of Benin in present-day southwestern Nigeria; he decreed a ban on the sale of male (although not female) slaves, a ban that lasted for more than two centuries. But his was and remained an exceptional case.

On the African side, furthermore, or rather that part of the African side that we know about, there is no hint of anything even remotely resembling remorse or moral scruples, not to mention an abolitionist movement, and certainly not in Ouidah. Consider Robin Law's assertion, based on his extensive fieldwork in the area, that there was "until very recently [this was written in 2004], a local consensus that the slave trade was a good thing for Ouidah". He added that he did not detect any feeling of shame anywhere.[92] Law, who is not taken to verbal excesses, notes also that references to the slave trade in the remembered praise names of prominent traders are sometimes "by the standards of modern susceptibilities, alarmingly callous".[93] In fact, and as we intend to demonstrate later, the treatment of the slaves destined for America, before they ended up in the custody of the Europeans, demonstrates that their fate was of no concern to the local population. If one asks why, the answer may perhaps be something to the effect that a slave was an "other",

someone without kin relations in this kinship-type society, and as such no longer considered to be a genuine human being, in the sense of not belonging to any human community.

It could be, nevertheless, that the slave trade represented a problem for the Africans involved too, including a spiritual one. We can deduce from works concerning the slave trade in other regions that capturing and selling slaves may have been considered in a sense a polluting exercise, placing the traders (but only the traders?) in spiritual danger. Hence the need for some sort of ritual-spiritual purification, assistance and/or protection, even some kind of religious redemption.[94] But the problem is that there is nothing whatsoever in our sources from the Slave Coast on the subject. We can therefore do no more than repeat Robin Law's speculative suggestion that the slave trade may have been understood in the idiom of witchcraft,[95] and that there may have existed some attempt to establish some sort of "psycho-religious control" of the operation of the slave trade,[96] whatever all that really means.

Incidentally, the frequent references to the works of Robin Law above are not fortuitous. Law's corpus constitutes an important part of the existing historiography on the past of the Slave Coast, and will therefore be with us throughout. However, the present author begs to dissent from *some* of Law's conclusions, one of the reasons why the present book has been written.

In the more global context, it remains true what the Cameroonian sociologist Axelle Kabou – as far as we know only she – has underlined on the African side, namely that the Africans hold the regrettable record of being the only people in the world to have sold their own kin (although perhaps they were not considered as such) into slavery on a vast scale.[97] However, we hasten to add (recalling the case of the kingdom of Benin), certainly not all Africans, and certainly not all the time.

But nothing of this really answers the "how-could-they" question, and certainly not on the European side. It is a question we have in the final analysis to leave unanswered, unless we argue that all, or at least most, European participants were really confident about the "subhuman identity" of the Africans or believed seriously that the Africans "filled up the space between mankind and the ape".[98] In brief, the Europeans simply could and did, they "slaved", to use a verb (accompanied by an adjective, "halve [half] slaved")[99] which has disappeared from current English, while usually claiming at the same time to be good Christians. Allow us to quote in this context two typical contemporary justifications, for whatever they may be worth. The first is the standard Pontoppidanian one (see above) that, as a Portuguese official (but

not a clergyman this time) put it, the Africans were freed through slavery, that is, given the opportunity to "see the light".[100] Note in this respect that the prudish Portuguese did not officially take part in the slave trade at all, they did not "slave". What they did was to *resgatar* slaves, a verb which can be translated as to buy back, to redeem, to ransom, to set free.[101]

The second justification is, as pointed out by no less a figure than King Louis XIV of France in 1696 (or by someone expressing himself in the king's name), that the Negroes (the word "slaves" was avoided) were essential for the cultivation of useful crops in America (no moral objections raised).[102] Or as expressed somewhat more straightforwardly by an anonymous French official in possibly 1775: "May humanity pardon us, but the case is that the negroes [he too avoided the word "slaves"] are as indispensable to the cultivation of the land in our colonies as the oxen and the horses are to the same in Europe".[103] All this is echoed by another Portuguese official who as late as 1811 referred to "this sad but necessary trade".[104]

* * *

We have allowed the questions and thoughts formulated above to surface in this Introduction, in the hope that they will not colour, or at least not colour unduly, the rest of this work, whether one believes they should do so or not. We need, however, to make a few comments on the problem of objectivity. We have been told repeatedly that objectivity is but a dream, be it a noble one.[105] But that is true in our opinion only in the absolute, fundamentalist sense of the term. In the historian's real world, a skewed, biased, or partisan account is, apart from being generally boring, easily detected; we all know what the reverse of objectivity and impartiality is. The question is in fact whether we pursue the goal of objectivity or not, while knowing full well that it is unobtainable. If we do, as we must, and do so displaying what is called intellectual honesty, we respect (however sermon-like this may sound) the ethical and moral obligations of our craft, which is, we believe, what we as historians must demand of ourselves, and what the rest of the world is entitled to expect from us.

Intellectual honesty compels us, among other things, to abide – if necessary – by conclusions we find repugnant, such as the one which appears in the title of the present work. It also compels us to distinguish between what we know for certain, what we *think* we know, and what we do not know, or know loosely, but allow ourselves to speculate about. The point is important, and especially so in the context of the Slave Coast with regard to the

epistemological problem at hand, and leads us to make a programmatic declaration about the type of history we believe we always try to write, trying again in this work. We favour a problematizing approach, that is, one in which we focus on the problems the past presents us with, which are always legion, given that very little about the past is absolutely certain, even at times at the purely chronological-factual level (leaving aside the problem of what an absolutely certain and irrefutable fact really *is*). The task of the historian in this context is not necessarily to resolve those problems, but to discuss and above all to define them. It makes for a kind of history-writing which implies necessarily more questions than answers, and is therefore not universally favoured. We think, however, that probabilizing history, as we call it, contributes powerfully to our insight and understanding, which is in the final analysis what history is, or ought to be all about. Or so the present author argues.

* * *

It is time to redress the balance somewhat. Although the local environmental conditions and the slave trade must necessarily loom large in the history of the Slave Coast – they represent a sort of backdrop to the rest – and although it seemed natural to focus on them in this Introduction, they do not constitute the whole story. In fact, our ambition is to present something approaching a global overview of the history of the Slave Coast in the relevant period. Due attention will then have to be paid to a variety of other, necessarily related themes, among them especially the nature of the polities which existed or emerged on the Slave Coast, in a comparative context. We frequently use the neutral term "polity" instead of "kingdom", and especially of "state", whether archaic, primary or secondary. We are in fact not certain that the existing definitions of those terms are applicable to the African political entities of olden times;[106] if, that is, they were really *political* entities...).

PART A

STRUCTURES AND TRENDS

1

THE SLAVE COAST

A GENERAL PRESENTATION

A general presentation of the Slave Coast is long overdue. So to begin at the beginning, the term Slave Coast refers to a maritime *region*; that is, we repeat, the long stretch of the Lower Guinea coast[1] in West Africa, roughly 320 km in length, between the river Volta in present-day eastern Ghana and the Lagos channel (the outlet of the vast Lagos lagoon) in western Nigeria, as well as that coast's hinterland (except in the small easternmost Apapa-Badagry-Lagos part where one does not normally include the Yoruba hinterland). How far inland is a matter of choice. We settle for about 150 kilometres, and we do so for sound linguistic reasons. However, we have noted that Robin Law opts for another 70 kilometres further north.[2] The problem is that about 120 km inland we enter progressively into a sort of heterogeneous frontier zone, characterized by a mixture of peoples, ethnic groups and languages. And the question is where exactly that zone begins, how extensive it is northwards, and how much of it can or should be defined as pertaining to the region we call the Slave Coast. 150 kilometres inland (our choice) gives us an area slightly larger than Belgium, that is, a very small proportion indeed of the enormous African continent, but a globally significant one for many centuries.

In modern terms the Slave Coast corresponds approximately to the southern ten per cent or less of the Republics of Togo and Benin, together with small parts of southeastern Ghana and southwestern Nigeria: more precisely, nowadays, the southern half of the Volta region in the former case, and Lagos

State in the latter. The Slave Coast is divided then between no less than four modern states, two officially Anglophone and two Francophone. It constitutes nevertheless a clearly delineated region, and not only for historical and linguistic reasons, but also for geographical-vegetational ones. Most of the Slave Coast coincides with a significant ecological feature, the so-called Benin Gap, where what is called the forest-savanna mosaic zone, comprising vast stretches of open grassland, breaks through the belt of tropical rainforest and reaches all the way down to the coast.[3] The reason has to do with the local microclimate:[4] this region receives much less rain than its eastern or western neighbours, a fact usually attributed to the roughly south-north-running Akwapim-Togo-Atakora hills and mountains along the Ghana-Togo border in the west,[5] and hence rainfall increases from west to east. Hence also, whereas the Benin Gap extends panhandle-like on the coast westward beyond Accra in Ghana,[6] the easternmost tip of the Slave Coast is covered by rainforest and is thus situated outside of the Benin Gap. (The name "Benin" refers then not only to a precolonial polity in southern Nigeria, and to a modern Francophone republic much further west, but also to a vegetational-environmental zone, as well as to a part of the Gulf of Guinea, etc.)

The Central Slave Coast centred on the towns of Ouidah and Offra (or Offra/Jakin) is no more than 100 kilometres in length, between Lakes Ahémé and Nohoué. But it was from this Central Slave Coast (the genuine Slave Coast, one may call it) that the great majority of the slaves was exported. The rest, the Western and Eastern Slave Coasts respectively (some 220 kilometres altogether), may be called peripheral, in the sense that it played only a marginal role in the slave trade to the 1770s. However, from that decade onwards the slave trade soared on the *Eastern* Slave Coast, owing in part to the considerable influx of people from the Central Slave Coast after 1724/27 (about which more later).

West of Lake Ahémé (and east of the river Mono, north of Grand Popo), we come to a curious small and sparsely populated sort of no-man's land, the Aja-Mono (or Adja-Mono) plateau. There, more or less "archaic" structures survived to the nineteenth century if not longer, that is, the structures associated with what we call acephalous ("headless") societies.[7]

As for the region west of the Mono, the Western Slave Coast – the Little Slave Coast of the Danes – it corresponds *grosso modo* to Eweland, plus regions occupied by the Hula, the Bê of Lake Togo being the westernmost Hula as far as we know.

Obviously the term Slave Coast, which was coined by European slave traders in the seventeenth century,[8] is highly pejorative. Yet it has stuck, and

has survived so far both the era of decolonization and that of political correctness. Indeed, the term is still widely used, as atlases, encyclopedias *and* many scholarly works testify. Why the name? Because the Slave Coast came to export *only* slaves once the cloth trade from Allada disappeared – as opposed to the Grain, Pepper, Ivory, and especially Gold Coasts, where, as their names indicate, other goods were, had been or remained of importance.

Since the Slave Coast can be defined as an historical region, it makes sense to study its past more or less separately from the rest of West Africa, even from the neighbouring Gold Coast, with which interrelations were intense, although certainly not in isolation from those other areas. For instance, we will encounter frequently in the following pages such polities as Oyo and Akwamu, the former a mighty and enormous Yoruba polity in the north-east,[9] the local superpower as it were; and the latter originally a realm in the inland of the Gold Coast.[10] Then there were, as we have seen, the Fante canoemen, together with the Ga of the region of Accra, and finally the Europeans, who, although they often distinguished between the Upper or Windward and the Lower or Leeward coasts (the Gold Coast and the Slave Coast respectively), also tended at times to consider the two as one region, and certainly to trade on both.

If one argues that it would have made more sense to choose as one's frame of study the whole of the Lower Guinea coast, one certainly has a point. But although that would have been too big a cake to swallow for the present author, in fact comparisons with the neighbouring regions are unavoidable, so that the present work does at times resemble something approaching the history of that broader region. It may also be that what follows has been inflated, somewhat unintentionally, with a certain global dimension ("the pen took charge").

As for the linguistic and ethnic distribution, the salient feature is that most people of the Slave Coast apparently speak what is basically the same language. The exception is, and especially was, a small section situated east of the Weme river and part of the wider Yorubaland. Ketu, a neighbour of Oyo, is the best-known and largest Yoruba polity inside the Slave Coast.[11]

Those who argue that with that exception there is only one language are a number of linguists, including the Beninese Hounkpatin Capo,[12] whom we choose to follow. Should one argue the opposite, namely that there are several languages (about twenty), one would have to add, our linguists say, that those languages are very closely related indeed. It all hinges on one's definition of what constitutes a language, what constitutes a dialect, and at which stage a dialect becomes a separate language (or vice versa). The problem of considering that there is only one language is that no agreement has been

reached on any measure of standardization, not to mention a *name* for that language. However, *Gbe*, meaning "tongue" or "language" in all the relevant dialects (hence for instance Fongbe and Ewegbe, the Fon and Ewe tongues), has been proposed, and has been adopted by many scholars, Hounkpatin Capo included. Other names proposed are Xwegbe and Egaf, the latter short for Ewe-Gen-Aja-Fon.[13]

What is beyond doubt is that Gbe differs sharply from the other languages spoken in the wider region, whether Yoruba in the east (and in the north, as we shall see), Ga-Adangbe in the west between the Volta and the Densu river west of Accra,[14] or Twi of the Akan and the Fante even further west.

But the apparent linguistic unity has not fostered any other kind of unity, and certainly not an ethnic one. Indeed, the people of the Slave Coast belong, and belonged traditionally, to a bewildering number of more or less fluid ethnic groups. Hence we have to confront and tolerate quite a few ethnonyms – that is, names of ethnic groups. In brief, the literature presents us with (roughly from east to west, to the west of Yorubaland) the Gun or Egun, the Tofinu, the Hula, the Wemenu or Oueneou, the Hueda, the Mahi, the Guedevi, the Fon, the Aïzo, the Aja, the Ewe, also written Eve or Vhe (the two occasionally put together as Aja-Ewe); the Guin (also called Ge or Gen), the Mina, the Anlo, the Watchi or Ouatchi, the Krepi, and a few more. Some may be considered to be subgroups of others (the three last mentioned are for instance often also catalogued as Ewe, and Krepi is frequently used in the sources as synonymous with Ewe).[15] One (Aïzo) does not really refer to a specific ethnic group as such, but denotes in general terms indigenous peoples or firstcomers. Other groups have disappeared more or less, especially the Guedevi. And some ethnonyms are of relatively recent date, Gun/Egun and Tofinu in particular. We must remember in this context that ethnic identity is bound to and by historical development, and that ethnic affiliation can be fairly unstable and fluctuating. That being said, we may define ethnicity (loosely) as perceived common ancestry, plus common customs and common language, together with in many cases boundary maintenance towards other groups.

Some minorities there are, in the north, in the region shading into the above-mentioned frontier zone. And here it is noteworthy that we find Yoruba-speakers in the north too. In fact, they inhabit a sort of southwest-bending panhandle all the way to, and including, Atakpamé far to the west in the Plateau region of present-day Central Togo.[16] Thus they constitute partly a buffer zone between the land of the Gur-speaking peoples to the north and

our Gbe in the south. What is noteworthy about the panhandle-Yoruba – Peel's Western Yoruba Groups[17] – is that, apart from two small polities,[18] they display what is qualified as marked archaic traits: they have no kings (contrary to those of the vast Yoruba heartland). They too are, in short, classified as acephalous.[19] Are we dealing with the advance guard of a migration which petered out, as Robert Smith has suggested?[20]

As for the present-day Mahi in the hilly region of central Benin (and clearly in the frontier zone), they do not constitute a linguistic minority properly speaking, they are in fact Gbe-speakers. But theirs is a relatively new ethnic group, a mixture of Yoruba and Fon, the latter being refugees from the south in the eighteenth century especially.[21] Since they were the northern neighbours of Dahomey, the main polity on the Slave Coast after 1727, and became possibly the principal victims of the slave-raids of that polity, the Mahi will appear frequently in the following.

We find genuine linguistic minorities in the Plateau region of Central Togo and especially its continuation into modern Ghana, north of Ho, that is from the shores of the modern Volta Lake and eastwards, yet another typical hilly refugee zone.[22] Those (small) minorities "speak languages which are unique to themselves".[23] We are referring to the more or less mysterious people who speak the so-called Ghana-Togo Mountain Languages (GTML-Togo *Restsprachen* in the German literature). They were and are clearly acephalous.[24] We mention these people because they pop up now and then in the traditions of the neighbouring Ewe. As for making head and tail of their past, it seems like even the specialists have given up the attempt, noting that their oral traditions, and the available linguistic evidence, sprawl out in all directions. Hence our leading authority, Paul Nugent, has described them as the first postmodernists.[25] But at least one linguist believes that their languages may be related to Guan[26] (the language of one group is actually classified as Guan[27]). And people who speak Guan constitute also an enigma of sorts – they are scattered in small and not so small groups nearly all over Ghana,[28] as well as possibly also in Central Togo.

After this brief overview of the linguistic situation, it remains for us to lament the rather strange fact that research in historical linguistics has, as far as we know, not yet been undertaken in the case of the Slave Coast. It is indeed one of the few fields one can think of which has the potential of broadening and deepening our understanding of its past. One wonders in particular what a systematic study of the etymological origins of place names might result in.[29]

The local political situation, past and present, implies that there was, and is, no authority capable of imposing a common language, or even of

standardizing any of the component dialects (if dialects is the correct term). Hence there is no agreed-upon orthography. If we add that the Europeans wrote down the words and names as they saw fit or thought they heard them, the result is an onomastic nightmare for the modern researcher.

Take for instance Ouidah, admittedly an extreme case. Ouidah, so spelt, is how the name appears on modern road maps and on the local roadsigns, and is also the orthography adopted by Robin Law in his work on its history already cited. Hence it is also adopted, in the present work, though reluctantly – somehow it does not sound right. But in the sources the town is more often referred to as Whydah (our favourite), or alternatively as Widah, Whidawe, Wheda, Guydah or Vida (all mainly English and Danish styles), Juda or Judas (French style), Ayuda or Ajuda (Portuguese style), and finally Xweda and Fida. But the problem is that the town was (and perhaps is) also called Glehue, Gléhoué, Gregory, Gregoy, Grighwe, Grighue and Agriffie etc. (I.A. Akinjogbin adds to the confusion by using what he presents as the Yoruba name for the place, Igelefe).[30] This second class of names has obviously another origin than the first. So what is the explanation? Ouidah/Whydah etc. is derived from Hueda, also written Xueda, Weda or Pédah, which is the name of the local ethnic group (not necessarily that of the original inhabitants of the place, who may have been Hula).[31] But it was also, we have learned, the name of a pre-1727 polity, of which Ouidah was part, with its capital at Savi some nine kilometres further north (also written Sahè, Saxè, Xavier, Sabba etc.). The original name of the *village* of Ouidah was in fact Glehue etc. Why and how the original name was replaced by one derived from that of a local ethnic group and the corresponding polity, we do not know. Hence Agriffie in Whidawe – that is, Glehue in Hueda – in the earliest extant document written from Ouidah in 1681 may be the correct way of putting it, according to Robin Law.[32] An additional problem is that the *polity* of Hueda disappeared in 1727, but certainly not the *town* of Ouidah-Glehue. However, the real problem is that when reference is made in the sources before 1727 to Ouidah or Whydah, we are not always certain whether it refers to the Hueda polity or to the town (village?) of Ouidah. To avoid confusion, we have tried to use the double name Ouidah-Glehue for the town and that of Hueda for the polity.

To take another possibly confusing example from some kilometres further east, there is Jakin (the twin town of Offra), also written Djèkin,[33] Diaquin, Djaquin and Jacquin; this is incidentally a Hula polity – Hula being also written Houla, Kpla, Xula, Xwla, Huda or Pla – at some points neighbouring the

Weme, also written Ouémé (note that Weme is the name of a river, an ethnic group *and* a polity; the original name of the river seems to have been Wo).

* * *

Let us pause for a while and have a closer look at the Hula, because they provide us with a sort of introductory glimpse into the logic of the societies of the Slave Coast even in remote times. The Hula are, or were, the famous water people, so called, those who worshipped Hu, the *vodun* or deity of the sea,[34] the meanest of the deities[35] since the sea was never really calm (*hu* means actually the sea – hence, we suspect, the names Hula and Hueda). To-day only a few scattered groups who call themselves Hula remain. But they constituted, one is inclined to suppose, the indigenous people of the south of possibly the whole of the Slave Coast[36] – Eweland included, or at least that part of the indigenous population whose domain was the lagoon and the marshlands, devoting themselves principally to fishing and salt-making.[37] It is in this context significant that they, like the Hueda, claim to have emerged from a hole in the earth[38] (incidentally not from the sea), usually a sure sign of indigenous status.

The point here is that although the name Hula may refer to the original inhabitants of the coast itself, possibly the people who greeted or invited the Portuguese on shore, it refers also to a specific way of life, one connected with water. Hence, people who were distinct from economic and religious points of view (the two being very much interconnected) also tended to constitute a distinct ethnic group. And when that specific way of life began to be eroded, the same happened to the corresponding ethnic group, its members shifting simply their ethnic affiliation. Note in addition that when the Hula of the Ouidah-Glehue region came under the sway of the Hueda, this was reflected in the religious domain too, in the sense that Hu was relegated to the position of younger brother of Dangbe the python,[39] the tutelary deity of the Hueda. In what we may call the official Huedan pantheon, Hu remained very much in evidence at Ouidah-Glehue.[40]

Finally, let us present a very curious Hula personage who lived at Agbanakin (or Agbananken) on an island in the lagoon; Agbanakin, together with the surrounding hamlets on both sides of the lagoon, is called Grand Popo or Hulagan (which is a direct translation of Great Hula). Grand Popo-Hulagan could be the (mythical) ancestral home of the Hula.[41] Agbanakin, whose title was *hulaholu* according to Félix Iroko[42] (who unfortunately does not explain what it means) called himself the "Master of the Lagoon", according to the eighteenth-century German-Dane Paul Erdmann Isert.[43] The

hulaholu has been variously presented as a chief, a priest, and even a sacred king.[44] As such he exercised some sort of undefined power, perhaps primarily a ritual one, over a vast area.

* * *

We repeat that although most people of the Slave Coast speak basically the same language, this linguistic unity is not mirrored in the ethnic field. Nor for that matter in the political one. That is, we cannot exclude the possibility that the above-mentioned *hulaholu* of Hulagan, and (afterwards?) the rulers of Tado in the interior, once held some kind of sway over a considerable portion of the Slave Coast. It is also fairly certain that those of Allada did so some time later.[45] Tado is situated ca. 100 km inland, in present-day Togo, but close to the modern Benin Republic border; the town of Allada, also called Ardres, Arida etc., is situated some 38 km inland in what is now central Benin; Offra and Jakin were for long dependencies of Allada. If the rulers of Tado did rule such a wide area, they sank early into oblivion, and those at Allada lost their prominent position after a short while. And the later dominant polity, that of Dahomey, controlled probably less than half of the Slave Coast.[46]

In fact, should one choose to consider the Slave Coast as one entity, as we do, we would have to add that it was an entity rocked by a more or less permanent civil war during the whole era of the slave trade, the rise and expansion of Dahomey in the first half of the eighteenth century being the most notorious episode in this context. The temptation is to argue that this permanent civil war may explain, in part at least, the slave trade.

One may wonder if there existed any kind of feeling of unity even at the level of the various ethnic groups. The Ewe or Vhe, who occupy roughly the western half of the whole Slave Coast (the Hula excepted), and who are often presented as a bloc, do apparently display such a feeling – there is even reference today to Ewe nationalism. But there are scholars who argue that this pan-Ewe identity, as we may call it, was fashioned, if not fabricated, by the German missionaries who were active in the region from 1847.[47] Indeed, according to the anthropologist Paul Nugent, the very term Ewe, as a unifying designation, was probably not in common currency before the 1920s.[48] Hence the contention that "The very term 'Ewe' has its origins in missionary ethnography".[49]

A closer look reveals that the term Ewe dissolves itself into a number of more or less separate, although closely related, groups. There is for instance the case of the coastal Anlo in the south-west who adopted what is called Eweness, whatever that may mean exactly, only recently.[50] They were traditionally

opposed to, and kept aloof from, those of Ewedome (inland Eweland[51]), that is, principally the Krepi or Peki in the west around Ho, and the Watchi on the plateau that bears their name in the east.[52] In fact, most slaves in Anlo came from Ewedome and thus spoke conveniently the same language as their masters ("Domestic slavery was widely practised in precolonial Anlo").[53]

It is probable that the various groups which made up the population of the Slave Coast in the period under scrutiny, and still do in large part, have occupied their present habitat since time immemorial.[54] This in spite of all the migration stories we encounter in the traditions. Those stories, if they really correspond to actual events, probably refer to migrations over short distances, involving only a limited number of people. However, we do know of several apparently fairly large-scale exoduses in our period, including many waves of Ga-Adangbe from the Accra region of the eastern Gold Coast, who fled east of the Volta after their homeland was conquered by Akwamu in about 1680. Some of them established the polity of Glidji or Genyi about 55 km west of Ouidah-Glehue, and formally including Little Popo-Aneho. But regardless of how numerous or few the fleeing Ga were, the fact remains that they were linguistically assimilated by the local Gbe-speakers.[55]

The expansionist wars of Dahomey also provoked migrations (as we shall see), mainly southwards and eastwards towards the sparsely populated Yoruba-speaking Eastern Slave Coast. The Yoruba were either pushed back or assimilated by the Gbe. The phenomenon affected especially the ethno-linguistical composition in the flood-plain of the Weme river and eastwards.

* * *

As noted, the people of the Slave Coast live in a region which corresponds roughly to what is called the Benin or Dahomey Gap, and which is part of the forest-savanna mosaic zone. Has the area covered by forest decreased in the last two to three hundred years? With modern ecological consciousness, it is tempting to believe so.[56] But the specialists tell us, first, that the forest-savanna mosaic type of vegetation and not forest was the original one, and second, that the change could actually be in the contrary direction, that the forest is *advancing*.[57] However, what does seem certain is that the fauna has declined sharply. One is particularly struck, when combing the sources, by the frequent reference to elephants, an animal of the savanna; and in fact to a somewhat lively trade in ivory, especially on the Western Slave Coast. There was even from old times a sort of corps of elephant hunteresses in Fon country known as *gbeto*, possibly the predecessors of the later famous Amazons.[58] To the best