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Robin Law, ed. *From Slave Trade to 'Legitimate' Commerce: The Commercial Transition in Nineteenth-Century West Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xi + 278 pp. \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-48127-4.

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## CRISIS OF ADAPTATION OR SMOOTH TRANSITION?

This volume is a collection of ten revised papers from a conference held at the University of Stirling in 1993 to evaluate the state of the debate on the impacts of the ending of the Atlantic slave trade on West Africa, and to present new research related to that question. Unlike many edited collections, all the chapters are of consistently high quality and relate well to one another as well as to the questions under consideration.

The individual contributors offer different perspectives and new information without losing sight of the common, central concerns stated in the introduction. The geographic range is also fairly extensive. The resulting book is a major contribution to the re-evaluation and interpretation of nineteenth-century African history that should be required reading of all graduate students and professional Africanists engaged in the study of African history and economics.

During the early nineteenth century, the trans-Atlantic slave trade was declared illegal and eventually eliminated, being surpassed in Western Africa by a 'legitimate' (i.e., non-slave) trade, mostly in vegetable products such as palm oil and groundnuts. The book's focus is primarily on Dahomey, Yorubaland, the Slave Coast and the Gold Coast, areas significantly involved in the slave trade in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that also made the change to non-slave exports by the mid-nineteenth century. The transition occurred among various societies at different times within the nineteenth century, but the commercial shift affected both coastal

and interior peoples and kingdoms to varying degrees. The chapters seek to assess those impacts relying primarily on previously published materials but also including some new data.

The important historiographical debate centers on the question of whether the commercial change constituted a "crisis of adaptation" for African rulers, by undermining their control over the income from overseas trade, or if the shift was accomplished relatively smoothly with little economic, political and social disruption. Was the commercial shift more revolutionary or evolutionary in different parts of West Africa throughout the nineteenth century?

Previous scholars such as K. Dike and B. Davidson, handicapped by far less data than now available, argued that the slave trade had profound and destructive effects on African societies. The trade's ending likewise caused tremendous economic and political upheaval and dislocation, provoking European intervention and colonization. Relying on similar findings, A. G. Hopkins, in his important work, *Economic History of West Africa* (1973), postulated a general "crisis of adaptation" from slave to legitimate trade, and further argued that this transitional period, rather than the colonial era, was the beginning of the modern economic history of West Africa.

With new and more specifically focused research, Hopkins' view has not been universally accepted by historians. The contributors to this volume are no exception. The general consensus is that the case for a crisis

has been vastly overstated and too broadly accepted for all of coastal West Africa. While some changes did occur as a result of the shift from slave to legitimate commerce, West African political, economic and social structures adapted rather smoothly. The transition to legitimate trade in general constituted an evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, process.

In an introductory essay (pp. 1-31), Robin Law sets the framework of the debate, expertly separating the numerous processes, problems and issues that need to be addressed. Rather than the standard summary of the chapters, Law presents a consideration of certain general aspects of the commercial transition highlighted by the various papers, including the market and prices for slaves, comparative profitability, large-scale and small-scale enterprises, slavery and gender, and the connection to imperialism. He stresses that the debate on the impact of the shift in nineteenth century West Africa has broad chronological and geographic relevance for other parts of Africa as well.

The transition raises questions about the relative advantages of large and small scale enterprise and about the role of the state in relation to the private sector. Issues of labor, gender, extended credit, and currency instability also figure into the debate. Finally, Law points out the period must be viewed against the wider background of commercial change and the growth of European imperialism throughout the world.

Paul Lovejoy and David Richardson, considering the impact of British abolition on the Atlantic slave trade in West Africa from 1808 to 1820, focus on slave prices and treat the slave trade as a series of inter-related markets. Relying on extensive archival data on slave prices, the authors suggest that abolition initially had a severe impact on the commercial elites of the Gold Coast and the Bights of Benin and Biafra by causing a rapid decline in income which lasted until about the 1820s. Then prices recovered and the number of slaves exported to the Americas, particularly from the Bights, also increased to former levels. Thus, if there were a "crisis of adaptation," it would be found in these regions. The authors convincingly conclude that any localized "crisis" was relatively brief and not disruptive in the long-term. The regions adapted successfully to the shift in the export trade.

Continuing the concentration on British West Africa, Martin Lynn considers whether a crisis resulted from the growth of the export palm oil trade in the nineteenth century. He argues that adaptation and compatibility, rather than crisis, characterized the transition, with more conti-

nunity than change occurring. Greater changes took place later in the nineteenth century with a reorganization of the palm oil trade after 1850. A fall in oil prices in the 1880s and a resultant marked shift in terms of trade were the real crisis in nineteenth-century Anglo-West African economic relations.

Other contributors likewise find more continuity and compatibility than crisis and change in the commercial shift from slave to legitimate trade. Elisee Soumonni, looking at the palm oil trade in Dahomey from 1818 to 1858 during the reign of King Ghezo, finds that the kingdom was not seriously destabilized or weakened by the transition. Gareth Autin, concentrating on the Asante response to abolition in the nineteenth century, concludes that the Asante adjusted relatively smoothly, owing to the flexibility of the Asante economy, the powerful position of regional markets, and the emergence of the Sokoto Caliphate to the north, whose economic expansion extended benefits to neighboring states. Ray Kea examines aspects of Danish commercial agriculture in southeastern Ghana from the late 1780s to the 1840s which extensively used slave labor and was geared to the local rather than external market, minimizing the impact of the commercial shift.

Two chapters study slave labor and the owner-slave relationship in coastal West Africa during the transitional era. Both these essays offer new and potentially very useful perspectives on the debate. Kristin Mann states that in Lagos the slave trade ended and the palm produce trade developed simultaneously with the imposition of British colonial rule. The impact of the commercial transition on owners and slaves must be understood in the context of British policy regarding domestic slavery and other legal changes that accompanied colonialism. The shift expanded opportunities for many small-scale traders, including some slaves, a few of whom became substantial traders. The transition, however, did not have the widespread liberating effect some contemporary European observers predicted. Slaves and owners renegotiated their ties of dependence and maintained the smooth functioning of the economy.

Susan Martin also focuses on the local labor question, emphasizing slaves and Igbo women. Females did most of the work in palm oil production until the development of an export trade when men appropriated most of the product. She concludes that the changes that did occur were incremental, driven primarily by local demographic and ecological factors as well as commercial contacts, and did not constitute a dramatic break with the past or the start

of a new period in economic history. Further case studies, delineating gender and generational differences and taking into account slavery, ecological and demographic pressures and trading incentives are needed to determine whether her excellent case study of Ngw-Igbo can pronounced an exception or a general model.

Continuing the focus on gender relations, Robin Law considers the implications of the ending of the slave trade and the expansion of legitimate commerce in the neighboring areas of Yorubaland and Dahomey. Law agrees with Martin that women often played a critical role in palm oil production and trading, and that there was a shift in sexual roles during the nineteenth century. He posits that the ending of the Atlantic slave trade meant increased numbers of male slaves being retained within West Africa. Because agricultural production, especially palm oil making, were predominantly female occupations in many areas, the transitional period must have had tremendous impact on gender relations. The study of gender relations in this debate has been neglected. Law insists that his essay is more exploratory than conclusive, opening avenues for future research which should shed new light on the impacts of the transitional period.

Ann McDougall's essay marks a geographic shift to the interior Sahara-Sahel desert-edge which marked not only an interface between Sahara and Sudan, but also between their economic systems and the Senegambian coast, influencing the slave trade's operation and experiencing abolition's impact. In terms of the debate over the crisis of adaptation, McDougall finds that the desert-edge reflected both change and continuity during

the nineteenth century, with new commodities and networks rooted in prior relationships. McDougall agrees with the other contributors focusing on coastal regions that the commercial shift was accomplished smoothly. She argues that the dichotomy between trans-Atlantic and trans-Saharan trades has been overdrawn and that the connections between coastal and interior need further study.

The concluding essay is by A. G. Hopkins, who rightfully insists that the debate now needs to be placed in a broader continental and international framework. He accomplishes a first step in this direction by considering Britain's first development plan for Africa. The transition experienced by West Africa was part of a larger modernization plan that affected much of Africa and the world, forming the world's first comprehensive development plan launched by the British after 1815 and pursued until decolonization. The crises that arose on the frontier of empires in the late nineteenth century were indicative of an emergent empire, and not its decline. The broad scope and interpretation of Hopkins' essay is an appropriate conclusion to an excellent and indispensable volume. While further studies are necessary to forward and refine the arguments, this volume has admirably and successfully addressed the key questions of the debate and opened up new directions for future research and interpretation.

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