Paper – Atlantic Centre

Title: The Gulf of Guinea in the Early Modern Period: Historiography, Transformations, and Colonial Legacies

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Abstract:

The article proposes a reflection on Africa's position in the global historical narrative, with an emphasis on the Gulf of Guinea region. The research addresses the inherent challenges in studying African history, marked by a scarcity of sources, fragmented narratives and the predominance of European concepts and perspectives that tend to marginalize African experiences and contributions. It questions the place of the Gulf of Guinea in the history of Africa and the Atlantic, highlighting how oral traditions, trade systems, political structures and urban centers were transformed or adapted under external influences.

Furthermore, the research seeks to understand the development of this region as a space of significant strategic and cultural relevance before, during, and after contact with European empires, analyzing the major transformations of the early modern period (15th – 18th centuries) and the legacy left by explorers of that era. In this context, it questions to what extent the colonial heritage continues to shape the historiographical vision and the sociopolitical realities of the region in contemporary times.

Keywords: Gulf of Guinea; transformations; African history; Empires; Early Modern Period

Introduction

The coastal region of the Gulf of Guinea, rich in cultural and historical diversity, has played a crucial role in economic, cultural, and political development over the centuries. Before the arrival of Europeans, this area was already a vibrant center of interactions and exchanges. However, starting in the 15th century, with the onset of contact with European empires, the region underwent profound transformations that significantly shaped its communities and social structures.

This study aims to shed light on the historical importance of the Gulf of Guinea, often underestimated in traditional historiography. Despite its ongoing influence on global dynamics, especially in the Atlantic context, the region has not received the attention it deserves in historical studies. Therefore, we propose to explore the position of the Gulf of Guinea in global history by analyzing the transformations that occurred, and the legacies left by Europeans through a critical historiographical approach.

Furthermore, we examine how the history of the Gulf of Guinea has been represented, identifying research challenges and proposing new methodologies to develop a more connected and less Eurocentric historical narrative. By doing so, we hope to contribute to a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the history of this African region, recognizing its complexity and importance in the global context of both the past and the present.

The Historiography of the Gulf of Guinea – problems and methodologies

The historiography of the Gulf of Guinea during the early modern period is quite complex, presenting several gaps in terms of thematic scope. Although there are already various studies on this region, we observe a certain limitation regarding the topics covered. The scarcity of sources has also contributed in some way to this restraint, not only because the prevailing perspective is European, but also because most of the work focuses on commercial and confessional aspects.[1]

[1] In 1987, Adam Jones, in his work *The Dark Continent*, highlighted the lack of sources for studying the West African coast. The author characterized these gaps as regions with a scarcity of sources and a limited number of studies, especially concerning more comprehensive themes. The absence of governmental or military bureaucratic structures in most of these territories complicates historical documentation and contributes to the perpetuation of these gaps.

The pioneering works, generally of a colonial nature, focused on the description of political and military events, missionary activities, the exploitation of natural resources, and primarily the slave trade.[2] These approaches, although necessary, are insufficient for a better understanding of the interconnected history between European empires and indigenous African peoples.[3] Nonetheless, in recent decades, new perspectives have emerged, giving greater attention to sociocultural dynamics, power relations, African resistance, geomorphological and environmental transformations of these areas, and especially the "voices" of native peoples.

Authors like Paul E. Lovejoy, Randy J. Sparks, Robin Law, John Thornton, Ivor Wilks, and Rebecca Shumway have opened new horizons for the study of the West African coast, particularly the integration of the Gulf of Guinea into the Atlantic context.[4] They have conducted studies on the daily lives of enslaved Africans, their strategies of resistance against Europeans, and the African elites who attempted to trade them. They also compared port commercial aspects between American and European cities with African ones,[5] apply interdisciplinary approaches, such as ecology, geography, anthropology, linguistics, archaeology, and history, helping us understand the intricate relationships between humans and the environment on the African continent. In one of his studies, Randy J. Sparks describes the transformation of a small African fishing village, Annamaboe (present-day Ghana), into an important trading port following the arrival of Europeans in the 17th century. The arrival of the Dutch marked Annamaboe's entry into the "Atlantic world", bringing significant changes to its physical, economic, and cultural structure, and even to the genetic composition of the local population through miscegenation. Annamaboe became a commercial hub through which African products, mainly enslaved people, were channeled to Europe and the Americas. In exchange, the

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[2] Some of these major studies were conducted by authors such as the British Basil Davidson and John D. Fage, who edited works like *A History of West Africa 1000-1800*, from 1978, and *A History of West Africa*, from 1969, respectively, or the American Philip D. Curtin, with the work *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*, from 1970.

[3] Regarding Basil Davidson, John D. Fage, and Philip D. Curtin, despite some limitations in their research, these authors continue to be regarded as references in the topics they address, especially for initial approaches.

[4] Works like: Law, Robin. *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving Port 1727–1892*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, James Currey, 2004; Thornton, John. *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

[5] Some of these referenced works include: "This Horrid Hole: Royal Authority, Commerce and Credit at Bonny, 1690-1840". In *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 45, No. 3, 2004 (pp. 363-392), co-authored with Lovejoy and David Richardson (another reference in this field of study), and "Slave-Trading Ports: Towards an Atlantic-Wide Perspective". In *Ports of the Slave Trade (Bights of Benin and Biafra)*, University of Stirling, 1998 (pp. 12-34).

city received manufactured goods, textiles, alcoholic beverages, and other items from Europe.[6]

Another example is Rebecca Shumway, who focuses on the Gold Coast region and analyzes how the Fante people, an Akan group from the Gold Coast, played a central role in the Atlantic trade, including the slave trade. The author highlights African agency, showing how the Fante negotiated with Europeans and other African groups, maintaining their autonomy and political influence. She also explores how trade transformed the social and political structures of the Fante, leading to the emergence of new elites and institutions. Through interdisciplinary research, Shumway places Africans at the center of the study, highlighting their ability to negotiate and adapt to the changes brought about by the Atlantic trade.[7]

Despite the observed evolution and integration of African regions into Atlantic historiography, gaps persist. The regions of the West African coast, particularly the Gulf of Guinea, receive less attention than other Atlantic port cities (such as European and American ones).[8] The reasons for these gaps are tied to three main factors: the dominant Eurocentric narrative, which emphasizes European empires and relegates African societies to a secondary role; the difficulty in accessing African documentation and primary sources due to the dispersion and organization of colonial archives (with digitalization of documents still underdeveloped in the national archives of the port cities in the region under study); and the focus on the slave trade, which, despite its significance, reveals a particular and unilateral focus that is insufficient for a comprehensive understanding of these cities' histories.

It is necessary to transcend the Eurocentric view and explore new perspectives, deepening the knowledge of the port cities of the Gulf of Guinea. Research should encompass areas such as daily life and social dynamics, understanding the everyday lives of natives, their relationships, and their mechanisms of resistance or, in some cases, submission. It is important to study economics and trade, analyzing the various forms of

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[6] Sparks, Randy J., "The peopling of an african slave port: Annamaboe and the Atlantic world, Almanack". In *Almanack*, n. 24, 2020.

[7] Shumway, Rebecca. *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. University of Rochester Press, 2011.

[8] Works such as "Atlantic Port Cities: Economy, Culture, and Society in the Atlantic World, 1650–1850," edited by Franklin W. Knight and Peggy K. Liss (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), hardly address African port cities, despite their significance during the indicated period. Additionally, "Africa: Journal of the International African Institute, Africa Bibliography 2008," published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the International African Institute (2008, pp. 1-426), also presents several gaps.

commercial exchanges and their impacts on local societies, both physical and metaphysical. Additionally, understanding the political and administrative role is crucial, investigating the port cities as centers of power and administration. The identities and representations of these peoples should be studied from the perspective of newly arrived Europeans, as well as uncovering cultural identities and forms of social representation in these spaces, considering the intercontinental relations that unfold, exploring the complex relationships between the port cities of the Gulf of Guinea and other parts of the globe.

The introduction of new academic approaches has brought innovative methodologies to the forefront, driving the advancement of social history and quantitative analyses. This process has generated new questions and arguments distinct from those previously formulated. Recently, the digitalization of data has made the circulation of information more accessible on a global scale, promoting discussions that transcend conventional circles. New transnational perspectives have challenged the Anglo-American view of these realities, while the Digital Age has democratized access to sources.[9]

To fill some of the "blank spaces" left by the gaps in sources, interdisciplinarity becomes a crucial tool. Historical and comparative linguistics, together with African history, can contribute to elucidating historical events, such as population migrations or the origins of certain communities. The analysis of a specific linguistic process can shed light on a particular historical event. However, there are limitations that may compromise its effectiveness. Debates arise around the uncertainty in linguistic classification, including the temporal challenges in linguistic reconstruction, the limitations of genealogical diagrams, and the issue of linguistic populations that may have been absorbed or become extinct. Therefore, a comparative and multidisciplinary approach, utilizing archaeological data, for example, can offer more robust results.[10]

Another method that has gained prominence is the use of African oral sources, driven by a renewed interest in the continent's pre-colonial history. While written sources

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[9] Domingues da Silva, Daniel B., and Philip Misevich. "Atlantic Slavery and the Slave Trade: History and Historiography". In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, 2018, p.3. Daniel da Silva is also one of the board members of the website and platform slavevoyages.org, which is one of the best digital-era databases on the slave trade. In this context, the work of researchers in the article – Lovejoy, Henry B., et al. "Defining Regions of Pre-Colonial Africa: A Controlled Vocabulary for Linking Open-Source Data in Digital History Projects," published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the African Studies Association, 2021 – suggests the creation of a system of regions for pre-colonial Africa, aimed at facilitating the collection, organization, and interpretation of primary sources related to Africa's past.

[10] Ibid., pp. 389-390.

are predominant and highly valued, the analysis of oral sources can provide a deeper understanding of the past. Historian Toby Green, a specialist in West African history, emphasizes the advantages of considering both approaches. A common aspect between them is the need to analyze both oral and written sources at a certain critical distance. However, there are significant differences, especially when studying a more distant past. Written sources tend to be static, while oral sources are dynamic, adapting and evolving over generations. Despite these transformations, oral sources can offer valuable insights into these pasts and societies, as told by the descendants of these cultures.[11] Like linguistics, orality can provide valuable information about migrations, conflicts, and cultural practices, offering a diverse and integrated perspective of the past. Despite their relevance, these sources face criticism, particularly regarding potential contemporary biases, as many oral narratives can be influenced by political factors. There is a risk that these narratives may reflect current issues more than the historical events themselves. However, they can reveal clues about the meanings of past eras, and it is on these aspects that historians should focus. Additionally, written sources also have political intentions and motivations, but they do not undergo the same transformations over time and through various historical processes.[12] Oral history emerges to overcome the limitations of archives, giving "voice" to colonized peoples. While oral history is widely used outside the academic environment, it faces skepticism within it, primarily due to the fragility of memory. Nonetheless, oral history should be recognized as a valuable tool for filling certain gaps in historiography.[13]

Another aspect that should not be underestimated in the historiographical production about the Gulf of Guinea is the way we perceive and use archives. African colonial archives, established during the colonial period, were created to support the imperial powers of the 19th century. They functioned as central control instruments, organizing information to legitimize and strengthen the colonial state. In this way, the archives themselves become an object of study. Ann L. Stoler argues that archives should be considered as spaces of knowledge production, not merely as sources of data and

[11] Green, Toby. "From Essentialism to Pluralisms: New Directions in Precolonial West African History from the Oral History Archive at Fajara, The Gambia". In *Landscapes, Sources and Intellectual Projects of the West African Past*, Brill, 2018.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Nugent, Maria. "Entanglement of oral sources and colonial records". In *Sources and Methods in Histories of Colonialism*, Routledge, 2017; More on this subject see McDonnell, Michael. "Paths not yet taken, voices not yet heard – Rethinking Atlantic History". In *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective*, ANU Press, 2005.

information.[14] Thus, it is essential to understand the structure of the archive and its internal and historical dynamics before using it. James H. Sweet also characterizes the African archive as a "trap", emphasizing how its organization reflects colonial logic.[15] The archive ceases to be merely a repository of documents and becomes a space to be studied.

The written sources themselves still require considerable heuristic work. It was only from the 1980s onward that a more critical and rigorous approach began to be adopted regarding travel literature. These works stopped being seen merely as illustrative and started to be subjected to deeper scrutiny and contextualization.[16]

The historiography of Africa has made significant progress in recent decades, overcoming initial limitations that favored a Western and colonialist perspective. Although gaps and challenges remain, such as the lack of local sources and the "blank spaces" in the historical narrative, methodological and interdisciplinary advancements, with an emphasis on linguistics and greater attention to oral sources, have provided a broader and more diverse understanding of Africa's past. Additionally, critical analysis and detailed work in colonial archives have been fundamental. With these new methodological efforts, African history can establish itself as a more robust and indispensable field of study for understanding other historiographies.

Transformations and European Legacies

Africa's history is deeply intertwined with global transformations, yet it has often been marginalized in historical narratives. This chapter explores the complex interaction between African societies and European influences, examining how colonial legacies and Eurocentric concepts have shaped the historiography of the African continent.

African history shares a conceptual past with other world histories of Western origin. This worldview, primarily through a European lens, is challenging to deconstruct because it has been ingrained over centuries through contact, representations, and simplistic readings of other peoples and civilizations. The colonial past solidified this

[14] Stoler, Ann Laura. "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance", in *Archival Science*, no. 2, 2002.
[15] Sweet, James H. "Reimagining the african-atlantic archive: Method, concept, epistemology, ontology". In *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 55, 2014.
[16] Ibid.

perspective, making it difficult to dismantle many of these conceptions. Most of these ideas are based on European concepts that emerged, for example, from the Enlightenment, as noted by Mozambican sociologist Elísio Macamo. One of the main ideas from that period is the dichotomy between the "civilized" and the "primitive". This comparison places Europe, depicted as "civilized", against Africa, labeled as "primitive", leading to the notion of "primitive society".[17] These classifications led to the development of the idea of "superior cultures" relative to others, something we now know to be incorrect, yet it still lingers in the subconscious of Western societies – and perhaps even in those that suffer this disparagement. Africa is, despite everything, a Western construct. Nonetheless, despite these views, studies reveal that on the African continent, even in the sub-Saharan region, there was already independent technological advancement several centuries ago, such as in pottery, cotton weaving, and metallurgy.[18]

Through archaeological studies, we know that the coastal region of present-day Ghana has been inhabited since the Bronze Age by fishing communities, primarily along the edges of lakes and rivers. The coastal societies (Fante, Ga-Adangbe, and Ewe) interacted with the inland Asante state and became key agents of contact following the arrival of Europeans along the Gold Coast, as shown in Fig. 1. They established trade and served as a bridge between the coast and the interior, playing a crucial role in the trade networks that connected the interior of Ghana to European markets.[19]

When the Portuguese arrived in 1471, the inhabitants of the region were still consolidating their territory. To protect their trade in gold, ivory, and pepper, the Portuguese built the São Jorge da Mina Castle in 1482. The slave trade began and gradually increased in the 16th century, eventually surpassing gold as the main export due to the high demand for labor in the Americas. Commercial competition among Europeans in the region emerged, especially after the publication of *Mare Liberum*[20], with the Portuguese, Dutch, and English—and later the Danes and Swedes—competing for coastal

[17] Macamo, Elísio. "Unmaking Africa – The Humanities and the study of what?". In *History of Humanities*, Vol. 6, nº 2, 2021, p. 387.
[18] Ehret, Christopher. "African in World History: The Long, Long View". In *The Oxford Handbook of World History*, Ed. by Jerry H. Bentley, 2012, pp.11-12.
[19] Berry, LaVerle, ed. *Ghana: A Country Study*. Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, 1995, pp. 5-8
[20] Grotius, Hugo. *Mare Liberum*. Translated by Richard Hakluyt. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004. Originally published 1609.

trade. The Dutch expelled the Portuguese from Elmina in 1642, and from then on, various powers fought for control of the lucrative trade along the coast.[21]

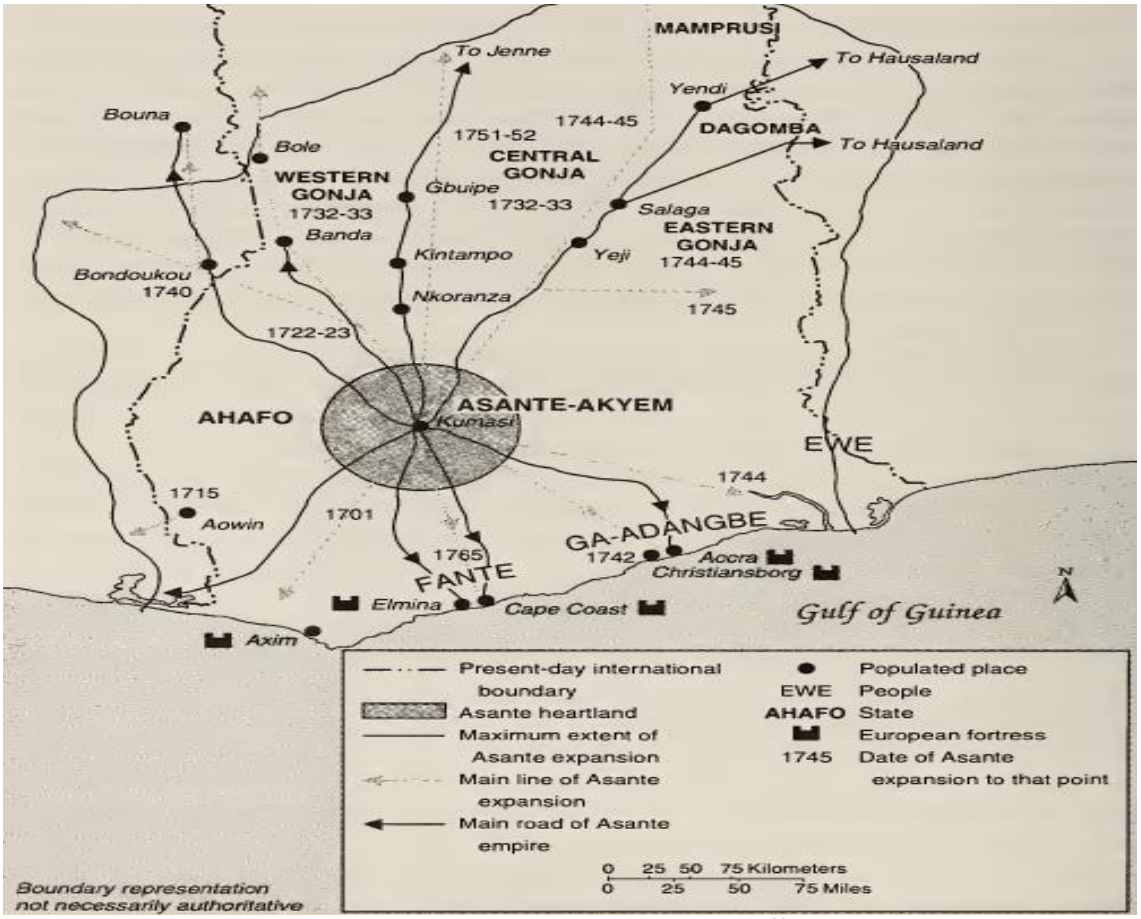

Fig. 1. Asante expansion and major fortresses in the 18th century.[22]

The slave trade was practiced even before European contact; however, European demand intensified the trade, with African chiefs actively participating in this commerce that would last until the 19th century, by which time the British had already consolidated their dominance in the region. Seeking to expand their territory and commerce (by this stage focused on gold and palm oil – the slave trade was still active but in significant decline following abolition), the British confronted the Asante state. After purchasing the Elmina fort from the Dutch in 1872, they further increased their control of the region, and through conflicts with the Asante until the end of the century, they eventually conquered and dominated nearly all the territory.[23]

[21] Berry, LaVerle, ed. *Ghana: A Country Study (...)*, pp. 8-13.
[22] Ibid., p.10.
[23] Ibid., pp. 13-16.

Regarding the region that is now Nigeria, centuries before European contact, there were organized societies such as the Yoruba and the Kingdom of Benin. The Kingdom of Benin, initially an agricultural society, became an important commercial power in the 15th century, establishing contact with the Portuguese during the same period.[24] The trade relations primarily involved the exchange of pepper, ivory, and later, enslaved people for European goods. As with the Gold Coast, the Portuguese monopoly was challenged by the Dutch, French, and British, with Britain becoming the dominant power in the region by the 18th century. The Oyo Empire and the Aro Confederacy were the main trading partners of the Europeans and Americans during this period, particularly in the slave trade (see Fig. 2).[25] The abolition of slavery and the creation of the Sokoto Caliphate significantly transformed the region in the 19th century. The abolition of slavery in 1807 affected the economy and generated instability. Britain intensified its intervention in the southern region, eventually annexing Lagos in 1861 to control trade and combat the slave trade. British control expanded along the coast from the mid-century onward.[26]

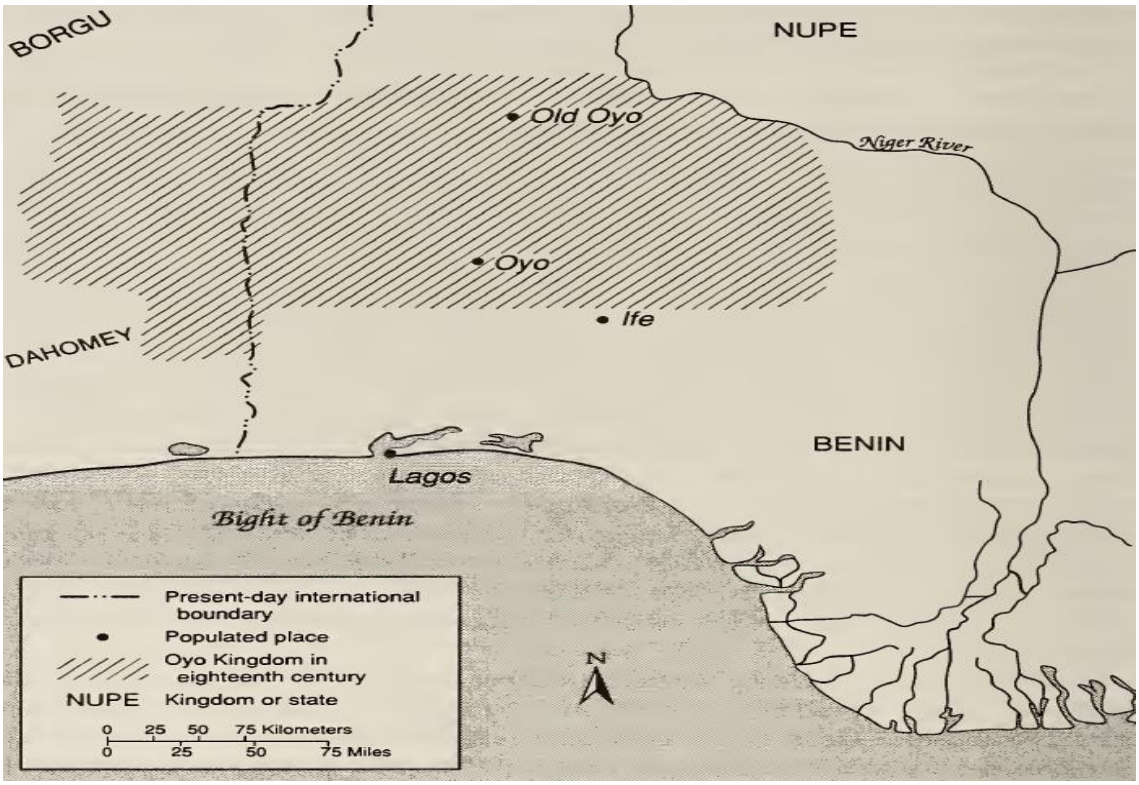

Fig. 2. Yorubaland (11th – 18th centuries)[27]

[24] Metz, Helen Chapin, ed. *Nigeria: A Country Study*. Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, 1992, pp. 6-9.
[25] Ibid., pp. 15-19
[26] Ibid., pp. 19-24
[27] Ibid., p. 8.

British colonization, which lasted about 60 years from the early 20th century, brought rapid changes in infrastructure development (roads and railways) and agricultural expansion, but also caused some economic distortions and demographic shifts. There was indeed a focus on commercial food production at the expense of food security in the country. The abolition of slavery was one of the main causes of social displacement. Additionally, the introduction of Christianity created instability and new alliances within society.[28]

Similarly, as in the previous cases, the region that is now Cameroon has had human presence for thousands of years, with groups like the Baka representing some of the oldest cultures. The first contacts with Europeans were also with the Portuguese (the country's name comes from the name given by the Portuguese to the Wouri River as "Rio dos Camarões", due to the abundance of shrimp). The Dutch and British established contacts later, although it was the Germans who colonized the country in 1884, following an earlier attempt by the British.[29] The growth of slave ports occurred along the entire coast of the Gulf of Guinea (in the Gold Coast, and the Bights of Benin and Biafra), in cities such as Whydah, Lagos, Elmina, Accra, Bonny, and Calabar. By the late 18th century, the slave trade was an integral part of the economies of the states in the region, resulting in a significant dependence on this business for local communities. Its abolition led to conflicts and instability among these peoples, much like it did initially due to competition for dominance in the trade.[30] The Industrial Revolution was crucial in the final integration of Atlantic economies, reducing production and transportation costs and directly affecting African economies. There was economic interdependence, with Europe producing manufactured goods and Africa supplying raw materials and agricultural products. Nonetheless, Africa's primary contribution to the first globalization process was the forced labor on American plantations between 1650 and 1850.[31]

Although Africa's urbanization has been diverse and complex, historiography often neglects and simplifies this diversity by using Eurocentric models. Beyond European and Arab influences, there were local initiatives in the development of these

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[28] Metz, Helen Chapin, ed. *Nigeria: A Country Study*, pp. 3-4.
[29] DeLancey, Mark D., and Mark W. Delancey. *Historical Dictionary of the Republic of Cameroon*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000., pp. 3-7.
[30] Falola, Toyin, and Matthew M. Heaton. *A History of Nigeria*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 52-60.
[31] Inikori, Joseph E. "Africa and the Globalization Process: Western Africa, 1450–1850." In *Journal of Global History*, Vol. 2, Issue 1, 2007, pp. 70-86.

regions that need to be valued. This simplification has served and continues to be used to justify colonial domination and the exploitation of resources that the African continent has suffered. Interdisciplinarity is important once again to better understand the urban dynamics of these spaces.[32]

There was a significant transformation along the coast of the Gulf of Guinea, with several cities becoming key interfaces due to the increasing value of Atlantic trade. Despite the traditional image of coastal areas as dead ends, there were various activities before the development of trade with Europeans, such as fishing, salt production, and inter-African coastal trade. The ports evolved from small villages dedicated to these activities into small port cities, often referred to as "fortresses" or "slave ports". These cities functioned as a kind of transformation laboratory that coastal societies experienced, continuously adjusting to the initiatives of the different actors operating there. The direct influence of European powers on local policies increased with the new dynamics of trade and negotiation that emerged.[33]

The Atlantic trade generated three African subsystems: Cape Verde and Senegambia; the Gulf of Guinea (including the island of São Tomé); and the Congo and Angola. Each had its own cycle of development and commercial importance. Several cities lost relevance with the end of the slave trade, such as Elmina and Whydah. Other port cities were chosen as political capitals by colonial states due to their strategic importance, and they continue to hold significant roles nowadays, such as Accra and Lagos.[34]

Among these cities, particularly those in the Gulf of Guinea, there were different types: independent city-states, such as Bonny or Old Calabar in the Bight of Biafra, and Anomabu on the Gold Coast. These were typically African in their urban structure and commercial practices. Another type was the royal port with a capital inland, like Whydah, where the port and political capital were separate, with royal authority exercised by official representatives (in the case of Whydah, between the 17th and 18th centuries). There were also ports that served as headquarters for European trading companies, such as Elmina or Cape Coast, where the presence of European companies significantly

[32] Coret, Clélia, et al. "Cities in Africa Before 1900: Historiography and Research Perspectives". In *Afriques: Débats, méthodes et terrains d'histoire*, no. 11, 2020.
[33] Saupin, Guy. "The emergence of port towns in pre-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa, 1450-1850: What kind of development did they entail?". In *The International Journal of Maritime History*, Vol. 32, 2020, pp. 173-174.
[34] Ibid., pp. 174-177

impacted administration and social structure. Accra, with the British company, served as an administrative and military center, strengthening the commercial monopoly. European presence was negotiated with local African authorities, who maintained political control. Over time, the gradual withdrawal of mercantilist companies led to cultural hybridization and the emergence of new urban elites. Lagos belonged to the independent city-states. However, between the 18th century and the mid-19th century, it emerged as an important center for the slave trade, becoming a central point in Atlantic commerce and eventually transforming into a port city under British control. Additionally, it's important to note that these urban port societies were populated by heterogeneous groups in terms of ethnic and linguistic origins.[35]

There is a historiographical debate that suggests these port cities are often seen as parasitic, extracting resources (mainly human) from the interior, with some interpretations considering them detrimental to the economic development of inland regions. Alongside economic changes, there was also a Westernization of the elites, who adopted European behaviors and customs, while their European and American counterparts showed little interest in adopting theirs.

Paradoxically, it was not the slave trade that threatened African dependency, but rather the gradual European withdrawal. The advent of industrialization proved to be economically more dangerous for their development, as they lost even more control over their economies and societies. The exploitation of resources while ignoring the needs and rights of local populations resulted in development patterns that caused long-term economic and social harm.[36]

In addition to these issues, the traditional focus of research on the slave trade has primarily concentrated on volume, conditions, and profits, as well as the demographic, economic, and social impacts on the coastal areas involved. While much has been published about specific ports, there is still limited understanding of how this trade contributed to the transformations of these African spaces. Gaps remain regarding the connections between various ports, their commercial conflicts, and the changes in their roles within the port system. The slave trade was crucial for the rise and fall of certain

[35] Saupin, Guy. “The emergence of port towns (...), pp. 177-180.
[36] Ibid., pp. 180-184.

ports. This is observable, for example, through digital research tools, which confirm some of the transformations that occurred.[37]

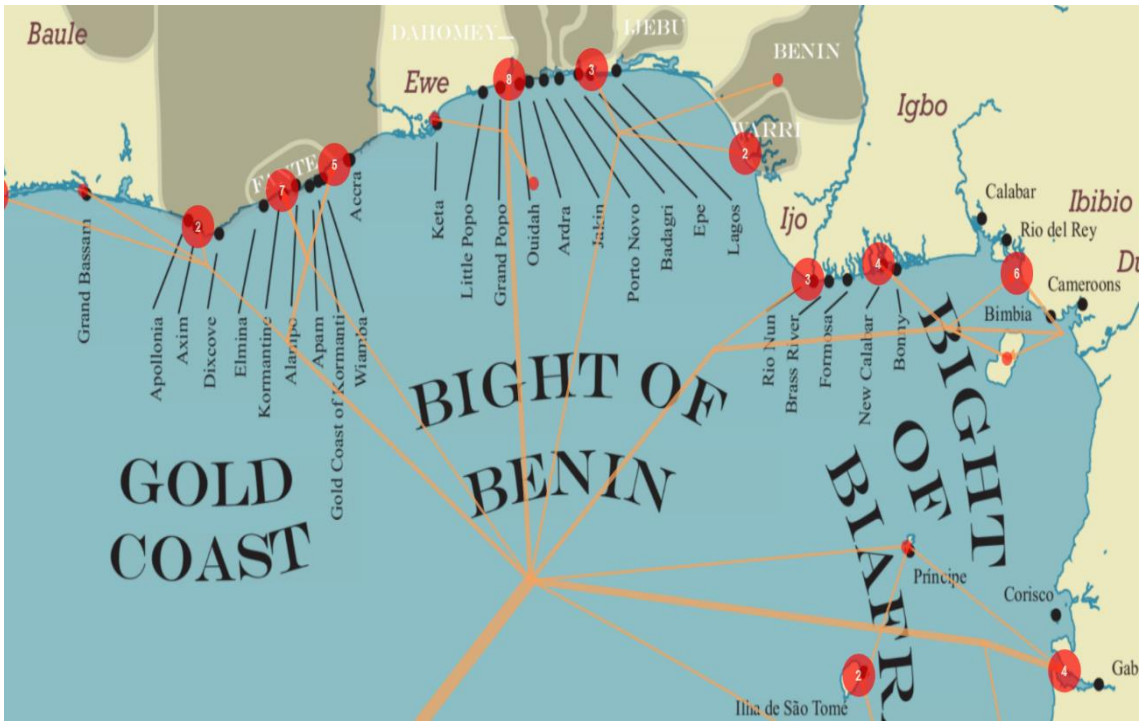

Fig. 3. In the image (sourced from slavevoyages.org), we can identify the number of ports that were involved in the slave trade.[38]

Additionally, when discussing the ports of the Gulf of Guinea, we often overlook the importance of the island ports during the early modern period. São Tomé, for instance, held significant strategic relevance during the 16th century. The islands of São Tomé and Príncipe connected various ports in that region, including those in Benin and Biafra, with São Jorge da Mina being the main Portuguese base of that period. With the arrival of other Europeans in the 17th century, such as the Dutch and English (primarily composed of merchants and state-sponsored trading companies), changes ensued, and ports like Whydah, Cape Coast, Bonny, Ardra, and Anomabu gained greater prominence, as Fig. 3 shows. In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, we also observe a resurgence of the port

[37] Ribeiro da Silva, Filipa. "The slave trade and the development of the Atlantic Africa port system, 1400s–1800s". In *The International Journal of Maritime History*, Vol. 29, 2017, pp. 138-142.
[38] The site is quite interactive, providing us with various information about the enslaved individuals and the ports (such as the flow, individual data on those embarked and disembarked, chronologies, etc.).

of São Tomé, thanks to changes in Portuguese economic policies, notably greater commercial freedom for its subjects, both in Portugal and Brazil.[39]

All these interactions left marks and a European legacy that endures overtime. One of these legacies is the borders that were drawn, which often disregard existing ethnic and cultural divisions, leading to tensions and conflicts that persist to this day. They also replaced traditional political structures, introducing centralized systems of governance.[40] Additionally, the export-oriented economy was designed to meet European needs, which developed economies dependent on exports and vulnerable to fluctuations in international prices. In terms of infrastructure and urbanization, during the XX century, Europeans developed roads, railways, and ports facilities primarily to assist the export of resources. This contributed to the urbanization of port cities, often neglecting rural development. There were also various cultural and social changes, such as language, the introduction of Christianity, and Western education. In this regard, Christian missions helped establish schools and hospitals in the region.

The ethnic divisions enforced by colonial policies with the "divide and conquer" strategy have left a legacy of distrust and rivalry among different ethnic and social groups. In terms of legal and administrative aspects, the European legacy is also evident with the introduction of written laws and judicial systems based on Western models. The demographic and human impact of slavery affected social structures and migrations, which continue to cause problems today. Discussing the history of slavery in certain African countries is still considered a "taboo". During the colonial period, the abolition of slavery was a gradual and incomplete process, marked by disputes over control of the labor of former enslaved people. In recent years, research has expanded to include themes such as memory, heritage, and discrimination. Some scholars have investigated the legacy of slavery and how the descendants of enslaved people experience their social and political relationships. Issues such as the pride of former slave owners and the challenges faced by the descendants of enslaved people remain unresolved issues.[41] The impact of the colonial past and, consequently, social memory on the lives and experiences of these

[39] Ribeiro da Silva, Filipa. "The slave trade and the development of the Atlantic Africa port system (...), pp. 142-154.

[40] Green, Toby. "Dimensions of Historical Ethnicity in the Guinea-Bissau Region". In P. Chabal, & T. Green (Eds.), *Guinea-Bissau: Micro State to "Narco State"*, C. Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2016, pp. 19-36.

[41] Bellagamba, Alice, et all. "Introduction. Slaves and Masters: Politics, Memories, Social Life". In *African Slaves, African Masters. Politics, Memories, Social Life*, Trenton NJ. Africa World Press, Harriet Tubman Series on the Africa Diaspora, 2017, pp. 2-4.

populations is understandable. These memories, or oral sources, are crucial for reconstructing African history. However, the topic of slavery generates silence and prejudices, both at the individual and collective levels. As a result, there is a noticeable adoption of silence as a strategy by both the descendants of slave owners and the descendants of enslaved people, aimed at avoiding confrontations with painful pasts and maintaining social balance.[42] Historian Alice Bellagamba argues that while silence can contribute to maintaining social peace, it deprives us of memories and important oral sources and traditions.[43] Nonetheless, these memories continue to influence African society and its social stratification, exerting both positive and negative effects.

Conclusion

When discussing globalization, Africa is often neglected in literature, perceived as a sort of "black hole". Africa's history is deeply intertwined with global transformations, having played a crucial role in the early phases of globalization, especially in the early modern Atlantic. However, internal transformation in Africa did not occur as it did elsewhere due to the lack of "primitive accumulation"[44], unlike in European powers.

The historiography of the Gulf of Guinea during the early modern period is a complex and multifaceted field, still with significant gaps in terms of themes and methodologies. Initial studies focused on political, military, and commercial aspects, particularly the slave trade, but proved insufficient to fully understand the interactions between European empires and African peoples. Recently, new perspectives have emerged, highlighting sociocultural dynamics, African resistance, and environmental transformations, giving "voice" to native peoples. Contemporary authors have expanded research with interdisciplinary approaches, revealing the complexity of human-environment relations and the importance of African ports in Atlantic trade. However, challenges such as the predominant Eurocentric narrative and the difficult access to African primary sources still limit a complete understanding of the region's history.

[42] Ibid., pp. 9-10.
[43] Ibid. p. 14.
[44] Marxist term to describe the historical process that enabled the development of capitalism.

To overcome these limitations, it is essential to transcend the Eurocentric view and adopt a more inclusive and interdisciplinary methodological approach. Integrating oral sources, critically analyzing colonial archives, and utilizing innovative methodologies, such as historical linguistics and data digitization, are fundamental to filling existing gaps. Additionally, it is crucial to recognize and value local initiatives in the development of coastal regions, exploring the complex relationships between the port cities of the Gulf of Guinea and other parts of the globe.

Despite everything, there are positive aspects to the global connections Africans have established, such as through NGOs and diasporas, which help build bridges between the African continent and the rest of the world, establishing commercial and cultural networks.[45] Moreover, recent contributions from African historians and researchers have significantly enriched our understanding of historical realities by providing diverse perspectives and insights. These works have highlighted the importance of integrating local narratives and methodologies, offering a more nuanced and comprehensive view of Africa's past and its global connections. Recognizing these contributions is essential for a more balanced and inclusive historiography and to achieve a more connected and global history of Africa.

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