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Vasco da Gama and Africa: An Era of Mutual Discovery, 1497–1800*

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In late May 1498, ten and a half months after leaving Lisbon, the Portuguese expedition led by Vasco da Gama reached the Indian port of Calicut, just a few weeks before Christopher Columbus first made contact with the American mainland while on his third trans-Atlantic voyage. As Daniel Boorstin has pointed out, Vasco da Gama's much longer and technically more difficult voyage had far greater immediate significance than the celebrated series of voyages by Columbus.[1] The successful culmination of decades of systematic exploration, da Gama's expedition opened up a practical and highly profitable new all-water route around Africa to Asia, whereas Columbus's ill-conceived ventures failed to achieve their objective of finding a direct route across the Atlantic to the riches of the Indian Ocean trade.

The long-term consequences of da Gama's feat were also noteworthy. A. J. R. Russell-Wood suggests that da Gama launched "a new era as momentous as that heralded by the Columbus landfall in the Bahamas."[2] Other historians contend that da Gama's voyage was actually of much greater importance historically than Columbus's "discovery" of the Americas, since, along with Pedro Álvares Cabral's discovery of Brazil in 1500 and Ferdinand Magellan's around-the-world expedition, it laid the foundation of global maritime trade. For this

* A version of this paper was presented at the Sixth Annual Conference of the World History Association, Pamplona, Spain, June 1997.

[1] Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Discoverers* (New York, 1983), pp. 175–76.

[2] A. J. R. Russell-Wood, *A World on the Move: The Portuguese in Africa, Asia, and America, 1415–1808* (New York, 1993), p. 6.

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reason, Paul Kennedy applies the label "the Vasco da Gama Era" to the period of European hegemony that extended to World War I.[3] However, just as some of the most exciting reflections occasioned by the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's first voyage examined its long-term significance from the perspectives of the indigenous inhabitants of the New World, so the quincentenary of 1498 should also be marked by a careful reevaluation of the significance of the Vasco da Gama era from the perspectives of the indigenous Africans, Asians, and Pacific Islanders.

This essay explores a small part of that agenda: the significance of the new relations resulting from da Gama's voyage for the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa. Africa had been the primary focus of Portugal's early decades of exploration and the first field where new commercial and cultural exchanges were developed. For a time, the contacts that earlier expeditions had established with coastal Atlantic Africans were eclipsed by the establishment of direct contacts with the Indian Ocean basin (including parts of eastern Africa). But the development of a new Atlantic economy that came fast on the colonization of the Americas soon restored western Africa's importance. Thus, African experiences illuminate many of the complex relationships launched by the Vasco da Gama era.

This essay suggests that, as was the case elsewhere in the world, the new commercial and cultural encounters in Africa were not simply the product of European initiatives but depended in fundamental ways on African actions and initiatives. For the purposes of this essay, the Vasco da Gama era in sub-Saharan Africa is considered to have begun with Henry the Navigator's pioneering expeditions down the Atlantic coast of Africa. These voyages set the pattern for Portuguese-African relations and culminated in Bartolomeu Dias's discovery of the way to the Indian Ocean in 1488, which made da Gama's voyage to India possible.[4] The essay first explores Portuguese-African relations in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and then reflects on the broader significance of the era for Africans. Where to end the essay is less obvious, since Portuguese colonial rule in sub-Saharan Africa persisted until 1975! Although the era that da Gama launched continues to have its impact, for practical reasons this essay will stop at about 1800, leaving to other hands the second round of changes brought by industrial expansion.

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[3] Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York, 1987), pp. 25, 244.

[4] David Birmingham has written an interesting overview of the period focused on Bartolomeu Dias's voyage around the Cape of Good Hope in 1488: "Portugal's Impact on Africa," *History Today* (June 1988): 44–50.

First Contacts and Impressions

During the fifteenth century Portuguese expansion along the Atlantic coast of Africa had generally been peaceful and based on mutually beneficial commercial exchanges. Coastal Africans quickly appreciated that Portuguese ships could provide an attractive alternative to long overland routes to the north and saw that they opened new trading possibilities as well. For example, along the Gold Coast of West Africa, first visited by the Portuguese in 1471, African rulers and merchants responded positively to the representative of King João II of Portugal who arrived in 1482 seeking permission to erect a trading fort. The African ruler, whose name the Portuguese rendered as Caramansa (perhaps a corruption of Kwamin Ansa, i.e., King Ansa) gave the Portuguese permission to build a small trading fort but warned that, should they fail to be peaceful and honest traders, he and his people would simply move away, leaving the post bereft of food and trade.[5] Originally called the castle of São Jorge da Mina, its name was soon corrupted to Elmina, this Arabic word for "the port" apparently having displaced the Portuguese name. As expected, both sides profited. The Portuguese crown was soon purchasing gold equal to a tenth of the world's production at the time, in return for which Africans received large quantities of goods brought by Portuguese ships from Asia, Europe, and other parts of Africa.

In 1486, the powerful kingdom of Benin in the Niger delta established commercial ties with the Portuguese. After consulting with the ambassador he had sent to Portugal to learn more about the homeland of these strangers, the *oba* (king) of Benin made overseas trade a royal monopoly, selling pepper and ivory that the Portuguese took back to Europe, as well as stone beads, textiles, and prisoners of war to be resold at Elmina. In return, Portuguese merchants provided Benin with copper and brass, fine textiles, glass beads, and a horse for use in the king's royal procession. As the demand for slaves grew in the early sixteenth century, the *oba* first raised the price of slaves and then restricted their sale. Contacts were also established in this period with the large kingdom of Kongo at the mouth of the Congo River in west-central Africa. Here too, both sides cooperated to establish commercial and cultural links that laid the basis for Portugal's most extensive sphere of influence in equatorial Atlantic Africa.

On the first half of its celebrated all-water voyage to India, Vasco da Gama's expedition bypassed all of these places, sweeping through

[5] J. W. Blake, ed., *Europeans in West Africa, 1450–1560* (London, 1942), p. 70.

the middle of the south Atlantic Ocean after calling at the Cape Verde Islands so as to catch the southern trade winds. Thus, its first contacts with mainland Africans occurred just north of the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of the continent. From 8 to 15 November 1497, while the expedition was halted at the Bay of Saint Helena to clean the ships, mend the sails, and take on wood, the Portuguese and the African hunter-gatherers who inhabited the area, now known collectively as the San, had time to satisfy their mutual curiosity about each other. One San man, taken on board da Gama's flagship and invited to dine at the captain's table, tasted everything that was served. A few days later, the San invited a Portuguese named Fernão Velloso to feast with them on roast seal and wild tubers.

Although the San could not supply the spices, pearls, or gold about which their Portuguese visitors eagerly inquired, a token exchange took place. The San were pleased to acquire the small copper coins, small bells, and tin rings the Portuguese offered, for they already "valued copper very highly" for personal adornment, although previously they had been able to get it only through trade with their African neighbors to the northeast. For their part, the Portuguese acquired shell ornaments, a foxtail fly whisk, and a penis sheath as souvenirs.[6]

After rounding the Cape of Good Hope, the expedition paused again in early December at what Dias had named Cowherds' Bay (Baia dos Vaqueiros, now Mossel Bay), because of the presence of Khoikhoi pastoralists with their large herds of cattle and sheep. There the expedition remained for two weeks, breaking up the storeship and transferring its remaining supplies to the other three vessels. The Portuguese account of the relations between the members of the expedition and the local Africans discloses a similar process of mutual discovery, exchange, and cautious interaction. When a crowd of about 200 Khoikhoi men and youths came to the beach to view the ships, the Portuguese put out from the ships to meet them. The Africans played a tune on some flutelike instruments; the Portuguese responded from the ships with trumpet calls. The Africans performed a dance of welcome; da Gama and his men, still in their boats, attempted to dance in response.[7]

In many places, the account, far from imposing the hardened racial prejudices and stereotypes of later centuries, exhibits a naive sense of

[6] E. G. Ravenstein, ed. and trans., *A Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco da Gama* (London, 1898), pp. 7–10. The author of this, the only surviving account of the voyage, is thought to be Álvaro Velho.

[7] Ibid., p. 11.

discovery that decades of Portuguese contact with Africa had not yet dispelled. For example, the author of the account expresses surprise at the "pretty harmony" of African music—only a few decades before the beginning of a fad for African musicians in Europe that would continue through the eighteenth century.[8] The account of Portuguese and African interest in trade also seems far from the rough and ready commerce of later times. Having already ascertained that gold, ivory, and spices were not available here, the Portuguese sought only to satisfy their short-term needs for fresh meat and water. In return for three copper bracelets, the Africans were pleased to oblige with a very fat black ox (which proved to be "as toothsome as the beef of Portugal").

There is even a parallel in that only males on both sides participated in this initial encounter at Mossel Bay, but on the second day "many visitors came and brought with them their women and little boys, the women remaining on the top of the hill near the sea" so as to see the strange visitors. Yet a shadow of violence lurked behind this show of mutual hospitality and friendliness, for both sides would have remembered the bloodshed that had ended the Dias expedition's visit at this very place a decade earlier. While expressing goodwill, both sides also made sure to display their military capacities. The Portuguese narrative innocently states that it was "the custom of this people for the young men to remain in the bush with their weapons." Similarly wary in the face of superior numbers of armed Africans, da Gama ordered men to land "armed with lances, assegais, and strung crossbows, and wearing our breastplates, . . . to show that we had the means of doing them harm, although we had no desire to employ them." He also ordered the firing of two cannon from the longboat, which, as expected, set the Africans on a precipitous retreat.[9]

On 25 December, having passed the farthest point reached by Dias, the expedition arrived at the coast they named Natal (Portuguese for "Christmas"). Early in January 1498 da Gama sent ashore Martin Affonso, who had learned a distantly related Bantu language while residing for some time in the kingdom of Kongo. At the diplomatic level the mission in northern Natal went smoothly: having presented the local chief with gifts of clothing, Affonso and a companion were given food and lodging for the night. Yet they slept poorly, for, the chronicler records, "all the night through, numbers of men and women came to have a look at them."[10]

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[8] Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London, 1984), pp. 9, 77–88.

[9] Ravenstein, *Journal,* p. 12.

[10] Ibid., p. 17.

Ordinary human curiosity is enough to account for such behavior, but it is frustrating to have no account of what the Africans were actually thinking. The thoughts that may have passed through the minds of the large numbers who came to stare from the shore at Mossel Bay at the pale strangers and their ships or who stared through the open bedroom windows in Natal may be conjectured from the quite specific African reactions that were carefully noted a century later in the journals of several groups of shipwrecked Portuguese who spent long periods trekking through the same part of southeastern Africa. Some Africans, hypothesizing that the strange white people might be some sort of sea creatures washed up on their shores, asked the Portuguese refugees to prove they were not fish by showing them their navels and demonstrating how they breathed with lungs. Apparently because of the visitors' pale skins, others took them to be preternatural "children of the sun," capable of magical cures or harm. Despite such first impressions, most Africans soon reached the conclusion that, however strange in their appearance, the shipwrecked Portuguese were "human beings like us," who deserved to be treated as guests. Africans offered them food and beds, and made them welcome by dance and music; in one case African women, catching their first sight of European women, "caressed and fondled" their alien sisters to comfort them.[11]

As da Gama's fleet made its way up the Indian Ocean coast of Africa during February, March, and April, it was the Portuguese turn to stare. Nothing that Portuguese explorers had seen during sixty-five years of exploration of Africa's Atlantic coasts prepared them for the wealth and architectural magnificence of the trading cities of the Swahili coast. Astonishment mixed with avarice at the sight of their riches, and the deeply entrenched presence of Islam incited the crusading zeal that had been so prominent a part of Prince Henry's original undertakings.

Most coastal rulers were suspicious of the intentions of these well-armed visitors, and some, accustomed to the luxuries of the Indian Ocean trade, were openly contemptuous of the trade goods that da Gama's vessels presented as gifts. The ruler of one island port sought to kill the Portuguese after he discovered they were Christians and not, as he had first supposed, Muslim Turks, but other rulers were helpful,

[11] C. R. Boxer, ed., *The Tragic History of the Sea, 1589–1622* (Cambridge, 1959), pp. 79–81, 92–95, 120–21, 245–46, and passim. In a series of essays Wyatt MacGaffey has explored the place of Europeans in the cosmology of the Kongo people; for his latest effort, see his "Dialogues of the Deaf: Europeans on the Atlantic Coast of Africa," in *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Stuart B. Schwartz (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 249–67.

whether out of apprehension at the visitors' military power or in expectation of gaining an advantage over rival towns. The sultan of the island town of Mozambique in the south arranged for two pilots to guide the Portuguese up the Swahili coast, though only one actually accompanied them. Farther north, the sultan of Malindi similarly provided da Gama with a skilled pilot, who guided the Portuguese across the open waters to Calicut in southwestern India.

Da Gama's first expedition passed along the African coast with little overt violence, but Portuguese commercial and religious agendas meant that many places on the eastern coast of Africa would soon feel Portuguese military might, as would other parts of the Indian Ocean basin. The later fleets, including one led by da Gama in 1502, pressed the Muslim rulers of the coastal towns to become tribute-paying subjects of the king of Portugal and even, in some cases, to convert to Christianity. In the name of Christ and commerce, a large war fleet in 1505 bombarded and looted those places that had failed to sign treaties, though it spared Malindi.[12]

The pillage, slaughter, and destruction of many of the rich Swahili towns was one consequence of the Portuguese penetration of the Indian Ocean, but farther north the Europeans' weapons and crusading valor were turned to the defense of the African kingdom of Ethiopia, which had been an object of Portuguese interest for decades. This mountainous kingdom, officially Christian since the fourth century, had long lived at peace with its Muslim neighbors, but during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries conflicts multiplied. After the Ottoman Turks conquered Egypt in 1517 and launched a major fleet in the Indian Ocean to counter the Portuguese, Ahmad Granye, the talented warlord of the Muslim state of Adal along the Red Sea, was emboldened to attack Ethiopia. By 1529 Granye's forces had overrun much of Ethiopia, and the survival of the ancient kingdom was in doubt.

Twenty years earlier, in 1509, Helena, the queen-regent of Ethiopia, had written her "very dear and well-beloved brother," the king of Portugal, proposing an alliance of her land forces and Portugal's fleet against the Turkish menace; the alliance was never consummated. As Ethiopia's troubles deepened, Helena's successors made renewed appeals for help. Finally, in 1539, Vasco da Gama's son Christopher reached Ethiopia at the head of a small Portuguese force. As elsewhere in Africa, the Portuguese overestimated their advantage on land. Christopher da Gama was captured in an early battle and tortured to death, and many

[12] A full account is in Justus Strandes, *The Portuguese Period in East Africa,* ed. J. S. Kirkman, trans. Jean F. Wallwork, 2nd ed. (Nairobi, 1968), pp. 12–71.

of his men were killed, but the mortal wounding of Ahmad Granye in a later encounter with the Ethiopian-Portuguese armies proved a turning point in Ethiopia's fortunes. Though the kingdom was much reduced in size, it had survived.[13]

These accounts show how varied were the early African encounters with the Portuguese, and they suggest that the ways in which Africans perceived the Portuguese and acted toward them were as important in shaping the relationships between the groups as were the motives and actions of the Portuguese. Depending on circumstances, Africans welcomed the newcomers as partners and allies, regarded them as passing curiosities, or opposed them as enemies. Along the Atlantic coast of the continent, the Portuguese and African ruling classes generally formed mutually attractive commercial ties. In the more thinly settled southern region, relations were sporadic until the Dutch East India Company established a way station at Cape Town in 1652. In eastern Africa, Portuguese efforts to gain a commanding position in the rich trade of the Indian Ocean produced both violent conflict and alliances, partly influenced by religious agendas on both sides.

Long-term Consequences

In the decades and centuries that followed these early encounters, Africa felt the impact of a growing European and Middle Eastern involvement in the Indian Ocean, as well as the effects of a growing Atlantic trading system tied to Europe and the European colonies in the Americas. It is no longer possible to examine these centuries only in terms of European actions and perspectives. A generation of diligent research has made it clear that the agendas and outlooks of the African participants also shaped these interactions.

The revisionists' detailed examination of the inner workings of African societies shows that, with few exceptions, Africans remained in direct control of their communities and territories during these centuries. Still, there has been much debate about how determinant external relations were in indirectly shaping the course of the continent's history. At one extreme, Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* seeks to locate in these early centuries the blame for

[13] Elaine Sanceau, *The Land of Prester John: A Chronicle of Portuguese Exploration* (New York, 1944), pp. 20–162; Tadese Tamrat, "Ethiopia, the Red Sea and the Horn," in *The Cambridge History of Africa,* vol. 3, *From c. 1050 to c. 1600,* ed. Roland Oliver (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 177–82.

the continent's modern economic woes. But Kenyan historian Bethwell Ogot cautions that too great an emphasis on "the gradual integration of Africa into the world capitalist economy dominated by Europe" in this period exaggerates the importance of external factors in African history and reinforces "racist ideas" of Africans "as hapless victims of world forces which they can neither comprehend nor control." Indeed, for Immanuel Wallerstein, the founder of the world-system approach, the incorporation of West Africa into "the capitalist world-economy" did not occur until after 1750, while eastern and southern Africa remained external to that system until a century later.[14]

The challenge of finding a passage between the shoals of particularistic detail and the abyss of overarching theory is common to the writing of all world history. The focus of this essay does not permit it to engage directly the important issues raised by the grand theories of changing global relations in the modern period, for as Ogot warns, such an approach ends up emphasizing factors external to the continent. Instead, to keep African realities in view, this essay examines the economic importance of the Vasco da Gama era separately on the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic sides of Africa, before reviewing its cultural importance.

Eastern Africa

What was the long-term significance of the Vasco da Gama era in eastern Africa? The prolific and influential historian Basil Davidson offers a highly negative assessment: "From the African point of view, [Vasco da Gama's] coming was an unrelieved disaster. It brought an end to the long and flourishing epoch of untrammeled trading intercourse with other lands of the Indian Ocean. It signalled the ruin for many of the Swahili cities."[15] An older and more detailed study by Justus Strandes reaches the opposite conclusion: "Portuguese rule in East Africa had no lasting influence whatsoever on the country, and East Africa today would appear the same even if there had been no Portuguese period in

[14] Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, D.C., 1972); B. A. Ogot, "The Historical Development of African Societies, 1500–1800: Conclusion," in *UNESCO General History of Africa,* vol. 5, *Africa from the Sixteenth Century to the Eighteenth Century,* ed. B. A. Ogot (Berkeley, Calif., 1992), p. 895; Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System,* vol. 3, *The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy, 1730–1840s* (San Diego, Calif., 1989), pp. 129–49.

[15] Basil Davidson, ed., *The African Past: Chronicles from Antiquity to Modern Times* (London, 1964), p. 122. This prolific author offers similar assessments in other works.

her past."[16] It is probably fair to say that both these conclusions suffer from exaggeration. As Swahili rulers had perceived from the beginning, their lack of a united front and the towns' lack of defensive battlements and weapons made the coast vulnerable to Portuguese naval bombardment. The value of Malindi's strategic decision to ally itself with the European intruders in 1498 was soon made evident. Portuguese assaults reduced the rival city of Mombasa to rubble in 1502 and again in 1528. Many other Swahili city-states suffered similar fates. The southern port of Kilwa was temporarily occupied, and its revival was undermined by Portugal's diversion of the Zambezi gold trade to its "factory" at Sofala.

Yet this was far from the eclipse of eastern Africa's participation in the Indian Ocean trade that Davidson suggests. The attacks by the Portuguese and their inept commercial policies—along with attacks by inland Africans—did much to disrupt trade along the Swahili coast, but many coastal cities were still able to prosper, and Swahili merchants continued to ply their trades in cooperation with Indian partners. In his magisterial study of the coast John Middleton argues that "the Swahili never completely lost their trading position" to the small, inefficient, and corrupt Portuguese presence, because "only the Swahili had the knowledge and experience to organize the trade with the interior; and, except in the far south, the Portuguese hardly penetrated beyond the coast itself."[17] In a recent survey from the Portuguese side, Russell-Wood agrees, pointing out that the older commercial relationships in the western Indian Ocean continued to function: "In East Africa, the Portuguese intrusion was no obstacle to Arab and Swahili traders who continued freely to engage in commerce with the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and India. From the 1670s, Gujarati and Goan traders invested heavily in Mozambique and it was they, rather than the Portuguese, who reaped much of the financial reward."[18] Even in the south where the Portuguese concentrated their trade, commercial continuity was strong. Gold, the most significant export from inland eastern Africa before 1498, continued to flow outward at an average rate of perhaps half a ton a year in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[19]

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[16] Strandes, *Portuguese Period,* p. 278. Strandes published the original edition of this work in German in 1899.

[17] John Middleton, *The World of the Swahili: A Mercantile Civilization* (New Haven, 1992), p. 45.

[18] Russell-Wood, *World on the Move,* p. 135.

[19] For an overview of this poorly documented trade, see Philip D. Curtin, "Africa and the Wider Monetary World, 1250–1850," in *Precious Metals in the Later Medieval and Early Modern Worlds,* ed. J. R. Richards (Durham, N.C., 1983), pp. 235–38.

Most of Portugal's limited and vulnerable trading network in the Indian Ocean was soon overtaken by the Dutch, who paid even less attention to eastern Africa. Muslims gradually challenged and displaced the Portuguese during the century between the Ottoman attacks of 1585–87 and the Omani conquest of Fort Jesus (Mombasa) in December 1798, after a three-year siege.[20] Yet, if Davidson's claim that the Portuguese arrival ruined the Swahili coast appears exaggerated, Standes's assertion that Portugal's presence there had no lasting impact may also be questioned. Ralph Austen argues that by linking the coast to the global trading networks Europeans were forging, da Gama's intrusion had profound importance, but that, in line with Wallerstein's analysis, its impact on most of eastern Africa would not be felt until the nineteenth century. Then Arab and Swahili caravans, heavily financed by Indians and armed with modern European firearms, expanded deep into the interior from the Omani colony at Zanzibar in search of ivory ultimately destined for European consumers.[21]

Western Africa

Although contacts on the western side of the continent began more peacefully than in eastern Africa, the arrival of the Portuguese constituted a turning point of much greater long-term importance for Atlantic Africans. For Africans of the western coast, who had previously had little or no sustained contact with the outside world, in John Thornton's words, the arrival of the Portuguese mariners "opened up a new and virtually unprecedented chapter in human history."[22] The commercial exchanges between Africans and Europeans grew rapidly over the next several centuries. David Eltis has calculated that the trade between western Africa and the Atlantic world reached a value of £8.2

[20] Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar* (Athens, Ohio, 1987), pp. 15–18. See also F. J. Berg, "The Coast from the Portuguese Invasion to the Rise of the Zanzibar Sultanate," in *Zamani: A Survey of East African History,* ed. B. A. Ogot and J. A. Kieran (Nairobi, 1968), pp. 119–31; and H. Neville Chitick, "The East Coast, Madagascar and the Indian Ocean," in *The Cambridge History of Africa,* vol. 3, *From c. 1050 to c. 1600,* pp. 228–31.

[21] Ralph Austen, *African Economic History* (London, 1987), pp. 60–67. Cf. K. M. Panniker, *Asia and Western Dominance: A Survey of the Vasco da Gama Epoch of Asian History* (London, 1953).

[22] John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1680* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 13.

million in the period 1681–90 and expanded nearly sixfold in value over the next century to £47.4 million.[23] Such commercial expansion depended upon Africans developing ports of call, state and private trading companies, currencies of account, and other infrastructure mechanisms along a 5,000-kilometer expanse of the Atlantic coast. Great quantities of goods from Europe, Asia, and the Americas passed through the hands of coastal African middlemen deep into inland marketing networks.

Stereotypes of Africans as undiscriminating consumers who were easily tricked into accepting shoddy goods and worthless trifles are highly misleading. Although, as da Gama had discovered, bits of copper and iron might be accorded a high value by isolated populations in southern Africa, Africans in the major ports of western and west-central Africa became highly selective, even finicky in their preferences as the volume of their foreign trade grew. Lengthy guidebooks sought to keep European traders abreast of the changing tastes of African consumers at the many ports of call along the Atlantic seaboard.

Although most of the imports were consumables that did little to stimulate African economic development, the assortment of goods resembled what was imported by most other parts of the world in this period. Overall, about half the imports consisted of textiles in a great variety of colors, patterns, and weaves, with which Africans of both sexes wrapped their bodies, just as they did with locally made cloths. The operation of the global trading networks can be seen in the gradual replacement of European woolen and linen cloth with vast quantities and varieties of Indian textiles, until they in turn were displaced by English cottons during the industrial revolution. Other goods in great demand included firearms and stimulants. The Portuguese had tried to restrict the sale of weapons to Christian allies, but other Europeans were eager to serve African demand for hunting and military firearms. As production costs fell during the eighteenth century, sales soared. Though still a modest proportion of total imports, firearms and

[23] David Eltis, "Precolonial Western Africa and the Atlantic Economy," in *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System*, ed. Barbara L. Solow (Cambridge, 1991), table 1. For additional detail see Ernst van den Boogaart, "The Trade between Western Africa and the Atlantic World, 1600–1690: Estimates of Trends in Composition and Value," *Journal of African History* 33 (1992): 369–85; and Eltis's reply, "The Relative Importance of Slaves and Commodities in the Atlantic Trade of Seventeenth-Century Africa," *Journal of African History* 35 (1994): 237–49.

ammunition went from 7.5% by value in the 1680s to 14.6% in 1820. African demand for alcoholic drinks and tobacco also rose.[24]

The bulk of the imports were of modest quality, used by persons of ordinary status, but certain items, such as expensive silks and brocades, were intended for the political and merchant elites, some of whom also developed a fondness for tailored European clothing, the fancier the better. British explorers in the Niger delta in the early 1830s were amused at the then well-established clothing preferences of local elites: "A soldier's jacket was the utmost of their wishes," which, when donned, elicited "loud yells of approbation" from their admiring subjects.[25] Taste for European architecture also dates from this period (some Old Calabar chiefs even imported prefabricated iron houses in the nineteenth century), though the study of this subject before 1800 is still in its infancy.[26]

Africans' demand for the imported goods was both discriminating enough to dispel notions of their gullibility and strong enough to demonstrate their enthusiasm for the opportunities offered by the new Atlantic economy. Yet the movement of the terms of the trade in Africans' favor as trade volume rose during the eighteenth century strongly suggests that Western demand for African exports was even stronger. From the time of the early Portuguese arrivals, western African exports had consisted of gold, ivory, dye woods, slaves, and other items. The expansion of plantation systems in the Americas drove upward both the volume and the price of slaves from Africa. Virtually all the growth in the eighteenth-century trade was attributable to the rising exports of slaves—whose value rose from about half of African exports in 1681–90 to 93% in 1781–90.

Thus any evaluation of the Vasco da Gama era in Africa must confront the facts and the emotions of the slave trade. This is no easy task, for the impact of the Atlantic slave trade in Africa is racked with controversy, and for good reasons. In the first place, the paucity of direct contemporaneous evidence of the trade's effects in inland Africa makes it impossible to measure many consequences with any precision. For another, the passionate moral crusades that the abolitionists launched

[24] Eltis, "Precolonial Western Africa," table 2; for a detailed inventory see Stanley B. Alpern, "What Africans Got for Their Slaves: A Master List of European Trade Goods," *History in Africa* 22 (1995): 5–43.

[25] MacGregor Laird and R. A. K. Oldfield, *Narrative of an Expedition into the Interior of Africa*, 2 vols. (1837; reprint, London, 1971), 1:88.

[26] See Peter Mark, "Constructing Identity: Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Architecture in the Gambia-Geba Region and the Articulation of Luso-African Ethnicity," *History in Africa* 22 (1995): 307–27.

have continued to shape most discussion of the subject. However justified such moral outrage may be, it is not a reliable yardstick for measuring historical change. Finally, there is the tendency, whether from ignorance or prejudice, to exaggerate the impact of external forces in shaping African history and to underestimate the resilience of African societies in the face of adverse circumstances.

A brief historiographical review will help frame these points. Images of African societies devastated by slave raids and brutalized by crass material values were popularized by British abolitionists to arouse support in their campaign to end the Atlantic slave trade. This belief in a corrupted Africa was soon taken up by Christian missionaries eager to "redeem" the continent's fallen souls, by merchants eager to promote an uplifting "legitimate trade," and ultimately by imperialists seeking to impose "civilized standards."[27] In the early twentieth century, the theme was appropriated by Pan-Africanists in the New World, opposing white domination. W. E. B. DuBois, for example, charged that "the ancient culture of the Atlantic coast was ruined by the trade in slaves, by the importation of gin, and by the European trade; European goods drove out native art and artistic industry."[28] Anticolonial nationalism continued the theme well into the late twentieth century. In a brief outline history for students, for example, the Ghanaian historian Adu Boahen harkens back to the abolitionist image: "The slave trade did not confer benefits of any kind on West Africa. On the contrary, it was, to use the words of one historian of the 1890s, 'an unmitigated misery—a crime unredeemed by one extenuating circumstance.'[29] Although the evidence for measuring such destruction has remained elusive, belief in its truth has become so well established that many present-day popular works and school texts now put forward the destructiveness of the slave trade in Africa as a demonstration of its immorality, bringing the argument full cycle.

The facts of the case, where they can be known, are more complex. Early nineteenth-century explorers, prepared by assumptions of African incapacity to encounter depraved and broken societies in inland West Africa, were inclined to report what they saw in these terms, but they were also surprised to find life much less grim than they had expected. By the end of the colonial period, African historians in new universities, such as Ibadan in Nigeria, had begun to examine western Africa's precolonial past for evidence of African's capacity for self-rule.

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[27] Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa* (Madison, Wis., 1964), pp. 254–55, 269–72.
[28] W. E. B. DuBois, *The World and Africa,* enlarged ed. (New York, 1965), p. 162.
[29] Adu Boahen, *Topics in West African History,* 2nd ed. (Harrow, 1986), p. 109.

They were inclined to see the often violent changes taking place in coastal West African societies in the early nineteenth century, not as perverted struggles of societies debased by slave trading, but as vibrant, healthy, even revolutionary dynamics, in which external factors, such as the slave trade, played only a minor part.[30]

Modern historians of Africa do not consider the Atlantic slave trade as the central engine of African history. Although they are far from claiming that the Atlantic slave trade was "good for" Africa, they show that its consequences were not uniformly devastating, especially when differentiated by place, class, and time. Modern historians also give due consideration to the inner workings of African societies, not just to the external forces. While recognizing the myriad horrors that the slave trade imposed on its victims and the great (but unmeasurable) suffering in many parts of Africa brought about by the warfare, social conflict, and population loss engendered by foreign slave trades, modern scholarship has also identified several external and internal factors that mitigated the destructive effects of the slave trade in Africa.[31]

The external factors relate very directly to the magnitude and complexity of sub-Saharan Africa's relationship to the Atlantic economy. First, the Atlantic slave trade was divided among a large number of coastal African ports and, over time, drew its victims from different parts of their hinterland, so that a single locale was usually not subjected to the destructive effects of the slave trade for long. Second, in contrast to the Americas, most of Africa remained free of European control. Aside from the small Dutch colony at Cape Town to serve the East Indian trade (which *imported* slaves mostly from the Indian Ocean territories) and the Portuguese slaving port of Luanda in Angola, Europeans generally limited their territorial holdings to small forts and trading enclaves along the coasts and were in turn limited by the strength of African states upon whose indulgence these outposts depended. Since the growing volume of trade functioned best under amicable relations, the general practice was to encourage good relations.

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[30] For the last point see Caroline Neale, *Writing "Independent" History: African Historiography, 1960–1980* (Westport, Conn., 1985), pp. 116–19.

[31] For overviews of the issues see Patrick Manning, "Contours of Slavery and Social Change in Africa," *American Historical Review* 88 (1983): 836–57; David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York, 1987), pp. 62–77; Paul Lovejoy, "The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on Africa: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of African History* 30 (1989): 365–94; Herbert S. Klein, "Economic Aspects of the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Slave Trade," in *The Rise of the Merchant Empires*, ed. James D. Tracy (Cambridge, 1990), p. 294.

Third, the scale of the Atlantic trade, for all its importance, was not so large as to dominate the inner workings of western Africa. Eltis calculates that the value of the Atlantic trade in western Africa in the mid-1780s averaged only £0.1 per capita per year, compared to £1.4 for the United States, £2.3 for Britain, and £5.7 for the British West Indies, though in many locales it was far more important than these averages suggest.[32]

Several factors internal to the continent that mitigated the destructive effects of the Atlantic slave trade have also come to light from modern research on the structures and workings of African societies. First, while most slaves were the product of warfare, the testimony of African slave traders and correlations between wars and prices cast doubt on the once popular belief that obtaining slaves was the principal reason most wars took place. At the very least, a significant portion (perhaps most) of the wars in Africa of these centuries—like the far larger wars in early modern Europe—would have taken place for "reasons of state" even if the Atlantic slave trade had not existed. Second, in places like inland Angola where periodic famine was a significant source of the slave trade victims, the Atlantic exchanges also led to the accidental introduction from the Americas of high-yield, drought-resistant cassava and maize, whose cultivation appears to have lessened losses of life due to famine. Third, although some parts of western Africa probably experienced much greater population loss due to the export of slaves, a demographic model constructed by Patrick Manning, which has found general acceptance among historians, projects that losses would have averaged a bit over 10% for western Africa as a whole between 1680 and 1860.[33] While this was tragic and substantial, Africa largely escaped the much greater epidemiological disasters that contact with European diseases inflicted on the Americas in the sixteenth century and on the Pacific Islands in the nineteenth.[34] Since African population recovered rapidly once the Atlantic slave trade came to an end, long-term demographic consequences were slight—in contrast to the Americas, where the demographic consequences of the introduction of enslaved Africans constitute one of the most prominent long-term effects of this period.

The debates about the role of the Atlantic economy in Africa con-

[32] Eltis, "Precolonial Western Africa," table 3.

[33] Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge, 1990), passim.

[34] Philip D. Curtin, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 126–28.

tinue, but although historians differ about the details—many of which are incalculable—and the extent of its impact, it is clear that coastal and inland African elites entered into this new economy willingly, even enthusiastically, and generally from a position of strength. Participation carried with it high negative consequences, but those Africans whose desire for imported goods was the reason for their participation seem to have believed that the gains outweighed the losses. Class standing and other circumstances shaped such perspectives. Clearly victims of the enslavement, refugees, prisoners of war, kidnapping victims, and those trodden underfoot would have held quite different views.

Culture

Despite their obvious importance, the material aspects of the Vasco da Gama era are not the only features worth considering. Significant cultural changes also took place in African societies. As one historical survey points out, "to an impartial observer living in the year 1400 Africa would have seemed inevitably destined to join the world of Islam."[35] However, the new contacts with Europe that directly challenged Muslim power in Ethiopia and on the Swahili coast also began to counter the Muslim world's cultural hegemony. As in the case of the commercial influences, the greatest period of cultural change would come in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but the pattern and direction of cultural change were set before 1800. Here too, one needs to beware of the tendency to presume that cultural change was largely destructive or otherwise negative. As Ian Campbell has persuasively argued in the case of Polynesia, cultural contact is generally nonviolent and mutually advantageous, a characterization that applies to Africa in this period.[36]

One cultural area of major concern to the Portuguese was religion, which featured prominently in early African-Portuguese contacts. For their part, the Portuguese were intently interested in spreading their faith, whose adoption, as they were well aware, would also help stabilize commercial and military alliances. Many secular-minded modern historians are inclined to discount the sincerity of Portuguese religious

[35] Roland Oliver and Anthony Atmore, *The African Middle Ages, 1400–1800* (London, 1981), p. 5.

[36] I. C. Campbell, "Cultural Contact and Polynesian Identity in the European Age," *Journal of World History* 8 (1997): 29–55.

motives; one English authority on Portuguese expansion speaks of "the way in which the Portuguese tried to hide policy behind a show of missionary zeal."[37] Likewise, many modern historians of Africa, while accepting the genuineness of Africans' interest in firearms and other material goods, have been dismissive of the sincerity of their interest in spiritual imports.

Such modern skepticism may be misplaced. Although religious and secular motives were often mixed up in the historical record, Christian missions were an important policy goal of the Portuguese, not a front for other interests. For their part, African rulers were similarly capable of seeing religion, trade, and politics as a package, but this should not be taken to mean that their interest in Christianity was insincere. Non-Muslim African rulers were as eager to add to their spiritual arsenals as to increase their military ones, and indigenous African religions were far more open to new religious knowledge and practices than was contemporary Christianity or Islam.

The introduction of Christianity in Africa was often tied to the introduction of firearms, since the Portuguese refused to sell these weapons to non-Christians. Because both Africans and Portuguese believed that human events had natural as well as supernatural causes, neither side found it contradictory to combine new weaponry and new beliefs. This was vividly illustrated by the rulers of the large coastal kingdoms of Benin and Kongo, both of whom invited early missionaries to battle fronts, apparently to test the power of their religion to affect the outcome.[38] As it happened, both battles ended in victory for the monarchs concerned, both of whom then opened their kingdoms to the missionaries. The experiment failed in Benin, whose rulers declined to admit more missionaries after 1538, but the rulers of the kingdom of Kongo adopted Christianity permanently, along with a commercial relationship based on a royal monopoly over the export of slaves. When the growing slave trade became disruptive, *Manikongo* Afonso I (r. 1506–c. 1540) appealed to "our brother," the king of Portugal, for help in stopping all trade "except wine and flour for the holy sacrament," a strong suggestion of the depth of his commitment to Christianity.[39]

In eastern Africa Portuguese missionaries also had some success.

[37] Blake, *Europeans in West Africa,* p. 32.

[38] David Northrup, "The Introduction of Firearms in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1450–1800," paper presented at the Fifth Annual International Conference of the World History Association, Pomona, California, June 1996.

[39] Translated in Davidson, *African Past,* pp. 191–92.

South of the Zambezi River, a series of inland rulers known by the title *mwenemutapa,* "great pillager," also opened commercial contacts with the Portuguese, adopted Christianity for a time, and sought weapons. A Dominican father, João dos Santos, claimed that his order alone had baptized 16,000 Africans along the coast from Mozambique Island northward, including 694 whom he baptized himself. Jesuits and Augustinians were also active. If these numbers seem inflated, other accounts suggest that there were well over a thousand African Christians on Mozambique Island in 1600 and, within a few decades, Christian communities of a few dozen as far north as Faza in southern Somalia. Some of these "converts" were slaves whose consent was not sought, but others were powerful men who at least temporarily switched from Islam to Christianity.[40]

The considerable efforts of the Portuguese over three centuries produced mixed results. Although in some states, such as Benin, rulers quickly abandoned their experiment with the new faith, in many other places the missionaries had more lasting success. By the early seventeenth century, according to the authoritative survey by Adrian Hastings, there was "a network of Catholic rulers spread all across Africa." Then the endeavor soured. Though Portuguese missionaries continued their efforts in Ethiopia through the seventeenth century, the Christian Ethiopian rulers ultimately refused to sever their ties to the patriarchate of Alexandria and affiliate with Rome. Almost everywhere else (except for the Soyo kingdom at the mouth of the Congo River), the fledgling African Christian communities declined rapidly during the seventeenth century, burdened by a missionary effort too closely under the control of Portugal and too closely tied to the rising Atlantic slave trade. By 1700, Hastings notes, the "likelihood of any enduring Catholic presence in black Africa of more than minuscule size had become extremely slight."[41]

Nevertheless, the historical significance of these conversion efforts may be greater than it seems. John Thornton has made a highly suggestive case for Africans' importance in shaping the form of Christianity among slaves in the New World. He argues that the small number

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[40] See Eric Axelson, *Portuguese in South-East Africa, 1488–1600* (Johannesburg, 1973); Strandes, *Portuguese Period,* pp. 122–23, 152–53; S. I. Gorerazvo Mudenge, "The Dominicans at Zumba: An Aspect of Missionary History in the Zambezi Valley," *Mohlomi, Journal of Southern African Historical Studies* 1 (1976): 32–63.

[41] Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450–1950* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 71–169, quotations on p. 127. Cf. Richard Gray, *Black Christians and White Missionaries* (New Haven, Conn., 1990), pp. 1–10, 35–56; Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa from Antiquity to the Present* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1995), pp. 45–73.

of enslaved Africans imported to the Americas who were already Christians (mostly from west-central Africa) were often used as catechists and that many other enslaved Africans who were not converts had acquired a sufficient knowledge of Christianity before crossing the Atlantic to influence the shape of Afro-Christian practice in the Americas.[42] It is also worth remembering that African American settlers and missionaries were significant in the renewed efforts to spread Christianity in Africa after 1800.

A second arena of culture contact involved Africans' use of European languages. Beginning with their earliest voyages, the Portuguese had taken Africans back to Portugal to be taught Portuguese so that they might serve as interpreters on future diplomatic and trading missions. Until 1538 the monastery of St. Eloy in Lisbon functioned as a center for training African linguists as well as European missionaries to Africa.[43] As overseas trade grew in western Africa, local inhabitants took the initiative in learning Portuguese and other European languages, a situation that recurred in western coastal India and Brazil.[44] Although some Europeans learned African languages, no African language had sufficient currency along the Atlantic coast to become a lingua franca.

Portuguese remained the principal language of communication in western Africa well into the seventeenth century. Early northern European traders conversed with Africans in Portuguese, and the Danes and Dutch generally continued to do so. In the islands of Cape Verde, São Tomé, and Principe, as well as in coastal Angola, Mozambique, and Guiné-Bissau the Portuguese language retains its influence, even if in a pidgin form, such as the Cape Verdean Kriolu. As French and English traders became more numerous in the coastal trade, Africans learned their languages so as to serve as interpreters and middlemen in the trade. Dutch also came into use around Cape Town and the Dutch outposts on the Gold Coast. Some coastal Africans became fluent in several European languages. In parts of West Africa frequented by the English, an English-based pidgin (incorporating some Portuguese words) was widely used by Africans of different languages as well. Some Africans could read and write pidgin English, and one prominent eighteenth-century trader of Old Calabar kept a diary in it.[45]

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[42] Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, p. 254.

[43] A. C. de C. M. Saunders, *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal, 1441–1555* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 12; Hans Werner Debrunner, *Presence and Prestige: Africans in Europe* (Basel, 1979), pp. 41–45.

[44] Russell-Wood, *World on the Move*, pp. 191–93.

[45] Nelson E. Cabral, "Portuguese Creole Dialects in West Africa," *International Social Science Journal* 36 (1984): 77–85; Salikoko S. Mufwene, "West African Pidgin English," in

For a time after 1696 the English Royal African Company ran a school on the Gold Coast to teach African boys standard English so that they might serve as interpreters, but it proved more efficient for the Company to send ambitious young Africans to study in Europe. In many parts of West Africa independent African merchants and rulers took the initiative in promoting Western education, making use of European trading vessels to dispatch their sons and daughters to Europe to improve their language skills, acquire literacy, and absorb other aspects of European culture. One scholar reports, "By the 1780s there were always at least 50 African schoolchildren, girls as well as boys, in Liverpool and the villages around" (plus others in Bristol), mostly from the Windward and Gold Coasts.[46] At this time in Sierra Leone and other parts of the Windward Coast, there existed "an English speaking class of rulers, traders and middlemen, several of whom had been trained in Europe. They occasionally adopted certain European customs in dress and eating habits, and realized the importance of a good schooling for business [yet were] fully integrated into the fabric of native life with its secret societies and cults."[47] A similar situation existed in the Niger delta area and in the neighboring trading towns of Old Calabar, where an English visitor at the end of the eighteenth century, when the slave trade was at its peak, noted that for some time many of the African traders had been able to write as well as speak English fluently, skills they polished during visits to England and through local schools established by the elites.[48] Some Africans also went to study in France, but by the later part of the eighteenth century the French government, arguing that France had "a Negro problem," had banned the introduction of Africans for instruction or any other purpose.[49]

Thus the Atlantic contacts provided the mechanism for the spread of Western belief, language, and learning in sub-Saharan Africa, much as the trans-Saharan, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean trades had long done for the spread of Islamic cultural influences. It is important to keep in mind that such cultural changes were generally additive and not substitutive—that is, they expanded a culture's range rather than displaced facets of it. As any modern study of cultural change in Africa can attest, "Westernization," like "Islamicization," has long been a

The Oxford Companion to the English Language, ed. Tom McArthur (Oxford, 1992), p. 1111. For the diary of Antera Duke, see C. Daryll Forde, ed., *Efik Traders of Old Calabar* (London, 1956).

[46] Fryer, *Staying Power,* p. 60.

[47] Debrunner, *Presence and Prestige,* p. 75.

[48] Captain John Adams, quoted in *Nigerian Perspectives: An Historical Anthology,* ed. Thomas Hodgkin, 2nd ed. (London, 1975), pp. 234–35.

[49] Shelby T. McCloy, *The Negro in France* (Lexington, Ky., 1961), pp. 43–62.

complex process of interaction, not a process of one culture displacing another.[50]

Finally, it is instructive to mention one other cultural consequence of the Vasco da Gama era: the establishment, by means of the slave trade, of large African populations in the Americas. By 1800 there were some 4.5 million persons entirely or partly of African descent in the Americas, a large number compared to a population of some 30 million in the regions of Africa their ancestors had been taken from. The Africanization of large parts of the Americas was significant by 1800, although African America would become increasingly molded by Western influences thereafter, particularly as the arrival of new slaves from Africa was brought to an end.[51] Similarly, though to a lesser degree, the spread of Western Christianity, languages, and education would also spread rapidly in Africa after 1800, in part thanks to roots already in place, in part due to new influences.

Conclusion

The new maritime connections with sub-Saharan Africa grew from modest beginnings in the fifteenth century to be of considerable significance by 1800. African responses to Portuguese expeditions up through Vasco da Gama's mirror the great diversity of the continent and its prior connections with other regions of the world, but everywhere Africans were as eager as Europeans to discover more about their new contacts and to assess what they might obtain and learn from them. Thus, any evaluation of the importance of the Vasco da Gama era must recognize Africans as active participants in its operations.

The greatest new relations were commercial. Despite some temporary disruption due to Portuguese attacks, eastern Africans continued their established Indian Ocean trade with some modest additions. The significance of the new trade was far greater on the previously isolated Atlantic side of the continent. Western Africa's involvement in a trading network with Europe, Asia, and the Americas brought new goods to Africa and permanently established large African communities in the Americas. Though the slave trade had destructive effects,

[50] William R. Bascom and Melville J. Herskovits, eds., *Continuity and Change in African Cultures* (Chicago, 1959), pp. 1–14. For Islam see Louis Brenner, ed., *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Bloomington, Ind., 1993).

[51] See Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York, 1986), especially chap. 8.

African societies proved resilient and resourceful in dealing with them. The consequences of sub-Saharan Africa's involvement in the world trading system cannot be reduced to a simple bottom line. They need to be understood in terms of complex struggles for wealth and power among Africans, as well as in terms of diverse relations between Africans and the outside world.

In addition to the foreign material goods from the Atlantic trade, Africans experimented with European cultural imports, notably in language, religion, and education. Although historians differ about the meaning of these commercial and cultural contacts, the Vasco da Gama era began major changes in sub-Saharan Africa's contacts with the rest of the world. Whatever a balance sheet (if one could be constructed) might reveal of the sum effects of commercial involvement, the negative impact in Africa was less than the demographic collapse and colonization that befell New World peoples. In larger terms, the Vasco da Gama era marks the transition from an era in which the Islamic world was the principal external partner of sub-Saharan Africa to one in which the Western world was the continent's major commercial and cultural partner.