



Brokers of Change

Atlantic Commerce and Cultures
in Precolonial Western Africa

Edited by Toby Green

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Published for THE BRITISH ACADEMY
by OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi

Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi

New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece

Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore

South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Published in the United States

By Oxford University Press Inc., New York

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First published 2012

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Data available*

Typeset by AtriTeX Technologies (P) Ltd, Chennai, India

*Printed in Great Britain on acid-free paper by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall*

ISBN 978-0-19-726520-8

ISSN 0068-1202

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Acknowledgements

This book has grown out of a conference held at the Centre of West African Studies, Birmingham University, from 11 to 13 June 2009. It is the product of the extremely fruitful collaborations and discussions that took place then, and all those who participated in the conference have played a key part in shaping the contents of what is published here. In addition to the contributors to the present volume, I would like to thank Michel Doormont, Walter Hawthorne, José da Silva Horta, Richard Lobban, Tom McCaskie, Keith Shear, Kate Skinner, Judith Spicksley, Maria João Soares, and Silke Strickrodt for their participation in that conference and for our subsequent exchanges. It was, however, a great sadness that for reasons beyond their control—and owing to the UK government's immigration procedures—António Correia e Silva and Zelinda Cohen were unable to attend and hence to participate in this venture: *a luta continua*.

All the contributors to this volume attended the Birmingham conference: my deepest thanks to them all for their willingness to participate in this joint project, and for the many strengths of their research. In particular, José Nafafé has been a great support throughout this project, helping to conceive and organize the conference, and gracefully bowing out of editorial duties which pressure of work made it impossible for him to undertake. I thank him for his camaraderie throughout, and for our enduring friendship, which means a great deal to me.

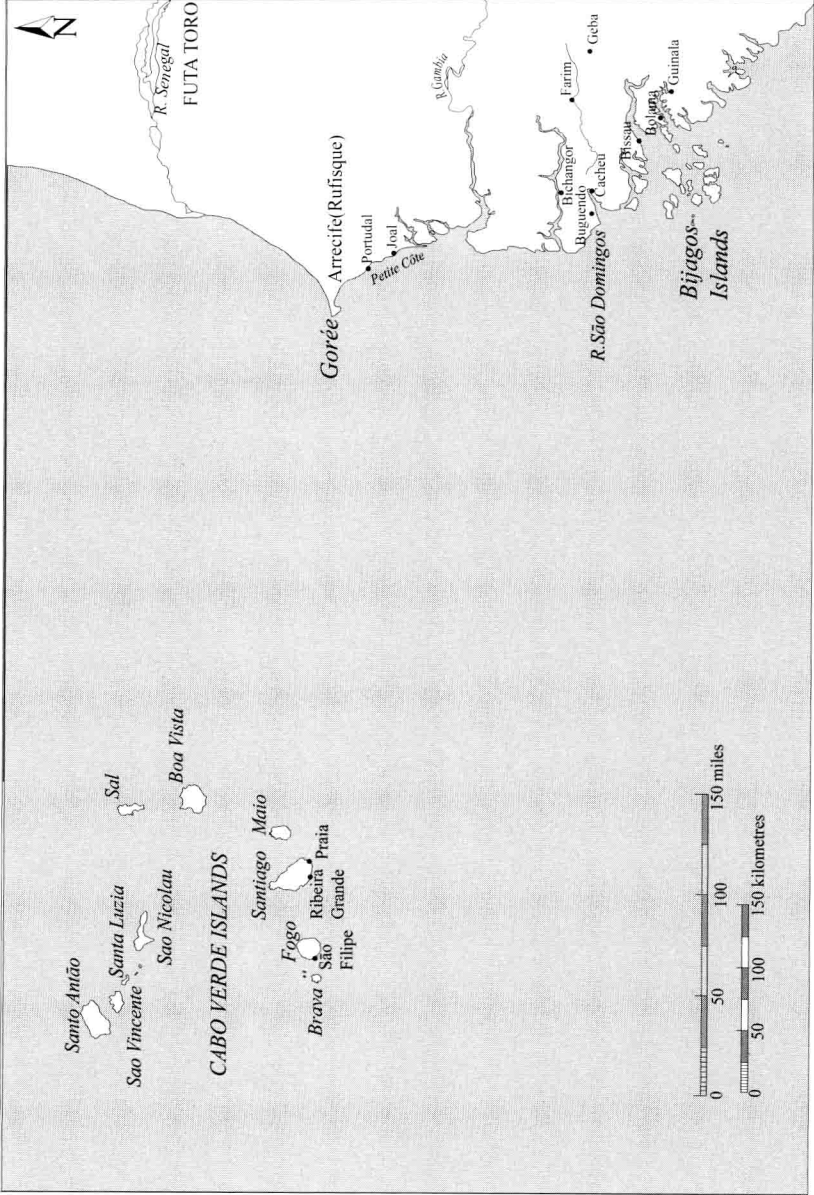
Subsequently, several colleagues also present at Birmingham have been instrumental in ensuring that this book would be published. Philip Havik offered at once to work on the introduction, a difficult task, which he completed with aplomb and then willingly collaborated with me as we pushed it through the final hurdles. Peter Mark undertook the daunting task of peer reviewing all the papers, something which he did with great speed, insight, and energy. And Paulo Farias offered many key points of advice and peer-reviewed one of the contributions at a late point in the process. I salute all three for their collaborative spirit and willingness to help to shape this venture and ensure its success.

The Birmingham conference was made possible by generous funding from a variety of institutions, so I thank the African Studies Association of the United Kingdom, the British Academy, the Economic History Society,

the Instituto Camões, and the College of Arts and Law at the University of Birmingham for the funding that made the event possible in the first place; Malyn Newitt also played a very important role at the outset of this project, through generously supplying a recommendation to funding bodies. In the years since, Brigid Hamilton-Jones and James Rivington at the British Academy Publications Department have been very helpful in seeing the book through to the editorial stage. Since the book went in to production, Elizabeth Stone has been a very efficient and thorough manager of the project.

It is a great pleasure to see this book finally in print. Putting together a multi-authored book is a reminder of the togetherness which is one of the high points of academic research. While, as my colleague Malyn Newitt once put it, editing such a venture can at times feel like herding cats, in this case all the contributors to this volume have shown remarkable patience and tolerance of the various mis-steps and requests I have made, and I thank them all for their forbearance and admire the brilliance of their essays; my wish is that they will find sufficient reward for all their hard work in the birth of what I hope is a complex and rewarding ‘kitten’.

*Cambridge
December 2011*



Map of Western Africa in the Precolonial Era

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Introduction: Brokerage and the Role of Western Africa in the Atlantic World

PHILIP J. HAVIK WITH TOBY GREEN

The theme of brokerage in Western African history

THE ATLANTIC HAS long been seen as a pivotal site for understanding the way in which local and regional economies and cultural frameworks gradually became integrated into a global system during the early modern era. Following the pioneering work of Braudel on the Mediterranean, the attractions of studies shaped by oceans, which thereby transcended national boundaries and the nationalist calling of earlier historiographies, became manifest.¹ Work by the Chaunu on Seville and the Atlantic world catalysed sustained interest in the processes of both cultural and economic exchange that have underpinned global histories since the later fifteenth century, and since the 1970s the study of such interconnected histories has seen an explosion which shows no sign of abating.² Works by scholars including Dubois, Elliott, Miller, Heywood, and Thornton took a global view of transatlantic connections, revealing interconnections of trade and diasporas that spanned Africa, the Americas, and Europe.³

¹ Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'Époque de Philippe II*, 2 vols (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1966); Francisco Bethencourt, 'Political Configurations and Local Powers', in Francisco Bethencourt and Diogo Ramada Curto (eds), *Portuguese Oceanic Expansion, 1400–1800* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 199.

² Huguette and Pierre Chaunu, *Séville et l'Atlantique (1504–1650)*, 8 vols (Paris: Librairie Armand, 1955–1956).

³ Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1497–1830* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006); Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800*, 2nd rev. edn (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

The rise of this transnational—or perhaps, to be more precise here, transnationalist—history was accompanied by a range of new theoretical approaches. For sociologists, anthropologists, and historians of the contemporary era, transnationalism itself became a key concern.⁴ Meanwhile, for those whose interests extended beyond European expansion per se, a key concept came to be that of brokerage, where, in Eric Wolf's classic 1956 definition, brokers are 'individuals who stand guard over the critical junctures and synapses of a relationship which connects the local system to the larger whole'.⁵ Importantly, these novel insights in the social sciences brought to the fore the question of social change, the fluidity of relationships, and the opportunities that they created for mediation.⁶ Since the 1950s, the ongoing debate on the issue has identified a range of fields and modalities involving brokerage, associated with patronage, clientelism, innovation, entrepreneurship, knowledge, migration, cultural competence, conflict resolution, transculturation, syncretism, hybridity, and creolization.⁷ In other words, brokers were people who linked up different worlds, who made connections where before there had been none. Brokers were necessarily at ease in a variety of cultural milieus, and possessed a sort of flexibility of outlook and cultural identification that not everyone was able to achieve. While Wolf's and Irwin Press's work was devoted to Latin America, many Africanists saw the explanatory opportunities of the idea of brokerage, and how it could explain and add nuance to the multiple cultural worlds and intense trade that are and have been characteristic of so many regions of West Africa.⁸

⁴ Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009); C. A. Bayly et al., 'AHR Conversation: On Transnational History', *American Historical Review* 111/15 (2006): 1441–64; Peggy Levitt, *The Transnational Villagers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Michael Peter Smith and Luis Eduardo Guarnizo (eds), *Transnationalism from Below* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction, 1998); Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (London: Routledge, 1996); Linda Basch, Nina Glick-Schiller, and Cristina Szanton-Blanc (eds), *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation States* (Langhorne, PA: Gordon and Breach, 1992).

⁵ Eric Wolf, 'Aspects of Group Relations in a Complex Society: Mexico', *American Anthropologist* 58 (1956): 1065–78.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1072–6.

⁷ Clifford Geertz, 'The Javanese Kijaji: The Changing Role of a Culture Broker', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2 (1959): 228–49; Irwin Press, 'Ambiguity and Innovation: Implications for the Genesis of the Culture Broker', *American Anthropologist* 71 (1969): 205–17; William Murphy, 'The Rhetorical Management of Dangerous Knowledge in Kpelle Brokerage', *American Ethnologist* 8/4 (1981): 668–75; Margaret Connell Szasz, *Between Indian and White Worlds: The Cultural Broker* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001).

⁸ P.F. de Moraes Farias, 'The Gesere of Borgu: A Neglected Type of Manding Diaspora', in Ralph A. Austen (ed.), *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature, and Performance* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 141–69.

Most studies linking the theme of brokerage to African societies have concentrated on the colonial era. The reasons for this were clearly established by Barber and Farias, who described the emergence of a pioneering West African elite tied to colonial economies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an elite ‘poised between the African hinterland and the tiny but powerful class of white administrators, missionaries and traders, [who] lived out in every detail of their existence their role as mediators’.⁹ In this important statement of the place of brokerage in colonial African histories, every aspect of the lives of these individuals involved contested identities and the unsystematic synthesis of aspects of African and European cultural forms.¹⁰ By holding a ‘two-sided allegiance’, they were conduits of African and European practices and values, and became key intermediaries in the formation of the colonial states of twentieth-century Africa.

Scholars of the colonial era have shown how this sort of brokerage worked at the cultural and the economic level. Practitioners of the Yoruba religion known as *Ifá*, the *babalawo*, sought to appropriate the materials of Christianity and Islam and convert them into extensions of the *Ifá* corpus; in doing so, the *babalawo* radically transformed the practice of *Ifá*, and yet at the same time, whilst this was thus incorporative of alien traditions, it was in itself in keeping with the character of *Ifá* as a changing religious practice indexical to the time and place of its recitation.¹¹ Similarly, Asante and Yoruba cultural nationalists sought to privilege some idealized ‘innate’ cultural pasts, but in doing so, themselves drew on European ideas of culture and society.¹² On the economic level, meanwhile, for some scholars, the colonial cocoa economy of the twentieth-century Gold Coast was seen as predicated on a complicated network of brokerage based on credit, as brokers both took payment for cocoa to individual farmers, and did so on the basis of credit from the colonial authorities.¹³ Others used the idea of brokerage to examine the role of landlords in markets in recently independent Ghana, or, in more distant times,

⁹ Karin Barber and P. F. de Moraes Farias, ‘Introduction’, in Karin Barber and Paulo Farias (eds), *Self-Assertion and Brokerage: Early Cultural Nationalism in West Africa* (Birmingham: Centre of West African Studies, 1990), 1–10, 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1, 3–4.

¹¹ Karin Barber, ‘Discursive Strategies in the Texts of *Ifá* and in the “Holy Book of *Odù*” of the African Church of *Örùnmìlà*’, in Barber and Farias, *Self-Assertion and Brokerage*, 196–240; K. Noel Amherd, *Reciting Ifá: Difference, Heterogeneity, and Identity* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2010).

¹² Robin Law, ‘Constructing “A Real National History”: A Comparison of Edward Blyden and Samuel Johnson’, in Barber and Farias, *Self-Assertion and Brokerage*, 78–100; T. C. McCaskie, ‘Inventing Asante’, in Barber and Farias, *Self-Assertion and Brokerage*, 55–67.

¹³ Roger J. Southall, ‘Farmers, Traders and Brokers in the Gold Coast Cocoa Economy’, *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 12/2 (1978): 185–211.