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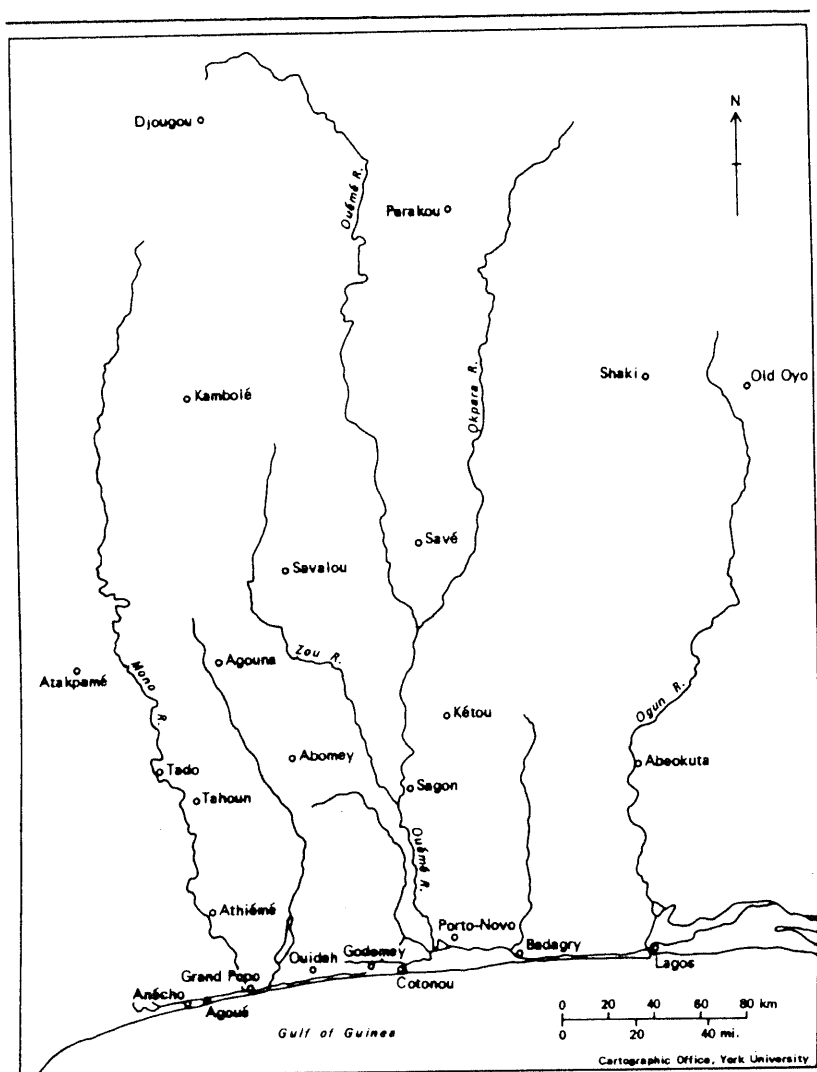
# **The Workers of African Trade**



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**MERCHANTS, PORTERS, AND CANOEMEN  
IN THE BIGHT OF BENIN****Links in the West African Trade Network****PATRICK MANNING**

The initial objective of this essay is to document the importance of two major trade routes that are left off virtually all maps of West African commerce (e.g., Hopkins, 1973: 59; Adamu, 1978: 65). These are the north-south portage route from Grand Popo to Djougou, dominated by trade in salt, and the east-west canoe route from Lagos to Keta, dominated by food-stuffs trade. Their importance stems not only from the large volume of goods they carried, but from their strategic placement: The east-west route linked all the major coastal population centers between Accra and the Niger, while the north-south route provided the major link from the coast to the great interior route between Kano and Salaga. My second objective is to analyze the labor conditions along these long-distance routes: The analysis contrasts the porters, unspecialized, part-time workers who acted as petty trader-transporters, with the specialized canoemen, who worked in corporate groups and often received wages. The study begins with an analysis of the commerce and the work process along each route, and along various spurs and corollary routes of the Bight of Benin, at the opening of the twentieth century, when they are best documented. The third aspect of the essay, a longitudinal study of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is intended to reaffirm the



Map 3.1: Dahomey, Late Nineteenth Century

significance of the routes, to further elucidate the nature of the work performed along them, and to show the impact of politics and changing technology on commerce.

### THE WORK OF THE PORTERS

Most of the long-distance overland trade of nineteenth-century Bight of Benin was carried by unspecialized porters working on their own or in small groups. Overall, that is, the Bight of Benin head transport system contrasted sharply with the greater specialization and division of labor in the Hausa-dominated interior commerce, even though the two systems met at such junctures as Sansanné-Mango, Djougou, Parakou, Shaki, and Ilorin.

The patterns of such porters' work emerge most clearly from the documents on the north-south route from Agoué and Grand Popo to Djougou. This route, in common with other north-south routes from the Volta to the Niger valley, in return for the southward movement of foodstuffs. According to the observations of French administrators at Kambolé and Savalou in the early twentieth century, some 90 percent of the tonnage of northward-moving goods consisted of salt. The salt commerce recorded at the interior points of the trade route was a significant proportion of salt imports to colonial Dahomey: Total salt imports to Dahomey ranged from 1000 to 3000 tons per year, and roughly two-thirds of that amount went to Grand Popo. The salt observed passing Savalou and Kambolé ranged from 250 to 350 tons per year and, accepting the assessment of administrators there that they saw only 40% of the commerce, we would conclude that some 600 to 900 tons of salt per year passed northward along that route (Tables 3.1 and 3.5; Manning, 1982: 356-363, 378).

Of the other northward-moving goods, textiles were most important in volume and value, followed by dyes, beads, alcoholic beverages, gunpowder, guns, mats, and baskets. Small amounts of such goods as tobacco, matches, and copper bars were noted (Table 3.2). Cowries had ceased to be carried north by the time of this survey, but they had been important in earlier days.

Salt commerce in particular seems to have lent itself to pursuit by individuals and small groups, as is clear in a description of the activities of such individuals during February 1906:

Les négociants de Djougou se sont approvisionnés et les grosses caravanes ne se reformeront que plus tard; pour le moment, ce sont des groupes

Table 3.1 Northward-bound Commerce Recorded at Kambolé, March 1905-February 1906<sup>a</sup>

| Month        | Persons | Salt<br>(kg) | Textiles<br>(pieces) | Dyes<br>(pkgs) | Gunpowder<br>(kg) | Guns<br>(pcs) | Alcoholic<br>Beverages<br>(barrels) | Beads<br>(pkgs) | Tobacco<br>(kg) | Matches<br>(pkgs) | Estimated<br>kg/porter |
|--------------|---------|--------------|----------------------|----------------|-------------------|---------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| March 1905   | 338     | 11,000       | 438                  | 110            | 70                | 19            | 6                                   | 120             |                 |                   | 35                     |
| April        | 190     | 4,000        | 56                   | 30             | 25                | 3             | 12                                  | 44              |                 |                   | 22                     |
| May          | 473     | 13,000       | 307                  | 241            | 171               | 8             | 29                                  | 127             |                 |                   | 29                     |
| June         |         |              |                      |                |                   |               |                                     |                 |                 |                   |                        |
| July         | 567     | 19,000       | 197                  | 242            | 366               | 13            | 11                                  | 11              |                 |                   | 35                     |
| August       | 597     | 20,000       | 332                  | 524            | 199               | 15            | 22                                  |                 |                 |                   | 35                     |
| September    | 497     | 18,000       | 390                  | 100            | 198               | 5             | 20                                  | 54              | 9               | 121               | 38                     |
| October      | 682     | 24,000       | 246                  | 42             | 50                | 20            | 10                                  | 38              | 17              |                   | 36                     |
| November     | 731     | 18,000       | 173                  | 297            |                   | 5             | 12                                  | 40              | 5               | 19                | 25                     |
| December     | 1283    | 44,000       | 540                  | 74             | 43                | 10            | 18                                  |                 | 1               | 5                 | 35                     |
| January 1906 | 730     | 35,000       | 243                  |                | 17                | 24            | 3                                   | 1212            |                 | 1                 | 48                     |
| February     | 477     | 12,000       | 295                  | 436            | 40                | 18            | 8                                   | 193             | 72              | 53                | 28                     |
| Total        | 6565    | 218,000      | 3217                 | 2096           | 1179              | 140           | 151                                 | 1839            | 104             | 199               | 35<br>(median)         |

SOURCE: Archives Nationales du Sénégal (ANB), 2-D-82, Savalou, March 1905-February 1906

a. Salt volumes converted from bags or loads to kilograms at the rate of 25 kilograms per bag.

Table 3.2 Southward-bound Commerce Recorded at Kambolé, March 1905-February 1906<sup>a</sup>

| Month        | Persons | Makari<br>(kg) | Beans<br>(kg) | Shea<br>Butter<br>(kg) | Pepper<br>(kg) | Kola<br>(kg) | Potash<br>(kg) | Sopa<br>(kg) | Turkeys<br>(head) | Sheep<br>(head) | Cattle<br>(head) | Horses<br>(head) | Estimated<br>kg/porter |
|--------------|---------|----------------|---------------|------------------------|----------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|-------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| March 1905   | 280     |                | 2,600         | 150                    | b              |              |                |              | b                 | 13              | 36               | 22               | 10                     |
| April        | 243     |                | 2,200         |                        | b              | 75           |                |              | 20                | 5               | 7                |                  | 9                      |
| May          | 245     |                | 1,100         |                        | b              | 200          |                |              |                   | 10              | 12               | 3                | 5                      |
| June         |         |                |               |                        |                |              |                |              |                   |                 |                  |                  |                        |
| July         | 593     | 6,500          | 1,800         |                        |                | 50           |                |              |                   | 12              | 21               | 1                | 14                     |
| August       | 629     | 8,600          | 1,900         | 450                    |                | 25           |                |              |                   | 17              | 17               | 3                | 17                     |
| September    | 594     | 4,100          | 3,800         | 1,800                  |                | 75           | 375            |              |                   | 7               | 10               |                  | 17                     |
| October      | 494     | 3,300          | 1,800         | 4,450                  |                | 75           | b              |              | 39                | 6               | 6                | 3                | 20                     |
| November     | 1547    | 12,300         | 7,100         | 8,400                  | 50             | 50           |                | 675          |                   | 15              | 15               | 3                | 19                     |
| December     | 1187    | 7,500          | 4,100         | 7,400                  | 125            | 275          | 125            | 325          |                   | 10              | 23               | 1                | 17                     |
| January 1906 | 1172    | 12,600         | 3,800         | 6,400                  | 75             |              | 550            | 125          | 74                |                 | 20               | 6                | 20                     |
| February     | 437     | 3,800          | 900           | 1,600                  | 50             |              | 500            |              |                   | 7               | 26               | 9                | 16                     |
| Total        | 7421    | 58,700         | 31,100        | 30,650                 | 250            | 825          | 1000           | 1125         | 133               | 202             | 193              | 51               | 17<br>(median)         |

SOURCE: ANB, 2-D-82, Savalou, March 1905-February 1906.

a. Weight figures given in kilograms in source. Other products listed, without volume, included calabashes and mats.

b. Listed but no quantity given.

de 3 à 4 Gambaris au plus, faisant du cabotage, le sel étant monté par tous les indigènes de Savalou, Banté, Cabolé, Bassila qu'ils soient ou non commerçants.

Des qu'ils ont un pécule suffisant, ils se rendent à Abomey, Toffo, Paouignan et même Savalou, achètent un sac de sel qu'ils vont vendre à Bassila, Aledjo, Léméré ou Djougou. Les autres articles sont l'apanage des négociants Gambaris ou nagots.<sup>1</sup>

That is, during the dry season, the roads were dominated not by the caravans of large Gambari (that is, Hausa and other northern) merchants, but by traders and cultivators from the region north of Djalloukou and south of Djougou who took their savings and a load of agricultural produce south to exchange for salt, which they then carried north. The commodities of a less prosaic and elementary nature remained in the hands of the Gambari and of certain Yoruba merchants.

Human porters, rather than donkeys, carried the salt and other goods along this route. Donkeys are scarcely mentioned in the records of this trade (except for the occasional driving of a lone animal to the south for sale), a pattern that reaffirms the contrast of transport on this route with that of the further interior. The porters carried heavy loads of up to 40 to 50 kilograms of salt, and moved their loads by carrying them a distance of some 800 to 1000 meters, after which they rested their burdens against the fork of a tree, assisted in this by a pole that they carried for that purpose. The size of the burdens is borne out by administrative statistics: the median burden, as measured both at Kambolé and Savalou, was 35 kilograms per person<sup>2</sup> (Table 3.1). The median figure is brought down because not all caravan members carried full burdens—some drove animals, and the children in the caravans carried smaller loads. An estimate of some 700 persons in caravans passing Abomey on their way from Savalou to Cotonou indicates that one-third of them were women and 5 percent were children, but it gives no indication as to the size of the burdens women carried (Table 3.4).

The standard day's journey was roughly 25 kilometers, perhaps slightly less for those carrying salt. The 400-kilometer journey from the coast to Djougou thus required some sixteen days plus rest stops. Assuming a layover of two weeks at the terminus, a full-time porter would make a one-way journey from Djougou to Grand Popo in a month and a round-trip journey in two months; such a porter would

Table 3.3 Persons Moving in Caravans through Kambolé, 1905-1907

| Month     | 1905      |           | 1906      |           | 1907      |           |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
|           | Northward | Southward | Northward | Southward | Northward | Southward |
| January   |           |           | 730       | 1172      | 1482      | 1155      |
| February  |           |           | 477       | 437       | 1199      | 1237      |
| March     | 338       | 280       | 348       | 511       | 1470      | 1274      |
| April     | 190       | 243       | 817       | 516       |           |           |
| May       | 473       | 245       | 524       | 493       |           |           |
| June      |           |           | 549       | 558       |           |           |
| July      | 567       | 593       | 470       | 467       |           |           |
| August    | 597       | 629       | 120       | 117       |           |           |
| September | 497       | 594       | 204       | 408       |           |           |
| October   | 682       | 494       | 830       | 937       |           |           |
| November  | 731       | 1547      | 739       | 602       |           |           |
| December  | 1283      | 1187      | 1054      | 925       |           |           |

SOURCE: ANB, 2-D-82, Savalou, March 1905-March 1907.

Table 3.4 Southward Commercial Movement at Abomey, 1910

| Month     | Men | Women | Children | Burdens | Cattle | Sheep and Goats |
|-----------|-----|-------|----------|---------|--------|-----------------|
| Jan.-Feb. | 117 | 45    | 17       |         | 236    | 120             |
| March     | 38  | 28    | 16       | 239     | 142    | 21              |
| April     | 141 | 52    | 4        | 133     | 89     | 145             |
| May       | 128 | 94    |          | 115     | 231    | 256             |

SOURCE: ANB, 2-D-2, Abomey, March-May 1910.

be able to make six trips in a year. If one thousand tons of goods moved north each year in burdens of 35 kilograms on the heads of porters who made six trips a year, it would take roughly 5000 full-time porters to carry the commerce along this route. In fact, since many of the porters were not full-time specialists, the total number of people involved in portage along this route was much larger than 5000 (Table 3.3). Further, since the total male and female adult population in the region through which this commerce passed was within the range of from 40,000 to 80,000, it may be seen that transport along the route was indeed a major activity for this region (Afrique Occidentale Française [AOF], 1911).

The southward-bound trade, dominated by commerce in the agricultural produce of the inland areas, further clarifies the character of this route as one carried by small-scale rather than large-scale commerce. The main product, both in volume and in value, was *makari*, a green paste made from the fruit of the *neté* or African locust bean tree. Shea butter was next in importance: It was used for cooking in

Table 3.5 Salt Moving Northward, Kambolé and Savalou, 1905-1914, in Kilograms

| Month     | 1905<br>(Kambolé) | 1906<br>(Kambolé) | 1912<br>(Savalou) | 1913<br>(Savalou) | 1914<br>(Savalou) |
|-----------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| January   |                   | 35,000            | 35,500            |                   | 48,000            |
| February  |                   | 12,000            |                   |                   |                   |
| March     | 11,000            |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| April     | 4,000             |                   | 53,470            |                   |                   |
| May       | 13,000            |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| June      |                   |                   |                   | 24,750            | 32,990            |
| July      | 19,000            |                   | 12,870            |                   |                   |
| August    | 20,000            |                   |                   |                   | 21,400            |
| September | 18,000            |                   |                   |                   | 10,775            |
| October   | 24,000            |                   |                   |                   | 36,675            |
| November  | 18,000            |                   | 53,235            |                   | 46,695            |
| December  | 44,000            |                   |                   |                   | 12,040            |

SOURCE: ANB, 2-D-82, Savalou, March 1905-February 1906; 2-D-83, Savalou, January 1912-December 1914.

areas north of the oil palm forest, and soap made from shea butter was also carried southward. Beans followed shea butter closely in volume and value. Small numbers of cattle, sheep, and horses were driven southward. Mats, calabashes, and pepper were other goods of northern provenance that flowed southward: These goods, rarely reported by European observers, seem sometimes to have dominated southward-bound caravans<sup>3</sup> (Table 3.2).

Certain of the southward-moving goods, however, were surely linked to the efforts of large-scale merchants whose geographical range and financial power exceeded those of the small-scale porters who were most numerous on this route. Kola, for instance, was diverted in small quantities from its primary destination of the Sokoto Caliphate, and flowed into the kingdom of Danhomè and neighboring areas. In addition natron, mined near Lake Chad, was exported in all directions, and some of it came south along this route (Table 3.2; Lovejoy, 1985).

An east-west portage route, linking such towns of the coastal plateau as Abeokuta, Abomey, and Atakpamé, intersected the Grand Popo-Djougou route at Tahoun in the middle Mono valley: This route focused on the exchange of local manufactures and foodstuffs but also carried goods from Europe and from the far interior. At the Dahomey-Nigeria border between Kétou and Meko, the main products moving west in 1912 were natron, originating in northern Nigeria, dyes, Yoruba textiles, jars, calabashes, gunpowder, and beads. Goods moving

eastward were dominated by guns, gunpowder, pepper, kola, textiles, and sheep.<sup>4</sup> Some of the livestock came from the region of Abomey. West of Abomey, as registered in December 1905, the westward trade included ceramic jars, cowries, oranges, natron, and calabashes, while the eastward trade was led by maize, but also included beans, indigo, and textiles. During that month, just after harvest, 4800 loads (some 120 tons) were carried eastward, and 2700 loads (65 tons) were carried westward.<sup>5</sup> This trade carried on, step by step, to Tahoun, Atakpamé, and other points west. By a calculation similar to that carried out above for the north-south route, one may estimate that this level of transport required, for the Abomey plateau, a full-time equivalent labor force of some 2000 porters, which may be set against an adult male population of roughly 30,000 for the region (AOF, 1911).

## THE WORK OF THE CANOEMEN

European writers on the Bight of Benin, while recognizing the great importance of canoe transport along the lagoons and rivers, rarely sought out details on the volume of commerce, on the organization of transportation, or on the financing of the water-borne commerce. Instead they contented themselves with capsule portraits of lagoon transport, of which the best was given by the agronomist Norbert Savariau (1906: 27):

Il existe dans tous les centres importants riverains des lagunes ou des cours d'eau de véritables corporations de piroguiers ayant chacune un chef auquel les intéressés s'adressent pour se procurer les pirogues dont ils ont besoin. Les prix de transport sont toujours établis à forfait, c'est-à-dire à l'avantage du plus rusé des deux traitants. On peut les évaluer en moyenne à 0 fr. 02 par tonne kilométrique. Nous deduisons ce chiffre des tarifs usités entre Porto-Novo et Cotonou.

Two-person canoes, usually of four to five meters in length and fifty to sixty centimeters in breadth, carried a sizable amount of such short-distance commerce as could be accommodated to the trade of fish. Among the Tofin of Lake Nokoué the women's trade canoes, known as "mosquito canoes," were often somewhat smaller than the men's fishing canoes. Larger dugout canoes, up to some 12 meters in length and 140 centimeters in width, could transport twenty to thirty persons or a cargo of two to three tons; these traveled longer distances and

carried a wider range of goods. Crews of four to six men propelled such canoes by poles or paddles; they also employed a mast and sail that could be hoisted in a favorable wind. The largest lagoon boats were flat-bottomed, up to twenty meters in length and four or five meters in width. Crews of four to six "taximen" transported cargoes of five tons or up to seventy persons between main towns and ports, also relying on paddles, poles, or sail (Bourgoignie, 1972: 194-196; Gruvel, 1913: 83; Foà, 1895: 142). The ethnic specialization of canoemen reflected this technical and occupational differentiation: Fishing specialists of the coast, including the Tofin of Lake Nokoué and the Hueda of Lake Ahémé, relied primarily on small canoes; the specialized canoemen who hired themselves out came dominantly from the Gen of the Togo lagoons, the Hula of Grand Popo and Kéténou, the Tori of the Porto-Novo lagoon, and such riverain Yoruba peoples as the Ijebu.

A break in the coastal lagoon system—necessitating a portage between two parallel lagoons at some point between Ouidah and Godomey—divided the canoe transport system in two. To the east, large canoes linked Godomey and Abomey-Calavi with Porto-Novo, Badagri and Lagos; in addition, canoes went up the Ouémé River as far as Sagon, and in the 1880s they began to go in growing numbers to the port of Cotonou. In the west, large canoes went along the lagoon from Avrékété and Ouidah to Grand Popo, Agoué, and on to Keta; canoes went up the Mono to Tokpli and, in smaller numbers, up the Couffo to Long Agomey. Several observers attested to the importance of the nineteenth-century water-borne trade in foodstuffs—for example, from the hinterland of Agoué, a rich agricultural area with a major regional market, to Ouidah with its concentration of population (Lambinet, 1893: 15, 22; d'Albéca, 1889: 61; Fonssagrives, 1900: 382; Bouche, 1885: 305). Lagos, as it grew, exerted a similar attraction on the areas west and north of it.

The 30-kilometer journey from Porto-Novo to Cotonou took six hours by canoe, and the 35 kilometers between Ouidah and Grand Popo took six to eight hours, the latter journey requiring that the canoemen negotiate their way through numerous barrages maintained by fishermen. Officials at strategically placed toll gates collected fees on passengers and merchandise. At the mouth of the Aro, the effluent of Lake Ahémé, which formed the south-western frontier of Danhomè, the fee for passing Europeans in the 1880s was one head of cowries plus a bottle of tafia (rum); local merchants paid as much

as one-tenth of their cargo plus some tafia (d'Albéca, 1895: 152). The trade canoes moved at a speed of some five kilometers per hour, roughly twice the speed of porters. Freight rates of 0.2 francs per ton-kilometer were about one-fifth the rate for head portage. At the same time, this work appears to have provided revenues that reached three francs per day per worker, and that therefore permitted both a profit for the canoe owner and a canoeman's wage, which exceeded the porter's daily wage of roughly one franc (Savariau, 1906: 27; d'Albéca, 1889: 57; 1895: 151; Bouche, 1885: 300).

Another group of boatmen transported goods across the hazardous surf to and from European ships that anchored from one to three kilometers offshore. The work of the surf boatmen was, if anything, more strenuous and certainly more dangerous than that of the lagoon canoemen. Along the coast of Togo and at Grand Popo this work was done by Gen and Hula boatmen, while at Ouidah and Godomey beach the boatmen were Ga from Accra; east of Cotonou, most goods crossed the surf via Lagos harbor, with incoming and outgoing goods moving between Lagos and other points through the lagoon network. Many of the surf boats were owned by European merchant firms. At Cotonou—before construction of the pier in 1893, after which lighters no longer had to pass through the surf—these firms hired boatmen at a salary of thirty francs per month plus a ration of rice, as well as a bottle of tafia each day, and a bottle of tafia to be divided among the crew with each trip; the boats made a maximum of sixteen trips each day (d'Albéca, 1895: 10).

Boatmen working both in the surf and in the lagoons were widely reputed to have added to their wages by stealing from the cargoes they were handling. At times, as we will see below, such theft took on the character of group rather than individual activity.

Boats were hired, as Savariau (1906: 27) implied, individually or in groups; fees went, therefore, to individual boat owners, or to owners of fleets of boats, or to corporations of boat owners. The evidence thus makes it appear that the roles of merchant and transporter were distinct, though it remains possible that large merchants may have owned fleets of canoes. The chief of the town of Sagon, situated at a strategic head of navigation on the Ouémé River, had control over a fleet of canoes and large numbers of porters.<sup>6</sup> This may, however, have simply been political control rather than actual ownership or employment of the canoes, porters, and boatmen. Thus, while it is

clear that the large canoes were owned by firms, the internal organization of the firms remains hazy. Many canoemen, however, were clearly wage workers, employed by canoe owners (Fonssagrives, 1900: 384-386; Couchard, 1911: 56).<sup>7</sup> Lineages and slavery, on the other hand, provided alternative forms for labor organization. Many slaves passed through the hands of boat owners, making it likely that many canoemen were recruited via enslavement. Further, the corporate lineage structure among the Gen, Hula, and other lagoon peoples was such that young men were not simply free agents to be employed at the going rate, but men who could be pressed into work through the manipulation of family ties, and who could also be given the hope of rising to a position of influence in the family and in the canoe corporation.

If the precise organization of the canoe work force remains speculative, its numbers may be surmised through estimates of the volume of merchandise transported. For the transport of goods across the surf, some 40,000 tons of goods were carried each way annually in colonial Dahomey at the end of the nineteenth century; slightly smaller amounts were moved in Togo, and larger quantities were moved in Lagos. These estimates are consistent with a full-time equivalent work force of perhaps 400 boatmen with some seventy boats for the coast of colonial Dahomey, or 1000 canoemen for the entire Bight of Benin, based on assumptions of six men per crew, ten trips per day, 150 days per year, with cargoes of one ton each. A much larger work force was required for lagoon transport because of the longer distances involved: assuming a minimal volume of 40,000 tons carried each way annually, one may guess that some 1000 full-time equivalent canoemen, with 180 boats, were required for each thirty-kilometer segment of the coast, which corresponds to 5000 for the area of colonial Dahomey and perhaps 10,000 for the entire Bight of Benin. This estimate is based on assumptions of a two-ton cargo being moved thirty kilometers per day by a crew of six working 200 days per year. Some confirmation of these estimates is provided by the fact that the French Army, in its invasion of Danhomè in 1892, requisitioned a reported twenty of the flat-bottomed, twenty-meter boats and 100 of the twelve-meter boats: This imposition required crews totaling some seven hundred men, probably a majority of those available in the region (d'Albéca, 1895: 70; Ross, 1971: 144-169). Additional confirmation comes from the volume of palm products moved each year via lagoon from Porto-Novo to Lagos (Manning, 1982: 347, 352-354).

Something of the outlook of the canoemen, and of their ability to defend their interests through group action, may be gleaned from the conflicts surrounding the construction of a road inland from Grand Popo in 1910 and 1911. The conflicts centered about the region's commandant de cercle, Antoine Rouhaud, who became widely known as "l'homme de la route de Grand Popo à Lokossa." The idea of a road crossing the marshes that surrounded the lower Mono was a threat to the livelihood of canoemen in any case: It would divert the southernmost leg of the Grand Popo-Djougou route from the river to land. Rouhaud, however, compounded the conflict by diverting funds that should have gone to canoe transport, cutting boatmen's wages in half, and by relying heavily on forced labor.

Construction began in May 1910, and immediately various groups of boatmen began selective slowdowns of transport. Canoemen in Athiémé, near the head of navigation on the Mono, opposed construction of the road, and European merchants there reported numerous thefts. The merchants had to call on canoes from Grand Popo to get goods moved down the river. The German merchants in Grand Popo were able to find boatmen, but the French had to come to the administration for help. Canoe transportation of goods from Grand Popo to Ouidah, which normally took six or seven hours, was taking up to six days for French houses (Manning, 1982: 207-209).

After the suspension of road construction and the transfer of Rouhaud, the conflict continued, though in a different vein. The focus of the slowdown now shifted to the surf boats and to the German houses. When the firm of Althof reported a theft of goods, the administration found some of the goods among some boatmen, and sentenced fifty of them to penalties of up to two years in prison. The other boatmen refused to land goods for Althof at any price for several months, and some ships were forced to leave port without loading or unloading their cargoes. The administrator attempted to mediate between the boatmen and the commercial houses but had to be satisfied with handing an ultimatum to the canoe chiefs that they would have to end their boycott or they would be arrested and forced to work on the roads, from which they had previously been exempt. To punctuate his threat, he arrested ten boatmen. A subsequent dispute flared up in December 1911, as canoemen refused to take loads to Ouidah for the firm of Cyprien Fabre because it was too late in the day. The administrator rejected Fabre's complaint, but warned the boatmen that they should obey their chiefs and employers.<sup>8</sup> Both the unity and the



divisions among canoemen are revealed in their conflicts with employers and government.

### CHANGING PATTERNS OF COMMERCE AND TRANSPORT WORK

From the eighteenth century into the twentieth century, the needs in the Bight of Benin for foodstuffs, salt, and local manufactures provided stability in the commerce along the main routes of the region. In contrast, the old trade in slaves and the new trade in palm products overlaid the underlying stability of this commerce with disturbances and successive transformations. Before 1770 the slave trade of the Bight of Benin, the most active of any African region but Angola, had drawn overwhelmingly on captives from the Aja peoples of the coastal band—that is, from Danhomè and the areas immediately surrounding that kingdom. The slaves from the interior of the Bight of Benin were taken among the Bariba and the peoples of the Atakora mountains, and they were evacuated along the western route, through Grand Popo, to avoid the high duties of Danhomè and its port of Ouidah (Manning, 1982: 35-36). Then the Oyo empire deepened its involvement in slave exports, particularly in the reign of the *alafin* Abiodun (1774-1789), and promoted the route from Oyo south and west to Porto-Novo, along which many Yoruba slaves were sold; the Shabe kingdom was allied to Oyo and the town of Savè was thus linked to this commerce. Further north, the wars of the Sokoto Caliphate resulted in the capture and export of many slaves after 1804; Hausa and Nupe slaves were, for a brief time, exported in large numbers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (Law, 1977: 176-180; Marty, 1926: 142-144; Manning, 1982: 335).

The breakup of the Oyo empire during the 1820s led to the export of a much larger number of Yoruba slaves and to an eastward deflection of their routes of evacuation: In a major political realignment, Danhomè, now freed from a century of subservience to Oyo, expanded its influence eastward, while Ibadan and Abeokuta rose as new centers of Yoruba political influence. Danhomè greatly weakened the Shabe and Ketu kingdoms and entered into a half-century of confrontation with Abeokuta. Porto-Novo, now brought under the influence of Danhomè rather than Oyo, lost its position as terminus of the main eastern route first to Badagri and then to Lagos, although Porto-Novo remained the staging point for the route running up the Ouémé River and to Parakou (Law, 1977: 278-302; Biobaku, 1957).

In the second half of the nineteenth century the export of slaves declined to a virtual halt. Lagos had become, during the 1840s, the regional slave exporting center, but the British occupation in 1851 ended that. Slave exporting had become a clandestine business: In hurried transactions, slaves came to be traded against silver coin—Maria Theresa dollars—rather than against bulky goods and cowries. In Danhomè all available surf boats, including those of European palm oil merchants, were occasionally requisitioned to load slaves who had been force-marched to a point of embarkation (Laffitte, 1873: 124-125). The domestic trade in slaves continued, however, now oriented around the needs of palm oil producers.

Palm oil, for which serious exports from Ouidah began in the 1830s, had by the 1850s become the main export from the Bight of Benin, and palm kernels provided a significant addition to export revenue beginning in the 1860s. The Atlantic commerce of the region became, more than ever before, focused on its coastal fringe. This new commerce relied heavily on water transport, but it also required the development of paths on which to roll 300-gallon puncheons and a new work force of puncheon-rollers, as well as a network for bulking oil and kernels.

This rising coastal commerce in palm products reinforced certain aspects of commerce with the interior. The Brazilian repatriates who settled in Agoué and other points between Keta and Lagos, particularly from the 1840s to the 1860s, illustrate the links of coastal and interior trade. The d'Almeida family, for instance, claimed origins among the Mahi of Savalou and the Yoruba north of Savalou. While the d'Almeidas were active in commerce all along the coast, they were also well placed to participate in ventures along the route to Djougou (Turner, 1975: 102-114). Salt, cowries, foodstuffs, and slaves provided the links between the rising palm oil trade and the interior commerce.

Palm oil exports generated continuing demand for slaves, as labor was required for palm oil production, portage, and canoeing. The royal and private oil palm plantations of Danhomè depended upon this slave labor. Outside that kingdom the major slave markets at Tahoun on the western route and at Okeodan to the east supplied planters in those areas (Newbury, 1961: 36; d'Albéca, 1895: 168; Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1972: 107-123; Manning, 1982: 50-56). These markets thrived almost until the end of the century. Most of the slaves sold there came from the Yoruba and Aja peoples within the Bight of Benin, but Gambari merchants brought in some slaves from more northerly regions.

Demand for palm oil caused European merchants to resume delivery of Indian Ocean cowrie shells to the Bight of Benin, now to be exchanged for palm oil. The supply of cowries—the money of the Bight of Benin for the previous two centuries at least, imported in exchange for slaves—may have been cut back sharply in the early nineteenth century, limiting money supplies for both coast and interior. The resumption of cowrie imports with the rise of palm oil trade meant that sacks of calciferous currency flowed not only into the hands of coastal planters, but also moved into the interior in exchange for slaves, agricultural commodities, and manufactures. But as German merchants in the 1850s and 1860s introduced East African cowries, the volume of cowrie imports grew to the point where prices inflated rapidly, and transport of burdens of inflated currency ultimately became impractical (Hogendorn and Johnson, in press).

In addition to cowries, merchants began importing European salt to exchange for palm oil and kernels; this salt competed with the domestic salt-purifying industry centered in the lagoons adjoining Grand Popo and Kéténou. The lagoon industry had supplied consumers both on the coast and, via the Grand Popo-Djougou route, in the interior, and it survived, despite foreign competition, well into the twentieth century. Hula and Hueda villagers in the vicinity of Grand Popo still produced an estimated one hundred tons of salt in 1940 (Grivot, 1944: 23-24; Officiers, 1895: 54; Foà, 1895: 134; d'Albéca, 1895: 57). To the east, the Hula of Kéténou also purified salt and in the nineteenth century sent salt northward via Porto-Novo, Savè, and Shaki. One may speculate that, with the rise of salt imports, the people of the areas of Grand Popo and Kéténou cut back their activities as saltmakers and diverted their energies to expanded involvement in production and transport of palm products. Salt dominated merchandise moving inland, with imported salt progressively displacing domestic salt. Cowries and slaves declined in importance on the Grand Popo-Djougou route after the mid-nineteenth century; after that, neither of these commodities ever threatened the position of salt.

The merchant population and its activities changed along with the trade. Slave merchants redirected their efforts toward the provision of a work force for oil palm plantations; merchants on the Atlantic littoral began exporting palm oil as well as slaves. During this mid-century transition two Brazilian merchants—Francisco Felix de Souza and Domingo Martins—dominated the export trade of Danhomè in slaves and palm oil; their commercial leadership serves also to emphasize that, at this time, the Atlantic import and export trades of

the Bight of Benin remained oriented toward Brazil and the Caribbean (Turner, 1975: 88-102; Ross, 1965: 79-90; Manning, 1982: 46-56). European merchants settled on the coast beginning in 1841, after an absence of several decades, but not until the end of the century had the Europeans, exporting palm products and importing cowries, textiles, alcoholic beverages, and salt, fully displaced the Brazilians and reoriented Bight of Benin commerce toward Europe.

Much of the east-west commerce along the coastal route in the late nineteenth century was handled by immigrant groups, particularly Brazilians and Saros (Sierra Leonians). Brazilian families, dominant in the trade of Anecho and Agoué, were also significant in the trade of Grand Popo, Ouidah, Porto-Novo and Lagos (Kopytoff, 1965; Turner, 1975). The Saros, though less numerous than the Brazilians, came to dominate the trade of Lagos. These networks stretched into the interior, as with the Saro connection to Abeokuta and the Brazilian ties to the interior from Porto-Novo and Agoué. Merchants based in coastal and interior towns were also significant: Leading Ijebu and Abeokuta merchants may be noted (Biobaku, 1957). In Danhomè the equivalent merchants, known as *ahisinon*, were chartered by the monarchy and were led by such Ouidah families as Adjovi, Houenou (Quénou), and Dagba (Quénou, 1938: 134-135; Forbes, 1851: II, 112-113; Marty, 1926: 105-107). Further west, Gen merchant families, bearing such names as Lawson and Johnson, competed with the Brazilian merchants (Newbury, 1961: 38, 113; Manning, 1982: 263). Gambari merchants established *zongos* (caravansarai) in each of the main towns of the Bight of Benin. Paul Marty toured these zongos in colonial Dahomey early in the twentieth century, and reported groups of 1000 Gambari in Ouidah, several hundred in Porto-Novo and in Grand Popo, and smaller numbers in other centers (Marty, 1926: 94-95, 112-113, 116-117, 122, 131, 135). Further inland, beyond the oil palm belt, the roles of merchant and king seem to have overlapped more thoroughly. Kpohizon, who was king of Tado, the ancestral center of Aja-Ewe kingship, acted as a merchant as well as a king: In fact a commercial dispute with Gbaguidi, king of Savalou, ultimately led Kpohizon into conflict with the French and to his deposition and exile in 1900.<sup>9</sup> The king of Danhomè also participated in commerce, though indirectly through agents (Bay, 1979: 1-15).

The merchants recruited transport labor by relying on their wealth in association with a variety of mechanisms. The *ahisinon* of Danhomè and the great merchants of Ijebu were heads of large lineages and sus-

tained large followings by maintaining their family structures. The Brazilian families grew in size because of the accretion of relatives through marriage, the attraction of clients and the incorporation of slaves. Gambari merchants, in order to build retinues, drew on family structures and on the need of young men to gain commercial experience. In addition to utilizing these institutions, merchants could recruit labor through wage employment and by appealing to states for support in recruitment. The majority of transport workers were apparently of free rather than slave status, although little information on the relative number of each is yet available (Oroge, 1971: 146-211).

Porters and canoemen worked in the manners described above well into the twentieth century. But the scope of their activity underwent progressive restriction and its nature was ultimately transformed by economic and political constraints. In the end, the most powerful forces of restriction and transformation were those of technological innovation and capitalist investment. But just as precolonial border changes had displaced trade routes, so too did the drawing and redrawing of colonial frontiers bring new limits to commerce.

With the mid-nineteenth-century expansion of the influence of Danhomè, regional trade routes became increasingly oriented toward Abomey. At the same time, Porto-Novo provided a second focus of trade because of its alliance with France (tentatively in the 1860s and then decisively in 1882). The drawing of colonial frontiers, in turn, led to more dramatic changes in routes. The French, with a foothold in Porto-Novo, sought to end the commercial dependence of that town on Lagos and worked energetically to build up the new port of Cotonou. This policy, in turn, led to confrontation with Danhomè and to the eventual French conquest; France also succeeded, after 1895, in reducing Porto-Novo's ties to Lagos. Virtually all of Porto-Novo's Atlantic trade prior to 1895 was transshipped at Lagos: some 20 percent of both imports and exports recorded at Lagos was in fact transit trade to Porto-Novo (Manning, 1982: 344). Nonetheless, the importance of Lagos as a regional metropolis was now such that the ties could not be wholly interrupted. Even before the twentieth century, a substantial smuggling industry grew up along the lagoon linking Porto-Novo and Lagos, which spread to the adjoining land routes, and which grew in importance with the passage of the colonial era (Mondjannagni, 1963: 17-57).

Political changes along the western frontier of colonial Dahomey, however, had a more severe effect on trade. Anecho in German Togo

was cut off from Agoué in 1887, and in 1897 the French ceded to Togo the entire right bank of the Mono River, with the result that Agoué was severed from its hinterland: Across the lagoon lay the village of Agouégan (site of a major regional market for provisions), the fields of the farmers of Agoué, and the trade route to the north. German taxes and customs regulations cut off most contact across the lagoon, and within months Agoué declined from a flourishing port to a village dominated by old people. In 1914 the French ceded to Togo the canton of Tado, in the lower Mono valley, and the canton of Kambolé, two hundred kilometers inland: The towns promptly declined, and the western trade route underwent another contraction (Garcia, 1969: 36-44).<sup>10</sup>

More important in redirecting trade were the railroads. As the railroads in Dahomey, Lagos Colony, and Togo reached inland to the coastal plateaus, they almost immediately captured the carrying trade in salt. The old routes from Grand Popo, Porto-Novo, and Badagri were truncated, and certain rail stations replaced them as the key points in transshipping salt "to the caravans" (Officers, 1894: 42). While the northern portion of the salt trade continued much as before, the old coastal segments of that trade died out at the turn of the twentieth century, and those who lived by that commerce were powerless to prevent its diversion. This collapse brought unmistakable reverberations along the southern segment of the western route. Chiefs in dry areas along the route—in Aplahoué, Adjaha, and Agouna, for instance—applied to the French administration to dig wells to give the caravans easier access to water, and a flurry of well-digging ensued, but to no avail. Disputes among merchants and canoemen broke out on the southern, water-borne portion of the route as business contracted. The efforts of Antoine Rouhaud, the overachieving administrator, to build a great road from Grand Popo to Lokossa may be seen as an attempt to regain the region's lost commerce, but Rouhaud succeeded only in bringing the area to the verge of rebellion (Manning, 1982: 181).

The more easterly route, running north from Porto-Novo, had already been a casualty of the fall of Oyo in the early nineteenth century, and the railroad reduced its importance even further. A long-distance trade in salt, textiles, staple foods, and local manufactures continued to be based in Porto-Novo, but it was much diminished by the decline of the towns of Kétou, Savè, Shaki, and Old Oyo. The Ouémé River, long a part of this route to the interior, was later reduced

to the status of a local artery as rail lines were built on either side of it. Indeed, the story of Aholoupé, confirmed by the French as chief of the canton centered on Sagon, at the head of navigation on the Ouémé, reveals something of the organization of this trade route, even though the story depicts its disassemblage:

Autrefois le Chef du canton de Sagon était le plus riche de tous. Tout le mouvement de voyageurs et de marchandises du Sud au Nord et vice-versé, se faisait par l'Ouémé jusqu'à Sagon ; le chef fournissait journellement des piroguiers, des porteurs et des hamacaires en grand nombre. Il touchait des primes importantes. Cette source de bénéfices est presque complètement tarie, depuis la création du chemin de fer et le Chef de Sagon n'avait pas la chance de trouver une compensation dans les remises provenant des travaux de la voie ferrée, parce que ses administrés, mal conseillés par les féticheurs, refusaient de se rendre sur les chantiers. Aholoupé et son sous-chef Ahijadé étaient donc devenus pauvres. Ils s'étaient laissés aller, pour se procurer des ressources, à des exactions qui ont soulevé contre eux non seulement les chefs de village, mais aussi la population toute entière du canton. Ce mouvement populaire a abouti à des plaintes portées devant moi, au remplacement des deux chefs et à leur comparution au justice.

J'espère que cette petite révolution aura de salutaires effets.<sup>12</sup>

The laborers could respond to the loss of their livelihood only by disappearing, and the big men could respond only by pressing additional exactions on their laborers: It was left to the colonial administration to organize the "revolution" and to reestablish peace and quiet.

As the colonial era proceeded, railroads and particularly trucks replaced portage. The canoe transport system, however, remained remarkably resilient in the face of the threats of rail and motor transport. The lagoon route was affected by modern technology over one short stretch, where the railroad from Cotonou to Ouidah and Segbohoulé (completed in 1906) could compete effectively because of the need for a portage in the lagoon route between Godomey and Grand Popo. It took the colonial government until 1930 to link the towns of Cotonou and Porto-Novo—thirty kilometers apart—by road and rail; in the interim, the fleet of lagoon canoes maintained contact between the port and the capital. Surf boats, too, survived into the 1930s, as some small freighters still called at Grand Popo (Desanti, 1945: 209; Manning, 1982: 147).

## THE SOCIAL RELATIONS OF TRANSPORTATION

Transportation in the Bight of Benin was more than just a technical function that needed to be performed; it was a major economic activity that both reflected and influenced the overall social order. The work of transportation, both for local and long-distance commerce, required a level of labor input that may be estimated at from 5 percent to 15 percent of the total labor output of the region (Manning, 1982: 82-84). The large role of transportation in the total regional output of labor was required for two reasons: the devotion of the region's people to commerce, both local and long-distance, and the relative inefficiency of the transport system, especially that of head portage. In the twentieth century, rail and motor transport would enable the region to rely even more heavily on commerce but with a much smaller labor input.

The transportation system was linked to other elements of the economy not only because of the commodities that were passed among merchants and from producer to consumer, but because the labor force also did work in other and competing areas. In good agricultural years, more labor was required to tend and harvest the bumper crops; yet more labor was also required to carry the produce to market. Such strains of competitive labor demand were less serious in canoe transport, where laborers were specialized to that task, than in portage. In poor years, labor released from the fields tended to seek out portage work. Salt production, of course, did not depend on the level of local agricultural output, but demand for imported salt did. Thus the demand for labor in transportation was regulated, in the short run, by the annual agricultural cycle and the vagaries of the harvest; in the long run, demand for labor was regulated by the level of commercial activity and the backward technology of portage (Manning, 1982: 83-84, 112-113).

As noted above, the internal organization of this work force is more difficult to analyze than are its activities and even its size. The social order of nineteenth-century Bight of Benin, as it underwent repeated transformations, appears in one sense to have been fluid and in another sense to have been complex and contradictory. Competing organizational systems for labor coexisted, and individuals moved back and forth among them.

Among the boatmen, three labor systems coexisted. In the lineage system, boats owned by a family were manned by lineage members

who received remuneration from the boat chief or family chief, and who remained members of the family firm with opportunity for rising within it. In the slave system, boatmen were the property of the boat chief or boat owner: They received subsistence for their work, but otherwise had little right to participate in the affairs of the firm. In the wage system, boatmen received daily or monthly wages, and their connections with the boat owner or firm owner did not extend beyond that wage contract.

While elements of each of these labor systems are clearly visible in the documents on Bight of Benin canoe transport, the boundaries between the systems remained hazy. Certainly it was possible to pay a wage to a lineage member, or to allow a slave to rise in the firm, or to link a wage earner to the family. Even the limits of the firm are hard to define—the firm might have been as small as the operation of an individual boat, or as large as a great agricultural and commercial complex which owned a fleet.

For the porters, the activity of individual porters working on their own account can be treated as a commodity exchange (or simple commodity production) system (Manning, 1982: 7). Viewed in this way, the porters acted as atomistic participants in the transportation system. With a slightly different emphasis, however, these same porters could be seen as having participated in a tributary system. That is, while they did not generally pay direct tribute to rulers in the regions through which they carried goods, aside from tolls at gates and markets, they can be seen as having subsidized rulers and monarchical trading operations indirectly by doing work to maintain roads and by accepting prices for their goods that were lower than those received by the kings. The kings, in turn, provided protection for the commerce which the porters carried. In addition to these structures, portage included the familiar institutions of landlord and broker (Meillassoux, 1971), and porters included lineage members and slaves of caravan leaders.

The social relations of transportation in the Bight of Benin were based on a clear and basic distinction between portage work and boatmen's work. On the one hand, boatmen worked collectively in crews and they were specialized laborers: They developed an artisanal mentality. They supported each other when facing accusations of theft, and they acted collectively in responding to threats to their wage levels or to the volume of their cargoes. Porters, on the other hand, worked as individuals or in ad hoc groups on a given trip. They were part-

time workers and usually agriculturists too, who developed the mentality of a casual labor force. When conditions of work were unsatisfactory, they simply escaped back to their peasant existence.

## NOTES

1. Archives Nationales du Bénin (ANB), Porto-Novo, 2-D-82, Savalou, February 1907.
2. ANB, 2-D-82, Savalou, January 1907.
3. ANB, 2-D-1, Abomey, December 1905.
4. ANB, 2-D-94, Zagnando, January-July 1912.
5. ANB, 2-D-94, Zagnando, January-July 1912.
6. ANB, 2-D-92, Zagnando, Rapport annuel, 1905.
7. ANB, 2-D-11, Grand Popo, July 1910.
8. ANB, 2-D-41, Grand Popo, May 1910-December 1911.
9. ANB, 1-E-42, Dossier Pohizoun, 1912.
10. ANB, 5-E, Mono (frontières), 1885-1907; ANB, 2-D-83, Savalou, February 1913.
11. ANB, 1-Q, Mouvement caravanier, 1909; 1-E-42, Dossier Pohizoun, 1912.
12. ANB, 2-D-92, Zagnando, Rapport annuel, 1905.

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