The collision between a Europe that was increasingly, if sometimes reluctantly, committed to the end of slavery and an African political economy rooted in slavery was most pronounced along the coast of West Africa in the nineteenth century. Here slavery had been transformed into an institution affecting the very structure of society, at least in Sierra Leone, along the Gold Coast, and in the Bights of Benin and Biafra. There continued to be areas in Liberia and western Ivory Coast where slavery was relatively marginal, but for the most part the social formation included a mode of production based on slavery, despite great variations between particular slave systems. Occasionally, slave regimes modified specific practices to assuage the principles of missionaries and European diplomats, but more often the antislavery forces themselves compromised. Europeans had to tolerate and sometimes openly support slavery to achieve aims other than the abolition of slavery and the slave trade, unless European public opinion was a factor.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the export trade in slaves from West Africa continued well into the nineteenth century, with the volume being particularly high until the 1840s. By 1866, 1,350,000 people had embarked on slave ships in the Bights of Benin and Biafra and the long stretch of coast from the mouth of the Volta River to the Senegambia. The Bights alone accounted for 940,000 slaves, or 70 percent of the total. This trade indicates one feature of slavery in coastal West Africa during the nineteenth century: Departures of slaves continued to have an important influence on the region, so that domestic slavery was still under the umbrella of external demand. This meant that institutions of enslavement and slave trading continued to function, despite British efforts to interfere in ocean shipping.
Slavery and “Legitimate Trade”

Nonetheless, there were changes in the export trade that reflected a fundamental reorientation in the economy of the West African coast, for here the shift to agricultural exports, particularly palm oil and palm kernels, but also gum Arabic and other goods—products of “legitimate trade”—resulted in the use of many slaves in local economies.1 Slaves became the largest component in the agricultural labor force, and they served as porters and canoe men to transport “legitimate” goods to market. This more intensive use of slaves in trade and production occurred despite the location of the British navy off the coast. Established patterns of slave trading had to be altered, but the proximity of the area to Europe also meant that areas close to the coast could benefit from the demand for agricultural goods. The fight against the slave trade, the shift to “legitimate” commodities, and the consolidation of European outposts in Sierra Leone, on the Gold Coast, at Lagos, in the Niger delta, and at Fernando Po were elements of the shift from slaves as an export to exporting “legitimate” commodities, but the transition from slaves to commodities did not result in the decline of slave trading and slavery within the coastal zone.

The export trade in “legitimate” commodities accounts for many of the slaves used in production and commerce in the West African coastal region in the nineteenth century, but not all of them. Internal commercial patterns included the export of kola nuts to the savanna, the production of foodstuffs for local consumption and regional distribution, and the mining of gold. Slaves were sometimes used in these activities. Slaves were also needed as porters in caravans and to man the crews on riverboats in these sectors, because transportation was so labor intensive.

Slaves became increasingly important in production, sometimes in large concentrations and other times in small holdings. Slaves lived in their own villages and on plantations to produce agricultural goods, including palm oil and kernels, rice, yams, and other crops. These plantations were found near the coast and along the rivers of Sierra Leone, in Asante, Dahomey, and the Yoruba states, and at scattered locations in the Biafra interior. Small holdings were found almost everywhere. Sometimes slaves were owned jointly by lineages as a result of inheritance or cooperative purchase, and other times individuals bought one or two slaves to assist on their farms. This pattern had existed previously, only now, more than ever before, slave-produced commodities were sold on the market. The greater commercialization associated with “legitimate” trade and with the growth of the domestic economy more generally was part of the final stage in the consolidation of a slave mode of production. Ironically, this transformation occurred at a time when the agents of abolition hovered on the edges of the political economy. The system of slavery would be dismantled, but the characteristic feature of the nineteenth century was the full development of slavery as a productive and social institution.
The use of slaves in nonproductive capacities (military, government, marriage) continued unabated, even as productive employment increased in scale. Slaves were still used as soldiers throughout this region, so that slave recruits were crucial in the control of the plantation sector and the peasantry at large, as well as in the enslavement of foreign enemies. Deliberately or not, the employment of slaves in the army prevented the consolidation of slave consciousness, while continued military action made flight more difficult by reducing the areas where it was safe to be. The assimilation of female slaves and children also did not change significantly. Women swelled the households of the wealthy for the same reasons as before. Without the safeguards of kinship, they were more dependent than free wives. As before, the status of slave wives and their children was allowed to improve, despite occasional limitations on access to land, credit, and other rights derived from lineage membership.

The myth for all slaves, whether they were actually incorporated into households or confined to plantations, was that individuals were to be assimilated. Culturally, they had to adopt the master’s language and respect his mores. Failure to adapt could result in punishment, sale, even death at a funeral of a wealthy man looking for victims to accompany him into the next world. Nonetheless, the scale of slavery in most areas was so great that real assimilation was impossible for many people. In parts of Asante, Dahomey, the Yoruba states, and the Biafra interior, slaves formed a majority of the population and were classified as separate from free society. Kinship terms could be used to govern slave-master relations, but slaves were not kin. Kinship operated to protect the free and to regulate the status of slaves and pawns. It provided access to land, labor, and religious shrines and ceremonies, and hence governed virtually every aspect of society. Those who traced their descent through a free father in patrilineal societies or through a free mother in matrilineal ones belonged to the class of free men and women. This class was subdivided into the wealthy and politically powerful men (and a few women) on the one hand, and the majority of free commoners on the other.

Some slaves who attained military and government positions accumulated slaves of their own, but they acquired these slaves as dependents themselves. These elevated slaves almost formed a caste of high-ranking slave officials in some places. This exception to the general subordination of slaves to the free population indicates that in unstable political conditions and periods of economic transition, enterprising individuals who were protected by the wealthiest and strongest political leaders could take advantage of personal opportunities to change their status. In no way did the existence of large slave owners among people of slave origin endanger the operation of these societies. In some situations, kinship rules were adjusted to incorporate a particular person, and his descendants joined the ranks of the master class. Nonetheless, there were two clearly defined classes, slave and free, with the free subdivided into a commercial-political elite and commoners.
The Western Coast and Asante

The sharp drop in slave departures from the stretch of coast westward of the Volta River to Sierra Leone meant that many slaves who otherwise would have been sent to the Americas were added to the local population. This demographic shift required a serious adjustment in the coastal economy, as the rapid increase in the servile population, particularly along the Sierra Leone coast and the Gold Coast, encouraged the expansion of productive activities. This economic adjustment enabled investment in production. The availability of slave labor enabled merchants and political leaders to find employment for new slaves; their success largely accounts for the continued prosperity along the Upper Guinea coast and in Asante.

The Sierra Leone region offered no coordinated response to European pressure against the slave trade. The only major state in the area was Futa Jallon, centered in the highlands in the interior, and despite slave revolts in the late eighteenth century there, the Futa Jallon economy continued to be based on slavery. On the coast itself, the decentralized political structure was one reason that the British and the Americans could found colonies for freed slaves at Freetown and Monrovia. The location of these settlements and the use of Freetown by the British antislave-trade squadron transformed this stretch of coast into a potential bridgehead in the struggle against slavery. The slaves seized on the high seas were liberated at Freetown, and many converted to Christianity and eventually returned to their homelands to assume an active role in local changes that helped undermine slavery. Similarly, the ex-slaves who came to Liberia from the United States were Christians with a commitment to freedom, even if they proceeded to establish a political order that discriminated against local people.²

Therefore, along this stretch of coast, which had once accounted for the export of many thousands of slaves per year, one might have expected to find that slavery was a marginal institution. In fact, the opposite was true. Instead, local conditions that included the extensive use of slaves in trade and production prevented the spread of antislavery sentiments until late in the century. Rather than press the issue of abolition, the British and the freed slaves accommodated themselves to the slave societies of the coast. Freetown, as its name suggests, was a bridgehead against slavery, but there was no victory there. Indeed, it was not until 1928 that slaves were freed in the Protectorate of Sierra Leone, despite the presence of the British in Freetown for 130 years.³ Nor did Liberia, despite its name, stand for the liberty of slaves, other than those from the United States. There were fewer slaves in Liberia than elsewhere along the coast, but this lower proportion had little, if anything, to do with the presence of freed slaves from the United States.

Among the Sherbro, slaves were employed on plantations to grow foodstuffs and to produce palm oil. The Ya Kumba clan, for example, owned land

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² See further discussion in chapter 12.
³ See further discussion in chapter 13.
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along the Kagboro River, south of Freetown, where they had developed a salt industry. The salt was shipped inland to purchase slaves from Susu merchants, and these slaves were then employed in the cultivation of cassava. The mulatto offspring of Portuguese and English merchants also owned considerable numbers of slaves, who were settled on plantations along the coast. The Caulkers were one such family, descended from Thomas Corker, an agent of the Royal African Company who was stationed on the coast in 1684, and a ranking woman of the Ya Kumba clan, which owned land on the coast.4

A similar concentration of slaves existed in neighboring areas, but not everywhere. The crucial variable appears to have been the extent of trade with the interior. Along the Upper Guinea coast, there was regular trade inland, with salt, rice, and imported European merchandise sent inland and slaves, kola, and palm produce brought to the coast. Hence among the Mende, who participated in this exchange, perhaps half the population at the end of the nineteenth century was slave, many of whom were settled on plantations, where they grew food and gathered palm products for transport to the coast.5 Along the Mellacouri and other rivers, where the Susu and Temne lived, a similar concentration of slaves existed, and again slaves were often on plantations, in this case collecting kola for sale to the coast or growing rice for export inland.6 Further down the coast, the Vai, who numbered only 15,000 or so, were largely a slave society; estimates indicate that three-quarters of the population was slave.7 By contrast, among the Kru of the Liberia coast, there was far less contact with the interior, and consequently there was less opportunity to acquire the wealth that could be invested in slaves. On this stretch of coast, there were relatively low proportions of slaves in the population; there do not appear to have been any plantations like those on the Sierra Leone coast. This same pattern characterized most of the Ivory Coast too, except for areas at the mouths of the Bandama and Comoe Rivers, where again there were routes inland.8

Asante and its dependencies on the Gold Coast also experienced the economic adjustment required by the shift from slave exports to the sale of other products early in the century. Here, the system of trade centered on European trade castles at Cape Coast, Elmina, and other places made it difficult to smuggle slaves.9 Some slaves were taken farther west, but Asante was forced to abandon the slave export business. The crisis of adjustment was profound. Some slaves were added to the population around the capital at Kumasi, but the concentration of slaves became so great that many were executed as war prisoners, there being no export market for them. By 1820, at a time when departures from the Bights of Benin and Biafra were at an all-time high, Asante was diverting its slave population into kola production and gold mining. The response is instructive, moreover, because it reveals a pattern that was to characterize much of Africa, not only other parts of the West African coast. Slaves were available in such numbers that their employment in the domestic economy was logical, indeed a necessity.
Asante is not usually mentioned as an example of an African country that responded to the pull of “legitimate trade.” Usually the designation “legitimate trade” is reserved for palm oil and peanuts, not gold and kola nuts. Gold had long been exported from Africa and hence did not represent a new departure in the export economy, whereas kola nuts were sold within Africa and not to Europe. Nonetheless, both goods were similar to palm oil, peanuts, wild rubber (which experienced a boom at the end of the nineteenth century), and other goods. Despite local consumption, both gold and kola commanded an international market and provided alternatives to the export of slaves. Furthermore, gold and kola nuts, like palm oil and peanuts, were closely related to the increased employment of slaves within domestic economies. The requirements for slave labor varied with each product and between different producing areas, but slavery and the economy were intimately connected.

Slavery in Asante and the adjacent areas on the Gold Coast was a complicated institution, with many variations in the treatment of slaves and the scale of slave concentration. On the one hand, the matrilineal Akan were divided between those who were subjects of Asante and those who were not. On the other hand, in parts of Asante, the subjects were not even Akan or matrilineal. The northern provinces in particular had a large population of Muslims, and practices among these people were different from those of the Akan. In effect, Asante had two sets of laws relating to slaves: one pertained to Akan owners and the other to Muslims. Both groups of slave owners cooperated in maintaining the strength of the Asante state and their supremacy over the enslaved population.

From their commercial towns along the edge of the forest and in the savanna farther north, Muslims continued to export kola nuts, gold, and other goods with which Asante was able to finance the import of textiles, livestock, salt, leather goods, and many other products, including slaves. Muslims employed slaves in their commercial establishments. Slaves were also needed to carry firewood and fetch water, because at some towns, particularly Salaga, the water supply was inadequate during the peak season of caravan trade. They gathered fodder for the livestock of visiting merchants and ran errands for itinerant merchants as well as their masters. Many slaves lived on plantations around the towns, where they grew crops that fed the large caravans of merchants. Given that slave masters, in their capacity as commercial brokers, housed and fed visiting traders free of charge, plantation output was a necessary feature of the successful business activities of the Muslim commercial population. The largest plantations around Salaga and Bonduku had several hundred slaves each. For much of the nineteenth century, Muslims were also resident to the southwest of the Volta River, in the area bordering on the forests where kola nuts were harvested.

The French reconnaissance officer, L.-G. Binger, passed through Salaga in 1888, fourteen years after the province of Gonja had asserted its independence.
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from Asante but still soon enough afterward to demonstrate the pattern of plantation development that characterized this important commercial center. Binger first reached the slave plantation of Dokonkade, to the north of Salaga:

Dokonkade is a village of between 400 and 500 inhabitants and is a place of agricultural importance. Many people from Salaga are settled there with their captives during the winter months. A small market is set up there where one can buy food-stuffs: naturally, potatoes are the most popular, as in the whole region. Sorghum is not sold at market, but one has simply to approach an inhabitant to get some easily and cheaply. . . . Going from Masaka to Salaga, one does not go through any villages but passes near Belimpe or Bourompe, Abd-er-Rahman-iri, Gourounsi-iri and other small farming communities dependent upon Salaga – villages of captives engaged in farming under the surveillance of a member of the master’s family. These assume the name of their owner, adding iri, sou, pe or kade, depending on whether they speak Dagomsa, Mande or Gonja; the suffix in each of the three languages means “villages, habitation”.

Another French officer, Benquey, reported on Bonduku in 1904, some thirty years after Gyaman had asserted its independence from Asante, that many slaves worked in the fields alongside their master:

For the Abron and above all for the Kulango agriculturalist, a slave is an assistant who enables him to increase the area he cultivates or who lessens the burden of heavy field work. The master himself works alongside his captives. A sort of intimacy which lessens the distinctions between them and renders the captive a servant rather than a slave grows out of their daily contact.

These conditions indicate relatively small-scale production by peasants and their slaves. Among the Muslim merchants, however, Benquey found that the situation was very different; again plantations were common:

Among the Dioula [Juula, i.e., Muslim merchants], on the contrary, there is no contact between masters and captives. The latter, dispatched to cultivator villages, have but little to do with their masters. The Dioula man is above all else a merchant eager to gain, seeking to draw the greatest possible profit from everything that can be bought or sold. Now the slave is . . . an easy investment and the source of considerable profit. Therefore, to the Dioula merchant, the slave is a piece of merchandise to which he gives the same consideration he would an ox or sheep.

In Bonduku and elsewhere in Gyaman some farmers had few slaves while others had plantations with much larger slave holdings.

Further south, in the central Akan areas of Asante, slavery was cast in a different mould. The matrilineal Akan were organized into eight great clans that dominated the Asante government. Muslim contingents were organized for the army, and Muslim advisers were usually important in government circles, but the real political battles in Asante were between the different clans. The issue of slavery was an important aspect of this political rivalry. Different clans tried to bolster their position by acquiring the two most important capital resources
in Asante: gold and slaves. The king, in a perpetual struggle to assert and maintain the primacy of the state, confiscated gold through inheritance taxes, but slaves remained in the hands of the lineages that comprised each clan and could not be touched. Hence, slaves were a particularly valuable investment, more especially because slaves were employed in mining or panning gold. J. Dupuis, the British ambassador to Asante in 1820, learned:

On the banks of the Barra [Ba], a river whose source is near the great Muslim city of Kherabi and which flows south to join the Tando or Assinia river [actually the Comoe], the Gyaman also practice gold-washing, and my informants relate that during the rainy season there is work for eight to ten thousand slaves for two months.13

Slaves could assist in the harvesting of kola nuts, and they could be used as porters in the transport of kola to the north or other goods to the coast. R. La T. Lonsdale, a British intelligence officer who traveled extensively in Asante and its former province in the early 1880s, reported that “the traders in all the regions of the interior mostly use slaves as porters.”14 Wealthy traders and officials, as well as corporate groups, owned slaves, but despite the ability of individuals to acquire large numbers, the tendency was toward corporate ownership by lineages. This was so for two reasons. First, lineages inherited the slaves of wealthy individuals, whereupon the slaves then belonged corporately to the person’s maternal relatives. Second, different sections of lineages – often maternal brothers – banded together to buy a slave or two at a time. Because access to the kola groves was related to lineage membership, the kola was treated as a virtually free good by lineage members. All that was needed was to pick the kola, sort and package it, and carry it to market. Women and slaves did much of this work, except in the major harvest, when everyone participated. Through inheritance and this kind of corporate activity, lineages acquired dependent lineages of slave origins that were liable to work for the corporate group.

In the early nineteenth century, the slave population of central Asante, particularly in the area around the capital, Kumasi, had become so large that the government feared a slave revolt. Whole villages of slaves had been established to populate this district and to supply food for the army. Thomas Bowdich, who visited Kumasi in 1817, learned that:

The higher class could not support their numerous followers, or the lower their large families, in the city and therefore employed them in plantations (in which small crooms [villages] were situated), generally within 2 or 3 miles of the capital, where their labours not only feed themselves but supply the wants of the chief, his family and the more immediate suite. The middling orders station their slaves for the same purpose and also to collect fruit and vegetables for sale, and when their children become more numerous, a part are generally sent to be supported by these slaves in the bush.15

John Beecham, another British commentator on the Asante scene, also mentions the existence of a plantation sector using slave labor:

The large towns of Ashantee contain a considerable population…. The towns of this part of Africa are surrounded by a number of plantations belonging to the inhabitants;
and the natives always include the slaves on those plantations in their estimates of population of the towns to which they are attached.\footnote{16}

Beecham based his information on the reports of a Methodist missionary who visited Kumasi in 1839. It is clear that at this date plantations were an established feature of the rural economy.

Agricultural policy was related to the collapse in the export trade for Asante. After 1807, slave departures fell sharply, although the acquisition of slaves through tribute and war had not reduced the number of slaves flowing into Asante. The agricultural development of the central district was one solution to the redeployment of slaves who otherwise would have been exported. The Kumasi district was not an area where kola nuts were produced; hence it appears that the government policy was partially makeshift. Slaves may have been settled there first in anticipation that they would be sold if trade revived, but subsequently many were settled in the provinces. Bowdich thought that this policy was particularly consolatory and beneficial to those slaves who, to prevent famine and insurrection, had been selected (from that fettered multitude which could no longer be driven off to the coast directly they arrived at the capital) to create plantations in the more remote and stubborn tracts; from which their labour was first to produce a proportionate supply to the household of their chief, and afterwards an existence for themselves.\footnote{17}

By 1820, when several diplomatic missions from England made it clear to the Asante government that the trade would not resume, the decision was made to disperse this slave population throughout the country, particularly to areas where gold was produced and kola harvested. The Asante government achieved the redistribution of slaves in two ways. First, it openly encouraged the acquisition of slaves through implementation of commercial policies, inheritance taxes, and other measures that favored small producers, particularly lineage segments. Second, it protected rules governing matrilineal inheritance so that the slave holdings of wealthy officials and merchants were dispersed among kin rather than retained in a single bloc close to the capital or other places where merchants and officials had located their holdings. Hence it appears that Asante pursued a conscious policy that was designed to adjust to the end of the export trade in slaves. Instead, gold and kola resources were developed, using slave labor through the medium of the clans and their subordinate lineages, as an alternative to slave exports.\footnote{18}

Estimates of the servile population of Asante are understandably impressionistic, but scattered reports indicate that a substantial portion of the population was slave or pawn. Most observers visited the major centers and followed the principal routes from the coast into the interior; hence the reports are most accurate on these places. Estimates ranging from 60 to 90 percent of the population are likely to be too high, but in the early 1870s, the population of the

\section*{Transformations in Slavery}
Kumasi area was thought to be about equally slave and free. On the coast, the ratio of slave to free was at least as high. This assessment for late in the century is probably roughly accurate for the early decades of the nineteenth century too. This is partially confirmed by the policy of the Asante government in dispersing slaves throughout the countryside after 1820 to check the growth of the slave population near the capital. But this policy did not eliminate large concentrations of slaves, either there or elsewhere. If the estimates of the size of the slave population are even roughly accurate, then some wealthy merchants and government officials had large holdings involving many hundreds and perhaps thousands of slaves. Gold mining continued to be work for slaves, and this sector of the economy was so important to the central government that conditions in the mines were probably strictly controlled. It was not an easy job, because pits caved in frequently and had to be dug anew after each rainy season. Deaths were common among the thousands of slaves involved in this vital sector.

Asante attempted to plan its economy through the deployment of slaves in agriculture and mining to cushion the country from the effects of the abolition of the export trade in slaves to the Americas and to accommodate the large-scale arrival of slaves into the state through tribute, trade, and war. This policy involved making slaves available to the lineages, so that the common people had a stake in the perpetuation of the state in a period of economic transition. Lineages acquired slaves through trade, particularly in kola nuts. To safeguard the opportunity to buy slaves, the government restricted the movement of foreign merchants, confining them principally to Salaga, northeast of the Volta River. Kola producers, usually a few related kin and their slaves, transported kola to Salaga, where they obtained better prices for their kola than would have been the case if foreign merchants had been allowed to travel into the production zone. Higher profits from kola sales were matched by lower prices for slaves at the Salaga market. This policy assured a steady influx of slaves that would benefit the lineages. It also guaranteed the prosperity of the Muslim sector in the north, with merchants and local government officials there able to acquire many slaves of their own for use on plantations and in other capacities.

The corollary to this economic policy was the perpetuation of customs that limited the cultural assimilation of slaves into Akan society. Slaves who had been purchased in the north could not themselves experience full integration into Akan society. They seldom lost their accent, and they usually were marked with facial and body scars that set them off from free Akan who had no such markings. Legally, these slaves could not inherit land or other property because they had no kinship link with a matrilineage. Nor could they perform religious rites that were associated with the ancestors. These disabilities did not disappear in the course of a lifetime, but the myth of Asante slavery, supported by custom and government action, held out the possibility of assimilation for the
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descendants of slaves. The truth was that full assimilation took several generations and was fraught with great difficulties. Matrilineal rules required that a person’s mother be free and have brothers or other relatives whose property and access to land could eventually be inherited. The children of slave women, whether the husband was slave or free, had no such connection, and throughout their lives they remained second-class citizens at the sufferance of the lineage that owned them. They normally would not be sold, but they could be pawned if the family fell into debt. Culturally, they were indistinguishable from free men, and it was both impolite and illegal to refer to their slave ancestry. Nonetheless, they lacked many legal and property rights, and their children often fared no better. The result was that many villages were inhabited by both free and slave, but only those who traced their ancestry through a line of free women controlled land distribution, made decisions over pawning, or managed joint investments in trade. The policy of cultural assimilation effectively prevented the consolidation of class consciousness among the servile population, but it did not result in the full integration of slaves into society.21

To the west of Asante, among the Baule refugees who had fled after the fall of Denkyira and other Akan states in the eighteenth century, slavery was on a much smaller scale.22 The Baule seized people in raids, and they bought slaves from Muslim merchants in the north as well as from their Guro, Senufo, and Dida neighbors, but rarely were slave holdings very large. Like other Akan, the matrilineal Baule wanted slaves to work in the fields, to serve as porters, and to bear children. Because there were usually only a few slaves in each family, it was relatively easy to incorporate them. Slaves worked alongside free people, and they were openly encouraged to identify with Baule culture. The bands of refugees who moved westward in the eighteenth century successfully displaced the Dida, Senufo, and Guro, incorporating many of these earlier inhabitants into Baule society through the institution of slavery. Indeed, these non-Akan were particularly attractive candidates for purchase and capture because they came from patrilineal societies. In this case, the matrilineal rules of the Baule provided a convenient justification for captivity. The Guro, Dida, and Senufo lacked the legitimate matrilineal links to the original refugee groups. They could become Baule, but they remained dependents for generations, until time had erased memories of slave ancestry and cultural distinctions that might endanger Baule domination. The Baule had to be concerned about their survival. They had lost out to Asante in the struggle for control of their homelands. Through the institution of slavery, they increased their numbers and guaranteed that they would not lose their newly acquired lands in the east.

On the periphery of the Baule country, along the coast between the Comoe and Bandama Rivers, were fishing villages and salt-making camps that supplied the interior in exchange for foodstuffs, cloth, and slaves.23 These communities had sold some slaves to Europeans during the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, the people at the mouth of the Bandama River shifted
to the palm-oil trade in response to the rise in demand. The relative prosperity from this trade made it possible for these merchants – the Alladian – to buy many slaves, so that there were larger concentrations than among the Baule or other people of the interior. The Alladian traded up the Bandama River to the town of Tiassale, which was the major staging point for trade with the Baule and with Muslim merchants from the savanna. The Alladian needed porters and field hands, and some merchants had as many as sixty or seventy slaves. By comparison with slavery elsewhere along the West African coast, these holdings were relatively small. Nonetheless, the scale of slavery here was still significant and suggests that the possibility of incorporation, which characterized slavery among the Baule and many Akan, was difficult.

**Dahomey and the Yoruba States**

Slavery was as important in Dahomey and the Yoruba states to the east as it was in Asante. These states continued to supply slaves for shipment to the Americas through the 1840s, and the scale of the trade, although greatly reduced after mid-century, continued at a level of several thousand per year until 1866. More significantly, slaves were used in the domestic economy on an unprecedented scale. Here the shift to “legitimate trade” involved the production of palm oil and its transport to the coast. Both the production and the transport were almost exclusively the work of slaves, and this required thousands of field hands and porters. Hence one aspect of slavery in this area was the concentration of slaves in the hands of relatively few owners. The plantation economy and the movement of freight by slave porters required the restructuring of the domestic economy. Slave owners emerged not only among the ranks of government officials and the state itself, but also among merchants, both native and foreign.

As in the Akan provinces of Asante, the legal setting for slavery emphasized kinship structures. Marriage contracts, access to land, cooperation in defense, and religious beliefs were conceived of in terms of genetic relationships. Unlike Asante, however, kinship rules were governed patrilineally, not matrilineally, and this difference affected the basic ideology. Practices varied because the male line was the important connection, and these distinctions required an emphasis on paternity that affected the institution of slavery. Children of slave women were technically free, as long as the father was free. The emphasis on owning domestic slaves, including newly acquired slave women and slave children, was on their incorporation into the family unit as they became acculturated and proved their loyalty. The trend, as in Asante, was toward the assimilation of these slaves, and the social myth about slavery held that assimilation was proper and inevitable, as long as slaves, particularly their descendants, complied with the cultural expectations of society. Once slaves or the children of slaves had become culturally assimilated, they could expect to be treated as full members of the family.
This was the way slavery was supposed to function. The actual practice was quite different. Slave holdings in Dahomey and the Yoruba states of Ibadan, Ijebu, Abeokuta, and Lagos were so large that free people constituted only a minority of the population, particularly by the middle of the nineteenth century. Individual warlords and wealthy merchants, including a few women also, amassed hundreds, even thousands of slaves, far too many to assimilate into their kinship groups. Because slave masters were primarily concerned with success in war and the functioning of the market, they largely ignored traditions and laws that encouraged the incorporation of slaves and their gradual emancipation. A few individuals could be rewarded through the extension of kinship rights, and children of slave women by free fathers could expect better treatment than children of slave unions. Full assimilation was also difficult because of divisions within the slave-owning class. Some masters were Muslim, others were Christian, and many were associated with orisha worship. Slaves also had different cultural and religious traditions that hindered their incorporation, especially for those from the Muslim north. The most significant distinctions were political, anyway. People were identified as citizens of Abeokuta, Ijebu, Ibadan, Ilorin, or Dahomey and not as Yoruba or Fon, the two major linguistic and cultural divisions.

Dahomey, the notorious slave-raiding and slave-trading state where regiments of female soldiers captured the imagination of abolitionists in Europe, was particularly prosperous in the nineteenth century, and this prosperity rested on slavery, as the critics of the slave trade charged. Not only were many slaves deported, even after mid-century, but slaves were successfully employed in the domestic economy to produce palm oil and other goods for local exchange and export. The king did indeed have thousands of women in his army and harem, and these women also traded on his behalf. Nonetheless, the most important development in the nineteenth century was the king’s investment in plantation slavery.

By the time the palm-oil trade became important in the 1840s, there were many plantations around the port towns of Ouidah and Porto Novo and near the Dahomey capital of Abomey. The owners of these plantations included the king, local merchants and officials, and Brazilian traders. One Dahomey businessman, Kwenun, the son of a local merchant, owned thousands of slaves by the 1860s, while the king confiscated some palm groves, establishing plantations in the area between his capital and the coast. Freed slaves, returning from Sierra Leone and Brazil, bought slaves for their farms on the coast, too. Some of these were Muslims whose origins were much farther north, and a few became quite wealthy. Domingo Martinez, a Brazilian, had plantations near Porto Novo.

F. E. Forbes visited Abomey in 1851 and learned that slaves constituted a third of the population, an estimated 10,000 out of the capital’s 30,000 inhabitants. He also found slave plantations on the outskirts of the capital:
Near Abomey is a royal plantation of palms, corn etc., called Leffle-foo. It is inhabited by people from the province of Anagoo, prisoners of war, and is under the direction of a Dahomean caboceer [official]. The gifts of nature are all bountifully bestowed, and the soil rich and capable of producing every vegetable production.  

Forbes learned that wealthy merchants had thousands of slaves, including one trader at Ouidah, whose “very extensive palm-oil plantations ... [required] very little labour in procuring this valuable and lucrative article of trade. On the estate are many establishments, slave villages, for the manufacture, which is very simple.” Forbes underestimated the labor needed to prepare palm oil for export. The oil had to be extracted and then transported to the coast; both activities were labor intensive, but his observations on the scale of slavery reveals the extent to which Dahomey now relied on slave labor.

A similar pattern of extensive investment in slave-based trade and agriculture characterized the economies of the various Yoruba states. These small states, based on well-fortified cities of considerable size, used slaves as the basis of their armies, usually organized as private militia units belonging to individual warlords, but slaves also occupied extensive plantations outside the walls of the cities. One warlord, Kurumi, can serve as an example. This man marched his private army into the town of Ijaye in 1829 and seized the government. By 1859, Kurumi had 300 wives and a slave army 1,000 strong. One slave subordinate – who was servile in origin but no longer in status – had 300 slaves of his own. Kurumi also owned farmland, and he had many other slaves for agricultural work. Yoruba warlords like Kurumi were found at Ibadan, Abeokuta, Ijebu-Ode, Ogbomoso, Ife, and Ketu.

Ibadan had one of the largest slave societies in the interior of the Bight of Benin. The city was founded as a war camp in 1829 and subsequently rose to prominence as a place of refuge for many people forced to evacuate their homes during the Yoruba wars that followed the disintegration of Oyo. Until the 1840s, the Ibadan warlords exported many of the slaves they captured, and they continued to sell some even as the trans-Atlantic trade entered its final decline. By the 1850s, however, most large slave owners were organizing their slaves for agricultural production. Samuel Johnson, the renowned Yoruba historian who wrote about the history of his people in the late nineteenth century, recorded that the influx of slaves into Ibadan was often several thousand per year. The able-bodied male slaves were trained as soldiers; the old and infirm were sold for whatever price they could fetch; pretty female slaves were placed in harems or married. “All the rest are sent into the farms, each to be employed in his or her own line. The chiefs had large farms and farm houses containing a hundred to over a thousand souls. These extensive plantations not only support their huge establishments but also supply the markets.” As palm oil became a major export to Europe, slaves were needed to produce the oil and carry it to the coast. Slaves were also used to grow okra, beans, maize, yams, and vegetables, which were marketed locally and also distributed to other Yoruba towns. Ibadan became militarily the strongest and demographically...
the largest of these towns, and consequently its agricultural output was important throughout the region.

By the 1860s and 1870s, there were 104 families at Ibadan who together owned an estimated 50,000 slaves, an average of 500 per family. These slave owners included all the political leaders, among them the Basorun, the military ruler of the city, as well as the various warlords. Slave holdings included private armies, plantation workers, craftsmen, livestock herders, and porters. Oluyole, the Basorun from 1837 to 1847, for example, had thousands of slaves, most of whom were Hausa and Muslim. Many of these were soldiers, but his land holdings were extensive, including separate plantations for yams, okra, beans, maize, and vegetables. Ogumnola, a warlord during the 1850s and early 1860s, had 1,800 slave soldiers alone, not including his plantation hands. Madam Efusetan, among women with extensive slave holdings, had some 2,000 slaves on her plantations in the 1870s, and she owned more in her Ibadan home. These examples could be repeated for Ondo, Ijebu, and Abeokuta.

Most of the slaves in Yorubaland were employed in the military, on plantations, as porters, and in harems. Thousands of slave soldiers were assembled on a permanent war footing. There were many wars, numerous skirmishes, and regular raiding into the territory of enemies. Neither Ibadan nor other strongholds gained supremacy in these struggles. Military slavery, therefore, was one response to political insecurity, but private armies made little if any contribution to the productive activities of their master’s household; indeed, they lived off the labor of other slaves. They could be used as porters, but they were not usually involved in farm work. Slave soldiers were given part of the spoils, and they could advance in military rank if they proved themselves in battle. They were fed by the warlord from the output of plantation slaves and often were given wives.

Plantation slaves worked under overseers, in separate villages outside the cities, where they risked capture in raids. Labor requirements included the construction of yam mounds – following the experiments of Basorun Oluyole, who wanted to grow yams that were large enough to constitute a single load, for example, upward of 40 kg each. He achieved this by building large compost heaps of weeds, banana and plantain stalks, and earth. Yam seedlings were planted on the top, so that the roots would grow into the soil and fill the compost mound. The experiments proved successful, and this became the method of yam cultivation among all the large slave owners. The technique required extensive labor, of course, and careful management. Slaves worked from sunrise until early afternoon, and then were free to work their own plots, where they grew subsistence crops. Planters also owned groves of kola, palm, and other trees, although there were few economies of scale in sylvan production. Many small producers also competed, particularly in the palm-oil trade. Besides the large slave owners, there were other farmers who owned fewer slaves, still sometimes as many as twenty or thirty.
Concubinage also required thousands of slaves, and these were more likely to be incorporated into a kinship group. Marriage to a slave woman changed her status, so that she was no longer liable for sale. Virtually all influential men – prosperous farmers and warlords – had more than one wife; some had hundreds.34 This demonstrates an extremely uneven distribution of women in society. Many slave soldiers and plantation slaves had no wives or married relatively late in life. Nonetheless, the incorporation of slave women through marriage and the granting of free status to their children demonstrate two features of Yoruba society in the nineteenth century. First, the status of women was low, and access to women through enslavement undermined marriage customs. Secondly, this treatment of slave women reflected an assimilation tendency. Control over the reproductive capacities of women remained as important as it had been when slavery was marginal to the functioning of kinship. Even the introduction of Christianity and Islam did not alter this practice. The Christians included repatriated individuals from Sierra Leone and the Americas who had been freed from slavery and resettled at Abeokuta and elsewhere. Many of these Christians acquired slaves and had more than one wife themselves. Muslims could have four wives, and as many concubines as they could afford.

On the one hand, there was a tendency toward assimilation, practiced more in some places than in others. On the other hand, plantations and large military establishments were a countervailing force in which slavery was far different in practice than the ideal of the assimilated slave. Samuel Crowther, an ex-slave from the Yoruba country who later became an Anglican bishop of the lower Niger River, reported that the nature of domestic slavery, as opposed to plantation slavery, was relatively benign in 1857. The main feature, true to the perception of slavery in those holdings that were small, was that slaves were treated as if they were members of the family. “The slaves and masters in this country live together as a family; they eat out of the same bowl, use the same dress in common and in many instances are intimate companions, so much so that, entering a family circle, a slave can scarcely be distinguished from a free man unless one is told.”35 In 1881, the Lagos merchant and slave owner, Braimah Apatira, provided a similar view of his relationship with his slave assistants:

The boys [trader slaves] live with their masters in the house, receiving food, clothing, and being treated as one of the family. But no wages are paid. If they need money they are dashed [given] some. If they conduct themselves well the master gets them wives and gives them money to start for themselves. The boys work for their masters and go to market for them. If they don’t behave they are sent away with nothing.36

Both Crowther’s and Apatira’s comments describe how slavery was supposed to function, as seen by proslavery apologists. In commercial establishments such as Apatira’s, some slaves may well have been treated as if they were family members, but where slave holdings were substantial, it simply was not possible to do so.
The Bight of Biafra

Slavery was almost as common in the Biafra interior as elsewhere on the West African coast. The concentration of slaves varied, with the highest ratios of slaves to free men near commercial centers, in the Niger delta, and along the northern frontier of Igboland. Slave-to-free ratios were lower in the densely populated central areas of the region, and here individual slave holdings tended to be small too. The region became the largest exporter of palm products, but unlike Dahomey and the Yoruba states, the palm trees remained primarily in the hands of small producers, particularly in the lineage-based villages of the densely populated central Igbo country and among the similar communities of Ibibio inland from the Cross River.

In this situation – when slave departures declined to insignificance in the 1830s and palm-oil exports were already substantial – there was no serious economic recession. As elsewhere, the availability of slaves who earlier would have been sold to the Americas made it possible for slave owners to redirect their labor into the domestic economy. The largest slaveholders among the Aro, the Efik of Old Calabar, the Igbo of Aboh, and the Ijaw of the Niger delta continued to concentrate on commerce. They invested in slaves because they were needed as porters and canoe men, and slaves were also used in agriculture near Old Calabar, Aboh, and the Aro settlements, where significant pockets of plantation development emerged. Nonetheless, the bulk of the export crop was not produced on plantations but on family and lineage farms, and the oil was often carried to bulking points by free people – usually women – as well. Central Igboland and the Ibibio country were densely covered with palm trees, and farmers could increase production merely by protecting young trees and allowing them to mature. Slave labor was used in this expansion, but on a small scale and in small holdings. Slaves were indeed useful in agricultural tasks, either in processing palm oil, carrying it to market, or tilling the land for yams and other crops, for all these activities were limited by the labor available. Those peasants who could afford to supplement the labor of their wives and children could increase output only if they had access to slaves or pawns.

In the Ngwa region of the palm belt, adult males harvested the palm produce on the trees near their compounds, while their wives cracked the nuts and extracted the oil. On certain days, lineage members also could harvest produce on the communal land of the clan or village. This land, administered by the heads of the lineages (okpara-ukwu) or the villages (eze-ala), contained large numbers of palm trees, so that the fruit gathered there was an important supplement to the palm supplies of the small producers. Once the oil was extracted, the women – sometimes accompanied by a few males if the distance to market was great – carried the oil, and, late in the century, kernels too, to the riverside depots; for Ngwaland, the principal markets were at Akwete, Ohambele, and Azumiri. Merchants in these towns bought the oil and kernels and then resold them to merchants from Bonny and, after 1869, from Opobo.
The women kept the proceeds from kernel sales; the receipts from oil went to their men.\footnote{40}

The lineages and village heads were also major producers of oil and kernels, primarily because they controlled the ancestral lands and because they had more wives and dependents – including slaves – who could increase the scale of production. These lineage and village heads also received additional labor from the community as a form of tribute on each \textit{orie} day of the four-day Igbo week. Such men as Egege Nwannenta, Nwagalasi Oguikpe, and Olujie Egbulefu became major producers at the end of the nineteenth century; profits from palm-produced sales strengthened the position of the lineage heads within Ngwa society. Similarly, the heads of Akwete, Ohambele, and Azumiri – the three major produce markets – were also large producers; their wives received credit from the Bonny and Opobo merchants, which enabled them to become influential intermediaries in the purchase of oil and kernels from small producers. These women journeyed to such Ngwa towns as Obegu, Aba, and Abala, where oil and kernels were plentiful, to buy direct from producers. At Obegu, Chief Ananaba dominated production and marketing; his share of the oil sold at Akwete has been estimated at one-quarter of the volume shipped from Akwete to Bonny.\footnote{41}

Throughout the Biafra region, wealthy men (and some women) consolidated their position in society through the control of lineage land, trade, and the acquisition of slaves and pawns. Isichei has characterized these “persons of property” (\textit{ogaranya}) as a class, distinguished by the size of polygamous families and the number of slaves and clients. In Item, for example, “a man’s wealth depended on the number of slaves.” There were three important slave owners in Item, each with an estimated 400 slaves. All three were local doctors who made and sold war charms. Some slave dealers at Arondizuogu had twenty to forty wives and many slaves, and they too were part of the \textit{ogaranya} class.\footnote{42}

The Ngwa lineage and village heads were members of the \textit{okonko} secret society, and membership in this and comparable societies seems to have been one of the criteria of the \textit{ogaranya}. These societies – \textit{okonko} among the Ngwa and Aro; \textit{ekpe} at Old Calabar; the \textit{ozo} titled societies at Asaba and elsewhere – promoted the interests of the elite.\footnote{43} The \textit{okonko} society, for example, was a masked society, which terrorized offenders, burned their houses, and sold people into slavery if there was a decision to enforce justice as defined by the society. Hence one of its functions was to guarantee credit and provide commercial links with other parts of the region, particularly with the Aro.

The heaviest concentration of slaves was at the commercial centers, including Abob, Asaba, Onitsha, Ossomari, Ndoki, Akwete, Uzuakoli, Aro Chukwu, and the towns of the Niger delta (Brass, Akassa, Elem Kalabari, Bonny, and Opobo). The slave population of Ossomari, numbered in the thousands, is an example.\footnote{44} A report of 1902 estimated the population of the town at 6,000 to 8,000, many of whom were slaves, and the outlying districts had thousands of slaves, perhaps as many as 14,000. At Asaba, where slaves were also numerous,
farms extended for thousands of hectares on the west side of the Niger, and although the number of slaves there is unknown, it is likely that much of this land was worked by slave labor. The Aro communities, not surprisingly, also had many slaves, since the Aro were the major slave traders in the region. In the Afikpo area, for example, where the Aro formed almost 10 percent of the population, they owned the most slaves. By 1900, one wealthy Aro merchant at Aro Chukwu, Okoroji, owned 1,000 slaves, according to local tradition. These were settled on three plantations, two of which were 15 km from town.

Yellow Duke of Old Calabar owned an estimated 3,000 slaves in the early 1880s, most of them settled on plantations where the slaves worked under overseers. Slaves farmed the fields of their master and carried palm oil into Old Calabar. Yellow Duke and other planters visited these plantations occasionally. The fact that Yellow Duke was formerly a slave demonstrates that there was a significant difference in status and opportunity between those slaves brought into the merchant firms of the town and those confined to plantations. After 1869, some Bonny merchants followed the Old Calabar lead in diversifying the activities of their slaves; plantations were established adjacent to the creeks inland where palm produce and food could be raised. Because the Bonny merchants concentrated on trade rather than production, it is unlikely that even a modest investment in agriculture would have been possible without slaves.

The incidence of slavery also increased on the northern frontier of Igboland. The more extensive cultivation of palm trees in the densely populated areas of the Biafra interior undermined the production of food crops. The palm belt eventually needed to import foodstuffs from other areas, particularly the region farther inland where slaves were employed in growing yams on plantations. Around Nike, for example, slaves sometimes lived in their own farm settlements. Although some slaves in the central Nike villages lived with their masters, they did the farming, for free men here did not engage in agricultural labor. Nor did free men marry slaves.

This use of slaves in agriculture was important in the shift to “legitimate” trade. Slaves were seldom settled on distinct palm plantations, but they were settled in their own villages sometimes or in separate parts of their masters’ compounds. No matter the arrangement, they grew yams for sale to the palm belt. All along the northern frontier of Igbo country, where land was readily available, adventurous men secured tracts of land and acquired slaves. It was necessary to conquer some of this land or protect it from invasion from the north, so that people relied on kinship to maintain militia units. Slaves were barred from the military, however; their task was to farm, sometimes in separate settlements that were more vulnerable to enemy raids. They could respond in self-defense, but their principal military function was to warn their master and his lineage of an impending attack. Some of these northern centers, such as Nike, were allied to the Aro, supplying the Aro with slaves, yams, and other goods in exchange for firearms and manufactures.
An examination of the commercial organization of the Niger-delta trading house is essential to understand how slavery functioned in this setting. Some firms had hundreds of slaves, and because they were organized on a paramilitary basis, the opportunities for advancement in the firm could be great. Occasionally, enterprising young men became wealthy and influential enough to recruit a crew for their own riverboat. These new subsidiaries continued under the central direction of the parent firm, but they traded largely on their own account. A man, slave or free, had to have sufficient capital or credit – usually a combination of the two – to outfit a boat and buy trade goods. He needed permission to operate in the markets of the parent firm, and this was either readily given because it promoted the interests of the house in general or it was decided to expand operations into new areas in the hopes of eliminating a rival or acquiring new sources of palm oil. In either case, the new enterprise needed a crew, often fifty or more men, and these were invariably slaves that the investor owned himself or in combination with several other investors. It is clear from this example that individuals could become extremely wealthy and powerful, unless they were eliminated in the fierce competition of the trade. Slaves successfully rose to the highest positions in the trading firms of the Niger delta towns, particularly at Bonny and Elem Kalabari, and also at Brass. One slave, purchased in his youth at an inland market, even rose to head the most successful commercial establishment at Bonny, and when he was forced into a difficult political position there he moved his following to a new site at Opobo and became that town’s ruler. This man, Jaja, accomplished in a single lifetime a transformation in status from humble Igbo slave boy to powerful ruler, owning more than a thousand slaves, including slave subordinates who had large holdings themselves.

Slavery in the Niger delta and at other commercial centers in the region, including Old Calabar, Aboh, and Duala, had more similarities to the military slavery of the Yoruba towns and Muslim countries than to domestic slavery or plantation slavery. Crowther observed that at all the commercial centers along the Niger, from the delta towns northward toward the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers, slave holdings were often quite large:

Accumulation of slaves at Abo, Idda, and Gbegbe, to show how wealthy they are – because a man’s worth is estimated by the number of his wives and slaves – is the prevailing ambition of the people. Ołumene [of Idah] is said to hold about 200 slaves, with whom he lives in a separate group of huts at Idda. Akaia and his brother, who have inherited their father’s property, are said to own about 400. At Aboh in the 1850s, where many firms owned large numbers of slaves, some of whom traded on the account of their master, Crowther learned that trusted slaves had become wealthy on their own. “Some of the old slaves have themselves become owners of a large property and many slaves; and thus become, in a great measure, independent of their masters, except waiting on them occasionally.” That slaves could in fact acquire their own slaves demonstrates
that slave status could change. The designation “slave” could be little more than a sign of origin and association with the commercial firm of the slave’s original master. Once slaves had assumed independence and an effective social freedom that placed them in the class of slave owners, emancipation had realistically taken place. Here was a system that promoted slaves as a means of securing strict loyalty and dependence.

Slaves were also sacrificed to religious deities at funerals and on other occasions; these practices too promoted social control. At Uburu, for example, a slave was usually killed in deference to the supernatural protector of the salt lake and marked the opening of the salt season, whereas in the Niger delta, a slave could be offered to such river spirits as Duminea.52 The taking of titles, especially ozo titles, required the death of slaves too. The 400 titleholders at Asaba in 1881, for example, had each sacrificed a slave on assuming his title; two more slaves were killed at the funerals of these men.53 At Old Calabar, the number of funeral victims was much larger; hundreds of slaves were killed at several important funerals in the nineteenth century. In most places, however, one or two deaths were usually sufficient. The cheapening of human life symbolized in these practices was perhaps most gruesomely displayed at the house of skulls in Bonny and the shrine of Ibinukpabi at Aro Chukwu, which was lined with the heads of slaves.54

Slaves hoped that successful apprenticeship in trade could lead to full assimilation and social mobility. Kinship terminology and structures were modified to allow for exactly that possibility. Newly purchased slaves, who were most grateful that they were not destined for an early grave or sale across the Atlantic, learned their lessons quickly. They called their mistress “mother.” They accepted a legal status that was likened to that of children, and they learned Ijaw, the Efik dialect, or Aboh Igbo because these languages were used to maintain a corporate distinctiveness that was useful in business and easily revealed the extent of assimilation. Strict discipline was required of these slaves. They learned the skill of the river trade and sudden military confrontation with rivals, where there could be no tolerance of insubordination. Those who would not conform suffered the consequences of sale or death, and such failures must have been far more numerous than the examples of slaves who rose to positions of power and influence. Nonetheless, both extremes were possible, and it did not take long for newly purchased slaves to realize this.

The possibilities of social mobility represented one extreme in the practice of slavery in the delta. People used the terminology of kinship, but this was not a situation in which slaves were incorporated into kinship groups as they were where small domestic units prevailed. Slaves were far too numerous. They comprised the bulk of the population and could aspire to any position in society except for certain titles. And Jaja even challenged the restriction on royal succession by staging a coup d’état at Bonny and then withdrawing his supporters to Opobo in 1869.55 Real relationships based on marriage between free people and genetic ties between generations were not the most important social
bonds in Bonny society. Rank could be acquired, and slavery was not always an obstacle to improving status.

Elsewhere, such fluid social conditions did not exist. At Old Calabar, which shared many of the same features of commercial organization, slaves were barred from attaining the highest positions in firms.\textsuperscript{56} Calabar traders also used riverboats to reach markets along the Cross River, but the descendants of free merchants prevented almost all slaves from acquiring positions of authority within \textit{ekpe} – the secret society that established and enforced the laws necessary for commerce, including the protection of creditors. By denying access to slaves, \textit{ekpe} guaranteed that those of slave status would not achieve the kind of mobility found at Bonny. Furthermore, Old Calabar merchants settled those slaves that they could not sell or use in their commercial firms on plantations outside the town. These slaves grew foodstuffs for the firms, and until the middle of the century they had the dubious honor of serving as funeral victims as well.

Hope Waddell, a missionary at Calabar in the 1850s, contrasted the two kinds of slavery, domestic and plantation, that were most common in the commercial centers:

Most of the slaves are employed in farming and trading. The former cultivate a portion of land, allotted by their masters for their own use, and generally supply the town markets with produce. Their labour is much less continuous and severe than that of West Indian slaves. If called into towns to work, they receive a small allowance. Those employed in canoes are fed, and are in crews of six to ten to each canoe, under a captain or supercargo. He has a commission on his trade and may trade on his own account a little, but not in palm oil, or so as to neglect his master’s interests. The canoe people traffic in provisions, buying with English goods up country, and selling to the townspeople, ships, and mission houses.\textsuperscript{57}

Until the 1850s, plantation slaves were also subject to seizure for sacrifice at funerals, which may well have been a poor consolation for the less strenuous labor conditions that they enjoyed over their Jamaican cousins. The amount of labor required on the plantations here and elsewhere in the Biafra interior did not render plantation conditions particularly enjoyable. Usually slaves worked for their master three out of every four days, with the other day reserved for their own fields and for market trading. These slaves had the possibility of a more autonomous life from their master than plantation slaves in the Americas. At Old Calabar, slaves formed an association, tied by blood pacts, which struggled to end the sacrifice of slaves at funerals. Through a series of demonstrations and riots, they successfully challenged the right of their masters to take the lives of slaves, thereby forcing a redefinition of the status of slave. This struggle, nonetheless, hardly amounted to a fight for emancipation, nor did it seriously challenge the institution of slavery.\textsuperscript{58} It ameliorated the conditions of slaves, but it left the institution, with its division between plantation slaves on the one hand and the domestic slaves of the trading firms on the other, firmly intact.
In the central areas of Igbo country, where slave holdings were small, the treatment of slaves also varied. In some places, slaves were readily incorporated into lineages. Free men took slave wives, and the children were treated as full members of the father’s lineage. Slaves could also acquire land from the lineage and start their own homestead, sometimes with the requirement that social deference be shown to the truly free members of the lineage and sometimes with the expectation that first fruits be forwarded to the lineage head. But slaves in some places, even when holdings were small, were not allowed to participate in religious ceremonies, and some villages discouraged or prohibited marriage between slaves and free. The general picture for domestic slavery, therefore, must emphasize the variations in practice. The tendency was toward cultural assimilation for non-Igbo or outsiders from distant parts of the country. They could expect to learn the local dialect, honor the taboos and shrines of the community, and look to the lineage for access to land. They were usually the ones to handle the heaviest agricultural work, particularly the construction of yam mounds. They also carried water. It was possible, nonetheless, for many of these people to blend into the community, and if they could not accomplish full integration, their children or grandchildren often did.

Domestic slaves were the first to suffer when the family or village faced difficult times. If a sacrifice was needed for a shrine, a slave would be bought for the purpose, but if poverty prevented this, a domestic slave would have to be used. Slaves were held as hostages, too, and even after many years they were not allowed to join the community fully. Debt, too, could result in the transfer of a domestic slave, even one born into the community. Similarly, the loss of a legal case, a dispute with a neighboring village, or cases of sorcery or alleged crime could all lead to the removal of one or more slaves from a village. For a lineage, therefore, slaves were an investment and a source of insurance. A lineage could encourage integration, but only up to a point.

One peculiar feature of slavery in the central Igbo provinces – where plantations were rare, population was dense, and palm-oil production greatest – was the existence of cult slaves (osu). These osu belonged to a deity and were placed under the direction of a shrine priest. They were often pledged to a shrine during a time when individuals were experiencing personal difficulties, but sometimes families disposed of unwanted children by offering them to the deity. In other cases, family members who knew that they were about to be pawned or sold outright sought sanctuary at the shrine and in return became osu. The osu themselves performed religious duties. They acted as mediators in disputes and occasionally enforced decisions that were blessed by the shrine priest. The shrines were part of a religious system that included the powerful oracle at Aro Chukwu. Indeed, the practice of attaching osu to shrines is sometimes attributed to the example of the Aro Chukwu oracle, and shrine priests and the Aro often shared similar interests and supported each others’ actions. The osu, because they belonged to the deity, really constituted a caste. Although they were despised, they were also feared. In the absence of the
central authority of a state in the Igbo country, they can be thought of as having functions that were comparable to government slaves in other situations.

The peculiar characteristics of *osu* demonstrate that slavery retained many local features along the West African coast during the nineteenth century. The continuation of earlier practices both in the Biafra interior and elsewhere reveals the strength of tradition in the face of economic and social change. Once slavery had existed on the fringes of the social formation, but now it had become a central institution. Older practices might persist, but the dynamic feature of slavery during the nineteenth century was the more intensive use of slaves in production. Even though slavery remained marginal in many places, and slaves supplemented peasant production in many other locations, the dominant trend was toward a transformation of the economy by relying on slave labor. In this sense, there emerged a mode of production based on slavery. The stages in the transition to a slave mode of production had included the transformation of slavery from a type of dependency in societies based on kinship into a means of supplying the export slave trade. The consolidation of institutions of enslavement and commerce in turn promoted the interests of commercial and political elites that owned large numbers of slaves. These slaves were then available for productive purposes, and this economic exploitation was promoted through the collapse of the market for slaves to be sent to the Americas and the simultaneous rise in market demand for locally produced commodities. In the space of four centuries, West African society had been transformed, and slavery and the slave trade were central to the process.

The transition in the social formation involved two internal transformations. First, between 1800 and 1850, the slave mode of production still included the export sector for slaves; trade and enslavement were integrated with this trans-Atlantic market, and slave-based production was largely a by-product of this external orientation. Pockets of slave-based production were clustered in areas most fully associated with the export trade. In the second half of the century, after the decline and collapse of slave departures, slaves were used more extensively in the domestic economy. Slaves were now destined to supply internal demand, with the output of slave labor directed at both production for export and domestic use. In terms of the consolidation of European capitalism, this transition in the social formation involved a major structural adjustment that strengthened the slave mode of production along the West African coast, thereby clearly separating the African economy from the capitalist world system by maintaining slavery as a barrier. By the end of the nineteenth century, slavery was the basis of political economy in Africa, whereas it no longer mattered in the European-controlled world.