Commodities as Currencies: The Integration of Overseas Trade into the Internal Trading Structure of the Igbo of South-East Nigeria.
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Résumé
Les recherches récentes ont prouvé l'existence, en pays igbo, d'importants échanges internes, indépendants du commerce avec l'outre-mer et probablement antérieurs à son apparition. Il est dès lors possible de démontrer que le commerce européen de la première moitié du xixe siècle répondait à une demande africaine et fournissait des marchandises utilisées comme « monnaies » indigènes dans l'intérieur du pays. Le fonctionnement, à l'époque précoloniale, de ces systèmes monétaires décentralisés constitue un facteur critique pour expliquer les échanges entre unités politiques autonomes aussi bien que les relations commerciales avec la côte.

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The Integration of Overseas Trade into the Internal Trading Structure of the Igbo of South-East Nigeria*

The transatlantic trade through the Biafran coast from the 16th century onwards has been regarded by numerous authors (Northrup 1978; Hopkins 1973; etc.) as the key to the development of an internal trade and market structure in Igboland. Only since the researches by G. I. Jones, A. E. Afigbo and others are we beginning to understand that the economy of Igboland may have relied for its subsistence equilibrium and the development of specialized crafts on an intensive internal exchange, which was virtually independent from overseas trade. G. I. Jones (1939, 1958) and A. E. Afigbo (1973, 1974) were the first to systematically use oral evidence to reconstruct the economic and political history of Igboland in the 19th century. Their method permitted them to use critically the 19th-century accounts of traders and missionaries travelling on the Niger, and earlier accounts of those who had traded on the bight of Benin and Biafra, and to countercheck them against the oral historical evidence collected in the interior. I am relying on their writings for my analysis of the internal developments in the last century.

The contribution I hope to make in this article is to take this new material on the precolonial economy and reassess from an Igbo perspective the impact of overseas trade. I hope to show that:

(1) European imports responded to African demands and had to adapt to the necessities of Igbo economy.

(2) Imports consisted partly of commodities used as 'native' currencies which were required for the internal exchange.

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The sudden expansion of the palm-oil trade at the beginning of the 19th century was possible because the Igbo in the densely populated areas were already producing oil and other items for exchange.

The functioning of decentralized and interrelated precolonial currency systems seems thereby of critical importance not only to explain the trade between the autonomous political units inside Igboland but also to shed new light on the trade relations with the coast.

The Structure of Internal Trade

The Igbo practised two types of exchange which both involved money: the first included the selling of goods by the producers themselves or the buying of goods needed for consumption; the second was the buying and selling of goods in order to make a profit (Hodder & Ukwu 1969: 129). The first type roughly corresponded to the buying and selling in village markets; the second to the long-distance trade performed by professional merchants. Both types of exchange are practised by village women who engage in wholesale trade on the larger village-group markets and sell retail on village markets.

We cannot sharply distinguish between local markets and larger village-group markets. The difference between the two was mainly one of size and of the extent to which they were patronized by long-distance traders. This depended on strategic location, on goods and services, and on the maintenance of law and order. One particular market could thus swing over decades between the two statuses. Village markets were until recently controlled by village councils and met every fourth or eighth day, according to local cycles; village-group markets were integrated into this periodicity and were connected to the colonies set up along trade routes by long-distance merchants, and through there with other village-group markets in more distant areas. The long-distance trade focuses on the two fairs at Bende and Uburu which differed from markets in that they were not controlled by local authorities and ran for several days in a twenty-four-day cycle.

The same kinds of currencies were used in the different transactions and closely linked the network of village markets with that of long-distance trade. They were accepted in long-distance trade until 1880-1900, and in the village markets until the 1920s and later.

1. I follow here the distinction made by U. I. Ukwu, although I will not use his terminology in Igbo language (izu ahia: selling by the producer himself and buying by the consumer; igba ubiri: buying and selling to make a profit). According to A. E. Afigho (personal communication), izu ahia is an all-embracing term which also includes igba ubiri, this, in turn, being only a local expression for this trading activity.
Stability and Convertibility of Currencies

During the precolonial period, for which we have few oral and written records, the currencies varied in the different areas of Igboland, being mostly cowries, manillas, brass-rods, iron currencies and copper wires.

The paramount importance and the universal validity of Igbo currencies can be underlined by comparison with the different use of the same forms of money in other regions of the world, such as in Tiv country or on the Rossel islands.

P. and L. Bohannan (1968: 228) designate the precolonial brass-rod and cloth currency of the Tiv, a population living in the north-east of Igboland, in terms of G. Dalton’s definition (1967) as ‘limited purpose money’, because it is not employed on the ‘peripheral’ village markets where consumption goods are bartered. Dalton distinguishes ‘general purpose money’, serving for commercial transactions (purchase and sale of labour, goods and services) and for non-commercial ones (redistribution, social services, fines, etc.), from ‘limited purpose money’ only used for non-commercial purposes. Tiv currency was normally only exchangeable inside a limited ‘prestige sphere’ for other prestige goods like cattle, horses, ritual offices and medicines. Any conversion of currencies against goods from the lower ‘consumption sphere’ entailed a loss of social standing for the person who was converting down. On the contrary, the acquisition of a wife for prestige goods and not for another woman was highly valued, the exchange sphere of women being considered higher than the ‘prestige sphere’.

L. Baric (1964), reanalysing the material collected by Armstrong on the Rossel island shell currency, declares that these shells cannot be defined as money since they do not fulfill its four essential functions—that is, to be a medium of exchange, a unit of account, a store of wealth, and a liquid asset. Baric calls them ‘primitive currencies’, because social relations are involved in each transaction and because not all currencies are equally appreciated and one sort cannot be converted into another one. The Rossel shells do not have ‘value’ but have ranks, as do cards in a game. Shells of the low categories serve for food purchase, whereas shells of higher rank are used for bridewealth, bloodwealth or mortuary payment: to each form of exchange corresponds a precise category of shells (e.g. shell number 18 of the Baric sample is the exclusive and obligatory medium in marriage transactions). The system can only function because loans are constantly made. They have to be paid back with a shell of the same category plus some lower shells. If the loan is outstanding for a long time, it is paid back with a shell of a higher category.

Igbo money is different from Tiv and Rossel money. In the Igbo economy the native currencies fulfill all the functions Baric attributes to ‘money’ and Dalton to ‘general purpose money’. They are employed in
commercial and non-commercial transactions and they are used as a medium of exchange, a unit of account, a store of wealth, and a liquid asset. However what distinguishes them from modern Western currency is the fact that they were not controlled by a State authority but that the stability of their value and their shape depended on the mechanisms of a decentralized trading system.

a/ The Different Uses of Igbo Money

Ethnographies from the beginning of this century describe that, in Igbo-land, virtually all commercial and many social transactions were, if not acted out, at least thought out in monetary terms. Money had to be contributed to for the funeral of a lineage brother or ally or for the bride-price of a brother. Fines payable to the village council, as well as compensations for wrongdoings, were normally paid in currencies. Each little transaction on the village market involved the use of money. G. T. Basden (1921: 197) describes the market exchange: ‘Each transaction is an entirely separate and distinct affair. A buys B’s yams for cowries and B buys A’s oil for cowries also; they make no attempt at direct exchange’.

The use of currencies as a unit of account becomes very explicit in the institution of the ‘silent trade’ (Kirk-Greene 1960: 133): little articles for sale were exposed on the side of the road with the equivalent amount of cowries beside them. The goods were left alone under the protection of a fetish. The buyer was supposed to put the exact amount of cowries, otherwise the fetish was believed to attack him. Units of currencies were sometimes so much regarded as units for accounting commodities that they became their quantitative measure. It could happen on an Igbo market like Aboh that yams were measured in ‘bags’ of yams, a bag being a counting device for cowries.

For a successful Igbo individual, not only a large stock of yams but also an important treasury of currencies were factors of prestige. G. T. Basden (1921: 200) reports having seen immense stores of cowries in a man’s possession. These stores of wealth were available as liquid assets for larger wholesale purchases. Also the women trading on village markets often accumulated a stock of currencies in order to buy, for example, larger quantities of salt on the village-group market, which they transformed into small salt cakes and resold retail.²

The generalized use of money also included the practice of credit giving. The creditor received a member of the debtor’s family as a pawn or was allowed to cultivate a piece of familyland until the debt was

² See Afigbo (1973) and Horton (1954) who collected oral historical evidence on this 19th-century practice.
payed back, usually with a 100% interest. A pawn had the same status as a slave, except that the creditor was not allowed to sell him, and that he could be redeemed.

b/ The Stability of Igbo Currencies

As Igbo currencies were not issued by a central authority, the stability of their value depended solely on their restricted supply, the regular destruction of surplus money and the transformation of money tokens into objects of daily use.

The scarcity of metal currencies was guaranteed for centuries by the fact that they had to be produced in a very complicated process or imported from far away through European traders. Cowry currencies arrived from the Maldive islands through the transsaharan route and were later brought by European ships.

In the 18th century, shiploads of iron bars, brass-rods and manillas were exchanged on the Biafra coast on relatively stable terms. All imported goods as well as those sold by African merchants were assessed in terms of the native currency of the trading port. According to James Barbot (1732: 469), a 17th-century merchant, the demand for currencies was usually very high among the African traders, but the Europeans preferred to pay them only part in money, the other part in goods. This may be because native currencies had achieved such a stable exchange value in the ports of the slave trade that it became more profitable for Europeans to import goods whose value African traders found more difficult to estimate. To quote J. Barbot (cited in Jones 1958: 50): 'slaves bought with cowries cost double the price as if purchased with other commodities especially when these shells are dear in Europe'.

During the 19th century the import of currency tokens increased considerably. From the industrial revolution onwards in Britain, the production of metals became ever cheaper and its import into Africa more profitable. The introduction of the steamship allowed for a less expensive and more rapid transport of cowries directly from the Maldive islands. We are only able to speculate on how the Igbo reacted to this sudden influx of currencies. However, the Igbo east of the Niger never accepted in their markets the larger cowries imported since 1850 in huge quantities from Zanzibar. The value of the Igbo cowry currency therefore remained for a long time more stable than in any other part of southern West Africa.

We find oral historical evidence of the ritual destruction of large amounts of moneys in title-taking ceremonies and in funerals, while the creation of large treasuries of currencies had in itself the effect of drawing them out of circulation and of stabilizing their value.

The quantities of iron, copper and brass moneys in circulation also remained limited because these metals were transformed by blacksmiths
into ornaments and tools for daily use. In Awka for example, surpluses of brass were consumed in forging heavy spirals to decorate the legs of young unmarried girls (Basden 1921: 91-92). These metal currencies differed from pure barter goods also in that they took a particular shape to which a value was attached which was recognized throughout a large trading area and which became a measure of value for other goods. Copper was forged into wires and rods in the Cross river region, brass currencies had the form of manillas in the Niger delta region. Although the shape of manillas still reminded of their former ornamental use as bracelets, their size had decreased to such an extent through the centuries that a manilla in the 19th century looked rather like a finger ring and had no other function than being a means of exchange.

c/ The Igbo Currency Zones: History and Repartition

It seems likely that native currencies were already in use in Igboland before the arrival of the Portuguese. Ibn Battuta (in Latham 1971: 599) describes in the 14th century how cowry and rod currencies in the Niger bend had come down through the transsaharan trade routes from the Mediterranean sea, shipped there through Arab traders from the Maldives islands (see also Johnson 1970: 18). According to G. I. Jones (fttch: 565), the Niger was the main artery for the circulation of cowries. The riverain tribes of the Niger diffused them to the northern, western and Isuama Igbo. D. Northrup (1978: 158), basing himself on the archaeological finds of copper wires and manillas at Igbo-Ukwu by Shaw (1975: 514), concludes that manillas were perhaps the currency used in the eastern hinterland of the Niger before the arrival of the Portuguese.

According to Pereira (in Jones 1958: 48), writing in the 16th century, manillas were exchanged in the rio Real area, but it seems that they were replaced by the end of the 17th century by iron bars as overseas trade currency. G. I. Jones (ibid.) describes the manilla area in the 19th century as including the eastern Niger delta, the southern Igbo and the Ibibio. The Cross river trading area uses brass and copper-rods. Iron currencies, in different forms, were exchanged down the Benue and further to the east (Jones fthcg: 565).

Until the 19th century the Europeans had to adapt their currency imports to the demands of the different ports, because the African traders rejected any effort to unify the trading currencies, although it seems that inside Igbo country the different monetary zones were interconnected without any major problem. Long-distance merchants employed all the currencies and were sometimes making a profit from exchanging them (ibid.: 551-552). Where two zones overlapped, both currencies were exchanged in the village markets. G. T. Basden (1921: 201) gives the example of Awka market, where cowry as well as arrow-shaped iron tokens were circulating. An arrow-head fetched the value of two cowries.
Also in Nsukka area cowries circulated together with brass-rods and salt cakes. The fact that most of these currencies could be converted into consumption goods inside or outside of their zone may also have facilitated exchange between the zones.

2 - The Village Market Inserted into a Market Ring

All the village markets in Igboland were, it seems, linked through the network of overlapping market rings. Each met every fourth or eighth day in alternation with other markets in the neighbourhood. The density of this network and the strong central position of the market inside the village was remarkable.

During the 19th century the trade on the village markets may have assumed a vital importance in the densely populated areas, where the production of food crops was not always sufficient for survival. The women had to exchange craft products (salt, pottery, raffia cloth, etc.) and palm oil against yams and coco yams which arrived either from more favoured near villages or through the long-distance network from more distant and more fertile areas. Basden (1921: 195) describes how they exactly knew the conditions of marketing in all the surrounding places and did not hesitate to walk long distances in order to make a good bargain. This mobility was only possible because the women had relatives in the villages they were walking through, otherwise the state of endemic warfare would have hindered their movements (Green 1964: 151).

An Igbo village market usually lies in the centre of the compounds. It is linked to the village-group market which lies either in the centre of the village group or on neutral territory in between two village groups. The Igbo market was owned and controlled by the whole village. It was generally supervised by a council of women who punished violence and stealing and performed rituals for the market deity (Basden 1921: 195).

Contradictory evidence exists as to whether the council also fixed the prices. K. Okonjo (1976: 47) writes for the area of Onitsha that the council of women which supervised the market also determined the prices. G. T. Basden (1921: 195), describing the system in the area of Awka at the beginning of this century, says at one point that ‘this council [of old women] often fixes prices, the rate of cowry exchange, what markets shall be visited, and with which towns commercial transactions should be maintained. It decrees what articles are to be admitted into the market and what is taboo. . .’. But he apparently contradicts this statement earlier in his book (ibid.: 90) saying: ‘No article of any value has a fixed price, exchanges are arranged only after long bouts of bargaining’. This contradiction may be resolved if we consider that, even if the volume of the goods traded was fixed for a certain quantity of currency tokens,
the quality of the products may have been disputed, as well as the dashes accorded during the transaction. Therefore, even in an exchange with fixed prices, the bargaining may have continued.

If we admit the hypothesis that prices were fixed on certain village markets, we are also able to understand the meaning of regulations prescribing which markets the women were allowed to visit and the restrictions towards articles entering the village.

As every market was an autonomous unit, regulated by an independent council, the terms of exchange may have differed from one to the other. One village in need of yams, for example, could offer a price fixed at a high level that would attract many sellers from the neighbourhood, until the other villages also lacked yams and forbade their women to sell. A village with a surplus of yams could also limit the sale from other places. These restrictive measures could also be used by villages which wanted to maintain a certain craft speciality on their market (Green 1964: 40): the council could forbid the sale of craft products made elsewhere.

The link between the village markets and long-distance trade was mainly created on the larger village-group markets. The long-distance traders brought goods not locally produced, like fish, cloth, ironwares, salt, or not produced in sufficient quantity in the area, like yams in the palm belt and oil in the north. Some of the women traders bought these goods wholesale in order to sell them retail on the village markets. At the same time they sold those goods they had collected on the local markets in larger quantities to the professional traders.

Considering the links between the village markets and long-distance trade, we may here refute the hypothesis advanced by A. G. Hopkins (1973: 58) that long-distance trade tended to cater for the needs of high-income groups only, linking together islands of purchasing power. We would like to advance the opposite hypothesis, that the long-distance trade linked to the village-market network catered for the needs of large parts of the population, balancing scarcities and surpluses—in providing horses and cattle for sacrifice to the high-income groups, it even contributed towards balancing the economic differences.

3 - Organization and Control of Long-Distance Trade

The transport of goods along the long-distance routes runs for a large part parallel to the market network. Products like slaves, cattle and horses never entered the village markets, but were transported and sold rapidly and sometimes secretly from one trading station to the other. Consumption goods and crafts travelled more overtly, however they also reached the village market only at the last stage of the chain. At the fairs of Uburu and Bende all the products were pooled to be exchanged. Slaves from all over Igboland, sold as criminals or debtors, kidnapped or captured
in war or ambush, and rejected as an abomination by their community, were advertised openly and grouped to be sold to the coast or, in smaller numbers, inside Igboiland. Uburu, the northern fair, was famous for the trade in salt (Northrup 1978: 105-107), pigs, horses and cattle, whereas the luxury goods coming up from the coast were sold further south at Bende. The markets of Nsukka and Onitsha were known for their large-scale commerce in foodstuffs.

No central authority controlled the trade, each group was responsible for its own security, for the smooth functioning of its network of commercial friends and allies, and for its success in the fierce competition with rival communities.

a/ The Trade Routes

A densely woven net of overland trade routes lay over the whole of pre-colonial Igbo country and connected it with the surrounding areas. In the east, an ancient route up the Cross river led from Ikom into the Bamenda grassfields (R. Harris 1972). In the west, Igboiland was connected to Yorubaland through several routes, one of the most important crossing the Niger via Onitsha and Asaba. To the north, the Niger was an important link to the transsaharan routes. To the south, the Orashi, Niger, Imo and Cross rivers were the main connections with the coast, although there also existed important overland routes, like the one from Bende through Aba to Okrika.

The trade routes centred on Bende and Uburu fairs and spread from there to smaller places like Nike or Aku in the north, Okigwi in the centre and Awka in the centre-west. The main points of change from overland to water transport were at Onitsha, Ossomari and Aboh on the Niger, Akwete on the Imo river, and Itu on the Cross river.

b/ The Trading Communities

Long-distance trade relied on personal relations. The long-distance merchant had to establish relations of friendship, alliance or ritual kinship with influential members of the villages he was passing through, since every village or village group was in a state of latent hostility with its neighbours. These hosts gave him a place to stay at night, helped him organize his business and provided guides to pass through the area (Jones fthcg.: 552). Each of these persons was offered a little gift or advantageous commercial conditions.

Most of the successful merchants came from particular communities

3. I am describing here only the most important connections. More detailed information about trade routes can be found in Northrup 1978; Afigbo 1973; Jones fthcg.
with a tradition in long-distance trade, the most famous being the Aro-
chukwu, Awka, Nri, Umunri, and Nkwerri. Although often in conflict
inside the local community, they displayed unity to the outside world,
which allowed them to exert considerable influence over the trade. They
could communicate to each other the needs of the customers and the
market conditions of the different areas. The authority of the Awka
smiths and traders and of Aro traders was also enforced, since they were
the agents of powerful oracles.4

The Aro, a mixture of Ibibio, Igbo and Akpa, may have appeared as
eye as the 14th century (Northrup 1978: 34-36). They specialized in
luxury goods and slaves and they certainly dominated the trade with the
coastal agents from the 18th century onwards. The Aro living in the
trading settlements and colonies, although they married women of the
neighbouring communities, tried to keep aloof from the native populations
and refused to give them their daughters in marriage (ibid.: 127). Most
of these settlements were small and peaceful and the presence of the Aro
colony was often appreciated by the village because it attracted wealth,
exotic goods and medicines and allowed the local population to get rid of
its wrongdoers by selling them as slaves (ibid.). The Aro relied on mar-
ket places for the retail sale of the goods imported from the coast, like
tobacco, spirits, gunpowder and textiles. However most of the time they
did not participate in the organization of the markets, which remained
under local control. Only in areas with a higher proportion of Aro
population, in Afikpo for example, did the Aro participate actively in
village councils and intervene in conflicts (ibid.: 121).

Aro settlements between Bende and Nri-Awka formed the village
group of Aro-Ndizuogo, whereas in other areas only a small number of
Aro families lived in each village group (Ukwu 1967: 651). All Aro
trading colonies and settlements remained attached to the patrilineage
which constituted their village Arochukwu. These lineages never
penetrated into the sphere of the Umunri traders most of Onitsha
province. Ndizuogo had importance because most of the trade between
the two spheres passed through it.

4. These oracles were consulted to solve serious conflicts within or between villages
and to increase fertility. G. T. Basden (1921: 245-250) gives us a detailed
description of the functioning of the oracle of Abwala in Awka: an itinerant
Awka blacksmith or trader brings the conflict and all the detailed background
information necessary to the oracle. After a certain time the parties in dispute
make the journey to Awka themselves. They are lodged in the house of their
conductor, make gifts and sacrifices, and their money is slowly drained from
them. In the end, sometimes after months, the oracle agrees to be consulted
and decides on the verdict. A person judged guilty is ‘eaten’ by the deity,
which means, most of the time, that he or she is sold into slavery by the Awka
people. An individual judged not guilty has to make expensive sacrifices to
honour the deity and gains considerable prestige when he comes back to the
area where the conflict started. The Aro oracles in Arochukwu and Aro-
Ndizuogo work on a similar principle.
The means the Aro employed to control local trade differed according to the conditions they found: in some areas they relied on an alliance with the warlike Ada, Ohaffia and Abam, whom they sometimes used as mercenaries. They were able to safeguard places by preventing an Abam attack, to settle conflicts with their help, but they were never able to control them completely (Northrup 1978: 121). Although the Aro had direct access to firearms imported by the Europeans, it seems they did not use their technological advantage to gain political control over Igbo-land; firearms only helped them to safeguard their position in trade, to make debtors pay back their debts and to hold the slaves they were to sell under control.

In areas where their military position was weaker, they based their commercial success on agreements with strong local traders and craftsmen or promoted the power of their oracle. Aro influence was confined to the overland routes inside Igbo-land. They as well as the Awka and Nkwerri had to organize the traffic with the coast with traders using waterways. With large canoes full of European goods, these coastal traders went up the waterways to meet their hinterland providers at the river ports along the Niger, Imo and Cross rivers (Hodder & Ukwu 1969: 135).

We have seen that although market networks and long-distance trade seemed to function on two almost separate levels, they were working according to the same principles. Money was involved in all transactions and no ideological barrier seems to have hindered the exchange of subsistence goods for money and of money for prestige items (ornaments, horses, etc.). The ideal of maximizing the advantages of one's village or trading community was present in all the exchanges. We may speculate that this pattern was already dominant before the advent of an important palm-oil trade with the Europeans.

**From an Integrated to a Dominating Overseas Trade**

The transition from the export of human beings captured through violence and sold in secrecy by a small group of professional traders, to the export of palm oil produced by thousands of small farmers and openly commercialized in every village market, poses some important questions about the direct impact of European demand on the internal trading structures. Most of the authors have tried to explain the palm-oil trade exclusively in terms of European demand, which encouraged African production to such an extent (Hopkins 1973) that it was able in a very short time not only to start offering enormous quantities of palm oil, but also to bring them rapidly to the coastal ports. I would like to elucidate this miracle and moderate the common belief in the mysterious powers of European demand.

I will examine the transition from an 'integrated' overseas trade to a
'dominating' one and try to relate the adaptation of the precolonial trading structure to the constraints of the colonial economy.

I - The Parallel Rise of Oil and Slave Trade

The abolition of the slave trade in 1807 by the British by no means brought it to an immediate end. Other European and American nations continued it with the African slave traders and brought it to a new peak in the 1820s and 1830s. In the 1810s, 9,200 slaves were shipped annually from the Biafra coast, and 20,000 in 1826 alone (Northrup 1978: 54-58). Meanwhile, the British demand for palm oil had received a response on the Biafra coast, and the British and Africans became successful in this new branch of business.

The response of the Igbo producers to British demand for palm oil was extremely fast: from 1806 to 1857, imports from the Biafra coast to Liverpool passed from 180 to 26,050 tons (Jones 1976: 615).

The explanation for this rapid increase is seen by various authors in the abolition of the slave trade and in the need of the African merchants to find a new product with which to deal. But, as we have seen, the actual rise of the slave trade in the first half of the 19th century contradicts such possibility. The palm-oil trade increased at the same time as the slave trade, palm oil being a further product exchanged, not just a replacement.

D. Northrup (1976: 361) sees a strong link between the slave and the palm-oil trades. He regards the latter as having developed out of the commerce in food that accompanied the trade in slaves. The rise of the slave trade in the last half of the 18th and the first half of the 19th century favoured an increasing demand for foodstuff to feed the slaves and merchants while in the harbour and on their voyage across the Atlantic. This trade in food followed the same routes as that in palm oil was subsequently to have. The food was produced by small producers and was carried through the market network towards the coast. Northrup (1978: 174) even claims that the coastal merchant States came to rely almost entirely on food imported from the hinterland, because they had so heavily specialized in commerce. He also suggests (1976: 362) that the slave trade encouraged a developmental economic growth which made the response to the demand for palm oil possible. He argues that the same regions that provided the food (yams) for the slave trade also provided the oil for the palm-oil trade.

I would agree with his analysis that the palm-oil trade is very likely to have used the market network for bulking and transporting oil, but I disagree with his explanation linking the commerce in oil to that in food. Northrup does not consider that the coastal States (apart from the Efik, who had their own local food supplies) could not grow all their
food in the delta. They originally exchanged salt and dried fish for yams coming down from the north, in particular from the Anambra valley. Oil did not necessarily take the same route as yam. Palm-oil producing communities often lay in very densely populated areas which lacked foodstuff far from having a surplus of it. It seems more likely that the communities which already owned large palm groves and traded palm oil for other goods, among them food, with neighbouring or more distant areas felt the increasing demand for palm oil and produced slightly more. Through the channels of the market network, the oil then arrived at the bulking centres on the waterways. It may have taken some time until the Igbo realized that they were producing for the Europeans. The palm-oil trade was therefore not necessarily incited by the growing slave trade, but rather it developed from the internal commercial structure, which already included dealing in palm oil.

The crucial question now is to understand the effect of growing exchange between the European merchants and the Igbo oil producers. In the first half of the 19th century the goods traded for palm oil did not differ very much from those traded for slaves. The imports included mainly commodities used as currencies inside Igboland—such as cowries, brass-rods, manillas, etc.—, or used as small change and consumption goods, such as salt, tobacco, or spirits. It is only in the second half of the 19th century that the import of cheap industrial goods increased and slowly replaced the raw materials and currencies (Northrup 1978: 208-214). The Igbo of the first half of the 19th century could therefore earn these means of exchange in order to reexchange them inside the internal trading structure for any item they needed. They sold their palm oil for currencies on the local market and may have reexchanged the currencies for foodstuffs from other areas.

G. I. Jones⁵ holds the opinion that the price fetched by palm oil on the coast was never sufficiently high to be an important incentive for considerably increasing production. No palm-trees were planted on purpose and the ones which had reproduced themselves through natural seed dispersal were not fully exploited even in the days of the palm-oil boom. The cutting of palm-nuts was so dangerous, and the boiling of oil such hard work, that the amount of oil produced per person remained limited. The expansion of exports was therefore due to a reorientation of the market network towards the oil trade with the coast, rather than to an increase in the productivity of the individual producer.

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⁵ Personal communication.
2 - The Adaptation of the Igbo Trading Structure

The adaptation of the traditional long-distance trade in Igbo country to the increasing constraints of overseas trade was extremely slow and was still not concluded as late as 1926 when the railway from Port Harcourt through Enugu to Kaduna was opening. Its transformation may have started with the discovery of the Niger confluence in 1830 by the Lander brothers, which opened to British trade an access to the interior. Or it might have been the final breakdown of the transatlantic slave trade in the middle of the 19th century which marked the beginning of a period when trade became dominated by foreign interests.

a/ The Fall of the Aro

The Aro system, concentrated on overland routes, was not suitable for the palm-oil trade, because the large quantities of oil bought wholesale could only be transported on waterways. The Aro therefore continued their commerce in slaves and tried to keep control over that in European goods. But the end of the transatlantic slave trade severed their direct access to imported goods and made them entirely rely on the internal slave market. Local demand, although increasing because some slaves were employed in the production of oil, could not counterbalance the lack of foreign demand. Aro effort in the second half of the 19th century to engage in the palm-oil trade and to coordinate its transactions through their network of communication may have come too late, as other Igbo were already involved in such a low-grade trade with the coastal merchants and later directly with the agents of the Europeans (Afigbo 1974: 70).

The evangelization of the Cross river through the Presbyterian mission from 1846 onwards and the establishment of the Onitsha Christian Missionary Society mission in 1857 contributed to undermine the authority of the Aro oracles. The new trading centres and administrative headquarters up the Niger and Cross river seriously limited the Aro sphere of influence. The relation between Aro and British traders soon became a powerplay for influence: the Aro tried to prevent the people in the riverine areas from trading directly with the British. They menaced the women doing so with sterility and announced an attack of the Abam (ibid.: 72). The British promoted their interests with gunboats up the Niger and Cross river and tried to detach allied tribes from the Aro. Sir George Taubman Goldie, head of the Royal Niger Company, wrote in 1899: ‘If the Royal Niger Company had had a free hand, they would have made the overthrow of this power their first main concern on receiving the charter in 1886, but in view of the Aro country containing the markets of all the principal Oil Rivers (except Benin) any such action
was for political reasons inadvisable'.

The overthrow happened only three years later, in 1902, with the destruction of the Aro oracle in Arochukwu, which marked the definitive entry of the British into Igboland.

b/ From Import of Currencies to Import of Commodities

More than by the inflationary import of manilla rings, cowries and iron during the 19th century, the Igbo economy was affected by an increasing import of cheap industrial goods from Europe. Hardwares fabricated in the growing British steel industry competed successfully with the craft products of local smiths. Cheap cotton from Manchester started to replace the various kinds of African cloth, while the missionary activities promoted European standards of prudery and an increasing consumption of textile. The salt formerly produced in the Niger delta was now imported almost as ballast from Liverpool (Jones fthcg.: 623). The European traders developed a monopoly in the salt trade by encouraging their partners, the African coastal chiefs, to prohibit salt production on the coast (Northrup 1978: 213).

With the import of large quantities of cheap fabricated goods, the overseas trade stopped being just one integrated element in the internal trading structure. The imported products were no longer only a means of exchange circulating in the internal economy and allowing for the selling of goods produced in Igboland, but were starting to compete with the internal production and to replace it. This process was still to be enforced by colonization, when the British traders directly took their products to the internal markets.

c/ The Invasion of the British Traders into Igboland

The conquest of Igboland in the first years of this century had strong economic motives. It was aimed at gaining control over internal exchanges and at eliminating the African middlemen controlling the trade between the coast and the hinterland. European demand for palm oil had sharply increased at the end of the 19th century, but African production remained relatively low. The British merchants intended to avoid the middlemen and to deal directly with the producers (Jones fthcg.: 649).

The strategies of the colonial administration corresponded to the interests of the British traders. The colonial headquarters were established either in the old commercial centres (Bende, Awka, Okigwi, etc.) which they were now able to control, or on the old routes, where the new

British trading stations were built (Aba, Owerri, Oguta, etc.) which replaced the traditional market centres (Ukwu 1967: 657). The colonial administration also almost immediately started to clear the old waterways and make them accessible to larger canoes. British trade factories were established at Itu, the old river port of the Aro. Following the clearing of waterways, the project of a railway was realized. In 1916 the first part, from Port Harcourt to Enugu, was finished. It cut across the old trading structure, its stations taking the place of the old market centres: Uzuakoli that of Bende fair, Aba station that of Ndoki market centre. Port Harcourt, the new port linked to the railway, made the old ports linked to the waterways inefficient (Jones fthcg.: 665). In the 1920s and 1930s, with the construction of feeder trunk roads to the railway, oil lorries superseded water transport in importance. No roads were built in the Niger and Cross river deltas. The coastal traders became increasingly cut off from the hinterland and some of them moved inland into the new British commercial centres.⁷

The former long-distance merchants were either integrated as agents or clients into the colonial trading structure or excluded from business. The agents of the British traders started controlling the wholesale purchase of oil and the sale of European goods and even the traditional exchanges of cattle and horses with the north. They either travelled in the area surrounding the factory to buy oil from smaller middlemen or collected it from them on the factory ‘beaches’ (Jones fthcg.: 669-670). A middleman wanting to be accepted as a customer by a British firm had to deposit a substantial sum of money; only then goods were advanced to him but never in excess of his deposit. Middlemen would specialize in particular articles, which they then distributed in smaller loads to their agents, who carried them for sale on commission to the markets of the area where their master traded (ibid.: 650-651).

The network of village markets was the last to be affected by the new trading policies. In the first two decades of this century, the village markets continued being controlled by market women using native currencies and acting as small middlemen between the producers of palm oil and the agents of the traders. Their position changed when the agents started buying directly on the village markets, dictating the prices of purchase. Igbo men were encouraged to sell directly to the agents, without first passing through the women who customarily produced the oil and sold it. An attempt to establish the first oil-mill, at Ibagwa, ended up in a women’s riot. New regulations controlling the quality of the oil produced and the Market Ordinance of 1924 (instituting a product examination fee) increased the dissatisfaction of the women.

The introduction of British money in the village markets in the 1920s

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⁷ The systematic development of an entirely new structure of communication was only possible through the use of forced labour.
constituted a particular problem. The traditional cowry and iron currencies experienced a considerable loss of value whereas British money became more and more exclusively accepted by the British traders and the colonial government. The women lacked a stable currency for their market transactions and especially for the wholesale purchases from the British traders. Brass-rods and manillas were no longer imported and became almost unobtainable because the metal was transformed into ornaments. British money, already a rare and overvalued currency, received an even higher value with the introduction of taxation in 1928, which regularly emptied the country of all its coin money, leaving the inhabitants, especially the market women in the remote villages, with an inflating stock of native currencies or with no currency at all. Not only did the markets become subject to the British monetary policies, but they also started to directly experience the fluctuations of the world-market prices. When the price for palm oil fell on the world market in 1929, the village women were directly affected. They lost a considerable part of their income in British money, found themselves unable to contribute to the taxes of their husbands and to continue buying wholesale from the trading agents. The crisis of the village market led to the all-women riots of 1929, spreading over most of the oil-producing areas (Müller 1981).

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The Igbo economy in the 19th century, with its extensive use of 'general purpose money', its reliance on markets and trade, and its decentralized political and economic organization, may have been to some extent exceptional then in West Africa. But it may serve as an interesting test case for Eurocentric economic history.

Analysing the factors of internal exchange and examining the impact of European imports throughout the century, I come to the conclusion that until the 1850s the development of markets and trade in Igboland did not depend on external European incentives. Imports did not restructure indigenous production but had to adapt to the internal trading structure. The contemporary trend towards increasing dependence on overseas trade and the domination of the domestic economy by foreign trade relations only started to emerge in the second half of the 19th century with the massive imports of European industrial goods. Although the internal exchange could function on the basis of 'native' currencies until the beginning of the 20th century, the Igbo could no longer rely on these after the invasion of British traders introducing the strong centrally controlled British currency into all aspects of social and economic life.

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