

# Refugees in Western Africa



## Introduction

While in Europe large-scale refugees movements were starting to decline by the end of the 17th century, several thousand miles due south, in West Africa, refugees were becoming a mass phenomenon like never before in the areas known as the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin, in places that today are Ghana, Togo, Benin, and southwestern Nigeria. As it turns out, the widespread trade of firearms for enslaved Africans from the 1670s and 80s contributed to the rise of new forms of hierarchical, militarized states - like the Akwamu, Asante, and Dahomey kingdoms in West Africa - that waged wars of territorial expansion, flooding their regions with refugees fleeing violence.

## REFUGEES IN WESTERN AFRICA

### INTRODUCTION

### THE TRADE OF FIREARMS FOR ENSLAVED PEOPLE

### REFUGEES FLEEING NEW MILITARIZED AFRICAN STATES

### CONCLUSION

## Early African-European Exchanges in West Africa

When Africans living the West Coast of Africa in the 1470s encountered Europeans, they were living in small, largely egalitarian societies. The coast itself only had small fishing villages that supplied the populations further inland, where larger-scale settlements engaged in agricultural production and long-distance trade. In most of the Gold Coast, people spoke Akan-languages and, while there were political and linguistic differences, mostly they shared the same cultural system and religious beliefs. To their east, most people on the coast spoke Ewe, a Gbe language in the Volta-Niger language group. There was multilingualism and migration, so this distinction is not absolute, but it paints a general picture. Most people lived a life of farming, raising animals and hunting, mostly dwelling in settled communities. There were social and political hierarchies, and most communities were ruled by a kind of a king, but power was relatively decentralized and kin based. The prevailing institutional frameworks for daily life were horizontal - ties among peers - rather than hierarchical. There existed diverse forms of bondage, including polygamy, debt bondage, voluntarily bondage for protection, as well as forms of chattel slaves (most of whom were women). However, such forms of bondage made up a small percentage of the population, few individuals were ever deprived self-determination, and such statuses were rarely heritable.

## Key Terms:

Gold Coast

Bight of Benin

Slave Trade

West India Company

Akwamu

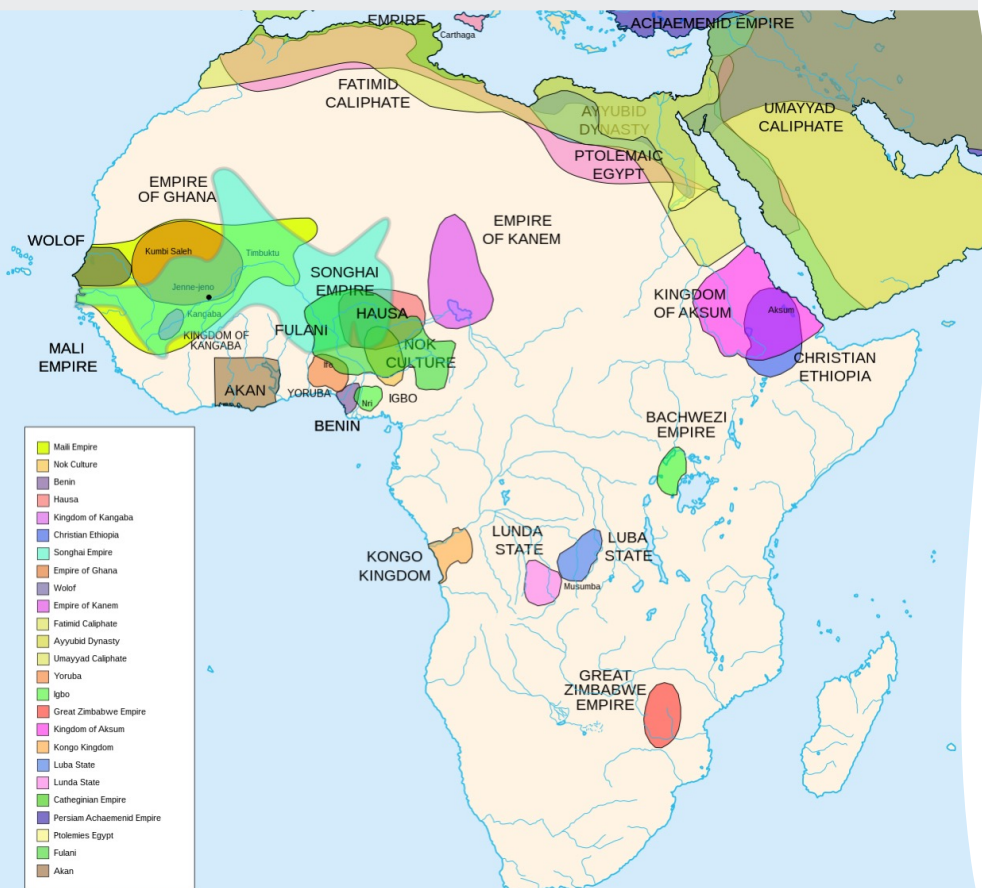
Asante

Jan Conny

Kingdom of Dahomey

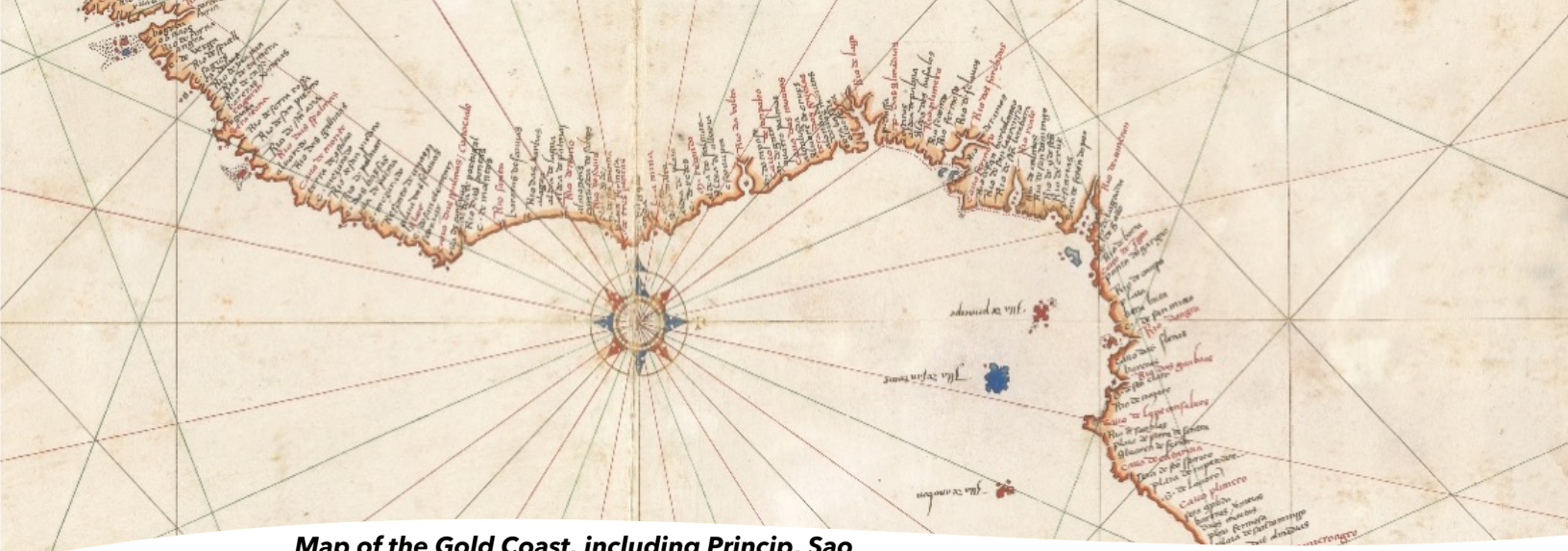
Trudo Agaja

Whydah



**Map of 15th century African civilizations**





**Map of the Gold Coast, including Princip, Sao Tome, and Annabon, 1511**



**Fort St. Anthony at Axim**

Soon after the first Portuguese sailors arrived in the area of present-day Ghana, they began purchasing such bonded people from West African kings, first to trade for gold elsewhere along the coast, then later to export them as forced laborers on sugar plantations in the islands of Sao Tomé and Príncipe, and by the 1520s to colonies in the Americas. Initially, coastal societies acquired enslaved people from middlemen on the coast, who had acquired them from Africans living further inland as war captives, as tributes from neighboring kingdoms, or as people bonded after committing a crime. Initially, this trade in human beings remained modest. Europeans were far more interested in this region for its gold.

Europeans purchased gold and slaves with cowrie shells (which many West Africans used for currency), but also gold, metals, tobacco, alcohol, clothing, and household goods. Initially, Europeans were wary of trading firearms, since they were so far outnumbered in more than twenty small forts along the coast, including St. George's Castle at Elmina and Fort St. Anthony at Axim. When they did sell Africans guns, they sold older, poorly functioning ones and provided no training. But for the most part, Europeans agreed amongst themselves not to sell firearms to Africans.



**St. George's Castle at Elmina, 1572**





**Elmina Castle, under the Dutch Flag**

## The Trade of Firearms for Enslaved People

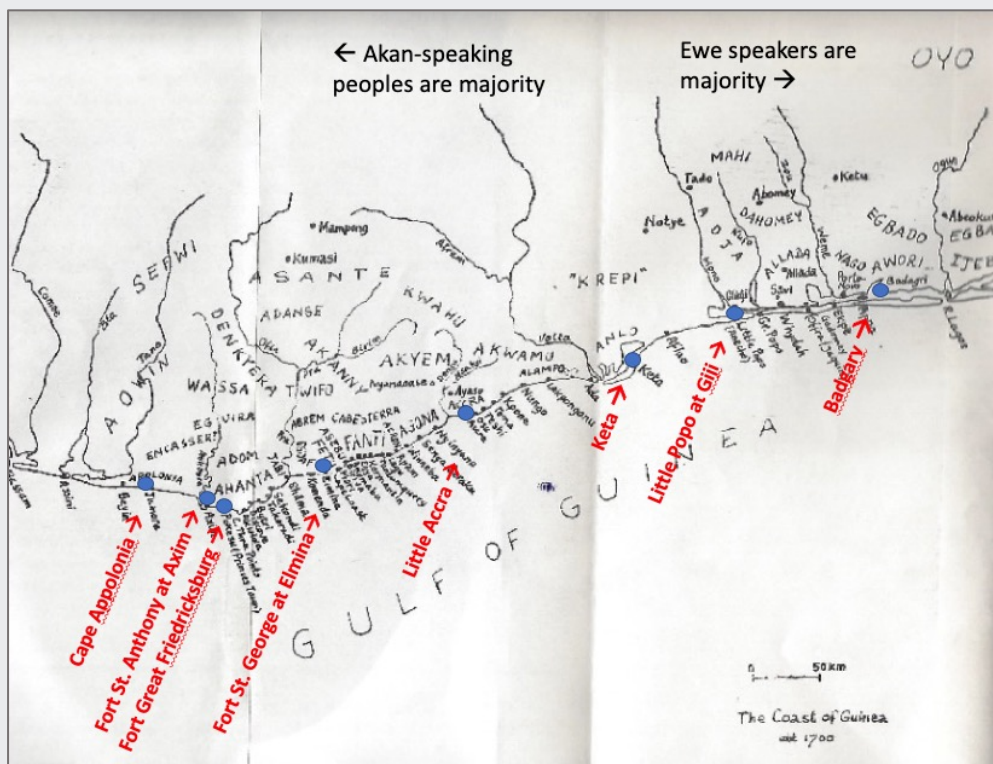
During the mid-17th century, these arrangements began to transform. The increasing demand for sugar in European cities, especially among wealthy merchants and businessmen with disposable income, sparked increasing public and private investments to intensify colonialism and expand mass enslavement in the Americas.

The Dutch Republic played a critical role in these developments. Starting in 1621, a new joint stock corporation with a government sponsored monopoly on Dutch Atlantic trade, the West India Company (WIC) began competing with the Spanish and Portuguese for domination of the Atlantic Ocean trade. In 1624, the WIC captured Salvador da Bahia, largest port in Brazil, a colony already producing significant amounts of sugar for export to Europe. The Portuguese expelled the Dutch the following year, but in 1630 the WIC sent a more formidable force and took control of all of Brazil. Now, Dutch officials felt an urgent demand for labor to work in Brazil's lucrative sugar plantations. That's why, for the first time, they turned to the large-scale purchase of enslaved Africans.



**Flag of the West India Company**

Dutch traders working for the WIC had already been doing business in West Africa from the 1590s. With the capture of Brazil, the WIC started dramatically increasing its slave trading along the Gold Coast. In 1637, the Dutch captured the Portuguese trading fort at Elmina. Within five years, they had taken control of all Portuguese-held lands in the region, and were becoming major slave traders, with over a dozen trading locations along the coast.



**Map of locations along the West African Coast mentioned in this reading, 1700**





**European ships off the coast of Elmina Castle**

By around 1650, these Dutch investments in Africa and the Americas were paying off. Stocks and bonds of the WIC amounted to 22.1 million guilders. For all this wealth, though, Dutch colonial rule in Brazil was a disaster. They faced rebellions from colonists as well as continued attacks from Spanish and Portuguese warships until in 1654, Portugal took back the colony from the Dutch Republic altogether.

While Dutch rule in Brazil was relatively short lived, it proved important to West Africa because the WIC used this opportunity to dramatically improve the efficiency and profits of the trade in enslaved Africans. After 1654, except for their colony in Suriname, the Dutch largely got out of operating colonies with large-scale plantations that functioned on the labor of enslaved Africans, like those operated by Portugal, Spain, England, and France. Now, they mostly purchased enslaved people on the African coast and resold them to non-Dutch buyers. From 1626 to 1650, Europeans purchased some 350 enslaved people per year from the Gold Coast and Bight of Benin. Between 1676 and 1700, those numbers had increased to more than 11,300 per year.\* The sale of enslaved people now far eclipsed all other trade with Europeans in the region.

Dutch traders spearheaded this transition in the intervening years. From 1641 to 1670, the WIC conducted at least 300 documented trans-Atlantic slaving voyages, or about 47% of the total number or slave expeditions. Dutch slave traders dramatically expanded the Atlantic slave system, including expanding the efficiency of the purchase, transport, and resale of enslaved Africans in what became a brutal and inhumane system of violence, exploitation, and terror.



**Map of slave trade from Africa above, and records of English slaving ship below**

*The Account of Negroes bought one bord the good Ship called the "Sarah Booneadventure" by Henry Nurs Comander For the Account of the Royall African Company of England on the gold Coast of Guiney from the 28 day of Feb. to the 18 day of July 1676/7.*

Men Slaves	Women	Boyes	Gerles	the First Cost	P's Sayes	Perpetonos	Nitrones	Tapsells	Paper bralls	Sheets	Musketts	Sleties	Iron barrs	Knives	½ barr'll Powder	Oun.[ounces]	Ang. [angles] <sup>18</sup>
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3		1	1		2	2	2	4	4	1							
4					1	1	1	4	6	1							
2	3				1	3		4	4	1							
2	2	1			2½			3½									6

\*These estimates come from researchers who present their findings on [slavevoyages.org](http://slavevoyages.org).





**Engraving of African coast, showing Elmina fort, European ships, and fishing boats**

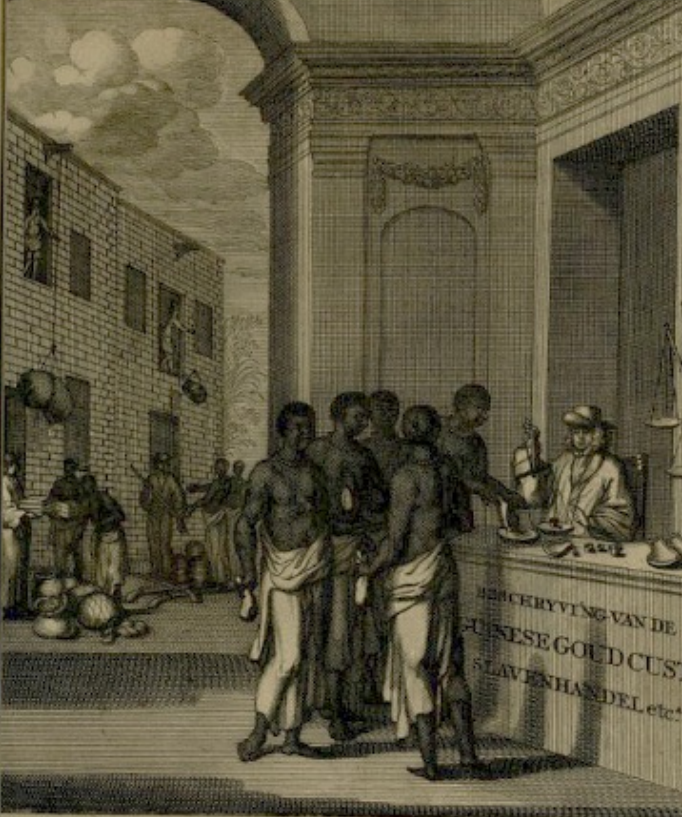
As demand in the Americas for enslaved Africans rose dramatically, on the West African coast the costs for enslaved Africans also went up. In this context, Europeans began offering firearms for sale in large numbers. In the 1650s, English traders first began selling more reliable muskets (flintlocks instead of matchlocks) in large numbers to African buyers. Other Europeans soon followed suit. Of course, the global sale of guns and gunpower proved a boon for weapons manufacturers back in Europe. Many African rulers also now saw that the new weapons gave them advantages against their rivals. Some even began to demand that Europeans only pay them in guns. By the 1670s and 80s, coastal communities on the Gold Coast had large numbers of firearms and gunpower, which were also making their way inland.

Many historians have stressed that Europeans' increased demand for slave labor and their increased supply of firearms created a feedback loop for Africans. If Africans wanted more guns and gunpowder, they needed more enslaved people to trade. Mostly they acquired those enslaved people by waging war or conducting raids on neighboring peoples. Once equipped with the firearms, they could capture ever more prisoners. According to this explanation, such a circular incentive system fueled a gunpower revolution in West Africa that contributed to widespread warfare that engulfed the Gold Coast and Bight of Benin starting in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century.



**Engraving of a sugar mill in Brazil, 1682**





**Engraving of trade on the Gold Coast, 1704**

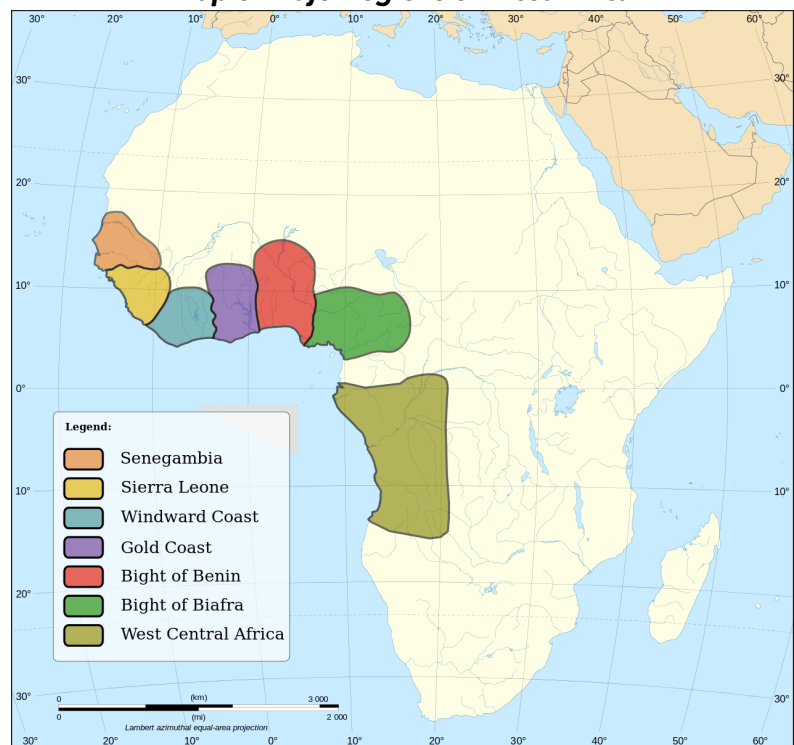
There remains debate about this point, though. The historian John Thornton has warned against assuming that West African rulers fought wars primarily to gain captives to trade for guns. They already had political and economic rivalries and long-standing grievances among one another, he points out. They also had traditions of taking war captives; these practices were not created when Europeans started selling them guns. But other historians have countered that, regardless of the intention of waging war, the effect of this incentive system was crystal clear. West African states that were successful in combat ended up with more war captives. Some of these captives could be incorporated into their state, but others could be sold to Europeans.

Finally, one benefit of that trade was the acquisition of guns and gunpowder, which made those state more successful in war against neighbors. Thus, Kwame Yeboa Daaku has shown that it was the newly expanding supply in guns, not changes in demand, that explains the glut of firearms on the Gold Coast (by comparing it to places where supply and demand remained the same). Joseph Inikori argues that even more important than the increasing supply of guns was the increasing European demand for enslaved African laborers during these years. Patrick Manning, Kwasi Konadu, and Kwabena Abu-Boahen and many others have similarly concluded that, regardless of the explicit motivations of leaders to go to war, the incentive system created by new markets introduced by Europeans starting in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century contributed to widespread warfare, even if the hostilities inciting the war itself were regional political hostilities.

## Refugees Fleeing New Militarized African States

By the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the merchant/agrarian societies that had once dominated the region were collapsing. In their place, the firearms-for-slaves exchange led to the rise of new expansionist, military states that grew more powerful, and more deadly, the more slaves they captured. Refugees fled this commercialization of violence, redefining themselves as they coped with these traumatic changes. Meanwhile many war refugees themselves turned to robbing and raiding for captives, since they found themselves with few resources.

**Map of major regions of West Africa**





## The Akwamu

The Akwamu kings of the Gold Coast were among the first to benefit from this new incentive system, starting in the 1680s. Akwamu armies raided the nearby hills looking for captives, many of which they sold to Europeans. The region became awash with refugees fleeing Akwamu raids. In some cases, these refugees introduced new methods of manufacturing salt and building canoes to their hosts.



**King Ofori of Accra**

### Explore more..

The Akwamu existed in present-day Ghana. Learn more about the impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade on Ghana:

- [Impact of the Slave Trade: Through a Ghanaian Lens](#)
- [Interview with Ghanaian Historian Akosua Perbi on the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade](#)

In 1677, the King of Accra, Ofori, escaped Akwamu attacks on his inland capital at Great Accra to the coastal city of Little Accra, where he established a court in exile. But the Akwamu kept coming, conquering Little Accra in 1681. Ofori and his followers fled eastwards across the Volta River, settling at Glijji, where they established a new refugee kingdom called Little Popo. With this victory, the Akwamu now successfully controlled some coastal territory around Accra, and thus gained direct access to European traders, giving them greater access to firearms, which helped them continue expanding.

The impact of Akwamu expansionism reverberated. As turned out, most refugees preferred to flee east or west along the coast, rather than inward, because they could thereby continue to access European trade posts, where they could purchase guns and sell enslaved people. The Adangme - another group of refugees fleeing Akwamu expansion - like Ofori's people moved eastward, to the Keta region, not quite far east at Little Popo, where they became notorious and violent bandits.

As many groups fled Akwamu expansion, they came to compete with one another for scarce resources. Such was the case with Little Popo and the Adangme kingdom of Ladoku. The king of Accra, the successor to Ofori, but also called Ofori, was reportedly killed in 1693 or 1694 in an attack on the Adangme. The Adangme refugees followed their victory over the Little Popo with an attack on Glijji, whose population fled as refugees yet again, this time inland to Allada. Wars in the western coast of the Bight of Benin, which included other regional powers, continued into early 1700s.

Over time, groups of refugees fleeing Akwamu raids formed a unified resistance. By 1729, this group sacked Akwamu's capital and established a new multilingual hybrid society - the Kingdom of Akuapem - made up of former refugees. Meanwhile the following year, the Akyem defeated the Akwamu, and now Akwamu refugees moved east to join the refugees their armies had forced there earlier.





**Depiction of an Asante scout, 1824**

## The Asante

To the northeast of the Akwamu, also on the Gold Coast, the Asante saw a similar rise to political prominence. Originally a tribute state of the more powerful Denkyira Kingdom, around 1701 a chieftain, Osei Tutu, and a local spiritual leader amassed a coalition of chiefs unhappy with Denkyira rule that rose up and defeated Denkyira. Osei Tutu's new kingdom then expanded further by launching wars on people toward the coast. These early conquests gave the Asante direct access to the Dutch trade fort at Elmina, and thus greater access to firearms, which they trade for gold, ivory, and slaves. Refugees fleeing Asante attacks moved west, to the Aowin Kingdom, which filled with all kinds of people fleeing Asante attacks. By 1715 the Asante began attacking the Aowin Kingdom itself, both to punish the Aowin and to recapture the refugees they protected. Refugees only began fleeing anew. One, named Domma, led a group of roughly 200 women refugees toward the town of Benga, where they were captured by raiders who captured and sold refugees like these in slave markets. By January 1716, the king of Aowin capitulated to the Asante.

Refugees fleeing Asante attacks also fled to Fort Great Fredericksburg, a fort built by German slavers from Brandenburg-Prussia in 1681, but in 1708 captured and controlled by an Akan merchant-prince, Jan Conny (also written as kōne kpole, Johann Konny, John Conoe, and other spellings), who ruled over a diverse community of refugees fleeing Asante expansion. Conny, who had moved from further inland, became a prominent merchant in the region around the Prussian fort. While the director of the Brandenburg-Africa Company, Nicolas du Bois, was formally in charge, he could only make decisions with Conny's consent. Conny became so powerful that in 1715 he sent du Bois back to Berlin, taking control over the fort and its environs in the name of the Prussian king. Conny's strength lay in his ability to attract and integrate a diverse array of refugees, and then redeploy their labor to serve his interests



**Map of the Asante Empire, 19<sup>th</sup> century**



**Depiction of the "John Canoe festival,"  
which emerged in the Caribbean after  
the fall of Fredericksburg and the  
enslavement of Jan Conny's supporters**

In 1716, Conny expelled Europeans from his forts and announced his plan to sell the fortifications to the French. The following year, the Brandenburg-African Company sold the rights to Fort Great Fredericksburg to the Dutch WIC. However, Conny did not recognize the right of the Germans to sell the fort without his approval. Conny grew famous through across the Gold Coast for standing up to Europeans. His fame grew even greater after Conny's soldiers successfully repelled a WIC sea attack, killing thirty-six Dutchmen and forcing a retreat. Conny continued to control Fort Great Fredericksburg for several years, declaring that the fort to be a "free port for all nations to trade but no none to settle."



The Dutch accepted his terms so long as they did not have the military strength to change the situation. In 1722, WIC traders reached an agreement with Conny granting them control of the fortification in exchange for a monthly rent, an annual tribute, and a lucrative one-time gift in trade goods. Conny's followers built him a new fortified encampment nearby. But Conny's legacy was not enduring. In November 1724, Dutch traders used grenades to destroy the walls of his new fortress. Early in 1725, Conny fled to an island off the coast, and then sought refuge inland, first with the Fante kingdom, and later further inland at the court of the Asante king. After that, the once powerful merchant-prince disappeared into obscurity, and into legend.

Meanwhile, Asante attacks across the Gold Coast continued through the 1720s. About fifty miles northwest of Fort Great Friedrichsburg, at the British fort of Cape Appolonia, another refugee society was emerging in the wake of Asante attacks of the 1680s. By 1721, the local queen of the inland kingdom of Adwɔmɔɔ fled from the region with her people to Assiini, where the refugees sought to purchase more guns and ammunition to defend themselves.

**Contemporary Fort Great Friedrichsburg**







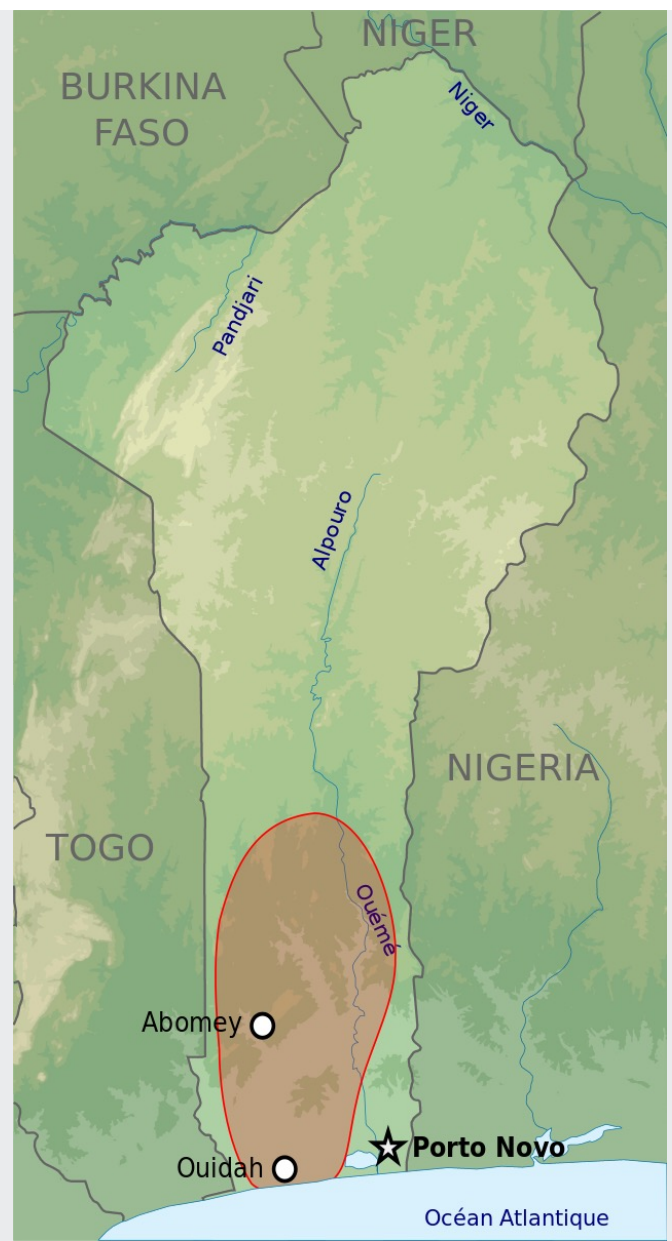
**Fort Appolonia, 1775**

Over time a new political order entirely emerged, as an enterprising migrant from inland named Anɔ Bile consolidated control over regional trade and loyalty from other refugees. By 1730, he had consolidated Appolonia into organized merchant state based around the trade fort there, a feat Jan Conny never even tried. In the 1760s, Anɔ Bile's successors consolidated Appolonia into a more centralized kingdom, until the Asante kingdom incorporated it as a tribute state in 1809.

### **The Dahomey**

The most extreme transformation in political order in West Africa resulting from the rise in the firearms-for-slaves exchange was the rise of the Kingdom of Dahomey, on the Bight of Benin, which by the 1680s, had emerged as a new form of state unlike anything else in West Africa. It was a heterogenous community of people from diverse kinship groups, and ruled through a hierarchical order based on property ownership, not kinship or horizontal forms of affinity. It was also an autocratic military state whose central focus was waging war, which allowed it to capture slaves, which permitted it to acquire more firearms which allowed it to wage more war. Its soldiers were well equipped with muskets, and well trained in their use. The Dahomey also retrained some war captives as soldiers and established a large underclass of enslaved war captives that functioned as chattel slaves for the king. From the 1710s to the 1730s, Dahomey, especially under King Trudo Agaja, conquered neighboring kingdoms, becoming the leading power in the western Bight of Benin - in what historian Robin Law calls a "revolution of destruction."

**Map of Dahomey Kingdom, superimposed on modern day West Africa**



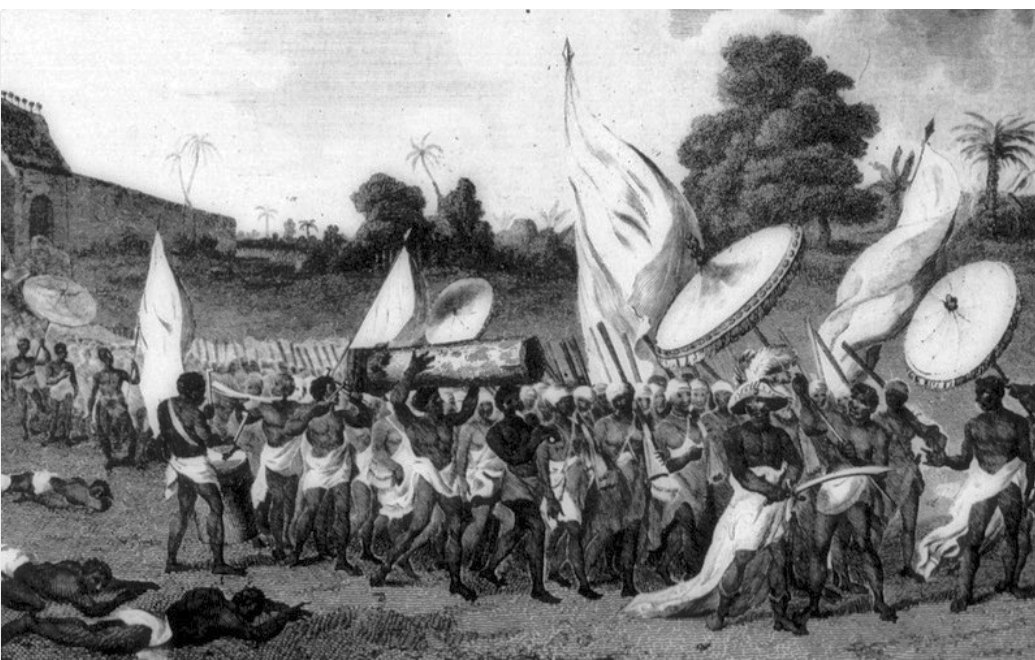


### **Armed soldier, Dahomey, 1891**

How self-conscious was Trudo Agaja about the slave-for-guns cycle? Unfortunately, the surviving written evidence discussing this question was produced by Europeans, who were not only poorly informed about the king's strategies, but as slave traders themselves, often saw Africans through grotesquely distorted filters. In 1734, the English slave trader William Snelgrave noted that the king "drives no regular Trade in Slaves, but only sells such as he takes in his Wars." Conversely, in his *The History of the Dahomey* (1793), the Scottish slaver, Archibald Dalzel, concluded that Trudo Agaja understood the advantage of capturing once unimportant coastal communities: "A very little experience must have taught such a mind as that of Trudo, how much more effective were the European weapons than those used by the inland people of Africa; and this must have suggested to him the advantage of a sea-coast, where only those weapons were to be obtained."



Since Snelgrave had lived at the same time as Trudo Agaja, and had even met him, it's possible that his account offers more reliable evidence. And yet the ways in which each man used characterizations of the king to justify their slave trading make both claims suspicious. Snelgrave presented war captives as an unintended consequence of conflicts in which Europeans had no involvement (and thus no responsibility). But he also argued that life as a slave on a plantation in the Americas was superior to life in Africa! Writing over fifty years later in the face of increasing abolitionist pressure, Dalzel portrayed Trudo Agaja as inhumanly and grotesquely cruel, and thus that Europeans were merciful by enslaving his war captives. Clearly, it's hard to take either man's account as a transparent account of the Dahoman king. Regardless of Trudo Agaja's intent, it's true that once he was in possession of slave ports, he sold war captives as his personal property, and used the wealth from their sale to purchase guns, which he used to fuel his expansion. Oral histories of Akan speakers conducted by historian Kwame Daaku starting in 1965 support the conclusions that West Africans were self-conscious about the importance of trading in guns along the coast.



**Engraving of the Ahsu (king's wife) of Dahomey under an umbrella, followed by musicians and an army of female warriors, many of whom would have been enslaved, 1793**



The Dahomey conquests sparked more waves of refugees. People fled eastward to the town of Aklon, for instance, where they overwhelmed local populations and established a new Gbe-speaking kingdom of Porto-Novo. Similarly, members of the kingdom of Weme fled east along the coast to establish a new state further to the east at Badagry, in present-day Nigeria. The ruling Whydah king and his followers who had been driven their homes in 1727 by the Dahomey moved to a series of fortified islands off the coast. From there, the Whydah kept up a small-scale war against the Dahomey, until the latter began barricading the island from food shipments. The conquests slowed in the 1740s, as a new king of Dahomey shifted away from its model of being a war machine and began incorporating more conquered peoples, established a more stable bureaucratic system, and promoting a shared identity among the Dahomey people.



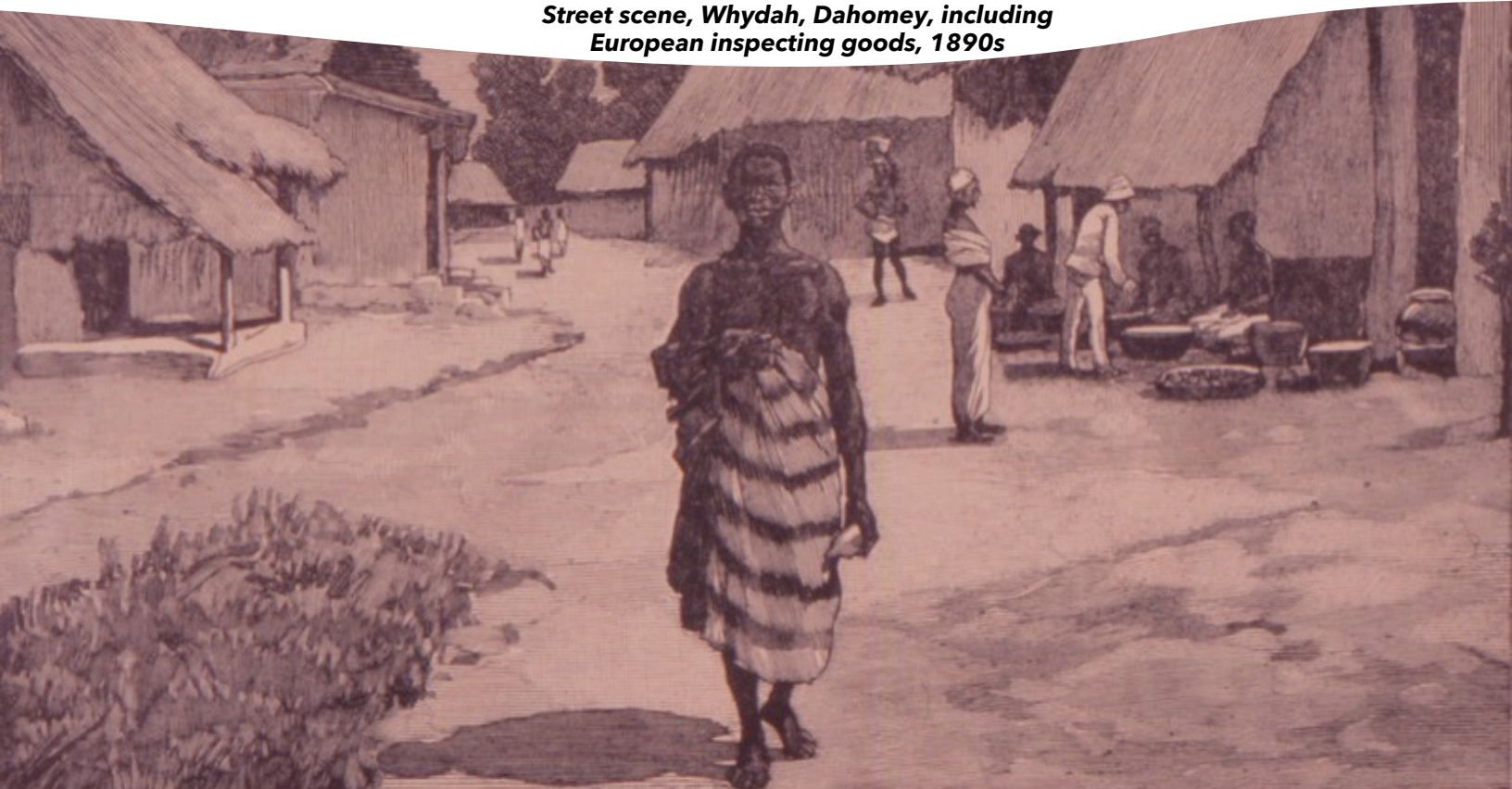
***Enslaved African, Dahomey***

## **Conclusion**

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The incentive systems created by the sale of firearms for captives meant that new war-based states fueled a transformation in West African politics, economics, and culture. In 1730, a Dutch agent wrote “that part of Africa which is of old known as the ‘Gold Coast’ ... had now virtually changed into a pure Slave Coast; the great quantity of guns and powder which the Europeans have from time to time brought here has given cause to terrible wars.” As noted above, we should be cautious about using Europeans’ testimonies about Africans uncritically during this period. But the Dutchman was certainly right out the general pattern. Some of the refugees fleeing this violence only further perpetuated violence themselves. Others adapted to their new homes, introduced new innovations to their hosts, welcomed others in need, and contributed to the creation of entirely new societies.

***Street scene, Whydah, Dahomey, including European inspecting goods, 1890s***





# Further Reading

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# Image Citations:

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## Page 2:

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## Page 4:

View of the Castle of Elmina, Gold Coast in Guinea, Johannes Vingboons, c. 1665-1668, Australian National Library, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ElMina\\_AtlasBlaeuvanderHem.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ElMina_AtlasBlaeuvanderHem.jpg)  
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Map of the Coast of Guinea, 1700, from The Dutch and the Guinea Coast, 1674-1742: A Collection of Documents from the General State Archive at The Hague, edited by A. Van Dantzig (Accra: Gaas, 1978), inset before page 1. Annotations by Jesse Spohnholz.

## Page 5:

"Untitled Image (Elmina Castle)", Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora, accessed June 4, 2022, <http://www.slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/item/600>  
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