

## CONTENTS

	<i>List of Illustrations</i> · xi	
	<i>Preface</i> · xiii	
	<i>Acknowledgements</i> · xvii	
	<i>Orthography, Currency Values, and Weights</i> · xix	
	<i>Abbreviations</i> · xxi	
	Prologue: A Gunboat for Christmas, 1851	1
CHAPTER 1	The Global Meets the Local	5
	<i>The Revival of Economic History</i>	6
	<i>Port Cities in History</i>	8
	<i>The Colonial Port City</i>	12
	<i>Entrepreneurship in a Colonial Context</i>	15
	<i>The Entrepreneurs of Lagos</i>	21
	<i>Cases and Sources</i>	23
	<i>Three Shocks</i>	26
	<i>Signposts</i>	28
PART I	THE SHOCK OF 1851	31
CHAPTER 2	Creating a Cosmopolitan Frontier, 1851–1880	33
	<i>The Expansion of Legitimate Commerce</i>	34
	<i>Business Uncertainty under the Consulate</i>	38
	<i>Founding a New Colony</i>	46
	<i>Settling In: The Town and Its Inhabitants</i>	53
	<i>The Saro Draw Lines in the Sand</i>	61
	<i>The New Order Established</i>	69
CHAPTER 3	The Mercantile Community	72
	<i>The New Commercial Environment</i>	72

	<i>Property Becomes Big Business</i>	75
	<i>Winners and Losers</i>	82
	<i>Men of the Marina</i>	86
	<i>Taking Stock</i>	101
CHAPTER 4	Chief Daniel Taiwo and His Network	103
	<i>Becoming a Lagosian</i>	104
	<i>From Kosoko to Glover</i>	106
	<i>‘The Head of All the Markets in the Colony’</i>	111
	<i>Business and Politics</i>	120
	<i>The Closing Years</i>	131
	<i>Conclusion</i>	132
CHAPTER 5	James Davies, King of the Merchant Princes	135
	<i>A Saro Story—With Royal Connections</i>	136
	<i>Davies and Taiwo: An Unexpected Alliance</i>	146
	<i>From the Heights to the Depths</i>	151
	<i>Returning to Business</i>	159
	<i>Halfway</i>	161
PART II	THE SHOCK OF 1892	165
CHAPTER 6	Crisis and Transition, 1880–1900	167
	<i>The Commercial Outlook</i>	168
	<i>Business Uncertainty under the Colony</i>	172
	<i>Expanding the Colony</i>	177
	<i>The Commercial Consequences of Colonial Expansion</i>	184
	<i>The Port and Its People</i>	189
	<i>Reverberations</i>	197
CHAPTER 7	The Mercantile Community	199
	<i>The Consequences of the Invasion of Yorubaland</i>	199

	<i>Failure and Success</i>	205
	<i>The End of a Golden Age?</i>	221
	<i>'Decline' in Context</i>	226
CHAPTER 8	Merchants as Money Lenders: Richard Blaize and Isaac Williams	228
	<i>Context</i>	228
	<i>Richard Beale Blaize: Beginnings</i>	229
	<i>Diversification: Property and Money Lending</i>	235
	<i>A Family Man</i>	238
	<i>Newspapers and Politics</i>	239
	<i>Blaize's Legacy</i>	243
	<i>Isaac Benjamin Williams: Early Life</i>	245
	<i>The Import Trade</i>	248
	<i>Property, Mortgages, and Rentals</i>	256
	<i>Family and Church</i>	261
	<i>Two Lives Compared</i>	263
CHAPTER 9	James Davies: The First of the Cocoa Farmers	265
	<i>Acquiring Woodland Estate</i>	266
	<i>Developing the Estate in the 1880s</i>	272
	<i>The Estate Farm Book, 1896–1899</i>	278
	<i>Ijon as a Centre of Innovation</i>	283
	<i>Output and Profits</i>	285
	<i>Final Years</i>	290
	<i>A Full Life</i>	292
CHAPTER 10	The Changing Economic Environment, 1900–1914	294
	<i>Commercial Expansion and Colonial Development Policy</i>	295
	<i>The New Commercial Environment</i>	302
	<i>Institutional Innovation</i>	306

	<i>Political Aspects of Entrepreneurial Motivation</i>	312
	<i>The Port and Its Inhabitants</i>	315
	<i>The Consequences of the Second Shock</i>	321
CHAPTER 11	Accommodation and Diversification	323
	<i>Mercantile Fortunes</i>	323
	<i>Accommodating Colonial Rule</i>	329
	<i>Diversifying the Economy</i>	341
	<i>Pioneers of Mechanisation</i>	345
	<i>Financial Innovation</i>	352
	<i>Bouncing Back</i>	360
CHAPTER 12	Negotiating Colonial Rule: Josiah Doherty and Samuel Pearse	362
	<i>The Doherty Family: Beginnings</i>	362
	<i>Josiah Doherty Finds His Own Business</i>	365
	<i>Feeling the Strain, 1914–1928</i>	368
	<i>The Man in the Merchant</i>	371
	<i>Samuel Pearse: The Great Survivor</i>	379
	<i>Calabar and the Ivory Boom</i>	382
	<i>The War and Its Aftermath</i>	390
	<i>Final Years</i>	393
	<i>Two Kinds of Success</i>	393
CHAPTER 13	Jacob Coker and the New Farming Frontier at Agege	395
	<i>From Commerce to Farming</i>	397
	<i>The Agege Plantation Complex</i>	402
	<i>The Farming Community</i>	408
	<i>The Agege Planters' Union</i>	418
	<i>Costs and Benefits</i>	426
	<i>From Davies to Coker</i>	428

PART III	THE SHOCK OF 1914	433
CHAPTER 14	War and Its Consequences	435
	<i>The Fortunes of War</i>	436
	<i>The Changing Commercial Environment</i>	437
	<i>Boom and Bust</i>	444
	<i>The Mercantile Community</i>	449
	<i>Co-operation and Innovation</i>	457
	<i>The Outcome</i>	461
CHAPTER 15	Peter Thomas: From Meteor to Falling Star	463
	<i>The Making of a Civil Servant</i>	464
	<i>From Government Official to Merchant</i>	465
	<i>The Exigencies of War</i>	467
	<i>Life at the Top</i>	471
	<i>The Long Descent</i>	476
	<i>The Final Phase</i>	484
	<i>A Vision Postponed</i>	487
CHAPTER 16	A Conclusion, a Conundrum, and a Speculation	489
	<i>Conclusion: Capitalists and the Spread of Capitalism</i>	489
	<i>Conundrum: The Missing Years</i>	499
	<i>Speculation: Development in the Long Run</i>	503
	Epilogue: Congestion for Christmas, 2022	511

*Appendix: Lagos Entrepreneurs, 1851–1931* · 515

*Sources* · 519

*Index* · 537

CHAPTER ONE

# The Global Meets the Local

THE PRODIGAL HAS RETURNED. Capitalism, once a prominent theme in the study of economic history, was cast out in the 1980s and not welcomed back until after the turn of the present century. Before then, the subject occupied a central place in historical studies. Marx and Engels emphasised a key feature of capitalist development in 1848, when they declared that ‘the bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part’ in promoting a decisive transformation: the transition from feudalism to capitalism.<sup>1</sup> This proposition generated a series of long-running and influential debates. The ‘rise of a middle class’ was the focus of one of the great historical controversies of the 1950s and 1960s. The original formulation was later expanded to encompass what became known as the ‘general crisis’ of the seventeenth century, which included broader questions of state-building, demography, and climate change. Echoes of the debate can be found in the dependency thesis, which claimed that intrusive foreign capitalists undermined Africa’s development prospects. Even modernisation theory, though lacking a historical perspective, assumed that indigenous entrepreneurship was central to development and devoted time and ingenuity to remedying its supposed defects.

Historical studies, however, are constantly on the move. Approaches to the subject rise and fall in favour as external influences penetrate ivory towers and the internal ruminations of the occupants reach the point where an infusion of novelty is required.<sup>2</sup> The collapse of the Soviet Union and the preceding decline of Marxist influences on historical studies stimulated a search for appealing alternatives. One result was the rise of post-modernism, which was also a product of the preoccupation with multi-culturalism in the United States. Post-modernists cast doubt on the presumed paramouncy of material

1. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*, p. 46.

2. For an example of these principles in action in the African context, see Hopkins, ‘Fifty Years’, pp. 1–15.

forces and emphasised instead the importance of representations of claimed realities. Economic history was pushed to one side. By 2000, anyone reviewing the literature on Africa might have supposed that long-standing problems of global poverty had been solved.

An appraisal carried out in 2020 would show, unsurprisingly, that poverty not only remained endemic but had also regained the attention it had once commanded. By then, post-modernism had run its course. At the same time, the Western world was coming to terms with the implications of 9/11, the consequences of the financial crisis of 2008, and the rise of China. New concerns have joined these problems: the realisation that economic development has increased inequality between and within states, the growth of nationalist reactions against globalisation, and the encompassing alarm brought by climate change. Clearly, it is time to take a fresh look at how we got ‘from there to here’.

### *The Revival of Economic History*

Today, the study of economic history is thriving.<sup>3</sup> It has attracted a new generation of scholars whose research interests span the continuum from qualitative to quantitative dimensions of the subject. Two illustrations, scarcely known to each other, provide an indication of the renewed vigour of the discipline. In the United States, what is called the ‘new history of capitalism’ has captured attention and earned an acronym (NHC).<sup>4</sup> The considerable discussion this departure has stimulated cannot be evaluated in the space available here. It is sufficient for present purposes to indicate the direction of travel. NHC takes a position that is critical of both neo-classical economics and Marxism. Proponents of NHC fill a space between these two schools by emphasising the role of political power and its attendant social and cultural institutions in shaping economic affairs. This formulation of political economy sees the development of capitalism as being linked, above all, to the mobilisation and exploitation of labour, especially coerced and slave labour. The wider consequences are manifest in the unequal distribution of wealth that is such a striking feature of developed societies today. So far, these ideas have been applied mainly to US history, but advocates of NHC are well aware that capitalism is a global phenomenon and needs to be treated in ways that transcend state boundaries.<sup>5</sup>

3. For two of many examples, see Neal and Williamson, *The Cambridge History of Capitalism*, Vol. I, Vol. II. Readers of the present study will be particularly interested in the chapters by Morten Jerven in Vol. I and Gareth Austin in Vol. II. Also Kocka and van der Linden, *Capitalism*, which includes an important contribution by Gareth Austin, pp. 207–34.

4. Beckert and Desan, *American Capitalism*; Beckert and Rockman, *Slavery’s Capitalism*.

5. See particularly Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*; Beckert and Sachsenmaier, *Global History*.

The second example is very different. During the last twenty years, the economic history of Africa has received an injection of vitality from economists who have been attracted by the apparent failure of many states in the continent to climb the development ladder.<sup>6</sup> Although the resulting initiatives have yet to acquire a formal acronym, they can be referred to collectively as the 'new economic history of Africa' (NEHA). A notable feature of this research has been the recognition by economists that history is an indispensable tool for understanding long-term development problems.<sup>7</sup> The most distinctive contributions so far have applied statistical techniques to data that can now be processed rapidly by computer programmes instead of by hand.<sup>8</sup> The results have included new findings on subjects relating to long-run economic growth, including the slave trade, demography, colonial fiscal policy, real wages, tax burdens, and measures of nutrition and welfare. The renewed interest in poverty, however, has reinvigorated research across an array of other relevant historical issues that are too varied to be summarised here.<sup>9</sup> Although the NEHA makes little explicit use of the term 'capitalism', its central interest is in capitalist forms of development, particularly as mediated by colonial authorities. Its assumptions adopt rational-choice models of behaviour; its priorities include the role of state policies in facilitating or retarding development, the need to install what it takes to be progressive institutions, such as individual property rights, and the importance of mobilising the labour force, whether through wages or by other means.

At this point, there is a prospect of building a bridge between NHC and NEHA, despite some profound differences over the nature of capitalism and its consequences. Both perspectives agree on the importance of the state; both accept that economic life is part of a complex of social and cultural institutions that influence outcomes, even if they often defy precise measurement; both take a spacious view of the subject, recognising that key issues are no longer confined to one locality or even to one country. They also share an important omission: neither school has given much attention to entrepreneurship. The subject readily escapes accounts at the macro-level; its place in the micro-economy is rarely amenable to statistical treatment. So far, NEHA has tended to put research into entrepreneurial history to one side in the belief that it

6. An early statement that helped to focus attention on the problem was Collier, *The Bottom Billion*. The recent revival of the subject is symbolised by the publication of a special issue of the *Economic History Review*, 'The Renaissance of African Economic History', 67 (2014), pp. 893–1112; Frankema and van Waijenburg, 'Bridging the Gap'.

7. The early literature is assessed by Austin, 'The "Reversal of Fortune" Thesis'; Hopkins, 'The New Economic History of Africa'. The examples that follow are taken from the later and current literature, which is less ambitious but more plausible.

8. Fourie, 'The Data Revolution'.

9. The vibrancy of the subject can be seen in the online publication, the *African Economic History Network*.



yields only slim pickings. Other historians have stooped to gather, if not to conquer. In the case of Africa, however, their publications, though numerous and often admirable, tend to focus on individuals or groups scattered across the continent, and their predominantly descriptive quality is not easily assimilated into the current development debate.

### *Port Cities in History*

The embryonic 'bourgeoise' of Lagos occupied an economic environment shaped by the 'port city', a concept that derives from a long and distinguished literature on urban development. The analysis of the relationship between towns and the rural areas around them was pioneered by Johan Heinrich von Thünen in a famous study published in 1826.<sup>10</sup> A century later, Walter Christaller, drawing on von Thünen, advanced what became known as central-place theory to explain the distribution of cities across a region, the circles of activity around them, and the hierarchy of goods and services within the circles themselves.<sup>11</sup> These two contributions set the course taken by studies of modern urban history, which have undergone considerable expansion during the last half century and now span several disciplines, including history, economics, and sociology.<sup>12</sup>

Although the term 'port city' was in use by the 1930s, when Christaller published his celebrated book, it was not until the 1970s that the species began to be seen as a distinctive urban type.<sup>13</sup> In 1971, Andrew Barghardt, a geographer, applied the term 'gateway' to refer to towns that were not central places but entrances (and exits) connecting two or more different regions or zones.<sup>14</sup> Port cities were gateways, though in Barghardt's usage gateways could also be inland towns serving the same function. This was the case in North America, where the frontier of settlement created new gateways as it moved westward. Inland wholesaling centres on West Africa's desert edge performed the same function as gateways to and from the Sahara. Barghardt's contribution made it

10. Von Thünen, *The Isolated State*.

11. Coincidentally, Christaller's *The Central Places in Southern Germany* (1933) also had to wait until 1966 for its English translation. Broeze reviews the development of the subject in 'Port Cities', as does Barnes, 'Notes from the Underground'. There is a large literature on African urban history. The starting point is Coquery-Vidrovich, *Histoire des villes d'Afrique noire*. Recent guides include: Salma and Falola, *The History of African Cities*; Fourchard, 'African Urban History'; Coret, Zaugg, and Chouin, 'Les villes en Afrique avant 1900'.

12. Recent developments in economic geography are covered by Pines, 'New Economic Geography'; see also Fujita and Krugman, 'The New Economic Geography'.

13. For one example, see Anon, 'Port Cities', and the descriptive study that follows: Seeman, 'Seattle as a Port City'.

14. Barghardt, 'A Hypothesis'.

clear that gateways were not merely variations on central places but a different type of settlement requiring separate analysis.

One of the first historians to have had a significant influence on the subject was Edward Fox, whose book on pre-revolutionary France was also published in 1971.<sup>15</sup> Fox contrasted one France that was inward-looking and predominantly agricultural with another that was outward-looking and dependent on trade across the Atlantic. The second France developed port cities that were also gateways, though they lacked the physical mobility Burghardt ascribed to them. Fox went on to argue that the French Revolution brought about the decline of the cosmopolitan, outward-looking France and the consolidation of its inward-looking counterpart.<sup>16</sup> Irrespective of the validity of his conclusion, it is evident that Barghardt's gateways and Fox's outward-looking ports had much in common without being identical.

Since the 1970s, port cities have become big business in the academic world.<sup>17</sup> Research has spread from studies of Europe and North America to encompass most of Asia; the chronological range has extended beyond periods that are immediately accessible to cover the centuries before industrialisation.<sup>18</sup> An awareness that the history of globalisation could inform our understanding of the present and provide a fresh perspective on the past has stimulated an increasingly spacious approach to the subject during the last 20 years. Although accounts of individual ports continue to predominate, there have also been efforts to link ports to each other and to set them in regional contexts shaped by the Atlantic, the Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and the China Sea. This development has not only given port cities greater prominence but has also helped to rescue oceanic islands from the long-standing assumption that their size limited their influence.<sup>19</sup>

Port cities were the bridgeheads (or nodal points) connecting two or more worlds.<sup>20</sup> They fostered informal relations with the interior and with external trading partners. They also served as launching points for conquests that paired political subordination with the 'liberating' power of commerce. They nurtured capitalists whose influence spread throughout the port and into

15. Fox, *History in Geographic Perspective*.

16. On this subject, see now Drayton's important contribution, 'The Globalisation of France'.

17. John Darwin has provided an immensely valuable guide to this now daunting literature in *Unlocking the World*.

18. The following are indicative of a much larger literature: Basu, *The Rise and Growth of Colonial Port Cities*; Broeze, *Brides of the Sea*; Knight and Liss, *Atlantic Port Cities*; Broeze, *Gateways of Asia*; Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders*; O'Flanagan, *Port Cities of Atlantic Iberia*; Masashi, *Asian Port Cities*; Gipouloux, Hall, and Martin, *The Asian Mediterranean*; Amrith, *Migration*; Bosa, *Atlantic Ports*.

19. For example, Sivasundaram, *Islanded*; Sivasundaram, *Waves Across the South*.

20. Darwin, 'Imperialism and the Victorians'; McPherson, 'Port Cities', in Fawaz and Bayly, eds., *Modernity*, ch. 4.

hinterlands where markets and merchants operated in an economy that had still to embrace capitalism fully.<sup>21</sup> They provided incentives in the form of consumer goods that encouraged societies in the hinterland to develop export crops; their own food demands stimulated local farmers to produce for the urban market. Port cities owed their prominence to locations that had distinct advantages in linking a productive hinterland to the wider world that lay across the oceans. In connecting different regions separated by long distances, port cities created elements of a world society as well as a world economy. In moving goods and channelling investment, they also transported people and ideas, carried exotic flora and fauna to distant continents, and unwittingly helped the spread of deadly diseases. Visitors often became sojourners, who in time could also become permanent settlers. The result was the creation of fluid, mobile, and hybrid societies that were multiplied by the mass migrations that colonised continents beyond Europe in the nineteenth century and Europe itself in our own time. In this sense, to adapt Marx, the early port cities 'showed the face of the future' to the rest of the world.

Lagos, which became a port city during the period covered by this study and remained one throughout the colonial era, exemplified the main characteristics featured in the literature.<sup>22</sup> The town occupied an island that lay close to both the sea and the mainland and was situated, uniquely in West Africa, at a natural breach in the lagoon system. It commanded an extensive system of waterways that ran parallel to the coastline and was joined to its northern hinterland by rivers that, though of modest proportions, provided the cheapest means of inland travel before modern transport facilities became available. Like most other port cities, Lagos was a key point of entry to and exit from large producing regions.<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, its main business was wholesaling, transport, and trans-shipment.

21. Gareth Austin distinguishes clearly between two basic concepts that are easily elided: capitalists are individuals; capitalism is a system. Thus, capitalists can inhabit a non-capitalist society. See 'The Return of Capitalism as a Concept', in Kocka and van der Linden, eds., *Capitalism*, pp. 207–34.

22. Lagos is the name given by Portuguese traders. *Eko*, which is still widely used locally, has several derivations, the most probable dates from the occupation of the island by Benin some time before 1603. Two translations of *Eko* have been advanced: one being that it is the Bini name for a camp; the other that it has a Yoruba derivation and refers to the people from the nearby island of Iddo. Lees to Secretary of State, 28 Feb. 1879, C.O. 806/130; evidence of Obeseke, senior adviser to King of Benin in Re Public Lands Ordinance: Amodu Tijani, Chief Oluwa v. Secretary Southern Provinces, LSCR, Civ. 76, 1915. See also Bigon, 'The Former Names of Lagos'. The authority on the early history of Lagos is Robin Law, whose publications on the subject are too extensive to be listed in this citation but are conveniently grouped in Falola and Childs, *The Changing World of Atlantic Africa*. See also the thoughtful essay by Olukoju, 'Which Lagos?'

23. McPherson, 'Port Cities', in Fawaz and Bayly, eds., with the collaboration of Robert Ilbert, *Modernity and Culture*, pp. 75–95.



MAP 1.1. Lagos and Its Hinterland in the 1880s. Adapted from 'Route Survey Through Yoruba Country', in PP. LX, 1877, p. 167.

The town exhibited the sense of restlessness that characterised all frontier settlements, where enticing opportunities allied to commensurate levels of risk attracted adventurous spirits. Immigration, accompanied by different shades of ethnic differentiation, filled out the port and filled it up with a high proportion of poor and semi-employed inhabitants. Lagos was typical, too, in having extremes of wealth. Old wealth was attached to chiefs who commanded followers and enjoyed rights of tribute and taxation. New wealth stemmed from trade in the goods that replaced the slave trade. The bulk of the population struggled on limited incomes and had low standards of housing, sanitation, and nutrition compounded by high rates of disease and death.<sup>24</sup> The unsettled way of life in port cities made it difficult to establish a fixed social order. Like its comparators, Lagos experienced an extended contest between advocates of different models of political and social order on the one hand and the fluidity that the needs of commerce demanded on the other. Old chiefs tended to lose ground; new money funded the emergence of an alternative oligarchy, as it did in other port cities.

The features that categorise Lagos as a port city make it possible to place the town in a wider analytical and comparative setting without which its singularities and similarities would remain unknown and its identity would be no more distinct than that of being one large port among many others. Lagos was part of a global transformation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Accordingly, its history needs to be joined to a long chain connecting port cities in other continents if its broader significance is to be understood. Yet, Lagos, like Africa as a whole, is bypassed by comparative studies that begin in Europe, travel west across the Atlantic and east to Asia without touching the continent's shoreline.<sup>25</sup> The present study draws on the literature on port cities to understand the opportunities and constraints that influenced the fortunes of the African merchants who injected the port of Lagos with much of its dynamism. The comparative references noted here should enable future historians to link the port to the much larger world of which it was a part.

### *The Colonial Port City*

Although Lagos clearly qualifies as a port city, significant features of its historical development are obscured if it is bundled with other port cities without further differentiation.<sup>26</sup> Port cities are a generic category; Lagos is one of a

24. The important source for this subject is Bigon, *History of Urban Planning*, which makes an invaluable comparison with Dakar.

25. For some valuable exceptions, see Fawaz and Bayly, *Modernity and Culture from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean*; Green, 'Maritime Worlds and Global History'; Darwin's pioneering study, *Unlocking the World*, is the first to integrate the specialised literature. Exceptions in West Africa include Law's exemplary study, *Ouidah*, and Olukoju and Hidalgo, *African Seaports*.

26. The concept of a 'port city' raises questions of classification that cannot be pursued further here. The standard is generally assumed to be the European port city. Yet some

distinct species. Although the term 'colonial port city' makes frequent appearances in the literature, especially in studies of Asia, most historical research on the subject has tended to take the colonial context for granted.<sup>27</sup> The present account has no special insight into this question. Nevertheless, it is important to declare implicit assumptions if the characteristics of the colonial version of port cities are to receive the emphasis they merit.

Colonial port cities differed from port cities in Western Europe in at least two striking ways: they were ruled by a foreign power, and they were imbued with racial discrimination.<sup>28</sup> Decisions taken by imperial and colonial governments were major influences on the shape and fortunes of the port cities they controlled. Imperial political ambitions, sometimes presented as necessities, transformed relations between the port and its hinterland and subordinated previously independent polities. Foreign rule created structures of political control, law, and education that invaded indigenous sources of authority, social customs, and beliefs. Economic policy, which expressed wider imperial priorities, greatly enlarged the market and turned the economy in directions it might not otherwise have taken. Colonial port cities displayed ethnic diversity at its most extreme. White rulers presided over indigenous and immigrant subjects (including in some cases white settlers). A formal political and social hierarchy separated the minority of colonial officials and expatriate merchants from most of the population. Varying degrees of discrimination accompanied these intrusions, stimulating both resentment and innovative reactions. Foreign rule gave content and substance to colonial politics. Questions about the legitimacy of an externally imposed government, the manifestations of the racial supremacy that accompanied it, and disputes over the surviving rights of indigenous political authorities achieved a degree of prominence that was absent from port cities in Western Europe. These were all highly sensitive issues. They came together in the nationalist movements that eventually brought colonial rule to an end.

The location of colonial port cities was determined partly by the transport revolution, which carried the steamship across the world during the second half of the nineteenth century, and partly by the politics of colonial expansion.<sup>29</sup> Larger ships required larger harbours; the cost of improvements

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European port cities might more appropriately be classified as colonial port cities. Odessa, for example, was subjected to foreign rule in the nineteenth century and its large Jewish population suffered discrimination from at least the 1880s and continuing into the twentieth century.

27. Bosu, *The Rise and Growth of the Colonial Port Cities*, p. xxi, recognises the issue but does not pursue it.

28. Green, 'Maritime Worlds and Global History', emphasises similarities between the two ports he studied. Port cities and colonial port cities do have features in common, but his study explicitly omitted consideration of colonial rule, which is regarded here as a crucial difference.

29. Darwin, *Unlocking the World*, is now the authoritative work.

concentrated shipping on a small number of key ports. Nevertheless, colonial ports were selected for the potential of their hinterlands rather than the quality of their natural harbours. Despite its advantages, the harbour at Lagos had shallow waters and was obstructed by a formidable sandbar; Madras was no more than a roadstead; Calcutta's access to the sea was tortuous. Freetown had one of the largest natural deep-water harbours in the world, but it never developed to the extent that Lagos did because its hinterland was far less productive. Political priorities also determined the location of major ports, which were often chosen to be capital cities of the colony or its provinces.<sup>30</sup> Lagos and Dakar, the two great ports of West Africa, owed much of their eminence to colonial patronage. Favours shown to Lagos reduced competing ports on the lagoon to minor satellites. The preference given to Dakar led to the contraction of St. Louis and Rufisque.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Takoradi and Conakry displaced smaller rivals, Colombo eclipsed Galle, Singapore displaced Malacca and Penang, and Hong Kong outstripped Canton.<sup>32</sup> Decisions affecting the location of colonial ports had the further consequence of influencing the starting points of the railway lines built during the second half of the century and a corresponding commitment to costly harbour improvements. The outcome was the concentration of business on the fortunate few and the decline of the unlucky.<sup>33</sup>

Notwithstanding these similarities, colonial port cities in tropical Africa had distinctive features that influenced the reception and trajectory of capitalism. Many port cities in Asia were well established before European merchants arrived and had reached an informal accommodation with the foreign presence in advance of the decision to formalise relations. Lagos was different. It was an upstart creation: a fishing village that was transformed into the leading slave port in West Africa during the early decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup> The contrast between the established economy and the one projected in Britain's development model was exceptionally sharp. The consequences for existing political and economic authorities descended with an alacrity that required rapid adjustment. The emergence of the port's merchant capitalists provides a dramatic example of assisted development at speed. Other changes, of structure and institutions, took time. In 1863, Richard Francis Burton, admittedly a highly opinionated observer, thought that the

30. For one of many examples, see Johnson, *Shanghai*.

31. Hidalgo, 'The Port of Dakar', in Bosa, *Atlantic Ports*, pp. 90–111.

32. Broeze, 'The Ports and Port Systems of the Asian Seas', at p. 78; Goerg, 'La destruction'.

33. The wider aspects of this process are covered by Konvitz, 'The Crises of Atlantic Port Cities'.

34. See Law, 'The Chronology of the Yoruba Wars'; 'Trade and Politics Behind the Slave Coast'. Elements of continuity (that do not focus on Lagos) are traced by da Silva, 'The Slave Trade'; and Saupin, 'The Emergence of Port Towns'.

site of the port was 'really detestable' and the town itself 'squalid and dirty'.<sup>35</sup> Some fifty years later, the acting governor was able to report that 'the town of Lagos itself has rightly earned the reputation of the "Liverpool" of British West Africa'.<sup>36</sup> Its population and trade had experienced huge increases. Its merchants enjoyed unprecedented wealth; like Liverpool, its inequalities had grown commensurately.

The Atlantic slave trade and the intervention that led to its elimination were unquestionably the most distinctive of the differences that marked West Africa's colonial port cities. The slave trade had created centres of power along the coast that converted new wealth into political authority in what were essentially militarised societies. When the Atlantic trade was abolished, many established supply systems were disrupted; those invested in them faced losses of wealth and power; alternative possibilities were uncertain and seemingly less profitable. Asian ports did not experience upheaval on this scale or with comparable rapidity. Merchants in Karachi and Bombay enjoyed a greater degree of continuity than their counterparts in West Africa; the Hongs in China survived the Opium Wars, even though some of them lost influence in ports that became uncompetitive.<sup>37</sup> By contrast, the leading ports in West Africa relied on a new generation of educated African immigrants to help develop what became known as 'legitimate' commerce in non-slave products. The transition was neither straightforward nor swift. After a dramatic start, orchestrated by the Royal Navy, it continued to the end of the century and created problems that became bound up with the decision to partition the region among the major European powers.

### *Entrepreneurship in a Colonial Context*

It is apparent from what has been said so far that port cities have been studied from many angles. Surprisingly, however, indigenous entrepreneurs have yet to achieve a prominent place in current research on colonial port cities, given that their activities were (and remain) central to the lives and livelihood of these pre-eminently commercial centres.<sup>38</sup> Studies of African entrepreneurs were

35. Burton, *Wanderings*, pp. 223–24.

36. Boyle, 26 May 1911, enc. in Boyle to Harcourt, 31 May 1911, C.O. 520/103.

37. In one respect, Asian entrepreneurs suffered more than their African counterparts: as shipowners, they were largely eliminated by expatriate competitors. Broeze, 'The Ports and Port Systems on the Asian Seas', p. 81.

38. I am grateful to Prof. Tirthankar Roy for his advice on the relevant literature dealing with India. The most concerted effort I can find is in Bosu, *The Rise and Growth of the Colonial Port Cities*. This collection of abstracts of conference papers contains 21 contributions, of which seven deal with entrepreneurs. Austin has provided an admirable survey of the whole field: 'African Business History', in Wilson, et al., *The Routledge Companion*, pp. 141–58.



undertaken by development economists during the 1960s and 1970s, but their work on tropical Africa has long been neglected.<sup>39</sup> Historians also produced some excellent research on this subject during that period, but their interest, too, waned after the 1980s.<sup>40</sup>

This conundrum calls for an explanation, given that the concept of entrepreneurship was first promoted in the eighteenth century. The subject has long been embedded in schools of business and management and currently supports a range of reputable journals. A survey of seventeen leading journals in the field between 1981 and 2010 has shown that the number of relevant publications has increased substantially since dipping during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>41</sup> It is telling, too, that Joseph Schumpeter remained the single most cited author, even though his key work was published in 1934.<sup>42</sup> The branch of the subject concerned with history, though much smaller, is also flourishing. The foundation in 1926 of the *Business History Review*, which remains the flagship journal, was an early indication of institutional recognition. Other journals followed: *Explorations in Entrepreneurial History* published its first issue in 1949; *Business History* in 1958. Entrepreneurship, it might be said, has created a thriving academic industry.

Evidently, there is no lack of either interest or outlets. The problem is that nearly all this research relates to North America and Europe. The analysis of citations noted above shows that between 1981 and 2010, hardly any articles ventured outside these familiar confines.<sup>43</sup> The sole contribution given a specific mention was a comparative study in which China shared space with the United States and Europe.<sup>44</sup> Journals focussing on history have done little better. The index to the *Business History Review* identifies only a handful of articles on Africa, none of which deals specifically with indigenous entrepreneurs. A survey of *Business History* produces a similar result. A recent assessment has confirmed that the Western bias remains substantially undisturbed.<sup>45</sup> *Explorations in Entrepreneurial History* took a more spacious view

39. As the valuable survey by Lindsay confirms; 'Biography in African History'. Examples relating to Nigeria include: Kilby, *African Enterprise*; Kilby, *Industrialization*; Nafziger, *African Capitalism*; Hogendorn, *Nigerian Groundnut Exports*; and an important late addition, Forrest, *The Advance of African Capital*.

40. See, for example, Laboratoire Connaissance du Tiers-Monde, *Actes du colloque*, 2 vols.; Ellis and Fauré, *Entreprises et entrepreneurs africains*.

41. Ferreira, Reis, and Miranda, 'Thirty Years of Entrepreneurship'. As always, there are exceptions to generalisations pitched at this level. For example, Ochonu, *Entrepreneurship in Africa*.

42. Schumpeter, *The Theory of Economic Development*.

43. Schumpeter, *The Theory of Economic Development*.

44. Jing, Qinghua and Landström, 'Entrepreneurship Research'.

45. Berquist, 'Renewing Business History'.

of the subject but was criticised for claiming more than it could deliver.<sup>46</sup> In 1969, the journal was absorbed by *Explorations in Economic History*, which has a broader remit.

A further difficulty is that there is no ready-made theory of entrepreneurship that fits pre-colonial and colonial economies. Neo-classical economists underplayed the distinctive role of entrepreneurs because they assumed that potential risk-takers had perfect information and would respond readily to demand when opportunities arose. Responses, however, are not automatic. Information flows are far from perfect. Even when they flow freely, other constraints can intervene to prevent supply from matching demand. Schumpeter reacted to this impersonal view of a highly personal world by emphasising the heroic qualities of entrepreneurs, whose distinctive innovating attributes not only created new firms but also shaped the performance of the economy as a whole.<sup>47</sup> His analysis did much to enhance the image of entrepreneurs and raise the profile of the subject. Schumpeter's interest, however, was in the operation of advanced industrial economies, which were far removed from the economic and social structures of typical colonial economies.<sup>48</sup> Heroism, moreover, is characteristic of the few rather than the many. It is not typical of the multitude of small businesses whose founders nevertheless engage in novel and risky activities.

Recent restatements of entrepreneurial theory are far more sophisticated than those of the 1950s and 1960s, but still remain firmly anchored in the Western world.<sup>49</sup> The proliferation of theories there appears to have reached saturation point. The more comprehensive the possible explanations of entrepreneurial motivations are, the harder it is to integrate them satisfactorily, even assuming that coherence is attainable.<sup>50</sup> Over the years, the names of distinguished scholars have been attached to characteristics such as innovation, profit-making, risk-taking, uncertainty, societal values, co-ordinating functions, and marginal groups, among other relevant attributes. Recent contributions have included the economic environment, resource dependence, organisational and educational skills, information flows, and a variety of institutional influences. All these features are undoubtedly relevant in some proportion, but fixing the proportion would seem to be impossible without relating very general variables to specific contexts. The difficulty here is that most closely specified theories have been devised mainly with the United

46. Fredona and Reinert, 'The Harvard Research Center,' unpick the character of academic entrepreneurship.

47. Hagedorn, 'Innovation and Entrepreneurship'.

48. Ebner, 'Schumpeterian Entrepreneurship Revisited' shows how Schumpeter's interests shifted from his European phase to his later American phase.

49. See Brown and Rose, *Entrepreneurship*, especially chs. 2–3; Cassis and Minoglou, *Entrepreneurship*.

50. Valuable syntheses include Casson, *The Entrepreneur*; Casson, *Entrepreneurship*.

States in mind.<sup>51</sup> The literature on organisational strategies and structures, for example, arose in response to the appearance of large industrial companies in North America. The consequent distinction between unitary and multi-divisional types of corporate government is closely related to that setting and has little application to the history of entrepreneurship in Africa.<sup>52</sup>

It is hardly surprising that this assortment of highly general characteristics and diverse applications has led the authors of a survey published in 2017 to conclude that ‘research on entrepreneurship remains fragmented’ and that ‘a lack of conceptual clarity inhibits comparisons between studies’.<sup>53</sup> Although this perceptive review contains a handful of references to the non-Western world, they relate to Western firms and forms and not to indigenous entrepreneurship. In this respect, the geographical focus of the literature remains today much as it was in the eighteenth century. Yet, more than half a century has passed since scholars in the social sciences and humanities began to investigate development problems in Africa and Asia, where indigenous entrepreneurs are plentiful, highly visible, and accepted as being essential to development.

The neglect of the non-Western world is more than a gap waiting to be filled; it also presents the problem of how to fill it.<sup>54</sup> Given the bias of entrepreneurial theory towards societies in Europe and North America, there is little to be gained from trying to squeeze Africa into a model devised for other purposes. One approach is to return to some of the basic propositions put forward by the founders of the subject, who described economies characterised by agriculture, commerce, and handicrafts.

Adam Smith is unhelpful in this regard.<sup>55</sup> He warned of the ‘pernicious’ tendencies of merchants and their monopolistic ambitions. His reference to their being an ‘unproductive class’ was later removed from its context and became widely generalised. In 1910, a European observer remarked of Freetown that, though it was ‘undoubtedly a distributing centre’, it was itself ‘a non-productive place. It makes nothing and it grows nothing’.<sup>56</sup> Smith had no word for ‘entrepreneur’ and relied on the invisible hand to draw the factors

51. For an analysis based on this (typically assumed) context, see Low and MacMillan, ‘Entrepreneurship’.

52. Austin, Davila, and Jones, ‘The Alternative Business History’, is a lone and important exception to this generalisation, but one that deals with large foreign firms rather than with African entrepreneurs, as the authors make clear (n. 45). Verhoef provides a concise survey of the literature in *The History of Business in Africa*.

53. Wadhvani and Lubinski, ‘Reinventing Entrepreneurial History’.

54. For some characteristically thoughtful remarks on this subject, see Austin, ‘African Business in the Nineteenth Century’, in Jalloh and Falola, eds., *Black Business and Economic Power*, ch. 4.

55. The quotations that follow are from *The Wealth of Nations* (1776, New York: Random House, 1937), pp. 98, 633.

56. M. B. Gleave, ‘Port Activities’, p. 267.

of production together.<sup>57</sup> A more positive approach, however, can be found in the work of his near-contemporaries in France, Richard Cantillon (1680s–1734) and Jean-Baptiste Say (1767–1832), who were entrepreneurs themselves before they wrote the pioneering studies that put the term into circulation.<sup>58</sup>

Cantillon and Say regarded entrepreneurs as risk-bearers operating in the conditions of extreme uncertainty that typified pre-modern economies. Businesses in these economies were typically small scale, run by one owner or family, and included many part-time or seasonal occupations. Cantillon was well aware that risks were not confined to business decisions but also included unpredictable hazards, such as war, robbery, and harvest failure. Given that nearly everyone lived in circumstances where the four horsemen of the apocalypse were just around the corner, it followed that entrepreneurship was a widespread attribute deployed to minimise risks as well as to seek profits. For Cantillon, entrepreneurs included everyone who lived on unfixed incomes. Self-employed water carriers, who he called ‘petty entrepreneurs’, were among those whose costs were known but whose incomes were uncertain.

Say’s assessment was similarly broad and included knife-grinders in his list of entrepreneurs. The essential characteristics of entrepreneurship for both writers were access to market information and the exercise of judgement honed by experience. Incomes were rewards for the exercise of skill in taking risks. Cantillon and Say drew a formal distinction between the supply of capital and the operation of a business, but agreed that in practice most entrepreneurs were sole owners who provided their own capital. They were also at one in emphasising the crucial part entrepreneurs played in the wider economy. Cantillon showed that entrepreneurs co-ordinated the flow of resources and goods between different sectors of the economy. Say portrayed the entrepreneur as the linchpin holding different elements of the economy together. Neither made innovation a defining quality, though Say referred to entrepreneurs as being leaders as well as organisers. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that British writers began to fill a gap in their vocabulary by adopting the French term, which now occupies a familiar place in the Anglo-Saxon literature.<sup>59</sup>

The qualities identified by Cantillon and Say are well suited to many aspects of entrepreneurship in Lagos and its hinterland between 1850 and

57. He referred (sparsely) to ‘undertakers’, a term that eventually became confined to funeral directors. It is interesting to discover that nineteenth-century translations of both Cantillon and Say substituted ‘undertaker’ for ‘entrepreneur’.

58. Cantillon, *Essaie*; Say, *Traité d'économie politique*. In later life, after he had published his book on entrepreneurs, Say opened a cotton spinning factory. See Brown and Thornton, ‘Entrepreneurship Theory’; Koolman, ‘Say’s Conception’. Murphy, *Richard Cantillon*, and Shoorl, *Jean-Baptiste Say* are two among the very few biographies.

59. John Stuart Mill (1848) distinguished between risk-bearers and managers and emphasised the role of innovation. Marshall (1890) was the first economist to consider entrepreneurship as a fourth factor of production.

1950. Risks were high; returns were uncertain. Entrepreneurs were leaders and organisers who co-ordinated exchanges between local, regional, and international markets. They were typically sole owners who ran modest businesses and provided their own finance. Merchants were among the most prominent 'leaders and organisers', as they were in Cantillon's and Say's time. Contemporaries applied the term 'merchant' to Lagosians who were direct importers and exporters who were also sizeable wholesalers.<sup>60</sup> Some additions are needed, however, to complete the characteristics of the entrepreneurs in Lagos. Their role as innovators needs to be highlighted. As we shall see, they contained Titans as well as minnows. They also operated in an open economy. Cantillon and Say, and many subsequent economists, were concerned with entrepreneurship in one country. Lagos entrepreneurs, however, were situated as intermediaries between the outside world and Africa. They were part of an international system that was central to their existence and the ultimate source of their fortunes. Subsequent chapters will show how the static system described here was made dynamic by external political intervention and fluctuations in international trade that had an immediate effect on commercial fortunes by changing opportunities and stimulating innovation.

This approach, though derived from eighteenth-century sources, is consistent with the claim that Africans understood the profit motive and did not need to convert their values and institutions into an idealised version of supposedly superior Western forms before entrepreneurship could flourish. That battle was fought and won more than fifty years ago, when it became clear that the notion of a 'traditional society' was found more easily in Western minds than in African realities. This position is also compatible with the view that African entrepreneurs had what are referred to here as 'extra-pecuniary' motives. The acquisition of wealth was of primary importance, but it was also a means to other ends: esteem, honour, and status, which were visibly expressed through philanthropy.<sup>61</sup> A complementary analysis has shown that, from the mid-nineteenth century, the Yoruba concept of 'enlightenment' became associated with ideas of progress derived increasingly from external influences, such as world religions, international travel, and education.<sup>62</sup> The merchants who appear in this study exemplified these qualities: their wealth delivered a high standard of living that was accompanied by a strong commitment to religious institutions, to less fortunate members of society, and to the improving force of education.

60. See, for example, the evidence of Ernest Barth, the agent for Rothlisberger in Rothlisberger v. Fabre, 1888. Lagos Supreme Court records (subsequently, LSCR), Civ. 8, 1888. Merchants and brokers are discussed further later in this chapter and in chapter 2.

61. Barber, 'Documenting Social and Ideological Change'.

62. Peel, 'Olaju'.

### *The Entrepreneurs of Lagos*

The vanguard of the new order that landed in Lagos with the British Naval Squadron in 1851 consisted of a group of Westernised former slaves of Yoruba origin.<sup>63</sup> Most of them had been captured by raiders and were intended for a life of slavery in the New World.<sup>64</sup> Unlike many of their less fortunate compatriots, the ships transporting them were intercepted by the British Anti-Slavery Naval Squadron and the slaves liberated and taken to Freetown, Sierra Leone. Many freed slaves returned to their homelands when it seemed safe to do so. They formed a distinctive group that soon acquired a collective shorthand: ‘Saro’.<sup>65</sup>

The Saro were ideally placed to provide the intermediary services the Lagos gateway needed. The majority of Saro, and all the leading members of their community, were Christians; most had been educated in mission schools in Freetown and spoke English as well as Yoruba, which was the language of the port and much of its hinterland. They became merchants, joined government service, and entered the Church. The businesses they operated can be classified as ‘firms’ because they were specialised, unlike households that conducted several tasks or individuals whose activities were seasonal. The typical firm was individually owned and unincorporated. Accordingly, African firms in Lagos can be compared in structure, if not always in scale, with the expatriate firms in the port for most of the period under review. Structural divergence was not apparent until about 1914, when the majority of expatriate firms had adopted limited liability, and became manifest in 1919, when the first wave of significant amalgamations took place.

The Lagos merchants were unique, however, in having dual connections with their regions of origin in the interior as well as with the European mercantile houses and officials who represented the colonial presence in Lagos.<sup>66</sup> They formed a reciprocal relationship with the British that straddled politics as well as commerce. The colonial authorities had a stake in the success of the Saro as agents of the civilising mission and as valuable sources of local

63. Huge credit should be given to the authors of three indispensable studies: Jean Herskovits Kopytoff for her pioneering work, produced at the outset of African Studies, *A Preface to Modern Nigeria*; Kristin Mann for her impressive study of aspects of Lagos life that goes well beyond the Saro community and in doing so conquers some formidable research problems: *Slavery and the Birth of an African City*; and Olukoju, *The Liverpool of West Africa*, which draws together many decades of thorough and invaluable research into this subject.

64. For important explorations of what is now a considerable literature, see Falola and Childs, *The Yoruba Diaspora*; Falola and Childs, *The Changing Worlds of Atlantic Africa*.

65. Also known as Krio in Sierra Leone and many other parts of the West Coast. See Cole, *The Krio of West Africa*.

66. The relationship between merchants, brokers, and traders, is discussed in chapter 2 of this text.

knowledge. States in the interior regarded them as key representatives in their dealings with the colonial government. The familiarity of the Saro with Yoruba culture, added to their family connections in the hinterland, gave them a competitive edge over the European firms in areas of trade that required local knowledge of market potential. At the same time, a degree of acculturation helped the Saro to enter international trade. Their knowledge of English enabled them to deal with expatriate firms in Britain as well as in the port; their espousal of gentlemanly values made them recognisable beyond the confines of Lagos, generated confidence, and improved their access to commercial credit.

The Lagos Saro were well aware of the value of their singular qualities. Their ethos gave them a sense of mission in spreading beneficial forms of commerce and ‘improving’ values to Africa; their attributes as intermediaries gave them the means of contributing to these ambitious goals. Inevitably, there were divisions within the group. As merchants, they were commercial competitors; they had loyalties to rival states in the hinterland; they owed allegiance to different branches of Christianity. Yet, they were fortified by common origins and shared values to an extent that generally rose above their differences. A variety of social organisations nurtured familiarity and provided mutual support. A high degree of inter-marriage integrated the group, reinforced its sense of distinctiveness, and gave it a claim on the future. Personal and commercial connections created networks that ran from Government House to family members in the hinterland and extended as far as Manchester.<sup>67</sup> It used to be thought that hybridity produced rootless, unbalanced individuals who spent their lives searching for an identity they never found. It now seems, though it is impossible to be sure, that in general the Saro managed their dual roles capably, if not effortlessly, probably because they were able to strike a balance that produced more benefits than costs.

Other repatriates added to the commercial life as well as to the diversity of the port city. Freed slaves from Brazil, Cuba, and elsewhere in Latin America, known collectively as ‘Brazilians’ (also called *Amaro* or *Aguda*), began returning to Lagos from the middle of the century, bringing the Portuguese language, and elements of Portuguese-Brazilian styles and ways of life.<sup>68</sup> In addition, they arrived with a different version of Christianity—Roman Catholicism—albeit with added syncretic elements.<sup>69</sup> By this time, too, there was an established Muslim community. Islam entered the port in the late eighteenth century, and its following expanded before and after the British, the

67. On networks, see Hein, *Port Cities*.

68. Amaro: ‘those who have been away from home’. For an overview see Omenka, ‘The Afro-Brazilian Repatriates’; a detailed study is Rosenfeld, ‘Apparitions of the Atlantic’.

69. As Robin Law has pointed out, the term is a generic that includes those who had never been to Brazil but had absorbed elements of Lusophone-Portuguese culture: *Ouidah*, p. 185; Law, ‘Yoruba Liberated Slaves’, in Falola and Childs, *The Yoruba Diaspora*, p. 350.

Saro, and the Brazilians (some of whom were Muslims) made their appearance. By the 1840s, Lagos Muslims had established a chief imam and a central mosque, which provided a focus for political as well as religious activity.<sup>70</sup> The cosmopolitan character of Lagos was a common feature of all colonial port cities. The Saro had counterparts who acted as intermediaries elsewhere, including (with variations) freed slaves in other ports in West Africa, *métis* in Senegal, Parsees in India, compradors in East Asia, *mestizos* in the Philippines, and members of creole and mulatto elites in Spanish America and the Caribbean.

### *Cases and Sources*

The careers of eminent Saro were among the first topics to attract attention when the study of West African history began its rapid expansion in the 1960s.<sup>71</sup> In those early days, there was considerable uncertainty about what kinds of African history could be written, how far back the past could be traced, and the extent to which the vast interior of the continent could be brought into the story. The first generation of historians of Africa, like the Old Coasters themselves, had good reason to hug the coastline. The Saro were appealing subjects because they counted as being indigenous but were also reasonably accessible through official and mission records. Subsequently, as confidence about the existence of source materials grew, the research frontier moved inland, and the Saro tended to be left behind. The small number of scholars who continued to study creole elites (including Saro) asked new questions and produced penetrating, detailed work on subjects such as multiculturalism and the Atlantic diaspora.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, changing priorities becalmed a subject that remains incompletely researched and open to new ideas.

Much of the existing literature includes material on business activities. Relatively few studies, however, have been devoted to entrepreneurial history and most of these concentrate on individuals or particular families. These accounts are products of impressive research and have made important contributions to African history. It is difficult, however, to know how far conclusions relating to specific cases can be applied more generally. A major finding

70. Raifu, 'Intrigues'; Animashaun, *The History of the Muslim Community*. I am grateful to the late *Alhaji* Animashaun for his advice on this subject.

71. The term 'creole' is used here in a cultural rather than in an ethnic sense to refer to Westernised Africans who stemmed mainly from Freetown, Sierra Leone, and spread to other ports on the west coast in the nineteenth century. The term 'Saro', a contraction of Sierra Leonean, is used to refer to creoles (and their descendants) who returned to what became Nigeria (principally to Lagos). These shorthand definitions need expanding, as suggested by Dixon-Fyle, *A Saro Community*, and Falola and Childs, *The Yoruba Diaspora*.

72. See, among other examples, Lindsay, *Atlantic Bonds*.



of many of these studies, for example, is that African merchants in the West Coast ports enjoyed a period of prosperity and matching eminence during the early years of legitimate commerce before entering a long decline towards the close of the nineteenth century.<sup>73</sup> Other themes, however, such as the structure of African businesses, have been neglected. An additional problem with existing studies is that the sample is small, often being confined to one merchant or family, and rarely extends into the twentieth century.

The contribution that comes closest to meeting the necessary criteria is Raymond Dumett's meticulous research on the Gold Coast between 1860 and 1905.<sup>74</sup> Dumett compiled a list of nearly two hundred indigenous traders from which he identified just twenty-five who were large enough to qualify as merchants. He then examined the careers of three prominent individuals in the coastal towns of Ada, Winneba, and Cape Coast. Dumett's analysis provides convincing evidence of the organising and innovative abilities of his subjects, including their awareness of the need for diversification. His comments on 'decline', however, are brief, pending (as he says) further study. He draws attention to the expanding role of the expatriate firms, the rise of racism, and the difficulty of obtaining credit. He qualifies these considerations, however, by noting the 'natural attrition' that accompanied sole ownerships everywhere, the rise of new opportunities following the rapid expansion of the cocoa industry, and the effect of displacement as trade shifted from small coastal towns to new centres, such as Takoradi, which the colonial government had selected to be the terminus to the colony's first railway line. In the absence of the complementary study Dumett hoped to produce, the fate of his sample remains uncertain, not least because it is unclear if it included merchants who were to achieve prominence after his selected terminal date of 1905. Nevertheless, this is a pioneering study that deserves credit for its detailed and objective analysis.

The foregoing comments reaffirm the truism that it is easier to see shortcomings and omissions in the work of other scholars than it is to recognise

73. See recent summaries of the literature containing further references in Akyeampong et al., eds., *Africa's Development*, chs. 6–7. For a generally gloomy view of mercantile fortunes, see also Barry and Harding, eds., *Commerce*; Harding and Kipré, eds., *Commerce*. An early general statement of the decline thesis is Amin, *Le monde des affaires sénégalais*. Amin had a sample of five hundred companies but his interest lay mainly in the years after 1945. His treatment of the period before then was far more schematic, though his interpretation was clear: the embryonic bourgeoisie did well during the nineteenth century but its development was retarded during the colonial period. Other sources that set the scene include: Reynolds, 'The Rise and Fall of African Merchants'; Nwabughuogu, 'From Wealthy Entrepreneurs to Petty Traders'; Lynn, *Commerce and Economic Change*, ch. 6; Olaoba and Ojo, 'Influence of British Economic Activity'.

74. Dumett, 'African Merchants', conveniently reprinted in Dumett, *Imperialism, Economic Development, and Social Change in West Africa* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2013), ch. 11.

failings in our own. I can now see that my own early research, though incomplete, was among those that failed to test the hypothesis about the decline of African merchants against evidence that new merchants might have been emerging.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, the inherited body of work referred to in this chapter has placed previously unknown evidence in the public domain and set out propositions that provide starting points for subsequent research. Without these contributions, the present book would contain far more weaknesses than it no doubt does.

The sample that forms the basis of this book attempts to meet the criteria suggested above by assembling a list of 116 African entrepreneurs covering a time span that begins with the establishment of the Lagos Consulate in 1851 and ends in 1931 with the onset of the world slump in 1929 and the ensuing financial crisis two years later.<sup>76</sup> One hundred of the entrepreneurs are merchants; the remainder have been classified as planters or as being in finance and other services.<sup>77</sup> Although Saro dominate the list, Muslims are present in increasing numbers. The sample also has limitations. The available source materials are biased towards members of the Saro community, who appear more frequently in official correspondence, missionary records, and Lagos newspapers than other groups do. Saro families also yield occasional golden nuggets in the form of a small number of private papers that have survived. Muslim merchants, those sometimes referred to by contemporaries as 'pagans', and women appear far less frequently in these sources than Saro do, despite their considerable presence in the commerce of the town. Moreover, I was unable to locate business records of any of these groups, assuming that they have survived. The omens are not favourable. Muslim informants assured me that business records had existed but were destroyed on the death of the founder. Nevertheless, a dedicated search might produce results that, however slim, would be a considerable improvement on the present state of knowledge.

Compensation can be found in several sources that remain significantly underused. The Land Registry Archive records crown grants, conveyances, and mortgages from the 1860s. The Supreme Court records deal with civil

75. Hopkins, 'An Economic History of Lagos, 1880–1914'. As explained in the preface, my original idea was to write a history of Lagos merchants, but I was advised that it would be impossible to find enough material for a Ph.D. on this subject. Consequently, I wrote a very general survey of the economic history of the port interspersed with comments about particular merchants. The result has been quite widely cited but in my estimation was an unsatisfactory compromise.

76. See the appendix.

77. See the appendix. Mann's list of 'Educated Elite Males in Lagos Colony, 1880–1915' in *Marrying Well*, pp. 128–32, identifies fifty-five merchants among two hundred names. We agree on all the major figures. Discrepancies arise because my own sample of one hundred merchants covers a longer period and because of inevitable difficulties of classifying marginal characters for whom information is incomplete.

and criminal cases from 1867; the Probate Registry houses wills and letters of administration from the 1880s. The Lagos Town Council archive deals with the affairs of the town from 1900; the records of the Registrar of Companies contain information about limited liability from 1912 onwards. Interviews with family members have provided information that varies from being no more than an outline to supplying vital details that cannot be found elsewhere. Fieldwork can be revelatory, sometimes embarrassingly so. I recall walking around Jacob Coker's estate at Agege with one of his sons and pausing at an elongated clearance to ask what it was. His reply indicated his surprise and, worse, his disappointment at my ignorance. It was, 'of course', the old caravan road running up to northern Nigeria and down to Lagos and, as I belatedly realised, the best possible advertisement for the major new export crop his father had developed: cocoa. Unusual sources can supplement written information. The cemeteries of Lagos may not be on the tourist route, but they provide information about family relationships and a plenitude of dates, even though the latter can include some heroic exaggerations of the life span of great men. In this instance, the requirements of precision overrule approximations that better represent reality.

The resulting list is pragmatic rather than rigorous. It includes almost all the merchants who contemporaries regarded as 'important'. Their subjective judgements have been checked against information in the sources noted above, which contain information about wealth and indebtedness, success and failure. Objective measurements of the performance of African merchants relative to each other and to the expatriate firms are invaluable but correspondingly rare. I have found only three such comparisons for the whole period 1851-1931, each based on contributions to customs revenues made by the leading merchant houses. Inevitably, uncertainties remain. It is clear that Saro represented local Lagos participants in the export trades with reasonable accuracy; the much wider range of merchants involved in the import trades can also be identified with some confidence, at least as far as the most prominent figures were concerned. Merchants who were connected only indirectly to the important export trades or whose activities have been preserved only in outline may well have been under-reported. Nevertheless, when these qualifications have been acknowledged, it remains the case that this sample is larger than any other comparable set of data available on Africa, and the period covered is also longer than that found in existing studies.

### *Three Shocks*

The static analysis presented so far needs a dynamic approach to set its subjects in motion. If history is the past on the move, entrepreneurs need to be given time if their place in the evolving economic environment is to be understood. The period has been divided into three phases, each corresponding to

an external shock that altered relationships among the components of the economic environment: colonial policy, the expatriate firms, African businesses, and international trade. As these relationships shifted, so too did the opportunities available to African entrepreneurs and their prospects for achieving profits or suffering losses. This approach provides a structured way of reassessing familiar arguments about the rise and fall of their fortunes, their motives for innovating, and the adequacy of their business structures. The two shocks that occupy the greater part of the book interacted with internal developments to produce their effects. Only the third shock, that of the world war in 1914, was independent of events in Lagos and its hinterland, though its consequences were felt there as they were in other ports and colonies.

The first shock, in 1851, was transmitted by Britain's decision to end the slave trade by bombarding the town and establishing a consulate, which became a colony ten years later. The outcome was decisive in shifting external trade from exports of slaves to exports of palm oil and kernels. Saro merchants took advantage of the change to establish their place in Lagos, whether in business, colonial service, or the Church. The development of legitimate commerce produced the first 'merchant princes' of Lagos, men who made money but were also motivated by a desire to show that Africans could absorb mid-Victorian values and carry the civilising mission into the interior.

Saro merchants led these revolutionary changes, which can be summarised as laying the foundations of the economy that characterised the greater part of the colonial period. What is not well known is how the creation of the colony enabled entrepreneurs to adapt business structures to fit new opportunities. A major transformation, known only through the Lands Office and Court Records, recast property rights. In the 1860s, freehold land became the basis of credit and, by extension, mercantile fortunes. The surprise here is how quickly indigenous merchants adjusted to the new system and also piled into the land market. The change was accompanied by another of fundamental importance, though one that indigenous merchants were slower to adopt: the emergence of wage labour. This development, which was momentous in principle if not yet in practice, was initiated by Saro merchants led, as will be shown, by James Davies.

The second shock hit Lagos in 1892, when the British government decided to enlarge the colony, which at that time was still confined to the island of Lagos and a narrow strip on the mainland side of the lagoon. The assessment of this event begins in the 1880s, when declining terms of trade reduced profits and caused relations with states in the hinterland to deteriorate. The invasion of the hinterland was an attempt to restore the fortunes of legitimate commerce. It formed the prelude to subsequent advances that led to the creation of the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria in 1914. It did not, however, improve commercial prosperity. There was no instant recovery; the century ended with another serious commercial crisis. The advance of the expatriate firms inland

after the turn of the century added to the difficulties faced by African merchants, whose limited capital resources made it hard for them to compete. Adverse trends extended beyond issues of economic development: increasing racism destroyed the universal ideals of the mid-Victorian period, reduced the status of educated Africans, and limited their opportunities for advancement in the Church and government employment, though not in business.

It is easy to see why many studies of the period conclude that by 1914 the 'Golden Age' enjoyed by African merchants in the West Coast ports had turned into what might be called an 'Age of Lead'. The interpretation advanced here suggests that the decline thesis needs modifying. Analysis of a large sample followed over a long period shows that, though some merchants declined, newcomers arose to take their place. Moreover, after 1900, African merchants responded to changing circumstances by innovating. Some developed new export crops. Others began to diversify the staple import-export economy. Another group turned from commerce to money lending and property rentals. Most of these activities took place within business structures founded in the 1850s and 1860s that were characterised by sole ownership. Nevertheless, after the turn of the century, African merchants recognised the need for change and began to experiment with new forms of organisation, including limited liability companies.

The third shock began abruptly in 1914. The war disrupted international commerce and presented fresh challenges for African merchants. Yet, they survived the conflict, participated enthusiastically in the post-war boom, and suffered correspondingly, if far less enthusiastically, in the slump that followed. The grim commercial outlook was confirmed by the global economic crises that struck in 1929 and 1931. Expatriate firms survived by amalgamating. African merchants responded, though less successfully, by forming limited liability companies in an attempt to increase capital resources while also limiting risks. The most obvious hypothesis identifies this period as the one that marked the irreversible decline of the merchants who had made such an important contribution to the Lagos economy since 1851. Any assessment of their fortunes between 1920 and 1945, however, has to be speculative because the necessary research on the period has still to be undertaken. Meanwhile, there are alternative possibilities, discussed in the concluding chapter, which suggest that the file should be kept open.

### *Signposts*

Treatment of the first two shocks applies a format that descends from the general to the particular. Each part of this book begins with a contextual chapter, followed by an account of the mercantile scene, and by detailed chapters illustrating the careers of specific merchants. This sequence is an attempt to surmount one of the most perplexing and enduring problems in writing history: how to

relate the particularities of individuals to the grand events that swirled around them. The space allocated to the three shocks is also unequal. Assessment of the second shock occupies the greater part of the book because the consequences of the invasion of 1892 unfolded over a period that extended to at least 1914. This period is long enough to reappraise judgements that depend on evidence that is confined mainly to the nineteenth century. Expansion into the hinterland after 1900 introduced new challenges and opportunities and increased the volume of material describing them. Extra space is needed to ensure that this evidence is incorporated into the history of the merchant community.

The third shock is treated briefly because it covers a short period and acts as a culminating statement, though one that opens the way for research on the unexplored era that follows. Analysis is confined to two chapters, one giving an account of the context and the fortunes of the merchant community and the other illustrating the career of Peter Thomas, who rose to eminence before being brought down by the sudden post-war slump and the grim years that followed. He struggled through the inter-war period hoping for a revival that never occurred. The discussion in the final chapter reassesses the application of the decline thesis to this period, evaluates the relationship between business structures and mercantile fortunes, and identifies initiatives that provide links with the expansion of Nigeria's economy after 1945.

Before reaching that point, however, I hope readers will pause long enough to enjoy this record of the careers of some of the most colourful and fabled figures in the history of Lagos. Their stories remind us that economic structures have no life of their own until they are animated by the actions of creative individuals.

## INDEX

- Abatan, Ismail, 413  
Abeokuta, 120–23, 139, 148, 181–82  
Abimbola, Elizabeth, 455  
Abina, Badaru, 455  
Aboderin, James, 481  
Aborigines Protection Society, 244  
Adatan House, 410  
Ademola, Ladapo, 427–28  
Adeshigbin, Dada, 84, 157, 261–62, 345–48, 346–47, 352, 361, 454, 460, 518  
Adeshigbin, Folaranmi, 348  
Adeshigbin, Oke, 347, 454  
Adeshigbin, Olufemi, 348  
Adewale, Sanni, 455  
African Association, 383  
African Banking Corporation (ABC), 174  
African Church, 315, 401–2, 411, 420, 421–22, 429, 497  
African Commercial Association, 98  
African & Eastern Trade Corporation (AETC), 96, 345, 450  
African & Gold Coast Trading Corporation, 380  
*African Messenger* (newspaper), 386  
African Oil Nuts Co., 132, 245  
African Produce Trading Co. (APTC), 331  
African Section, 180  
*African Times* (newspaper), 171, 273  
Afriland Towers, 263  
Agege, 402–26, 429, 512–13  
Agege Plantation Complex, 402–8  
Agege Planters' Union (APU), 418–26, 442–43, 453–54, 495  
Age of Lead, 28  
Agricultural Union, 418  
agriculture: Agege Plantation Complex and, 402–8; Agege Planters' Union (APU), 418–26, 442–43, 453–54, 495; Agricultural Union, 418; changes to, 428–31; costs and benefits of, 426–28; decline of, 317; diversification in, 176; innovation in, 283–85; machinery in, 422; statistics regarding, 409; wage labour in, 422  
Ajao, Braimah (Abibu Oke Balogun), 205  
Ajasa, Kitoyi, 125–29, 193, 196, 259, 384–85, 389, 430–31  
Ajisafe Moore, Eric A., 345  
Akerere, David, 223, 454–55  
Akidele, Alufa, 339  
Akilagun, 80  
Akinduro, James, 413  
Akinsanya, Samuel, 473, 486  
Akitoye, 1, 2, 39, 41, 45  
Akitoye, Alfred, 205  
Alabi, Nathaniel, 351  
*Alake*, 124, 427–28  
Alake Bridge, 241  
Alakija, Folorunsho, 498  
Alawusa, Momo, 116  
Allen, William Alfred, 139, 270  
*Allianca*, 204  
Anglican Church, 131, 142, 192, 241, 291, 293, 400, 412, 497  
*Anglo-African* (newspaper), 230  
Animashaun, Sumanu, 67, 85, 111, 119, 131, 133  
annexation, of Lagos, 46–53  
Anti-Slavery Squadron, 363  
Antony, Olamide Bank, 348  
Apatira, Brimah, 67, 85, 344  
APU Motor Transport Company, 423  
Arbuthnot, William, 482  
Arbuthnot Latham, 478–79, 481, 482–83  
Association for the Promotion of Religion and Education in Lagos, 147  
Association of West African Merchants (AWAM), 440–41, 442  
automobiles/motorcycles, 320–21, 328, 351, 423  
Avoseh, T. Ola, 345  
Awoboh Printing Press, 386  
Awori, 104–5, 147, 286n7  
A. W. Thomas & Co., 451  
Awu, Momadu, 87  
Ayodele, Alfred, 347

- Baba Isale*, 84–85  
Bada, debt of, 79–80  
Bada, Yesufu, 80–81  
Badagri, 106–7, 115  
Bakare, 372–73  
Balogun, Alli, 193, 205, 223, 334–38, 356, 361, 391, 439, 450, 495  
Balogun, Busari, 338  
Bamidupe, 347  
banking, 174, 228. *See also* financial sector; *specific banks*  
Bank of British West Africa (BBWA), 174, 200–201, 203, 226, 311, 326, 327, 410, 477–81  
Bank of England, 448  
bankruptcy, 155, 157–58, 311  
Bankruptcy Act of 1869, 155, 157  
Banner Bros., 77, 224  
Baptista da Costa, João, 344  
Baptiste, J. L., 248  
Barghardt, Andrew, 8  
barracoons, 72  
Barrow, Knapp, 127, 128–30  
bartering, 38, 74, 83, 173, 185, 326, 494.  
*See also* trade  
Baya, Brimah, 80  
Beckley, Jacob, 407  
Beckley, Joseph Ogunola, 411, 417, 420  
Beckley, Thomas E., 262  
Beckley Williams, Jane, 262  
Beecroft, John, Consul, 1, 41  
Benjamin, Joshua B., 220  
*Bento de Freitas*, 204  
Berkeley, George, 110  
Berry, Sara, 425  
Bethlehem Lodge, 118  
Bida Emirate, 91  
Bight of Benin, 42  
Birtwistle, C. A., 305–6  
Black Star Line, 443, 471  
Blackstock, 369–70  
Blaize, Emily Cole, 238–39  
Blaize, John (Olapajuokun, Ojelabi), 230  
Blaize, Richard Beale: assets of, 234; beginnings of, 229–35; challenges of, 162; Daniel Taiwo and, 111; debt recovery by, 211; diversification and, 235–37; family of, 238–39; as intermediary, 241–42; interview with, 242–43; leadership of, 401; legacy of, 243–45; as lender, 100, 235–37; newspapers and, 239–43; overview of, 229, 263–64; philanthropy of, 233–34, 238–39, 243–44; photo of, 90, 231; politics and, 239–43; property of, 191, 235–37, 236; religious beliefs of, 240–41  
Blaize Memorial Institute, 244–45  
Blyden, Edward Wilmot, 90, 99, 242–43  
Bombay, 15  
Bonanza House, 307  
Borges da Silva, Lazaro, 344  
Botanic Station, 176–77, 276–78, 418, 424  
bounded rationality, 498  
Boyle, A. G., Acting Governor, 442  
Branco, Joaquim Francisco, 332–33  
Brazil/Brazilians: arrival of, 22–23; business challenges of, 332–33; characteristics of, 333; as immigrants, 62, 190; influence of, 53; isolation of, 203–4; as merchants, 92, 203; population of, 203; property of, 77; as slave traders, 38–39, 118; trade with, 92, 204, 333.  
*See also specific persons*  
bread industry, 343, 386, 460, 472  
brewing plant, 438  
Britain: Asante revolt and, 241; bank rate of, 259; Chamber of Commerce in, 198; competition with, 198, 268; consulate of, 33, 38–46, 47–48, 55; crown grants and, 64; currency and, 172; declaration of war by, 436; default position of, 177; defence by, 50; development plan of, 2, 3, 14, 69, 297, 300, 490; integration and, 179; Lagos invasion by, 33; limited liability companies and, 310, 507; Nigeria and, 438; obligations of, 50; political challenges of, 70, 125; post-war reconstruction and, 448; revenues of, 188; slave trade decision of, 27, 52, 72, 292; threats to, 47, 50, 181, 198; trade with, 34, 168, 189, 296, 324, 369, 436, 440, 445; Yorubaland invasion and control by, 167, 178, 182, 239, 491, 493  
British & African Product Supply Company, 443  
British Anti-Slavery Naval Squadron, 21  
British Cotton Growing Association, 239  
British West Africa, exports from, 34, 35  
Broadhurst, John, 464



- brokers, 74–75, 492  
Brown, Matthew, 201, 303, 325–26, 328  
Bruce, Commodore, 87  
Bucknor, Joseph S., 91, 206  
Burton, Richard Francis, 14–15, 54, 55  
business: accommodating colonial rule in, 329–41; barter trade in, 74; boom and bust in, 444–49, 477; British revenues in, 188; cash payments in, 173–74; changes in environment of, 437–44; colonial expansion consequences to, 184–89; commercial credit in, 43–44; commercial environment of, 72–75; commercial expansion and, 295–302; commercial outlook regarding, 168–71; competition in, 39, 493; co-operation in, 457–61; currency in, 74; debt payment in, 43–44; decline of, 225–27; decline thesis regarding, 493; diversifying the economy in, 341–45; economic dualism in, 197; financial innovation in, 352–60; fortunes in, 323–28; innovations in, 172, 457–61, 495; institutional innovation in, 306–12; international economy for, 297; mercantile community in, 449–57; middlemen in, 324, 327, 328; new commercial environment in, 302–6; occupation statistics in, 317; pioneers of mechanisation in, 345–52; politics and, 108; property in, 75–82; recklessness in, 448; reverberations in, 197–98; rivalry in, 324; status in, 327; supply-side conditions of, 188; transaction accounts in, 139; trust system in, 43, 310; uncertainty under colony, 172–77; uncertainty under consulate, 38–46; winners and losers in, 82–86; women in, 85–86. *See also* entrepreneurship; merchants; trade  
*Business History Review*, 16  
  
Calabar, 382–90  
Calcutta, 14  
Callender, Sykes & Mather (CSM), 99, 100, 154–59  
Campbell, Alfred Cope, 114, 217  
Campbell, Benjamin, Consul, 62, 74–75, 83  
Campbell, Robert, 54–55, 230  
Campos, Albizu, 499  
  
Cantillon, Richard, 19, 490  
Canton, 14  
capitalism, 3, 5–7, 14, 45, 71, 489–99  
Cardoso, Lourenço Antonio, 333, 368, 416, 453  
Carroll, H. M. C., 386  
Carter, Gilbert, Governor, 99, 183, 184, 191, 213, 215, 234, 240, 241–42, 401, 493  
cash payments, in trade, 173–74  
cattle trade, 392, 460  
Caxton House, 191, 234, 243, 245  
central-place theory, 8  
Chalmers, Stewart, 472, 484  
Chamberlain, Joseph, 301–2, 503  
Chamber of Commerce (British), 198  
Charles, Andrew, 81, 219–20  
Charles McIver, 224, 306  
Chevalier, Auguste, 425  
Child, Mills & Co., 151, 152–54  
Christaller, Walter, 8  
Christchurch, 388  
Christ Church, Faji, 142  
Christie, George W., 266  
Christie & Co., 160, 270  
Church Missionary Society (CMS), 39, 46  
Church party, 427–28  
City Hotel, 472  
civilised societies, 2–3  
Clifford, Hugh, Governor, 430, 444, 448  
CMS Grammar School, 141–42  
cocoa: adoption of, 460; in Agege, 398–402, 418–26, 495; characteristics of, 288; at Estate Farm Book, 278–83; exports of, 287; improvements to, 423–24; innovations of, 283–85; origin of, 275–76, 426; outputs and profits of, 285–90; photo of, 271; risks regarding, 283; shipping challenges of, 469; statistics regarding, 409, 421, 427, 447, 482; success of, 424; at Woodland Estate, 272–78. *See also* Ijon  
coffee, 409, 427  
Coker, Arthur (Kofi), 291  
Coker, Ben, 399  
Coker, Isaac Olusi, 153  
Coker, Jacob Kehinde: African Church and, 400–402; Agege Plantation Complex and, 402–8; Agege Planters' Union (APU) and, 418–26; allocation of, 469; associates of, 411–12;

- Coker, Jacob Kehinde (*continued*)  
background of, 395–97; as borrower, 357, 368; business of, 397–98; characteristics of, 411; from commerce to farming by, 397–402; costs and benefits of, 426–28; credit rating of, 410; criticism of, 430–31; debts of, 399–400; family of, 291; farming by, 258–59, 398–402; farming community and, 408–18; field work regarding, 26; home of, 410–11; James Davies and, 289; leadership of, 315, 443; legacy of, 512–13; motives of, 430; overview of, 428–31, 453–54, 497; Peter Thomas and, 468–69; philanthropy of, 498; photo of, 396; politics and, 375; property of, 213, 398, 399, 402–8; proposal of, 470; wealth of, 427; Woodland Estate and, 291–92
- Coker, Jacob Osolu, 258
- Coker, James Ojoye, 280, 282, 289, 291
- Coker, James Osolu (Ajobo), 395–97, 398–99
- Coker, John, 400
- Coker, Samuel A., 412
- Cole, Abraham, 221
- Cole, Alfred, 221
- Cole, Isaac A., 344–45, 387
- Cole, James William, 66, 78, 81, 153, 206, 218–21, 235
- Cole, Mary Jemima Sawyer, 221
- Cole, Patrick, 128
- Cole, Thomas, 66
- Cole, Thomas Francis (Daddy Alade), 91, 207, 237, 238, 238n37
- Cole Blaize, Emily, 238–39
- Cole Thomas, Josetta, 465
- Cole Williams, Eleanor, 207, 212, 238
- Colombo, 14
- colonial development policy, 295–302, 504
- Colonial Development & Welfare Act of 1940, 509
- colonialism, entrepreneurship and, 15–20
- Colonial Loans Act of 1899, 302
- colonial port cities, overview of, 12–15
- Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria, 27
- Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, 295
- commerce, legitimate, 34–38. *See also* business
- commission houses, 73–74
- Commission of Enquiry, 203, 400
- Conakry, 14
- construction industry, 343–44, 460
- consulate, British, 33, 38–46, 47–48, 55
- Cooper, Hannah, 66
- corn, 427
- Corporation, Regulation, and Winding Up of Trading Companies Ordinance, 308–9
- cotton industry, 139, 140, 168, 171, 295, 409
- country trade, 484
- cowries, 39, 43, 52, 74, 79, 83, 112, 173
- credit, 43–44, 65–66, 67–68, 75–76
- Criollo, 275–76
- crown grants: of Daniel Taiwo, 113; function of, 75–76, 195; of James P. L. Davies, 141, 195; overview of, 64–65; reforms and, 67; rights regarding, 257; for swamp land, 195; of Zachariah Williams, 195, 212–13
- Crown Grants Index, 91
- Crowther, Josiah, 97, 119, 222
- Crowther, Samuel, 97, 119, 137, 217, 220, 222, 312
- Crowther Bros., 118–19
- currency, 39, 43, 52, 74, 79, 83, 112, 172, 173, 250, 286
- Cyprian Fabre, 225
- Dahomey, 40, 51
- Dakar, 14
- Dangote, Aliko, 498
- da Rocha Properties, 356
- Davies, Catherine Kofoworola Reffle, 280, 283, 290
- Davies, James Arthur, 146, 150, 159
- Davies, James Pinson Labulo: assets of, 139; bankruptcy of, 151, 155, 157–58; as Big Man, 492; business dealings of, 159–61; Callender, Sykes & Mather (CSM) and, 154–59; case of, 270; characteristics of, 161–62; Child, Mills & Co. and, 152–54; Christie & Co. and, 160; commerce work of, 138–46; crown grants of, 141, 195; Daniel Taiwo and, 104, 111, 113, 114, 122, 131, 134, 146–51, 162–63; death of, 282; early life of, 136; as educator, 97; as employer, 285; Estate Farm Book and, 278–83; final years of, 290–92; heights

- and depths of, 151–59; innovations of, 283–85, 495; labour shortage and, 421; leadership of, 142; legacy of, 289, 428–31; as mediator, 148; memorial of, 512; motives of, 429–30; naval service of, 137–38; outputs and profits of, 285–90; overview of, 135–36, 161–63, 265–66, 292–93; philanthropy of, 141–42; photo of, 90, 144; property of, 151; royal connections of, 136–46; as Saro, 136–46; as ship captain, 138; universalism and, 194; Woodland Estate of, 266–78, 282–83
- Davies, John Romanes Adewale, 291
- Davies, J. W., 66
- Davies, Matilda Bonifacio Serrano, 145
- Davies, Nancy Charlotte, 136, 270
- Davies, Peter, 403
- Davies, Samuel, 136, 137, 138
- Davies, Samuel Sogunro, 161
- Davies, Sarah (Aina) Forbes Bonetta, 142–46, 269, 290
- Davies, Stella Forbes, 146, 159, 280, 281, 282, 289, 291
- Davies, Victoria Matilda, 145–46, 159
- Davies Bros., 160
- Davies Randle, Victoria, 280, 290–91
- Dawodu, Benjamin (Fagbemi), 115, 217, 222, 348–49
- Dawodu, Benjamin Charles, 223, 258, 348–49
- Dawodu, Thomas, 414, 417, 418
- Dawodu, William Akinola, 345, 348, 349–52, 454
- Dawodu & Co., 350–51
- debt, 43–44, 67–68, 76–77, 79–80, 81
- Decker, J. P., 382
- Decker Pearse, Cassandra Lydia, 382, 387–88, 390, 393
- Deniga, Adeoye, 345
- Dennett, R. E., 421
- Denton, George, Acting Governor, 91, 182–83, 195, 201, 274
- Dilke, Charles, 183
- discrimination, 312–15, 441–42, 474
- diseases, 191
- Disu, James Asani, 456
- diversification, of the economy, 341–45
- Doherty, Eleanor Ariwoola Fatoregun, 364
- Doherty, Flora, 376
- Doherty, Frederick, 363, 365
- Doherty, Henry Theodore, 363–64, 377
- Doherty, Joseph, 376, 377
- Doherty, Josiah: advertising by, 372; background of, 362–64; business of, 365–68; challenges of, 498; characteristics of, 371–72; death of, 377; home of, 319; Lagos Wassaw & Ashanti Gold Mining Syndicate and, 307; leadership of, 307, 443; legacy of, 376; as lender, 331–32, 399, 410; Nigerian Shipping Company and, 308; Nigerian Shipping Corporation and, 385; overview of, 362, 393–94, 413–14, 501, 507; photo of, 366; politics and, 375–76; property of, 333, 345; proposal of, 470; strain to, 368–71; success of, 450; viewpoint of, 458
- Doherty, Richard, 371, 376
- Doherty, Samuel, 363
- Doherty, Theophilus Adebayo, 368, 377–79, 458
- Doherty, William, 363
- Doherty, Wusamotu Shelle, 372–73, 374, 501
- Doherty House, 319
- Doherty Villa, 365
- Dosunmu: annexation concerns of, 48, 49; Child, Mills & Co. and, 153; coup plan of, 50; grants from, 63–64, 65; income of, 84; land allocation and, 45–46; political rivalry of, 42; Saro support or, 63; support for, 39; threat against, 40; trade and, 83, 84
- Dotunmu, 395–96
- Dudgeon, Gerald, 409
- Dumett, Raymond, 24
- Dunkley, Henry, 224
- Dyer & Wintle, 468
- Eagle & Lagos Critic* (newspaper), 171
- Ebun House, 319
- Ebute Metta, 276–77, 300
- economy: adversity and, 462; diversifying, 341–45; economic nationalism, 462; financial innovation in, 352–60; history of, 6–8; interest rise in, 448; international saturation and, 448. *See also* business; financial sector

- Edun, Adegboyega, 427-28  
Egba, 105, 120-23, 180-81, 183, 184, 408, 412  
Egbado, 105  
Egba United Government (EUG), 412  
Egerton, Walter, Governor, 244, 313, 350, 424  
Egharevba, Jacob U., 345  
Ekitiparapo Society, 485  
Elder Dempster, 174, 201, 441, 442, 443, 495  
Elebute, Adeyemo, 135  
Eleko, Eshugbayi, 430  
Eleko Affair, 430  
Elephant House, 319, 344, 386-87, 393  
Elias, Michael, 342-43, 392, 460  
Ellis, Alfred, 57  
Empire Resources Development Committee (ERDC), 438-39  
English Bankruptcy Act, 157-58, 311  
enlightenment, 20  
entrepreneurship: benefits of, 20; as bouncing back, 360-61; in the colonial context, 15-20; diversifying the economy and, 341-45; as essential, 490; as extra-pecuniary, 20; financial innovation in, 352-60; ideals regarding, 490; innovation in, 28; new combinations of, 490; overview of, 19-20, 21-23; pioneers of mechanisation in, 345-52; political aspects of motivation of, 312-15; post-war, 28; as risk-bearing, 19. *See also* business; *specific entrepreneurs*  
Epe, 1  
Estate Farm Book, 278-83  
*Explorations in Entrepreneurial History*, 16-17  
export trade: allocations in, 325; boom of, 168; decline in, 447; diversification and, 496; duties on, 440, 445; as European dealings, 202-3; European firms and, 83; products in, 112, 169, 186-87, 232-33, 295-96; recovery of, 325; rise of, 34, 35, 295, 446; risks of, 326; statistics regarding, 82-83, 440, 448, 451, 494. *See also specific merchants; specific products*  
Ezzidio, John, 78  
Fabre & Cie, 91  
Fairley, J. D., 224  
Fanimokun, Joseph, 412  
Faseye, property of, 78  
Fashola, Mohammed Bello, 416, 456  
F. & A. Swanzy, 237  
Fatoregun Doherty, Eleanor Ariwoola, 364  
feudalism, to capitalism, 5  
financial innovation, 352-60  
financial sector, 460-61, 501-3. *See also* rentiers  
fires, in Lagos, 1, 58, 191, 211  
Flower of Lagos, 57, 193-94  
Forbes, Frederick, 143  
Foreign Office, of Britain, 47-48, 69  
Forsythe, Charles, 67, 153, 261  
Fox, Edward, 9  
France, 9  
Frankema, Ewout, 37  
Frazer, Louis, 39  
freehold grants, 419  
freehold tenure, 67  
Freeman, Henry, Governor, 50, 51, 63-64, 76, 77, 83, 141  
Freetown, 14  
free trade, 2, 3, 123, 172, 180, 193, 296-97, 324, 437, 439-40, 446, 491, 503-4  
Galle, 14  
Gambia Plantation, 414  
Gandhi, Mohandas, 499  
Garvey, Marcus, 443, 471  
gateway, 8  
G. B. Ollivant, 100-101, 210, 258  
George, Charles Joseph, 91, 92-96, 191, 507  
George, Charles Will, 95, 96, 507  
George, Ferris, 220  
George, George Will, 453  
George, Hannah, 95  
George, Harriet, 94, 95  
George, James, 78, 93-94, 358, 507  
George, James & Son, 93-94, 95-96, 248, 453  
George, John, 78, 95  
George, John Oluwole, 94  
George, Josiah, 94  
George, Thomas (Masinka), 93  
Germany, 34, 168, 296, 436, 439, 461  
Giwa-Tubosun, Temie, 498  
Gladstone, William, 183

- G. L. Gaiser: allocations to, 304; buying price fixing of, 175; crisis survival of, 188–89; Daniel Taiwo and, 108, 111, 122; dominance of, 224; Josiah Doherty and, 371–72; kernel duties on, 445–46; palm kernels purchase of, 305; premises of, 345; profit of, 172; railway and, 303; viewpoint of, 201  
globalisation, informing by, 9  
Glover, John Hawley, Governor: crown grant viewpoint of, 64; Daniel Taiwo and, 108, 110, 121, 122, 123–24; departure of, 148; leadership of, 268; leadership transition of, 123; Oshodi Tapa and, 87; pawning viewpoint of, 124; recall of, 123; tax of, 147–48; viewpoint of, 105  
Glover Memorial Hall, 239  
gold, 297–98, 355, 385  
Golden Age, 28, 491  
Goldie, George, 151  
Gollmer, Charles, 46, 63  
Gooding, James H., 98  
Grand Hotel, 391  
great depression, 151–52  
Griffith, Brandford, 126  
gunboat diplomacy, end of, 1–2  
  
Haastrup, Joseph, 130, 217, 367  
Harleston, Alexander, 230  
H. B. W. Russell, 217, 224–25  
Hebron, Abraham, 218  
Hemming, Augustus, 183  
Hennessey, John Pope, Governor in Chief, 123, 142, 148–49  
Henshaw, Joseph, 287  
Hethersett, Andrew, 129  
Hicks, John, 505  
hides, 385  
HMS *Bloodhound*, 1–4  
HMS *Bonetta*, 143  
HMS *Volcano*, 137–38  
Hoare, Thomas, 92, 153, 202, 206  
Ho Chi Minh, 499  
Holt, John, 171, 181, 188, 189  
Holt & Welsh, 100, 185, 210, 225  
Holy Cross Cathedral, 359  
Holy Trinity Church, 344  
Hong Kong, 14  
Hopwood, Harold, 370  
  
Hotel de l'Europe, 386  
H. Robbin & Co., 139  
Hughes, David, 413, 416–17, 418  
Hughes, M. J., 469  
Hutton, James, 313  
  
Ibadan, 105, 177–78, 180, 298–300  
*Idejo*, 44–45, 48, 49, 84, 133  
Ifako, 403–5  
*Ifole*, 120, 121  
Igbo, Brimoh, 342, 453  
Ijebu, 180–81, 183, 184  
Ijesha-Ekitiparapo Society, 485–86  
Ijesha Union, 485  
Ijon, 266–68, 271, 283–85, 512  
Ikeolorun, Rabiatsu, 339, 341  
Ikeolorun, Samota, 339–41, 343, 501  
immigration, 12, 15, 53, 190  
import trade: advantages of, 326; benefits of, 326–27; competition in, 252–53; European firms and, 83; function of, 73–74; growth of, 325–26, 446, 447; products in, 112–13, 160, 232, 249; Saros in, 333–34; statistics regarding, 83, 494, 510; substitutions in, 438. *See also specific merchants; specific products*  
Industrial & Commercial Bank Ltd., 458, 459  
innovation: in agriculture, 283–85; in business, 42, 71, 172, 457–61, 495; of cocoa, 283–85; in economy, 352–60; in entrepreneurship, 28, 352–60; financial, 352–60; of Isaac Williams, 495–96; of James Davies, 283–85, 495; at Woodland Estate, 283–85; World War I and, 457–61  
interest rates, 79, 448  
Iron House, 356, 359  
Isaga, 363  
Isheri, 104–5, 108, 111, 124–25, 131, 133, 147–51, 212–22, 268, 281, 289, 337, 403  
Islam/Muslims: adaptations of, 457; arrival of, 22–23; culture of, 457; disputes of, 193; in import trade, 333–34; in Lagos, 192; as merchants, 25, 457, 507; mosque of, 89; spread of, 316; statistics regarding, 54  
ivory, 112, 382–90, 393–94  
*Iwofa*, 422

- Jackson, John Payne, 97, 99, 240, 308  
Jamaat Party, 338  
Jawando, Selia, 373, 375  
J. D. Fairley, 89  
J. H. Doherty Ltd., 378  
Jibowu, Samuel Alexander, 405, 411, 417  
J. Nathan & Co., 205  
Joe, Thomas, 92, 96, 153, 215, 262  
John, J. H., 369  
John and Jane Thomas Fund, 475  
John Holt & Co., 225, 305, 344-45, 398, 399  
Johnson, James, 142, 397, 429  
Johnson, Samuel, 179  
Johnson, T. W., 62n157  
Johnstone, Thomas, 451-52  
John Walkden & Co., 209, 249-51, 253, 254-55, 331, 368  
Jones, Alfred, 174, 234, 242, 419  
Jones, L. T., 1  
J. T. Chanrai & Co., 343, 357  
Julius Escherich, 225  
J. W. Jaeckel & Co., 468
- Kakanfo, 130  
Karachi, 15  
K. Chelleram & Sons, 245  
Kekereogun, Mohammed Laweni, 456  
Kemta House, 410  
Kennedy, Arthur, 122  
kernels, palm: alteration of, 175-76; barter terms for, 296; Britain and, 440; challenges of, 37-38; demand for, 34, 37-38, 75; duties on, 445; from Germany, 439; increase of, 295; machinery for, 422; pool of, 305; price fixing of, 175; production of, 168; redirection of, 460; slavery and, 284-85; statistics regarding, 36, 427, 446, 447; value of, 169, 185  
Kew Gardens, 274, 276-77, 414  
Keynes, John Maynard, 448-49  
Kidd McCoskry, 53  
Kinder, Ashton, 456  
King, Antoninus, 346  
Kingsley, Mary, 242  
Kingsway Stores, 378  
kola nuts, 342, 392, 409, 460  
Königsdorfer, 304  
Koranic Party, 193  
Koranic schools, 192  
Korowo, 66  
Koshemani, Rabiatsu, 453  
Kosoko, 1, 39, 41, 42, 45, 49, 84, 87-88, 107  
Kraus & Co., 385
- Lagos: attractions of, 59, 60; bombardment orders for, 1; cemeteries in, 26; civilised societies in, 2-3; colonial development policy in, 3, 295-302, 491; as colonial port city, 12-15; conditions of, 61; criticism of, 14-15; current status of, 511-12; demographics of, 54, 190, 316; description of, 53-61, 58; destruction to, 1; development in, 55-57, 59, 67, 317-19; diversification in, 22-23; diversity in, 53; drainage problems in, 190-91; enlargement of, 27-28; European population in, 316-17; expansion of, 177-84; features of, 10, 12; harbour at, 14; illustration of, 60; immigration in, 12; inhabitants of, 53-61; interventionist countries in, 2; law and order in, 63; map of, 11, 56, 299; mission creep in, 2; modernity in, 319-21; name origin of, 10n22; as new colony, 46-53; New Lagos, 58, 59, 103; new order establishment in, 69-71; new wealth in, 12; occupation statistics in, 317, 327-28; Old Town, 58, 59; old wealth in, 12; population growth of, 53-54, 189-90, 315-16; as port city, 8; public utilities in, 319-20; religious demographics in, 192; street names in, 66-67; water supply in, 320. *See also specific locations*  
Lagos Agricultural Bank, 356  
Lagos Bachelors' Cricket Club, 194  
Lagos Building Society, 96, 132  
Lagos Chamber of Commerce, 233, 313, 375, 390, 485  
Lagos Finance Company, 356  
Lagos Grammar School, 233-34  
Lagos Hotel, 386  
Lagos Market Women Association, 328  
Lagos Native Bank, 307-8, 356  
Lagos Native Beads Sellers' Association, 372  
Lagos Native Pastorate Mission, 233-34  
*Lagos Observer* (newspaper), 128-29, 191, 200, 314

- Lagos Reporter* (newspaper), 188, 200  
*Lagos Standard* (newspaper), 186, 194, 200, 206, 311, 314–15, 320–21, 365  
Lagos State Record and Archives Bureau (LASRAB), 513n5  
Lagos Stock Exchange, 378, 507  
Lagos Stores & Tomlinson, 224, 303, 305, 345  
*Lagos Times* (newspaper), 170–71, 176, 323  
*Lagos Times & Gold Coast Colony Advertiser* (newspaper), 240  
Lagos Town Council, 26  
Lagos Warehouse Company Ltd., 175, 224, 250–51, 254, 397–98  
Lagos Wassaw & Ashanti Gold Mining Syndicate, 307  
*Lagos Weekly Record* (newspaper), 131, 174, 240, 305, 311, 324, 345, 386, 400, 444, 446, 447  
*Lagos Weekly Times* (newspaper), 171, 314  
land: allocation of, 44–45; credit system and, 44, 67–68; crown grants for, 64–65, 67; development of, 67; following annexation, 49–50; freehold tenure for, 67; grants for, 45–46, 63–64; mortgages for, 65–66; sales of, 66, 67; turnover regarding, 65–66. *See also* property  
Land Registry Archive, 25  
Laotan, A. B., 345  
Law, Robin, 178  
Laweni, Saka, 345  
law of descent, 196–97  
lawyers, property purchase and, 78  
Legislative Council, 242  
legitimate commerce, 34–38, 492. *See also* business  
Leigh, Alfred, 98  
Leigh, Aureola, 98  
Leigh, Jacob Samuel, 79, 80, 90, 92, 96–101, 111, 119, 153, 155, 206, 217, 222, 237, 258  
Leigh, Sabina, 98  
Leigh, Sarah, 98  
Lenin, Vladimir, 499  
Leopold, King, 306  
Leventis, A. G., 220  
Lever, William, 306, 506  
Lewis, Samuel, 280  
Lewis, Thomas, 67  
Lewis, William, 93  
Liberia, 445  
limited liability companies, 28, 304, 307–12, 323, 378, 457, 458, 506, 507. *See also specific companies*  
Little Popo, 118  
Liverpool Chamber, 180  
*Liverpool Courier* (newspaper), 242–43  
Liverpool House, 191, 260  
Liverpool School of Tropical Diseases, 239, 475  
London & Kano Trading Co., 96  
Lovell, E. A., 326  
Lucas, J. Olumide, 345  
Lugard, Frederick, Governor, 419–20, 435–36, 438, 439, 440, 443–44, 474  
Luna, Andrew Costa, 118  
  
Mabinuori, 348  
Macaulay, David, 116  
Macaulay, Dorcas Folashade (Ireti), 375  
Macaulay, Herbert, 291, 315, 328, 375, 389, 430, 444, 467, 484, 499  
Macaulay, Milton, 375  
Macaulay, Thomas Benjamin ‘Smart,’ 270, 272  
MacGregor, William, Governor, 215, 235, 240, 241, 242, 297–98, 313, 319  
Macleod, Justice, 156  
Madras, 14  
Makanjuola, 334  
Malacca, 14  
Manchester House, 191, 207, 209, 211  
Mann, Kristin, 196  
manufacturing sector, 504, 510  
Marina: current status of, 512; 56 and 58, 95–96; land values in, 256–57; men of, 86–101; photo of, 318, 449; property changes in, 78, 100–101, 141, 358, 502; slave trade in, 72; structures in, 73, 191–92  
Marina Bank, 235  
Marshall Plan, 462  
Martins, Adolphus Brimah, 357  
mattresses, 484–85  
McCallum, Henry, Governor, 99, 187, 189, 312–13, 400  
McCoskry, William, Consul, 66, 77, 79, 83–84

- McIver & Co., 96  
mechanisation, pioneers of, 345-52  
merchants: accommodating colonial rule  
by, 329-41; adaptation by, 494; barter-  
ing complications to, 38; as bouncing  
back, 360-61; Brazilian, 92, 203; chal-  
lenges of, 439; characteristics of, 497;  
debt repayment to, 43-44; defined,  
74; diversity of, 83; failures and suc-  
cess of, 205-21; incentives for, 495; as  
independent native, 202; as money  
lenders, 228; Muslims as, 25, 457, 507;  
philanthropy of, 497-98; property  
importance to, 95-96; recent conun-  
drum regarding, 499-503; reversal  
of fortunes of, 500-501; risks of, 81;  
Saro as, 91-92, 329, 492-93; sole  
ownership by, 496, 506; status of, 327;  
uncertainties of, 37, 63; value of, 202;  
wealth growth of, 37, 57; winners and  
losers, 82-86; women as, 85-86, 328,  
338-39, 372-73. *See also* business;  
*specific merchants*  
Meyer, Paul, 370  
middle class, rise of, 5  
middlemen, 167, 180, 182-83, 193, 200,  
317, 324, 327, 328  
Mill, John Stuart, 503-4  
Miller Bros., 305, 351, 410  
Mills, Henry, 148, 152, 153  
Millson, Alvan, 180, 273-75, 289-90  
mineral oil, 37  
missionaries, 2, 65, 120, 143, 146, 195, 198,  
230, 293, 420, 423, 430  
M. Konigsdorfer & Co., 225  
Moloney, Alfred, Governor, 104, 125,  
127, 176, 179-80, 181-82, 202, 273,  
276-77  
money lending, 228. *See also specific*  
*banks; specific persons*  
Moore, Cornelius B., 92, 206  
Morel, E. D., 242  
mortgages, 76, 79  
motor vehicles, 320-21, 328, 351, 423  
mushroom gentlemen, 448, 451-52  
Muslims. *See* Islam/Muslims  
National African Company, 97n116  
National Bank of Nigeria, 96, 357, 378,  
458, 459, 507  
National Congress of British West Africa  
(NCBWA), 315  
Native Board of Trade, 337  
Neville, George W., 185, 200-201  
Newcastle, Duke of, 51  
new economic history of Africa (NEHA), 7  
new history of capitalism (NHC), 6  
new imperialism, 198  
New Lagos, 58, 59, 103. *See also* Lagos  
new wealth, in Lagos, 12  
Niger, 89, 91, 97n116, 99, 112-13, 118  
Niger Company, 450, 474, 496-97  
Nigeria, 321, 438, 440. *See also* Lagos  
Nigerian Association of African Import-  
ers & Exporters, 378  
*Nigerian Chronicle* (newspaper), 212  
*Nigerian Daily Times* (newspaper), 386  
*Nigerian Handbook*, 448, 451  
Nigerian Legislative Council, 389  
Nigerian Mercantile Bank, 459  
Nigerian National Democratic Party, 315,  
328  
*Nigerian Pioneer* (newspaper), 311, 345,  
352, 430-31, 444  
Nigerian Properties Ltd., 132  
Nigerian Shipping Company, 308-10  
Nigerian Shipping Corporation, 368, 385  
*Nigerian Spectator* (newspaper), 376  
Nigerian Stock Exchange, 378  
Nimbe, Abdul Ramonu Olorun, 456  
Nobre, Francisco, 344  
Obasa, Orisadipe, 244  
Odunburo, Joseph, 413  
Odunmosu, Joseph, 426  
Odutola, Adeole, 501  
Odutola, Jimoh, 501  
Ogunbiyi, Jacob, 105, 106, 107-8, 114, 118,  
121, 127-28, 131, 133, 153, 344  
Ogundeji, Isiah, 407  
Oil Mills, 78  
Oke, Abibu, 205, 455  
Oke, Dada, 406  
Okin, Dada, 407  
Olajumoke (Obasa), Charlotte, 244, 245,  
352  
Olaniyan, Idris, 205, 455-56  
Olapajuokun, Ojelabi (John Blaize), 230  
Olayemi, Charles, 244  
Old Calabar, 382-90



- Old Lodge, 260  
Old Town, Lagos, 58, 59. *See also* Lagos  
old wealth, in Lagos, 12  
Olowogbowo, 62–63, 87–88  
Olowu, Odedeyi, 413  
Olowu, Seidu, 205, 223, 335, 365  
Olufemi, Ernest, 244  
Olukolu, Fasheke, 85, 205, 223  
Oluwole, Isaac, 389  
Oni, Claudius, 186, 200, 201, 205, 223  
Oniye, Ige Egun, 407  
*Oparun*, 150  
Opium Wars, 15  
Osborne, Frederick, 185, 201  
Oshodi, Henry Glover, 87  
Osmena, Sergio, 499  
O'Swald, Wilhelm, 39, 83, 86  
Ottawa Conference, 504  
Owu, 136–37  
Oyasonya, Emmanuel, 118
- Pacific House, 96, 191  
Palmerston, Lord, 47, 51  
palm kernels. *See* kernels, palm  
palm oil: adaptation in, 460; agreement regarding, 114–15; alteration of, 176; in Badagri, 106–7; barter terms for, 296; broker control of, 75; challenges of, 37–38; competition in, 39; decline of, 47; increase of, 295; industry, 72–73, 140; pioneers of, 87; price fixing of, 175; progress regarding, 41–42; slavery and, 284–85; statistics regarding, 36, 82, 168, 446, 447; uses of, 169–70; value of, 34, 169, 171, 185  
Parliamentary Select Committee of 1865, 177  
paternalism, 3  
Paterson Zochonis, 185, 201, 296, 303  
pawning, 70, 124, 411–12  
Payne, John Augustus Otunba, 66, 159, 219, 313  
Pearse, Samuel Herbert: as borrower, 335; connections of, 388; as exporter, 325; final years of, 393; home of, 319; Hotel de l'Europe and, 386; investments of, 389–90; ivory boom and, 382–90; kola trade and, 342; as merchant, 223; Nigerian Shipping Company and, 308; Old Calabar and, 382–90; overview of, 362, 379–82, 393–94; photo of, 381; politics and, 389; properties of, 217, 345, 384–85; publishing and, 386; railway and, 460; resilience of, 382; as society member, 388–89, 390–91; trades of, 385, 391–92; undercutting by, 468; World War I and, 390–92  
Pearse, Samuel Herbert Abiodun, 391  
Pearse & Thompson, 380, 382, 384  
Pelewura, Alimotu, 328  
Penang, 14  
Pennington, A. R., 245  
People's Union, 337–38  
Perseveranza House, 357  
Phillips, Evangeline Ayodele Pearse, 391, 393  
Phillips, S. C., 391  
Phoenix Hall, 219  
plantations, defined, 172. *See also specific locations*  
Po, Fernando, 275, 287  
polygamy, 376, 411n69, 421–22  
port cities, in history, 8–15  
Port of Lagos, 13–14, 52, 59, 63, 185, 204, 300–301, 321, 511  
Porto Novo, 116, 182, 211  
Possu, Akinpelu, 85  
post-modernism, 5–6  
poverty, 1, 6–7, 475, 513  
Pratt, Harry, 92, 153  
Princess Christian Hospital, 243–44  
Probate Registry, 26  
produce, 171, 202–3, 331, 441, 446. *See also specific produce*  
profit motive, 2, 20, 489  
property: as business, 75–82; capital for, 356; financing of, 78; freehold grants and, 419; freehold of, 77; law of descent and, 196–97; merchants and, 95–96; price rises of, 77; rights, 3, 27; sales statistics regarding, 77–78, 96; of Saro, 27, 194–95; transferring of, 196; values of, 195, 502. *See also land; specific owners*  
Protestant Church, 194  
public utilities, in Lagos, 315, 319–20  
Quezon, Manuel, 499  
Quilliam, Abdullah, 89

- racial discrimination, 13, 194, 312–15, 321, 435, 474, 490, 493
- Radcliffe Son & Durant, 224–25
- railway, 297–302, 303, 342, 392, 403, 406, 422–23
- Randle, John, 211, 212, 290–91
- Raymond House, 191, 248–49, 260, 261, 263
- Rayner, Justice, 195, 196
- Red Book*, 452, 463
- Red Cross Fund, 475
- Reffle Davies, Catherine Kofoworola, 280, 283, 290
- Régis Ainé, 40, 107, 111, 114, 225
- Régis Frère, 39
- Registrar of Companies, 26
- Remo House, 367–68
- rental property, 260, 357–58, 502–3. *See also specific property owners*
- rentiers, 132, 229, 246, 352, 358, 361, 495, 501–3. *See also specific persons*
- Restaurant de Rocha, 356
- Robbin, Henry, 66, 78, 92, 137, 139, 358
- Rocha, Candido João da, 307, 345, 352–60, 389, 410, 450
- Rocha, João da, 92, 204, 353, 355
- Rocha, Moses da, 358–59
- Roman Catholicism, 22
- Roman Catholic Pro-Cathedral, 192
- Rose Cottage, 258, 357, 397, 399–400, 401–2, 409–10, 472, 484
- Rowe, Samuel, Governor, 125
- Royal African Society, 239, 244
- Royal Navy, 72
- Royal Niger Company, 91, 119–20
- rubber trade, 186–87, 285, 295, 394, 409
- Rufisque, 14
- Salisbury, Lord, 302
- Sant Anna, Manuel de, 92, 204
- Sapara-Williams, Christopher, 309
- Saro: advantages of, 190; arrival of, 61; business ownership by, 71; cases and sources regarding, 23–26; challenges of, 496; characteristics of, 103; clubs of, 193–94; debt repayment to, 43–44; decline thesis regarding, 493; as employees, 73; following annexation, 49–50; growth of, 27; headquarters of, 62–63; in import trade, 333–34; as intermediaries, 192–93; land allocation to, 63; lines in the sand by, 61–69; as merchants, 91–92, 329, 492–93; modernisation and, 70; myths regarding, 162; overview of, 21–23, 61–62, 491; political expression of, 430; prominence of, 491–92; property rights of, 27, 194–95; statistics regarding, 62; support for, 39; values of, 193–94, 219; visibility loss of, 227
- Sasche & Co., 384
- Sasegbon, Daniel, 417–18
- Savage, Daddy, 63
- Savage, Josiah A., 92, 222–23
- Sawyer Cole, Mary Jemima, 221
- Say, Jean-Baptiste, 19
- Scala, Giambattista, 53–54
- Schumpeter, Joseph, 16, 17, 490, 498, 507
- scientific racism, 194
- Scottish Nigerian Mortgage & Trust Company Ltd., 332
- self-determination, 444
- self-financing, 420
- Serrano Davies, Matilda Bonifacio, 145
- services, 8, 21, 25, 37, 84, 108, 129, 150, 162, 190, 195, 342, 345, 350, 361, 398, 459, 515, 518
- sewing machines, 345–46, 361, 454, 460, 495, 505
- Shackleford, Amos, 343, 472
- Shelle, Akanni, 373
- Shelle Doherty, Wusamotu, 372–73, 374, 501
- Shepherd, Nathaniel, 206, 222
- Shitta, Yesufu, 89, 91
- Shitta Bey, Mohammed, 88–91, 97, 111, 118, 119, 122, 131, 192, 193, 344
- Shitta Mosque, 89, 90, 192
- Sholabomi, Sarian, 131–32
- short-folding, 175
- Shyngle, J. Egerton, 259, 282, 385, 414–15, 481
- Sibthorpe, Aaron, 475
- Sierra Leone, 190, 341. *See also* Saro
- Sierra Leone Friendly Society, 475
- Sierra Leone News* (newspaper), 215–16
- Simpson, William, 319
- Singapore, 14
- slaves/slave trade: abolition of, 2, 27; conversion of, 230; economic concerns

- regarding, 40–41; effects of, 284–85; efficiency of, 70–71; elimination of, 15; favour for, 38–39; growth of, 52; interception avoidance of, 72; interruption to, 179; Lagos as exporter in, 33; land acquisition and, 67; political authority from, 15; property acquisition and, 42; revival of, 40, 47; trust system regarding, 43; warehouses for, 73
- smallpox epidemic, 58
- Smith, Abel, 481, 482–83
- Smith, Adam, 18–19, 201, 310
- Smith, Smalman John, Justice, 80–81
- Smuts, Jan Christian, 239
- Sodipe, Sodeinde, 97
- Sogunro, 160
- sole ownership, 24, 28, 225, 323, 327, 360, 376, 496
- Somefun, Moses Odeyinka, 398, 411, 416
- Sorunke, 121, 122
- Spanish silver dollar, 172, 250. *See also* currency
- Speed, Edwin, Chief Justice, 196
- Spirits, 160, 168, 202, 305, 326, 335, 371, 385, 440, 467, 494
- SS *Niger*, 138
- steamships, 13–14, 49, 52–53, 73, 83, 185, 301
- sterling, 34n6, 74, 79, 112, 172, 286, 446, 448, 477
- S. Thomas & Co., 465
- St. Louis, 14
- St. Paul's Breadfruit, 192, 330, 400–401
- Supreme Court Records, 25–26
- tailoring, 346
- Taiwo, Alfred, 131, 132
- Taiwo, Daniel Conrad: accounts of, 117; Ajasa case and, 125–29, 193; as becoming a Lagosian, 104–6; as Big Man, 492; business dealings of, 110, 111–31; characteristics of, 131; closing years of, 131–32; Crowther Bros. and, 118–19; exercise of power of, 133; faith of, 108; influence of, 125; as intermediary, 120–21, 123, 125; Jacob Ogunbiyi and, 105, 106, 107–8, 114, 118, 121, 127–28, 131; James P. L. Davies and, 146–51, 162–63; from Kosoko to Glover and, 106–10; language understanding of, 111; leadership of, 108; legitimate commerce and, 97; as lender, 235; overview of, 103–4, 132–34, 492; philanthropy of, 131; photo of, 109; political ambitions of, 128–29; politics and, 120–31; property of, 113–14, 219, 358; proposal to, 53; quote of, 44; rental properties of, 114; retribution of, 123–24; Richard Blaize and, 111; Royal Niger Company and, 119–20; staff problems of, 119–20
- Taiwo, Rebecca, 131–32
- Takoradi, 14, 24
- Tapa, Oshodi, 40, 49, 62, 67, 84, 85, 86–88, 106, 107, 133
- taxation, 147–48, 302
- Taylor, Christopher, 137, 141
- Taylor, Daddy Thomas, 329, 330
- Taylor, David: leadership of, 443; as merchant, 223; overview of, 329–32, 413, 452–53; properties of, 100, 217, 345; proposal of, 469–70; as rising merchant, 200; support from, 201
- Taylor & Co., 380
- Taylor Williams, Marion Amelia, 262, 263
- Tete Ansa, Winifried, 458–59
- textile industry, 34, 168, 175, 232, 343, 367, 369–70, 460
- Thomas, Andrew Wilkinson, 319, 385, 450–51
- Thomas, Emmanuel, 476
- Thomas, Isaac B., 345
- Thomas, Jacob (Mosalawa), 451
- Thomas, James Jonathan, 88, 92, 100, 206, 213–18, 235, 331
- Thomas, Jane, 464
- Thomas, John, 464
- Thomas, Joesetta Cole, 465
- Thomas, Laetitia Rebecca, 464
- Thomas, Margaret, 476
- Thomas, N. G., 130
- Thomas, Peter, Jr., 476
- Thomas, Peter John Claudius: allocations of, 469; aspirations of, 473–74; background of, 464–65; cases of, 481–82; characteristics of, 473; civil service of, 485; death of, 486; descent of, 476–83; diversification by, 472; economic development viewpoint of, 474–75; estate of, 486; exigencies of

- Thomas, Peter John Claudius (*continued*)  
war and, 467–71; as exporter, 325;  
final phase of, 484–87; as government  
official, 464–65; home of, 319; Jacob  
Coker and, 468–69; legacy of, 476; as  
merchant, 465–67; overview of, 29,  
452, 463–64, 487–88, 496–97, 501;  
philanthropy of, 475, 476, 498; photo  
of, 466; property of, 151, 442, 467, 472,  
477, 484; religion of, 476; as rentier,  
260; Samuel Pearse and, 384, 389;  
success of, 471–76; tannery of, 343,  
460; viewpoints of, 474, 475–76; vision  
of, 486–88
- Thomas, Stella, 476
- Thomas, Stephen, 464, 465
- Thomas, Stephen (son of Peter Thomas),  
476
- Thompson, Ailara Giwa, 341
- Thompson, Humuani *Alake*, 341, 343, 501
- Tika Tore Press, 386
- timber, increase of, 295
- Tinubu, Efunporoye (Efunroye), 39–40,  
85–86, 122
- Toffa, King of Porto Novo, 116
- Tomlinson, T. E., 216
- trade: with Brazil, 204; cash payments  
in, 173–74; competition issues in, 187;  
country, 484; declining terms of,  
459–60; expansion of, 185, 449–50;  
foreign restrictions in, 439–40; free, 2,  
3, 437, 504; growth of, 185; regional,  
113, 133, 228, 342; reports regarding,  
170–71; reverberations in, 197–98;  
trends in, 170; unpredictability of, 437;  
World War I effects on, 368. *See also*  
business; export trade; import trade
- Trotsky, Leon, 499
- trust system, 43, 310
- Tse-tung, Mao, 499
- Tugwell, Herbert, 217, 243, 401
- Tukuru, Alhadji, 392
- Turner, J., 92
- Turner, Susannah (Efubemi), 97
- undersea cable, 174–75
- United Africa Company (UAC), 306, 378,  
450, 487, 504–5
- United Native African Church, 194, 219,  
315
- United States: cocoa and, 458; as com-  
mercial and financial provider, 469;  
entrepreneurship and, 17–18; exports  
from, 504, 508–9; as new history of  
capitalism (NHC), 6; trade with,  
440
- Universal Negro Improvement Associa-  
tion, 471
- Vaughan, James C., 344
- Venn, Henry, 137, 143, 145, 194
- Victoria, Queen of England, 143
- Vincent, Ephraim, 118
- Voigt & Co., 80–81
- Voigt Schabert, 225
- von Thünen, Johan Heinrich, 8
- wage labour, 422, 493
- Walkden, Thomas, 255
- Wasinmi Mosque, 338
- Water House, 355, 356, 359, 360
- Water Street, land allocation on, 46
- water supply, in Lagos, 191, 320
- The Weekly Times* (newspaper), 240
- Welsh, Thomas, 233
- Wema Towers, 245
- Wesleyan Church, 93, 97–98, 215, 217–21,  
234, 239, 249, 261–63, 339, 464, 467
- West Africa*, 447
- West African American Corporation, 458,  
459
- West African Brewery Syndicate, 438
- West African Cooperative Producers Ltd.,  
458, 459
- West African Federation of Native Ship-  
pers, 443
- West African Producers Co-operative  
Society Ltd., 459
- West Africa Settlements, 177
- Wey, Joseph, 78
- Whitford, John, 54, 55, 57
- W. H. Lever, 345, 450
- Wilberforce House, 88, 216, 217
- Will, Isabella, 93
- Will, James, 93
- Williams, A. T. Faro, 207
- Williams, Edwin, 220, 382
- Williams, Eleanor Cole, 207, 212, 238
- Williams, Frederick Ephraim, 411–12
- Williams, George A., 97

- Williams, Isaac Benjamin: early life of, 245-48; family of, 261-63; import trade of, 248-56; innovations of, 495-96; leasing business of, 256-61, 357; as lender, 257-60, 398, 399, 410; mortgages of, 256-61; overview of, 263-64; photo of, 247; property of, 101, 191, 256-61; religion of, 261-63; success of, 450
- Williams, Jacob, 261
- Williams, Jacob Olutunde, 261, 262, 263
- Williams, Jacob Sylvanus, 246
- Williams, Jacob Taiwo, 207, 217
- Williams, James O'Connor, 186, 206, 217, 222
- Williams, Jane Beckley, 262
- Williams, Marion Amelia Taylor, 262, 263
- Williams, Mary, 262
- Williams, Patience, 218
- Williams, Philip Henryson, 223, 456
- Williams, Rhoda, 218
- Williams, Samuel B., 78
- Williams, Samuel Ladipo Osanyintade (Daddy Sam), 206-7
- Williams, Sarah O'Connor, 213
- Williams, Seidu Jabita, 223, 307, 456-57
- Williams, Zachariah, 155, 191, 195, 206-13, 216, 222, 237, 238, 246, 257, 258, 335, 358, 380, 416
- Williams Bros., 100, 207, 209-10, 213
- Williams Moore, Eliza Sabina, 206
- Williams & Pearse, 382-84
- Williams Street, 319
- Willoughby, Isaac H., 66, 79, 92, 382, 387
- Wilson, Woodrow, 444
- Witt & Busch, 110, 188-89, 224, 303, 304, 305
- Woermann Linie, 436, 442
- women, of Lagos: industrious qualities of, 57; in production, 187, 282, 285; in sources, 25, 85, 338; as traders, 85-86, 328, 338-39, 341-42, 372-73. *See also specific women*
- Wood House, 290, 291
- Woodland Estate: development of, 272-78; innovation at, 283-85; Jacob Coker and, 291-92; James Davies at, 282-83; overview of, 266-72, 292-93
- World War I: boom and bust and, 444-49; changing commercial environment and, 437-44; co-operation and, 457-61; effects of, 467; fortunes of, 436-37; innovation and, 457-61; mercantile community and, 449-57; outcome of, 461-62; overview of, 499; Samuel Pearse and, 390-92; shipping challenges and, 441-43, 504; trade effects from, 368
- World War II, 509-10
- Wright, Rufus, 409, 413, 416, 418
- yellow fever, 191
- Yeyeju, Idowu, 67
- Yoruba, 21, 86, 124, 194, 314-15, 497
- Yorubaland, 52, 177, 178, 182, 199-205, 493