Exploring Materiality and Connectivity in Anthropology and Beyond

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Sir, I have the honour to inform you that the King of Cabinda has declined to receive the presents. ... I was told ... that the King could not receive them ... without a written declaration from the captain that they were ‘for nothing’. ... I immediately wrote to say, he would get them ‘for nothing’: that he had signed a Treaty and the Queen of England had sent him presents; but received in answer that he could not accept them.¹

This disagreement about an anti-slave-trade treaty between King Mongoya of Cabinda and Lieutenant Need of the Royal Navy in 1855 is emblematic of the ways in which African rulers on the coasts of West and Central Africa and Europe’s imperial agents (traders, consuls and navy personnel) forged and contested economic and political relationships in the nineteenth century, a highly volatile and crucial period of imperial contact. It points to different notions of contract – a concept of contract via gift exchange versus a single, signed piece of paper – and highlights the central role of gift exchange in constituting and challenging relationships in Atlantic Africa. In this chapter, I argue that a focus on such gifts and their acceptance, refusal and reciprocation can yield new insights into the constantly shifting power relations that shaped the transition of the transatlantic trade in enslaved people into the so-called ‘legitimate trade’ in natural resources (1807–67) and subsequent colonisation (1884–1914). A focus on gifts, their particular materiality and the struggles over their meanings allows us to look at the connecting and disconnecting qualities of material culture in imperial contact. In other words, it sheds light on the material processes through which

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Julia T. S. Binter
people established cultural, political and economic relationships, forged identities, struggled to maintain sovereignty or impose dominance and drew themselves and others into relationships of dependence.

Hence, it allows new insights into the processes of becoming imperial.

**Gifts in Atlantic Africa**

Marcel Mauss’s seminal *Essay on the Gift* (2016), which discussed the importance of gift giving, receiving and reciprocating for the social cohesion of non-capitalist societies, has inspired several major strands of anthropological debate: a specialised literature on regional differences in gift exchange and related notions of personhood in the Pacific (Munn 1986; Strathern 1988; Weiner 1992; Gregory 2015), a growing body of literature on the central role of gifts in capitalist and neoliberalist societies (Godbout and Caillé 1998; Graeber 2001; Tsing 2013), and a broader discussion at the intersection of economic anthropology and material culture studies about the biography and transmutability of things, that is, their properties and the encoding of value in exchange (Kopytoff 1986; Appadurai 1986; Gosden and Knowles 2001; Kingdon and Bersselaar 2008). Moreover, Nicholas Thomas (1991, 14) has drawn attention to gift exchange as social and political process and as acts of ‘consumption and personification’ in the colonial contact zones of the Pacific. However, in most of these debates ethnographic examples from Atlantic Africa, with a few notable exceptions (Guyer 1993; Apter 2005; Piot 2009), remain conspicuously absent. A main reason for this omission could be that Atlantic Africa does not lend itself to dichotomous interpretative models such as commodity economies versus gift economies, understood as individualistic, money-based exchange systems of alienable products and collective systems of prestations and counter-prestations that establish mutual dependency and reciprocity respectively. As Karin Barber has highlighted, economic exchange in Atlantic Africa ‘cannot be described as the articulation of two preexisting sets of relations, capitalist and non-capitalist’, but rather as ‘workable systems that *originated* at the interface of local and European commerce’ which ‘spawned idiosyncratic artistic genres’ (Barber 2013, 112) and forms of cultural expression.

Studies of transcultural economic activities in Atlantic Africa have, thus, rather focused on things that helped to translate between radically different regimes of value and served as ‘the vehicle for the creation of new interpersonal obligations’ (Pietz 1988, 115), one example being the ‘fetish’ or *nkisi* in early Portuguese–Kongo relations, or on commercial
transactions more generally (Guyer 2004). In her ground-breaking study on the logics of Atlantic African economies, Jane Guyer rejects the idea of equivalence which, according to her reading of Mauss, has been fundamental to the theory of both gift and commodity exchange. Instead, she stresses that, although African economies have been monetised for centuries, it is not fixed ratios (equivalences) between money and things that allow the turning of a profit, but rather the deliberate maintenance of asymmetries of value that allow for conversion across thresholds and thus for making gains. According to this economic logic, pricing takes into account the social, cultural and economic capital of all actors as well as the particular context and conditions of a transaction. Gains thus accrue for both sellers and buyers. However, Guyer’s focus on currencies and ‘marginal gains’ disregards the crucial role that gifts play in these exchanges. I seek to bring back the gift, understood as a thing ‘of exchange in which parts of the giver are embedded, extending social relations beyond the transaction’ (Tsing 2013, 23), into the discussion of economic exchange in Atlantic Africa. Following Andrew Apter’s line of argument (2005, 122–76), I will show that gifts were part and parcel of translations between regimes of value and of conversions across thresholds. In addition, I will trace the ways in which rituals of gift exchange, which had been developed in the context of transatlantic commerce, subsequently played a crucial role in the forging of political relations during processes of colonial encroachment. In order to understand this ‘politicisation’ of the gift, it is necessary to look at the trading rituals that developed at the ‘interface of local and European commerce’ (Barber 2013, 112), taking the Niger Delta ‘in the very eye of the Atlantic trade’ (p. 117) as a foil for discussion.

Trading rituals and transvaluation

The Niger Delta, in today’s Nigeria, extends for roughly 450 km from the Bight of Benin in the west to the Bight of Biafra in the east, and lends itself, with its many creeks and islands, to small forms of organisation. In the west of the delta, the Kingdom of Warri (Itsekiri) traces its monarchical roots back to the Kingdom of Benin. In the central delta, city-states made up of lineage-based houses, or ‘canoe-houses’, such as Bonny, Brass and New Calabar (Ijo) and, in the east, Old Calabar (Efik), developed their hierarchical social organisation in dialogue with the transatlantic trade in enslaved people, which started in the sixteenth century and peaked two hundred years later. These highly hierarchical social organisations
were ‘geared toward individual achievement, i.e. … self-aggrandizement or self-making … through the recruitment of a diversity of people, with opportunities for extreme and rapid social mobility’ (Barber 2013, 117). In other words, recruiting people, through marriage, pawnship or slave raiding, into relationships of dependence (Lovejoy and Falola 2003) resulted in ‘wealth-in-people’ (Guyer 1993). This ‘wealth-in-people’, in turn, was based on, and added to, ‘charisma’ (p. 253), which was achieved by ‘the cultivation of [the] singularity of persons’, encompassing ‘personal beauty, strength, skill and general worth’ (p. 259). At the Atlantic coast, this charisma depended heavily, I argue, on the ability to establish trustworthy and gainful relationships with European trade partners, one particularly valuable manifestation of these gainful relationships being personalised gifts such as staffs and hats embellished with the name of the African merchant in question. Countless portrait photographs of African merchants from the end of the nineteenth century testify to their significance in self-fashioning (for example Figure 3.1). But what made these gifts so valuable to their recipients? To answer this question, we have to look at the trading rituals that had been developed during the Atlantic commerce.

Figure 3.1 Unidentified photographer, Chief (Prince) Egbe of Warri with relatives, ca. 1895. © Unilever Collections, Unilever Art, Archives and Records Management, Port Sunlight (UAC/1/11/10/3/2/1).
Travel accounts of the period of the trade in enslaved people (Adams [1823] 1966; Landolphe and Quesné 1823), memoirs of the ‘legitimate’ trade in natural resources (Cardi 1899; Harford 1899; Cotterell 1910) (palm oil in the case of the Niger Delta) and oral history that I conducted in the delta in 2015 and 2016 suggest that the basic patterns of trading rituals remained relatively stable till colonial encroachment. Particularly the memoirs of Harry Cotterell (1841–1913) and Charles Napoléon, comte de Cardi (1844–1906), European traders active in the delta from the 1860s to the 1890s, give insights into these rituals and the attitudes and mutual perceptions with which the European and African middlemen conducted the trade.

Above all, the European merchants had to conform to the elaborate trading etiquette of their African ‘customers’ (Cotterell 1910, 21), which consisted in officially hosting them on their ships, sharing a sumptuous meal, and ‘shake-hands’ (Cardi 1899, 446), a term in the trade vernacular of the coast denoting the presenting of gifts to the ruling African traders and their retinue. Already at the beginning of the century, ‘these presents chiefly consist[ed] of gold-laced hats, silver-headed canes, pieces of rich silk, and embroidered coats and waistcoats’ (Adams [1823] 1966, 123). These ceremonial gestures of hospitality and goodwill made it possible to ‘break trade’ and start the actual commerce, which included the payment of the ‘comey’ (Dike 1956, 43) – that is, export duties levied on European traders – and the fixing of exchange ratios – between fictional units of account (such as the ‘trade ounce’ and the ‘pawn’) and palm oil. Once the prices and the range of goods that the African merchants wanted to procure were fixed, European traders advanced these goods on trust to the African middlemen, who then travelled to the hinterland to exchange them for palm oil.

Like their European counterparts, the African middlemen had developed specific rituals for receiving their guests. They set out to welcome their European visitors in their war canoes, pulled by up to eighty paddlers, accompanied by the rhythm of their talking drums, their flags flying in the wind (Cotterell 1910, 25; Lander and Lander [1832] 1965, 232–3). Moreover,

on such occasions the Chiefs would rig themselves out in the most grotesque costumes one can imagine – full suits of cast-off Livery, Naval and Military Uniforms, and even Dress Suits were used to improve their appearance, and to show respect to their visitors.

(Cotterell 1910, 81)
It was an extravagant, multisensory way of communicating their wealth and power to their European visitors, though some of the intended messages seem to have been lost in translation. While Africans on the shore and trade partners in the hinterland would immediately recognise the appellations with which the talking drums praised the owner of the canoes, most European traders heard ‘savage music’ (Cardi 1899, 445) and beating ‘tom-toms’ (Cotterell 1910, 25–6). The flags adorning the bows or sterns of the canoes were easier to recognise and gave proof of a trader’s name, accomplishments and commercial and political alliances (Figure 3.2). Hence, the disembodied extension of a trader’s presence in the form of drum language and iconographic flags not only testifies to the multisensory qualities of the trader’s performance, but also alludes to his varied target audiences and channels of communication.

Similarly, the international fashion style that the African middle-men donned for the occasion disturbed and impressed the European visitors in equal measure. Whereas African traders seemingly tried to show off their success in the palm oil trade and their knowledge and idiosyncratic interpretation of European festive costume and regalia, many British traders were not sure how to cope with forms of self-expression that ‘confounded the fundamental alterity of the African’ (Apter 2005,
Despite ridiculing these forms of African fashion, traders like Harry Cotterell and Charles de Cardi, who spent decades trading in the delta, forging commercial relationships and familiarising themselves with local customs, often learned to appreciate these products of cultural arbitration as a sign of mutual ‘respect’ (Cotterell 1910, 81). They sensed that the African merchants were keenly aware of their position in the transatlantic economy and had developed ways of ‘seeing and acting beyond local environments’ (Prestholdt 2008, 88). Jeremy Prestholdt calls this positioning in the globalising world a particular form of ‘African cosmopolitanism’ (see also Mbembe 2005; Northrup 2002; Getz 2013) or ‘vision of globality’ (Prestholdt 2008, 89) that was as much formed by transatlantic encounters as it itself shaped these encounters.

The trade rituals mediated these encounters. They highlight the processual quality of coastal trade, where people and things – ships, canoes, commodities and gifts as well as the fluid landscape of the Niger Delta – intertwined in ever-changing formations, testifying to Tim Ingold’s notion of a ‘world of incessant movement and becoming’ (Ingold 2011, 141). Following Ingold’s processual vision of life, the commercial transactions and cultural arbitrations can be interpreted to have formed ‘knots … woven from the countless lifelines of its manifold human and non-human constituents as they thread their ways through the tangle of relationships in which they are … comprehensively enmeshed’ (Ingold 2011, 141). This meshwork, though, was shot through with claims to political, economic and cultural power. Looking at these enmeshments from a Marxian perspective, which plays close attention to power relations, Andrew Apter defines them as a form of transvaluation, or, more precisely, as a ‘mediation of economic and cultural oppositions through commodity exchange, whereby sign-values and exchange values, givers and receivers, sellers and buyers, achieve formal commensurability’ (Apter 2005, 123). Apter stresses the fact that canoes were more than ‘merely … symbols of wealth and power’ (123) and emphasises the transitive and transformative quality of the canoes as key sites of political, economic and cultural arbitration. Read against the backdrop of Anne Haour’s (2013) argument that trade between West Africa and Europe created liminal spaces specifically dedicated to accommodating strangers and brokering cultural differences, the middlemen’s war canoes and European trading hulks can be identified as such liminal spaces, in which political, commercial and cultural values were negotiated and contested.

Gifts played a key role in all of these forms of transvaluation. The giving and receiving of gifts at the beginning of trade rituals recognised the sovereignty of all the parties involved. They were the prerequisite
to ‘breaking trade’, materialising commercial interests and alluding to potential future gains. Gifts were also crucial to the forging of identities and establishing more binding and longer-term connections between the various actors at the coast. The connecting quality of gifts formed a part of the logic of trade which consisted in advancing goods on trust and – in the period of the trade in enslaved people – often receiving a member of the middleman’s family as a pawn in return. Despite this mutual dependence, the only certain signifier of a trader’s economic success, and thus his trustworthiness, was his ostentatious display of wealth in the form of dress, European-style architecture and furniture, and lavish entertainment (Ikime 1969, 59). Moreover, a large fleet of trading canoes manned with paddlers as well as armed forces, all of them bonded, manifested his wealth-in-people. The middlemen’s idiosyncratic interpretation of international fashion and their taste for European furniture and architecture showcased their cosmopolitan connoisseurship and can be read not so much as a consumption but as an ‘investment, a performative conversion, a devotion of present income to the hope of future gains’ (Guyer 2004, 99). However, personalised gifts in which ‘parts of the giver were embed- ded’ (Tsing 2013, 23) distinguished those African middlemen who had been able to forge not only commercial ties based on the exchange of commodities, but also longer-term personal relations with European trade partners. Gifts were thus the ultimate material testimony of a person’s cosmopolitan reach, the decisive addition to a person’s charisma in the Atlantic trade.

**Gifts forging contracts**

If European traders accepted and adapted to these trading rituals, how can we explain the various misunderstandings and conflicts which gift exchange engendered, such as the encounter between Lieutenant Need and King Mongaya of Cabinda mentioned at the beginning of this chapter? The historical record suggests that such disputes over gifts emerged when new imperial agents, such as the Royal Navy’s West Africa Squadron, entered the Atlantic interface and tried to redefine the meaning and value of certain gifts and, consequently, power relations. Let me give a brief overview of the new actors and changing conditions with which African middlemen were confronted during the nineteenth century.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, littoral rulers could rely on established trading ties with European and especially British trade partners in order to continue their trade in enslaved people while
simultaneously establishing their trade in palm produce (Latham 1974; Jones 1989; Lynn 1995, 1997). By the middle of the century, palm oil and palm kernel were among the most sought-after trading goods of the Victorian era, being used as lubricant for industrial machinery and railway stock, and as an essential ingredient in the manufacture of soap and candles (Lynn 1997). Driven by the prospect of a lucrative trade, a new wave of British traders tried to enter the palm oil trade in the 1850s. These new traders pushed to establish themselves with factories on the shore, and attempted to circumvent littoral middlemen by using steamships to penetrate the hinterland. These moves ‘from ship to shore’ and ‘from sail to steam’ (Lynn 1995, 68) increased the competition in the Niger Delta and slowly but steadily modified British-Nigerian relations.

From the perspective of British imperial politics, the abolition of the transatlantic trade in enslaved people and the growth in the palm oil trade were interdependent. As ‘every stolen slave was not only a lost producer of goods for export but also a lost consumer of goods from countries such as Britain’ (Huzzey 2012, 137), British abolitionists propagated ‘legitimate’ forms of commerce like the palm oil trade as a ‘remedy’ (Buxton 1840) for the trade in enslaved people. In the first half of the century, the British government did not advocate colonial rule but founded the Royal Navy’s West Africa Squadron in 1808 with the aim of capturing slave ships and signing anti-slave-trade treaties with West African rulers. But it was not until 1849 that the Foreign Office stationed a consul off the Niger Delta on the island of Fernando Po who was to mediate the ever-changing relations at the coast and soon established courts of equity where European and African traders were supposed to settle disputes over, among other things, pricing and outstanding debt. Subsequently, the West Africa Squadron (and, from 1867 onwards, its successor, HM’s naval forces at the Cape of Good Hope and the Coast of West Africa) began to provide military protection for British traders and missionaries and, at the end of the century, military prowess to break the sovereignty of the coastal people.

The dispute between King or Mabouk Mongoya of Cabinda, in today’s Angola, and Lieutenant Need of the West Africa Squadron in 1855 is particularly revealing of the ways in which the Royal Navy’s practices interrupted long-established rituals of connecting and binding people. Whereas the gift exchange of trade rituals allowed for continuous renegotiations of commercial relations and a reaffirmation or dissolution of relationships of trust, the Royal Navy’s insistence on a single signed treaty sought to halt this process. Mabouk Mongoya’s refusal of Lieutenant Need’s gift, as well as the encounters which preceded it, highlights the
fact that this introduction of a new form of contract was fraught with conflict. Like many other middlemen along the coast of West and Central Africa (cf. Latham 1973), the Mambouk sought to continue the trade in enslaved people, and claimed that in the previous year another agent of the West Africa Squadron, Officer in Command Wilton, had tricked him into signing the treaty in the first place. The commander had offered to take charge of the education of one of his sons. The written consent that he signed for this purpose turned out to be the anti-slave-trade agreement that the Mambouk had previously refused to sign. After Wilmot’s ‘Machiavellian triumph … the Cabinda leaders protested in a letter to the Portuguese in Luanda, asserting their recognition of the Portuguese flag and calling on the Portuguese [who no longer officially supported the trade in enslaved people at this time, but tolerated it] to give them protection’ (Martin 1972, 147).

This episode illustrates several important factors in the shifting power relations of the African Atlantic. It points to the sometimes ‘Machiavellian’ methods that the Royal Navy used to change the ‘moral economy’ of the transatlantic trade, ‘which legitimate[d] the production of social inequality [and] the management of the rent of dependency’ (Bayart 2000, 252). It also draws attention to the readiness of African elites to forge alliances with imperial powers if that served their interests (Bayart 2000). Most importantly for the discussion of the gift, it shows that the written treaty as a form of contract did not entail the same potential to build and negotiate relationships of trust. The processual notion of contract via gift exchange suited the ‘unpredictable, fluctuating and competitive world of individual self-creation’ (Barber 1995, 217) of the Atlantic interface. Signed treaties, in contrast, sought to fix relations to a particular point in time at which power relations, once established – for example by the show of military might – could not be renegotiated. Yet, as we will see in the following section, gift giving retained its central role in the negotiation of relationships during colonial encroachment.

Socio-political transformations, cosmopolitan self-fashioning and imperial gifts

The transition from the trade in enslaved people to one in natural resources was not accompanied only by an increasing presence of imperial agents such as consuls and the Royal Navy on the coasts of West and Central Africa. Coastal societies also had to cope with internal economic and political transformations. Hence, various new actors sought to
‘thread their ways through the tangle of [Atlantic] relationships’ (Ingold 2011, 148). Especially towards the end of the nineteenth century, these relationships were of not only an economic but also a political nature. Despite the introduction of written treaties, gifts continued to shape the meshwork of Atlantic relations, in which the presence of new imperial actors as well as internal socio-political transformations afforded unforeseen alliances as well as fierce conflicts.

The most significant internal transformation was the growth of domestic slavery. Even though slavery had been an integral part of many West African societies, rising demand in the labour-intensive production of and trade in palm oil led to an increase in domestic slavery in societies that sustained the trade (Dike 1956; Ikime 1969; Mann 2007; Falola and Heaton 2008). The demand for bonded labour was in large part met by the long-established system of pawning, in which women and children in particular, as well as criminals, were given as pledges for outstanding debt. However, the pawn system allowed considerable social mobility, and successful unfree traders were able to buy their freedom and found their own trading businesses.

In the Kingdom of Bonny in the eastern Niger Delta, in the 1860s, the social mobility of people of slave status enabled a war of succession to be fought out between the so-called ‘head slaves’ of the ruling ‘canoe houses’. These canoe houses were cooperative, family-run trading units which acted as local government institutions and consisted of a trader’s family and their enslaved people (Alagoa 1970; Cookey 2005; Jaja 1991; Dike 1956). As head slaves of their canoe houses, Jubo Jubogha (abbreviated as Jaja) and Oko Jumbo had gained wealth, and thus power, as traders in the palm oil trade, and were now in a position to influence local politics. In their struggle for supremacy, the two men also sought assistance from rival British traders, who supported their party of choice with armaments (Dike 1956, 194). Jaja (1821–91), with several other leading canoe houses seceded from Bonny and founded a new settlement upstream on the River Ikomtoro in 1869. He named his new settlement Opobo after the legendary king Opubu of Bonny, who ruled at the beginning of the nineteenth century and re-established religious traditions that had ceased to exist in Bonny because of the influence of Christian missionaries (Dike 1956; Cookey 2005).

Jaja also sought to consolidate his new-found position by diplomatic means, aligning himself politically with the interests of the British Empire. When, in 1873, the Royal Navy enquired whether the rulers in the Niger Delta would provide military support in the fight against the Ashanti, in today’s Ghana, the king and chiefs of Bonny initially declined.
It appears to us that the authorities at Cape Coast have been misled, as to the nature of this country. We are not a warlike people having been brought up to peaceful pursuits, and our trading business finds employment for all the [men here] … But should Jaja supply some [soldiers], it will only be just that we would do so also.5

Jaja did comply and sent 50 (probably bonded) men. The king and chiefs of Bonny followed suit.6 After the successful conquest of Kumasi, the Ashanti capital, Commodore William Hewett of the Royal Navy presented Jaja of Opobo with a golden sword as a sign of gratitude for his services. Such presentation swords had come into fashion in the late eighteenth century for recognising the achievements of Royal Navy personnel for the expanding British Empire (McGrath and Barton 2013, 76–82; McAleer and Petley 2016, 1–2). One of the earliest recorded prestations of such swords occurred in Barbados in 1757, when the assembly of planters awarded Captain Middleton (later First Lord of the Admiralty) ‘100 pistoles … to buy him a sword for taking a French privateer infesting the coast of the island’.7 Many more prestations for similar skirmishes and colonial suppressions in the West Indies were to follow. The presentation sword was thus the quintessential imperial gift, testifying to, and drawing Jaja into, the imperial relations of the British Atlantic. However, the interpretation of the sword within Opobo society might have been quite different. It probably added to Jaja’s charisma and signified his ability to mobilise and tap into the ever-increasing British relations in the delta. Today, the sword serves as a ‘symbol of royal authority’ of Opobo’s founding figure, ‘commemorat[ing] the role of Opobo’s peace-keeping force in Ashanti, Ghana (Gold Coast), a friendly African Kingdom’ (Jaja 1991, unnumbered page).

However, Jaja’s assistance in extending imperial relations in other parts of West Africa did not deter the British from dismantling his own sovereignty, once European interests in the African continent changed more generally. Jaja’s rule (1869–87) came to an end at the time of the ‘scramble for Africa’, in which Britain was rethinking its strategy of an ‘informal empire’ (Lynn 1999) on the continent and, in the case of the Niger Delta, started to extend its spheres of influence via the signing of protection treaties. Since the involvement of the West Africa Squadron, written treaties had become a common diplomatic tool for negotiating the terms of trade, and African middlemen had begun to use them to reinforce their interests in the ever-shifting economic and political landscape at the coast. Yet negotiations about treaties had to comply with the rituals of gift giving developed during the transatlantic trade. This was also true
of the negotiation of protection treaties from 1884 onwards. Lengthy correspondences between the consuls in the delta and the Foreign Office in London attest to the plethora of things that coastal rulers were given in order to start negotiations over the status of protection. Among them were a Japanese sword for the King of Brass, a musical box for the King of Bonny and a telescope for the Duke of Calabar. Additional gifts were silks, cottons, damasks and satins of various qualities (manufactured in India, China and Britain), tapestries of Persian and European manufacture, a court suit and a navy uniform, several rocking chairs, mattresses and pillows, mirrors, silver plates, goblets, bowls, scissors, an accordion, a melodeon, two magic lanterns, two chromolithographs of the Queen, several breech-loading guns, cartridges, knives, tobacco and rum. The presents for Jaja of Opobo have not been reported, but they probably complied with his cosmopolitan taste and facilitated this new step into colonial dependence.

On the other side of the delta, the 400-year-old Kingdom of Warri (Itsekiri) had to accommodate similar internal transformations under mounting external pressure. An interregnum (1848–1936) shifted the trading, and hence the political authority, away from the royal lineage to the most successful traders of noble and chiefly descent. In order to negotiate trading conditions with the Itsekiri, the British fell back on the well-established authority of the ‘Governor of the Benin River’ or gofine, a political post comparable to that of a finance and foreign minister. As sign of the gofine’s power, the consul ordered a ‘Stick of Office’ in the form of a gold-headed staff from the Foreign Office in London.

Staffs in many different forms and materialities had been omnipresent in Atlantic Africa, generally serving as signs of office, position and power (Picton 1991). For example, the Yoruba in today’s Nigeria used dance staffs as an extension or ‘portrait’ of ritual specialists (Drewal 1990). The rulers of Dahomey, in today’s Benin, used ceremonial staffs as mnemonic devices (Blier 1991). For members of the Ekpe society in Old Calabar, east of the Niger Delta, the ofo, a small, unadorned wooden staff, served as a ‘vital instrument for the classification of persons, for the differentiation of roles … and empowered their performers for social and moral control’ (Ejizu 1986, 144). Concurrently with their high local value, staffs became sought-after gifts in the transatlantic trade. In the Niger Delta, they mostly consisted of a wooden handle and a silver top, often engraved with the name of an African merchant, reflecting the close ties between trade partners. Britain’s political agents realised their significance and used staffs to confer or recognise power, drawing African rulers into a web of imperial relations.
As was the case in the Kingdom of Warri, the consul used the staff of office not only to recognise the gofine’s position, but also to challenge it in case the office holder ‘disgraced it’\(^\text{10}\) in the eyes of his European trade partners. A particularly severe ‘disgrace’ or infraction was the blockage of trade, a strategy that middlemen used to ascertain their position in trade and protest against falling oil prices. Nanna Olomu (1852–1916), the fourth and last Governor of the Benin River, also employed this tactic, refusing British traders access to the hinterland markets – a right that, like Jaja of Opobo, he had successfully negotiated in the protection treaty of 1884. With the breaking of his staff of office in 1890, the British consul marked the official end of Nanna’s political career in the Oil Rivers Protectorate (Ikime 1968). Yet there were another four years of diplomatic skirmishes before the British Empire used military force to end Nanna’s sovereignty, with the Royal Navy attacking his town, Ebrohimi, looting it and burning it to the ground. Like Jaja of Opobo in 1887 and Oba Ovonramwen of the Kingdom of Benin in 1897, Nanna Olomu was sent into exile, in his case to Accra, in today’s Ghana. Thanks to the continued efforts of one of his British trade partners, George Neville, who petitioned Parliament in London, Nanna was the only ruler of this region to return to his homeland alive, founding a new settlement and rebuilding parts of his trade business in 1906 (Neville 1915). Moreover, Neville procured the upper half of the broken staff of office from the wife of former consul Claude MacDonald and sent it to Nanna with a note saying, ‘a memento of the old times’.\(^\text{11}\) The former symbol of power had become a nostalgic mnemonic device.

In February 1915, one year after the Southern and Northern Nigeria Protectorates had been amalgamated into the new colony of Nigeria, Nanna Olomu received another gift. On his tour through the colony, Frederick Lugard, first Governor-General of Nigeria and author of the highly influential ‘The dual mandate in British tropical Africa’ (1922), which laid out the system of indirect rule in the British Empire, paid Nanna a visit in his new town Koko. They shared a meal and Lugard presented Nanna with a gift, a newly patented water filter from London.\(^\text{12}\) This gift not only testifies to the high value of new technologies in Atlantic Africa and the influential position that Nanna seems to have retained in the colony; it also highlights the continued, albeit altered, use of gift giving in colonial Atlantic Africa. Whereas during the period of the transatlantic trade gifts were used to recognise the sovereignty of African rulers and forge successful commercial ties, they had now become a means to recognise their position in the system of indirect rule. Gifts had thus played a crucial part in the processes of becoming imperial.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that, once we overcome the dichotomy of gift versus commodity economies, gifts can be a valuable analytical category with which to understand the ways in which people negotiate relationships across political, economic and cultural thresholds. Atlantic Africa, as the ‘interface between local and European commerce’ (Barber 2013, 112) and the prime site of ‘colonial contact’ (Clifford 1997; Pratt 1992), particularly lends itself to such an analysis. The focus on the materiality of gifts, understood not only as the material qualities but also as the underlying forces and potentialities of things of exchange ‘in which parts of the giver are embedded’ (Tsing 2013, 23), has allowed insights into the always dynamic struggles over sovereignty and the power of interpretation. By tracing the giving, accepting, refusing and reciprocating of gifts, from trading rituals to the signing of protection treaties and diplomatic visits in the colonial state, I have demonstrated that gift giving shifted from acknowledging the sovereignty of African rulers to drawing them into relationships of dependence. This politicisation of the gift attests to the connecting and disconnecting qualities of material culture and what Philipp Schorch and Martin Saxer have termed thing~ties. Gift exchange in Atlantic Africa cannot be comprehended in a notion of exchange of discrete entities (things) with relations between them (ties). Rather, relations were embedded and materialised in gifts while simultaneously constituting them. The thing~ties of gift exchange were inherently processual and open-ended. In other words, the material processes of becoming imperial were far from teleological. If nothing else, the struggles and misunderstandings about the meaning of gifts highlight the fact that gifts had the capacity to establish unforeseen and contradictory relationships, opening up potentially new ways of resistance and collaboration. Hence, the act of gift exchange was invested with the potential to impose power as much as to forge alliances and generate resistance.

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Notes

1. Lieutenant Henry Need to the Admiralty, 30 January 1855, ART/10/1, MS65/134, National Maritime Museum Manuscripts, Royal Museums Greenwich.
2. Because of its limited length, this chapter focuses on gifts given by British imperial agents. Yet African elites often reciprocated these gifts and used them as a means of building political, economic and cultural relations. For a detailed discussion of gifts from Atlantic African elites in European museum collections see, amongst others, Kingdon (2018) and Kingdon and B尔斯elaar (2019); for East Africa see Bennett (2018).
3. Anna Tsing writes of ‘objects of exchange’. In accordance with the theme of this volume, I use the term ‘thing of exchange’ instead.
4. From an interview conducted by the author with J. O. S. Ayomike in Warri, Nigeria, in 2015.
6. Captain James Nicol, SS Biafra, to Consul George Hartley, 30 October 1873; King and Chiefs of Grand Bonny to Consul George Hartley, 3 November 1873, CALPROF 4/1, Vol. 3, National Archives Ibadan.
8. Correspondence between Consul Edward Hewett et al. and the Foreign Office, 22 May 1884 to 8 November 1885, FO 84/1939, National Archives, London.
10. G. Clarke, Chair of the Court of Equity to Consul G. Hartley, 6 September 1875, CALPROF 3/1, National Archives Ibadan.
12. From an interview conducted by the author with Anthony Nanna in Koko, Nigeria, in 2015.

References


