



GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE LONDON  
DEUTSCHES HISTORISCHES INSTITUT LONDON

## CALL FOR PAPERS

### *COMMERCIAL AGRICULTURE IN AFRICA AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE SLAVE TRADE*

**An International Conference to be held at the German Historical Institute London**

**Convenors: Robin Law (University of Liverpool/University of Stirling), Suzanne Schwarz (Liverpool Hope University), Silke Strickrodt (German Historical Institute London)**

**23-25 September 2010**

By the mid nineteenth century the view that ‘legitimate’ commerce, especially the export of agricultural produce, would help to eradicate the Atlantic slave trade and bring mutual benefits to Britain and Africa had become a central tenet of mainstream abolitionist thought. As A. G. Hopkins has suggested, the attempt to establish export agriculture in Africa was part of British efforts to reform the international economic order after 1815 and represented ‘Britain’s first development plan for Africa’. Recent scholarly literature has explored the impact of the development of legitimate forms of trade on African economy and society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Comparatively little attention has been given, however, to earlier attempts to develop commercial crop cultivation and alternative forms of trade with Africa. By focusing on the period from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, this conference will explore the ways in which different interest groups and individuals attempted to exploit the natural resources of Africa through diverse agricultural and trading systems. Keynote speakers are Gareth Austin, Christopher L. Brown, David Eltis and Robin Law.

Papers are invited on any aspect of agricultural development and trade in African commodities from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. This conference offers scope to examine the changing relationship of commercial agriculture in Africa to the Atlantic slave system. We would also like to re-examine the origins of the Atlantic slave trade in relation to European understanding of the viability of establishing European plantations for the production of export crops in Africa. The earliest European plantation economies were in fact established on islands off the African coast – Madeira and São Tomé – before the system migrated across the Atlantic. Subsequently, experimentation in establishing plantations and encouraging export crop production by Africans, by the English Royal African Company and the Dutch

West India Company in the seventeenth and eighteenth century was motivated by a desire to find alternative or supplementary sources of profit, at a time when conditions in the slave trade were difficult for the established monopoly companies. The slave trade also itself had the effect of stimulating commercial agriculture in parts of Africa, to supply food crops for the provisioning of slave ships. In the mid- to late eighteenth century increasing intellectual debate focused on the most effective means of harnessing the economic potential of Africa, including the possibility that developing commercial export agriculture there might be preferable to the existing trade in slaves. The question was given special significance by the developing industrialization of Britain, and consequent emphasis on the raw materials and markets which British manufacturers required. In 1789 Olaudah Equiano put forward an economic rationale for abolition by arguing that 'a commercial intercourse with Africa opens an inexhaustible source of wealth to the manufacturing interests of Great Britain'. In practical terms, the late eighteenth century witnessed attempts by abolitionist campaigners to reform African economy and society through a combination of 'Commerce, Civilization and Christianity'. The development of the colony of Sierra Leone in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century reflected a commitment to the suppression of the slave trade and a determination to develop a profitable and 'honourable commerce' in the natural resources of Africa. The Danes also established plantations on the Gold Coast from 1788, in anticipation of the abolition of the slave trade. By the mid to late nineteenth century, the British government, together with traders and missionary societies, played an increasingly active role in encouraging commercial agriculture, especially the cultivation of cotton, as an alternative to the slave trade. This idea was central, for example, to the British Niger expedition of 1841, with its project of the establishment of a 'model farm' in the interior; and, despite the catastrophic failure of that expedition, continued to inform British policy thereafter. In the aftermath of abolition, slave trading ports such as Liverpool adapted their commercial networks in Africa to facilitate the import of palm oil, camwood and other legitimate commodities. For Africans also, the development of agricultural production for export formed a crucial element in their strategies for coping with the decline of the slave trade. The nineteenth-century commercial transition represented, as Hopkins has suggested, the beginning of the modern economic history of West Africa, and raised issues and debates which remain central to its long-term economic development.

Please submit proposals for papers, including title and abstract of 500 to 1000 words, to both Suzanne Schwarz (schwarz@hope.ac.uk) and Silke Strickrodt (strickrodt@ghil.ac.uk) by 12 January 2010.

It is planned to publish an edited collection of a number of the papers presented at the conference.