

The Political Economy of ‘quasi-statehood’ and the demise of 19th century African politics

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Abstract. This article challenges two prevailing views of the failure by African polities to attain sovereign statehood in the late 19th century by providing evidence from two case studies showing that many African polities were not ‘quasi-states,’ lacking the empirical political and economic capacity to join the international community of sovereign states. Nor were they unable to sustain or promote international commerce. Instead, when heightened international economic competition threatened the profits of European traders, European interests pressed for pro-expansionist policies and for conditions deemed necessary for the success of European commerce.

One of the recurring and perplexing issues of political analysis has been why some political units became internationally recognized states while others became colonies, protectorates or, alternatively, disappear altogether. It is particularly striking to read the history of 19th century Africa in the light of the literature on European state building. Standing out is the fact that, until the Europeans took over, African political communities were engaged in much the same process. Rulers armed and politically organized themselves, made and broke foreign alliances, and fought wars to establish and extend their political and economic control, subjugating several religious and ethnic groups along the way.¹ The puzzle is why this process led to developed nation-states in Europe, but failed to do so in Africa. Despite some progress towards sovereignty, why did most African polities fail to achieve it?

Recent decades have seen a profound evolution in the dominant answer to that question, which is best summarized in terms of two waves. The first wave,² reflecting an ‘older orthodoxy’, held that the imperatives of a world economy, variously construed, resulted in Western dominance in the form of colonies. However, this literature was rightly criticized for being overly functionalist and for locating the causes of local political developments entirely in systemic forces.

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¹ Robert Bates, *Essays on the Political Economy of Rural Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 26–9; E. Colson, ‘African Society at the Time of the Scramble,’ in L. H. Gann and P. Duignan (eds.), *Colonialism in Africa 1870–1960*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 27–65; Basil Davidson, with F. K. Buah and J. F. A. Ajayi, *The Growth of African Civilization: West Africa 1000–1800* (London: Longmans, Green, 1965); J. Vansina, ‘Long-Distance Trade Routes in Central Africa’, *The Journal of African History*, 3 (1962), pp. 375–90.

² André Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System* (vols. I, II: New York: Academic Press, 1979) and vol. III (San Diego: Academic Press, 1989).

Accordingly, a more recent 'revisionist' literature which offered several appealing advantages arose. It sought the causes for national/local political developments in national, rather than systemic, supranational, factors. It was more self-consciously 'political', in the sense that it asserted the importance of political causes for political outcomes, and paid real attention to national/local variations among political units in the developing world.

At its core is a claim that the presence of colonies rather than sovereign states in much of Africa can be primarily attributed to the weakness of the political regimes which arose there in the period up to and including the late 19th century (when they were replaced by colonies). If the claim is a purely formal one, i.e. African states were not powerful enough to resist Western colonization efforts, it is obviously true. However, the claim is more subtle and profound: it is that these early African regimes were 'weak' in important respects, and they disintegrated due to these weaknesses, rather than being overwhelmed by Western strength. The key issue is: what were these weaknesses? For some scholars, the emphasis is on the failure of these regimes to take on the formal attributes of statehood and their incapacity to enforce regularized rule on their inhabitants.³ Others, however, refined this into an argument suggesting that their weaknesses lay in their economic capabilities, defined in terms of their capacity to promote commerce, which in turn has now come to be understood in terms of the inadequate development of property rights.⁴ Then, when given the opportunity, both African and European traders switched support to European authorities, who allegedly provided a stable market structure. Colonial rule thus is credited with bringing capitalism and the 'free market' to the non-Western world.⁵

The object of this article is to question several aspects of the broad consensus that this literature reflects. Despite its persuasiveness, I argue it goes too far in its claims, in particular by locating the causes for the failure of parts of Africa to develop sovereign states so firmly in Africa that it neglects the impact and influence the European powers had. My argument is motivated by several overarching observations. The first is that functionalist explanations, while clearly of some validity, are ultimately unsatisfying for many reasons. The second is that, when considering the European experience, we see that many European states became quite strong, prospered and survived into the present day even though they were essentially patrimonial regimes, riddled with various 'inefficiencies' until quite recently.⁶ Thus, it may not be adequate to point to such features of African regimes in order to explain their demise. Finally, the thrust of this second wave of literature, though it pays Africans the (dubious) compliment of handing them responsibility

³ John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade,' *The Economic History Review* 2nd Series, 6 (1953), pp. 1-15; Michael Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); Robert H. Jackson, *Quasi-states: International Relations, Sovereignty and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁴ Douglass C. North, *Structure and Change in Economic History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and its Competitors* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁵ Miles Kahler, 'Political Regime and Economic Actors: The Response of Firms to the End of Colonial Rule', *World Politics*, 33 (1981), p. 384; Bill Warren, *Imperialism: Pioneer of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1980).

⁶ Öyvind Österud notes that in the 19th century, 'the empirical qualities of recognized states were extremely variable and often precarious'. 'Narrow Gate: Entry to the Club of Sovereign States', *Review of International Studies*, 23:2 (1997), p. 182.

for their own fate, tends to understate the role that the colonial powers played in the development of colonialism, and views it merely as a response to the failures of indigenous state-building.

I intend to test the adequacy of explanations of the sort advanced in this second, now dominant, wave of literature for the high incidence of colonies and low incidence of sovereign states in Africa at the end of the 19th century. Since this outcome was, in large measure, the result of the wave of colonization that took place in the 19th century, it is on that that the empirical discussion will focus. The purpose is not to present a new 'theory of colonization' but to raise questions about now-dominant views that support the need for some rethinking and perhaps qualification of them.

In line with my critique of the second wave of literature, I seek to demonstrate three things: first, that the 'quasi-states' present in these areas prior to colonization were stronger and more 'state-like', at least judged by conventional European standards, than is often acknowledged; second, that among their attributes was the ability (all-important according to this second wave of literature) to sustain and promote commerce; and third, that as a consequence, they did not collapse by virtue of their own 'weaknesses' but were deliberately destroyed by Western states acting at the behest of merchants and officials who sought not a general property rights regime capable of supporting commerce, but economic regimes that privileged their own commerce.

I evaluate the alternative explanations with two case studies: the Asante kingdom, to come under British rule, and the Tukolor empire, to come under French rule. The cases raise doubts that political incompetence, social crises, or property rights violations deprived them of their sovereignty. In fact, the Asante kingdom and Tukolor empire *were* engaged in state building. When that process impeded British and French commerce, the metropolises intervened. While in the long run the overall economic benefit of colonialism to the metropolises may have been less than the costs of formal imperial rule, the short-term economic interests of European traders in Africa, supplemented by pressure from interest groups in the metropole, impelled the European powers to take actions resulting in the destruction of African proto-states.

Scholars who contend that the organization of domestic forces, exposed to war and trade, strongly conditions state formation argue that state building involves struggles and coalition building between the monarchy, the aristocracy, the bureaucracy, religious and ethnic groups, peasants, and merchants.⁷ Trade and political disputes often led to war. War, in turn, led to the reorganization of political communities and institutions. In one view, sovereign states emerged because they were more efficient than other political arrangements.⁸ Yet in a number of African polities, a centralizing ruler *had* established control over a 'landed aristocracy', developed elite representative bodies, amassed armies which conquered neighbouring territories, and was attempting to rationalize standards.

⁷ Thomas Ertman, *Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Charles Tilly (ed.), *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1979).

⁸ Spruyt, *Sovereign State*.

State formation and dismantlement in the periphery: recent analyses

Various new hypotheses have been proposed to explain why this process of state formation in the Third World did not yield states similar to those in Europe. One perspective comes from Robert H. Jackson's theory of quasi-states. A quasi-state is one to which the international community currently accords sovereignty, but which has 'a comparative lack of power and agency'.⁹ It has a 'ramshackle' regime 'whose writ often does not extend throughout the country; where it does, it is observed irregularly'.¹⁰ Quasi-states, found mostly in the Third World, attained their sovereign status due to a shift in international norms after World War II, not through any evidence of capacity to rule. Currently, statehood is granted not through 'empirical qualifications' but through juridical ones. When given independence, the former colonies did not have to pass the test of viability and capacity used in earlier centuries. Were it not for the post-1945 'accommodating norms' of the Western states, most Third World states would not exist.¹¹ Instead, they would be colonies or protectorates.

The implication is that only healthy states, 'real' states, used to get recognized. 'The [post-1945] independence of sub-Saharan Africa required suspending the historical practice of extending recognition and membership in the international community only to credible governments of more or less cohesive states'. Under the norms of empirical sovereignty, the polities which became colonies deserved their fate—particularly since they (allegedly) did not protect 'the persons, property, and liberties of Europeans'. A 'real' state has 'able and responsible rulers and productive and allegiant citizens'. It is an independent actor on the international scene, maintaining commitments, and can 'reciprocate in international trade and finance'. Jackson alludes to the Western bias in one criterion of sovereign statehood: being 'civilized'. Yet he accepts the imperial powers' definition of civilization.¹²

Jackson's criteria of 'empirical statehood' were met by a number of African kingdoms and empires. Several were cohesive until deliberately undermined by Europeans. France, the paradigm of the absolutist (sovereign) state, evinced some 'quasi-state' symptoms during its allegedly absolutist phase.¹³ The cohesion and capability of some European states has, at times, been questionable; they were nevertheless granted sovereignty.

Jackson contends that '[s]tate-building is primarily a domestic process' which the 'community of states at most can only assist or hinder'.¹⁴ Yet there is a fine line between 'hindering' and derailing, a line, I suggest, often crossed during the Scramble for Africa. He claims that native African polities, militarily weak, and

⁹ This essay does not address Jackson's claims concerning statehood among contemporary Third World states, only his arguments about the 19th century state system. Quote at Jackson, *Quasi-states*, p. 187.

¹⁰ Robert H. Jackson, 'Juridical Statehood in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Journal of International Affairs*, 46 (1992), p. 1.

¹¹ Robert H. Jackson, 'Quasi-states, Dual Regimes, and Neo-classical Theory: International Jurisprudence and the Third World,' *International Organization*, 41 (1987), p. 526, and Jackson, *Quasi-states*, pp. 15, 25.

¹² Jackson, 'Quasi-states, dual regimes,' pp. 529–31; Jackson, *Quasi-states*, pp. 24, 168. Jackson, 'Juridical statehood', p. 2. Jackson, 'Quasi-states, dual regimes,' p. 530. Jackson, *Quasi-states*, p. 29. Ibid., pp. 71–2; Jackson, 'Quasi-states, dual regimes,' pp. 523, 534–5.

¹³ Ertman, *Leviathan*, pp. 35–110, 125–53; Skocpol, *States*, pp. 57–64.

¹⁴ Jackson, *Quasi-states*, p. 21.

looking nothing like a proper nation-state, were 'unable to demonstrate' that they deserved 'empirical statehood'.¹⁵ In not questioning the source of the weakness, Jackson ignores the role foreign interests had in undermining nascent African states.

Imperialism is one way in which polities in the international system interact. The 'quasi-statehood' argument implies that statehood hinges on empirical attributes of polities, and on international standards. In a recent article, Christopher Clapham has made it clear that the concept 'state' depends heavily on international norms, and that rather than seeing statehood as a binary category, we should see it in degrees, just as various international actors now do. Making those two points raises the question of why the norms of statehood change. This article is a reminder that economic self-interest on the part of actors involved in international economic exchange colours their application of normative criteria of statehood to empirical contexts.

Another perspective, focusing on periphery social organization, does explore the source of periphery weakness. In his significant contribution to the study of imperialism, Michael Doyle argues that, to explain colonial rule across history and the globe, pericentric, metrocentric and international systemic analyses must be viewed together. While external pressures are important in explaining variations in the timing of imperialism, social organization on the periphery is the key variable in whether a polity withstood or succumbed to European advances. Doyle hypothesizes that '[p]olitical weakness in the periphery led to collapse and collaboration, and the sources of this weakness can be traced to characteristics of tribal and patrimonial societies'. Further, 'none of the political units of tribal society is extensive enough to provide political order for an entire market or social region'. Authority is not centralized or undisputed. The bureaucracy is neither independent nor continuous, it is just a band of notables. Because of that, tribal societies 'exploded from within' when penetrated by European capitalism. Peripheral societies, being relatively disorganized and divided, were no match for the competitive political and economic pressures of the expanding Euro-centric international system. He acknowledges that the core put pressure on coastal African polities, and that sometimes these 'thin states' could 'resist European pressures to penetrate their authority'. Nevertheless, Doyle maintains that for tribal polities, '[r]apid socioeconomic change destabilized tribes internally by disrupting their political authority, externally by changing their traditional relationships to their neighbors'. Internal crises 'demanded' metropole control. Even in the 'exceptional cases' in which trade with the core strengthened the tribal polity, it was the tribal polity which 'eventually provoked military conquest'.¹⁶

Because tribal and patrimonial societies lacked centralized governments and cohesive national identities, they were unable to repel European military invasions. African governmental crises threatened European commercial interests, and, hence, metropolises had to impose imperial rule.¹⁷ For Doyle, the counter-factual is that if peripheral polities had had a centralized government and national identity, the periphery polities would not have fallen to European pressure; the 'quasi-states' were incapable of competing with sovereign states.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 39, 67–8.

¹⁶ Doyle, *Empires*, pp. 46, 166, 194, 186, 46, 163–5, 177, 193–4, 226–7, 167, 188, 194, 226, 203, 175.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 218–221, 133; cf. Ronald Robinson, 'The Excentric Idea of Imperialism, with or without Empire,' in Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel (eds.), *Imperialism and After: Continuities and Discontinuities* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), p. 278.

But were there really only a handful of cohesive polities in the non-Western World? If periphery polities were weakened by capitalism, then they should not have prospered from contacts with Europeans in the 15th to 19th centuries. Yet many did. If they were 'derelict states'¹⁸, why did so many survive until the late 19th century? There is a danger in this revisionist literature of downplaying the extent to which periphery polities were centralizing their governments, managing economic relations with core states, and utilizing religion or other cultural attributes to fashion 'national' identities. National identity may reside in the eye of the beholder, and the Europeans appeared unwilling to recognize non-Western forms of 'nationality'.¹⁹

Recent scholarship on the development of sovereign states emphasizing the role of property rights would frame the collapse of African polities as an instance in which the local entity responsible for enforcing property and commodity rights failed to do so. If the structure of the local polity cannot prevent free-riding nor make credible commitments to foreign and domestic actors, then it is likely to be superseded by an institution which can.²⁰ If the 'demand' from traders, local and foreign, for an enforcing agency exists, yet the local polity does not 'supply' it, foreign powers have an incentive to provide it. Given competition from organizationally efficient polities—the sovereign states of Europe—the African polities lose their autonomy. In essence, African polities' property rights were inadequate to the demands of an international capitalist economy dominated by sovereign states. But, some African rulers *were* enforcing property rights, including agreements with foreign investors. Recalling the history of European political development and interstate conflict, it is unrealistic to think that African polities would have been spared many problems of state-building. If one also notes that African polities had been coping and managing relations with Europeans, the question remains: Why the sudden collapse?

Political collapse in the periphery: the missing international connection

In various ways, the proponents of the property rights view have provided important correctives to the flaws of dependency and world-systems theories. However, in arguing that the politics of the periphery plays a role in imperialism, this literature implies that states and their economic elites act only when the opportunity for profit presents itself. But states are proactive, even predatory, seeking to create market opportunities. In the late 19th century, the problem often was that the efforts of African polities to guarantee property rights for their own traders and allies conflicted with the interests of the European traders. The unwillingness of African polities to guarantee rents and profits to Europeans at the expense of their own traders led the Europeans to 'supply' the agency which would do so. When their own interests were at stake, Europeans exploited the difficulties African rulers faced in

¹⁸ Jackson, *Quasi-states*, p. 22.

¹⁹ David Strang, 'Contested Sovereignty: the Social Construction of Colonial Imperialism' in Thomas J. Biersteker and Cynthia Weber (eds.), *State Sovereignty as Social Construct* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 50–80; cf. Colson, 'African Society,' p. 28.

²⁰ North, *Structure*; and Spruyt, *Sovereign State*, pp. 527–28.

the process of state building. European states were frequently goaded by their own traders and officials, who created situations to persuade their governments to intervene, or by core economic interest groups, which formed pro-expansionist coalitions.²¹ The resulting foreign economic pressures cannot be ignored, because they are crucial to explaining the downfall of nascent African states.²²

The fact that European states exerted pressure is, in itself, unremarkable. Such actions are one of the hallmarks of inter-state relations. The fact is noteworthy because it has been overlooked in several recent waves of literature on Third World statehood and imperialism.

Commercially motivated intervention by the metropolises does not tell the whole story. The second significant factor is that in the phenomenon of state building, domestic actors will seek to profit, both in terms of political power and economic gain, from their relations with the international economy and foreign actors. Foreign actors can exploit this, and alter the incentive structure for the domestic actors. This changes the propensity of the latter to ally with or oppose a centralizing elite. By manipulating the state building process in this way, foreign actors may be able to enforce their economic will on a peripheral polity.²³ This was not just the contingent by-product of individual actors behaving rationally; it was the result of a concerted effort to dismantle nascent African states. In the final analysis, one *can* say that many African polities fell because they were too feeble to resist the European onslaught, but invoking power disparities begs the question of *why* the Europeans used their power as they did, and *when* they did.

I explore these arguments with a study of the 19th century Tukulor empire in the Western Sudan, and the Asante kingdom in West Africa.²⁴ In Doyle's language, the Tukulor were a patrimonial society, the Asante tribal. The Tukulor and Asante polities, quite powerful relative to adjacent political entities in the Sudan and on the Gold Coast, were not unique. There were other African, not to mention Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern and South American polities similarly organized, interested in territorial expansion, and capable of mounting a strong resistance to European efforts at imperial control and domination.²⁵ There were also small, decentralized and fragmented polities (as there were in Europe), which could be said to have self-destructed, yet many polities did not.

This article uses the two cases to explore problems of three theories of imperialism, and to see if they support an alternative interpretation. The Asante and Tukulor represent clear instances in which supposedly flawed African regimes were replaced by colonies. I consider one case which came under British domination and

²¹ Anthony G. Hopkins, 'The Victorians and Africa: A Reconsideration of the Occupation of Egypt, 1882,' *Journal of African History*, 27 (1986), pp. 363–91; Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 17–18, 203–6.

²² Jeffrey A. Frieden, 'International Investment and Colonial Control: a new interpretation', *International Organization*, 48 (1994), pp. 559–93.

²³ As Doyle notes, domestic politics in the core is a significant factor in accounting for *which* core state imposes imperial rule. Doyle, *Empires*.

²⁴ Across the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, 'Asante' has been given various spellings, such as Ashante and Ashanti. I shall use 'Asante'. Similarly, 'Tukulor' has been spelled 'Toucouleur', and 'Tokolor'. I shall use 'Tukulor'. In quotations, I leave the spelling as it is in the original text.

²⁵ Michael Crowder, 'Introduction' in Crowder (ed.), *West African Resistance* (New York: Africana Publishing, 1971) pp. 1–18; J.F.A. Ajayi and M. Crowder (eds.), *History of West Africa*, vol. 2 (London: Longman, 1974); Colson, 'African Society,' p. 38.

the other under French in order to meet any counterclaim that my argument is peculiar to one imperial power.

If nascent states collapsed because of their own internal contradictions, economic inadequacies, or property rights failings, one would expect to find evidence of domestic political disorder, succession crises, internecine conflicts, and African disregard of their own laws. One would *not* expect to find that, before the imposition of formal imperialism, the African polities had an organized political system, an economic system in which individuals acted on opportunities in the international economy, that rulers were successfully extending their territorial control, and that they had well-organized armies that at times defeated European forces.

If, on the other hand, African polities fell as a result of European efforts to control trade and increase profits, (a) one could expect to find European traders calling for help in securing or maintaining access to trade routes, markets and resources to the exclusion of African traders; (b) these traders and colonial officials complaining that the actions of African polities were detrimental to European commerce and profits; (c) treaties and military operations which enforced the metropole's version of 'free trade'; and (d) that the independent African polities would be assessed in terms of their impact on European commerce and trade. Such a scenario would be evidence that the African polities were destroyed not by their own failings but as a result of determined European action. This is, in fact, what the record shows. In what follows I analyse each polity's adjustments to European contact, the nature of European actions and interests, and conclude with an analysis of how these interests worked to destroy the nascent Tukulor and Asante states. The article concludes with an assessment of contemporary implications.

Undermining an empire—the French and the Tukulor

The history of the Tukulor empire belies the view that contact with Europeans disrupted the cohesion of patrimonial societies, and that there were no 'more or less cohesive states' in 19th century Sub-Saharan Africa.²⁶ The parochial interests of core merchants within the international capitalist economy, not 'frail' African political systems, provided the incentive for French economic actors and political elites to create a system amenable to their interests. Sufficient profits had to be made so that traders might avoid bankruptcy. Independent African rulers hindered this process by their own trade efforts, including bilateral agreements with other core states, or in their wars of territorial expansion. So, too, could an indigenous trading class.

Where the profitability of trade was hindered by competition with African traders, European economic interests had a motive to break existing authority structures. The market and credit systems from which French interests profited were vulnerable to the vicissitudes of African state building, and to the retaliatory boycotts of African middlemen. Europeans preferred to work in controlled markets, where a 'political convention' compelled middlemen 'to purchase goods at stated places'.²⁷

²⁶ Jackson, 'Juridical Statehood,' p. 2.

²⁷ C. W. Newbury, 'Trade and Authority in West Africa from 1850–1880', in Gann and Duignan (eds.), *Colonialism*, p. 76.

Between 1818 and 1850 French commercial enterprises sent a number of missions into the Western Sudan, and arranged with various small polities for the protection of French traders by building 'fortified' trading posts, paying local rulers a ground rent.²⁸ These polities were absorbed by the Tukulor empire, which by the middle of the 19th century 'was the largest and most powerful state in the Western Sudan',²⁹ and had extensive trade with Britain and France in guns and gunpowder, and an economy based on gold, gum, kola nuts, and textiles.³⁰

Its political system resembled a nascent state; due to the great size of the empire and the difficulties of communication, administration was decentralized but not absent: local power was held by emirs (either religious leaders or military commanders) who were 'vested with wide powers to rule the territories under them as long as they recognized the Shaikh's sovereign powers'. The government was financed by tribute from conquered polities and from foreign trade, predominantly with France.³¹

French intervention in the latter half of the 19th century was provoked by two factors: first, the goal of promoting and protecting French trade, and second, the realization that the Tukulor were not going to be forthcoming on all economic issues. European concerns were more about African competition than lack of African control over commerce. Stable property rights were a secondary problem.³² There were some comments about the 'hazards of a trade exposed to arbitrary acts of the natives', but they were coupled with expressions about 'the difficulties of competition'.³³

Encumbrances on European capitalism were not the sole issue. French traders attempted frequently to evade African middlemen. One historian notes that in Senegal 'African gum traders and carriers were definitely excluded by European merchants and by administrative regulation' from operating independently and profitably. If the Tukulor were not building their own market economy it was because the Europeans intervened, not because the patrimonial society could not handle it. When African merchants retaliated, French traders complained that '[t]he enemies of our expansion, the indigenous people . . . were quick to hinder our action'.³⁴ The struggle was over *which* merchants and *which* polities would control economic exchange and profit distribution.

What structural contradictions existed owed more to French policy than Tukulor politics. Military conquest came to be regarded as the only means of promoting and protecting French commercial interests, and it was French military activity which

²⁸ B. O. Oloruntimehin, 'The Western Sudan and the Coming of the French, 1800–1893', in Ajayi and Crowder (eds.), *History*, pp. 355–6; and his *The Segu Tukulor Empire* (London: Longman, 1972), p. 28.

²⁹ A. S. Kanya-Forstner, 'Mali-Tukulor,' in Crowder (ed.) *Resistance*, pp. 53–7; David Robinson, *The Holy War of Umar Tal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Oloruntimehin, *Tukulor*, p. 1 (the quotation); Oloruntimehin, 'Sudan,' p. 363.

³⁰ Kanya-Forstner, 'Mali-Tukulor,' p. 57; Oloruntimehin, *Tukulor*, pp. 26–7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 150, 152; quote on p. 165. Henri Brunschwig, 'French Exploration and Conquest in Tropical Africa from 1865 to 1898,' in Gann and Duignan (eds.), *Colonialism*, p. 148.

³² Newbury, 'Authority,' p. 90.

³³ J. D. Hargreaves (ed.), *France and West Africa: An Anthology of Historical Documents* (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 146.

³⁴ First quote at Newbury, 'Authority,' p. 82; second quote at Oloruntimehin, 'Sudan,' pp. 356–7.

disrupted trade, political stability and peaceful coexistence.³⁵ The major disagreements between local officials and Paris were about the means necessary to extend and protect French trade, with the former arguing that 'military domination was the essential precondition of profitable French trade'.³⁶ This protection of commerce included wars to wrest control of, for example, the Morocco-Sudan-Senegal gum trade.³⁷ French traders did not argue that the Tukolor empire was unable to support commerce, or that 'arbitrary' acts were excessive. The available data indicate that trade increased with European contact, and that Tukolor leaders were able to tax it.³⁸

In fact, the merits of the Tukolor empire were regularly assessed in terms of profits; contemporary comments were not about an anarchic political structure, but that the Tukolor were not good capitalists. If the Tukolor were willing to grant the French lenient and exclusive commercial rights, then the French were not openly hostile.³⁹ The Tukolor rulers were not opposed to French commerce; they were opposed to French encroachments on Tukolor sovereignty—encroachments implicit in the building of protected trading posts, with trade conducted under French supervision and reinforced by gunboats.⁴⁰

The view that domestic politics were the primary source of African state destruction becomes even more suspect when one sees that France sought hardest to undermine the Tukolor polity when the latter was strongest. In 1857, without permission from the Tukolor ruler, France undertook actions which provoked a three year war for territorial control,⁴¹ illustrating the efforts of a metropole to control trade and prices.

Collapse of the Tukolor empire

In 1864, the Tukolor empire underwent a succession crisis. One might argue that this is evidence that the state was not institutionalized (though 19th century France had no shortage of succession crises). By Doyle's logic, the succession crisis came about because commercial engagements with Europeans increased social differentiation before political authority could be extended. Tribute from trade mitigated the dependency of individual rulers on the wealth and authority of a central ruler, and an increase in the number of private traders made challenges to autocratic rule easier. By this scenario, France imposed imperial rule merely to provide effective political authority.

However, though Tukolor administration was decentralized, commercial activities do not seem to have increased in the decade before the ruler's death. There were no

³⁵ Bernard Schnapper, *La Politique et le Commerce Français dans le Golfe de Guinée de 1838 à 1871* (Paris: Mouton, 1961), p. 249; Kanya-Forstner, 'Mali-Tukolor,' pp. 58–9; Oloruntimehin, *Tukolor*, pp. 208–9, 220.

³⁶ A. S. Kanya-Forstner, *The Conquest of the Western Sudan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 29–31; and Kanya-Forstner, 'Mali-Tukolor,' p. 59.

³⁷ Oloruntimehin, 'Sudan,' p. 356.

³⁸ Kanya-Forstner, *Conquest*, p. 40; C.W. Newbury, 'North African and Western Sudan Trade in the Nineteenth Century: A Re-evaluation', *Journal of African History*, 7 (1966), pp. 233–46.

³⁹ Hargreaves, *France and West Africa*, p. 152.

⁴⁰ Kanya-Forstner, *Conquest*, p. 39, fn. 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

large increases in revenue or in the percentages taken by regional governors. If capitalism had empowered private merchants, there should have been rebellions in most of the Tukolor provinces. However, this was not the case.⁴²

In contrast to what one might expect if French economic actors had only wanted a stable environment for commerce, French intervention was not geared toward resuscitating African political control. The centre had extended political authority as international economic contacts had increased, an extension French colonial governors and merchants had not wanted. If imperial intervention came about because African political structures were too fragmented to support commerce, why had the French not acted when the Tukolor ruler died, when the empire was in turmoil? Authorization from Paris for outright conquest came not at the height of the Tukolor empire's political crises, but at the height of intra-European commercial competition during an international depression.⁴³ The intervention was determined by France's assessment of how to control commerce in the region, not by how best to resolve an 'authority crisis'. As long as French economic actors were able to profit from the internal wars by selling arms to the various factions, they did not complain of internal strife.⁴⁴

There were two internal weaknesses to which one might point. First, the rules of succession were not regarded as legitimate by all those whose acceptance of them was most critical. Second, the subsidiary rulers of the many territories composing the polity had independent access to armies, and an interest in preserving their relative autonomy.⁴⁵ These might seem to be ingredients for a domestic political crisis, even without direct French intervention. Yet, these 'structural contradictions' were not fatal. Of the three major regions of the empire, the centre held firm command of two and put down several attempts to overthrow the regime.⁴⁶ A French officer even remarked on the 'high degree of order and organization that reigned in the Tokolor Empire'.⁴⁷ If internal contradictions explain state collapse, the Tukolor should not have recovered.

It is undeniable that, for a time, the empire was less than unified, in large measure owing to disputes over the locus of sovereignty.⁴⁸ The importance of this is that if imperial pressure came, it would be more difficult to mount an effective resistance. Oloruntimehin summarizes the emerging successor's dilemma: '[n]ot only was it impossible for him to take arms against the French [who were challenging Tukolor sovereignty in several areas] while he was fighting his civil wars but he in fact still needed French arms to use against his rivals'.⁴⁹

The Tukolor case attests to the significant role foreign alliances play in state building and dismantling. After the ruler's death (1864), some provinces conquered during the war of religious unification sought to regain their independence. Regional

⁴² Oloruntimehin, *Tukolor*, p. 177; Kanya-Forstner, 'Mali-Tukolor,' pp. 62–3.

⁴³ Hargreaves, *Prelude to the Partition of West Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1963); Oloruntimehin, *Tukolor*, p. 188.

⁴⁴ Oloruntimehin, *Tukolor*, pp. 190, 183, 187–8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 155, and Kanya-Forstner, 'Mali-Tukolor,' p. 61.

⁴⁶ Kanya-Forstner, *Conquest*, p. 48.

⁴⁷ B. I. Obichere, 'The African Factor in the Establishment of French Authority in West Africa 1880–1900', in P. Gifford and W. R. Lewis (eds.), *France and Britain in Africa*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971) pp.443–90; p. 463.

⁴⁸ Kanya-Forstner, 'Mali-Tukolor,' p. 63.

⁴⁹ Oloruntimehin, 'Sudan', p. 375.

rulers who were opposed to the goal of a centralizing and dynastic government used alliances with French colonial officials to counter it. For French traders, such alliances were a way of ensuring that the Tukulor would not reemerge as a formidable power. In exchange for French military support against the Tukulor, the African polities gave the French exclusive commercial rights. As a French commander said, '[t]he importance of that affair is completely commercial'.⁵⁰

It was, then, intervention by foreign traders, not structural flaws inhering in the periphery polity, which precipitated the destruction of the Tukulor empire. In fact, at the end of the Franco-Prussian war, the Tukulor empire still existed, albeit with rifts which could be exploited. While the central authority did have domestic opponents, internal contradictions had not consumed the polity, nor had the political system evinced an inability to deal with European contacts. To reduce the French incentive to form subverting alliances, the Tukulor ruler created a more favourable trading environment for the French.⁵¹ However, in the altered international economic context, and with the French colonial governors and economic actors defining their interests in terms of the economic development of the Sahara and Sudan, the Tukulor policy of appeasement was futile.

International economic conditions and state destruction

To make the claim that periphery polities did not collapse because of structural contradictions or authority crises inhering in their presumed inability to adapt to commercial intercourse with Europeans, one needs to show that Europeans were not responding to chaotic periphery politics, but to other considerations. These, I suggest, were largely economic in nature.

In the international economic depression of the late 19th century, competition between the industrializing European states was fierce. Each state had an incentive to preempt the others in gaining and controlling markets. European firms faced the problem of over-production and the threat of being shut out of export markets. In spite of the general rise in quantities traded, companies engaged in the import-export trade in Africa faced narrowing profit margins and increased competition. Jurisdiction over fiscal policies such as duties was of critical importance to the survival and profitability of each country's merchants, and to funding the core administration supporting the trade.⁵² Therefore, European states had every incentive to intervene and control the African polities which had governed access to African markets. The issue was that of creating property rights which would funnel profits to European, not African, merchants, and tax revenue to European, not African, governments: 'it is time for French production to be protected in the market which the French maintain at the price of such large sacrifices of men and money. In

⁵⁰ Brunschwig, 'French Exploration', pp. 148–52; Hargreaves, *Prelude*, pp. 256–8; Obichere, 'African Factor', p. 445; Jean Ganiage, *L'Expansion coloniale de la France sous la troisième République, 1871–1914*, (Paris: Payot, 1968), pp. 173–4; quote at Oloruntimehin, *Tukulor*, p. 188.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 200–201; and Kanya-Forstner, 'Mali-Tukulor', p. 63; Obichere, 'African Factor,' p. 464.

⁵² C. W. Newbury, 'Credit in Early Nineteenth Century West African Trade,' *Journal of African History*, 13 (1972), pp. 81–95; Newbury, 'Authority', pp. 88–92.

such a country the theory of free exchange cannot be put into practice'.⁵³ The stakes were perceived to include not only France's West African possessions and colonies, but the metropole itself. It was French commercial and political circles, however, which had created the conditions demanding 'sacrifices of men and money'.⁵⁴

British complaints mirrored those of the French. Summarizing the situation in 1892, Lord Salisbury wrote that the British government 'cannot ignore the fact that British merchants are apprehensive that attempts may be made to exclude them from sources of trade in territories under French influence', a worry borne out by stipulations in French treaties.⁵⁵

French traders and officials realized that '[t]o keep the coveted markets of the Western Sudan out of British hands, France had to sweep the Tokolors out of the Upper Senegal, occupy the Senegal-Niger valley, . . . take Bamako', and 'eliminate the British presence'. Various domestic interest groups in France suggested that it was essential to maintain protected French trading posts in the Tukolor region, as '[i]t is the only manner by which we obtain for ourselves the Saharan trade. Up to now, that detour of commerce has benefited England; and even . . . Germany'. Although as a percentage of France's overall balance of trade West Africa was not great, the interest groups mattered: 'if an influential member . . . of the chambers had a large stake in African trade . . . then West African problems received special treatment'.⁵⁶

West African traders were represented politically by the *Parti Colonial*, whose leaders were on important parliamentary commissions, led key government departments, and had economic stakes in many parts of the growing French empire, including West Africa. Moreover, colonial issues proved useful at bridging severe domestic political conflicts.⁵⁷ Although there was an anti-colonial faction in France which advocated abandoning all colonies and expansionist efforts which did not cover their costs, it was frequently over-ridden by those wanting to protect French commercial interests and expand French geo-political influence.⁵⁸

The Tukolor, however, were unwilling to be pawns of French commerce: they regularly reacted against French military and economic efforts to control trading areas.⁵⁹ To protest against unauthorized French fort building, the Tukolor closed off caravan routes, making it 'difficult, and sometimes impossible, for the French to continue their commercial activities in the region' and began entertaining trade proposals from the British.⁶⁰ This strategy of playing foreign powers off against each other indicates that the Tukolor empire was not a helpless polity which exploded from

⁵³ Governor of Senegal, in C. W. Newbury, 'The Protectionist Revival in French Colonial Trade: the Case of Senegal', *Economic History Review*, 21 (1968), p. 343.

⁵⁴ Newbury, 'Victorians, Republicans', p. 493.

⁵⁵ C. W. Newbury, 'The Tariff Factor in Anglo-French West African Partition', in Gifford and Louis (eds.), *France and Britain*, pp. 221–59, quote at p. 222.

⁵⁶ C. W. Newbury and A. S. Forstner, 'French Policy and the Origins of the Scramble for West Africa', *Journal of African History*, 10 (1969), 253–76, here at p. 259; Oloruntimehin, *Tukolor*, p. 202, 203; Newbury, 'Protectionist Revival', p. 340.

⁵⁷ L. Abrams and D. J. Miller, 'Who Were the French Colonialists? A Reassessment of the *Parti Colonial*, 1890–1914', *Historical Journal*, 19 (1976), 685–725; pp. 691–3, 695, 703–7, 710–13; C. M. Andrew and A. S. Kanya-Forstner, 'The French Colonial Party: its Composition, Aims, and Influence, 1885–1914', *Historical Journal*, 14 (1971), pp. 99–128.

⁵⁸ See documents in M. Chailley, *Histoire de l'Afrique Occidentale Française, 1638–1959* (Paris: Éditions Berger-Levrault, 1968), pp. 158–160; and in Hargreaves, *Prehude*, pp. 144–47.

⁵⁹ Newbury, 'Authority', p. 92.

⁶⁰ Oloruntimehin, *Tukolor*, pp. 252, 230–31, 233.

the 'shock' of European contacts. Had it been a politically inept 'quasi-state', or were its governing structure undermined by, in Doyle's words, increased differentiation without political integration, it would not have been able to act in this manner.

That France continued its policy of exacerbating 'internal difficulties' by inciting regional rulers to rebel attests to the degree of coercion used to wrest control of profit margins. The admitted intent was 'to exploit the seeds of discord which exist between the Tokolor conquerors and their discontented tributaries' and 'to prepare the terrain for our commerce'.⁶¹ The French covertly supplied arms to the Tukolor opposition, maintained an arms embargo against the Tukolor, claiming to be friends of the Tukolor while violating transnational agreements.⁶² After various French military incursions, the Tukolor emperor told the French, 'You have disrupted my states without authorization, without any rights, and in default of [our] treaties . . . I will reclaim . . . the possession of the very lands on which you have erected your forts'. Clearly, the Tukolor empire was not failing from inadequate political and economic structures, or from its transgressing transnational property rights.⁶³ It was being forced to collapse.

French commercial and military circles then demonstrated that they were not interested in a unified Tukolor empire if it meant they would be forced to deal with an uncooperative government: they utilized European competition to strike profitable bilateral trade agreements. French grievances were not that the Tukolor were inept in managing capitalist trade relations, nor that Tukolor rulers had lost authority over the populace, or expropriated foreign investments. Rather, the 'problem' was that a French monopoly of commercial activity in the region was threatened. To resolve this economic problem, the French government sanctioned military conquest in 1882, and defeated resistance efforts. By 1893, French colonial governors and traders had succeeded in their goal of fragmenting and taking over the empire.⁶⁴

By any calculation, the French had greater resources, and the international economic context provided the incentive to translate those resources into outcomes. One can only speculate whether, had the Europeans not imposed imperial rule, some African states would have survived. Yet, it should be clear that the French policy of denying Tukolor sovereignty was not a response to an authority crisis in a 'ramshackle' regime. Imposition of imperial rule and the dismantling of the Tukolor empire was a response to an international economic crisis in which the state building process in Africa could be exploited for economic gain.

The international arena is also the critical element in the story of the Asante polity.

Undermining a kingdom—the British and the Asante

British economic activity in West Africa—the location of the Asante Kingdom—began in the 15th century; in time, the territories under their control grew. The

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 229–30, 270; quotes on p. 249.

⁶² Hargreaves, *Prelude*, p. 257.

⁶³ Obichere, 'African Factor', p. 466; Oloruntimehin, *Tukolor*, pp. 236–7, 249–51.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 236; Hargreaves, *Prelude*, pp. 254–5; Kanya-Forstner, 'Mali-Tukolor', 70–73.

system typical in the 18th and early 19th centuries was that 'Forts and Factories were built on soil which belonged to natives, and a ground rent paid to the Chiefs of the several towns adjacent to the said Forts'. British 'governors' regulated the interaction of British and African traders at these forts, on what came to be called the Gold Coast. Their complaints were not about internecine warfare or a collapse of authority within the Asante kingdom. Sovereignty was not denied because the Asante lacked a 'credible government'.⁶⁵ Instead, when Asante politics got in the way of British economics, the British government intervened.

Increased involvement came about when the British abolished the slave trade (1807) and sought to impose 'legitimate commerce', despite the avowed aim to avoid direct political control where possible. The puzzle of how such a principle could lead to formal imperialism and the destruction of nascent African states is resolved when one sees that 'possible' was assessed primarily in terms of economic interests. In the words of a colonial official: 'We have only, or at least mainly, to consider whether the trade that is carried on at these various points which we occupy is increasing or diminishing, and whether there is any reason to think that at any point it would be greater or less if our occupation were to cease'.⁶⁶

The Asante political system belied standard models of 'tribal society'. By 1800, the Asante had instituted constitutional reforms and centralization of the administration, making the polity more unified than that of the Tukulors.⁶⁷ The polity had judicial procedures which followed 'due process' and also stipulated set punishments for various crimes.⁶⁸ The king did not inherit his title automatically; he was appointed by a council which had judicial and 'legislative' powers. While the bureaucracy was dependent upon the crown, its administrators were chosen by ability and competence, not by ascriptive characteristics, and administrations 'spanned reigns and interregna'.⁶⁹ The Asante king was developing an exchequer, and becoming 'absolutist', eliminating the vestiges of independent authorities in the kingdom.⁷⁰

By the early 19th century, Asante had made 'most of what is modern Ghana tributary to it';⁷¹ furthermore, according to a contemporary observer, 'Law and Order is just as great in the Ashantee kingdom as with the Asiatic Eastern peoples'. Asante power was such that it motivated neighbouring polities to form an alliance in

⁶⁵ J. J. Crooks, *Records Relating to the Gold Coast Settlements from 1750 to 1874* (London: Frank Cass, 1973), p. 3. 'Credible' phrase in Jackson, 'Juridical Statehood', p. 2.

⁶⁶ A. Boahen, 'Politics in Ghana, 1800–1874', in Ajayi and Crowder, *History*, 167–261; pp. 179–80; G.E. Metcalfe, *Great Britain and Ghana* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1964), pp. 92–3, 112–13; quote on p. 307.

⁶⁷ Colson, 'African Society', pp. 36, 40.

⁶⁸ T. C. McCaskie, *State and society in pre-colonial Asante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 82, 87.

⁶⁹ Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 394–5; see also his 'Bureaucratization in 19th Century Asante', *Journal of African History*, 7 (1966), pp. 215–32, 216–18, 231; and Boahen, 'Ghana', p. 172.

⁷⁰ Ivor Wilks, 'Ashanti Government' in Daryll Forde and P. M. Kaberry (eds.), *West African Kingdoms in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1967), pp. 206–38, here at 217–18, 229.

⁷¹ Crowder, 'Introduction', p. 6.

an unsuccessful effort to limit Asante's access to weapons.⁷² Contrary to the contention that 'tribal society' brings on imperial rule by its inability to structure politics and commerce, Asante rulers controlled an extensive, developing economy. A contemporary wrote that 'Ashanti in the days of its power was one of the most important commercial centres in Africa'.⁷³ The initial economic dislocation produced by the suppression of the slave trade was not disabling; Asante rulers shifted to taxing trade in oils and kola nuts and exacted tributes from markets and trade networks, while Asante producers expanded production in their gold mining enterprises. The polity's traders and private middlemen were active in the economy and the government.⁷⁴ In the 1880s and later, Asante traders, eager to diversify, exploited the lucrative rubber trade. The Asante national economy was somewhere between being 'a subsistence and a fully-fledged modern market economy', with the rulers controlling the level of wealth accumulation. The Asante methods of surplus extraction, then, were not unlike those utilized by European rulers in earlier centuries.⁷⁵

As with the Tukulor and the French, the Asante were willing to cooperate with the British government and British traders as long as doing so did not compromise Asante sovereignty. The Asantes had a policy of 'the highest level of accommodation to the interests of the European merchant powers on the Gold Coast which was compatible with the unification of Greater Asante'.⁷⁶ This policy was rendered irrelevant by Britain, whose ostensibly pacific ends of trade and social order were written on British terms and enforced by war; it was not that Asante policy 'demanded' European intervention.

As early as 1766, British merchants and colonial officials expressed concern over the economic threat posed by a strong African polity. In contemplating Asante expansion, a merchant wrote, 'I think it very clear that our trade would be totally ruined should that event take place, for the whole trade being in the hands of a powerful absolute Monarch, he certainly would put what price he thought proper on Slaves, and also on our commodities'. Similar sentiments were expressed by the Gold

⁷² Quote at Fynn, 'Ghana-Asante', pp. 25–6. T. C. McCaskie has challenged the claims of Wilks and others that the Asante polity was a powerful, semi-bureaucratic entity, yet leaves the reader confused as to the bases of his claims. He writes that 'the precolonial Asante state simply lacked the infrastructure and technology to command society solely by coercive force' (*State and Society*, p. 9), and that 'the reach of coercive capacity depended for its effectiveness on a most fragile equation' (*Ibid.*, p. 10). However, he also notes that the Asante polity controlled the ability of individuals to acquire 'great wealth' via warfare or trade (*Ibid.*, p. 52), and goes on to state that '[i]t should be clearly recorded and understood that the coercive potential of the evolved state was formidable in range' (*Ibid.*, p. 82). In describing Asante power, McCaskie points to the 'incremental ability of central government to mediate, by force or by law, the national market in subjects and land'. McCaskie, *Ahyiamu—'A Place of Meeting': an Essay on Process and Event in the History of the Asante State* (*Journal of African History*, 25 (1984), pp. 169–88, here at 175. He also notes, as have many scholars of the development of sovereign states in Europe, that the Asante state [that is the term he uses] structure was 'enabled' by the social context (*State and Society*, p. 73 and ch. 3).

⁷³ Edward Reynolds, *Trade and Economic Change on the Gold Coast, 1807–1874* (London: Longman, 1974), pp. 69–71, quote on p. 174; Martin Lynn, 'The West African palm oil trade in the nineteenth century and the 'crisis of adaptation'', in Robin Law (ed.), *From slave trade to 'legitimate' commerce: The commercial transition in nineteenth century West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Gareth Austin, 'No Elders were Present: Commoners and Private Ownership in Asante, 1807–1896', *Journal of African History*, 37 (1996), pp. 1–30.

⁷⁴ Austin, 'No Elders'; Reynolds, *Trade*, pp. 69–71.

⁷⁵ Reynolds, *Trade*, p. 35; Boahen, 'Ghana', p. 168. Kwame Arhin, 'Trade, Accumulation and the State in Asante in the Nineteenth Century', *Africa*, 60 (1990), pp. 524–37; p. 531.

⁷⁶ Wilks, *Asante*, p. 175.

Coast Governor.⁷⁷ In 1819, much like French traders in the Tukulor empire, British merchants complained of the increasing numbers of indigenous peoples participating in direct trade with 'foreign' merchants and of the fact that British middlemen were being circumvented.⁷⁸ The issue was, again, to whom profits would accrue.

Transnational contacts did not fatally destabilize relations between and within African polities. Complaints about the Asantes violating property rights or being unable to structure economic activity were not forthcoming. What *was* forthcoming was a policy resembling that of the French: to promote 'free' trade, officials were authorized to implement measures benefiting British trade. It was suggested that 'there might be an occasional appearance of a ship of war on the coast, in order to demonstrate to the native powers that the interests of the British residents in this quarter are not lost sight of by the Government at home'.⁷⁹

In essence, the British decision to intervene in Asante politics and property rights was based on whether or not Asante politics undermined British economic interests. In 1822, after numerous acts of goodwill on the part of the Asante, British officials refused to reciprocate. It was then that, in retaliation, the Asante disrupted trade. British merchants protested the Asante monopoly of northern trade, and demanded that Asante be destroyed 'before our footing in this country can be considered safe and respectable'. When the Asante arrested a Fante native in British service for violations of Asante law in Asante territory, the British seized upon the event as an excuse for war. The problem for the British was that they were defeated in the ensuing 1824 battle.⁸⁰ Clearly, Asante was not a hopelessly 'weak' polity bent on expropriating European property.

The Asante Civil War of 1832 provides evidence that political system destruction did not follow from the inherent weakness of periphery polities. When a leading Asante city tried to secede, it was defeated and the new Asante leader consolidated his control over fractious regions. By Doyle's hypothesis, this ability to challenge existing authority is traceable to an increase in trade-derived wealth. However, although the increase in wealth did give the city the resources with which to undertake the challenge, the same trade also enriched the centre. Thus, even if the international trade/domestic crisis link is significant, it does not explain the different outcomes—in this case, why Asante power prevailed.

To be sure, political changes were taking place in Asante. One could argue that if capitalism took root in Asante, it would undermine the power and authority of the 'absolutist' elites. The Asante had a political structure which purposefully limited large-scale accumulation of private capital. In spite of these limitations, capitalism *did* penetrate Asante—and was exploited by the mercantilist state. Eventually, the Asante chief was constrained 'never to act without the advice and full concurrence of his counselors'.⁸¹ Put in the perspective of European state building, the Asante

⁷⁷ Boahen, 'Ghana', pp. 171, 170.

⁷⁸ Reynolds, *Trade*, p. 54.

⁷⁹ Crooks, *Records*, p. 252; quote is on p. 241.

⁸⁰ J. B. Williams, *British Commercial Policy and Trade Expansion, 1750–1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 421; J. K. Fynn, 'Ghana-Asante (Ashanti)', in Crowder, *Resistance*, pp. 19–52, here at p. 24; Boahen, 'Ghana', pp. 182–7; quote at *Ibid.*, pp. 185–6; Crooks, *Records*, p. 170; Fynn, 'Ghana-Asante', pp. 30–32.

⁸¹ Kwame Arhin, 'Aspects of the Ashanti Northern Trade in the Nineteenth-century' *Africa*, 40 (1970), pp. 363–73; Ivor Wilks, 'Ashanti Government'; quote in Robert Sutherland Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1929), p. 407.

showed the antecedents of cabinet government, quite the opposite of the standard theories' expected authority crisis.

After the Civil War, when European commerce was on the rise (1840s to 1870s), Asante attention was directed at protecting or extending Asante sovereignty, not in fighting off rival claims to authority *in* Asante. If anything, comments of British officials and traders, and actions by Asantes, show that Asante was a viable polity. In 1863 the Gold Coast Governor wrote of the 'earnest desire I entertain that a final blow shall be struck at Ashantee power'. Attesting to Asante cohesion, he noted that 'the movements of the Ashantees are organized, sanctioned and approved by their king'.⁸²

The hypothesis that the primitive nature of periphery polities led to their own destruction is weakened further by the fact that the British intervened when the Asantes threatened to conquer regions which were important to British trade. In 1873, the Asantes 'virtually annihilated' the large Fante and Denkyira armies. The British reaction was to seek, in the words of the 1873 military commander, 'to defeat the Ashantee army in the field, to drive it from the protected territories and . . . to march victorious on the Ashantee capital, and to show not only to the King, but to those chiefs who urge him on to constant war, that the arm of Her Majesty is powerful to punish, and can reach even to the very heart of their kingdom'.⁸³

British traders, in fact, had a sizeable stake in the Gold Coast trade. Despite the abolition of the slave trade, British merchants were doing well in the early 19th century. Trade statistics show that just between 1830 and 1840, the value of goods exported by British merchants rose dramatically. Due to exogenous changes in accessibility to capital, storage and transport, the number of British traders increased. Competition between them became tight. Further competition from Asante traders, efforts by the Asante rulers to extract rents, as well as trade stoppages due to Asante wars (either with other African polities or with the British) were significant economic concerns to traders.⁸⁴ British merchants and colonial officials were convinced that 'if Asante power could be destroyed, a vast field for commerce would be opened to them'. To facilitate this, Asante traders often were insulted and attacked.⁸⁵ The Asante were, however, not expropriating British investments, or violating transnational contracts, but merely proving to be successful rivals to British commercial interests.

Collapse of the Asante

As with the French, British traders and colonial officials exploited the rifts in Asante politics to fragment the polity. The British signed treaties with various African chiefs who formerly had been subordinate to the Asante, and/or were threatened by them.

⁸² Boahen, 'Ghana', pp. 199–200; Austin, 'Abolition', p. 99; quotes at Metcalfe, *Great Britain and Ghana*, p. 295.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

⁸⁴ C. W. Newbury, *British Policy Toward West Africa: Select Documents, 1875–1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 614–15; Lynn, 'Palm Oil'; R.E. Dumett, 'Pressure group, bureaucracy, and the decision-making process: the case of slavery abolition and colonial expansion in the Gold Coast, 1874', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 9 (1981), pp. 193–215.

⁸⁵ Fynn, 'Ghana-Asante', pp. 28, 34.

Britain, like the French, sought to block Asante access to arms. The force employed to create the conditions favourable for the imperial merchants is described by a colonial official (in 1826), who notes that several tribes 'were constant allies of the Ashantees until they were bribed, cajoled or frightened, by threats of destruction from [the Sierra Leone Governor] . . . to join his alliance'.⁸⁶

A variant of this is illustrated by the British government's reaction to inquiries from the Asante king on the subject of regaining control of the Assin people. The colonial administration's response was that 'any interference with these Assin chiefs' would be considered 'a declaration of war'.⁸⁷ Such guarantees of security to co-operative African chiefs, who were vulnerable to Asante conquest, created something of a quisling class in West Africa. Stable and profitable trading conditions were maintained for Britain, while African rulers yielded legal jurisdiction over their own subjects to the British. This is not at all the scenario expected by Jackson, Doyle, or the property rights argument: European intervention and manipulation came *before*, not after, these African rulers lost much of their authority.

These policies made it unlikely that African rulers would be able to govern effectively. A Fante chief arrested 'for championing the cause of self-government', and deported by the British, stated that the protectorate Governor had 'wrested from the hands of our kings and chiefs and headsmen their power to govern their own subjects'. A merchant in 1874 wrote that 'the policy of the last twenty years . . . has very properly been directed to breaking the authority of the Kings here, of reducing their importance, and of making the people look up to the [British] Government as the only authority'. In rejecting the idea of having the African chiefs collect the poll taxes assessed by the British, a British official wrote that such a measure 'would tend to exalt the power of the chiefs, which it is part of our policy to endeavour to lower'.⁸⁸

This situation was the pretext for British extension of formal control over the Gold Coast. While Doyle⁸⁹ writes that '[t]ribal society demands the use of force to support other transnational contacts (due to their disruptive effects)', we have seen that the 'demand' was predominately a British construction masked by British claims about 'civilizing' the Africans, essentially intended only to produce better labourers and consumers. It was not the case that the Asante and other Africans were incapable of being capitalists, but that they were not acquisitive enough for British trade to prosper. Much as the French thought the Tukulor Muslims were not good capitalists, the British complained that many African traders, 'instead of exchanging all their goods for produce, built houses, bought slaves, and surrounded themselves with a large retinue of servants . . . and, unable to estimate the cost of their goods, drove the European merchants from the trade by ruinous competition'.⁹⁰ In 1863, the 'civilized' British violated agreements with the Asantes, provoking another war in which the Asante defeated them. The conflict had a devastating effect on trade, and prompted British trader outcries for further inter-

⁸⁶ Wilks, *Asante*, pp. 169–75; Fynn, 'Ghana-Asante', p. 24; quote at Metcalfe, *Great Britain and Ghana*, p. 104.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 208, 196–7, 206, 237.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 206–7, 219–220; Fante quote at 308–9; cf. Boahen, 'Ghana', p. 241; merchant quote at Reynolds, *Trade*, p. 114; third quote at Metcalfe, *Great Britain and Ghana*, pp. 255–6.

⁸⁹ Doyle, *Empires*, p. 177.

⁹⁰ Reynolds, *Trade*, p. 151.

vention.⁹¹ Once again the merits of the existence of the Asante state were being evaluated in terms of trade.

International economic conditions and state destruction

It was the international economic depression of the late 19th century which ensured British intervention. As in the Tukulor case, the international context explains the timing of state destruction. Worsening terms of trade and increased commercial rivalry produced a situation which was very costly to British traders and creditors.⁹² The influx of additional European traders aggravated a situation which deteriorated further when non-African sources of palm oil and substitutes entered the market, hurting the competitiveness of the commodities in which British traders dealt. The decline in prices was dramatic.⁹³

Under such conditions, the Asante polity and its traders were serious threats to British traders. With profits shrinking, British merchants struggled to shift the terms of distribution in their favour. In 1874, the British found a pretext for yet another war with Asantes and forced a retreat. This, however, was not the end of Asante: after their defeat, even without the superior British weapons, they exercised whatever limited policy choices were available.⁹⁴ They soon discovered, as had the Tukulor, that the altered international economic conditions rendered many of their efforts fruitless.

Showing considerable sophistication, Asante formulated and began implementing a policy of involving European 'capital and expertise' in its economic development 'to preserve its political independence'. In 1878 and 1879 the Asante set up mining companies with the French, a situation which 'greatly perturbed' the British. Furthermore, the Asante reorganized their military, and used European traders to procure better equipment. Despite the heavy war retribution exacted by the British, some serious domestic problems and the rebellion of several subject political entities (a few of which were instigated by the British), the Asante polity rebounded.⁹⁵

The Asante polity had been weakened by internal conflict, which had emerged 'from the refusal of the tributaries to continue to fight in Asante's costly wars or submit to the control of their economies' by the Asante. Eventually, the Asante had another civil war (1883–8), one in which the Asante elite 'squandered its coercive power'.⁹⁶ Yet even historians who emphasize the 'internal contradictions' of the Asante polity note that British intervention was a significant factor, both in destabilizing the polity prior to the war, and afterwards. As Aidoo notes of Asante's post-war re-organizing efforts, 'the prospect of a revived Asante frightened the

⁹¹ Fynn, 'Ghana-Asante', p. 34; Metcalfe, *Great Britain and Ghana*, p. 321; Reynolds, *Trade*, p. 147.

⁹² A. G. Hopkins, 'Economic Imperialism in West Africa: Lagos, 1880–92', *The Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, 21 (1968), pp. 580–606; p. 585.

⁹³ Hopkins, *Economic History*; Lynn, 'West African Palm Oil'; Reynolds, *Trade*, pp. 146, 103–38.

⁹⁴ Fynn, 'Ghana-Asante', pp. 38–9; Boahen, 'Ghana', p. 259.

⁹⁵ Wilks, *Asante*, pp. 612–15, 636–7, 683–92; Hopkins, 'Economic Imperialism', p. 593; Fynn, 'Ghana-Asante', p. 42.

⁹⁶ Agnes A. Aidoo, 'Order and Conflict in the Asante Empire: a study in interest group relations' *African Studies Review*, 20 (1977), pp. 1–36, here at 25; McCaskie, *State and Society*, p. 70.

British authorities, whose imperial interests were best served by a prostrate kingdom'.⁹⁷

Internal contradictions do not provide an adequate explanation of state collapse. It is also clear that Asante, instead of self-destructing as 'tribal societies' are expected to do after so much European contact, was seeking to profit from its links to the international economy. To understand, then, why the polity foundered, one must look to the actions of foreign actors, namely those in West European states.⁹⁸

Motives in the Metropole

As I have indicated, the international context increased the incentives for Britain and France to act forcefully in African politics. In 1875 a prominent French trader pronounced that the region over which the Asante had 'the entire monopoly of trade' was 'one of the richest parts of central Africa'.⁹⁹ With the advent of mining, the threat to Britain and its merchants of being outflanked by French economic enterprises was of some concern. The prospect of profits from new industries going to French, German or Asante interests was intolerable. The rationale for territorial annexation had little to do with the internal condition of the Asante political system.¹⁰⁰ Commercial competition, not anarchy in African polities, was the issue.

The failure of the major European states to reach agreement on (mutual) tariff reductions seems to have been a very significant factor in impelling those states to take control of the political and economic systems of African polities. In the absence of an international organization which could punish free trade violations, this is not surprising. Her Majesty's Government quickly authorized colonial officials to make 'treaties of friendship and freedom of trade' with as many polities as possible and adopt a policy which stipulated that 'if the sections of Ashanti which are still independent of the Gold Coast [the British Protectorate] decline to accept [British] rule, they should be compelled to do so'.¹⁰¹

Like the Tukolor emperor, the Asante king rejected the British ultimatum, insisting on continued Asante sovereignty. In this way the Asante could negotiate contracts with French interests if British terms of trade were unfavourable.¹⁰² This was clearly not the action of a state beset by internal contradictions, unable to manage its incorporation into the international economy, and unwilling to respect transnational property rights.

The response of the Gold Coast Governor makes plain the source of state destruction. 'At a period when the French are advancing inland on both sides of us, it is not, I submit, to be tolerated, that the opening up of the interior of this part of Africa to British commerce, should be prevented by the pretensions of a petty

⁹⁷ On contradictions, see Aidoo, 'Order' pp. 19, 33 and McCaskie, *State and Society*, p. 266. Quote in Aidoo, 'Order', p. 29.

⁹⁸ Basil Davidson, *Black Man's Burden* (London: James Currey, 1992) pp. 59–69.

⁹⁹ Wilks, *Asante*, p. 608.

¹⁰⁰ Metcalfe, *Great Britain and Ghana*, pp. 465–7; Newbury, 'Tariff Factor', p. 223; W. G. Hynes, *The Economics of Empire: Britain, Africa, and the new Imperialism, 1870–1895* (London: Longman, 1979) pp. 46 and 65.

¹⁰¹ Metcalfe, *Great Britain and Ghana*, pp. 463, 473, 398–9.

¹⁰² Wilks, *Asante*, p. 650.

despotism'. In 1896, on the pretext of treaty violations, a 'considerable military retinue' marched to the Asante capital, deposed the king, and established a formal protectorate.¹⁰³

Conclusion

The Tukolor and Asante cases suggest, first, that at least some African polities were not 'quasi-states', lacking the empirical political and economic capacity to join the international community of sovereign states. Some periphery states adapted to European contact, and could marshal the forces of a centralized government and national identity; they were far more resilient than the 'patrimonial', 'tribal' and 'quasi-state' models allow. Internal contradictions in their authority structure were not the primary variable accounting for their collapse. Rather, their considerable capacities and wealth goaded local European traders to seek their demise.

Second, the Tukolor and Asante cases render suspect the hypothesis that periphery states could not sustain and promote international commerce. As was typical of European state builders, African rulers enforced property rights and sought to retain control over lucrative trading routes. The penetration of capitalism and the shift in trade to different commodities did not lead to a political crisis of such magnitude that the very existence of the polity was in doubt. These changes, of course, produced political and economic adjustments, but that was little different from patterns of state building in Europe.

Third, the Tukolor and Asante cases show that European traders successfully pressed their home governments to alter the structure of African property rights in their favour, even African property rights supportive of capitalism, thus undermining the African polities in the process. It was not breaches of transnational contracts by the periphery polities that spurred colonial intervention; many periphery polities were respecting property rights, and, until the actions of core states prevented them from doing so, also enforcing property rights.

Clearly, changes in the 19th century African economies had some impact on the political systems of African states. The disagreement is over the source of their loss of sovereignty. The evidence indicates that European states brought about the destruction of the Tukolor empire and Asante kingdom by fragmenting the polities and by forcefully overthrowing the rulers, and this cannot be understood by focusing primarily upon domestic politics and transnational property rights. The European states were not sucked into a political vacuum; they helped to create it. Mere contact with Europeans and the international capitalist economy did not demolish these states. Instead, through treaty violations, military conquest and occupations, and alliances with disaffected groups, Europeans chipped away at the integrity of African political systems. Eventually, the superior military resources of the Europeans enabled the French and British not only to defeat resistance efforts but to compel some states to 'accept' European protection.

These 19th century cases have contemporary implications. First, the problem with the property rights argument is symptomatic of the 'new institutionalist' economics.

¹⁰³ Boahen, 'Ghana', pp. 246–59; Metcalfe, *Great Britain and Ghana*, pp. 478, 480; Wilks, *Asante*, pp. 655–7, 659.

Applied to state building, such approaches usually view that process as the formation of benign, mutually beneficial contracts between willing individuals. The state itself is merely a neutral enforcer of those contracts. This perspective ignores the substantial discrepancies in power, ensuing discrepancies in privileges and wealth, and possible limits on an individual's ability to 'exit'. Moreover, while the state may eliminate free-riding between relatively prosperous economic competitors, it may do so at the expense of those lacking resources, creating situations in which wealthy economic actors are able to 'free-ride' on the rest of the population. Conflicts between states over which state gets to appropriate wealth from a territory may lead to the destruction of one of them.

One branch of the normative approach to 'First/Third World' relations focuses on the changing qualifications for sovereignty. Argued most forcefully by Jackson, it holds that most Third World states born after 1945 were not ready for sovereignty, but nevertheless received it. These incompetent, corrupt polities are 'quasi-states'. The fate of the Tukolor and Asante suggests that at least some of today's 'quasi-states' were virtually created by the same Western powers, which, in the late 19th century, played an active role in destroying other potentially 'real' states. Sovereign statehood may have been empirical, but the criteria were not those posited by quasi-state theory. European states were selective about which nascent states they allowed to meet certification.

Finally, polity dismantlement on the periphery is a caveat to the dominant view that liberal trading regimes benefit weak and strong alike. Power politics often occurs in an economic framework. The Asante and Tukolor are reminders that much of international relations remains a quarrel over to whom economic rents shall accrue.