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Hopkins, A. G. *Capitalism in the Colonies: African Merchants in Lagos, 1851-1931.* Publisher: Princeton University Press, 2024, pp. 552. ISBN-13 : 978-0691258843.

Reviewed by: Chisara Agoha, University of Calgary, Canada

Lagos, a port city often referred to as the "Liverpool of West Africa," played a pivotal role in the economic history of the region (p. 15). A.G. Hopkins examines the development of entrepreneurship in Lagos from the precolonial period. He elaborates on the diplomacy between the British colonial government and traditional leaders, aimed at abolishing slavery, fostering a free trade policy, and promoting Christianity. Political stability was essential for the exploitation of raw materials and commercialization in Lagos. Initially, commerce in the city was facilitated through cooperation with local rulers, such as Akitoye. However, this collaboration gave way to invasion, resulting in the imposition of colonial rule in 1862.

The book comprises three parts, each covering distinct periods that correspond to external factors altering various aspects of Lagos's economic environment. Hopkins refers to these external events as "Shocks." The book contains sixteen chapters, with the first chapter serving as the introduction. Part one includes chapters two to five, part two contains chapters six to thirteen, and the final part comprises chapters fourteen to sixteen. The first shock of 1851 explores the British government's attempt to halt the slave trade in Lagos by bombarding the city and increasing the export of raw materials, such as palm oil and kernels. This period marked the emergence of the Saro in Lagos's economy. The Saro, formerly enslaved people of Yoruba origin, gained entrepreneurial influence due to their Christian background and access to Western education, and served as local and international business intermediaries and government workers in Lagos. According to Hopkins, the introduction of legitimate trade elevated some of the Saro to the status of "Big Men" (p. 43). After the annexation of Lagos in 1862, business was reorganized around property, credit, and cash transactions. The shift to cash transactions introduced more competition among merchants, drawing additional African traders from lower trading orders into export businesses. Despite this shift, the author argues that the new economy did not yield greater profits than the trade in enslaved people.

Unlike in the slave trade, where merchants controlled the trade, profit, and personal relationships, entrepreneurs dealing in raw materials faced bad debts due to the influx of traders into the new trading system and the lack of enforcement of sanctions against debtors.

The second shock occurred in 1892 when the British government expanded the colony to include the hinterlands to promote commercial prosperity. The period between 1880 and 1900 was marked by commercial crises and the erosion of the role of educated Africans in government and the Church, primarily due to racism. The Church was implicated in the racist treatment of African Christians, leading to the establishment of an independent African church, the United Native African Church, in 1891. African merchants faced limited capital resources, resulting in the decline of their businesses and the diminishing affluent status of the Saro. To navigate the new business obstacles, Lagos merchants employed various strategies, including diversification and the initiation of new crop exports, such as cocoa and kola, as well as the introduction of motor vehicle sales. Others opened industries such as flour mills, publishing houses, rental properties, money lending, and the hospitality sector. Some Lagos merchants expanded their businesses to other areas in what is now Nigeria, such as Calabar, where they exported ivory, palm oil, cocoa, and kernels.

The third shock occurred in 1914, when the First World War disrupted international commerce, leading to the closure or amalgamation of firms with which African merchants had long-standing trading relationships. Additionally, the expulsion of German firms during the war harmed the businesses of many merchants. The global depression further exacerbated the decline of businesses during the interwar period. However, the closure of some European firms was followed by the takeover and dominance of African merchants. While some scholars have credited trading as a domain for Yoruba women, Hopkins refutes this by arguing that women were largely absent as major traders. Instead, they participated in small-scale trading. One of the most intriguing aspects of the book is the author's argument regarding Madame Efunporoye Tinubu (c. 1805-1887). Scholars maintain that she was prominently involved in the slave and palm oil trades; however, Hopkins contends that there is more evidence regarding her life as the wife of King Adele than her trading activities. He suggests that the narrative surrounding Madame Tinubu has been shaped to position her as a nationalist and feminist icon. Furthermore, the author argues that colonial rule was characterized by both collaboration and contestation. Merchants such as David Augustus Taylor expanded their businesses with European firms during this period, while women organized and formed trade unions, such as the Lagos Market Women Association, which opposed colonial policies detrimental to their economic activities.

One of the strengths of this book is its analysis of various frameworks, including Marx's theory, which is essential for understanding the author's perspectives on capitalism. His inclusion of maps, pictures, and tables serves as compelling evidence to support his arguments. Notably, his analysis of colonial port cities provides a nuanced understanding of Lagos's distinctiveness. Unlike in Asia, where port cities were established before the arrival of European merchants, Lagos emerged as a result of commercial interactions with Europeans during the Transatlantic period. Importantly, Hopkins argues that Lagos's relevance as a port city was due to the high productivity of its hinterlands. Although this book presents in-depth arguments and achieves its goals, its length may deter a wider audience, particularly undergraduates and non-scholars.

The book extensively utilizes primary sources, including newspapers, business records, archival materials from Ibadan and London, private records obtained from descendants of merchants, and the Supreme Court's records. Hopkins also benefited from interviews with merchants and family members of Lagos entrepreneurs. The book concludes with an epilogue set in Lagos in 2022, when it has become a megacity with a large population and a thriving industrial center. Hopkins laments how modern changes in Lagos's economy have nearly erased the legacies of past merchants, memorable sites, and other valuable aspects of history. Nevertheless, this comprehensive work will be valuable to new generations of historians, business scholars, and government officials studying the spread of capitalism and entrepreneurship in nineteenth-century Lagos.

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