Both the Dutch and the Portuguese societies in Western Africa were divided into three ethnic groups: Europeans, Africans, and people of mixed descent. However, the composition of these groups and the role they played socially and economically differed. At the head of these societies were the Europeans, to be more precise their military, administrative and commercial staff. In the Dutch case, the Company employees were the only representatives of the Republic’s political and diplomatic interests and the Company’s commercial and military policies. The officials of the Portuguese Crown, for their part, were mainly instruments of the royal decisions for the Western Africans settlements. They often failed in their missions, due to great opposition by the settlers. They therefore played a minor role in the development of the settlements.

In the Portuguese Western African societies, the colonists of European and mixed descent, organized in local elites, played a key role in the development of the local economies. These elites sponsored intensive agricultural production for the export and local consumption markets, enabled the coastal commercial circuits linking the Archipelagoes with the African coasts and participated partially in the trading routes connecting the islands with other Atlantic areas, namely Europe and the Americas. In addition, the high number of people of mixed descent in the local elites helped the Portuguese economic interests in penetrating the interior and having access to the supply areas of African products, especially in the Guinea-Bissau region and Angola. The formation of these local elites also helped to cement the connections between these middlemen and the local African communities.

The formation of local elites generated social and economic unrest, however. On the one hand, the economic interests of the local elites differed from the policies of the Portuguese Crown, which spawned conflicts between the royal officers and the members of these groups. These clashes were often disruptive for trade. On the other hand, among the local elites, various powerful families vied for political influence, economic power and social prestige. These rivals made use
of their personal armies of slaves and clients to impose their will upon their enemies within the elite group.

In both the Dutch and the Portuguese cases, intermarriages between Europeans and Africans created a third social group. In the Dutch outposts, Eurafricans only started to be hired as Company employees in the late 17th century, and only in the 18th century did they become important brokers with the African hinterland. In the Portuguese settlements, Eurafricans played a key role as a labor force. Mixed descent people served in the army and the navy on a local level, as well as in posts on the royal, municipal and ecclesiastic administration. Eurafricans were also essential for the development of the coastal and land trade. Therefore, they became especially important for the success of the Portuguese intra- and inter-continental trade. In the Dutch case, the success of the trading activities of the WIC and the Company employees was highly dependent on the Africans, especially the free Africans, who worked for the Company as middlemen, transporters and sailors. The Eurafricans only became an influential group during the second half of the 18th century.

Free Africans living in the surroundings of the Dutch and the Portuguese settlements became integrated into these colonial societies, since they were used as auxiliary troops and hired as middlemen in the land trade connecting the coast and the hinterland markets. In both the Dutch and the Portuguese societies in Western Africa, enslaved Africans were at the bottom of the social ladder. They were mainly a social group in transit between the African hinterland and the consumption markets of the Americas and Europe. However, a considerable number of slaves were to be found in the posts and settlements, proportionally more in the Portuguese settlements because of the type of activities they performed. In the Dutch case, slave labor played a minor role, since its importance for the Company’s economic activities on the Gold Coast was limited. The enslaved Africans were employed mainly as domestic servants and unskilled workers. In the Portuguese settlements, enslaved and manumitted Africans were used in agriculture and as soldiers in the landlords’ ‘personal armies’ and the local militias.

In Chapter Four we will examine these three main social and ethnic groups present in the Dutch and Portuguese societies in Western Africa in a comparative perspective, and will debate the role played by each social group in the economic growth of the posts and settlements and in the building of the Dutch and the Portuguese Atlantic empires.