PART TWO

WESTERN AFRICA IN THE DUTCH AND THE PORTUGUESE ATLANTIC ECONOMIES
In the second part of this study we will examine the economic role of Western Africa in the Dutch and the Portuguese Atlantic economies and the Atlantic system in general. To overcome some of the methodological concerns associated with the concept of the ‘Atlantic system,’ we will adopt a three-dimensional perspective. In the analysis of the economic activities of these two empires and in their struggle for the control of the Atlantic economy, three viewpoints will be taken into consideration: first, that of the European states and state-sponsored companies; second, that of European businessmen and settlers; and third, that of officials of the states or companies serving in the different Atlantic posts and settlements.

Based on original evidence, this study contributes to the debates surrounding the ‘Atlantic system’. Firstly, by examining the intra-continental trade in Western Africa, Chapter Five will show how the African coastal and hinterland commercial activities played a key role in the formation of the Atlantic system, and how the access to and the control over supply and consumption markets in Europe, Africa and the Americas were vital for the success or the failure of Europeans in the Atlantic economy.

Secondly, Chapters Six and Seven will illustrate that until the mid-17th century the Atlantic was not divided into various systems or sub-systems. The borders of the Atlantic ‘national clusters’ such as the Dutch Atlantic or the Portuguese Atlantic were defined artificially by the European states and state-sponsored companies. The settlers, entrepreneurs, businessmen and agents operating in the Atlantic system often moved beyond these ‘national clusters.’ The businesses and investments of these men encompassed multiple regions in the Atlantic, namely Western Africa, Brazil, Spanish America (South and Central), the Caribbean and North America, traditionally classified as sub-systems within the Atlantic system.

Since the 1990s, the term ‘system’ has been recurrently used in the field of Atlantic History. The so-called ‘Atlantic system’ has been an important tool on studies of the early modern Atlantic economy. This