CHAPTER FIVE

SAILING IN AFRICAN WATERS: COASTAL AREAS AND HINTERLAND

The areas of Western Africa where the Dutch and Portuguese developed their coastal circuits were more or less the same. Both coastal circuits changed over time in order to reduce time and costs of long-distance trade and thus make them more efficient and competitive. In the Portuguese case, such evolution caused the collapse of some coastal trading circuits, while in the Dutch case the coastal routes were separated from the long-distance circuits.

The organization and the goals of the coastal circuits were different, however. For the Dutch, the coastal routes were mainly regarded as a way to obtain African goods for the international markets. Only after the establishment of the WIC did the coastal trade increased in order to guarantee the supply of the Dutch posts on the African coast. In the Portuguese case, the development was the inverse: the coastal circuits, the waterways and land routes in the Senegambia and the Guinea-Bissau regions, Cape Verde, São Tomé, and Angola were utilised to supply the posts and settlements and promote their development. In addition, they were used to obtain profits from the African coastal trade and to supply the inter-continental circuits.

In the following pages we will examine these differences and emphasize the key role of the intra-continental trade in the success of the Dutch and the Portuguese in the Atlantic system and its impact on their survival in Western Africa.

1. Routes

In order to supply the inter-continental trade circuits and to guarantee the survival of the people based at the Western African posts and settlements, the Dutch and the Portuguese developed various coastal routes along the Western Coast of Africa. These coastal circuits were implemented more or less in the same areas of Western Africa, i.e. Cape Verde, Senegambia, the Gulf of Guinea and West-Central Africa, since the products these areas had to offer were in high demand in
Europe as well as in the Americas. These intra-continental routes were organized differently and changed in order to better achieve their goals throughout the 17th century.

The coastal commercial circuits developed by the merchants from the Republic were not efficiently connected with the inter-continental routes or completely fixed until the early 17th century. The ships freighted in the Dutch home ports to conduct trade between the Republic and Western Africa were the same that carried out the coastal trade in a system of port-to-port commerce. These ships or fleets followed several coastal routes such as: a) the Cape Verde and Senegambia circuits; b) the Gulf of Guinea circuits; and c) the West-Central Africa circuits. Each of these coastal circuits included several routes.

The Cape Verde and Senegambia regions comprised the routes between the island of Gorée, the Petite Côte of Senegal and the Cape Verde islands (see Map 1). For example, a vessel operating in the route Republic–Cape Verde would approach the coast at the latitude of Gorée. From there on the ship would proceed further south, sailing port-to-port along the Petite Côte and stopping at places such as Portudal, Rufisque, and Joal. For instance, the ship Roode Hart, freighted by Elias Trip1 for a trading voyage between Holland and Cape Verde, departed from Dordrecht in November 1605. Once Cape Verde was in sight, the vessel approached the island of Gorée and from this point onwards started to navigate port-to-port in order to trade along the shore with the local people. This vessel conducted trade in Gorée, Portudal, Rufisque and Joal.2

The Gulf of Guinea circuits, on the other hand, encompassed all the routes in the areas between the Grain Coast and Cape Lopez. A commercial trip to the Gold Coast would also approach the continent at the latitude of Cape Verde and there start port-to-port navigation, anchoring at Komenda, Cape Coast, Accra, Allada, Lagos River, Benin, Cameroon, Corisco Bay and Cape Lopez (see Maps 2). For example, Captain Cornelius Hansen, skipper of two vessels in the service of the Amsterdam-based Compagnie van Guinea, departed from Amsterdam in 1603 to ‘Guinea on the Gold Coast’ and began his port-to-port trade in Cape Verde continuing trading along the coast until he reached

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1 All names of merchants quoted throughout the book were made uniform.
2 Fleur, Pieter van den Broecke’s journal, 23–42. See also, for example: GAA, NA 117/22: 1609-09-19; NA 62/217v: 1610-01-14; NA 253/476v: 1612-04-13.