CHAPTER TWO

THE RISE OF GIN

The Fon in Benin used to place forged iron staffs (*asen*) on family shrines as memorials to the dead. One of such staffs, from the important former slave trading port of Ouidah and most likely dating from the second half of the nineteenth century, depicts a figure seated at a table arranged with containers of types that would normally contain imported liquor. The figure probably represents Yovogan, a special minister appointed by the king of Dahomey to oversee foreigners and trading houses in Ouidah. There are numerous references to Western material culture: the central figure is seated on a chair at a table, wearing a top hat and holding a pipe. Behind him is a cross, and next to the table are flags. The containers on the table represent various types of imported drinks. The large vessel in the middle of the table has the shape of a demijohn: a large, small-necked bottle, usually cased in wickerwork. In West Africa, demijohns typically contained rum, even though they were also used for other products such as palm oil. The smaller containers arranged on the table around the demijohn have the characteristic shape of gin bottles, in West Africa called ‘square face’ or ‘four cornered’. The symbols on such *asen* are notoriously difficult to interpret, and it has been remarked that only the maker and the donor who commissioned the memorial staff understand all the references.\(^1\) Nevertheless, the prominent display of imported liquors, including gin, is striking. This *asen* is an elaborate example, but it is not unique: many artefacts originating from nineteenth-century coastal West Africa contained references to gin. Most of these artefacts had ritual functions, while others—such as the Asante gold weight in the shape of a gin bottle illustrated in Figure 2.1—were connected to trade. As such, these artefacts serve as powerful reminders of the importance that West Africans attached to rum and gin by the second half of the

\(^{1}\) *Selected Works from the Collection of the National Museum of African Art*, 1 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian 1999), 63. An image of the *asen* described can be viewed on the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston website: www.mfa.org/collections/search_art.asp (the accession number is: 1992.400).
nineteenth century. They also indicate that imported liquor was only one amongst a range of foreign imports that achieved prominence in West African societies. Finally, the fact that the asen originated in Ouidah, reminds us that imported liquors reached West Africa as part of the transatlantic slave trade, and highlights that to understand the rise of gin, we need to consider the organisation of the trade in which rum and gin became important.

Wine, brandy, and rum have long been part of the trade between Europe and West Africa. When the French trader Jean Barbot visited Accra around 1700, he paid for slaves and gold with brandy, knives, cloths, guns, gunpowder and various beads. He also made payments in brandy to African leaders for the right of anchorage. However, when trading at Cape Coast, he was forced to sell his brandy cheaply, as English trading ships had been selling great quantities of rum and other spirits just before his arrival. During the eighteenth and the first decades of the nineteenth century, distilled liquors formed one of the main categories of goods imported into West Africa, alongside various types of cloth, iron and ironware, crockery, guns and gunpowder. Liquors did not dominate the import trade, but they always constituted a substantial part of the parcel of goods exchanged. Rum was by far the most important liquor while, until the middle of the nineteenth century, gin did not figure prominently. I found no evidence in the sources for Emmanuel Akyeampong’s claim that ‘three centuries of Dutch-dominated liquor trade on the Gold Coast had definitely popularised Dutch gin labels over British labels.’

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