In the previous chapter I described how during the decades around World War I, Dutch gin became the most well known, and most widely consumed distilled liquor in West Africa. I discussed the impact of the war, the ritual requirements of West African traditions, and the changing colonial legislation that specified which types of liquor and what brands could be imported into West African colonies. However, such processes do not explain how individual West African consumers selected their liquor purchases. Did they simply buy whatever was available? That would not correspond with the increase in brand awareness during this period. Also, liquor stores tended to stock various brands of gin, sold against slightly different prices, which would indicate that consumers perceived differences between various gins.\(^1\) In 1933 one Nigerian trader declared that his customers sometimes brought the label along to be certain they got the exact brand they wanted.\(^2\) The people I spoke with in Ghana and Nigeria told me that all imported gins were thought to have ‘a good smiling scent’,\(^3\) but that some were considered more prestigious than others. When I asked Torgbui Baku and his elders how their parents decided which drink to buy, they explained:

In those days, all gin came from Holland but the one which was mostly liked by our great grandfathers was the one which has got the bird at the shoulder level (the one you have brought)—the Royal Stork Gin. When you bring this before any elder, you are respected as a big man. It was the best of all in those days. Another brand was that, on the bottle, there were two stamps; one on the left side and one on the right side. In those days, our great grandfathers only established the difference through taste and the shoulder emblem. No matter where the bird turned to, or what and what not…Our grandfathers, even though they might have been

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\(^1\) PRO CO 96/685/2 Governor Slater to L. S. Amery, 23 January 1929.
\(^2\) Henkes Archive Box 21/3–21/8 Supreme Court of Nigeria Judgment in the trademarks application of J. H. Henkes Distillery, opposed by Netherlands Distilleries, 3 November 1933, evidence by Karimu Kotun.
\(^3\) Interview with Dakpo Akoto, held at Akatsi, 28 July 2000.
illiterate, could identify the brands through the signature that was signed on the paper and stuck to the bottle.\(^4\)

This answer from the Denu elders indicates that brand awareness was a key factor in selecting gin for purchase. It also illustrates some of the features African consumers examined to establish whether they had the correct type of gin. The glass seals, labels, and trademarks they scrutinised, had, of course, been introduced by the manufacturers with this specific purpose in mind. However, this does not necessarily mean that African consumers read these signs as intended by the manufacturers: the comment that the bird on the glass seal could face in different directions indicates that, perhaps, brand recognition was not as precise as the producers had hoped for. This leads to a final element in the answer of the Denu elders: the emphasis on having the knowledge on the basis of which to identify the appropriate, respected brand of gin.

Which, then, were the most respected brands? People I interviewed in Nigeria would name ‘Elephant Gin’, ‘Money Gin’ and ‘Seaman’s Schnapps’ as the most prominent brands of earlier days. In Ghana chiefs and elders remember ‘Bird Gin’ (\textit{abatitwa}), ‘Stork Gin’, ‘Money Gin’ and ‘the one which has a crown on the shoulder of the bottle.’ Some of these terms refer to actual brand names: ‘Elephant’ is a popular brand of the Melchers Distillery, while the Henkes distillery owned the ‘Stork’ brand. ‘Seaman’s Schnapps’ is a brand nowadays distilled in Nigeria. The terms ‘Money Gin’ and ‘Bird Gin’ are much less precise. ‘Bird Gin’ could refer to Henkes’ ‘Stork’ gin, but may also have included a whole range of other gins that were imported at the time and included depictions of birds on labels or on glass seals. Similarly, it seems that ‘Money Gin’ denoted an assortment of brands that showed either coins or prize medals on the label. According to Yaovi Doe, ‘this one, the money was not drawn on the bottle itself, it was rather drawn onto paper and stuck onto it.’\(^5\)

This apparent brand awareness among African consumers contrasts to the lack of formal advertising for Dutch gin brands in West African newspapers and magazines during the 1920s and 1930s. The absence of advertising for gin, compared to the prevalence of advertising for

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\(^4\) Interview with Torgbui Baku and twenty other chiefs, elders and queen mothers, held at Denu, 5 August 2000.

\(^5\) Interview with Sarah A. A. Afetsi and Yaovi Doe, held at Tegbi, 2 August 2000.