CHAPTER 3

Private Businessmen in the Angolan Trade, 1590s–1780s

Insurance, Commerce and Agency

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On 7 August 1782, Christiaan Ketner, master of the Danish ship Anna Bolette, granted power of attorney to Clement Denijs, merchant in Ostende to sign a freight contract with Liebert Baes Derdeyn & Co. also based in Ostende. Ketner was to command the vessel and its crew of 45 to 50 men. The ship was to sail from Amsterdam to Angola, thence to America and finally return to Europe. The ship was to carry slaves and ivory (or elephant tusks) from Africa. The ship’s officers were to be paid according to the number of slaves sold, with the master receiving four guilders per slave, the first pilot and the chief-surgeon each 24 stuivers per slave, the second pilot 10 stuivers, and the third pilot 6 stuivers. To oversee the slaves’ health, two ‘good’ surgeons were to be appointed as part of the crew, and provisions, salt, barrels of water, and medicines were to be carried on board. Like Ketner, in the eighteenth century, ship’s officers together with small- and mid-size firms were often organizers of and participants and agents in the preparation of commercial ventures to Western Africa, and more specifically Angola. This was not, however, always the case. Throughout the early modern period the organization of the Angolan trade (as well as western African trade more generally) underwent changes in the number and profile of the business people involved as well as in the mechanisms used to insure, finance and manage this commerce and its complex links between Europe, Western Africa, and the Americas. The purpose of this essay is to unveil some of the complexities, continuities and changes of the

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1 This article is an extended version of a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of African Studies Association (ASA) held in Washington DC on 17–19 November 2011, in the Panel “Cross-Cultural Exchange on the West Central African Coast, 1600–1850” organized by Mariana P. Candido and Stacey Sommerdyk. I would like to thank all participants in the panel and the discussion for their suggestions. I would also like to thank David Richardson for editing and commenting on earlier versions of this essay.

2 Amsterdam City Archive (former Gemeente Archief van Amsterdam, hereafter cited as SAA), Notarialen Archiven (hereafter cited as Not. Arch.) 16371/463: 1782-08-07.

3 SAA, Not. Arch. 16371/463: 1782-08-07.
insurance, finance and commercial organization underlying Angolan trade during the early modern period.

Although the transatlantic slave trade database has provided us with an impressive collection of data on slave voyages, including details of ship owners and captains, relatively little is still known about private merchants’ involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. This contrasts with other areas of Atlantic commerce in which private businessmen’s activities have been examined. In the last two decades, private entrepreneurship has become an important research area in the field of Atlantic history. Various studies have shown the role played by private business in the making of the early modern Atlantic economy. Initially, private entrepreneurship was typically studied separately from imperial entities but recently scholars have started to look at private enterprise in various branches of Atlantic colonial trade, in the process broadening our understanding of when and how private business operated sometimes simultaneously in different colonial settings. The works of Schnurmann, Studnicki-Gizbert, Ebert, Trivellato, and Antunes are some of the most important contributions.

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4 Some of the materials presented here are also partially integrated into my PhD dissertation, titled “The Dutch and the Portuguese in West Africa: Empire Building and Atlantic System: 1580–1674,” defended at Leiden University in June 2009 (published with the title Dutch and Portuguese in Western Africa: States, Merchants and the Atlantic System, 1580–1674 (Leiden: Brill, 2011; Atlantic World Series, no. 22)).
