Trade Networks in Benguela, 1700–1850

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Benguela was connected to the Atlantic economy from the early seventeenth century. The bay between the Katumbela and Kaporolo Rivers provided a natural harbour that favoured settlement and anchorage of ships. Before the arrival of the Portuguese, inland populations sent caravans into the littoral to acquire dry fish and salt. After the establishment of the colony in 1617, the coastal demand for cattle, zebra skins, and ostrich plumes increased. Some products remained in the town, while cattle, slaves, salt, and nzimbu shells were exported to Luanda. The movement of caravans pushed the colonial state to build fortresses inland during the seventeenth century in the attempt to control the flow of trade. The establishment of Caconda in 1680 and its transfer to a safer location in 1768 demonstrated the Portuguese efforts and failures to enforce land and commercial control. The colonial garrisons in Benguela and Caconda were small and insufficient to enforce domination of local people. Unlike in the Americas, the Portuguese colonial state did not manage to extend its control inland, although traders circulated freely. Strong African states and tropical diseases kept Europeans close to the coast, discouraging their expansionist agendas.

Benguela was originally established as a commercial post, but quickly evolved into an urban centre. Africans who lived nearby relocated into the region around the fortress, drawn there by trade opportunities. New economic activities opened, such as salt mine exploitation, sale of foodstuff, and porterage. The settlement expanded, yet life in town revolved around the Atlantic


slave trade. Portuguese merchants established in the home country or in its colony in the New World, Brazil, stopped in the port of Benguela and bartered imported goods for captives. Traders from other parts of Europe had also been visiting the port since the seventeenth century in search of minerals and slaves.\(^4\)

By the early eighteenth century, traders based in Brazil requested licences to sail directly to Benguela, indicating that it was seen as a profitable slave market. Unlike other regions along the coast of Africa, by the 1700s Portuguese and Brazilian traders started travelling inland and settled in and around Caconda, although the power of the colonial state was limited. The establishment of Caconda did not result in political control of African states but increased the participation of foreign and Luso-African merchants based in Benguela in the internal trade. Due to vassalage treaties signed with African rulers, coastal merchants and their associates could circulate in the interior.\(^5\) They could also live under the protection of African rulers obeying laws and paying tribute in order to trade.

This essay focuses on trade networks in Benguela, including the evolution of the merchant community in Benguela during the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries. Local Africans played vital roles in the actions of foreign traders, helping them to expand their trade inland. Women were also key agents in the establishment of the commerce of human beings along the coast and the interior. This study focuses on the Atlantic trade network that connected Benguela and its population to other parts of the world, and also on the internal routes that linked the littoral and the hinterland. This essay explores the introduction of new consumer practices in the central highlands and the establishment of new commercial elites associated with the international slave trade and the colonial state.

The Evolution of Benguela from and during the Eighteenth Century

During the eighteenth century, the settlement of Benguela and its population expanded directly with the growth of its importance in the Atlantic trade.

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