During the centuries of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, commercial centers developed all along the West African coast at sites where trade routes from the interior were connected to Atlantic trading networks. Some of them had already served as minor entrepôts on the fringes of trans-Saharan trade routes that connected Sub-Saharan Africa with the Maghreb and the Sudan, and grew in importance from the mid-fifteenth century onwards, as navigators from different European countries hugged the coast searching for gold, ivory, and other commodities. Other centers started to develop only in the last quarter of the seventeenth century after the slave trade had gradually become the dominant type of business on the coast. These ‘hubs’ of the slave trade, varying from simple roadsteads to considerable towns, were frequented by merchants from the interior who came to offer enslaved people for sale. Their counterparts, the European buyers of slaves, were either stationed on the coast in forts and factories as resident employees of chartered trading companies or called at a place as visiting captains of slavers. Everywhere along the Guinea coast traders, arriving from the hinterland or from overseas, relied on the services of expert local middlemen or brokers and other professionals, such as guardsmen, porters, sellers of food, water and firewood. Besides, they depended on the skills of practiced canoe men capable of crossing the ‘bar’—the dangerous chain of sandbanks situated parallel to the coast—who brought the slaves on board the ships that anchored at the roads, ferried crew and passengers up and down, and carried out the loading and unloading of all provisions, water and merchandise.¹

¹ The term ‘port’ is somewhat inappropriate for the African context: David Eltis, Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, “Slave-Trading Ports: Towards an Atlantic-Wide Perspective, 1676–1832,” in Robin Law and Silke Strickrodt, eds., Ports of the
Although the search for economic gain was at the root of the alliances between Africans and Europeans in the coastal contact zone, their encounters also produced numerous social customs to facilitate mutual relations. Each side did not necessarily need to have a thorough understanding of the other, but a *modus vivendi* was established that enabled a practical cooperation to the mutual benefit of both parties. This chapter explores these trans-cultural trade encounters that historians have labeled “moral communities.” As I will argue, one can distinguish between four types of communities, every one of them engendered by the specific features of the trade that was conducted.

*Slave Trade (Bights of Benin and Biafra)* (Stirling: Centre of Commonwealth Studies, University of Sterling, 1999), 12–34. Piet Emmer, who suggested me to use the apt term ‘hubs,’ encouraged me to fit some ideas from my ‘micro history’ approach into the wider perspective he favors in his own work. This essay is an attempt to do so.

2 The concept of a contact zone has been introduced by Mary L. Pratt to perceive trans-cultural encounters in an objective way, concentrating on the interaction of peoples from different cultures who happen to intersect at a certain time and place. She borrowed it from the linguistic concept of ‘contact language,’ meaning “an improvised language that develops among speakers of different tongues who need to communicate with each other consistently, usually in the context of trade.” Mary L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), 7–8. For other methodological perspectives on encounters see: Stuart B. Schwartz, ed., *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
