

‘RUBBER FEVER’, COMMERCE AND FRENCH COLONIAL RULE IN UPPER GUINÉE, 1890–1913*

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the trade in wild rubber that emerged in Upper Guinée, in the colony of Guinée Française, at the end of the nineteenth century. Guinée’s rubber boom went through two phases. The first, from the 1880s to 1901, was dominated by local collectors and Muslim traders who directed the trade to the British port of Freetown, Sierra Leone. In the second phase, 1901–13, expatriate merchant houses entered the long-distance trade and, with the help of the colonial state, reoriented the commerce to Conakry, port city and capital of Guinée. The Guinée case offers an alternative perspective to that provided by the better studied rubber markets of Central Africa and South America, and contributes to scholarly debates about export economies, colonial rule and social change. In Guinée, local production and commercial networks maintained significant influence in the market throughout the rubber boom, thwarting colonial efforts to control the trade. The colonial state proved particularly challenged by the practice of rubber adulteration, whereby local collectors and traders corrupted rubber with foreign objects to increase its weight. While the trade exposes the limits of colonial power, rubber also played a largely overlooked role in the social and economic transformations of the period. Evidence suggests that profits from the rubber trade enabled peasants, escaped slaves and former masters to alter their circumstances, accumulate wealth and rebuild homes and communities destroyed during the preceding era of warfare and upheaval.

KEY WORDS: Guinea-Conakry, colonial, agriculture, business – African, slavery abolition.

THE demand for rubber expanded enormously in the second half of the nineteenth century, creating a robust global market for wild rubber. Most historical research on the sources that fed this trade has focused on the two major rubber exporters, Brazil and the Congo Free State, both notable for the volume of their exports and notoriety of their labor practices. Less consideration, however, has been given to other regions from which rubber came. One of the world’s leading rubber exporters was a French colony in West Africa, Guinée Française (now Guinea-Conakry). The ‘rubber boom’ in what became Guinée Française lasted from the 1880s, when the trade first emerged in the region, until the worldwide price crash of 1913, when cheap, high-quality cultivated rubber from plantations in Southeast Asia entered the global marketplace. Guinée Française, or Guinée, offers an alternative

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perspective on the rubber trade. Unlike in Central Africa or Amazonia, Guinée's rubber trade remained mostly in the hands of indigenous production and transportation networks. Guinée thus demonstrates that a particular 'West African' model of collection and commerce supplied rubber to the world market.

Guinée's experience of the rubber boom contributes to historical debates about indigenous trade networks, export economies and colonial rule in West Africa. Guinée's rubber market reinforces the findings of other scholars who have found that African producers and traders took advantage of expanding agricultural export economies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although the rubber boom coincided with the French colonial conquest and occupation, the French did not introduce the rubber trade to the region, nor were they wholly successful in their efforts to redirect and manage it. In Guinée, local initiative, not colonial mandate, was responsible for the growth and dynamism of the rubber market. Indeed, Muslim traders, or *juula*, maintained a prominent role in the rubber market throughout the rubber boom, from the late precolonial through the early colonial period.¹

This article investigates the wild rubber trade in Guinée. It first explores the process of rubber collection generally, and then compares the colony's rubber trade to that of Amazonia and the Congo. It then details the two phases of the rubber trade from the 1880s through 1913 in the interior savannas of the Upper Milo and Niger River Valleys. In the first phase, local commercial networks managed the trade in Haute Guinée, or Upper Guinée, and directed it to the British port of Freetown, Sierra Leone. The second phase started around 1901 when, with the help of the French colonial state, expatriate merchants gained control of the long-distance trade. But the French proved unable to capture and fully discipline the market. Despite colonial policies aimed at regulating the trade, rubber adulteration, a strategy used by rubber collectors to increase the weight of produce at the expense of its purity, remained a persistent feature of Guinée's rubber market. While the rubber trade exposes the limits of French colonial power, this article concludes by showing that the market opened up new economic and social opportunities to the people of Upper Guinée. Evidence suggests that profits from rubber enabled people, in particular slaves, to accumulate wealth, alter their circumstances and rebuild homes and communities that had been destroyed during the preceding era of warfare and upheaval.

RUBBER COLLECTION IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the uses and applications for rubber multiplied, reflecting changes brought about by the industrial revolution. Manufacturers relied on hoses, bumpers and engine parts made with rubber. Burgeoning middle classes in Europe and North America used an array of rubber consumer goods: waterproof clothing, rubber boots,

¹ A note on orthography: the term '*juula*' ('*juulaw*', plural) can be spelled in a variety of ways, including '*dioula*', '*dyula*' and '*djula*'. This article uses the singular form, and relies on the orthography that is used widely in present-day Mali and Guinée. I have, however, retained the French spelling when quoting directly from the archival record.

contraceptive devices, sporting balls and, especially, bicycle tires. The bicycle craze of the 1890s was made possible in part because rubber pneumatic tires replaced solid tires, making bicycle riding more comfortable and popular. Together these products created a boom market for the substance critical to their function: rubber.

In 1900, efforts to cultivate rubber on plantations had not yet proven successful, and the mass production of synthetic rubber lay more than three decades in the future. Manufacturers therefore were forced to rely on natural rubber sources, that is, the trees and vines that grew wild in tropical rainforests and savannas. They also had to rely on the collectors or tappers who gathered and processed rubber latex.

Wild rubber comes from two plant sources, trees and vines. In all parts of the world, rubber collection followed a basic pattern. The first step required finding the rubber plants and tapping the plant to collect the sap, or latex. Depending on the size and age of the trees and vines, numerous incisions would be made to bleed a plant. Buckets or small vessels such as calabashes collected the sap as it dripped. The rubber was then processed, or coagulated. Coagulation stabilized the substance chemically, making it possible to shape the rubber into balls, twists or flakes for transport and sale. Methods of coagulation varied by region. In South America, the latex was usually smoked, whereas in West and Central Africa rubber collectors often heated the latex or mixed it with a combination of acidic fruit juice, salt and water. The coagulation process affected the quality of the rubber produced: quality declined if the final product contained too much moisture or debris.

Rubber brought various regions of the world into a direct and often brutal relationship with global economic forces.² Since the market's beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century, Brazil's exports dominated the trade. Two types of rubber trees grew in the Amazonian River Basin, the Castilla tree and the *Hevea brasiliensis*. The *Hevea* trees produced Pará rubber, which set the industry standard for quality and output. These durable trees could be tapped for years and yield a regular supply of latex. The *Hevea* trees grew in sparsely populated areas in Amazonia on land that typically was not suitable for systematic agricultural production. Rubber tappers tended to lead a solitary existence, living alone in huts among groves of rubber trees and relying on intermediaries for imported services, goods and foodstuffs. Isolated and resource-poor, tappers often accumulated heavy debts and became locked into cycles of rubber collection.³ Amazonia also witnessed other, more

² Turn-of-the-century trade journals, *India Rubber World* and *Le Caoutchouc et le Gutta-Percha*, chronicled rubber trends and prices. Another source that reveals the importance of the rubber trade is A. S. Manders (ed.), *Who's Who in the Rubber World* (London, 1914). For a detailed chronology of rubber and its changing uses through the early twentieth century, see *Annals of Rubber: A Chronological Record of the Important Events in the History of Rubber* (New York, 1936).

³ Bradford L. Barham and Oliver T. Coomes, *Prosperity's Promise: The Amazon Rubber Boom and Distorted Economic Development* (Boulder, 1996), 37–47; Michael Edward Stanfield, *Red Rubber, Bleeding Trees: Violence, Slavery, and Empire in Northwest Amazonia, 1850–1933* (Albuquerque, 1998), 39–62; Barbara Weinstein, *The Amazon Rubber Boom, 1850–1912* (Stanford, 1983), 15–34.

extreme methods of coercion, particularly in Peru. These methods included violent abuse and enslavement.⁴

As European explorers and colonial conquerors discovered in the nineteenth century, rubber also grew wild in Africa, in patches and swaths from Sénégal to Kenya and Madagascar. Unlike Amazonian rubber sources, African rubber plants (the *Funtumia elastica* tree and the *Landolphia* vine) were fragile, prone to depletion and produced latex of an inferior grade to that of Amazonia's towering *Hevea* trees.

Despite its lesser quality, African rubber made a significant contribution to the world rubber market. The first commercial sale of rubber from Africa started 'timidly' around 1855, when samples sent from a Gabonese commercial outpost were sold in Europe. West African rubber first entered the British market in 1864, and rubber from eastern and southern Africa followed in the 1870s. French commercial houses gained a foothold in the market in 1889.⁵ By the end of the nineteenth century, the Congo Free State emerged as the second major rubber exporter after Brazil.

The Congo's engagement with the rubber market reflects that colony's particular imperial experience. The ruler of the Congo, King Leopold II of Belgium, divided the colony into massive tracts, rights over which he granted to a handful of European concession companies.⁶ These companies, in which Leopold retained a significant share, compelled local people to gather rubber by means of force, subjecting local populations to beatings, murder, rape and mass mutilations.⁷ This vicious regime reaped rich rewards for its architects. Rubber exported from the Congo increased almost fifteen fold from 1890 to 1905. By 1900 rubber comprised more than 80 per cent of the Congo's exports.⁸

Since the turn of the century, the rubber trades of the Congo Free State and Amazonia have captured the interest of journalists, activists and historians.⁹ This interest stems from the fact that these two regions not only led

⁴ The violence of the Amazonian rubber boom predominated in northwestern Amazonia, particularly in Peru. Stanfield, *Red Rubber*, 131–204; Weinstein, *Amazon Rubber Boom*, 26.

⁵ William Woodruff, *The Rise of the British Rubber Industry* (Liverpool, 1958), 31; Léon Peyrissac, *Aux ruines des grandes cités Soudanaises: notes et souvenirs de voyage* (Paris, 1910), 181. James Africanus Horton made a passing reference to the presence of rubber in his 1868 book, *West African Countries and Peoples*; idem, *West African Countries and Peoples* (Edinburgh, 1969 [1868]), 134.

⁶ From 1885 until 1908, the Congo Free State existed as the private domain of King Leopold II. In 1908, the Belgian government took over the territory and renamed it the Belgian Congo. On the early rubber trade in the Congo, see Samuel Nelson, *Colonialism in the Congo Basin, 1880–1940* (Athens OH, 1994), 91, 112.

⁷ Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost* (Boston, 1998); E. D. Morel, *Red Rubber: The Story of the Rubber Slave Trade Flourishing on the Congo* (London, 1906); Nelson, *Colonialism in the Congo*, 93. For the violence of rubber exploitation in neighboring French Congo, see Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au temps des grandes compagnies concessionnaires, 1898–1900* (Paris, 1972).

⁸ Nelson, *Colonialism in the Congo*, 95, 98.

⁹ On rubber in the Amazonian River Basin: Barham and Coomes, *Prosperity's Promise*; Stanfield, *Red Rubber*; Weinstein, *Amazon Rubber Boom*; Z. L. Frank, 'The Brazilian rubber boom: price shocks and production in Mato Grosso, 1900–1930', paper presented at the Economic History Association Meeting (Stanford CA, 1999). On the Congo Free

the world in rubber exports, but each also made an appearance on the international scandal stage. The horrific effects of Leopold's Congolese exploits mobilized an international protest movement led by E. D. Morel, a British clerk-turned-activist, and inspired Joseph Conrad's exploration of humanity, *Heart of Darkness*.¹⁰ Likewise, the Putumayo scandal of 1909–13 focused attention on rubber collecting in Peruvian Amazonia, where widely publicized examples of violent compulsion seemed to confirm that rubber collecting was an intrinsically coercive and cruel process.¹¹

Although the Congo and Brazil grabbed the headlines in the first decade of the twentieth century, other parts of Africa contributed more quietly to the turn-of-the century global rubber market. Rubber became an important export from Angola, Gold Coast, Côte d'Ivoire, Sénégal, Madagascar and the French Soudan.¹² In Guinée Française, rubber emerged as the colony's lifeblood. As in the Congo, rubber dominated Guinée's economy at the turn of the century and often made up as much as 80 per cent of the colony's exports.¹³ But, as will be detailed below, Guinée's rubber trade operated very differently from that of the Congo or Amazonia. The Guinée case shows that the wild rubber trade did not invariably spawn institutions of violence, or create burdensome cycles of debt and dependence. Rather, it will be argued here, indigenous collectors and traders maintained significant influence in the rubber trade throughout the boom.¹⁴ In Guinée, people were not forced into gathering rubber, but did so when it was profitable to do so.

State: Lewis Gann and Peter Duignan (eds.), *The Rulers of Belgian Africa, 1884–1914* (Princeton, 1979); Robert Harms, 'The end of red rubber: a reassessment', *Journal of African History*, 16 (1975), 73–88; Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*; Nelson, *Colonialism in the Congo*; Bogumil Jewsiewicki, 'African peasants in the totalitarian colonial society of the Belgian Congo', in Martin Klein (ed.), *Peasants in Africa: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Beverly Hills, 1980), 45–75; Jean Stengers, 'The Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo before 1914', in Lewis Gann and Peter Duignan (eds.), *Colonialism in Africa, 1870–1960* (5 vols.) (Cambridge, 1969–73), 1, 261–92. On rubber in the French Congo: Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo*.

¹⁰ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Mineola NY, 1990 [1902]); Morel, *Red Rubber*. For a narrative of Morel's career, see Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 177–181, 209–24.

¹¹ Roger Casement, who helped E. D. Morel in publicizing the brutality of the Congo, also brought international and official attention to Putumayo. He joined an effort spearheaded by Benjamín Saldána Rocca and Walter Hardenburg. Walter Hardenburg, *The Devil's Paradise: Travels in the Peruvian Amazon Region and an Account of the Atrocities Committed upon the Indians Therein* (London, 1912); Stanfield, *Red Rubber*, 131–49, 205–12; Casement's report is excerpted in Hardenburg, *Devil's Paradise*, 264–338.

¹² Raymond Dumett, 'The rubber trade of the Gold Coast and Asante in the nineteenth century: African innovation and market responsiveness', *Journal of African History*, 12 (1971), 79.

¹³ In 1896, rubber constituted 67 percent of the colony's exports; in 1900 and 1903, 80 percent. Fonds ministériels, inspection et contrôle, Mission Rheinart, 1903–4, Centre d'Archives d'Outre Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France (CAOM) FM/contr//905; Odile Goerg, *Commerce et colonisation en Guinée, 1850–1913* (Paris, 1986), 338–9. For more statistics on Guinée's rubber trade, see *Statistiques du commerce des colonies françaises* (France, 1897–1914).

¹⁴ Dumett makes a similar point about the Ghana rubber trade, where 'the rubber trade came into its own largely as a result of indigenous entrepreneurship and where European influence was peripheral'. Dumett, 'Rubber trade of the Gold Coast', 79.

The role of local productive and commercial networks in the rubber market invites comparison with other agricultural export economies that emerged in Africa in the nineteenth century. Historians have debated the origins and significance of cash crop production in Africa, as well as the impact of colonial rule on African economies. Like the farmers of Sénégal, Nigeria and Ghana who grew peanuts and cocoa for export in the late nineteenth century, Upper Guinée's productive and commercial sectors responded efficiently to external demand.¹⁵ This case therefore counters generalizations that presume that colonial rule leveled indigenous economic systems. Odile Goerg, for example, posits that in Guinée Française, colonial rule brought about the 'destruction of a complex network and the substitution of this old organization with another, dominated by the exterior'. According to Goerg, the French colonial occupation furthermore 'dispossessed the traditional merchants of their roles turning them into nothing more than auxiliaries to European commerce'.¹⁶ But this characterization of the effect of colonial rule does not apply fully to the rubber trade, which prospered through the early colonial period as a result of local initiative and participation. When colonial and expatriate interests were able to leverage themselves into the market, they did so only by making significant infrastructural changes. Even then, foreign interests still had to grapple with robust indigenous networks of production and trade.

While rubber collecting and cash cropping share many similarities, they also differ in important ways. Cash crops require committed, systematic cultivation; rubber tapping, on the other hand, is a more arbitrary enterprise which depends first and foremost upon locating rubber plants that can be tapped. In this regard, rubber collecting presents parallels to the exploitation of another natural resource, gold. Shallow-pit surface mining has been practiced for centuries in West African regions rich in gold deposits, such as Buré or Asante.¹⁷ Like gold, rubber plants were a naturally occurring substance. Rubber collectors did not plant, tend and then harvest rubber vines and trees; rather, they found wild rubber 'deposits' and 'mined' them. Success in both gold mining and rubber collecting depends upon making a 'lucky strike'. Just as a gold vein might run dry, so too rubber plants could be exhausted by overexploitation.¹⁸ In both activities, few barriers hindered access: neither shallow-pit gold mining nor rubber collection required highly specialized skills or expensive equipment. Furthermore, no economies of

¹⁵ Polly Hill, *The Migrant Cocoa-Farmers of Southern Ghana: A Study in Rural Capitalism* (Cambridge, 1963); Jan Hogendorn, *Nigerian Groundnut Exports: Origins and Early Development* (Zaria, 1978); Laurance Marfaing, *L'évolution du commerce au Sénégal, 1820-1930* (Paris, 1991); James Searing, 'God Alone Is King': *Islam and Emancipation in Senegal* (Portsmouth NH, 2002), 195-225.

¹⁶ Odile Goerg, 'La destruction d'un réseau d'échange précolonial: l'exemple de la Guinée', *Journal of African History*, 21 (1980), 467.

¹⁷ Raymond Dumett, *El Dorado in West Africa* (Athens OH, 1998), 51-79; Timothy Garrard, *Gold of Africa* (Geneva, 1989), 110-21.

¹⁸ Overexploitation became a major concern among French colonial officials and agricultural experts and helped to shape colonial environmental policy. Yves Henry, *Le caoutchouc dans l'Afrique occidentale française* (Paris, 1907), 204-8; James Fairhead and Melissa Leach, *Misreading the African Landscape: Society and Ecology in a Forest-Savanna Mosaic* (Cambridge, 1996), 240.

scale operated to prevent individuals and smaller operations from entering the market.

That rubber collecting rewarded mobility and luck and required minimal investment made it particularly attractive to people in transit, in particular slaves leaving their masters. Indeed, the global rubber boom coincided with massive slave exoduses that took place in the Soudan in the first decade of the twentieth century. Many slaves left regions with high concentrations of slaves, such as the Middle Niger River, to return to their original homelands or to establish new domiciles.¹⁹ Richard Roberts and Martin Klein have identified a number of 'push and pull' factors that help explain slave departures.²⁰ These include the French occupation, which made it easier for slaves to 'seek their own liberation', as well as the elimination of new sources of slaves, the threat of famine and the presence of a high percentage of recently enslaved people.²¹ Roberts and Klein also discuss the market forces that contributed to the Banamba slave exodus, in particular the creation of a new grain market in Bamako and the demands of the French colonial state for 'construction crews, porters and railroad workers'.²²

Absent from this discussion of new markets for produce and labor, however, is attention to how the exploding rubber trade, whose boom years coincide precisely with massive slave departures, may have played a role in slavery's decline. Collecting, bartering and selling rubber likely supported at least some escaped slaves as they traveled and resettled. That the rubber market opened up opportunities for social and geographic mobility is suggested by scant but telling archival evidence that indicates that former slaves collected and sold rubber to change the terms and conditions of their lives. For example in Siguirri's Liberty Village, one of the villages set up by the French for escaped slaves seeking emancipation, some inhabitants collected rubber while waiting for their liberty certificates.²³ French officials also expressed concern about 'bandit' rubber collectors. These collectors were escaped slaves or profiteers, or both, who roamed the countryside in search of rubber vines to tap. Officials complained that these bandit collectors were particularly detrimental to the trade, for they bled rubber plants dry, decimating and killing them.²⁴ These instances demonstrate that the rubber

¹⁹ On slaves leaving their masters in Upper Guinée in early 1900s, Archives Nationales de la Guinée (ANG) 2 D 105, 'Rapport politique, cercle de Kankan, no. 346, 1903'; Archives Nationales du Sénégal, Section Afrique Occidentale Française (ANS) 7 G 86, 'Extrait du rapport politique de la Guinée Française', 4^{ème} trimestre, 1909; ANS 2 G 10/19, 'Rapport politique, 2^{ème} trimestre, 1910'; ANS 7 G 64, 'Situation économique, 1913'.

²⁰ Richard Roberts and Martin Klein, 'The Banamba slave exodus of 1905 and the decline of slavery in the Soudan', *Journal of African History*, 21 (1980), 385–6, 390; Martin Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* (Cambridge, 1998), 159–77; Richard Roberts, 'The end of slavery in the French Soudan, 1905–1914', in Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts (eds.), *The End of Slavery in Africa* (Madison, 1988), 282–307. On slavery and its decline in Senegal, Searing, 'God Alone Is King', 184–8.

²¹ Roberts and Klein, 'Banamba', 385–6, 390; Klein, *Slavery*, 159–77.

²² Roberts and Klein, 'Banamba', 385.

²³ Archives Nationales (France), Section Outre-mer (ANSOM) GIN/XIV/1–3, Noirot, 'Lettre de l'extinction de la captivité', directeur des affaires indigènes à m. le gouverneur des colonies, 25 juillet 1904.

²⁴ ANS K 14, 'Renseignement sur la captivité dans le cercle de Beyla', 10 juin 1894.

market should be considered seriously as a force in changing the labor and social relations of the Soudan in the first decade of the twentieth century.

JUULA TRADERS, FREETOWN AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE
RUBBER TRADE

'Rubber fever' went through two phases in the interior savanna region of the Upper Milo and Middle Niger River Valleys, an area that the French identified as the Southern Soudan. In the first phase of the rubber trade, from the 1880s through about 1901, the rubber boom was shaped by the dynamic interaction of local rubber collectors, *juula* traders and the British port city of Freetown, Sierra Leone.

The task of collecting rubber typically fell to young men, or *bilakoro*, who possessed the agility and skill to find and tap rubber vines. These young men may have been slaves, former slaves, or members of independent rural households devoted to agricultural production. After the *bilakoro* spliced and bled the plants, adult men prepared the latex for transport and trade by coagulating the rubber into balls, twist and flakes.²⁵ Male household heads typically oversaw the sale of the rubber to *juula*, or Muslim Maninka traders. When rural household heads made a sale to *juula*, rubber entered a complex system of commerce that had deep roots in West Africa.²⁶ Muslim trade networks linked key towns and different productive regions, facilitating the movement of caravans and goods from the Atlantic coast to the edge of the Sahara. Because pack animals were rare, expensive and prone to deadly disease, goods were transported where possible in canoes, and otherwise by porters and slaves. During the conquest of the Soudan, *juula* impressed French officials with their willingness to travel to and from distant commercial centers. One official noted, '*Dioulas* do not hesitate to traverse the Soudan from south to north to resell at Kayes, Medina, or Nioro ... achieving a considerable benefit despite the expense of transport'.²⁷

Juula did indeed travel great distances, not simply to acquire goods and products, but to go where their earnings could be most advantageously reinvested. Freetown, Sierra Leone, emerged as the preferred destination for *juula* of the Southern Soudan. Founded by British philanthropists and black settlers in 1787, Sierra Leone became an official British colony in 1808. During the nineteenth century Freetown became the terminus of a Soudanese trading circuit in which gold, salt, slaves and kola nuts were traded for arms, cloth and manufactured goods.²⁸ British policies in Sierra

²⁵ Henry, *Le caoutchouc*, 19.

²⁶ On trading diasporas, Jean-Loup Amselle, *Les négociants de la savanne: histoire et organisation sociale des Kooroko (Mali)* (Paris, 1977); Abner Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa* (London, 1969); Philip D. Curtin, *Cross Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge, 1984), 38–59; Allen M. Howard, 'The relevance of spatial analysis for African economic history: the Sierra Leone-Guinea system', *Journal of African History*, 17 (1976), 365–88.

²⁷ ANS 2 G 1/10, 'Compte rendu de la situation commercial, région Senegal et région sud à la fin de l'année 1898'; Archives Nationales de Mali (ANM) Q 38; also, ANS 7 G 45, 'Bulletin commercial et agricole', Kankan, 1 Oct. 1892.

²⁸ Winston McGowan, 'The establishment of long-distance trade between Sierra Leone and its hinterland', *Journal of African History*, 31 (1990), 25–41.

Leone facilitated commerce: taxes and duties were less in Freetown than in French-controlled ports and the trip to Freetown was easier and safer than the journey to other coastal cities.²⁹ As *juula* came to favor Freetown, so their comings and goings helped to turn the city into a bustling, prosperous metropolis.³⁰

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, empire-builder Samori Touré further reinforced links to Freetown. Samori, a former *juula* and member of the Maninka ethnic group, embarked on a series of military campaigns in the late 1860s.³¹ By the 1880s, he had defeated many of the small states and chieftaincies of the Southern Soudan and built a massive empire. The expansion and maintenance of this empire required a well-equipped army; *juula* networks helped to ensure that a regular flow of arms and munitions from Freetown supplied the Samorian state.³² In the dwindling years of his power, Samori sought to profit from rubber by organizing its collection, transport and then its sale in Freetown.³³

While Samori strengthened commercial ties to Freetown, he affected more adversely other sectors of the Southern Soudan's economy. Resisters and rebels to Samori's military machine were typically executed or taken captive, their fields destroyed and their goods and livestock confiscated.³⁴ The prospect of death, destruction and enslavement prompted many people to abandon their villages and leave the region.³⁵ The region's instability and warfare did not end with Samori's retreat. The French armies who followed in pursuit of Samori in the late 1880s and early 1890s were similarly ruinous to the towns and communities through which they passed.

In the aftermath of Samori's campaigns and the French wars of colonial conquest, the growing rubber trade proved especially opportune. As the price per kilo reached 6.5 francs in 1890, people in areas where rubber grew wild entered the market at an unprecedented level.³⁶ Particularly in parts of Wasulu, a region that had suffered repression when it revolted against Samori in the Great Revolt of 1888, profits from the sale of rubber

²⁹ Henry, *Le caoutchouc*, 31–2; André Arcin, *Histoire de la Guinée Française* (Paris, 1911), 661, 663.

³⁰ David Skinner, 'Mande settlement and the development of Islamic institutions in Sierra Leone', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 11 (1978), 32–62; Allen Howard, 'Trade and Islam in Sierra Leone, 18th–20th centuries', in Alusine Jalloh and David Skinner (eds.), *Islam and Trade in Sierra Leone* (Trenton, 1997).

³¹ The definitive study of Samori is Yves Person, *Samori* (3 vols.) (Dakar, 1968–75).

³² Martin Legassick, 'Firearms, horses and Samorian army organization, 1870–1898', *Journal of African History*, 7 (1966), 95–115; Yves Person, 'Samori et la Sierra Leone', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 7 (1967), 5–26.

³³ Edouard Guillaumet, *Projet de mission chez Samori: rapport à m. le ministère des colonies* (Paris, 1895), 12.

³⁴ Kwame Arhin notes that Gold Coast settlements active in the rubber trade helped to create a 'boom in the domestic slave trade with Samory'. Kwame Arhin, 'The Ashanti rubber trade with the Gold Coast in the eighteenth century', *Africa*, 42 (1979), 38.

³⁵ François Manchelle, *Willing Migrants: Soninke Labor Diasporas, 1848–1960* (Athens OH, 1997), 133; Roberts and Klein, 'The Banamba slave exodus', 385.

³⁶ ANG 2 D 105, 'Rapports ... sur la Territoire de la Guinée Française, 1894–1905', 27 mars 1899.

enabled the reconstruction of towns and villages that had been leveled by Samori.³⁷

In selling their rubber, collectors exercised different options in search of the highest return. Many waited for *juula* to pass through their town or village and purchase their supplies.³⁸ Some collectors of the Southern Soudan went directly to the closest commercial trading center, such as Kankan, where they shopped around for the best price. Local chiefs sometimes organized rubber gathering in their villages and then negotiated a price for it in bulk at a nearby trading center.³⁹ Depending upon the resources of their households, sometimes rubber collectors became itinerant long-distance traders and themselves made the trip to Freetown. In the first phase of the rubber boom, the various places where rubber collectors could sell their rubber checked *juula* dominance of the trade.

FRENCH COLONIAL RULE AND THE RUBBER TRADE, 1880S–1901

The emergence of the rubber market coincided with the French colonial conquest of the late 1880s, but the French were peripheral to the trade during the first decade of their occupation. Not that French officials were unaware of rubber and its growing commercial significance. On the contrary, they made frequent reference to the lively trade. They remarked on the abundance of rubber vines in the Soudan, on the willingness of local populations to collect rubber and on the ‘good number’ of inhabitants who traveled to trade in ‘British ports and rivers’.⁴⁰ Soon after the 1891 occupation of Kankan, the principal Maninka trading metropolis in the Southern Soudan, a French military officer noted that the central marketplace hosted a thriving rubber exchange. To his consternation, Freetown was the ultimate destination of the rubber flakes and balls traded in Kankan.⁴¹ Four years later, another French official posted to the region wondered whether this indigenous commerce in rubber could be ‘turned to our profit’.⁴² In the 1890s one of his colleagues remarked that rubber collection witnessed a ‘considerable extension’ in the district of Kankan and elsewhere in the Southern Soudan.⁴³ Another administrator estimated that in 1895, between 36 and 45 tons of rubber were exported from the Soudan to Sierra Leone in the fourth quarter, and that over the whole year 72,000 francs worth of Soudanese rubber was carried to Sierra Leone.⁴⁴ That same year, rubber made up well over half of Freetown’s total exports.⁴⁵

³⁷ ANS 7 G 58, Gauthier, ‘Rapport sur une tournée dans les cantons de Konadogou, Dutoulou, Dinnere le 11 au 26 décembre 1902’.

³⁸ ANS 7 G 58, Gauthier, ‘Rapport’.

³⁹ *Ibid.* Rubber collectors exercised a similar range of selling options in the Gold Coast, Arhin, ‘Ashanti rubber trade’, 37–41.

⁴⁰ ANS 1 D 95, Archinard, ‘Campagne du Soudan, 1888–89’; Etienne Peroz, *Au Soudan Français: souvenirs de guerre et de mission* (Paris, 1889), 448.

⁴¹ ANS 7 G 45, ‘Rapport sur la situation politique et militaire’, cercle de Kankan, 1892.

⁴² ANS 7 G 45, ‘Rapport sur la situation générale du cercle de Kankan’, Kankan, Soudan Français, région sud, 15 octobre 1896.

⁴³ ANM I E 11 13, ‘Rapport politique’, Soudan Français, mai 1899.

⁴⁴ Henry, *Le caoutchouc*, 23.

⁴⁵ £35,997 out of £53,109. *Sierra Leone Annual Report (SLAR) for 1895*, 1895 (170), 10.

A note in a French commercial report demonstrates Freetown's continued significance to the trade routes of the Soudan. In estimating the amount of rubber traded in the marketplaces of Kankan, Siguiri and Kissidougou, a French official followed his totals with a significant caveat: 'Many of these tables [indicate] a great amount of merchandise as coming from Guinée Française or going there, even though in reality, they are coming from or going to Sierra Leone'. As a result, he cautioned, it is difficult to know 'the real destination of ... exported rubber'.⁴⁶ Frustrated by their inability to trace – or benefit from – rubber exports, colonial officials took a number of steps to counteract *juula* mastery and the British orientation of the Soudan's rubber market.⁴⁷

Initially, French administrators tried to direct the trade by discouraging *juula* from going to Sierra Leone. Their British counterparts in Sierra Leone soon noticed the French deterrence campaign. In the spring of 1890 a British administrator reported that a caravan of 300 men from Segu, Buré, Siguiri and Amana arrived in Freetown 'despite persuasion not to'.⁴⁸ One trader, Foday, from Buré, near Siguiri, described the pressure that French officials put on *juula*. According to Foday, the French 'give traders going to Senegal an escort of soldiers', and advised caravans that the 'roads to Senegal were peaceful and those to Sierra Leone were not'. One French official told Foday that his caravan could obtain 'better and cheaper goods' in Senegal. But Foday, like many other *juula*, ignored the French officers' directives and continued on his way to Freetown.⁴⁹

The French also attempted to shift the axis of the rubber trade by favoring expatriate commercial houses and by collecting rubber as tax payments. In 1896, the military required districts in the Southern Soudan to make tax payments in rubber. French officials then tried, unsuccessfully, to auction off that rubber in Kayes, one of the new colonial commercial centers that had sprung up along the Dakar railroad line.⁵⁰ In 1897 the French commercial houses resident in Kayes sent representatives to rubber producing areas throughout French West Africa. They set up two posts in the Southern Soudan, at Dinguiraye and Kouroussa.⁵¹ The same year, a French commercial firm, Maurer, established itself in Kankan.⁵² But neither a short-lived attempt at taxation nor the presence of a few expatriate merchants altered the currents of trade that took rubber to Sierra Leone.

⁴⁶ ANM I Q 39, 'Rapport commercial du Soudan', Soudan Français, rière trimestre, 1899. For a similar remark on the importance of the interior to commerce from the perspective of the British in Sierra Leone, see *SLAR for 1891*, 1891 (64), 20.

⁴⁷ Other West African colonies faced similar cross-border drains: German Togoland attracted rubber traders from the Gold Coast, while the Gold Coast drew rubber from Côte d'Ivoire. Kwame Arhin, *West African Traders in Ghana in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London, 1979), 51–3; Dumett, 'Rubber trade of the Gold Coast', 92–3.

⁴⁸ Sir J. S. Hay to Lord Knutsford, received 23 Apr. 1890, no. 62a, 7581, British Colonial Office (CO) 879–24, 5422. See also *SLAR for 1898*, 1899 (273), 11, 27.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Henry, *Le caoutchouc*, 22.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 29.

⁵² Goerg, *Commerce et colonisation*, 349.

An 1898 French commercial report had promised that whoever could provide a 'means of transport will win a good market'.⁵³ The first phase of the rubber market proves the validity of that observation. In the 1890s, *juula* trade networks provided a means of transportation and they consequently won a 'good market'. To the dismay of French officials, this market took the rubber of the Southern Soudan to Freetown. It would take structural changes – requisitioned labor and the railroad – to break the lock of *juula* networks on the long-distance trade and sever the ties to British Sierra Leone. Even these changes, however, did not completely obliterate the patterns and relationships that shaped the first phase of the rubber trade.

COLONIAL INTERVENTION, 1901–12

In 1900, French West Africa was reorganized and the Southern Soudan was incorporated into Guinée Française. As the most important export, rubber drove French policies in the colony.⁵⁴ In 1896, rubber constituted 67 percent of the colony's exports; in the subsequent decade, rubber made up 75 to 80 percent of Guinée's total exports.⁵⁵ Prices paid per kilo ranged from eight francs in 1904, nine in 1905 to twenty in 1910.⁵⁶ Profits from the trade built the colony's capital, Conakry, and helped to establish that port city as the colony's commercial and administrative center.⁵⁷ Rubber brought about 'a long period of real prosperity' and also made Guinée economically the second most important colony in French Africa.⁵⁸ In the minds of colonial administrators, Guinée's rubber trade also fortified French national interests, for it helped 'to support the struggle against rubber imported from the Americas ... [and the] Belgium Congo'.⁵⁹

To promote the colony's capital, Conakry, and make it a practical destination from all parts of the colony, the French had to rework Guinée's circuits of trade, particularly from those regions with historic ties to Sierra

⁵³ ANS 2 G 1/10, 'Compte rendu de la situation commercial', région Sénégal et région sud à la fin de l'année, 1898. A similar point is made in ANSOM FM/GM/Soudxiii/4, 'Rapports mensuels agricole et commerciale', Soudan 1894.

⁵⁴ The frequency with which issues relating to rubber occur in the *Journal officiel de la Guinée Française* indicates the extent to which rubber dominated the colonial agenda in Guinée. *Journal officiel de la Guinée Française (JOGF)*, 1901–9. For more on the decrees pertaining to rubber commerce in Guinée, see Goerg, *Commerce et colonisation*, 344–7.

⁵⁵ ANSOM, contr 915–17 'Rapport d'inspection sur la situation économique de la Guinée', Sabatier, 29 avril 1904, Mission Rheinart, 1913–14; ANSOM contr 905, Fonds ministériels, inspection et contrôle, Mission Rheinart, 1903–4; Henry, *Le caoutchouc*, 30; Goerg, *Commerce et colonisation*, 339.

⁵⁶ *Statistiques coloniales pour l'année 1905* (Paris, 1907); ANS 7 G 64, 'Rapport de la situation économique, 1913'.

⁵⁷ A contemporary French observer wrote, 'European in construction ... [Conakry] developed with a rapidity similar ... to the birth of American cities'. H. Hamet, 'Mémoires: le Soudan et la Guinée', *Société des ingénieurs civils de la France* (1900), 277–8. For more on Conakry's origins and development, see Odile Goerg, *Pouvoir colonial, municipalités et espaces urbains* (2 vols.) (Paris, 1997), 1, 135–73.

⁵⁸ Inspecteur Rheinart, 'A.S. la situation politique, administrative, économique et financiers de la Guinée, 1913–14', CAOM, contr/917; Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule*, 144.

⁵⁹ Hamet, 'Mémoires: le Soudan et la Guinée', 285.



Map 1. Guinée Française, 1910.

Leone.⁶⁰ Colonial officials adopted two strategies in their efforts to reshape local trading patterns. First, they started building a railroad to link Conakry with interior cities and towns. Construction progressed gradually: the railroad reached Mamou in 1908, Kouroussa in 1910 and did not arrive in Kankan until 1914, after the rubber market had bottomed out.⁶¹ The second strategy benefited expatriate merchants at the expense of local *juula*. Colonial officials passed a decree in 1901 that authorized district administrators to requisition labor for use by European commercial houses.⁶² Providing expatriate merchants with porters to transport rubber to Conakry focused the colony's commercial flows on its capital and principal port city. Requisitioned labor also undercut *juula* networks that had specialized in long-distance transportation. The demands on local populations were significant: the district of Kouroussa provided 2,600 porters in four months in 1903.⁶³ That same year, Kankan's local commander cautioned against demanding more than 2,000 porters from the region.⁶⁴ In 1905, the circle of Kankan provided 2,000 porters and 200 laborers for the railroad.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ In Upper Guinée, even French merchants avoided the trip to Conakry when forced to bear the cost themselves. ANG 2 D 133, 'Rapport agricole', no. 522, cercle de Kankan, 1903, registre, 1902-4.

⁶¹ Jean Suret-Canale, *La République de Guinée* (Paris, 1970), 112.

⁶² Arrête 25 avril 1901, *JOGF*, 5 (1901).

⁶³ ANG 2 D 133, commandant du region Kouroussa, avril 1903, registre, 1902-4.

⁶⁴ ANG 2 D 139, l'adjoit commandant du cercle de Kankan à m. l'administrateur commandant de la haute Guinée, no. 367, cercle de Kankan, 31 mars 1903.

⁶⁵ ANG 2 D 135, 'Rapport politique', cercle de Kankan, avril 1905.

In March 1905, the administration instituted a relay system intended to replace requisitioned labor as the means to transport goods to and from the capital. Discussions took place at the upper echelons of the administration over how to 'provoke' men to 'volunteer' as porters. The debate was largely academic; in practice, the relay system was staffed by forced laborers, a fact that was not lost on the population of Guinée.⁶⁶ Requisitioned labor was extremely unpopular with local people, who were well aware of the interests that it served. One French official explained that 'there exists a vigorous and reciprocal hatred between the native and the [expatriate] merchant of the Soudan'. Local people felt that expatriates treated 'blacks like ... slaves', and that foreign interests sought to exploit the land and people of Guinée until their 'natural richness has disappeared'.⁶⁷

Hostilities to foreign interests manifested themselves in numerous ways. In Kankan, for example, expatriate merchants had difficulty acquiring land on which to set up shop. Local Maninka traders refused to cede space in the marketplace to expatriates, or demanded 'excessive' compensation to do so.⁶⁸ Foreign merchants also had trouble hiring local employees to help build and staff their trading posts. French officials blamed the shortage of day laborers in part on the increasingly lucrative rubber market.⁶⁹ The intransigence of local market forces prompted one French official to observe that 'the *dioulas* seem to have finished with the advantage over the European commerce, whose expenses are enormous'.⁷⁰ Thus even with the significant labor subsidies provided by the colonial state, European merchant houses still struggled to establish themselves and make a profit in Upper Guinée.

Slowly, however, the railroad and forced labor tipped the balance towards the foreign firms. By 1905–6, massive inputs of labor helped expatriate merchant houses gain the dominant stake in the long-distance rubber trade in Upper Guinée.⁷¹ The number of expatriates in Kankan serves as an indicator of the profits that could be made in rubber. By 1909 there were almost forty European and Syrian merchants in Kankan, a year in which almost 10,000 tons of rubber were produced and exported from the districts of Upper Guinée alone.⁷²

While French officials sought to promote Guinée's rubber trade, they also worried about the colony's dependence on a single commodity. The 1908 mini-crash in rubber prices confirmed these fears. This drop demonstrated 'all the dangers of prosperity' built on 'monoculture': many people in Upper Guinée found themselves without foodstuffs or the means to

⁶⁶ ANS 7 G 63, lieutenant-gouverneur de la Guinée Française à m. le gouverneur-général, A.S. du portage, no. 730, 1910.

⁶⁷ ANG 2 D 105, 'Rapport politique', Guinée Française, 4^{ème} trimestre, 1901, rapports généraux sur le territoire de la Guinée Française, 1894–1905.

⁶⁸ ANG 2 D 133, 'Rapport mensuel économique', no. 247, 23 décembre 1902, registre, 1902–4. ⁶⁹ ANG 2 D 134, 'Rapports sur les travaux', cercle de Kankan, 1904.

⁷⁰ ANS 2 D 105, 'Rapport politique', cercle de Kankan, 4^{ème} trimestre, 1901.

⁷¹ ANS 7 G 63, lieutenant-gouverneur de la Guinée Française à m. le gouverneur-général, A.S. du portage, no. 730, 1910. See also Goerg, *Commerce et colonisation*, 384; Goerg, 'La destruction d'un réseau d'échange précolonial'.

⁷² ANS 1 G 276, A. Chevalier, 'Mission agricole et scientifique de 1906, 1910'.

purchase them.⁷³ But when the price of rubber bounced back the following year, Kankan's marketplace thrived once again. The central square was hardly able to contain all the boutiques, commercial houses and sellers that clamored for space. Vendors overflowed into the streets, and French officials consequently developed plans to build a new marketplace for the city.⁷⁴

JUULA INTERMEDIARIES

The shift to European control of the long-distance trade in rubber did not completely eliminate *juula* from the rubber commerce. Expatriates lacked the resources and knowledge to travel to the dispersed communities where rubber grew wild and make purchases on their own. This limitation opened up an opportunity for *juula* traders to become short-distance traders. Exploiting their familiarity with rural regions and peoples, *juula* bridged the gap from countryside to commercial center and acted as intermediaries, a profitable role which they safeguarded carefully.⁷⁵ One French official explained the origins of the system, noting that initially the European community turned to 'certain influential residents of the town [Kankan] ... to bring them clients'. *Juula* families maintained 'a clientele of producers and porters' who brought goods and produce from outlying regions into cities like Kankan.⁷⁶

Juula exerted considerable control over the marketplace, determining both the location and the time of day that rubber could be purchased. According to one colonial administrator, transactions took place 'above all at night'. Buyers went 'from hut to hut, buying rubber'. After making their rounds, they had the rubber 'brought discretely to their [commercial] house'.⁷⁷ Many of the expatriates bristled under this system because it left them vulnerable to poorly made or fraudulently produced rubber; they had little control over the quality of the rubber they acquired. But the expatriates had few alternatives for they proved unable to develop direct relations to rubber collectors.⁷⁸

French officials expressed a range of opinions about the position of *juula* in the rubber trade. Some administrators thought that *juula* hindered the development of a colonial economy. They blamed them for preventing European merchants from cultivating more advantageous relations with 'the producers of the bush' who were 'sometimes timid, even fearful', but attuned to their own interests. Had Europeans developed direct ties to collectors and treated them as clients, 'they would have come into their houses

⁷³ ANG 2 D 139, 'Rapport politique', no. 70, cercle de Kankan, février 1909.

⁷⁴ ANG 2 D 139, 'Rapport politique', no. 59, cercle de Kankan, avril and novembre 1909.

⁷⁵ ANG 2 D 105, 'Rapport politique', cercle de Kankan, 1905.

⁷⁶ P. Humblot, 'Kankan, métropole de la haute Guinée', *Bulletin de l'Afrique française: le comité de l'Afrique française et le comité du Maroc*, 6 (1921), 154.

⁷⁷ ANG 2 D 139, 'Rapport politique', cercle de Kankan, novembre 1909.

⁷⁸ It seems likely that African intermediaries were more influential in the rubber trade than they were in other export-oriented trades, such as peanut production. Because cash crops were systematically cultivated in a fixed location, expatriate merchants were better able to develop direct relations with their cultivators. For the role of African intermediaries in the peanut trade, see Searing, *God Alone Is King*, 215–17.

and by-passed the help of the intermediary, whose intervention is not free'.⁷⁹ But not all Europeans viewed *juula* as detrimental to commerce. One official pointed out that *juula* networks extended expatriate and colonial commercial interests, encouraging 'the taste for transactions' in even the 'smallest village'.⁸⁰ Other French officials credited the rubber market more generally with increasing the circulation of cash throughout the colony. In 1906, one official commented that because of the rubber trade, 'monetary circulation, almost non-existent in the interior of Guinée three years ago, becomes more and more regular and easy'.⁸¹

But the dominance of the expatriate commercial houses in long-distance trade and the control of *juula* traders over local exchanges did not create a trading system impervious to subversion. Individual collectors still exercised some choices when it came to selling their rubber. Ironically, the colonial state itself provided one of the most attractive alternatives. Just as individual rubber collectors had traveled previously to Sierra Leone for the best prices, after 1901 those same collectors could avoid both merchant houses and *juula* by headloading their rubber to the closest train station. As the train tracks were built from Conakry to Kankan, railroad depots emerged as sites of rubber exchange.⁸² But the railroad – which carved out gradually the same route that thousands of men had walked as requisitioned porters – never played quite the role that colonial officials had hoped it would. The first train to run from Conakry to Kankan, its terminus, arrived on 15 August 1914. By this time rubber's heyday had passed, for the price of rubber crashed in 1913.

RUBBER ADULTERATION

The limited capacity of the colonial state to intervene in the rubber market is most starkly illuminated by the practice of rubber adulteration. Because rubber was paid for by weight, collectors and traders sometimes acted on the considerable incentive to increase the weight of rubber by adding other liquids and objects. Sales suffered as a result. European manufacturers sometimes found balls and twists of Guinéen rubber to be of such poor quality or so corrupted with foreign items as to make them unusable. In some years, rubber adulteration caused the price of Guinéen rubber alone to crash on the world market, while the value of rubber from other parts of the world continued to rise.

Collectors used a variety of methods to adulterate rubber. Some combined other types of sap with the rubber while coagulating it. Other techniques included mixing water, pebbles and stones into the latex, to make the balls

⁷⁹ ANG 2 D 105, 'Rapport politique', cercle de Kankan, 1905.

⁸⁰ ANG 2 D 133, 'Rapport commercial du 2ième trimestre', no. 493, cercle de Kankan, 1903; also Chevalier, 'Rapport sur une mission scientifique', 8.

⁸¹ ANS 2 G 6/ 7, 'Rapport d'ensemble', Guinée Française, 1906; ANG 1 D 21, Thoreau-Levaré, 'Monographie du cercle de Kankan', 1908. Dumett makes a similar point about the Gold Coast in Dumett, 'Rubber trade of the Gold Coast', 90–1.

⁸² ANG 1 D 21, Thoreau-Levaré, 'Monographie'; Allen Howard shows how the railroad similarly altered sites of entrepreneurial activity and exchange in Sierra Leone. Howard, 'Trade and Islam in Sierra Leone', in Jalloh and Skinner (eds.), *Islam and Trade*, 30.

and twists heavier. One particularly audacious method consisted of covering small round objects, such as oranges, with a thin layer of rubber and passing them off as solid balls.⁸³

The structure of the rubber trade facilitated widespread adulteration. Expatriate merchants relied on *juula* intermediaries for supplies of rubber, and often had difficulty controlling the quality of the produce brought to them. Moreover, when the prices of rubber were high, expatriates were often more anxious to purchase rubber and move it through the export chain than to verify its content and purity.

As a result of these structures and practices, rubber adulteration occasionally wreaked havoc on the price of Guinéen rubber. In 1901, buyers in Europe found that rubber from Guinée contained more fruit than rubber.⁸⁴ The market responded accordingly, and the value of Guinéen rubber dropped by more than two-thirds in that year. This decline prompted the governor of Guinée Française to develop an official policy aimed at regulating the sale of rubber in the colony. A series of decrees and circulars passed in the colony in 1901 outlined the proper methods to prepare rubber for circulation and sale. In February 1901, a circular warned that the price of rubber in Europe was high, but that 'fraud' had eroded the price of Guinéen rubber.⁸⁵ On 22 May 1901 a decree was passed that limited the amount of impurities that rubber exports could contain.⁸⁶ On 20 February 1903, another decree granted the administration the right to conduct on-sight inspections of rubber bought by local commercial houses, marking the administration's first effort to intervene in the transactions of expatriate merchant firms.⁸⁷

Despite these regulations, the price of Guinéen rubber once again plummeted in 1904 'due uniquely to fraud'.⁸⁸ The price of Congo rubber and South American rubber continued to rise uninterrupted that year.⁸⁹ These price spasms prompted the governor-general in Dakar, Sénégal, to take action by passing a law pertaining to the circulation of rubber in French West Africa on 1 February 1905. This decree strengthened the position of local administrations to regulate the collection and trade of rubber.⁹⁰

Regulation was not the sole approach that the French took to eliminate rubber adulteration. The colonial administration developed programs aimed at improving the quality of rubber production. The rubber boom inspired the first wide-scale effort of the French government to establish *écoles pratiques*, or technical schools, in French West Africa.⁹¹ These schools launched outreach programs to train members of the population in the 'proper'

⁸³ Henry, *Le caoutchouc*, 49, 136–7; in Brazil, rubber adulteration did take place, although it seems not with great frequency or persistence. Weinstein, *Amazon Rubber Boom*, 21 n. 34.

⁸⁴ Henry, *Le caoutchouc*, 136–7; 'Circulaire concernant des mesures à prendre pour empêcher la falsification du caoutchouc', *JOGF*, 2 (1901).

⁸⁵ 'Circulaire concernant des mesures à prendre pour empêcher la falsification du caoutchouc', *JOGF*, 2 (1901).

⁸⁶ Arrête 22 mai, *JOGF*, 7 (1901).

⁸⁷ Goerg, *Commerce et colonisation*, 345.

⁸⁸ Henry, *Le caoutchouc*, 208.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 127, 208.

⁹⁰ Goerg, *Commerce et colonisation*, 345.

⁹¹ 'Ecoles pratiques pour la préparation du caoutchouc', *Revue indigène*, 3 (1906), 68; Suret-Canale, *La République*, 101.

methods of rubber collecting and coagulation. To help ensure future sources of rubber, district commanders were also ordered to develop experimental plots for growing rubber plants. Commanders tried to grow rubber in Labé, Timbo, Dinguiraye, Kouroussa and Kankan. Kankan's rubber plot, for example, measured over a hectare, while that of Faranah had over 10,000 vines.⁹² French officials hoped that such initiatives would systematize rubber collection, militate against adulteration and ensure sustainability of production.⁹³

The crash of 1913 rendered irrelevant French attempts at market education and regulation. But the persistence of rubber adulteration in Guinée reveals that the trade remained tied to local networks of production and commerce. These networks continually challenged the French state's attempts to direct the economic activities of its colonial subjects and control the colony's lucrative but volatile export economy.

RUBBER, SOCIAL MOBILITY AND CHANGE

The rubber market may have confounded expatriate merchants and colonial officials, but it became a valuable resource for people in Upper Guinée. As one official noted, 'rubber became the regulator of the economic life of the country, because it brought wealth [previously] unknown'.⁹⁴ The rubber trade helped people to alter their circumstances and rebuild their lives in the aftermath of war, upheaval and enslavement. While evidence for these changes is more impressionistic than concrete, rubber made a substantial impact on social, material and economic life in Upper Guinée.

A 1910 report by Auguste Chevalier, a French colonial official and agricultural specialist, illuminates the transformative effect of the rubber trade in Upper Guinée. Chevalier explained that during an 1899 voyage through the region, he had 'met natives every day crossing through the bush, slaves fleeing or released *sofas* [soldiers] ... They were going to look for their natal villages to establish themselves there'. On his return voyage in 1910, he noted the change wrought by profits of the rubber trade: 'These same individuals ... today ... have rebuilt their old villages; they have exploited the vines of rubber or kola plants. They have lived for more than ten years in a state of absolute peace and their families are secure'.⁹⁵ While Chevalier's bias to the colonial project is evident, his comments nevertheless show how sales in rubber became a significant factor in the lives of the inhabitants of Upper Guinée.

⁹² Henry, *Le caoutchouc*, 212–15.

⁹³ Other decrees, such as the one passed on 3 Apr. 1908, limited the time of year when rubber could be collected to the dry season. An *arrête* of 24 Apr. 1908 created *écoles pratiques* at Ditinn and Kankan. More anti-fraud legislation was passed on 8 Apr. 1911 and 31 May 1911. For an outline of these decrees aimed at rubber in Guinée, see Goerg, *Commerce et colonisation*, 344–7.

⁹⁴ Arcin, *Histoire*, 665.

⁹⁵ ANS 1 G 276, Chevalier, 'Mission'. In another piece, Chevalier remarked the rarity of a place 'so completely transformed ... in such a short time'. Chevalier, 'Rapport sur une mission scientifique dans l'ouest Africain (1908–1910)', *Nouvelles archives des Missions Scientifiques* (Paris, 1911), 9. See also, Chevalier, *Nouvelles archives des missions scientifiques* (Paris, 1911); Henri Hua and Chevalier, *Les Landolphiées (lianes à caoutchouc): du Sénégal, du Soudan, et de la Guinée française* (Paris, 1901).

Rubber collecting not only helped escaped slaves and people dispossessed and on the social fringes, it also became a useful resource for people at the other end of the socioeconomic scale. At the beginning of the 1900s, rubber enabled some slave masters to sustain the departure of their slaves. As one colonial official observed, in some villages 'masters ... do not work the earth, living exclusively on the commerce of rubber'.⁹⁶ Another official commented that '*la fièvre du caoutchouc*', or 'rubber fever' delayed, but did not resolve, the challenges that slave masters faced after their slaves left.⁹⁷ Some former masters who were 'not used to working the soil' supported themselves by becoming rubber brokers.⁹⁸ For them, the 'crisis' of slave departures occurred not with the initial departure of slaves, but when the price of rubber plummeted in 1913. With the price crash, former slave masters found themselves with neither commercial nor labor resources.

The rubber trade also shaped the economic activities of Upper Guinée more generally, sometimes to a degree that caused French officials considerable anxiety. French officials worried that in some parts of Upper Guinée people 'neglected their fields' to concentrate on gathering rubber. When rubber prices reached twenty francs per kilo in 1910, one official observed that people abandoned other economic activities and devoted themselves to rubber collecting 'almost exclusively'.⁹⁹ As early as 1905, local *juula* passing through rural areas of Upper Guinée traded rice for rubber, and in 1907 the district of Kankan imported rice and millet from neighboring districts.¹⁰⁰ In 1911, one administrator lamented the fact that in Kankan, long the 'rice granary of the Soudan', people now avoided rice cultivation because the rubber commerce 'lets them live in agreeable and easy comfort' without working in the fields.¹⁰¹

The ascendance of high-quality plantation rubber from Southeast Asia led to the collapse of the rubber market in Upper Guinée and elsewhere in West Africa in 1913, closing an important chapter in Guinée's history.¹⁰² Unlike rubber from the Americas and Africa, rubber from Southeast Asia was cultivated on plantations, not collected from rubber plants or trees that grew wild. But the arrival of plantation rubber on the international market simply accelerated the demise of a form of production already in decline. Overtapping throughout West Africa had severely depleted rubber plants and meant that there were few untouched sources left to tap.¹⁰³

⁹⁶ ANS 2 G 5/12, 'Rapport d'ensemble annuel', service d'agriculture, Guinée Française; ANS K 25, Deherme, 'Etude de l'esclavage', 1906.

⁹⁷ ANS 7 G 64, 'Rapport du lieutenant-gouverneur à m. le gouverneur-générale, A.S. de la situation économique', Guinée Française, 1913.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Gauthier, 'Rapport'.

¹⁰⁰ ANG 1 D 21, Thoreau-Levaré, 'Monographie'. Also, ANG 2 G 5/12, 'Rapport d'ensemble', service d'agriculture, 1905.

¹⁰¹ ANSOM, FM contr 912, Mission Pherivong, 1910-11; Jean Suret-Canale, *French Colonialism in Tropical Africa, 1900-1945*, trans. Till Gottheiner (New York, 1971), 45.

¹⁰² In Guinée Française the price paid for rubber plummeted from 9 francs to 3 francs per kilo from January to September 1913. ANS 2 D 3-1, 'Situation économique de la Guinée, 1914'; ANSOM FM contr 916, William Ponty, 'Rapport à monsieur le ministre des colonies sur les effets de la crise du caoutchouc en AOF', ND, Mission Rheinhart, 1913-14; Suret-Canale, *La République*, 102. ¹⁰³ Suret-Canale, *French Colonialism*, 45.

The immediate consequences of the rubber crash in Upper Guinée were severe: with food scarce and imported grains expensive, famine threatened. But local systems of production and commerce once again proved their resilience. Throughout the rubber boom, local traders and producers had not wholly abandoned other commercial activities. *Juula* networks continued to move products less integrated to the global economy, such as kola and karité butter. While the rubber trade dominated Guinée's Atlantic exports from the 1890s to 1912, the kola trade remained a central feature of Guinée's commercial landscape, never ceasing to prosper through the frenzy of rubber fever.¹⁰⁴ The permanence of the kola trade demonstrates that local producers and commercial networks continued to trade in products with local market appeal.

CONCLUSION

In his study of gold mining in the Gold Coast, Raymond Dumett interviewed a local miner about shallow pit gold mining. Kwame Yeamoah remarked that 'Gold is a gift from God'.¹⁰⁵ At the turn of the century, when rubber reached as high as twenty francs per kilo, the people of the Milo and Upper Niger River Valleys may have felt similarly about rubber.

The era of the rubber boom opens a window into the early colonial period in Upper Guinée. Rubber collection and trade involved a significant proportion of the population and it brought marked prosperity to an area just emerging from a long period of warfare. It also engaged people with the international economy to an unprecedented degree and scale. Although short-lived, the rubber boom was an important episode in Guinée's history. The rubber boom demonstrates that production and commercial networks located far from the coast responded efficiently and largely on their own terms to the demand for rubber. After 1901, French policies succeeded in reorienting the trade towards Conakry and delivered a blow to *juula* networks. But this change nevertheless failed to unseat indigenous interests in the rubber trade. *Juula* retooled their trade routes, relying on their knowledge and contacts to become short-distance traders. At the same time, the profits that could be earned from rubber continued to draw rural populations into the market. People used profits from the trade to support themselves and change the material and social circumstances of their lives. That a rubber collector from a small village in Upper Guinée could always exercise the option of hoisting the rubber he collected on his head and trekking to Freetown, Conakry or the closest train stop in search of a better price serves as a quiet but significant reminder of the limits of the power exercised by the *juula* networks, the expatriate merchant community and the colonial state.

The Guinée rubber trade also offers an important counterweight to other regions that exported rubber at the turn of the century, such as the Congo

¹⁰⁴ Hugues le Roux, *Guinée Française: mission Hugues le Roux* (Paris: Ministère des affaires étrangères), 49; ANG 2 D 133, 'Rapport commercial du 2ième trimestre', no. 493, cercle de Kankan, 1903. It seems that the Sierra Leone–Guinée connection continued to thrive in the kola trade through the early colonial period. *SLAR for 1910*, 1910, 51–2.

¹⁰⁵ Dumett, *El Dorado*, 78.

and Amazonia. Guinée's rubber market shows that the global rubber 'boom' did not inevitably produce violent and coercive labor regimes, cycles of debt dependence or rigid hierarchies of exploitation. Like West African growers of cash crops, the rubber collectors and traders of the Southern Soudan responded largely on their own terms to external demand. Unlike cash crop production, which necessitated a rooted commitment to a particular plot or area of cultivation, rubber collecting rewarded mobility and travel. The structure and effect of the rubber trade in Guinée therefore demonstrates that 'rubber fever' deserves serious and renewed consideration as a force in the social, economic and political transformations that took place in West Africa at the turn of the century.