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Households, hometowns and migrations in the colonial era: the circulation of child labour in the Gold Coast

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I. Scale

Today I would like to discuss the history of child labour in the Gold Coast in the 19th and 20th centuries – that is the colonial period in modern-day Ghana. The key question I want to address here is: on what geographic scale should children – and in particular child labour – be studied? Let me start with two images (Figure 1) that encapsulate western – and, increasingly, modern non-western – views of the scale of ‘African’ childhood. The first is a marketing campaign for a South African charity. The second is perhaps the most iconic image of African childhood, a child being carried on its mother’s back. This particular image dates from around 1900 but the iconography is so pervasive that it could really be from any period, anywhere in the continent. What do these images tell us about African childhood? They tell us that the African child is static, helpless, bounded to the local, reliant on the generosity and mobility of others. They tell us also that the African child is insular, vulnerable, tied – in physical and social terms – to the family, the household and perhaps to the village. These ideas are not new: they have been encoded in missionary appeals and colonial policies since the 19th century.¹

But these ideas are, nonetheless, quite wrong. As I’ve carried out my research it has become in-

Figure 1. *Campaign for Feed SA, TBWA\Hunt\Lascaris, Johannesburg, 2008; Weib mit Fetischkind auf dem Rücken, Friedrich Ramseyer, Basel Mission Picture Archive, c.1888-1908.*



¹ Phyllis M. Martin, “Life and Death, Power and Vulnerability: Everyday Contradictions at the Loango Mission, 1883-1904,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2002): 61-78; Megan Vaughan, *Curing Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 63.



Figure 2. Thomas Ernest Kyei (1908-1999), who grew up in the town of Agogo in Ashanti Region. (Gold Coast maps adapted from Roger Gocking, *The History of Ghana* (London: Greenwood Press, 2005), 3, 39.)

creasingly clear that the history of childhood can only be understood on a larger scale: that is, children are part of regional histories. Moreover, children do not have a purely passive or stationary relationship with these regions – they are historical actors within regions and in some cases active in their creation.

Scale in an individual childhood: T. E. Kyei (1908-1999)

How then is this enlargement of scale manifested in historical study? I want to first look at the life and family history of one man whose autobiographical account of his early childhood demonstrates nicely how we can go from the image of a child tied to its mother’s back to the child as a regional actor – and do so through the gradual enlargement of the scale of study.² Thomas Ernest Kyei (Figure 2) was born in 1908 and lived in a small town/village in the Ashanti Region of the Gold Coast: so his birth came shortly after the imposition of British rule and at the beginning of the cocoa boom that made the Gold Coast the world’s largest cocoa exporter by 1911.³

What is striking is that the scale on which childhoods need to be understood generally gets larger as children get older and take on new labour roles. So infancy was in fact a very dependent and static period of childhood, spent – to quote Kyei’s autobiography – ‘puking

² T. E. Kyei, *Our Days Dwindle: Memories of My Childhood Days in Ashanti* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001).

³ Roger J. Southall, “Farmers, Traders and Brokers in the Gold Coast Cocoa Economy,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 12, no. 2 (1978): 183.

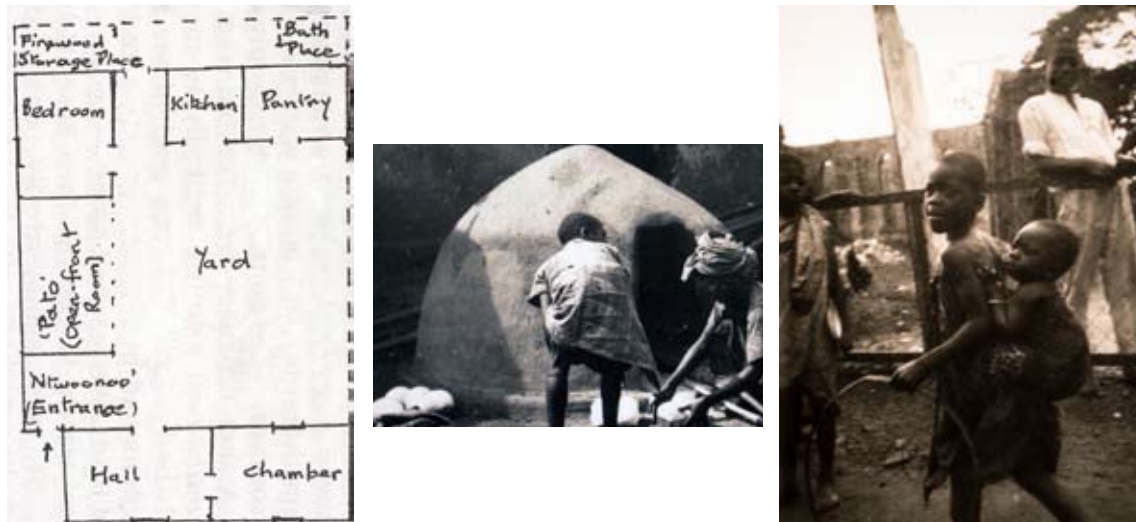


Figure 3. Plan of T. E. Kyei's house (from Kyei, *Our Days Dwindle*, 8); *Backofen Agogo*, Basel Mission Picture Archive, c.1925-35; *Negerkinder – Jubiläum Akropong*, Basel Mission Picture Archive, 1928.

and mewling in the nurse's arms'.⁴ Here, if children moved through regions, it was with – and not away from – adults. But the end of infancy – marked by weaning and learning to walk – was a crucial transition in a child's life. And it requires our first expansion of analytical scale, as children moved out of the immediate orbit of their parent or carer and into the household.

The household was the locus of child labour (Figure 3). From a very young age, children were expected to help with household chores like cooking, cleaning and carrying. Intra-sibling care was extremely important.⁵ Kyei, for example, was tasked with keeping the flies away from his infant brother while his mother went to build a farm – so already we can see how the use of child labour in a very local sense was integral to the creation of much wider economic spaces, in this case the village-agricultural complex.⁶

Indeed, the next expansion of analytical scale comes from those forms of child labour that centred on the household but inserted children into larger economic spaces, primarily the village or town (Figure 4). This meant tasks like collecting water from communal facilities or petty commerce. Street trading was in fact the most visible form of

⁴ Kyei, *Our Days Dwindle*, 64.

⁵ Of the many sources on domestic child labour in addition to Kyei's autobiography, see for example Barrington Kaye, *Bringing up Children in Ghana: An Impressionistic Survey* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1962), 194-99.

⁶ Kyei, *Our Days Dwindle*, 1.

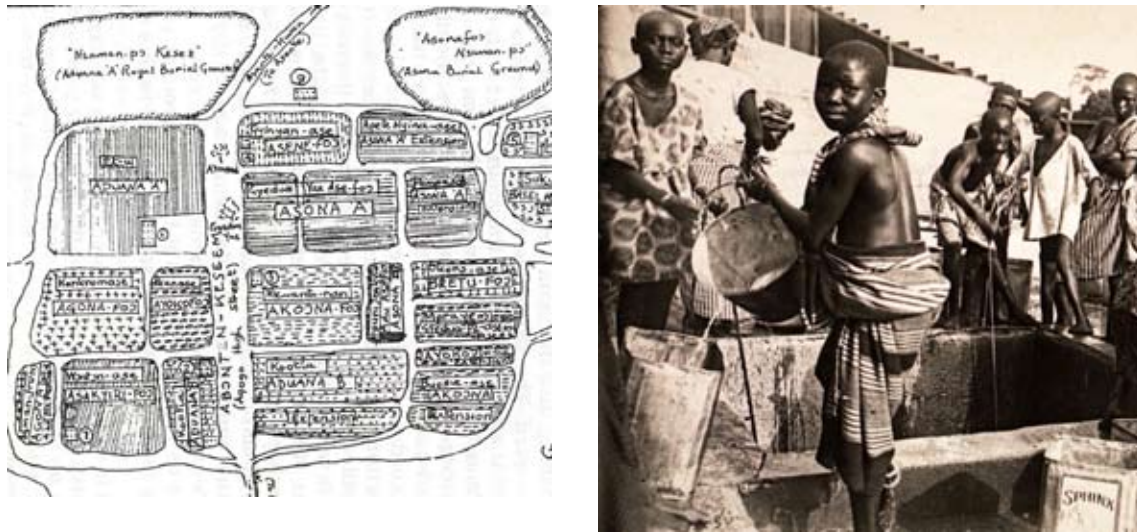


Figure 4. Plan of Agogo (from Kyei, *Our Days Dwindle*, 9); *Kinder am Wasserplatz i. Kumase*, Basel Mission Picture Archive, c.1925-1931.

child labour and it was important even for the children of ‘subsistence’ farmers.⁷ Kyei’s grandmother, for example, sent him into the village with vegetables to barter for salt.⁸

But perhaps the most important aspect of household-centred child labour is that the household was not singular, permanent or always kin-based. Polygamy and complex kin networks created dispersed, multi-nodal households: so when Kyei undertook chores for his father he was moving between separate buildings occupied by his mother, his father and his father’s other wife (Figure 5).⁹ But these meta-households existed on a much larger scale than simply the village – and the circulation of children between their various nodes was crucial in binding them together.

Child labour was integral to the viability of the meta-household as an economic unit primarily because it was flexible and interstitial. And by that I mean that children were used to fill temporary or permanent gaps in household labour power caused, for example, by death or illness – and their care was often out-sourced if those kinds of incidents made parental care impossible. Or child labour might be moved around to meet the immediate financial needs of a household,

⁷ Its visibility also made it the most obvious form of child labour to decry. On this process in Lagos, Nigeria, for example, see Saheed Aderinto, “‘The Girls in Moral Danger’: Child Prostitution and Sexuality in Colonial Lagos, Nigeria, 1930s to 1950,” *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 1, no. 2 (2007), <http://www.scientificjournals.org/journals2007/articles/1246.pdf>; L. Fourchard, “Lagos and the invention of juvenile delinquency in Nigeria,” *Journal of African History* 47, no. 1 (2006): 115-137.

⁸ Kyei, *Our Days Dwindle*, 25.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

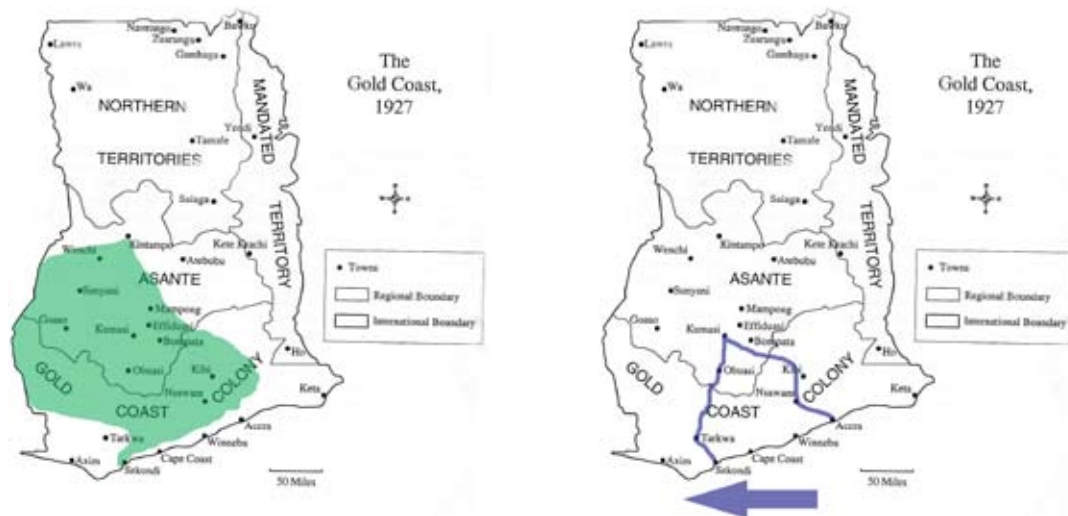


Figure 6. The forest ecological zone and export transit routes in the Gold Coast.

mercial one. Portage connected the cocoa region to the narrow arteries of mechanised transport that took goods to the coast for export. And this opens up a new region: that of Atlantic commerce. Kyei, for example, helped his grandmother transport her cocoa crop to Asokore, where he gained an idea of the topology of trading routes – railways and shipping – that linked Ashanti to global markets (Figure 6).¹² Kyei also overheard in Asokore that ‘all the good things in the shops...came from the place Aburokyire, the country of the “White-man”’.¹³ And so this was an Atlantic region defined by the flow of commodities – but Kyei’s experience involved both the commercial and cognitive creation of a region, and of the place of the colony within it.

II. Colonialism(s) and regions

I want to turn now to look at the impact of the colonial coastal presence and eventual colonial rule on the construction of regions and the articulation of child labour to those regions.

Apprenticeships, factories, colonies

The first aspect I want to look at is 19th century patterns of how and where child labour was used – particularly in relationship to apprenticeships on the Gold Coast. In the 1950s most apprentices began learning their trade between 10 and 12 years old – and, from limited

¹² Kyei, *Our Days Dwindle*, 28-9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29

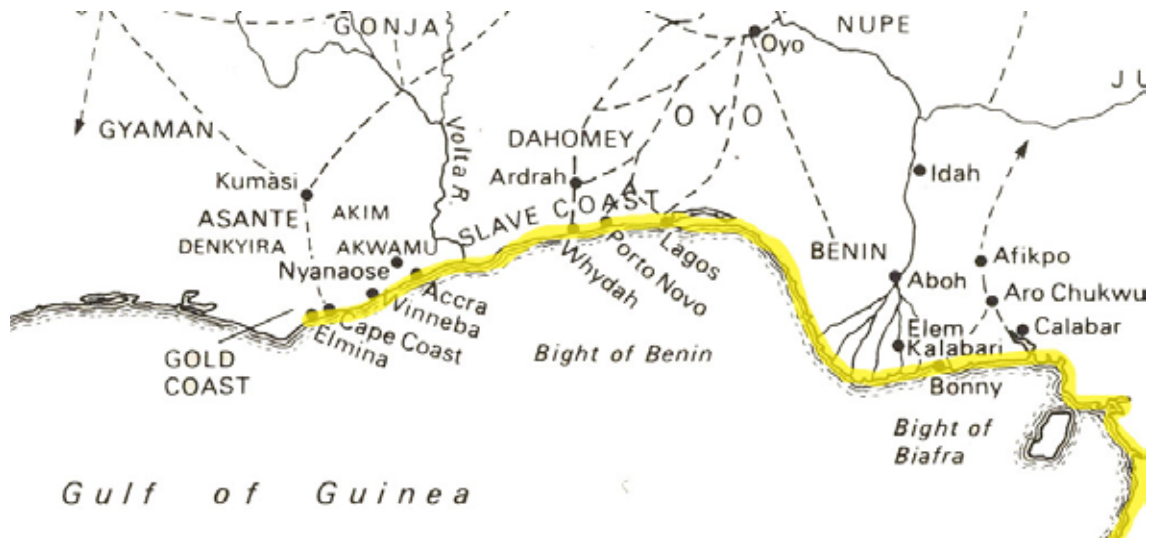


Figure 7. Labour market for apprentices in 19th century West Africa. (Adapted from Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*, 96.)

evidence, that seems to have been the case in the preceding century as well. But in the 19th century the institution of apprenticeship in coastal areas changed significantly. This was related to the reconfiguration of West Africa as a region under the influence of colonialism and trade.

These changes were confined to the coast, where European powers had long established factories (Figure 7). Europeans had little territorial control beyond the walls of their forts but the factories themselves were important and influential trading posts, dealing first in slaves and then in increasingly valuable quantities of so-called ‘legitimate’ products: palm oil, groundnuts, rubber and so on. These factories created a demand for craftsmen in new or previously marginal trades: coopers, masons and bricklayers for example.¹⁴ This growth of demand and opportunity led to an improvement in the conditions and rewards of apprenticeship, previously likened to ‘perpetual servitude’.¹⁵ It also meant that boys were less compelled to follow their fathers into a particular trade.¹⁶

Finally – and most relevantly for a discussion of regions – this phenomenon also caused a dramatic increase in the immediate and future mobility of apprentices. Transport technology and trading routes inserted apprentices into a labour market that spanned the European coastal presence

¹⁴ A. B. Quartey-Papafio, “Apprenticeship amongst the Gas,” *Journal of the Royal African Society* 13, no. 52 (July 1914): 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁶ Inheriting a trade was ‘traditionally’ the case, see Ioné Acquah, *Accra Survey: A Social Survey of the Capital of Ghana, 1953-1956* (London: London University Press, 1958), 74

eastwards as far as Congo. And in fact making trips to work in other European factories in Cameroon, Congo and particularly Nigeria became an important part of apprenticeship in the Gold Coast and a way of fulfilling – and ending – the obligations of an apprentice to his master.¹⁷ So here we have an aspect of child labour that can only be understood on a regional scale – but it is a very strange kind of region, stretching the length of the West African coastline but hardly penetrating the interior.

And in fact the dynamics of child labour for this very small group of apprentices in the coastal strip were dependent upon – but very different from – the dynamics of the West African interior. Because here the ‘legitimate’ products driving coastal commerce were increasingly being produced by slaves redirected from closed trans-Atlantic routes to the domestic market. So child labour was circulating through this region, but it was a very different kind of mobility because many children were moving along slave routes and as slaves. Figure 8, for example, shows a slave caravan liberated in Asante, around half of these slaves were children, many of those very young.¹⁸

Indeed, it was not until the late 19th and early 20th century that apprentices in the interior began to experience a similar mobility to their coastal counterparts due to a combination of colonial

Figure 8. Internal/external slave trading routes; *Coumassé 1896. Caravane de pauvres esclaves qui nous furent remis par le gouvernement*, Friedrich Ramseyer, Basel Mission Picture Archive, 1896.



¹⁷ Quartey-Papafio, “Apprenticeship amongst the Gas,” 20-22

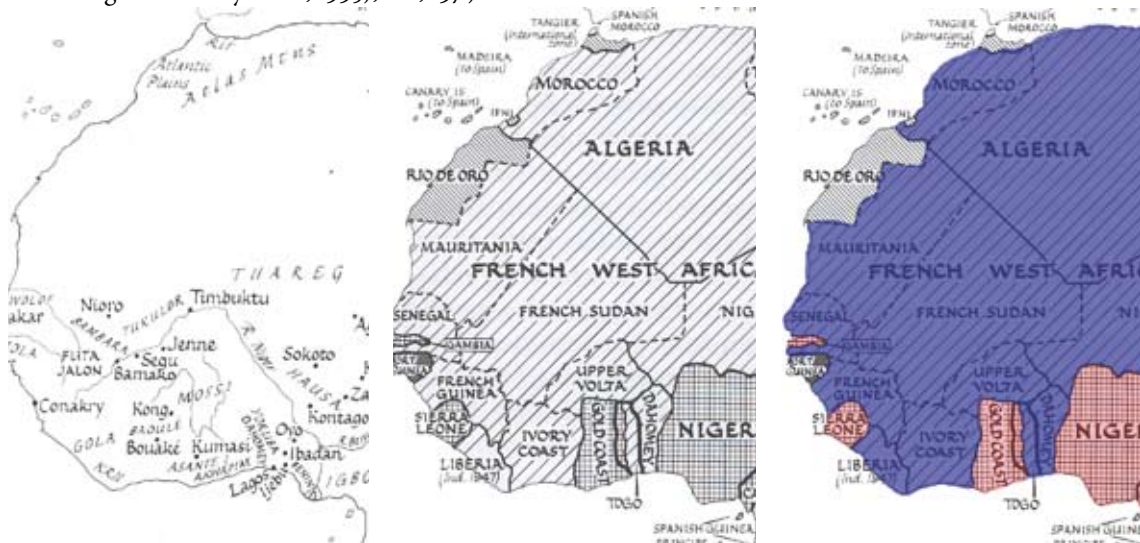
¹⁸ Children were probably under-represented in the slave population exported across the Atlantic - but demand for children was higher in both the domestic and trans-Saharan slave trades. On the age profile of slaves and the use of slaves in 19th century ‘legitimate’ commerce, see Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 60-63, 159-183

rule, the abolition of domestic slavery, urbanisation and economic specialization. But the creation of colonial states also changed the nature of that mobility: it became much more about moving from a village to a town or between towns within a particular colonial territory than about moving between colonial outposts along the Atlantic littoral. So the lesson here is simply that regions are not fixed: they can be changed by shifts in technology, commerce or the relations of production.

Imperial boundaries and regions

Finally, I want to look at the period of formal colonial rule over 20th century West Africa. This is perhaps the most obvious example of the political construction of regions: first, by the formalisation of the often arbitrary boundaries of colonial states and, second, by the splitting of West Africa after World War One into two distinct imperial and linguistic zones, English and French (Figure 9). The importance of these delineations is well-documented and undeniable, particularly for the meta-narratives of colonial and post-colonial West African history. But at the level of the individual and of the everyday, the analytical division of West Africa into discrete regions breaks down. This is true even for children, whose physical and social vulnerability was counter-balanced somewhat because they could bypass certain de facto restrictions on mobility precisely because they were considered too young to be colonial subjects.

Figure 9. Three ‘West Africas’. (Adapted from John Iliffe, *Africans: the History of a Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 188, 197.)



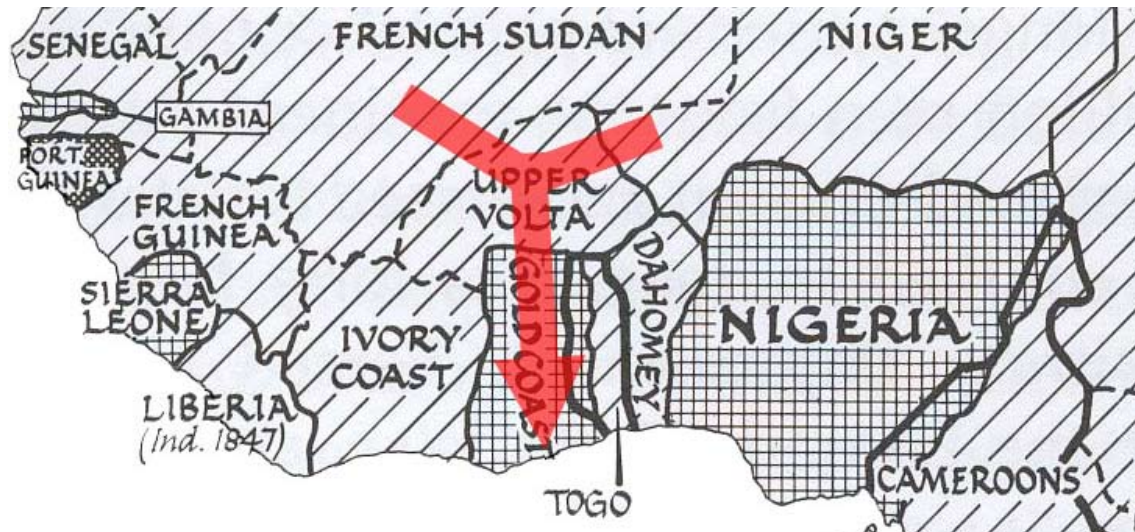


Figure 10. Migrations to the Gold Coast.

As part of my research I have been looking at juvenile criminal records from the 1950s. And it is clear from those that we cannot just consider children within a particular colonial boundary or imperial sphere: their lives crossed between regions and were influenced by the distinct historical dynamics of those regions. There are lots of trivial examples of these processes at work in the daily lives of children in the Gold Coast. So things like children being used to smuggle goods across colonial borders, children who stayed behind in the Gold Coast when their migrant parents returned to Nigeria or Togo and children who came from French territories to get an English-language education in addition to, or instead of, a French language education.¹⁹

But probably the most dramatic manifestation of the permeability of imperial regions was the phenomenon of seasonal migration to the Gold Coast by inhabitants of French colonies in the northern Savannah in order to raise money to pay for French colonial taxes (Figure 10).²⁰ Children were part of this migratory pattern as dependents of adult households but also sent as individuals, migrating, living and working independently in Accra to raise tax money on behalf of their families. This was not a luxurious life but by living in cramped, unhygienic accommodation and eating cheap, starchy foods, migrant children were able not just to survive but to save money to pay taxes on their return home.²¹

¹⁹ For details, see Lord, "Child Labour in the Gold Coast."

²⁰ Documented most famously in Jean Rouch, "Migrations au Ghana," *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 26 (1956): 33-196; Jean Rouch, dir., *Jaguar*, 1967.

²¹ Lord, "Child Labour in the Gold Coast," 31-6

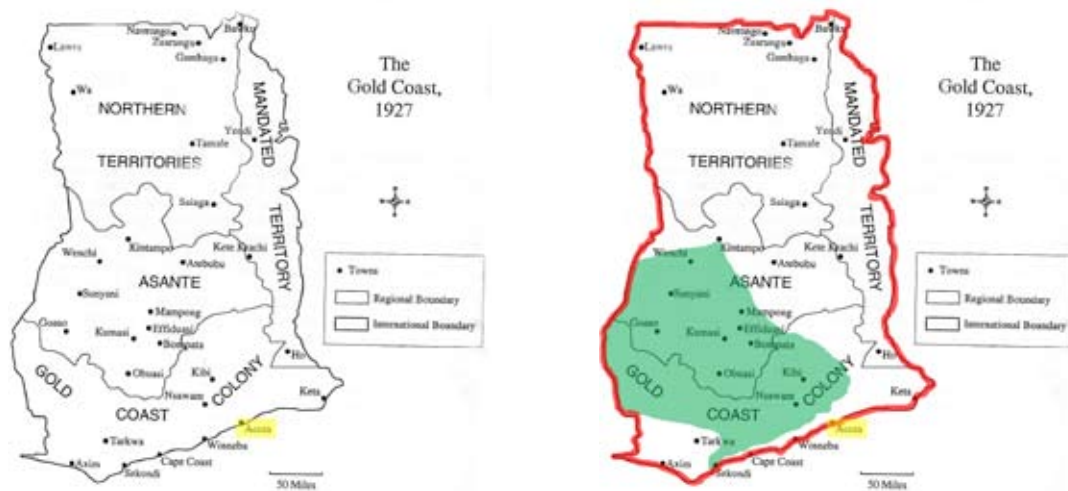


Figure 11. Accra and its regions.

So what does this migration tell us about the ‘region’ as an analytical tool? In this case the most suitable region is again West Africa, but it makes sense only as an aggregation of smaller regions, multiply defined and overlapping. So we have a migratory pattern initially motivated by differing tax regimes across imperial regions. The originating region for this migration was largely rural, had a limited labour market and was sparsely monetized. The destination regions – particularly Accra - were urban, highly monetized and had a large market for seasonal and casual waged labour (Figure 11). But the economic dynamism and wealth of Accra itself stemmed from being the political focal point of a particular colony and from the agricultural wealth of the cocoa belt, which Accra was linked to but not a part of.

Conclusion

So, to sum up, the ‘region’ has to be considered as a historical construct. It is enormously valuable as an analytical tool, providing access to a broad and comparative viewpoint that in-depth research often lacks. But the ‘region’ is never constant: academics always need to be aware that the obvious delineations of regions – ecology, commerce, geography and politics - are made obvious only by certain historical conjunctures. And, as such, the historical dynamics of West Africa- and, I would suggest, elsewhere – are only comprehensible if we incorporate a temporal analysis of the creation, destruction and reconfiguration of regions.