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Collusion, Collaboration/Cooperation and Conflict: How Indigenous Gold Coast

Merchants Shaped State Formation in the Gold Coast, 1850-1950

Abstract

In this paper, I argue that indigenous actors helped shape the formation of the colonial state in the Gold Coast. This argument challenges theories based on notions of 'colonial legacy' that, by overemphasising the imported nature of the state in Africa and other former colonies, ascribe complete autonomy to the colonisers in the process of state formation. I propose instead that the strategies of resistance and cooperation which indigenous actors adopted towards colonisers allowed them to influence colonial government policies and their implementation, and in so doing, shape the formation of the incipient state. This research focuses on indigenous merchants from the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries and the coalitions they developed to resist colonial policy. The tensions and internal contradictions inherent in the omnibus alliances they forged enabled certain courses of action while precluding others. The strategies these merchants adopted were in no way restricted to the 'weapons of the weak.' This paper outlines a few of these courses of action – an eclectic mixture of grassroots mobilising, subtle subversion and elitist mediums of newspaper- and petition-writing – and focuses attention on the nature of their activism carried out via the newspapers and petition.

Introduction

This study examines the role that the elite indigenous[1] West African merchants played in

state formation in West Africa. I will focus specifically on the commercial, political and social-

organising activities of indigenous merchants in the British colony of the Gold Coast and the

diverse alliances they formed in the course of their business and political endeavours. This elite

merchant class, also known as the merchant princes, arose from the first set of Christianised and

Western-educated indigenes and for decades were the only intermediaries between Western

representatives along the coast (missionaries, traders and colonial administrators) and their own

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[1] [1] The term indigenous is one that I'm still struggling with, but which I'm constrained to use for want of a better word till I find a fitting replacement. Like the term 'traditional,' it comes with loaded but unspoken normative assumptions that evaluates the people designated thus against standards of Western progress or civilization.

societies. Previous studies that have examined state formation in West Africa have focused heavily on the roles of colonial officials and other explicitly political actors, thus neglecting to account for the significant roles that other indigenous actors played in this process. I would argue, instead, that to get a better grasp of the process by which the state in the Gold Coast was formed, it is necessary to look at this other set of actors and the diverse coalitions that they formed, the tensions inherent in these alliances and how they shifted over time in response to changing circumstances.

The Gold Coast was a West African colony of the British empire. It was the only British colony among its neighbours. To the east, it was bordered by the Ivory Coast, to the north by Burkina Faso (known as Upper Volta till 1984) and to the east by German Togoland. The French controlled Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso, and the Germans held Togoland until their defeat in WWII, when Togo became a protectorate of France. The European 'Scramble for Africa' continued into the first decades of the 20th century, and being hemmed in by rival European powers, the British empire had to keep a constant eye on the expansionist intentions of their rivals, especially considering that the Gold Coast was the richest in the region (Taylor 1954).

The timeframe guiding the historical analysis for my research has been deliberately selected. Although there had been some form of European presence on the Gold Coast since at least the late 15th century, it was not until the latter first half of the 19th century that the colonial structure started gaining a foothold on the coast. The Bond of 1844, signed between British representatives and Fante chiefs, had provided foreign intervention a legitimate backing (Danquah 1957). However, it was only in the late 19th century, after the Berlin Conference of 1884, that colonial power on the coast began assuming a definite form. My analysis begins from the few years following the signing of the Bond. My working hypothesis is that the small Gold

Coast elite to which the merchants belonged were crucial agents that supported the construction of the colonial structures, but that once it was erected, they got pushed out to its periphery. The period from the 1850s, then, was marked by their struggles for re-entry; failing which they launched a series of attacks on the colonial administration. To do this, however, they needed to portray themselves as agents and representatives of the Gold Coast population, necessitating a variety of alliances. By the late 1940s, the decline of colonial authority was underway and a political class had arisen, eclipsing these earlier actors. However, the structure of the state, and what courses of actions were politically possible or permissible had already been shaped by the actions of the merchants and the various actors they allied with (Meredith 2006). In first election in the Gold Coast, held in 1951, was won by Dr Kwame Nkrumah, who later in 1957 led the country to independence, and changed the name from Gold Coast to Ghana.

Problem and Aims

It is a fact that most sub-Saharan African state formation occurred under colonialism. Nevertheless, scholars using the 'colonial legacy' explanation overemphasise the autonomy of the imperial powers in imposing the modern state. Drawing on Bertrand Badie's notion of the imported state in Africa, Pierre Engelbert (1997: 767) declares that the 'contemporary state in sub-Saharan Africa is not African. It descends from arbitrary colonial administrative units designed as instruments of domination, oppression and exploitation.' Arguing that there were variations in the extent to which pre-existing institutions were consistent with the ones that were 'imported,' he maintains that much of the differences in levels of development and institutional capacity across Africa can be explained by 'these differences in the congruence of pre- and post-colonial structures which account for the variance in levels of state legitimacy in Africa' (Engelbert 2000: 14). Crawford Young (1986: 26-7, emphasis mine) makes this point even more spectacularly, arguing that:

[t]he character of the contemporary African state has been *determined* by its colonial origins. … Sovereignty was held by the occupying power and its prerogatives were delegated to the colonial administration. For the most part, colonial administrations held *untrammelled authority* to rule and to dispose of land, resources, and subjugate peoples – rights derived in conquest.'

However, I propose that while at first blush, the notion of the 'imported state' appear valid, it proceeds upon the assumption that colonial authorities had complete autonomy in the erection of the structures of the state. Such a view of the colonial state would suggest Young's '*untrammelled authority.'* In reality, colonial regimes hardly ever had the kinds of autonomy that is often ascribed to them; colonial policy was shaped in important ways by protest and other more subtle forms of resistance. We, therefore, need a more contingent understanding of state formation in colonies that pays attention to the ways in which conflict and cooperation/collaboration[2] between the colonial administration and indigenous actors shaped which policies were possible or feasible and how they could be enacted.

'Colonial legacy' arguments that emphasise the imported or 'inherited' (Leys 1976) nature of the African state draw on Peter Ekeh's (1975) concept of the 'two publics in Africa' following colonialism. The first public, which he called the 'primordial' public, refers to the social sphere to which Africans belonged and to which they owed allegiance before the emergence of colonialism. The civic public of the bureaucratised state, which was introduced by colonialism, on the other hand, was seen as alien and treated as such. It was the sphere that people could plunder to serve the interest of their 'primordial' publics. This argument explains much of the ethnicisation of African politics and related ethnic tensions. However, Ekeh's argument doesn't necessarily imply complete colonial autonomy in the creation of the state.

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[2] I pair 'collaboration' with 'cooperation' because of the caution by Steinmetz (2005) that collaboration gives that impression that coloniser and colonised had equal power in the designing and implementation of colonial policy, which doesn't accurately reflect the obviously unequal power distribution that colonialism involved. I still use 'collaboration' because the indigenous merchants were centrally involved in the proto-colonial administration.

Indeed, part of his argument was that the hostile attitude that Africans developed towards the state was in large part instigated by nationalist leaders who wanted to grind the wheels of colonial governments to a halt in order to force the colonial administration to give in to their demands, a strategy that was more or less successful in different colonial contexts.

George Steinmetz (2007) warns that the notion that colonial authorities did not have absolute autonomy in the formation of states should not be taken to extremes that suggest that both colonisers and colonised enjoyed the same or even similar amounts of power in the process. At the very least, colonial authorities were the sole actors responsible for policy making. Within the context of this limitation that Steinmetz suggests, however, opponents of colonial rule, or those bent on moving it towards certain directions, attempted to influence outcomes. These attempts could take a variety of forms. Opponents could challenge or resist a policy proposal, leading to its abandonment or revision. They could also resist the implementation of new or existing policies, leading again to withdrawal or revision. Or they could, through their protests, push to have certain policies adopted. In this study, I shall be examining how indigenous actors in the Gold Coast achieved some of these aims through the changing phases of their relations with the colonial administration.

To do this, I will focus on the merchant princes of the Gold Coast and the diverse alliances they formed over this period. Many of them started their careers working for the European trading houses. Their relationship with the small European community in the Gold Coast from the early 1800s was an intimate one. By the turn of the century, however, the arrival of fully-fledged colonialism ended their once cosy relationship with the colonial administration. Colonial policy shifted to favour European businesses to the disadvantage of the indigenous traders. Yet, the merchants did not give up without a fight. Using their positions on the colonial

legislative council and their ties to various social actors, they tried to recruit broad-based support for their protests and demands for equal treatment from the colonial administration (Dumett 1983). They attempted to appear as a unified group in order to force the colonial administration to create a more favourable space for them (Rathbone 1973).

While forming these alliances appeared to be a good idea for the merchants in terms of their political endeavours, in practice these relationships were rather tenuous. As Westernised elites, they saw themselves as the agents of progress and enlightenment, a special group that was somehow above other Africans in the Gold Coast. The different alliances they forged to press demands on the colonial administration for a favourable economic environment were, therefore, fraught with all manner of contradictions. Their religion, education, worldview, tastes and demeanour all set them apart from those they went into alliance with. The internal tensions within these alliances were, in a sense, inevitable. For instance, the religious diversity of their coalitions made their self-conception as agents of progress a contentious matter, eliciting reactions from non-Christian members. My hypothesis is that these dynamics of accommodation and friction affected the goals and strategies of the alliances they forged, which in turned moulded how they could resist or collaborate with the colonial administration. To study how this in turn shaped the formation of the incipient colonial state, my study focuses on three broad objectives:

1) I will examine the nature of the network ties and alliances that these merchants formed. These ties were many and varied: they created ties to the colonial administration, to trading houses in Europe, to members of the indigenous merchant class, to traditional authorities, to wealthy farmers, to indigenous labour and to migrant labour from neighbouring colonies. I

will examine how the nature of particular alliances opened possibilities for some actions while precluding others.

2) These ties changed and shifted following shifts in the various group interests over time. I will analyse how these shifts in alliances affected the social basis of the alliances themselves.

3) Finally, I will explore how these changing social dynamics interacted with the incipient British colonial administration to shape the emerging institutions of the state.

In this paper, however, my aim is more modest. After an overview of the literature, I will provide a brief history of the changing relations between the indigenous merchants of the Gold Coast and the European community on the coast, and follow this with an analysis of two sources: a petition by merchants, agents and traders to the colonial office in London, and articles in a newspaper, *The Gold Coast Times* (GCT). I argue that although they were pushed to the periphery of the colonial administration, the merchant princes struggled from their peripheral position to directly influence how colonial policy was designed and the manner of its implementation. In the next section, I examine the state as an object of sociological analysis

Theoretical and empirical background

Sociology as a discipline arose as a response to sweeping social transformations across Western Europe.[3] The complex of forces driving these changes, collectively conceptualised as

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[3] Of course, these changes were inextricably linked with transformations in other parts of the world; but from the earliest period (Magubane 2005), intellectual energies were channelled into explaining the changes in Western Europe.

modernisation, were understood to be central in the eventual emergence of the state as we now know it.[4] But even though it 'is intimately entwined with modernity, both as lived and as theorised' (Adams et al 2005: 1), it was not until the mid-20th century that sociologists, specifically historical sociologists, starting focussing scholarly attention on the state. Classical sociologists had focussed much attention on the industrial revolution and the emergence of capitalism (Marx, Weber) and the consequences of these and other forces on social and group life (Durkheim, Simmel).[5] The features of modernity which later scholars distilled from the classics included 'the calculating spirit (*Rechnenhaftigkeit),* the disenchantment of the world (*Entzauberunger der Welt),* instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalitat)*, and bureaucratic domination' (Löwy and Sayre 2001 in Adams et al 2005: 13). When sociologists later turned to study the state, they isolated features of states that were consistent with this definition of modernity. For instance, Poggi (2004: 95) conceptualised modern states as characterised by depersonalised, formalised, integrated, differentiated and organised rule. But states don't always have to be conceptualised thus. Charles Tilly (1990) provides a definition of states based largely on legitimate use of violence, as 'coercion wielding organisations that are distinct from households and kinship groups and exercise clear priority in some respects over all other organisations within substantial territories.'

Historical sociologists and political sociologists have drawn on a number of theories to explain state formation in the West. These theories have emphasises various forms of violence,

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[4] This is not to imply that the states exhibit homogenous features across space. Nor is it to imply that once states emerge, their characteristics persist; differences in state capacity and function during the period of Fordism and post-Fordism only goes to emphasise the fluidity of state structures.
[5] Marx paid more attention to the state than the others because of his preoccupation with the relations between economics and politics.

internal disturbances, revolutions and war-fare (Tilly 1985; Skocpol 1979)[6]; economic logic with the rise of an incipient bourgeois class and the need for absolute monarchs to accommodate this class (Anderson 1975) or the need for rulers to accumulate wealth and resources, ultimately for purposes of warmongering (Kiser and Barzel 1991). These processes culminated in 'the establishment of increasingly effective modes of management of larger and larger territories, put in place on behalf of rulers by growing bodies of professional administrators' (Poggi 2004: 97).

The main difference between state formation in Western Europe and other parts of the world, especially in parts of Africa and Asia, is that unlike the latter cases, states in Europe emerged as the unintended consequence of other processes.[7] In his review of theories of state formation in post-colonial Africa, Frank Stark (1986) distilled two broad camps into which the various theories coalesced: state-building theories and Marxist theories. The state-building theorists focus on the role of 'creative' (p. 335) dominant political leaders. These are mostly charismatic leaders whose very persons become the arena for the legitimation of the new state.[8] For instance, David Apter's (1955) study of transitions in late colonial Gold Coast saw in Nkrumah this charismatic quality 'and bestowed upon him individual responsibility for the new state of Ghana' (Stark 1986: 337). Stark faults these theories for failing to account for structural factors affecting the process of state-building, making it difficult to see beyond the personal qualities of individual leaders in explaining the failures or successes of state-building ventures.

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[6] Weber, especially, emphasises the state monopolisation of legitimate means of violence.

[7] Indeed, Tilly (1975) argues that the Western European experience in state formation is unlikely to ever be repeated. A similar argument could be made for the rise of capitalism and development in the West, which also was an outcome which wasn't anticipated. By contrast, the 20th century was marked by a proliferation of strategies for developing countries to reach the 'advanced stages' of development which Western countries (including Japan, Australia/New Zealand, USA and Canada) had achieved.

[8] David Amponsah (2013) provides a fascinating account of how the body of Kwame Nkrumah, on the eve of Ghana's independence and on the day of independence, became the arena of performance by which he conveyed to the grassroots masses and invited foreign dignitaries his legitimacy as head of state.

The Marxist theories are more 'rooted firmly in the context of imperialism and colonialism' because they have 'stressed the colonialism and imperialism in which the African states had been created, and the 'post-colonial' economic domination of the metropolitan centres which continues to constrain, and even control, their institutional development' (Stark 1986: 340, 336). The emphasis in this school of thought is on how the crucial institutions and structures of the colonial state are shaped by the 'foreign imperial bourgeoisie' (p. 340), leading to the assumption that the colonial state is not only inherited, but also 'overdeveloped.' The notion of an 'overdeveloped state' provides a powerful imagery to accompany conceptions of the imported or inherited whose formation indigenes had little to do with. Debates in this school are about the extent to which the post-colonial state is independent of Western bourgeois interests, which is understood to be more or less strong, never absent. There is broad agreement that the colonial state is an inheritance (Ley 1976).

Both theoretical camps suffer from a number of defects. The state-building theorists lack enough historical depth. Beginning their analysis from the late colonial period, they ignore the institutional building phase of the colonial period. Although some institutions and policies changed upon the attainment of independence, the structures of the post-colonial state maintains important continuities with the colonial state.[9] The Marxist theories, with their anchoring in colonialism and imperialism, compensate for this lack of historical depth. However, the theoretical gains of this historical sensitivity are lost by their failure to account for the dynamism of the colonial context, thus obscuring the role that local actors played in the formation of the

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[9] George Steinmetz (1999) discusses a distinction that is often made between state formation and policy-making. State formation is understood to refer to the processes that birth the state, while policy-making refers to the ongoing process of administration. Because policy-making sometimes involves fundamental breaks with pre-existing state structures (as, for instance, when a welfare regime gets retrenched), Steinmetz argues that the distinction between the two processes is misleading. Steinmetz's argument notwithstanding, in the case of former colonies, it is possible to identify a period during which the 'modern' state was institutionalized.

colonial state. To them, the state arrives in the colonies pre-packaged by the European bourgeoisie. Hence both theoretical camps subscribe to the notion of the colonial legacy.

I will argue that, contrary to the Marxist scholars' contention that the European bourgeoisie exported state structures conducive to appropriation into the colonies, in actual fact it is not clear at all that the colonisers had a clear sense of what the structures of colonialism ought to be. This is equally true of the formation of European states, which, according to Tilly (1975, 1990) were unintended by-products conscious designs. The structures that were eventually formed emerged out of fraught political processes in which indigenous actors collaborated with some policies and resisted others`

Furthermore, both schools of thought are guilty of obscuring the contributions of 'grassroots' actors. In the Marxist school, the 'grassroots' actors were the indigenous actors who resisted or collaborated with the colonisers. In the world systems approach that this school sometimes adopted (Stark 1986), processes at the local level get glossed over. In the state-building approach which focuses on indigenous leaders as the dominant actors, the 'grassroots' forces are those actors outside the field of juridical power. However, we have learnt from James Scott (1987) that those without juridical power still resort to 'hidden transcripts' or even sometimes open means of protests to shape politics. It is, therefore, important to pay attention to these. Traditional authorities, urban workers, youth groups and peasants were important political forces during the colonial period. The nature of their organisation and forms of expressions shaped the nature and direction of politics and of juridical power, and they were potent political forces that dominant actors tapped into to further their political ends.

Finally, these theories fail to take account of culture. Colonialism introduced to the societies under its control a distinctive form of 19th century Western culture: modernity. Although it is usually presented as devoid of cultural content, modernity was a very socially and historically specific creation of Western culture that emerged from the industrial revolution, capitalism and bureaucracy. The articulation of this cultural sphere with other cultures was bound to set in motion unanticipated reactions that deserve study. For instance, how colonialism was understood by indigenous people, and how did this meaning affect how colonial policy was interpreted and implemented? Also, the early collaborators of the colonisers were missionary converts, and their conversion involved a sharp break with the beliefs of others in their societies. Especially for the merchants princes in my study, their conversion, coupled with their Western education, gave them a totally different orientation. Their subsequent ties and networks bore the marks of these cultural incongruities. Finally, a focus on culture is crucial because it helps understand the reasons why some voices get silenced and others get privileged in the state formation process. For instance, Emily Osborne (2011) observes that although women in French West Africa were prominent public actors in the pre-colonial period, their role had been eclipsed by the establishment of formal colonialism. I intend to address these gaps in my study.

Linguistic and Cultural Turns and the Study of States

As is clear from the foregoing, the attention of scholars of the state after the mid-20th century was on dominant political actors and on juridical power. These approaches, referred to by Adams et al (2005) as 'second wave historical sociology' was to experience a revolution with the turn by social historians to linguistic and cultural approaches to history, which, according to Steinmetz (1999: 2), 'disrupted entrenched ways of thinking about familiar objects of social

research.' The linguistic turn, which emerged first in the late 1960s entailed 'the notion that language is the constitutive agent of human consciousness and the social production of meaning, and that our apprehension of the social world, both past and present, arrives only through the lens of language's precoded perceptions' (Spiegel 2005: 2). The linguistic turn draws on Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics,* in which he argued that language renders the world intelligible through its own internal rules of signification which are arbitrary. And because language 'precedes the world,' we come to perceive the world through the lens provided us by language. Such a view suggests the impossibility of an objective or neutral point of view, since the ways we come to see and experience the world are mediated by fundamental structures which themselves are arbitrary. Our experience of reality, in other words, is socially and linguistically constructed.

Although this approach proved invigorating for historical research, scholars felt the need to move beyond the 'overly systematic account' of language that it entails. Instead of assuming the primacy of 'impersonal semiotic codes, historical actors are now seen as engaged in inflecting the semiotic constituents (signs) that shape their understanding of reality so as to craft an experience of that world in terms of a situational sociology of meaning, or what might be called semantics' (Spiegel 2005: 3). This foregrounds notions of agency, structure and social change. For instance, rather than assert that human actors are governed by culture, Sewell (2005: 87) argues that '[t]o engage in cultural practice is to make use of a semiotic code to do something in the world.' However, this conceptualisation of actors as empowered agents is only possible because scholars have earlier reconceptualised culture to mean *culture as practice*. This entailed a move away from a holistic understanding of culture as a *unified* system of symbols and meanings, into one where culture is understood as presenting actors with tool kits (Swidler 1986)

that actors pick and choose from to perform the task at hand. This necessitates a view of culture as 'being contradictory, loosely integrated, contested, mutable, and highly permeable' (Sewell 2005: 89). This renovated understanding of culture reinserts human agency in historical research. It also makes it possible to understand social change. Giddens' theory of structuration, of social structure as medium of action as well as its outcome, suggests a view of culture which is not homogenous, tightly bounded or deterministic (Giddens 2005; Sewell 1992).

The cultural turn followed the linguistic turn. It emphasised 'the constitutive role of culture' (Steinmetz 1999: 2) in social processes. This approach in some ways is a backlash against the imperialism of positivism in the social sciences. In sociology and political science, the scientism underlying positivism was most prominent in Marxist approaches that treated culture only as an epiphenomenon of material factors and process. Weber privileges the role of culture in his analysis of states, but he relegates the role of culture to pre-modern or non-Western societies. His own formulation of the transition from a traditional to a rational-legal form of authority suggests that the role of cultural factors as one approaches modernity tends to decline. Furthermore, researchers working in the Weberian tradition continue to reinforce the notion that Western states approximate a rational order, implying the absence of culture, while non-Western states are characterised by customs, values and traditions. This perspective, according to Steinmetz (1999: 20) is anchored in a worldview which can be called '*foundational decontextualisation* …defined as a view of human subjectivity as determinable outside its social and historical context.'

This poses dangers for scholars studying states outside the Western context, because almost automatically cultural explanations are expected to apply to these cases. It is expected that they are still embedded in a system of tradition that pervades all aspects of the state and

influencing its character. These states are then considered to be deviations from the model of what states are supposed to be, viz. a western state. This danger notwithstanding, there is the need to explicitly spell out the cultural elements of states, whether Western or non-Western.

Following the cultural turn, however, scholars, drawing heavily on Foucault, have shifted from the focus on juridical power characteristic of the second wave of historical sociology (Adams et al 2005) to ways 'that power is widely dispersed throughout capillary networks' and thus pays attention to 'the decentralised and molecular nature of power' operating outside the central structures of the state (Steinmetz 1999: 9-10). Paying attention to 'hidden transcripts' and 'weapons of the weak,' (Scott 1987; 1990) these scholars have examined 'subalterns engaging in resistance' and have foregrounded questions of 'subjectivity, ambivalence, contradiction, affect, and multiplicity' (Orloff 2012: 7). This more diffuse notion of grassroots movements yields insights which could be incorporated in theories of the state. As Orloff (2012: 9) succinctly puts it, analytical leverage is achieved when we 'join high politics and politics from below, attend to organisations and institutions, including of course the state and its varying boundaries and enmeshments with other entities.'

I will be sensitive to these theoretical considerations in this study. I will be paying attention to the fact that these merchants were driven by a multiplicity of motives, not only commercial ones. A good many of them were nationalists. Some had royal blood. There were those among them who performed ecclesiastical duties. And they (sincerely) saw themselves as agents of progress. What this means is that there are multiple and cross-cutting commitments which cannot be so easily parsed. Further, owing to this multiplicity of goals, some in this elite group had commonalities of interests with actors from the traditional society, as well as with the colonial administration itself. In particular, I will be paying attention to how the merchants

tapped into diffuse frustrations at colonial rule from various quarters in the traditional societies and channelled this into their resistance of the administration. The 'grassroots' actors very important in the whole process; *power was in their midst.* 'But while power is everywhere, politics is not. We need a conception of politics that is linked to but not coterminous with power' (Orloff 2012: 10). To translate this power into political action that can effectively engage with the colonial administration, they needed to weld themselves to other actors who had both the *desire* and the *capacity* to channel capillary power into political purposes. The merchant princes were in a position to tap into these diffuse social forces and channel them into their own political endeavours.

From Centre to Periphery: The Changing Position of the Merchants in the Incipient Colonial Structure

The merchants that constitute my focus in this research were concentrated along the coastal towns of the Gold Coast, where European activity was also concentrated. These merchants had a clear conception of themselves as agents of progress. This was not without cause. They had created a niche for themselves from the very early stages of European presence on the coast as intermediaries between the Europeans and the traditional[10] societies. They belonged to a small group of Christianised and Western-educated Gold Coasters who constituted a small body of elites. In the early 19th century, after the abolition of the slave trade in 1808, European involvement in the West African coast in general, and the Gold Coast in particular, was minimal. From the vantage point of the 21st century, it would appear paradoxical that 'some of the most forceful arguments for government intervention on behalf of economic development

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[10] I use traditional to distinguish the societies from which these merchants originated, from the social sphere of the Europeans. Although the concept of modernity is one that I engage with in this study, I do not intend, by my use of 'traditional' to imply any dichotomy of tradition-modernity.

and social change in the Gold Coast came not from British business interests but from a small group of educated West African and West Indian traders, lawyers and proto-nationalists' (p. 203) (Dumett 1981: 203). These included John Sarbah the elder, J.P. Brown, P. W. Bernasko, George F. Cleland and William F. Hutchison. At this time, the relations between the indigenous merchants and the few Europeans on the Coast was a very cosy one, an evidence of which was that many of them had adopted the names of the Europeans on the coast, as can be some from some of the names above.

They saw themselves as leading lights in the Gold Coast. They referred to themselves as 'the intelligentsia' and were at pains to distinguish themselves from 'the scholars,' whom they felt only had enough education to be clerks. They were a very cohesive group, interacting frequently and intermarrying among themselves. Furthermore, they 'were conscious that they were a vital force for the socioeconomic and political transformation of the colony' (Dumett 1983: 669-70). In fact, in the first decades of the 19th century, many of these merchants occupied crucial posts in the administration, including justices of the peace, magistrates, and commanders of some of the trading and administrative forts and castles. They saw themselves as heirs of the emerging social system (Kaplow 1977) that they were trying to catalyse by coaxing the colonial office in London to establish a colonial administration. To them, this was obvious; they were 'interpreters of cultures' because 'they had knowledge of the African culture because they were a part of it, and … they had a complimentary knowledge of the European culture because they had been trained in its manifestation' (Denzer 1965: 8).

By the turn of the twentieth century, however, they found themselves pushed to the periphery of the colonial society. By this time, the colonial administration was more firmly established on the ground and the volume of European trade on the coast had expanded. Kaplow

(1977: 318) suggests that the earlier rise to prominence of the merchant princes had only been 'permitted and even encouraged' as middlemen by the British until the eventual 'consolidation of its own economic and territorial empire.' However, this account ascribes an agency and intentionality to colonial actors which does not necessarily reflect the complexity of the situation. For instance, Kaplow herself explains that the expansion of European activities on the coast was partly a result of accelerating industrialisation in England and the subsequent need for raw material for their factories. However, another perhaps more important reason for the initial limited involvement of Europeans on the coast was the high number of European deaths which had earned West Africa the accolade, 'White Man's Grave.' Medical breakthrough with the use of quinine to treat malaria made the coast less dangerous for Europeans (Patton 1989). European racism, especially against Africans, became more insidious from the 1890s (Dumett 1983), as a result of which many Africans occupying top posts in the colonial administration found themselves pushed out for Europeans (Patton 1989). This trend of events affected the merchants deeply, because they soon found themselves elbowed out to the margins of the system they had help create, and faced with a highly competitive trading space in which they were denied access to credit, price-fixing agreements, shipping rebates and other sorts of concessions which Europeans merchants enjoyed.

In the face of these shifts, their attitudes towards the colonial administration changed from collusion and cooperation to one of conflict and resistance. They adopted a variety of strategies, from writing petitions to the local colonial administration and the London colonial office, writing letters in newspapers, creating associations and organising various kinds of boycotts. To pull these strategies off, they had to forge alliances with a bewildering array of actors. And there was really no apparent logic to the kinds of alliances that they were creating.

Quite understandably, they allied with the chiefs, who felt their authority was being encroached upon, and who, therefore, sometimes joined forces with the merchants to resist colonial policies. They also formed alliances with wealthy farmers and poorer farmers, whose interests sometimes diverged widely. For instance, when the merchants lead a boycott of cocoa exports in 1930, poorer farmers, who didn't have enough reserve cash to fall back on, started breaking ranks with the protest after about a month (Rhodie 1968). The merchants also had ties to European merchants on the coast, and to the colonial administration; many of them served on the colonial legislative council. Of course, they also had ties to other members of the small indigenous elite; lawyers, doctors and other kinds of professionals. Their ties extended to other traders and nationalists in the West African region; and in the early decades of the twentieth century, they formed the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA). In Europe, they had ties to capitalists, but at the same time also maintained ties to communist and anti-imperialist organisations!

The eclectic nature of these ties made them volatile indeed. While forming these alliances appeared to be a good idea, in practice these relationships were rather tenuous. As self-proclaimed agents of civilisation, they felt that the sway of the traditional leaders did not extend to them. For instance, in a letter to King Kofi Amonu of Annomaboe, one of the indigenous merchants, John Sarbah wrote demanding repayment of a loan:

> 'I have sufficient cause to insult any personage who would not respect his position in life. It would be meet for your honour and dignity to settle that Balance as soon as possible. For I fear it may cause some unpleasantness. This bearer is to bring up the full settlement of the balance.'[11]

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[11] Letter from John Sarbah to King Kofi Amonu, 21st May 1874, John Sarbah Letterbook Sc. 6/4, Ghana National Archives, Accra.

They formed the Aborigines Rights Protection Society in the late 19th century and the NCBWA as pressure groups on behalf of the people. In reality, however, these were never mass movements. As noted earlier, the merchants constituted a close knit circle, distinguishing themselves from those not having as much education as they did. In these society meetings, they used complex and legalistic language (Denzer 1965; McLaughlin and Owusu-Ansah 1995). Nevertheless, they cast themselves as nationalists. And to justify their self-designation as nationalists to the colonial administration, they needed to demonstrate ties to significant actors in the traditional society. One of these elites, Kobina Sekyi, formed a Gold Coast Farmers' Association that was mobilised in a number of protests against low prices of cocoa and palm-nut on the world market.

These widely ramifying networks introduced an incredible amount of contradictory logics in these alliances, and made them prone to frequent shifts. Nor was there any coherence in the ties that members of these elites themselves formed. Kobina Sekyi, emblematic of Gold Coast nationalists, exemplified this competing tendencies in his very person. He wrote numerous treatises in the newspapers about the need to preserve national culture, warning that 'by learning to think as the white man thinks we are forgetting to see things from our *own* point of view… we shall completely lose our individuality' (quoted in Rohdie 1965: 390-1). Yet, he at the same time maintained membership in philosophical societies in England!

The different alliances they forged to press demands on the colonial administration for a favourable economic environment were, therefore, all fraught with tensions. My argument is that these dynamics of accommodation and resistance between not only merchants and colonial leaders, but between elites and local tradition leadership, amongst other alliances they formed,

are important to understanding the nature of the institutions and structures that finally did emerge from the structures of colonialism.

A full examination of the nature of these alliances and how they constrained or enabled certain types of action by the merchants will have to await till later in my dissertation as I collect more data. In the next section I am going to analyse some of their action in the second half of the 19th century after they found themselves outside the influential domains of the colonial administration. These merchants did not confine their strategies merely to the use of 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1987). Just like the omnibus alliances that they forged, they also employed all manner of strategies, ranging from writing of newspaper articles and letter, petitions to the colonial office, boycotts, demonstrations and sending delegations to London. In the next section, I draw on two main sources: newspaper letters and articles from *The Gold Coast Times,* and a petition to the colonial office in London. At this point, their demand was not for self-government. They 'insisted that they were loyal to the British Crown and that they merely sought an extension of British political and social practices to Africans' (McLaughlin and Owusu-Ansah 1995: 25). Their activities were directed at shaping the emerging state. This section below begins the argument I want to make in my dissertation, namely, that the merchants played a central role in shaping the emergence of the state.

'A newspaper is certainly a great weapon': Resisting Colonial Policy

Although Gold Coast newspapers have been widely studied as sources of nationalist thought, they have not been considered as key instruments in hands of the merchants. Raymond Dummet notes that in addition to being a 'profit-making business in its own right', newspaper publishing served as a medium 'to press for government financing of projects favourable to

economic development'; he judged these merchant princes to be 'considerably ahead of their time, and certainly ahead of most colonial officials, in recognising that any general economic development had to be related to advances in farm productivity, and that this in turn was dependent on increased state support for improvements in transportation and technical assistance to agriculture' (1973: 688-9). Indeed, the power of the newspaper as a medium to influence policy and trigger social change was not lost upon them. A scathing article criticising the abuse of public money by the colonial administration started thus: 'A newspaper is certainly a great weapon. It proves, as a rule, as sharp as a "two edged sword" – cutting to the core when it makes the effort to cut.'[12]

This section will examine a few of the objectives which their newspaper and petition writings tried to accomplish: 1) cast themselves as representatives of the people 2) present themselves as leading lights and pioneers of progressive change on the continent 3) present themselves to the colonisers as collaborators in the administration of the colony 4) try to shape government policies and strategies by criticising, scrutinising and suggesting alternatives, and 5) perhaps, most impertinently, point out to the British where they were falling short in administering the colonies, and even of metropolitan England!

In their bid to shape colonial policy, one of the first tasks of the merchant princes was to identify themselves as representatives of the people. For instance, in an article addressed to an incoming governor, W. A. G. Young, the author opened by saying: 'Sir – You must never be startled by the perusal of a letter about you in the columns of this paper. My 'nom de plume' is PHYLLIS and whatever I say must be considered by you as said in the interests of the general

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[12] *Gold Coast Times* (hereafter GCT), May 30, 1884. Most of these articles came without a byline.

public, and for the good of the commonwealth.'[13] This point was made even stronger in the

petition the merchants wrote in 1893:

> We would … respectfully invite your Lordship's attention to the urgent necessity of securing an adequate representation of the general public on the Legislative Council – at the present time there is only one unofficial member, who has practically no influence whatever on the Council from the fact that even on matters of mere detail, apart from all questions of Government policy, the official members are bound to vote as instructed, and he is therefore in hopeless minority when opposed to measures that chiefly affect *the classes whom he is supposed to represent, and of whose requirements he has special knowledge, and whose interest he has at heart.*[14]

This assumption of the role of representatives of the people was riddled with

inconsistencies because, as said above, these elites formed a tight and cohesive circle that sought

to actively distinguish themselves from those they felt to be below their ranks. In their

newspapers, references abound to 'heathens' and 'wild bushmen'; in an account narrating the

public display of supernatural powers by a priest, the enthusiastic crowd was referred to as 'the

vulgar throng.'[15] In addition to distancing themselves from the people, they actually also actively

advocated for the adoption of western institutions, and in a manner which was bound to cause

outrage in some quarters. Reporting the disappointment of a colonial official that government

communications were still being interpreted (as at 1882) rather than delivered in English, which

they acknowledged to be 'a language now most universally spoken,' they expressed their

agreement with the sentiments of the official, going even further to say that:

> The more the English is adopted the more also we may opine will English customs or usages be embraced; and this would mean an introduction of civilised institutions. We wish to see many of the native usages altogether abolished as they are not in any way conducive to material progress. We are aware that we may be treading on 'delicate ground', but we are compelled to strongly accentuate our views upon the matter, *in the interest of the whole country.* But we do not mean at the same time that we wish to see

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[13] GCT, May 30 1884, 'Letters to Eminent Men – No. 1. To Our New Governor.'

[14] Despatch from Governor Sir W. Brandford Griffith, K.C.M.G., forwarding a Memorial from Merchants, Agents and Traders of the Gold Coast Colony (hereafter, Despatch), emphasis mine.

[15] GCT, May 30 1884, August 5 1882.

the vernacular done away with absolutely. Far from it; it is necessary that the vernacular should be preserved in the interest of Philology, if not for anything else. We simply desire to see the English tongue more extensively promoted, as it may lead to the extensive promotion of civilised ideas and usages.'[16]

It is, therefore, obvious, that their idea of what was needful for the colony was bound to clash with those of others. The traditional society itself was not marked by any unanimity of preferences or interests. In accounts of the various cocoa hold-ups or boycotts which the merchants instigated, competing interests and preferences among the various actors always emerge and sometimes even lead to the eventual failure of the boycotts (Rhodie 1968; Howard 1976; Southall 1978). In addition to these internal tensions in the traditional societies, the indigenous elites also recognised that it was 'a most difficult thing to maintain the interest of our people in anything…' but nevertheless felt the need to 'arouse ourselves and cultivate to the utmost this refining pursuit which… will tend to benefit and improve the masses of our people.'

But this did not imply that they uncritically accepted everything British as 'civilised.' A report about the plan to establish a Royal College of Music in England carried the commentary that 'We have wondered why the British nation has allowed itself to be behind the other nations of Europe in this matter,' noting that the 'cities of Paris, Berlin and Vienna have each of them their Conservatoires' training musical talents and equipping them with 'every chance of becoming a Beethoven or a Mendelssohn.'[17]

But although the indigenous elite circle appear cohesive from the outside, they weren't themselves free from internal tensions. A good deal of attention in the newspapers was focussed on fostering solidarity and common action among the traders. For instance, at a time when 'trade still remains dull,' a short article recommended that 'the local merchants should endeavour to

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[16] GCT, May 1884.
[17] GCT August 5, 1882

meet together casually to consult about the best plans for ensuring a revolution in its state'; while another lamented 'that there is no Commercial Association in the town.[18] A body like that exists in the principal towns of all the colonies of Her Majesty. In the present state of trade the formation of a society of this sort would be highly opportune.'[19]

A great deal of effort in the newspapers was directed at influencing government policy. For instance, in August of 1884, the *GCT* carried a short article addressing the need for a Town Council. A lot of these demands were made with an eye on what was happening in other colonies in West Africa. In another article, it was reported that: 'Our Sierra Leone brethren are clamouring for a Town Council or municipality – a form of government much wanted here. We cannot but believe that they will be successful, as the people up there are never apathetic in such matter.' These comparisons with other colonies were often intended to rouse the elites to action. The report of a costly fire outbreak praised the people of Sierra Leone for their unity in dealing with the consequences of the fire, but continued that 'we think Cape Coast under such contingency would lose more, & this because the people are not sufficiently united.'

And while on the subject of the Sierra Leone fire outbreak, they went on to suggest to the colonial administration that 'the time seems very ripe for the introduction of hydrants into the colony. Surely it is not the intention of government to wait for a fire to break out before they see to the provision of these needful things.' And perhaps in anticipation of a protest from the administration of lack of funds, they quickly added, 'There is money enough to bear the strain of such an outlay, so why should it not be made.'[20]

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[18] Cape Coast.
[19] GCT, August
[20] GCT, May

Sometimes, their protests were directed at the very heart of the colonial structures. In their Petition to the colonial office in London, they decried the situation where 'the trading community, upon which the whole basis of the Government rests, have practically no voice whatever in the administration of the Colony, and no control over the expenditure, and are further never consulted upon any contemplated fiscal changes, although the same may seriously affect them and the people in whom their interests are bound up' (p. 53). The purpose of the petition was ostensibly to protest against the imposition of an *ad valorem* duty of 10% on some imports. While noting that they were not in principle opposed to *ad valorem* duty 'provided something is at once done with the money in hand' (p. 53), they maintained that such duties should not exceed 5 per cent. In his notes and observations attached to the petition, the governor, Sir W. B. Griffith, notes that the 'petition is one which requires careful consideration as it is practically an indictment of the policy pursued by the Government' (p. 3). The fears of the governor were not without reason; for, as shown above, the merchants were tying the paying of duties and taxes to development and representation in the colony. For instance, in the petition, they wrote that in 'connexion with the whole financial administration of the Colony, we would point out that the vacillating policy of the Government, in so frequently and suddenly changing the Customs tariff, is highly detrimental to the trade of the Colony,' and further protested against the collection of revenue which is then 'hoarded and let out on interest to other Colonies' (p. 53).

The petition even included advice by the merchants to the British colonial office about how to efficiently govern their colonies in light of changing international circumstances:

> We would point out to your Lordship that the position of the British on the West Coast of Africa has materially changed during the last few years. Whereas previously they had unrivalled influence wherever there was a Settlement, they are now closely hedged in by foreign competitors. The French on the west and the Germans on the east, with firm footholds on the coast and with a tendency to converge together on the north, are doing

their utmost, not only to develop their own particular districts, but to attract and divert trade from districts where British influence was formerly supreme, to their own ports. *Both these Powers, whose Colonies it is hardly necessary to remark are managed on principles totally different from ours, are adopting most practical methods* by the construction of roads and other public works, and by thorough exploration of the resources and prospects of the country; *and it behoves us to take all possible steps to encourage and foster the trade and industry of this Colony*, which the figures and the appended lists show to be by no means unimportant, and which is largely derived from interior districts (p. 54).

The petition also included a close scrutiny of the Colonial Reports, contradicting reports of infrastructural developments which the Reports claim to have been achieved. For instance, referring to roads which had supposedly been planned or built, they noted that 'No roads whatever worthy of the name have been constructed in the Kwitta districts, and with regard to the other quotation, whatever the works "in contemplation" may be, it would be extremely interesting to have a list of what has been done' (p. 54). In a similarly sarcastic tone, they complained that in 'other parts of the country, bridges are chiefly conspicuous by their absence' (p. 55). They ended the petition by asking for an imperial officer to be despatched from London to ascertain the state of the Gold Coast colony.

Their suspicion about how the colonial administration was using public funds was one theme that they returned to over and over again in their newspapers. In the *GCT* of May 30 1884, they wrote about 'the shameful waste of public money' and 'reckless and unpardonable extravagance' of the administration. The article insinuated that the governor was treating an official as 'his adopted son' and enabling this official to misappropriate funds:

> Sir Samuel Rowe may have been very ready to tell people that there was not sufficient money for any great reforms, but if this was simply a disgraceful 'trick' to get in the money, so as to pay it out to his adopted child, it is for the public now to say. There will certainly be a very rigorous protest against the reappointment of this Governor to this colony. He was not liked here and the longer we are without him the more will be our opportunities to make material progress.'

That year, Governor Rowe was not reappointed. W. A. G. Young took over the governorship from him. This was not the first time they had foiled the appointment of a governor. In 1882, there were reports that Col de Winton was going to be appointed governor to replace Rowe. An article in the GCT was unambiguous about their displeasure at this decision, making clear that their preference was for Captain Maloney. Maloney, they claimed:

> Would suit us far better than the Lieutenant Colonel, as he has resided much longer among us and is already showing symptoms of energy. We most flatly denounced as impolitic not very long ago, the policy of sending to the coast persons absolutely unacquainted with the country or people; and since then we have been indulging the belief that no more such elements would in future be pushed into our midst, little thinking that there was such a thing brewing in the minds of the authorities as the thought of installing another foreigner… The public must not infer from these remarks that we wish to throw any obstacles in the way of the Lieut-Colonel; now must they consider that we are endeavouring to be the part of detractors. …We are inclined to believe however that the Gladstone government will eventually give this subject the deliberation it deserves.[21]

Col de Winton was eventually not appointed, leaving Rowe to serve as governor until 1884, when W. A. G. Young, who had previously served in the colonial office in the West Indies, was appointed. Upon his appointment, a letter in the GCT was addressed to him, detailing a list of inefficiencies and mismanagement of Rowe. The letter then advised the incoming governor to '[a]llow your star to shine out with that effulgence which characterised it in the West Indies, in the firmament of the political world of the Gold Coast' GCT May 1884. While attempting to resist the appointment of British officials whom they were opposed to, they also kept pushing to be given space in colonial administration:

> What is the highest post a person can attain who is persevering in our days? He can only be a possessor of a lot of money and be called merchant prince. But what is the money, without the necessary honour? …but what is the money if you have no opportunities to become useful with it? …What more pleasing than a high post in the government of one's own country? GCT 30 May 1884

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[21] GCT August 1882

I have attempted to demonstrate here that the merchant princes of the Gold Coast adopted a number of strategies to influence the policies of the colonial administration. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, they used elitist means to achieve these ends, chiefly using newspapers and petitions. At the turn of the twentieth century, they started broadening their approach, forging alliances with a variety of actors in the traditional societies. Subsequent work in my dissertation will examine these alliances and coalitions that they built to challenge and influence colonial policies. In the next section, I will present the research methods I will employ to achieve this end.

Research design

The study will rely primarily on historical approaches to data collection and analysis. I will consult archives in Ghana for relevant documents from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century. Relevant documents include newspapers from this period, ledgers and account journals, personal letters, minutes of the official committees on which some merchants served, as well as available records of their interactions with chiefs, labour, and other groups. These documents will help me gain insight into the nature of their alliances with various social actors. The letters, for instance, will also give me an intimate view of how shifts in the coalitions they formed affected the nature of the merchants' activism towards the colonial administration, and the limits and possibilities that these shifts imposed. Proceedings of the legislative committees on which these merchants served will also provide insight into their demands and compromises with the colonial administration. I will also conduct interviews with descendants of these merchants. These interviews will be to elicit information which might not be captured in the archives but which may have been passed down by oral traditions in the family.

I have already started gathering some of these data from my first field trip in the summer of 2012. I acquired copies of letters of John Sarbah the merchant as well as ledgers and accounts records. That trip also allowed me to identify other archives in the country that I will need to consult on subsequent data collection trips; these are archives in Koforidua in the Eastern Region, Cape Coast in the Central Region, and Kumasi in the Ashanti Region. These were the most important site of indigenous mercantile activities during the period under consideration: 1850 to 1950. Depending on what emerges from the data collection as key protest activities and outcomes, I will need to consult additional archives. One archive I envisage having to visit is that of the Cocoa Marketing Board in Accra, an organisation which was set up after the cocoa hold-up of 1937 to protest unfair cocoa prices on the world market.

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OCCUPATION AND PLACE OF EDUCATION OF THE CONGRESS DELEGATES

Name	Occupation	Place of Education
Nee Taobai Tackie	Ga Mantse	Germany
Nee Kojo Ababio IV	Jamestown Mantse	Not available
Hon T. Hutton-Mills	Lawyer	Freetown, England
C. J. Bannerman	Lawyer	England
A. B. Quartey-Papafio	Lawyer	Freetown, England (Cambridge)
E. C. Quist	Lawyer	England
F. V. Nanka Bruce	Medical doctor	Lagos, Scotland (Edinburg)
Akilagpa Sawyerr	Lawyer	Freetown, England (Durham)
C. E. Reindorf	Medical doctor	Lagos, Freetown, England, Scotland
A. J. Ocansey	Merchant	Accra
J. T. Addy	Educator	Not available
Kwatei Quartey-Papafio	Lawyer	Freetown, England (Durham)
J. Henley Coursey	Lawyer	England
J. C. Mensah	Clergy (Wesleyan)	Not available
E. Ofori	Merchant	Not available
Mark Hayford	Clergy (National Baptist)	England
Timothy Laing	Journalist	England (Durham)
S. O. Akiwumi	Merchant	Lagos
J. J. Arkrong	Journalist	Not available
J. Kitson Mills	Educator	Not available
J. Addo Vanderpuye	Merchant	Not available
J. M. de Santana	Merchant	Lagos
J. Clover Addo	Laywer	Freetown, Scotland (Edinburgh)
R. Sam Sackey	Lawyer	England
H. van Hein	Merchant	Cape Coast
Osam Pinanko	Clergy (AME)	United States
Prince K Ata Amonu	Lawyer	England (London)
W Ward Brew	Lawyer	England
Chief Censel(?)	Divisional Chief of Saltpond	Not available
Samuel Quagraine	Not available	Not available
C. A. Barnor	Not available	Not available

P. E. Sampson	Lawyer	England
I B Helson (?)	Lawyer	Lagos, England
J E Eninseng (?)	Lawyer	England
S R Wood	<mark>Merchant</mark>	Not available
J E Casely Hayford	Lawyer	Freetown, England
Frederick Arkhurst	Not available	Not available
C J Reindorf	<mark>Merchant</mark>	Accra, England