



Nested Patriotism: Revisiting Collaboration, Resistance and Agency in Colonial Ghana

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Abstract

This paper presents an account of Gold Coast elite in the nineteenth century and their patterns of interactions with the emerging colonial state. Known as the merchant princes, they acted as intermediaries and played essential roles in colonial administration. Their involvement in government was consistent with the belief among some British administrators that ‘allies must be purchased over to our side’ in order to evoke ‘a friendly spirit favourable to our purposes’. Drawing on archival documents, including petitions, official correspondences and newspaper reports, the paper shows that the relationship between merchant princes and colonial administration was a fundamentally ambivalent one. There was equivocation on both sides, the merchant princes often vacillating in their responses to colonial policy, while colonial officials constantly viewed them with suspicion. This ambivalence shaped political developments on the Gold Coast in the nineteenth and turn of the twentieth century. The merchant princes straddled their natal societies and the emerging colonial order, embodying a nested patriotism. The fundamental roles that they played in the emergent colonial order necessitate revisiting the contentious ‘collaboration versus resistance’ debate which reduced responses to colonial rule to either opposition to colonial domination or betrayal of one’s country. The paper argues that these concepts could be useful analytical tools if employed in the analysis of *actions* rather than *actors*.

Keywords Colonialism · Collaboration · Resistance · Agency · Nested patriotism

Introduction

In the mid nineteenth century, British merchant and colonial official, Brodie Cruickshank outlined a strategy for prosecuting the so-called civilising mission on the Gold Coast (now Ghana). He was convinced of the African’s ‘capability for improvement,’ a fact which

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placed an obligation on 'Christian England' to commit itself to 'the noble attempt to cultivate and improve them'. However, this mission could not rely heavily on European labourers, because the climate and disease burden of West Africa made permanent European settlement unlikely. The only way open to winning 'this righteous crusade' was to win over a class of Africans, and even then, the battle-plan could only be carefully and patiently rolled out. Rather than 'any sudden and violent *coup de main*,' the strategy must be an 'insidious' one where '[a]llies must be purchase over to our side'; until 'prejudices have been removed' and 'a friendly spirit favourable to our purposes fully awakened.' If this strategy was followed, 'steady and progressive advancement' would be witnessed on the Gold Coast, with the happy result of 'raising this long degraded race into the ranks of civilization' (Cruikshank 1853: 7, 10–11).

Cruikshank's altruistic, if condescending, professions were common among British residents on the Gold Coast in the middle of the nineteenth century. In actual fact, however, official British policy towards the Gold Coast remained inconsistent and proceeded erratically throughout the nineteenth century and officials in London repeatedly disavowed any social responsibility on the Gold Coast. For example, in 1847, an official in the London Colonial Office declared in frustration, 'why we should take upon ourselves to be judges over them I know not' and another opined that 'I cannot but think that it was an error to countenance the establishment of this singular jurisdiction'.¹ Moreover, the profusion of epithets like 'degraded race' in Cruikshank's writing shows that these reformist pretensions were mixed with a good dose of racial arrogance.

This notwithstanding, such reformist sentiments were frequently professed and were central to self-conceptions of the incipient colonial administration. Officials often made reference to 'the good of our motives' as justification for their actions (Asante 2018: 67), including the policy to incorporate Gold Coasters in the administration. The attitudes of coopted Gold Coasters towards the colonial administration were not static or predetermined either. In spite of these paradoxes, early accounts of African colonial employees lacked complexity, afflicted with what Tom McCaskie (2018: 205) has recently described as a 'black-and-white portrait' lacking in an understanding of 'situational ambiguities of possibility, choice and action.' This calls attention to the necessity of attending to the complexities of the colonial situation.

Cruikshank's proposal draws attention to one source of such complexities. He puts in the most explicit terms a strategy to which the British resorted, sometimes in spite of themselves, and which did not always yield the results which official policy anticipated. Gold Coasters exercised agency in the ways in which they responded to European incentives. Even when they did not openly resist, they adopted strategies of evasion and other quieter forms of dissent that have been so richly documented in the African colonial historiography (Isaacman and Isaacman 1977; Ranger 1967). As Cruikshank (1853: 28–9) himself observed:

¹ CO 96/9, Colonial Office minutes of 15 February 1848, on W. Winniett to Colonial Office, 25 November 1846, TNA. A decade later, a governor lamented that '[w]e have been struggling between two antagonistic principles. One of these principles is non-interference with the native rights as to slavery; the other is the great principle of the empire, the non-recognition of slavery in any form. The conflict meets us at every point. It meets us in our intercourse with the chiefs, in the administration of justice, in the collection of the Poll Tax; in every measure we undertake. It was strikingly seen in raising the Gold Coast Corps.... Nor have our efforts sensibly diminished slavery'. CO 96/41, B. Pine to Colonial Office, 1st October 1857.

The native, keenly alive to his interests, supple and fawning, readily acknowledged the superiority of the white man in words, and hailed him, without any scruples of pride, as his master. But he had, and ever has had, a reservation in his own mind which limits the signification of the term to his own construction of it, and has no more intention of giving implicit obedience, if he can help himself, when his pleasure and profit appear to him to be compromised, than if he had never entered into any undertaking upon the subject. Neither would he wish to shake himself free from the necessity of obedience. His object is to endeavour, on all occasions, to magnify the sacrifice which he is making to gratify your wishes, not so much from a determination not to obey them, as to obtain some bribe or concession for his obedience.

These strategic games on both sides shaped the ongoing nature of politics on the Gold Coast. 'It has,' claimed Cruickshank, 'certainly given rise to an incessant struggle, productive of *every species of artifice* on both sides, in the attempts of the one party to extend their power and influence, and of the other to obtain new privileges' (p. 29, emphasis mine).

To examine how these struggles played out, this paper examines the trade and politics of the merchant princes of the Gold Coast. They were a heterogeneous category of actors whose social lives placed them at the intersection between their natal societies and the emerging European sphere of influence. As a result, they had a clear image of themselves as agents of progress, and this shaped their attitudes towards the colonial government they helped to establish. To make this analysis, I re-examine the contentious collaboration versus resistance debate and propose that those labels can be useful analytical tools if applied to *actions* rather than *actors*. This, in turn, requires that our conception of agency and structure should move beyond a dualistic mode towards a relational understanding of actors and their actions.

Collaboration, Resistance and Agency

The concept of 'collaboration' was introduced to colonial historiography by Ronald Robinson as a conceptual tool for making sense of the colonial subjugation by European powers of large swathes of the world. He used the term 'collaborators' to describe indigenous elites in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East who had chosen to cooperate with agents of European colonialism. Robinson rejected as Eurocentric earlier explanations 'deduced more from first principle than empirical observation,' which focused on conditions internal to European metropolitan centres rather than on the colonies themselves. In his own words, it was needful to explain why 'a handful of European pro-consuls managed to manipulate the polymorphic societies of Africa and Asia, and how, eventually, comparatively small, nationalist elites persuaded them to leave.' Such a theory would never be complete unless scholars paid serious attention to the colonised, or in Robinson's words, the 'victims,' themselves (Robinson 1972: 118). This was important because '[d]omination is only practicable in so far as alien power is translated into terms of indigenous political economy' (ibid: 119).

Collaborators were attracted to the charms of European civilisation, the material and symbolic benefits it promised, but they were also induced by the fear of reprisal if they chose the path of resistance. Collaborative arrangements allowed Europeans to co-opt elites in the establishment of colonial governments, but Robinson notes that these arrangements were 'bargains' rather than one-sided affairs (ibid: 121), since the domestic balance of power had to be carefully maintained if the collaborative arrangement was to be viable. Indeed, British authority on the Gold Coast, especially during the period of consolidation of rule, was

singularly ‘fragile and nervous’ (McCaskie 2018: 210). This implied that even though they considered indigenous political systems as primitive, colonial governments, nevertheless, needed to rely on them to bolster their power and were inevitably drawn, willy nilly, into the ongoing, complex struggles among local interests (Spear 2003). Since imperialism depended so intimately on this complex collaborative arrangement, which was furthermore always in flux, Robinson suggests that paying attention to its pattern and dynamics would be rewarded with a ‘more comprehensive view of the factors involved’ in colonial conquest, since ‘the choice of indigenous collaborators...determined the organisation and character of colonial rule’ (Robinson 1972: 123, 139).

The introduction of the term to colonial studies contributed to further dividing an already polarised field of African colonial historiography. This theory was itself not altogether immune from the Eurocentric bias which Robinson had set out to challenge. A focus on collaboration seemed to give credence to scholarly perspectives which had questioned the authenticity of African nationalist resistance or dismissed Africans who had resisted colonial incursions as naïve or myopic. About resistance to the imposition of colonial rule, Robin and Gallagher (1962: 640) wrote that they constituted ‘romantic, reactionary struggles against the facts, the passionate protest of societies which were shocked by a new age of change and would not be comforted’. Others went even further to label resisters as short-sighted, ill-advised, or leaders unable to come to terms with social change (Oliver and Fage 1962: 203; see also Hargreaves 1969; Perham 1960). Such assertions echoed the smugness which characterised the triumphalist tone of the earlier colonial historiography.

There was more than just a theoretical debate at stake in those heady days of empire’s end (Gocking 1981). Scholars felt a responsibility to challenge perspectives which undermined the legitimacy of nationalist struggles, some even then still being waged across the continent. The nationalism that animated the anticolonial movements in the dying days of colonial rule was also exhibited by scholars, historians not excepted. This is not unique to scholarship about Africa. Students of Asian colonial history have also grappled with the intellectual and political implication of colonial collaboration (De Ceuster 2001). In such an intellectual milieu where, according to Alexander Holmes (1972: 7), nationalism came to be taken ‘as an article of faith rather than a conceptual tool for analysing history,’ it was inevitable that their perspectives would clash with scholars who treated valorised freedom fighters as ‘romantic’ or ‘ill-advised.’ Nationalist historians sought to present a particular version of colonial history in which Africans valiantly fought against colonial rule, and, even if they had to run away from the invading colonial power, they had lived to fight another day and to eventually win freedom from domination. Consequently, images of African reactions to colonialism congealed onto either righteous resistance to colonial rule or cravenly connivance with the enemy.

This nationalist school, therefore, privileged the study of anticolonial resistance. The approach often involved retrospective studies of nationalism and national movements in order to trace a genetic link between twentieth century anticolonial resistance and early colonial or even precolonial political dynamics (Ajayi 1961; Ranger 1968). Writing from this perspective, Ajayi, (1969: 500) argued that once scholars recognised that colonialism was simply ‘an episode’ in African history, it would then be ‘possible to write the history of conquest and the establishment of European rule in Africa in terms of the interaction of two sets of human beings rather than in terms of the contemporary view of Europeans as gods dealing with sub-human natives.’ Studying the African initiative was a necessary corrective to earlier accounts which unduly privileged European action and projected ‘the image of Africans as passive

barbarians' (Isaacman and Isaacman 1977: 31). Indeed, the goal was explicitly stated to be 'to redress the balance and highlight the African perspective' (Boahen 1985: 9).

However, this did not come without its own risks. In the polarised context in which the debates took place, the thin line between highlighting the African perspective and overstating it was blurred. It resulted in the overstatement of the importance of nationalist resistance as a form of African reaction to colonial rule (Denoon and Kuper 1970) and collaboration became an epithet, much like it had been in the history of the Nazi occupation in Europe. Eventually, invoking the collaboration-resistance dualism came to foreclose, rather than stimulate, critical enquiry (Cooper 1994, 2005). Perhaps this was inevitable; considering its association with treachery, the term collaboration had come to be imbued with opprobrium. The term initially emerged as a descriptor for persons who assisted the Nazi regime. A large literature on Vichy France, for instance, explore the many ways in which French persons cooperated with the occupying German forces. This provides a sharp contrast to the concept of resistance, in which we find images of actors who entered into confrontations (overt, covert, armed, or symbolic) with the invading force. These concepts are hardly neutral academic terminologies serving only to designate a particular type of social action. On the contrary, they are powerful political instruments which have been frequently invoked to legitimise a particular political constituency or to exclude another. As Drapac and Pritchard (2015: 867) observe, 'national historiographical traditions continued to be influenced by the need to find resisters to celebrate and collaborators to condemn.'

In this paper, I make a critical re-evaluation of the concept of collaboration by telling the story of a group of Gold Coast merchants in the nineteenth century. I attempt to show that the concepts of collaboration and resistance could be useful analytical tools if they are employed in the analysis of *actions* rather than *actors*. A focus on action would show that this class of Gold Coast elite embodied what we could term as *nested colonial patriotism*, a civic orientation at once directed towards their natal societies and the metropolitan centres of colonial power in such a way that allegiance towards the natal societies is subsumed under loyalty to the colonial power. Furthermore, a focus on action requires that we move beyond the assumed duality of structure and agency in sociological theory. In this dichotomy, structure refers to normative and other social forces that constrain human action. Agency, on the other hand, refers to the capacity of individuals to shape their social environment (for a review of this literature, see Sewell 1992). This debate presents a false dilemma between an 'oversocialized conception' (Wrong 1961) of social actors, on the one hand, and, on the other, autonomous individuals drawing on inner resources to shape their circumstances. In contrast, my analysis is rooted in a relational approach to agency (Burkitt 2016) in which individual autonomy and reflexivity can only be understood within the context of their ongoing social interactions and the entitlements and duties which arise from these interactions.

Resistance and the Colonial Encounter

To properly contextualise the analysis, it is important to make brief comments about some factors which shaped African responses to colonial rule. These include the nature of colonial imposition, the type of colonial regime and how these changed over time. Where colonies were acquired by conquest, the colonised, by definition, militarily resisted European colonialism; the Asante repeatedly fought the British until they were militarily subdued at the turn of the twentieth century (Boahen 2003; Brempong 2000). On the other hand, other colonies were

initially offered, or sought, a 'protected' status; where this was the case, colonial rule was marked by much less violence, as was the case with the southern states of the Gold Coast.

Type of colony was also important. On one extreme were settler colonies, which tended to be heavy-handed in their control of colonised populations. Even where they did not virtually wipe out the indigenous population, the governments were so repressive that violent resistance was the only viable option open to the colonised. Non-settler colonies, on the other hand, had relatively more room for non-violent expression of grievances. These were important contextual factors that shaped the context within which individuals and societies responded to colonial rule.

Reactions to colonial rule changed over time. The literature distinguishes between primary and secondary resistance (Ranger 1968). Primary resistance refers to the attempts by states and chiefdoms to ward off colonial incursion by armed struggle. Secondary resistance, on the other hand, refers to the struggles of the mass nationalist movements which eventually led to independence. However, primary resistance was not a given in each case of colonial encounter. A variety of factors, including those mentioned above, influenced the possibility and intensity of resistance. For instance, the Islamic states of Africa are generally regarded as having put up a stronger resistance to colonial incursion, but even then, the incidence and intensity of resistance depended on a number of internal and external factors (Kanya-Forstner 1969).

Having said that, the era of colonial imposition and that of decolonisation tended to be more turbulent than the era of colonial rule. Once colonial rule was established, however, the reactions of the colonised were recalibrated in light of the existence of colonial domination as a fact of life. In West Africa, most of the leading figures during this period attempted to make the best of the new circumstances they found themselves in. Kwame Arhin (1985: vi) argued this much in his introduction to a volume on three West African colonial civil servants, where he contended that they 'ought to be considered as men who thought of colonial rule as the best opportunity for advancing the technical and socio-economic progress of their respective people.'

This is the context within which I present the merchant princes of the Gold Coast. The southern states of the Gold Coast were under threat of Asante annexation when they accepted British protection in the nineteenth century. The extension of British control on the southern Gold Coast, thus, proceeded 'organically' via a gradual extension of irregular jurisdiction until the territory was declared a Crown Colony in 1874. These, together with the general absence of settlers in West Africa, meant that colonial policies were not as repressive, and African reactions not as violent, as they were in other parts of colonial Africa like Southern Rhodesia or Mozambique.

The Merchant Princes of The Gold Coast

The 'merchant princes' were a small group of Gold Coast merchants in the nineteenth century, influential, wealthy, western-educated and Christian.² They were a product of the great social and political transformations that the Gold Coast witnessed in the nineteenth century following the abolition of the slave trade. 'Legitimate trade' in primary products emerged as the most important economic activity on the Gold Coast and was the wave on which these merchants rode to prominence. The merchant princes were indigenous and mixed-race merchants who

² For an account of African involvement in the trade of the preceding centuries, see Daaku (1970).

operated in all three European spheres of influence on the Gold Coast. In the nineteenth century, the most notable among them were Jan Nieser of the Dutch settlements (Lever 1970), Henrich Richter of the Danish settlements (Justesen 2003) and James Bannerman of the English settlements (Dumett 1983).

In addition to their enormous economic might, they also exerted great political influence, partly because of the limited financial resources of the European governments on the coast. At various points in their careers, they held responsible positions in the respective European administrations of the forts and castles, in the running of which they were pivotal. Some even on occasions advanced loans and even gifts of money to the cash strapped administrations.³ A few of them, like Nieser and Richter, supplied munitions to the ill-resourced Dutch and Danish administrations during periods of warfare (Lever 1970; Justesen 2003). Others fell while fighting in the colonial army against the powerful inland kingdom of Asante.⁴ Thus, their patterns of interaction with the European establishments on the Gold Coast made them indispensable in the emergent colonial order.

These merchants were a community unto themselves, set apart from the larger Gold Coast population by their distinctive characteristics. They were enmeshed in dense web of relationship deriving from inter-marriage and mutual social and economic interests. Educated in the mission schools, many of them were also closely associated with the churches, and some were ordained lay preachers in the mission churches (Dumett 1983; Kimble 1963; Reynolds 1974). Most of the members of this tight-knit educated and Christianised community were engaged in trade either as agents of European firms or on their own account. These, in addition to their wealth and living styles, meant that they shared more in common with the European residents than with the general Gold Coast population. For instance, John Mensah Sarbah, who served on the Legislative Council for 9 years, was revered among his peers, but was much hated by the public. On one occasion when the council passed an unpopular bill, '[a] mob of Cape Coasters stoned his house' because they counted him among the 'member[s] of a council that passed unpopular bills', even though he had been 'sharply' critical of it (Tenkorang 1973: 75).

The proliferation of European surnames such as Bannerman, Hughes, Hutton, Lutterodt, Mills and Vanderpuije is an indication of the strength their association with the small European community. Many started their mercantile careers as apprentices or agents of relatives or European trading firms, like R. G. Ghartey, John Sarbah and W. F. Hutchison, who at an early age had worked as labourers, store clerks or buying agents (Dumett 1983: 670). Perhaps, the most telling evidence of their closeness to the European traders for was the fact that many of them adopted the names of their European associates (Dumett 1983). But there was also a strategic element. Reynolds (1974) suggests that adopting European names allowed Gold Coasters easy access to credit. Embeddedness in networks of trust and longevity in trade were crucial in securing credibility in trading networks, a perception which was probably much helped by name-recognisability. During the cultural revival which swept through the Gold Coast elite at the *fin de siècle*, many of them dropped their European names for African ones (Sampson 1969: 78–9; Tenkorang 1864: 73).

Some of the merchant princes entered into trade using capital bequeathed to them by their parents. This was especially true for mixed-race merchants like the Bannermans, Brews, Huttons,

³ During a period when the annual British parliamentary grant for the Gold Coast administration was about £4000 per annum, 'Mr [James] Bannerman... actually expended upwards of £5000 in aiding the British Government here.' CO 96/55, Andrews to Colonial Office, 3rd December 1861.

⁴ 'Mr Hutchison raised Volunteers during the Ashantee Invasion & died while commanding them in the Interior.' CO 96/68, Colonial Office to Conran, 11th January 1866.

Hughes, Richters and Vanderpuijes whose fathers had been European merchants on the Gold Coast. For many others, however, their capital had been accumulated after years spent working as apprentices and employees of European trading firms on the Coast. For instance, after working for years for Danish trading firm, Stooover Brothers, RJ Ghartey saved enough to start trading on his own account and was even able to ‘[amass] sufficient capital to buy out his parent organization’ (Dumett 1983: 677). The import-export trade on the Gold Coast was based on the commission system, carried on via a sort of barter-credit system whereby European firms shipped manufactured goods to their correspondents on the Gold Coast, who shipped back the equivalent of those goods in primary commodities like palm oil and rubber.

The merchant princes found themselves in a unique moment in the early nineteenth century that allowed them to thrive. After the abolition of the slave trade, European interest in the Gold Coast dipped significantly. The British government adopted a nonchalant attitude to their ‘territorial possessions’ in West Africa. They withdrew from the coast, handing over the administration to the British merchants who continued to trade on the coast. Politically and commercially, the Gold Coast settlements had become ‘trifling and unproductive concerns’ (Kaplow 1977: 318). Cruickshank (1853: 27), who lived through this era, expressed horror at ‘the contemplation of the nations of Europe... clinging to Africa like leeches and sucking her very life-blood, and to find her now almost neglected and forsaken when she is no longer permitted to be their prey.’ According to Kaplow (1977: 322), it was this disinterest of Europeans in the Gold Coast at this time that created the opportunity for the Gold Coast mercantile class to arise and thrive: ‘They mingled freely with the thirty or forty white residents. Europeans and Gold Coast merchants faced the same problems and possibilities, and common concern with mercantile matters united them in a tiny community of “civilized” residents, among whom distinctions of color were unimportant.’ These circumstances, although perhaps unsatisfactory at the social or political level, nevertheless, nourished and nurtured the merchant princes. They thrived under these conditions until irregular British jurisdiction on the Gold Coast gave way to a focused policy and an increasing consolidation of authority.

‘Allies must be purchased’: the merchant princes in colonial administration

The merchant princes were intimately connected with the political administration of the Gold Coast in the mid-nineteenth century. The Bannerman family is a good case. James Bannerman, one of the leading Gold Coast merchants, was for a long time a prominent colonial official. In March 1850, he assumed the civil commandantship of Christiansborg Castle in Osu, and his son, Edmund Bannerman, was appointed as his secretary.⁵ When the Danish forts and castles on the coast were transferred to the British Crown in 1850, three Bannermans accompanied Governor Winniett to meet the Danish governor for the official handing over.⁶ James Bannerman, who enjoyed considerable esteem among both Gold Coasters and Europeans, was appointed lieutenant governor from 1850 to 1851, following the death of Governor William Winniett.⁷

⁵ CO 96/18, W. Winniett to Colonial Office, 30 March 1850

⁶ CO 96/18, W. Winniett to Colonial Office, July 1850

⁷ In 1853, when Governor Stephen Hill was about to proceed on a leave of absence, he considered reappointing Bannerman to act in his absence on account of the ‘...great respect’ he had for him. CO 96/27, S. Hill to Colonial Office, 22nd July 1853

Other Gold Coast merchants were also held in high regard. When Joseph Smith, ‘a Native of this place, and a Magistrate,’ applied for the position of collector of customs after the resignation of the British occupant, Governor Winniett recommended his approval because ‘Mr Smith is unanimously respected by all classes of persons on the Coast.’⁸ The Colonial Office was well disposed to approve Mr. Smith’s application, as a comment on the application by Mr. Merivale shows: ‘...it is of great importance to encourage the natives of the coast to value education by showing them the advantage to which it leads – I am therefore very glad to have an opportunity of making this appointment.’ Merivale’s justification for approving the appointment of Smith echoes Cruickshank’s plans of achieving English ends and was an important justification for the policy on involving Africans in the administration of the Gold Coast in the nineteenth century.

Up to the mid-nineteenth century, there were clear signs that relations of interdependence existed between the merchant princes and their European counterparts. Kimble (1963: 65) writes that European residents during this period ‘were not thinking in terms of colour’. To some extent, such sentiments were shared by metropolitan officials. When James Bannerman received the royal commission, issued upon the authority of Queen Victoria, which appointed him as lieutenant governor, he was addressed as ‘Our Trusty and Wellbeloved James Bannerman,’ and it was intimated that the Queen ‘reposit[ed] especial trust and confidence in your loyalty, integrity and ability.’⁹ When the Legislative Council was instituted, Bannerman was one of two merchants appointed by Winniett as mercantile representatives.¹⁰ Before this, Bannerman had worked for three decades as a Justice of the Peace. Other African merchants similarly held high positions in the administration. In 1851, half of the 12 Justices of the Peace commissioned by Governor Hill were Africans. These included Charles and Samuel, two sons of Bannerman, as well as George Smith, Joseph Smith and Henry Barnes. Africans also held high positions such as Commandants of the various coastal forts and Collector-General of Customs (Kimble 196,365–66).

As a body, the Gold Coast mercantile elite were careful to openly display their loyalty to the British Crown. In a letter to Winniett, a group of these merchants praised the Governor for ‘judicious administration’ which has had salutary effects on trade and ‘civilization’.¹¹ In a subsequent letter, they declared that:

...it is our unequivocal unanimously decided opinion that the existing form of Government that we now enjoy under the Queen is the best, and it is our wish that it remains unaltered. It is our glory and happiness to acknowledge Her Government and Administration... and we fervently pray, that no misdoing of our own, shall cause us to be disinherited, or to be cast off to the care of others.¹²

⁸ CO 96/19, W. Winniett to Colonial Office, 27th July 1850

⁹ SC 2, royal commission appointing J. Bannerman as lieutenant governor of the Gold Coast, 1850

¹⁰ The other was Brodie Cruickshank. When making the appointment, Winniett remarked that these ‘are two of the most influential and best informed Gentlemen in Africa; and who are known to have strongly at heart both the Commercial and Social interests of the Country.’ CO 96/19, W. Winniett to the Colonial Office, 21st August 1850

¹¹ The judicious acts they praised included the military expedition which toppled Kaku Aku, the much hated King of Appolonia. CO 96/13, Native Merchants to W. Winniett, 4th December 1848, enclosed in W. Winniett to Colonial Office, 5th December 1848

¹² CO 96/19, Native Merchants to W. Winniett, 14th August 1850, enclosed in W. Winniett to Colonial Office, 15th August 1850

In addition to expressing their anxiety to have British authority securely established for the promotion of order and progress, they were also quick to affirm their willingness to assist British administrative efforts. For instance, when Governor Kennedy visited the eastern districts, a group describing themselves as ‘educated natives of Accra,’ took the opportunity to deplore the condition of their district but trusted that the Governor would take steps towards ‘the amelioration of our country.’ They were careful to assure him ‘that we are ready to assist in carrying out any measures which your Excellency may deem fit to adopt to restore peace and to bring about a renewal of trade in our district.’¹³

The above account raises the classic image of the colonial collaborator, of a set of actors working closely with the colonial administration to achieve shared interest. It is possible to point to a self-serving impulse as the driving force in this relationship. As intermediaries between the European and African worlds on the Gold Coast, they saw themselves as obvious heirs to the political sphere they were helping to construct. As Robinson (1972: 133) argues, rewards like offices and contracts were used by the colonial administrations to maintain the collaborative arrangement. But they also had more immediate goals. Their requests for roads, and social order and tranquillity, as well as the dissemination of education, were goals they pursued to further their commercial interests. They thus had good reasons to give allegiance to the British government, because such an allegiance best served their goals and interests. In this sense, their interests were entwined with that of the British. And in situations where the interest of one set of actors is entwined or encapsulated in the interest of another, cooperation is guaranteed, even if the relationship is marked by a deficit of trust (Cook et al. 2005).

But such a conclusion would be hasty. The collaboration-resistance dichotomy, taken uncritically, precludes a careful consideration of the mundane aspects of colonial governance in which these Gold Coast merchants were obviously so deeply embedded. A better approach is to place their actions within the context of the times in which they lived, the actual problems that they grappled with, and the immediate concerns which shaped the strategies that they adopted. This would, at the very least, afford other possible explanations for their actions. The merchant princes appeared genuinely committed to ensuring that their communities benefited from the fruits of European modernity. Thus, they saw their connection with England as the sure means to attaining this end. James Bannerman, as Lieutenant Governor, succinctly expressed what impelled many of his contemporaries:

As one deeply interested in the welfare of the Country, I grieve that I can point out no way of Africa helping herself. She must still look to the fostering hand of England, until greater progress has been made. This progress is rapidly going on, and the time I believe is not far distant, when she may be prepared for very great modifications of the present system. This can but be hastened by affording instruction to the young and justice to all.¹⁴

This image of England as a ‘foster’ parent gently nurturing her tender wards for eventual self-governance coincided with the British conceit of being burdened with a civilising mission. Having been educated in the formal Western tradition and proselytised into Christianity, their ideological commitments often overlapped with those of British. Their continued demands for the ostensive markers of modernity, such as schools, hospitals, roads, clean water and street lighting, showed their desire to join their European mentors in the modern world. When Henry Barnes, a

¹³ CO 96/79, Educated Natives to Sir Kennedy, 11th November 1868, enclosed in Sir Kennedy to Colonial Office, 9th February 1869.

¹⁴ CO 96/22, Bannerman to Colonial Office, 6 May 1851, TNA.

Cape Coast merchant, appeared before the 1865 select committee, he gave words to these sentiments. In response to a question about whether ‘your people are improving, are better educated, are better traders and are better off’, he agreed, adding ‘with the aid of the English’.¹⁵ When asked what they wanted, he said: ‘We want a good governor and plenty of good roads... but not without a little expense, perhaps,’ which the people, he believed, would be willing to contribute towards. And he claimed that if the British left, they would be ‘very sorry’ as it would be an ‘injury’ to the country.¹⁶ At this time, the coastal state depended on British protection to ward off annexation by the powerful inland kingdom of Asante.

But the vicissitudes of Gold Coast politics meant that their support for the government was not always guaranteed. A case in point is the discrepancy between their avowed preference for British governance and their responses to the enactment of certain policies. This was especially so when their perceived interests, commercial or political, were immediately at stake. An attempt in 1852 to introduce legislation that outlawed domestic slavery for educated Gold Coasters got them up in arms. The Legislative Council had decided to partially enforce the ban as a first step in the gradual eradication of the institution of domestic slavery. The reasoning of the governor was that educated Gold Coasters ‘were on a footing with Europeans in their advantage’.¹⁷

A proclamation was issued to this effect, in which the merchant princes were accused of using credit from their European trading partners to invest in domestic slaves. The merchant princes condemned this claim as a slander calculated to undermine their commercial interests. In reaction, four Cape Coast merchants, Henry Barnes, Joseph Smith, Thomas Hughes and William De Graft, wrote to the governor to register their regret at the ‘undeserved aspersions which Your Excellency were pleased to cast upon our character in your Proclamation...’¹⁸ Thereafter, a numerous signed protest was sent to the Governor to register their displeasure at the Proclamation which had so dealt ‘a *death blow* to our character and credit.’¹⁹ They also took issue with the fact that the proclamation targeted only the ‘educated native’ population. They argued that such a selective application of English laws and usages risked hindering the wide dissemination of education on the Gold Coast.²⁰ But the crux of their protest was in respect to the legality of the prohibition that the proclamation had imposed on them. Contrary to their professed preference for English governance, they referred to legal principles which suggested that they were not subject to English law: ‘we have been distinctly given to understand publicly in the Assessor’s Court, that the English law is not in this Country—What law therefore this Proclamation enforces upon us, we are at a loss to determine.’²¹ They protested that the Proclamation was not based on law, and can, therefore, not be held to be binding on them.

¹⁵ H. Barnes testimony to the 1865 select committee, Q. 5808, *Parliamentary Papers* (1865).

¹⁶ *Ibid.* Q. 5812-6.

¹⁷ CO 96/25, Legislative Council proceedings, enclosure in S. Hill to Colonial Office, 23rd April 1852. A marginal note by an official in the Colonial Office questioned on what basis the African elite were considered to be on ‘equal footing’ with European. After this policy was promulgated, a disturbance occurred in Cape Coast and the traditional leaders tore up the posted notices, and the governor suspected that ‘the affected parties, educated natives, had a hand in it’: CO 96/25, S. Hill to the Colonial Office, 23 April 1852.

¹⁸ CO 96/25, Barnes, Smith, Hughes, De Graft to S. Hill, 7th May 1852, enclosure in S. Hill to Colonial Office, 13th May 1852

¹⁹ CO 96/25, H. Barnes and others to S. Hill, 15th December 1851, enclosure in S. Hill to Colonial Office, 13th May 1852. Emphasis in original.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ CO 96/25, H. Barnes and others to S. Hill, 15th December 1851, enclosure in S. Hill to Colonial Office, 13th May 1852. They also quoted from a resolution by English traders on the Gold Coast presented to the Governor of Sierra Leone (under whose government the administration of the Gold Coast Settlements was placed) in 1841, against an abrupt cessation of the system of domestic slavery.

vThis challenge was irrefutable. The governor, in frustration, complained to his metropolitan superiors that ‘...it is to be regretted that educated Natives enjoying all privileges and advantages of the White Merchant Traders should be found giving countenance to, and fostering a system so decidedly at variance with the wishes and intentions of Her Majesty’s Government.’²² In the Colonial Office too, officials found themselves in the position of incapacity, because they recognised that the British government was powerless to enforce the abolition of domestic slavery on the Gold Coast, which was a ‘Foreign [Territory] not within British jurisdiction...’ especially since ‘The Native Traders... object to the measures as illegal.’ It was also observed that ‘...the Governor is treading upon delicate ground, & if natives object to his attempt as illegal, which seems very natural, the subject will require careful attention.’²³

However, barely a year after this affair, the merchant princes called again on the Governor Hill, this time imploring him to again exert the authority of the British government. They made this call in 1853, after the Asante Kingdom invaded the southern town of Assin, inciting fears of an outbreak of war. The governor had already gathered forces and drawn a battle strategy, but was frenetically engaging diplomatically with the invading Asante forces. In the middle of the ongoing diplomacy, Governor Hill received a letter from ‘the Merchants of Cape Coast’ imploring him to discontinue the negotiations and immediately start the war.²⁴ In their letter, the merchants referred to the territories surrounding the English forts on the coast as ‘Territories belonging to the English,’²⁵ quite the opposite of the claim they made about the reach of British jurisdiction when the government tried to abolish domestic slavery. They were now willing to accept the right of the British to exercise power on the Gold Coast, on the basis of which they implored the administration to cease negotiations with the Asantes and precipitate the war.²⁶ Such calls from the Gold Coast elite for the British to decisively, if selectively, project power were common. When another major invasion of Asante forces loomed in 1873, the Gold Coast merchants and their colleagues sent a similar petition again to the administration.²⁷

Agency and the Problem of Motivation and Goal Orientation

Agency theorists tend to think of agency as ‘a property of individuals, in this case, reflexive cognitive powers’ (Burkitt 2016: 323). This view is flawed because, as Burkitt argued, it fails to take account of the social context and social relations in which humans are constantly embedded; instead locating agency within human consciousness and motivations. But motivations are notoriously hard to pin down. And even when definitely identifiable, they hardly remain static. Furthermore, action is not always necessarily oriented towards some overarching interests. When actors are confronted with the problems or puzzles of daily life, the key

²² CO 96/25, S. Hill to Colonial Office, 13th May 1852

²³ CO 96/25, Colonial Office minutes on S. Hill to Colonial Office, 13th May 1852

²⁴ CO 96/27, S. Hill to Colonial Office, 8th April 1853

²⁵ CO 96/27, Merchants of Cape Coast to S. Hill, 6th April 1853, enclosure in S. Hill to Colonial Office, 8 April 1853. This group included both African and European merchants.

²⁶ CO 96/27, Cape Coast merchants (T. Hughes and others) to S. Hill, 6 April 1853, enclosed in S. Hill to Colonial Office, 8 April 1853

²⁷ Petition of the ladies, merchants, agents, traders, and other inhabitants of Cape Coast, and its vicinity, re precautionary measures for the safety of the town, &c., &c., *The West African Herald*, 7th June 1873

concern is often to find the most pragmatic solution to the immediate problem at hand (Swidler 1986). A goal-oriented theory of human action risks attributing connections between actions and ultimate values or interests even when there is none (Biernacki 2005). But there are other reasons why explanations that assume linearity between overarching values and actions are problematic. At any point in time, people have a number of different, sometimes competing, goals or values simultaneously. Thus, even within a framework of interest-orientation, it is no easy matter attributing motives to action. As I have argued above, the loyalty of the Gold Coast merchants to the British government can be attributed to a number of motivations. Similarly, different reasons—some strategic, others pragmatic—motivated the decision of the colonial government to include Gold Coasters in the administrative apparatus of the emerging colonial state. They were held together by strong ties, but these were not necessarily bonds of love.

British officials were often suspicious of these educated elites. The ‘educated natives’ were variously described as ‘discontented,’ ‘unprincipled,’ and they were denounced as ‘the curse of the West Coast’ of Africa (Kimble 1963: 87–93). Colonial officials frequently suspected them of involvement in disturbances in the colony. In an internal Colonial Office memo, Meade observes that ‘The “educated natives”... have been at the bottom of most of the troubles on the Coast for some years past,’ observing further that they ‘have always been a thorn in the side of the Govt. of the G. Coast.’²⁸ However, the government still found it necessary to involve these ‘thorns in the side’ in the administration of the colony. British merchant and administrator, Brodie Cruickshank, observed that local colonial officials administered the colony on the assumption that the ‘general Government of the Natives was greatly strengthened by the admission of educated natives to official appointments, and their views in this respect have met the approval of successive Secretaries of State.’²⁹

In the mid-nineteenth century, the administration was careful to project an image of moral rectitude in consonance with its self-conception as an agent of social and moral progress (Asante 2016). However, members of the Gold Coast elite who had been guilty of flouting the most solemn of Victorian mores still found their ways eventually into the administration. The wealthy Cape Coast merchant, Thomas Hughes, is a good example. In the 1840s, he was imprisoned for impregnating two women and having them carry out abortions, a crime for which he became extremely unpopular among British colonial officials and in the Colonial Office.³⁰ So odious was Hughes’ character to metropolitan officials that when, on a business trip to London, he acted as courier for the Aborigines Protection Society, the Colonial Office refused to accept the documents when they realised that he was the medium through which these documents had arrived in London.³¹ In addition to his moral infamy, Hughes was also a vocal opponent of the government. He was especially critical of the poll tax and an increase in customs duty which came into effect in the 1850s. In spite of these, he was appointed as a collector of customs in the late 1850s and was later elected councillor in the newly created Cape Coast municipal corporation (Kimble 1963).

²⁸ CO 96/115, Minute by Mr. Meade, on G. Stratham to Colonial Office, 3 January 1875. Meade also cites this indictment by Governor Kennedy: ‘Cape Coast is afflicted with a number of mischievous half educated mulatto adventurers, whose livelihood mainly depends on keeping up dissension.’

²⁹ CO 96/28, B. Cruickshank to Colonial Office, 7 September 1853

³⁰ CO 96/16, J. Fitzpatrick to Colonial Office, 4 July 1849

³¹ CO 96/21, Colonial Office to Aborigines Protection Society, 17 June, 1850

Turn of Fortunes and Struggles for Re-Entry

By the close of the nineteenth century, the African elite had been pushed to the margins of the consolidating colonial state. Many factors accounted for this. British colonial governance on the Gold Coast became more assertive after the territory was proclaimed a Crown Colony, marking a transition from irregular jurisdiction to a more self-assured administration (Allot 1957). This increasing assertiveness happened alongside changing social dynamics. High mortality among residents had kept the European population small, but medical breakthroughs in the treatment of malaria rendered West Africa less dangerous towards the end of the nineteenth century. The ensuing rise in the resident British population, together with increasingly virulent scientific racism, changed the dynamics of race relations on the Gold Coast. Opportunities to serve in high positions in the colonial administration narrowed considerably, and many already occupying such positions were elbowed out to make way for incoming English officials (Kaplow 1977; Patton 1989).

Things were not much better on the commercial front. There were many risks attending to the system of credit on the Gold Coast, and default of payment by commercial agents was common. Agents and retailers who left the coast to trade in the interiors were effectively beyond the reach of the limited colonial establishment. Thus, many merchants, both African and European, sustained heavy losses through such defaults (Dumett 1983). The volatility of commodity prices on the world market also worked to the disadvantage of the African merchants. This generally unfavourable commercial climate generated mutual suspicion between African merchants and their European trading partners and undermined the basis of the credit system on which the merchant princes depended to carry on trade (Kaplow 1977; Reynolds 1974). In the cutthroat competitiveness which characterised the end of the nineteenth century, they were politically denied access to credit, price-fixing agreements, shipping rebates and other sorts of concessions which Europeans merchants enjoyed. So debilitating were these factors that by the end of the nineteenth century, the heirs of the merchant princes were abandoning full-time trading for professions such as law, medicine, and journalism.

These transformations altered the character of colonial politics. The decades leading to the end of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of organised protest and nationalistic groups. These nationalistic organisations required closer alliance between the educated elite and traditional leaders than had been the case previously. The ill-fated Fante Confederation was the first such major nationalistic organisation. The main movers behind the Confederation were members of the educated elite, predominantly merchants, such as Prince Brew, Joseph D Hayford, George Blankson and JF Amissah, in alliance with Kings and Chiefs of the Fante Territories. Two influential merchants, George Blankson and RJ Ghartey (from 1872, King Ghartey V), were elected secretary and president respectively (Sampson 1969: 56). One of the main reasons for the formation of the Confederation was the Report of the parliamentary select committee of 1865 which had recommended British withdrawal from West Africa, but, as Francis Agbodeka (1964) has strongly argued, there were also important grievances, not least the Anglo-Dutch exchange of forts and, by implication, territorial jurisdiction without consultation with the ruler in the affected territories. But events took an unexpected turn. The anticipated withdrawal did not happen; in fact, the British went on to conclusively consolidate their power, and the leaders of the Confederation were rounded up on charges of treason (Kimble 1963).

A relatively more successful and longer lasting alliance between educated elite and traditional rulers was the Aborigines' Rights Protection Society, which was formed to

protest against a Lands Bill intended to vest all 'unused' lands in the Crown. John Mensah Sarbah, son of influential merchant, John Sarbah, and Jacob Sey, were crucial to the initial success of the Society. JM Sarbah, who had taken up the legal profession, provided pro bono legal services for the Society, and Sey, one of the most influential merchants of the period, bore the cost of passage for the delegation despatched to England to present a petition to the Secretary of State for the Colonies (Kimble 1963).

They adopted non-disruptive modes of protest. Their activism comprised of petition writing (addressed to both the local and metropolitan government), newspaper publication and litigations. However, they were careful to convey to the colonial government that their protests against specific colonial *policies* was not a wholesale repudiation of British colonial rule. King Ghartey V, who had been arrested together with other leaders of the Fante Confederation, epitomised the sentiments of loyalty to empire. On his deathbed, he sent a farewell message 'to all patriotic native kings and friends of the country's cause', in which he remembered the 'many wounds' he had sustained, especially the 'deep scars of the defunct Fanti Confederation.' He urged them to keep up the fight and closed by wishing God's blessings on 'our country, and the Queen. Amen.'³² Ghartey V, thus, echoed the sentiments of the merchants address to Winniett acknowledging their acceptance of imperial domination even though relations between the Gold Coast elite and the colonial government had considerably deteriorated. In southern Africa, Ranger (1967: 353) observes that resistance to colonial incursion was often characterised by a 'rejection of white mastery but a longing for African control of modern sources of wealth and power'. On the Gold Coast, this longing induced the merchant princes to enter into troubled alliance with the British colonial administration.

The sentiments they often expressed hint at their embodiment of a *nested colonial patriotism*, one simultaneously oriented outwardly towards the imperial centre on the one hand, and on the other, inwardly oriented towards the colonial state and the pre-existing polities over which the colonial state had been superimposed. As products of the European education and Christian missionary labour, they were naturally drawn towards the trappings of European civilisation and aspired towards it. As such, their multiple allegiances were ranked in an order that prioritised empire. As colonial patriots, they repeatedly expressed the desire to contribute towards the attainment of the social progress in ways generally consistent with colonial objectives. Many of them believed, with James Bannerman, in the 'fostering care' of England, but they felt their involvement in the process of social transformation was necessary. As a result, a recurrent theme in their activism was to challenge the narrowing of opportunities for Gold Coasters in the colonial administration. This was a resounding theme in their newspapers, in which they expressed longing for the opportunity to contribute to colonial state building:

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?³³

³² King Ghartey's farewell message to the Gold Coast Aborigines Rights Protection Society, cited in Sampson (1969:15)

³³ Jottings, *Gold Coast Times*, 30 May 1884

Conclusion

In this paper, I have revisited the collaboration-resistance debate by telling the story of a group of Gold Coast merchants in the nineteenth century. Standing, as they did, astride their natal societies and the emerging European sphere of influence on the coast, they had a clear conception of themselves as agents of progress. They attained prominence at a time when British representatives on the coast were considering the idea of ‘purchasing allies’ to help them prosecute the so-called civilising mission. There were many reasons why they were positively drawn towards the idea of a British imperial presence on the Gold Coast. As Arhin (1985: vi) contends, they embraced ‘colonial rule as the best opportunity for advancing the technical and socio-economic progress of their respective people.’ They also saw the British Empire as a bulwark against Asante annexation. As a result, they worked closely with the colonial administration, and many of them occupied positions of prestige and responsibility in it.

But their relationship with the colonial administration was fundamentally ambiguous, marked by equivocations among both merchant princes and British officials. This relationship, described by a contemporaneous observer as ‘productive of *every species of artifice* on both sides’ (Cruikshank 1853: 29, emphasis mine), shaped the ongoing nature of politics on the Gold Coast. I have attempted to show that although the terms ‘collaboration’ and ‘resistance’ can be useful conceptual tools, they are, nonetheless, fraught with analytical danger. As Frederick Cooper (1994) has cautioned, they close off enquiry rather than generate new insights or puzzles. However, we can overcome the limitations which the earlier historiography had suffered if we use them to analyse *actions* rather than *actors*. A focus on *actions* allows us to place the colonised within the actual contexts in which they operated and to better understand the constraints that shaped their choices and the opportunities which enabled certain courses of action.

As I have shown above, pragmatic considerations often trumped avowed ideals, goals or interests in the unfolding drama of Gold Coast politics. The relations between the Gold Coast elite and the British government were often uneasy, and both sides had to make compromises. Indeed, when Governor Pine proposed a mass reincorporation of Gold Coast merchants who had been ostracised from the administration, he referred to past conflicts and advised the Colonial Office ‘that these contentions should be buried in oblivion.’³⁴ On their part, the educated African elite were driven by their commercial and political interests, but these had to coexist with their multiple allegiances. These allegiances constituted a *nested colonial patriotism* because they were oriented towards the British imperial and their own African states or chiefdoms, in a hierarchy prioritising empire. This multiplicity of interests and filiations shaped the interactions between this class and the British colonial government in the nineteenth century and into the first few decades of the twentieth.

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³⁴ CO 96/41, B. Pine to Colonial Office, 30th April 1857, TNA

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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