

Food and Drink: Palm Oil versus Palm Wine in Colonial Ghana

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The oil palm tree, *Elaeis guineensis*, has provided West African communities with useful products for millennia. For the last two centuries, it has also given the rest of the world vast quantities of fatty material, first used for soap and grease and later for food. For most of the nineteenth century, these two scales of production and consumption – one local, one global – were complementary. This paper focuses on a controversy which developed in the colonial Gold Coast (modern Ghana) over the future of the palm oil industry. In the first half of the twentieth century, new technologies made exports of edible palm oil feasible, offering West African producers access to a rapidly-growing world market for fat. Most Gold Coast farmers ignored the palm oil industry, however, focusing on cocoa and other crops. Instead of intensifying the cultivation and harvesting of oil palm trees, many tree owners opted to convert them into palm wine, meeting a vibrant local demand for drink.

In the nineteenth century, palm oil emerged as a new export commodity as foreign powers began suppressing the long-established trade in slaves along the West African coast. Farmers continued to produce palm oil for local use, but began exporting oil—and later, palm kernels—harvested from groves of wild and cultivated oil palm trees. Fresh palm oil could only circulate as a foodstuff locally, due to biological processes that caused rancidity.¹ The nature of the oil palm's fruit worked against the commodification of palm oil as a food. In global commerce, palm oil was an inedible substance, used in European and North American industries, and by the late nineteenth century this stuff was often produced using different methods than oil intended for local consumption.² Manufacturers of soap, candles, grease and tinplate in Europe and North America did not care whether the oil was appetising or not so long as it was cheaper than tallow.

In the twentieth century, a series of chemical discoveries and technological innovations reshaped the fats and oils industry, making it possible to produce edible palm oil for the world market.³ Growing demand for edible fat in the West encouraged investment in production and refining, and underutilised oils from plants like cotton flooded into the world market in the form of margarine, cooking oils and solid baking fats. European experts had also discovered an African oil palm variety with unusually good yields growing in Sumatra, where Dutch colonial scientists had been experimenting with the tree.⁴ Imperial powers

¹ Edible palm oil was exported as a foodstuff for slave ships and some quantities found their way to Europe and America, but the scale of the trade was limited before the nineteenth century. Martin Lynn, *Commerce and Economic Change in West Africa: The Palm Oil Trade in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, 2002; N.H. Stilliard, 'The Rise and Development of Legitimate Trade in Palm Oil', MA thesis, University of Birmingham, 1938.

² G. I Jones, *From Slaves to Palm Oil: Slave Trade and Palm Oil Trade in the Bight of Biafra*, Cambridge: African Studies Centre, 1989, p.49.

³ Jonathan E. Robins, 'From "hogless lard" to "smart balance": technology and the globalization of fat', paper presented at the 2015 American Society for Environmental History conference.

⁴ Kurt Berger and S.M. Martin, "Palm Oil," in *Cambridge World History of Food*, ed. Kenneth F. Kiple and Kriemhild Coneè Ornelas, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 397–410; for descriptions of West African production systems, see Anne Martin, *The Oil Palm Economy of the Ibibio Farmer* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1956); Susan M. Martin, *Palm Oil and Protest: An Economic History of the Ngwa Region, South-Eastern Nigeria, 1800-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); J Sarbah, "The Oil Palm and Its Uses," *Journal of the Royal African Society* 8 (1909): 232–50.

anxious to make their tropical colonies paying concerns saw palm oil as a great opportunity: the established trade in inedible oil could be replaced with a higher-value trade in edible oil to feed Europe and the world. In western Africa and southeast Asia, a new production system (the concessionary wage-labour plantation/mill) and a new ecology (Deli oil palm monoculture) threatened to sweep away the decentralised, ‘peasant’ palm-oil industry of West Africa. Producers who had once enjoyed a natural monopoly on the palm-oil trade were forced to adjust, and many did so by turning the oil-palm tree into another commodity: palm wine.

This paper shows that the debate over palm oil and palm wine was multi-dimensional. Earlier studies focused on palm gin, illicitly distilled from palm wine, which first appeared in West Africa in the 1930s and which quickly threatened colonial law and order (to say nothing of colonial tax revenue).⁵ The arrival of palm gin in fact intensified a long-running debate about the best uses of oil-palm trees. Beyond providing an alternative source of tax-free alcohol, palm-wine production created environmental concerns, as local taste on the Gold Coast demanded wine from felled trees, rather than wine tapped from standing trees. Some colonial scientists feared that indiscriminate palm felling would lead to desertification, but others – as well as indigenous elites on the Gold Coast – were more worried about the loss of oil-bearing trees. Making palm wine and gin removed the trees that were needed to generate commodities for export, and some observers worried that West Africans were trading future prosperity for drink.

The idea of ‘anti-commodities’ offers one way of understanding the function of palm wine in the colonial economy. In this paper, I argue that palm wine functioned as an ‘anti-commodity’ in West Africa, providing an alternative to the world market for edible palm oil and kernels. Anti-commodities can be defined as things “produced in such a way that price shocks associated with an over-reliance on commodity production can be absorbed.”⁶ Crops that meet subsistence needs, products that can be stored indefinitely, or things which can be used in different ways in local and global markets all serve this anti-commodity function of insulating local actors from the vagaries of the global market. In their introduction to a recent volume exploring the idea of anti-commodities, Sandip Hazareesingh and Harro Maat argued that the anti-commodity phenomenon extends beyond the materiality of a given substance. For Hazareesingh and Maat, the anti-commodity concept encompasses the ways in which individuals built:

resilient livelihoods, manifested through acts of creation and of productive ingenuity that often accompanied episodes of defiance, and that went far beyond these moments of active resistance and endured over time.⁷

⁵ Emmanuel Akyeampong, *Drink, Power, and Cultural Change: A Social History of Alcohol in Ghana, c.1800 to Recent Times*, Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1996: compare the Ghanaian case with a similar sequence of events in Nigeria. See Philip E. Leis, ‘Palm Oil, Illicit Gin, and the Moral Order of the Ijaw’, *American Anthropologist* 66:4 (August 1964), pp.828–38; Simon Heap, ‘Those That Are Cooking the Gins: The Business of Ogogoro in Nigeria during the 1930s’, *Contemporary Drug Problems* 35 (2008), p.573; Chima J. Korieh, ‘Alcohol and Empire: “Illicit” Gin Prohibition and Control in Colonial Eastern Nigeria’, *African Economic History*, 31 (2003), pp.111–34.

⁶ Bruce Mouser et al., ‘Commodity and Anti-Commodity: Linked Histories of Slavery, Emancipation and Red and White Rice at Sierra Leone’, *Commodities of Empire Working Papers*, 19 (2012), p.3.

⁷ Sandip Hazareesingh & Harro Maat, ‘Introduction’, in *Local Subversions of Colonial Cultures*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p.2.

This broader definition of ‘anti-commodity’ captures the ways in which palm wine was used in colonial West Africa. It was a specific thing, produced for local rather than global consumption, but it also reflected a response to changing conditions within the colonial economy. Instead of remaking the landscape with plantations of high-yield trees to support export production, palm-tree owners found it much more lucrative to turn their property into wine, exchanging the possibility of future oil production for a produce with ready demand among local consumers. The wide distribution of oil palms allowed some West Africans to resist the new plantation systems and to short-circuit an economic system in which West Africans exchanged agricultural commodities for imported consumer goods like alcohol. The resulting conflict over oil-palm trees illustrated the resistance of African farmers to colonial demands for commodity exports, but also highlights competing visions of economic development within West African communities.

The Gold Coast oil palm industry

British administrations in Gold Coast and nearby Nigeria wanted the revenue that edible palm-oil exports would bring, but they were wary of introducing plantation concessions that would undermine indigenous land tenure and chiefly authority – institutions that the colonial state relied on for the ‘indirect rule’ model of governance. The ‘traditional’ palm-oil industry in Nigeria continued to grow during the first half of the twentieth century, despite growing competition from colonial plantations around the world. The once important palm-oil industry on the Gold Coast seemed to be in a terminal pattern of decline, however. The Gold Coast palm-oil industry had long been regarded as a neglected asset by colonial officials, reflecting British stereotypes about the alleged ‘laziness’ of Africans as well as what was believed to be the inherent fertility of tropical forests.⁸ An 1889 report on ‘Economic Agriculture in the Gold Coast’ is illustrative of the colonial mindset:

It is impossible to travel through the oil districts without being struck by and lamenting the enormous waste of produce which is everywhere apparent. One walks among the thousands of splendid trees in full bearing with the nuts falling off ungathered, and at the places where the oil is made heaps of nuts worth hundreds and collectively many thousands of pounds and see rotting, because with his defective means the owner cannot bring them to market. The oil is made in the most careless and wasteful manner, the quality being thereby injured and the price reduced while the process of cracking the nuts by hand is so slow that there is not the time to carry it out.⁹

The author of this report was sure that “contact with the European merchant and the discovery that pure clean [oil] pays better than bad and dirty oil will effect a revolution in oil making,” but officials were making similar observations half a century later. Efforts to introduce hand-powered machinery and other methods for improving the quality of palm oil failed, as many Ghanaians seemed uninterested in expanding the palm-oil export trade. The District

⁸ On the idea of the ‘lazy African’ see Klas Rönnbäck, ‘The Idle and the Industrious: European Ideas about the African Work Ethic in Precolonial West Africa’, *History in Africa* 41 (June 2014), pp.117-45; for European ideas about the fertile nature of African landscapes, see P. D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action*, London: Macmillan, 1964; Helen Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870-1950*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

⁹ Report of the Commission on Economic Agriculture in the Gold Coast 1889, MSS W.F. Hutchinson, Secretary, Accra, 149-150, ADM 5/3/7, Public Records and Archives Administration, Accra branch (PRAA).

Commissioner for Oda, for example, reported in 1925 that “the Chiefs in this district are not interested, in any way, in the Palm Oil Industry.”¹⁰

Of course, Ghanaians still made large quantities of palm oil for local consumption. The Department of Agriculture estimated the colony’s consumption at no less than one million gallons per year in the 1920s; this figure was significantly larger than exports for most of the pre-1945 period. In urban centres, edible palm oil fetched “about three times what it is worth for export,” nearly £72 per ton. One official remarked:

It is not in the least curious ... that owners of oil palms, with this large and remunerative market open to them, do not exert themselves still more and manufacture a surplus for export worth something like £30 to £35 per ton on the English market.¹¹

This disparity between local and global prices, alongside the incredible success of cocoa exports, meant that there was little interest in exporting palm oil.

By the 1920s, however, British administrators were worried that even Nigeria’s successful export industry would soon be driven out of business by plantations in western Africa and southeast Asia. Colonial secretary Ormsby-Gore reported that “people long engaged in West African trade are seriously disturbed at the outlook.” The solution was not imitating the new large-scale plantations, however. Ormsby-Gore argued it was possible to modernise the industry in British West Africa without jeopardising “native rights in land.”¹² In the course of investigating ways of revitalising the Gold Coast palm oil industry, however, colonial officials discovered a problem even more worrying than foreign plantations: the intentional destruction of oil palm trees.¹³ Cutting palms for wine was not a new phenomenon, of course. As one colonial administrator put it: “Palm-wine, from the point of view of the farmer, is as normal a source of income as palm-oil or kernels are.”¹⁴ Palm wine served social, political and religious functions across West African societies, and while the availability of imported liquor diminished the prestige of palm wine as a ritual drink, it remained popular in areas where suitable palms grew.¹⁵ Colonial officials came to view palm wine as a problem in and of itself, but one that was connected to the changing landscape of the Gold Coast. Oil palms felled for wine were increasingly replaced with cocoa, and the colony’s dependence on cocoa monoculture put farmers in a precarious economic and ecological situation. Cutting down oil palms also reduced the amount of oil available for local consumption, a worrying prospect for officials who began to pay greater attention to import dependency and nutrition in the 1920s.¹⁶ In the interwar decades, Gold Coast elites and colonial officials used the palm

¹⁰ Oda DC to CCP, 4 March 1925, ‘Palm oil records, Oda district’, ADM 36/1/11, PRAAD-Accra.

¹¹ The ‘colony’ referred to here includes the Gold Coast Colony proper, as well as Ashanti and the Northern Territories. All subsequent references to the Gold Coast should be taken as applying to the area of modern Ghana unless otherwise specified. Agriculture Department annual report for 1922-1923, 17, ADM 5/1/79, PRAAD-Accra.

¹² Ormsby-Gore Report, p.101, ADM 5/3/24, PRAAD-Accra.

¹³ I have identified only a handful of records discussing palm felling in the Colonial Office papers at the National Archives (UK). Most of the debate appears to have occurred within the Gold Coast administration, and all of the archival records cited in this paper were located in archives held by Ghana’s Public Records and Archives Administration.

¹⁴ Memo, Director of Agriculture, 13 February 1934, CSO 8/3/3, PRAAD-Accra.

¹⁵ The definitive work on palm wine and alcohol generally in Ghana is Akyeampong (1996).

¹⁶ Jonathan E. Robins, “‘Food comes first’: creating a “food problem” in colonial Ghana”, paper presented at the 2015 British and the World Conference.

wine issue to contest broader issues about the future of the environment, economy and society of the Gold Coast.

The palm-felling problem

The first colonial officials to question the practice of palm-felling were less interested in palm wine itself than they were in the environmental repercussions of clearing large areas of oil palms. As early as 1909, colonial officials expressed concern about the “great destruction of Oil Palm” to supply growing urban centres like Cape Coast with wine.¹⁷ Along the coast, trees were replaced with food crops, while further inland farmers enthusiastically planted cocoa after felling oil palms and other trees. As historians have documented, the health of forests was a major concern for colonial governments in the British Empire. Some scholars have traced a direct link between contemporary conservation policy and the colonial past, seeing colonial environmentalism as a hegemonic, coercive project aimed at protecting an arbitrarily-defined ‘nature’ from human communities.¹⁸ As Richard Grove has shown, many British colonial officials embraced a ‘dessicationist’ theory, which held that forest clearing invariably led to desertification.¹⁹ Experience on islands and in India seemed to show a clear link between forest clearing and declining rainfall. Gold Coast officials pointed to the dry, treeless Accra plain as proof that “uncontrolled deforestation was causing rapid climate change in the form of declining rainfall.”²⁰ Drawing on experience garnered across the British Empire, scientists and officials called for the strict regulation of forest resources to halt desiccation and erosion, processes which posed an “implied threat to the economic basis of colonial rule.”²¹

Initially, the Gold Coast agriculture department viewed palm felling through this ‘dessicationist’ lens. In 1914, for example, an official at the Aburi agricultural research station warned an important chief in the Eastern Province to “instruct all your people to discontinue the practice of felling oil palms.” The official delivered the dessicationist gospel to the chief and insisted that if deforestation continued, the people would “neither have oil palms or cocoa, as cocoa cannot thrive on a dry country and if all the oil palms are removed the country will soon be useless for cocoa or any other product.”²² Gold Coast elites had successfully resisted colonial efforts to impose conservation policies, however. In the 1890s, legislation aimed at limiting rubber tapping and timber harvesting was forcefully rejected by Gold Coast

¹⁷ H. C. W. Grimshaw, Report 1001/09, 3 August 1909, extracted in, ADM 11/1/151, PRAAD-Accra.

¹⁸ The literature is substantial, and best developed on South Asian topics. See for example Richard P. Tucker, ‘The Forests of the Western Himalayas: The Legacy of British Colonial Administration’, *Forest & Conservation History* 26:3 (1982), pp.112-23; Pernille Gooch, ‘Victims of Conservation or Rights as Forest Dwellers: Van Gujjar Pastoralists between Contesting Codes of Law’, *Conservation and Society* 7:4 (2009), pp.239-48. Taking a contrarian position, Gregory Barton (*Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p.166) has argued that imperial conservation policies “gave birth to an environmental revolution which is still in the process of saving humans from themselves.”

¹⁹ Richard H. Grove & Toyin Falola, ‘Chiefs, Boundaries, and Sacred Woodlands: Early Nationalism and the Defeat of Colonial Conservationism in the Gold Coast and Nigeria, 1870-1916’, *African Economic History* 24 (1996), pp.1-23; Richard H. Grove, *Ecology, Climate and Empire: Colonialism and Global Environmental History, 1400-1940*, Cambridge: White Horse Press, 1997; see also Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocasts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, London: Verso, 2001.

²⁰ Joseph Morgan Hodge, ‘Colonial Foresters versus Agriculturalists: The Debate over Climate Change and Cocoa Production in the Gold Coast’, *Agricultural History* 83:2 (Spring 2009), p.202.

²¹ Grove (1997), p.153.

²² Acting Director of Agriculture to Sir Emmanuel Mate Kole, Konor of Manya Krobo, 17 April 1914, SC 17/365, Mate Kole papers, PRAAD-Accra.

elites, as well as by chiefs and urban elites in neighbouring Lagos colony, which was experiencing similar pressures on forest resources. There was little true waste land or primeval forest, especially along the coastal belt, so the creation of forest reserves necessitated the seizure of land from local communities. Gold Coast elites decried the conservation proposals as “British Brigandism.”²³ When the Gold Coast Forestry Department was belatedly founded in 1909, it had no forest reserves to manage and the office was abolished entirely in 1917.²⁴

In Grove and Falola’s interpretation, the good intentions of colonial foresters were foiled by the political power of African chiefs and urban elites, who successfully defended local customs from conservation legislation. The rest of this paper shows that environmental science was only one lens through which colonial officials viewed the use of trees. Economic concerns were also vitally important, and the knowledge and actions of Africans had a significant impact on how colonial policy developed. As Joseph Hodge has observed, colonial science “was far from being a homogenous enterprise.” The ‘dessicationist’ theory was influential and long-lived, but it was not hegemonic. Conflicts among European officials and between Europeans and Africans produced “an enigmatic, fractured, somewhat contradictory mission” for the colonial state in the agricultural and environmental arenas.²⁵

Liquor policy and palm wine

A treaty signed in the aftermath of the First World War created the conditions in which this struggle between colonial policy and indigenous values and knowledge played out. In 1919, the victorious Allied powers signed a convention dealing with the spoils of war in colonial Africa. While the main aim was to strip Germany of its lucrative African trade in liquor and other commodities, the agreement also called for the general prohibition of cheap “trade spirits.” Throughout the 1920s, activists used the new League of Nations to push alcohol prohibition on European colonies and the new mandatory states.²⁶ Africans were not asked for their views on the treaty, and even European officials in Africa found that they had little influence over the treaty, which upset a centuries-old trade in liquor.

While not as controversial a topic as environmental policy, alcohol policy in Africa has also attracted a great deal of interest from scholars. Early studies focused on the importance of alcohol in trade between Europe, America and Africa, and more recent scholarship has moved beyond imports and exports to focus on local patterns of production, consumption and meaning.²⁷ The continent is host to a rich diversity of alcohol traditions,

²³ Grove & Falola (1996), p.11.

²⁴ Barton (2002), p.107; Grove (1997), p.175.

²⁵ Hodge (2009), p.217.

²⁶ Raymond E. Dumett, ‘The Social Impact of the European Liquor Trade on the Akan of Ghana (Gold Coast and Asante), 1875-1910’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 5:1 (1974): p.69; Virginia Berridge, *Demons: Our Changing Attitudes to Alcohol, Tobacco, and Drugs*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp.136-7.

²⁷ For an overview of the field, see Lynn Pan, *Alcohol in Colonial Africa*, Helsinki; New Brunswick: Finnish Foundation for Alcohol Studies/Rutgers University Center of Alcohol Studies, 1975; Deborah Fahy Bryceson, *Alcohol in Africa: Mixing Business, Pleasure, and Politics*, Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002; Akyeampong (1996); J. S. Crush and Charles H. Ambler, *Liquor and Labor in Southern Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1992; J. Willis, *Potent Brews : A Social History of Alcohol in East Africa, 1850-1999*, Oxford: James Currey, 2002. For studies focused on trade and prohibition, see Leis (1964); Dumett (1974). For more recent studies, see A. Olukotun, ‘Prohibition and Paternalism: The State and the Clandestine Liquor Traffic in Northern Nigeria, c.1898-1918’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies* (1991), pp.349-68; Lynn Schler, ‘Looking through a Glass of Beer: Alcohol in the Cultural Spaces of Colonial Douala, 1910-1945’, *The*

reflecting the variety of indigenous sources of alcohol as well as contact with foreign (mainly European) products and technologies. During the colonial period, the production and consumption of locally made alcohol like palm wine frequently created conflicts between individuals and colonial states. Colonial governments depended on revenue from alcohol taxes and licenses, and many saw links between alcohol consumption and social disorder.

On the Gold Coast, urbanisation and the growth of the market economy during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries disrupted the socio-cultural framework in which alcohol had traditionally been consumed. Young men used cash earnings from labour and trade to purchase imported alcohol, bypassing elite-controlled organisations that regulated opportunities to consume alcohol ritually and socially.²⁸ Across British West Africa, rising rates of alcohol consumption provoked a response from governments and temperance organisations, local and foreign. The Gold Coast was an attractive target for prohibition campaigners, because its annual consumption of imported spirits “far [exceeded] that of all the other West African colonies put together.”²⁹ Gold Coast officials and African merchants alike were powerless to resist the new prohibitionist movement in Europe, and were forced to adapt to a new economic landscape. With cheap rum banned by the 1919 treaty, many turned to alternative drinks.

The District Commissioner for Oda reported around 1920 that the trade spirits ban led to “an appreciable increase in the consumption of palm wine in this District.” He also observed that the ban was not having the desired effect: “intoxication, I regret to say, would appear to be on the increase.”³⁰ Kojo Nkum, the Omanhene of Gomoa, wrote to the District Commissioner at Winnebah in 1922 with a complaint about rampant palm felling for wine production:

I have to inform your Worship that since the prohibition of Rum people have been spoiling many palm trees so much by the felling of them and if I could get the assistance of the Government to either put a stop to such willful acts and order be strictly made to tap the trees in very few numbers, I shall be so thankful as good many of the Chiefs, sub-Chiefs, Odikroes and subjects have often made complaints to me about the trees.³¹

A committee investigating the oil palm industry in the Western Province was sure that:

the main cause of this increase in palm tree felling is the recently imposed restrictions upon the importation of trade Spirits and the consequent alarming increase in illicit distillation of palm alcohol.

The committee regretted that oil palms “should be sacrificed for immediate gain.”³² Chiefs and colonial officials alike worried about unregulated access to alcohol, as well as the loss of oil- and kernel-producing trees. The only major palm-oil mill operating on the Gold Coast

International Journal of African Historical Studies 35:2/3 (2002), pp.315; Korieh (2003); Simon Heap, ‘A Booming Business in the Bush: How the Anti-Commodity of Local Ogogoro Destroyed the Imported Liquor Trade in Nigeria in the 1930s’, paper presented at workshop *Local forms of production as resistance against global domination: anti-commodities*, Amsterdam: International Institute of Social History, 2010.

²⁸ Akyeampong (1996), Chapter 4.

²⁹ Cited in Akyeampong (1996), p.88; see also 82-3.

³⁰ Oda DC to Commissioner, Central Province, c. 28 May 1920 [year illegible], ‘Palm Oil records, Oda District’, ADM 36/1/11, PRAAD-Accra.

³¹ Kojo Nkum to DC Winnebah, 9 March 1922, ‘Palm Oil records, Oda district’, ADM 36/1/11, PRAAD-Accra.

³² Director of Agriculture to Colonial Secretary, 28 March 1933, CSO 8/3/3, PRAAD-Accra.

reported in 1920 that “great damage is being done to the oil palm areas by the indiscriminate cutting down of trees for the purpose of manufacturing palm wine,” threatening the future of the oil industry.³³ Farmers also cut down palm trees to plant cocoa and food crops, but colonial officials did see not these as undesirable uses of forest land. While colonial officers warned farmers against putting their “eggs in one basket” by specialising in cocoa, they understood that cocoa was much more attractive as a cash crop than palm oil and kernels.³⁴ Colonial Undersecretary Ormsby-Gore thought it was obvious that the decline of the Gold Coast palm oil industry was “entirely due to the success of cocoa, in which the labour is less arduous and the returns greater.”³⁵

As complaints about palm-wine felling accumulated in Accra in the aftermath of the liquor ban, acting governor J.C. Maxwell polled staff in Britain and the Gold Coast about the best course of action. Experts at Kew identified a ‘palm tree belt’ and proposed a forest reserve scheme. The Conservator of Forests strongly backed the reserve plan and called for legislation “making it compulsory on all owners of Oil Palm groves to reserve a maximum of one-third and a minimum of one-fifth of their holdings.” The Commissioner for Ashanti seconded the plan. Most of Ashanti was outside the proposed ‘palm tree belt’, however. Officers in districts with high concentrations of oil palms were vehemently opposed to forest reserves. The Central Province commissioner warned that reserves would “meet with fierce opposition” from farmers, although he predicted that chiefs would loyally support any reserve legislation. The Eastern Province commissioner questioned the very premise of the discussion, saying he was “not at all sure that imprudent felling of Oil Palm trees does take place in his province.” He also dismissed a plan to promote tapping of standing trees, noting that the wine was inferior. In his view, “the country is not yet ripe for the adoption of a protective policy.” For his own part, Maxwell was wary of resorting to legislation, and felt sure that “[t]he African is fully alive to the value of the Palm Tree in districts where he gets a ready sale for the products.”³⁶ Colonial Secretary G.S. Northcote supported forest reserves, but he stressed in a later memo that education rather than regulation was necessary to develop the oil-palm industry. Northcote believed Ghanaians would eventually learn “their duties toward posterity and of the foolishness of squandering a prospective source of wealth.”³⁷

The problem was that the product with ‘ready sales’ was wine, not oil. The versatile nature of the oil-palm tree gave individuals an outlet for their labour that directly competed with palm-oil and kernel exports. Palm wine was untaxed (or untaxable), and its sale meant less tariff revenue from exported oil and imported liquor. Worse still, the trees were physically destroyed, reducing the export potential of the landscape. Elsewhere in West Africa, colonial governments enacted outright bans on palm-wine tapping. French authorities banned it in several colonies in 1907 in an effort to support the oil and kernel industry. A French expert on the oil palm industry scoffed that “the natives do not hesitate to sacrifice” oil palms when they wanted “their favourite drink.”³⁸ Even the tapping of standing trees, which preserved the tree at the cost of fruit yield, came under colonial scrutiny. While some

³³ Palm Oil Estates Managers Ltd., quoted in Agricultural Department annual report for 1920, 13, misfiled in ADM 5/1/78, , PRAAD-Accra.

³⁴ See correspondence and memos, c. 1910-1923 in ADM 11/1/821, , PRAAD-Accra.

³⁵ Ormsby-Gore Report, 140, ADM 5/3/24, , PRAAD-Accra.

³⁶ Acting Gov. Maxwell to Duke of Devonshire, 27 July 1923, ‘Palm Oil Records’, Oda district, ADM 36/1/11
Ormsby-Gore Report, 140, ADM 5/3/24, , PRAAD-Accra.

³⁷ Memo, GS Northcote, 1933, in CSO 8/3/3, PRAAD-Accra.. During the Second World War, some schools required students to plant and harvest oil and coconut palms for the war effort, but these efforts appear to have evaporated after 1945.

³⁸ Paul Hubert, *Le palmier à huile*, Paris: H. Dunod et E. Pinat, 1911, pp.79-81.

agricultural officials hoped to teach Gold Coast farmers to tap standing trees instead of felling them, other Europeans wished Africans would stop tapping trees entirely. One handbook aimed at would-be colonial planters warned that palm wine tapping would whittle away at plantations, suggesting that tapping was “a practice which the Government are endeavouring to eradicate.”³⁹

Confronting colonial myths

Had scientific ideas like the ‘dessicationist’ theory been all-powerful, the palm-wine controversy should have led to a strong state conservation response. Yet when colonial officials confronted the palm-wine problem, they discovered that it was not really a problem at all, at least as far as environmental change was concerned. Instead, officials – as well as Gold Coast elites – focused on economic and moral dangers posed by palm wine. First-hand observations from British officials and local elites showed that the palm-felling issue was much exaggerated. In the Central Province, an agricultural agent reported: “people are almost to a man of the opinion that there are already plenty of palms and that such as are cut down will eventually be replaced by natural agencies.” The same writer noted that “the more enlightened chiefs now realise the danger of excessive destruction of their palms,” though he noted that in Winnebah “the people appear to value their palms least, even going so far as to sell standing palms to foreigners for the purpose felling for wine.” “The people will not see the necessity of further planting whilst the palm oil trade remains in its present inactive condition,” he concluded.⁴⁰

When questioned about palm felling by the Accra District Commissioner, the king of Teshie insisted that only “old fruitless trees” were cut for wine. The famous lawyer John Atta Mills supported this claim, telling the Colonial Secretary that around Cape Coast the extensive felling of oil palms had “the effect of improving the growth of both the trees and the quality of the nuts produced.” He further noted that “in the littoral palm fields, the trees generally grow stunted and immature and do not produce good nuts as in the forest palm fields,” carving out a geographical distinction between the coastline and the inland region at the edge of what was becoming cocoa country. Mills concluded that felling trees for wine “does little or no harm at all to the palm trees in the [Central] province generally.”⁴¹ An expert interviewed by a wartime committee on vegetable oils acknowledged that diminished access to imported liquor led to increased demand for palm wine, but he stated that “probably only useless trees” would be felled.⁴² The anthropologist Margaret Field, tasked by the colonial government with investigating Manya Krobo state in the 1930s, reported that “[p]alm trees are never felled solely for the sake of their palm-wine but only when the trees require thinning out. No palm is cut down without a sense of guilt and a ceremonial apology.”⁴³ While she

³⁹ F. W. Milligan, *The Cultivation of the Oil Palm*, London: Crosby, Lockwood, and Son, 1914, p.82.

⁴⁰ Prov. Superintendent of Agriculture A.B Culham to CCP, 10 April 1924, ‘Palm Oil records, Oda district’, ADM 36/1/11, PRAAD-Accra.

⁴¹ Nikoety Manshe to DC Accra, 25 Sept 1908 and JA Mills, Gold Coast Aborigines Rights Protection Society to SNA, 3 October 1903, ADM 11/1/1144, PRAAD-Accra.

⁴² Committee on Edible and Oil-Producing Nuts and Seeds, *Minutes of Evidence*, Cd. 8248, London: HMSO, n.d., p.124.

⁴³ Dr. M. J. Field, report on Manya Krobo land affairs, 1940-1941, CSO 21/22/177, PRAAD-Accra.

praised Krobo practice, Field argued that other groups were less scrupulous, and faced “a serious social problem” due to the growing popularity of distilled palm wine.⁴⁴

When colonial agricultural officials engaged with Gold Coast farmers and made first-hand observations, they tended to conclude that palm wine did not pose an existential threat to the environment or economy of the colony. Political officials in Accra and London feared for the future of the oil palm industry, but agricultural experts insisted that “palms are usually growing too closely together and if intelligent discretion is shown in thinning them out for this purpose [palm wine] no very serious consequences need be anticipated.”⁴⁵

If the environmental risks of palm wine were easy to dismiss, the economic and moral repercussions of the growing palm wine and palm gin (*akpeteshie*) industries continued to bother colonial officials, as well as Gold Coast elites. From the colonial point of view, the liquor ban had created a net loss for the imperial economy. More palm wine meant less palm oil, but if Africans did make more palm oil for export, they were prohibited from buying their preferred drink with their earnings. By banning cheap liquor imports, the colonial government drove “the natives into drinking nothing but palm wine,” creating “a real risk of a destruction of or damage to palm trees … [which] have an economic value.”⁴⁶ French officials in neighbouring Côte d’Ivoire hoped that suppressing palm wine alongside imported liquor would stimulate sales of French wine as an alternative drink,⁴⁷ but pushing British-made drink on Ghanaians would hardly have appeased the prohibitionist lobby. In any case, no British manufactures could replace the void filled by imported liquor, because locally made drink was an easy replacement.

If palm wine was a loss to the imperial economy, it was a boon to the local economy. As colonial officials quickly realised, farmers cut down oil palms for wine because palm wine was a more lucrative industry than palm oil. The same pattern was also visible in Nigeria, where men took up alcohol production as palm oil prices declined.⁴⁸ Officials could hardly argue that palm wine tappers and palm tree owners were making irrational economic decisions, given the profits to be made. Yet if palm felling continued to grow at the rate observed in the 1920s and 1930s, the palm-oil industry would never get a chance to compete with palm wine on economic terms. There would simply not be enough trees left, and the coastal palm-oil belt, which was not suitable for cocoa cultivation, would lose its only viable export industry. The Gold Coast government tried to promote coconut palms, rubber trees, and other export crops as alternatives to oil palms, but only a few plantations and concentrated areas of non-plantation production were successful, in the far east and far west of the colony.⁴⁹ Farmers in the Central Province evidently preferred to chase the cocoa frontier to the north, or serve the growing urban markets for foodstuffs instead of investing in a new export crop. A few officials feared that if left unchecked, the steady process of oil-palm felling would lead to local shortages of palm oil. One district commissioner reminded the

⁴⁴ M. J. Field, ‘The Agricultural System of the Manya-Krobo of the Gold Coast’, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 14:2 (1943), p.58.

⁴⁵ Agricultural Department annual report for 1918, 13, ADM 5/1/75, PRAAD-Accra.

⁴⁶ R. Slater, ‘The Gold Coast: Some Facts and Figures’, *Journal of the Royal African Society* 29:116 (July 1930), p.348.

⁴⁷ Owen White, ‘Drunken States: Temperance and French Rule in Côte d’Ivoire, 1908-1916’, *Journal of Social History* 40:3 (Spring 2007), pp.669-71.

⁴⁸ Leis (1964).

⁴⁹ A. Baron Holmes, “The Gold Coast and Nigeria,” in *Tropical Development, 1880-1913: Studies in Economic Progress*, ed. W. Arthur Lewis (London: Allen & Unwin, 1970), 171.

Omanhene of Oda that palm oil was a food “of very considerable nutritive value and the diet of the people would suffer badly if the supply of palm oil were to decrease.”⁵⁰

Some Gold Coast residents joined the government campaign against palm wine, though their reasons were more moralistic than economic. J. L. Hammond of Afiansi, who identified himself as a “subject of 45, patriotic, sympathetic, farmer, observer (member of the Royal Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) but of poor education,” petitioned the governor for protective legislation for the oil palm in 1935. Hammond described a “war” against oil palms, a tree of which “every part is useful, and must be deemed sacred.” While there was an ample stock of local folklore supporting Hammond’s claims about the sacred nature of the oil palm tree, he chose to cite Revelation 7:9, which refers to palm fronds. Hammond signed his letter, “Farmer, Defender of Palm Tree.”⁵¹ Hammond’s letter blended local and imported ideas, mobilising indigenous traditions venerating the oil palm in the service of a Christian temperance movement. The religious campaign against alcohol was not new, dating back to the early colonial period, when African and European missionaries and religious activists campaigned against the liquor trade as a demoralising, unproductive industry. Hammond’s concerns reflected the rising popularity of homemade alcohol, whereas earlier campaigns had focused squarely on imported “trade spirits.”

Another letter writer, E. Tackie Otoo, also demanded temperance legislation aimed at palm wine and *akpeteshie*. Otoo warned of a “danger to our industrial existence as a people” if oil-palm felling continued. This claim had a double meaning for Otoo: he hoped that the palm-oil export industry might be revived, but also feared that palm wine would undermine the industrious character of Gold Coast farmers. Otoo was particularly concerned about *akpeteshie*, which was a closer replacement for imported liquor than palm wine. According to Otoo, Africans faced “inevitable doom” when they chose “the made-easy drink as a substitute for the trade spirits.”⁵² Distillation technology made the production of strong drink easy, and Otoo argued that liquor was causing a “holocaust of life by which the man-power of the Country, the vitality of the youth is being undermined.” Otoo would have agreed with anti-liquor traffic campaigners in Britain who believed that alcoholic drink “reduced large numbers of men [in Africa] to a state of incapacity and sloth which halted useful commerce and hindered economic development.”⁵³

Otoo and Hammond both saw palm-wine tapping (especially for distilling) as a misuse of the colony’s trees. Instead of providing a renewable source of wealth in the form of oil and kernels, the oil palms of the forest became a temptation for the wine tapper and contributed to the downfall of young men. Men like Hammond and Otoo were essentially defending the pre-1919 situation, in which Gold Coast producers made palm oil and exchanged it for imported liquor, and in which access to alcohol was regulated by cost and social convention. Palm wine and *akpeteshie*, being ‘made-easy drink’, were disincentives to labour, especially for labour in the commodity-export sector. Their cheapness and ubiquity made alcohol accessible to young

⁵⁰ DC Oda West Akim to Omanhene of Oda, 28 July 1944, ‘Palm Oil records, Oda district’, ADM 36/1/11, PRAAD-Accra.

⁵¹ Rev. 7:9 refers to palm branches, though these were almost certainly acquired from date palms rather than oil palms. J. L. Hammond to Governor, 25 Sept. 1935, CSO 8/3/3, PRAAD-Accra.

⁵² E. Tackie Otoo to Col. Sec., 27 May 1936, CSO 8/3/3, PRAAD-Accra.

⁵³ Dumett (1974), p.72.

men.⁵⁴ The government in Nigeria had similar worries about the “evil effect” on working men of an “unlimited supply of crude alcohol” produced from local materials.⁵⁵

In the model colonial economy, palm trees were “transformed” into rum and gin through processes of commodification and market exchange. By making palm wine and *akpeteshie* domestically, the inhabitants of the Gold Coast opted out of foreign trade, taking palm produce straight to the local marketplace. While palm oil and kernels could function as ‘anti-commodities’ in their own right when farmers chose to eat them or sell them in local markets instead of exporting them, the conversion of oil palms into wine and liquor allowed West Africans to actively reshape their economic environment. Prices for imported liquor had been regulated by government policy and by competition among expatriate merchants, but the arrival of *akpeteshie* forced merchants to compete with local producers for a share of the African market. Buyers of palm oil and kernels also had to confront the fact that they had to compete not only with local consumers of oil, but also with drinkers for a share of oil-palm resources.

Had the colonial government taken up the cause of temperance – especially in conjunction with environmental concerns – it might have developed a stronger policy to safeguard palm-oil trees, or at least to suppress palm wine and *akpeteshie* sales. Prominent Gold Coast elites supported the temperance movement, but colonial officials came out in favour of palm wine, or at least in support of the rights of Africans to use their land and their trees as they wished.⁵⁶ These officials refuted the claims of foreign and local temperance activists that Ghanaians in particular had a drinking problem. One official noted, “The facts that palm wine drinking is reprehensively excessive, or the destruction of palm trees a serious problem, are by no means conclusively established.”⁵⁷ When Ormsby-Gore visited the region in 1925, he flatly rejected claims that British West Africa had a drinking problem, and he affirmed the right of Africans to consume whatever beverages they chose.⁵⁸ Other officials followed suit. In a 1931 minute, a Gold Coast official rejected both the moral and economic cases for palm wine regulation:

- 1) There is practically no definite evidence leading to the supposition that drunkenness from palm wine in the Gold Coast and Ashanti amounts to a definite evil.
- 2) The same can be said of its effects on the health of the consumers.
- 3) It is by no means established that it is either necessary or possible to attempt to protect the trees by legislative action.
- 4) There is nowhere any estimate of the approximate gain to the revenue from the licensing of the retailers of palm wine...⁵⁹

As the attorney general for the Gold Coast remarked in a 1939 memo on palm wine ordinances: “Palm wine is the national beverage. In the good old days Englishmen were free

⁵⁴ Governor Hugh Clifford reputedly said, “practically every man has a public-house in his own back garden.”

⁵⁵ Quoted in Korieh (2003), p.121.

⁵⁶ Palm wine and *akpeteshie* sellers are hard to find the colonial archive. As Akyeampong’s work shows, prison records are the only place where testimony from these individuals can be found.

⁵⁷ Enclosure in file 124a, n.d., CSO 8/3/3, PRAAD-Accra.

⁵⁸ Ormsby-Gore Report 1926, 179-180, ADM 5/3/24, PRAAD-Accra.

⁵⁹ Minute on file no. 2085/30, 27 August 1931, CSO 8/3/3, PRAAD-Accra.

to brew theirs – beer.”⁶⁰ A few British officials even admitted to drinking palm wine themselves. One young administrator in Nigeria told his family, “It’s not at all bad.”⁶¹

The Agriculture Department recognized that palm wine was “a comparatively important source of revenue to the owners [of trees],” and that total prohibition of palm felling was “impossible and would indeed be unjust.” Still, the department called for “a guiding hand” to protect oil palms “in the interests of posterity.”⁶² Ultimately the colonial government turned to the tools of indirect rule, encouraging stool authorities to establish ordinances and by-laws protecting palm trees. A law from Dixcove was typical:

No person shall fell, injure, or destroy any oil palm tree unless he or she has obtained the permission of his or her chief so to do.... Whenever permission has been obtained to fell oil palm trees for the purpose of making palm wine for sale or private consumption, for every oil palm tree felled unless there is another oil palm tree within five yards thereof two fresh oil palm trees shall be planted by the party felling as aforesaid near the place where the tree was felled.⁶³

Offenders could be punished with a £5 fine or two months of hard labour. Proposals to license and tax palm-wine sellers were less easily implemented, and as Emmanuel Akyeampong has shown, the fact that unlicensed distillation was illegal meant that from the 1930s onward the booming *akpeteshie* market was entirely beyond the taxman’s reach.⁶⁴

In the Gold Coast and Nigeria, agricultural officers promoted tapping standing trees as an alternative to felling, but with little success. The Gold Coast Agriculture Department taught tapping methods from at least the 1920s, and it found that Ghanaians preferred “the beverage prepared from the felled palms.”⁶⁵ Some colonial officials resorted to racist stereotypes to explain the preference for felling over tapping, such as the district commissioner who declared, “The native I believe prefers cutting down the tree merely because he is too lazy to tap it, [and] to introduce a system which will entail much labour on the part of the collector is going to be difficult to enforce.”⁶⁶ As the Agricultural officer quoted above noted, however, the wine made from felled palms was more appealing to Ghanaian drinkers than wine made from standing trees. One district commissioner suggested that the local authorities waive license fees for palm-wine tappers who did not kill trees, but nothing seems to have come of the idea to create an economic incentive in favour of the lesser wine.⁶⁷ Tapping palms brought new problems, besides a lower quality wine. Agricultural officials reported infestations of insects in trees that had been tapped standing. Tapped sap was:

⁶⁰ Memo, 17 May 1939, CSO 8/3/3, PRAAD-Accra.

⁶¹ David Wynford Carnegie, *Letters from Nigeria of the Honourable David Wynford Carnegie, F.R.G.S., 1899-1900: With Introduction and Appendix*. Carnegie, Helena M., Brechin: Black & Johnston, 1902, p.38.

⁶² Agriculture Department annual report for 1922-1923, 10, ADM 5/1/79, PRAAD-Accra.

⁶³ Bye law no. 100 F, 1935, Dixcove paramount chief, CSO 8/3/8, PRAAD-Accra. See also Manya Krobo bye-laws, CSO 8/3/6.

⁶⁴ Akyeampong (1996).

⁶⁵ Agricultural Department annual report for 1925-1926, 9, ADM 5/1/83, PRAAD-Accra.

⁶⁶ H.W. Thomas to Commissioner Central Province, 22 April 1922, ‘Palm Oil records, Oda district’, ADM 36/1/11, PRAAD-Accra.

⁶⁷ DC Oda West Akim to Omanhene of Akim Swedru, 29 May 1945, ‘Palm Oil records Oda district’, ADM 36/1/111, PRAAD-Accra.

uneconomical to gather after a period, [but] there was sufficient wine to produce a most congenial breeding place for Red Palm weevils, with the result that they hollowed out the interior of the palms with detrimental effects.⁶⁸

Added to this was the difficulty of climbing a mature palm, carefully cutting a flower bud while clinging to a trunk high above the ground, and placing a container to collect the sap – and then coming back to collect the filled container. Felling a tree was safer, faster and yielded much more wine for the labour involved.

New tapping approaches, forest reserves and local byelaws ultimately had little impact on the ways in which Ghanaians used their oil palms. The colonial state did carve out large tracts of land for forest reserves, but these had little impact on the oil-palm belt. The logic of “empire forestry,” which Greg Barton argues protected forests from “massive overexploitation,” was far from a hegemonic idea in colonial Ghana.⁶⁹ By 1936, the Agricultural Department was in effect endorsing felling trees for palm wine, noting that “in many areas the palms grow too profusely and considerable improvement could be effected by fairly drastic thinning.”⁷⁰ On-the-spot observations and the advice of local farmers trumped imperial science and fears about deforestation and desiccation.

Archival evidence also indicates that the by-laws which were passed to protect oil palms were rarely enforced. When laws were being drafted in the 1920s, Governor Guggisberg candidly remarked that legislation was not “going to do any good in restricting the cutting down of palm trees.”⁷¹ District commissioners were just as frank with local leaders, telling chiefs that they did not expect the laws to be enforced very rigorously.⁷² By the 1930s, colonial observers began to see that oil palms did not face anything like an extinction crisis, though their numbers were depleted around urban centres like Cape Coast and Accra. Expatriate firms continued producing palm oil and kernels on leases in the Western Province, selling oil locally as well exporting it. Later colonial policies tried to encourage palm planting, instead of restricting palm felling. Yet officials were powerless to force people to take even simple steps, like replanting oil palms. Guggisberg complained, “[t]here is no report to show that Political Officers or Agricultural Officers by their personal example have encouraged re-planting,” despite direct orders from the government to hold tree-plantations and to enforce tree-planting rules.⁷³

Oil palms and economic development

If the colonial government was uncommitted to alcohol prohibition and palm-tree protection, it nonetheless experimented with other ways of promoting the palm-oil industry. The Agricultural Investigation Station at Cape Coast claimed in 1936 that palm-wine tapping would end if:

the production of palm oil and palm kernels can be made more profitable than producing palm wine. If this can be done the Chiefs and owners of the palms will

⁶⁸ James Steele, Agricultural Department, to CCP, 14 July 1923, ADM 36/1/11, PRAAD-Accra.

⁶⁹ Barton (2002), p.157.

⁷⁰ Agricultural Department report for 1935-1936, ADM 5/1/94, PRAAD-Accra.

⁷¹ Minute, Gov. Guggisberg, 12 March 1924, ‘Palm Oil records, Oda district’, ADM 36/1/11, PRAAD-Accra.

⁷² See DC Western Akim to Omanhenes, 16 April 1936, ‘Palm Oil records, Oda district’, ADM 36/1/11, PRAAD-Accra.

⁷³ Minute, Gov. Guggisberg, 12 March 1924, “Palm Oil records, Oda district,” ADM 36/1/11, PRAAD-Accra.

be loath to allow their palms to be cut down; and instead of the palms decreasing in number an increase could be expected.⁷⁴

One approach was to allow foreign companies to negotiate concessions with Ghanaian chiefs on a limited scale. A few palm oil mills were installed by European firms, including Lever Bros., before 1914. None were successful in securing the quantities of fruit needed to justify the investment in equipment, although at Butre a mill managed to operate for a few decades.⁷⁵ The Director of Agriculture hoped that “pure palm-oil,” meaning machine-made stuff, would become popular across the country and thus encourage more foreign and local investors to build oil mills. In the long run, he hoped the “felling of palms for wine may become less profitable relative to collection and sale of fruit.”⁷⁶ The strength of the local market for palm wine and palm oil worked against the mills, however. The Secretary of the Cape Coast Chamber of Commerce observed that mills struggled with the “prohibitive price asked by the natives” for palm-fruit bunches. Two factors were to blame: “Shortness of supply owing to the lack of cultivation of palm trees;” and palm oil “largely sold for local consumption, and [realising] good prices.”⁷⁷ He might have added a diminished supply of trees due to felling for wine to his list of reasons for the high local price of oil-palm fruit. The Director of Agriculture thought it “unlikely that the adoption of such machines will have any effect on the production of palm wine,” noting that the Butre mill in the Western Province routinely struggled to buy enough fruit from farmers, and had to import Nigerian workers to harvest the firm’s own trees.⁷⁸ As with palm wine, households could capture the added value from turning palm fruit into oil themselves with relatively little equipment, and had no need to sell their fruit to an oil mill. A state-sponsored mill at Bukunor in the Eastern Province failed after a short trial in the 1930s because it simply could not buy enough fruit to make oil.

A different approach was to make the traditional palm-oil production process more efficient, allowing Ghanaian produce to compete with plantation products on the world market. The small scale of artisanal production matched the existing farm-and-forest environment of the Gold Coast colony.⁷⁹ The broad distribution of oil palms meant that labour costs for gathering fruit increased much faster than oil yields. At some radius from a village (or oil mill) it was no longer worthwhile to collect fruit and transport it back for oil production. The forest imposed a natural cap on the size of any one palm-oil-producing centre. Still, even in communities that produced palm oil for export, British and Ghanaian observers reported declining production across the first half of the twentieth century. Artisanal palm oil was simply not competitive with plantation-produced palm oil, due to high labour costs, and in the case of the Central Region, scandalously poor product quality.

Ghanaian and European inventors tried to sell machines for mashing palm fruit, pressing oil and cracking kernels to farmers with little success. These machines would have helped with the competitiveness of artisanal oil on both fronts, by reducing the labour needed to extract oil, and by improving the process itself to make a more desirable oil. Tackie Otoo asked the Colonial Secretary to distribute hand-powered oil presses to farmers, predicting that

⁷⁴ Report, Agricultural Investigation Station, Cape Coast, 21 Sept 1936, ‘Palm Oil records, Oda district’, ADM 36/1/11, PRAAD-Accra.

⁷⁵ Its best customers appeared to have been local buyers of fresh oil.

⁷⁶ Memo, Director of Agriculture, 13 February 1934, CSO 8/3/3, PRAAD-Accra.

⁷⁷ J.A. Larnier, Sec of Cape Coast Chamber of Commerce to SNA, 7 Sep. 1908, ‘Oil Palm trees, cultivation of’, ADM 11/1/1144, PRAAD-Accra.

⁷⁸ Dir of Ag to Col Sec, 9 June 1936, CSO 8/3/3, PRAAD-Accra.

⁷⁹ Jonathan E. Robins, ‘The Fante Palm Oil Machine: Appropriate Technology and the West African Palm Oil Industry’, paper presented at the Michigan Tech D80 Development conference, October 2015.

the higher efficiency of the machines would improve returns from palm oil and “lead to total extinction of the [*akpeteshie*] Stills,” giving “fillip to the industry to which too much attention cannot be paid.” Azu Mate Kole, the konor of Manya Krobo, submitted a ten-year plan in 1946 that similarly called for “some simple press to extract the palm-oil from the pericarp.” The konor was “against the big central machine for extraction of oil.”⁸⁰ Despite its similarity to colonial proposals for hand-powered palm oil machines to revitalise the export industry, the konor’s plan was aimed squarely at increasing the value of oil-palm trees for Ghanaians. He wrote:

it seems so silly that we should produce palm-nuts in the Gold Coast, send it all the way to the United Kingdom for refinery only to be brought back to us in bottles for consumption in the Gold Coast.

The konor called for tariffs on foreign oils to stimulate local industry, and some colonial officials shared his sentiments. From the 1920s onward, colonial officials scolded Ghanaians for eating too many imported foods, urging them to keep money in the local economy by growing and consuming foodstuffs. The District Commissioner for Western Akim, for instance, asked why the people of his district:

buy imported oil for cooking when the people of this country ought to be making it themselves from ground-nuts , shea butter trees, and the oil palm trees.... I tell you that by buying all these things from other countries you are making yourselves poorer.⁸¹

Conclusion

When Ghanaians turned palm trees into wine instead of oil, they were responding to market conditions. In the face of low oil prices in the world market, palm wine became an attractive use for palm trees, especially in light of colonial alcohol control legislation that pushed alcohol prices higher. Palm-wine producers operated on a local scale, and while they may have appreciated that their wares substituted for imported foreign goods, there is no evidence suggesting that a *swadeshi*-style campaign for local, anti-colonial drink was underway. Still, their decisions to cut down palm trees and make wine had political implications that went beyond the flouting of colonial licensing and tax rules. Colonial administrators were ultimately forced to shift their strategies for economic development away from the export sector, recognizing by the 1940s that local markets were strong and in need of foodstuffs and manufactured goods. In other colonies, administrators resorted to the forcible transformation of the environment to increase palm-oil exports. The plantation system replaced mixed forest with a monoculture of oil-palm trees, and it avoided the palm-wine issue by placing ownership of the trees in the hands of foreign investors. The wide distribution of oil palms in Ghana had little to do with the failure of the plantation system to take root, but access to trees opened up palm wine and *akpeteshie* as lucrative alternatives to employment in the export sector, creating anti-commodities that actively worked against the growth of palm-oil exports.

⁸⁰ ‘Ten Year Plan for Manya Krobo State’, 1946-1947, CSO 21/22/181, PRAAD-Accra.

⁸¹ “Address by Acting DC to the People of Western Akim District,” June 1933, “Government policy”, ADM 36/1/10, PRAAD-Accra.

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The mutually reinforcing relationship between 'commodities' and 'empires' has long been recognised. Over the last six centuries the quest for profits has driven imperial expansion, with the global trade in commodities fuelling the ongoing industrial revolution. These 'commodities of empire', which became transnationally mobilised in ever larger quantities, included foodstuffs (wheat, rice, bananas); industrial crops (cotton, rubber, linseed and palm oils); stimulants (sugar, tea, coffee, cocoa, tobacco and opium); and ores (tin, copper, gold, diamonds). Their expanded production and global movements brought vast spatial, social, economic and cultural changes to both metropoles and colonies.

In the Commodities of Empire project we explore the networks through which such commodities circulated within, and in the spaces between, empires. We are particularly attentive to local processes – originating in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America – which significantly influenced the outcome of the encounter between the world economy and regional societies, doing so through a comparative approach that explores the experiences of peoples subjected to different imperial hegemonies.

The following key research questions inform the work of project:

- 1) The networks through which commodities were produced and circulated within, between and beyond empires;
- 2) The interlinking 'systems' (political-military, agricultural labour, commercial, maritime, industrial production, social communication, technological knowledge) that were themselves evolving during the colonial period, and through which these commodity networks functioned;
- 3) The impact of agents in the periphery on the establishment and development of commodity networks: as instigators and promoters; through their social, cultural and technological resistance; or through the production of anti-commodities;
- 4) The impact of commodity circulation both on the periphery, and on the economic, social and cultural life of the metropoles;
- 5) The interrogation of the concept of 'globalisation' through the study of the historical movement and impact of commodities.

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