

Capitalist exchange, consumerism and power in nineteenth century Gold Coast: Interrogating Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* and the contested personage of the merchant prince

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Abstract

Commercial activities in nineteenth century Gold Coast were crucial in defining, not only the nature of African capitalism, but the consumption changes it brought to its merchant elite, commonly referred to in African historiography as merchant princes. The transformation of the Gold Coast economy into a commercial capitalist economy, which had as its life source a vibrant north Atlantic world market, exposed merchant princes to other goods which were not necessities but had the power to change one's social status. In partaking freely in this consumerism that the north Atlantic world offered, they were redefining power relations and helping to entrench colonial capitalism in the Gold Coast. More importantly, this new kind of consumerism signaled the merchant princes' desire to, at once, show off their newly acquired wealth and also appropriate power in a politically uncertain environment. Using available historical sources as well as creative works such as Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*, this paper suggests imaginative ways in which scholars may tease out African agency in existing narratives on the nineteenth century.

Keywords: merchant prince, capitalist exchange, power, Gold Coast, *Anowa*

Introduction

The nineteenth century Gold Coast was described as an “area of vigorous economic activity,” (Ilfie, 1983, pp. 13-14) as commercial activities were crucial in defining, not only the nature of African capitalism, but the consumption changes it brought to its merchant elite, commonly referred to in historiography as merchant princes. In traditional historiography and from common knowledge, guns and liquor had been the stereotypical mainstay of consumer goods on the West African coast at the height of the Atlantic slave trade. However, contrary to popular belief, before the nineteenth century, the Gold Coast economy had exposed merchant princes to other goods, which were not necessities but had the power to change one’s social status. These goods included European linen, Turkish carpets, velvet-covered armchairs, silver-headed canes, and felt hats. (Alpern, 1995; Murillo, 2017) By the nineteenth century, African merchants had changed the narrative by openly consuming such luxury items, thereby injecting African agency in the political economy of nineteenth century Gold Coast. Narratives on these colorful and contentious personages by Dike (1956), Amenumey (1968), Sampson (1969), Daaku (1970), Reynolds (1974a), Kaplow (1977), Arhin (1979), Kea (1982), Dumett (1983), Rotimi and Ogen (2008), Akyeampong (2010), and Sapong (2011) situate them in the grand narrative of mercantilist Euro-African interaction on the West African coast while others, such as Priestley (1969) and Smith (2014) focus on family histories.

This study uses Aidoo’s play, *Anowa* (1984), as a trope to explore the contested sites of capitalist commercial exchange and power on the West African coast before consolidation of formal colonial rule in the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, it situates the fascinating person of the West African merchant prince, who was highly contentious and often underappreciated, in this pre-colonial milieu. This middleman played several roles, including facilitating trade on the West African coast, consuming imported luxury items, and resisting European mercantilist expansion. In the end, the merchant prince who was adored by some and loathed by

others, became a tragic figure of British imperialist designs and was hounded out of his/her sphere of influence. What is most instructive is that British merchant capital exploited the groundwork laid by this class to establish colonial rule.

The themes of African capitalist exchange, consumerism, and power are aptly dramatized in *Anowa*, Aidoo's theatrical interpretation of nineteenth century Gold Coast social and political economy, and also historically foregrounded in a highly contentious era when European nations sought to strengthen their commercial and political hold on Africa. In the story, Aidoo recreates the proverbial tale of a girl who defied her parents and community by turning the mores of gender roles, marriage, and occupation upside down. *Anowa*, the female protagonist of this eponymous drama, decided to elope with Kofi Ako, a man she chose to marry. They subsequently built a new life by taking advantage of the Atlantic trade boom of the nineteenth century to accumulate wealth. This paper draws the reader's attention to the character Kofi Ako, whose rise to wealth and power reflects the lives of historical figures who came to prominence in the nineteenth century Gold Coast by virtue of capitalist commercial exchanges in a north Atlantic economy. As noted by Reynolds (1974a), by the mid-nineteenth century, "status was achieved through the creation of wealth by trade and production for market by a group whose commercial and political interests frequently overlapped" (p. 256). In casting the character of a merchant prince in *Anowa*, Aidoo had historical examples to work with. The list included John Kabes, George Blankson Sr., F.C. Grant, R.J. Ghartey, John Sarbah, John Ocansey, Geraldo de Lima, James Bannerman, J.W. Hansen, Henry Barnes, J.P. Brown, James F. Amisshah, John G. Halm, and John Plange (Dumett, 1983, pp. 671-673).

Anowa feeds the reader with snippets of Ghana's precolonial history by weaving the formation of the Anglo-Fante alliance, in the face of Asante invasion, seamlessly into the plot. Between 1806 and 1826, there were several wars between the Asantes and Fantes, which culminated in the subjugation of the Fantes. It points out that

the Fante armies, “well-organised though they [may] be, are more skilled in quenching fires than in the art of war!” (Aidoo, 1984, p. 6) It continues, “let not posterity judge it too bitterly that in a dangerous moment, the lords of our Houses sought the protection of those that-came-from-beyond-the-horizon against our more active kinsmen from the north” (Aidoo, 1984, p. 6). For Aidoo (1984), it was in this era that “the lords of our Houses signed that piece of paper – the Bond of 1844 they call it – binding us to the white men who came from beyond the horizon” (p. 8). Here, she was referring to a declaration signed by a group of southern rulers, including the kings of Denkyira, Abora, Cape Coast, Anomabu, Dixcove and James Town, formally recognizing the roles of Commander Hill and George Maclean as representatives of British power and jurisdiction on the coast.

The nineteenth century is referred to as a period of the “new imperialism” because unlike previous attempts at Empire, this one saw the massive deployment of European technology, show of force, business acumen, and other tools of Empire. Headrick (1981) argues that comparatively, technology gave Europe an edge over Africa and Asia. It was also an era that offered economic opportunities for enterprising West Africans who saw the necessity of symbiotic trade relations with Europeans. Thus, in *Anowa* it was said that “men will always go where the rumbling hunger in their bowels shall be stilled, and that is where they will stay... let it not surprise us the that This-One and That-One depend for their well-being on the presence of the pale stranger in our midst” (Aidoo, 1984, p. 7). However, events were neither simplistic nor were West Africans passive observers. They responded in various ways to adapt, negotiate and sometimes resist the terms of engagement. Commercially, cases of accommodation, adaptation, negotiation, and resistance were evident in the rise to prominence of a coastal merchant elite, who shrewdly negotiated the boundaries of commercial authority and often resisted European economic incursions into their spheres of influence. Sometimes, these merchant princes adapted to situations by forming and shifting alliances between European nations to

ensure the survival of their African businesses. The function of these merchant princes, “who wielded considerable influence in their home bases, soon evolved from facilitators of trade to resisters of British intrusion into the heartland of West Africa” (Sapong, 2011). Thus, these merchant princes were not solely agents of Euro-African commercial relations, but also often interfered with the extent of European influence in West Africa.

A word on analytical framework

There are several theoretical perspectives on the origins of capitalism in world history. These include orthodox Marxism, modernization theory, and Wallerstein’s world-systems analysis. While orthodox Marxism perceives the late eighteenth century and the nineteenth century as the watershed moment for the fruition of capitalism, world-systems analysis date it further back to the “long” sixteenth century. Modernization theory, on the other hand, relies on the drastic contrast between the pre-industrial medieval era and the industrial modern era, a transition that witnessed the dissolution of important vestiges of medieval society. Capitalism, however, received its first classic statements in the works of Adam Smith (1776/2003), who is of the view that capitalism is the systematic production of commodities for sale on the market to generate profit. It is assumed that this profit would be used to enhance material comfort as well as to further social progress. Smith argued that capitalism emerged out of centuries of competition between manufacturers and merchants in the rational pursuit of individual economic gain. He saw capitalism as the harbinger of a future free market economy, in which diligent men would be prosperous because all have access to a vibrant market. Gradually, the pursuit of economic self-interest led to new forms of wealth and productive resources, as well as intellectual and cultural habits, which eroded the existing pre-capitalist structure of society.

Weber (1905/2002) took Smith’s classical views a step further by inquiring into the nature of the spirit, which Werner Sombart (1911/2015) had also argued, was crucial to the development of modern capitalism. According to Weber, man is

motivated by the making of money and acquisition of wealth as the fundamental purpose of life. Consequently, traditional modes of enterprise encouraged the accumulation of wealth for the sake of material comfort, but the advent of capitalism witnessed the triumph of rationality over tradition. Capitalism initiated a disciplined labor force and a systematic reinvestment of capital. Weber argued that this kind of rationality, which combined a disciplined labor force with a systematic reinvestment of capital, took place mostly in Protestant nations such as England and Holland. Thus, it stands to reason that there is a causal relation between Protestant ethic and capitalism, at least in parts of the Atlantic world, where a percentage of the colonists were Protestant. Weber's thesis, however, presents a difficulty for the Gold Coast. Apart from the absence of a significant Protestant population in the Gold Coast, pre-capitalist modes of production before the nineteenth century creates analytical complications.

In orthodox Marxist terms, for the economy to be capitalist, it needed a land monopolizing upper class, which would hold labor to ransom. McNally is of the view that "capitalism was the product of an immense transformation in the social relationships of landed society...Without a radical transformation of the agrarian economy, the activities of merchants and manufacturers would have remained strictly confined" (McNally, 1988, pp. xi-xii). This transformation prompted rural producers to enter the labor market as wage laborers, and they came to rely on their wage as a means of subsistence. Analytically, this seamless transition to wage labor is problematic and may be at odds with the economic history of nineteenth century Gold Coast. Austin (2005), in an important study of labor, land and capital in Asante, points out that even the social organization of labor is highly complicated. This situation is "epitomized by the difficulty of separating familial from extra-familial [slaves and pawns] sources of labor, or non-market from market ones" (Austin, 2005, 106). Generally, by the nineteenth century, parts of Africa with centuries-old economic connections to world markets exhibited a combination of merchant capitalism "in the sphere of exchange" and "pre-capitalist modes of production."

(Iliffe, 1983, p. 5) The pre-capitalist mode of production included domestic production by family units, as well as the use of slave labor in both rural and urban centers of production (Iliffe, 1983). Quintessentially, Iliffe (1983) points out that African capitalism is:

by definition identical to capitalism elsewhere. But surrounding the core, the flesh may have distinctive shapes and qualities Its special qualities result, on the one hand, from the very late stage in the global history of capitalism at which that system of production developed in Africa, and on the other hand, from the special characteristics of Africa's pre-capitalist societies. (pp. 4-5)

In analyzing the capitalist impetus in nineteenth century Gold Coast, this work focuses on the nineteenth century capitalist sector of exchange, which dates back to West Africa's interaction with the Mediterranean world market. Through interactions with trans-Saharan trade networks, commercial activities in the Gold Coast involved the use of weights and measures, currencies, and systems of credit in procuring and exchanging goods and services.

On a broader historiographical canvass, the demand, supply, and consumption patterns of these African merchants signaled "moving beyond the restrictive analytical logic of an always dominant 'core' that underwrites most models of historical integration" (Prestholdt, 2004, pp. 757-758). Thus, any analysis of the global capitalist system must take cognizance of the divergent and contingent demands in peripheral markets, which shaped the responses of European markets. On the Gold Coast, these merchants who traded in and consumed imported manufactures appropriated surplus to underpin their place as an African coastal elite. Socially, they saw themselves as agents of change and sought to redefine Gold Coast African "class" relations. Politically, they saw themselves as a viable alternative to the Colonial Office and European commercial enterprise, especially from early to mid-nineteenth century when the Crown wavered on its future on the Gold Coast. Indeed, by the 1830s and 1840s, European capital "permitted and even encouraged the

growth of this African merchant group as a temporary intermediary for the consolidation of its own economic and territorial empire.” (Kaplou, 1977, pp. 317-318) In the end, the commercial activities of the African merchant elite helped to entrench colonial capitalism in the Gold Coast by accumulating capital for “monopolies which overwhelmed them.” (Kaplou, 1977, p. 333) From this weakened position, the political ambitions of the African merchant elite were easily thwarted by the colonial government.

Additionally, an analysis of the activities of these merchants helps scholars to explain nuances in the mode of production in pre-colonial African economies as well as transitional periods in the nineteenth century before formal colonial rule. Here, the pre-colonial African state may have significantly intensified an awareness of class relations, but it becomes one of several avenues for analyzing the mode of production. Indeed, Freund (1998) is of the view that more thought should be put into analyzing the character and workings of class (p. 31). Using the orthodox Marxist schema to analyze pre-colonial African societies presents its own challenges because of the use of slave labor but one way around this difficulty will be to focus on African merchants. These individual entrepreneurs excelled and created class consciousness in the nineteenth century Gold Coast by openly acquiring and consuming luxury products to set them apart from the rest.

A word on historical methods

Scholarship on the political economy or social history of nineteenth century Gold Coast mostly maintained the preferred traditional sources employed by historians – colonial and post-colonial archives and lately, oral histories. Historians, however, may find it intellectually fruitful to fish for points of contact and comparison in the creative arts, even if it is an exercise filled with minefields. McCaskie (1990) is particularly concerned about losing the Rankean “as is” essence of history, especially when creative writers base their works on historical events. In an analysis of Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The healers* and Asante history, McCaskie points out that Armah wanted to “subvert the rhetorics of power” by

“putting the past in a conjectural realm safely beyond the lived epistemologies of time and place” (p. 46). Thus, the trope of an “Africa of desire,” an Africa which is seemingly romanticized, becomes problematic in the quest for history as it really happened. Despite McCaskie’s reservations, he concedes that perhaps we should meet Armah halfway. Indeed, this paper is intended to meet creative works halfway because texts such as Armah’s *The healers* and Aidoo’s *Anowa* lend themselves to multiple layers of analyses and interpretations.

Significantly, Diamond (1989) argues that the fiction of a particular society “may reveal more of its values, customs, conflicts, stresses, changes and transformations than does all the formal scholarship of historians and social scientists” (p. 435). The origin of Aidoo’s early works such as *Anowa* was based on the lives of ordinary women. She was raised in a royal household, an environment that proved instrumental in raising her consciousness of traditional lore, custom, ritual, and human drama. In *Anowa*, the misconception that African femininity was passive was upstaged by Anowa’s fiery spirit of rebellion. In the drama, Anowa did not embody the societal ideal of womanhood. On the contrary, she sought validity for what she believed in and all things dear to her. In this gripping tale, however, there are multiple ways in which scholars may approach this creative work. The historian may be interested in the historical context, the anthropologist and sociologist in the mores and norms of Yebi that drove the protagonists to their tragic ends, and the literary critic may read it as a post-colonial text. Indeed, the need for multiple viewpoints culminated in Adams’ (2012) edited volume on Ama Ata Aidoo. In *Essays in honour of Ama Ata Aidoo at 70*, the reader is entertained to perspectives from historians, linguists, poets, literary critics, and cultural anthropologists on how the works of Aidoo may be analyzed and applied to their various crafts. It should be noted that most of those analyses were done with an eye on the historical context, not necessarily the present context of the author.

On deeper reflection, *Anowa* serves as a critique of colonial

discourses and inventions of dashing imperial agents, intrepid colonial officials, and devilish West African interlopers. The person of the pre-colonial West African merchant and entrepreneur was highly contested. Extant colonial official correspondence often used derogatory epitaphs for African merchants and entrepreneurs who engaged them in open competition. For instance, colonial officials such as A.B. Ellis and W.W. Claridge perceived Geraldo de Lima, the Anlo-based (Vodza) merchant prince as a dishonest person, a smuggler, scoundrel, and troublemaker (Ellis, 1893; Claridge, 1964). Furthermore, John Kabes, the prominent merchant prince of Komenda, was referred to as “ungrateful defrauder” and “dishonorable knave” (Goucher & Walton, 2013, pp. 362-364). Indigenous references were generally positive, although voices of chastisement could also be heard. In *Anowa*, Kofi Ako is praised for being “prosperous” and having the means to “dress up fifty brides” and another fifty more, “without moving a step” (Aidoo, 1984, p. 41). On the other hand, he bears “a bigger crime ... inherited from the clans incorporate” by depending on the pale stranger for his wellbeing (pp. 6-7). Badua, in a disparaging manner, insinuates that Kofi Ako, the “watery male of all watery males,” “good-for-nothing cassava-man’s” commercial venture with the white men was growing because they were buying men and women (pp. 33). This conundrum posed by perceptions of the merchant prince gives this work the poetic license to stretch the bounds of historical inquiry by imposing glimpses of Kofi Ako in the life-stories of the merchant princes or vice-versa. Whatever their human foibles might be, these men’s entrepreneurial spirit puts African agency back into the grand narratives of nineteenth century imperial and commercial activities. Using available historical sources as well as creative works such as *Anowa*, this paper suggests imaginative ways in which scholars may tease out this African agency in existing narratives on capitalist exchange in nineteenth century West Africa.

Furthermore, the need for interdisciplinarity in the humanities is a driving force behind this paper. To free historians from the research lull that sometimes occurs, there is a need to look

to the creative arts to push the boundaries of innovative thinking and to bring historical themes alive. Through the various genres of literature, creative writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo believe in using their art as a medium for interrogating our historical consciousness. Aidoo's desire to articulate and dramatize Ghanaian history is shaped by an understanding of the writer's commitment to broach taboo subjects, speak about the unspoken and reflect society's mood at any given time. This study hopes to illustrate the capacities and limitations of West Africans' attempt to control market forces, or at least to manipulate them in a nineteenth century world. In the process, the intention is to push the boundaries of innovative thinking by appreciating the nuances between the dramatic and factual.

More importantly, this paper is a response to Reid's (2011) apprehension about the marginalisation of "pre-colonial African history from mainstream Africanist scholarship" (p. 135). He bemoans "the abiding fascination with the colonial era" and its entrenched, hegemonic hold over the direction and focus of professional research. Reid particularly extols the enormous value of researching Africa's "deeper past" to elucidate present-day issues (p. 135). The themes of pre-colonial nineteenth century, especially conversations emanating from the denouement of Atlantic slavery, the consolidation of capitalism and Empire, and the negotiation of social relations, offer historians a deeper understanding of issues confronting the post-colonial state.

Capitalist exchange, consumerism and power in a nineteenth century Atlantic world

The abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 gradually changed the nature of European commercial activities on the Gold Coast. From a rational economic point of view, it was generally concluded that West Africa had more lucrative goods to offer than slaves. Thus, British trading firms and the Colonial Office encouraged trade in agricultural products such as palm oil, rubber, and eventually cocoa (Hopkins, 1973). Accordingly, while an acknowledgement of the existence of the various descriptions

and interpretations of nineteenth century Gold Coast economy is important, the aim of this work is to examine the perceptible existence of capitalist exchange in this period, in conjunction with the motivation for the capitalist zeal that accompanied economic activities. The question is not over the existence of capitalism as it is over the mode of production and the resultant class relations. It may be argued that the nineteenth century Gold Coast economy was an admixture of pre-capitalist modes of production and commercial or merchant capitalism. In bridging the apparent gap between emphasis on agrarian production and the stress on commercial endeavor, this paper suggests the two as a continuum. The agrarian economy of the Gold Coast left some room for reinvesting profit, and the introduction of an Atlantic world market, commercial enterprise, and the desire for economic growth supplanted the so-called social commitments of African merchants and farmers.

By the eighteenth century, the Gold Coast had built an emerging merchant class. John Kabes (1640s – 1722) of Komenda was the quintessential merchant prince, who had a proclivity for wearing fineries, including a lace-embellished hat. He also carried a silver-headed cane. Interestingly, in *Anowa*, Kofi Ako, who “wanted to have joy in our overflowing wealth” (Aidoo, 1984, p. 38), mimicked the merchant princes by building a big house in Oguaa where the furniture is “either consciously foreign or else opulent... In the central wall is a fireplace and above it, a picture of Queen Victoria ... to the left of the Queen is a picture of Kofi Ako himself” (p. 43). Elsewhere, he is “resplendent in brilliant kente or velvet cloth and he is over-flowing with gold jewelry ... As he passes, he makes the gestures of lordship over the area” (p. 44). Consequently, by the mid-nineteenth century, “the Gold Coast’s leading African merchants were those who most successfully combined economic activity of a capitalist kind with social relationships in an older style” (Iliffe, 1983, pp. 13-14). These Victorian merchants, as Kaplow (1977) pointed out, became “a temporary intermediary for the consolidation” of European capital, economic and territorial empire (pp. 317-318).

By the 1830s, the commercial landscape of the Gold Coast was evolving rapidly. Catalysts for this evolution included the availability of credit from London-based trade houses such as Forster, Smith and Swanzy, which sent merchandise to correspondents on the Gold Coast to be sold on commission. Additionally, the introduction of steamship services to the Gold Coast streamlined and expanded the export trade. In 1852, the African Steamship Company was formed, followed by the founding of the British and African Steam Navigation Company in 1869 (Reynolds, 1974a, pp. 256-257). A number of African merchants accumulated wealth and increased their economic and social power base through trade and production for the market. George Blankson Sr. (1809 – 1898), a Gold Coast Merchant, was described as a “commercial king” (Iliffe, pp.13-14) who built a castle that is wonderful to behold at Anomabo, and also retained a hundred slaves. Interestingly, Blankson served the Methodist Church as a lay preacher in the 1840s and became a member of the Gold Coast Legislature between 1862 and 1873. J. Bannerman and J.W. Hansen were involved in the export of products such as palm oil, ivory and gold dust to Europe, while selling imported items on the Gold Coast market. Additionally, they hired out laborers, canoes, and messengers.

Related to the intensification of African capitalist exchange in the nineteenth century Gold Coast was a kind of consumerism that emanated from a larger consumer revolution, which had earlier engulfed the Atlantic world in a complex symbiotic relationship. African merchants who made use of the established credit system began investing in palatial homes, slaves, and other landed property that gave them a sense of security. On the heels of their newly found status, they had to maintain a lifestyle that was consistent with their status (Reynolds, 1974a, p. 259). Consumerism, the preoccupation with the purchasing of consumer goods, played its part in entrenching capitalism in the Atlantic world, and the Gold Coast in particular. Consumer demand became the driving force behind economic change. Even before Britain experienced the Industrial Revolution, Breen (1986) argues that throughout its

domain:

sharp-eyed businessmen were mastering the techniques necessary to turn out small consumer goods on an unprecedented scale. Indeed, the flooding of these items onto the domestic market was responsible for what some historians have termed the birth of a consumer society. (pp. 475-476)

Awareness of the availability of these goods generated a yearning for luxury items, and even when people could not afford them, they made do with what they could acquire. In doing this, colonial subjects were imitating culture and society in the metropole, in a desperate attempt to redefine themselves. In essence, easy access to manufactured goods, which peaked in the 1740s, confounded the social divide in the colonies, and “the very wealthy found that they had to spend ever greater amounts of income just to distinguish themselves from middling consumers” (Breen, 1986, p. 478).

There was an English “consumer revolution,” which took place sometime between 1690 and 1740 in England, Scotland and Britain’s mainland American colonies. During this phase, “consumers of the gentle and particularly “middling” classes began to purchase an unprecedented number and variety of manufactured goods and to use many of them in conspicuous displays of leisure, social ritual, and status affirmation” (Axtell, 1992, p. 127). Axtell indicates that the development of wants, instead of necessities arose out of an economic situation in which both Europeans and natives found themselves with adequate purchasing power to cater for most of their trivial wants. In the case of the Europeans who were faced with so many economic choices, “consumers... were empowered by a heady sense of personal independence and the ability to fashion themselves with the material trappings of “gentility” (p. 128). Additionally, Hunter’s (2001) study of the social life of Massachusetts merchants from 1670 to 1780 revealed that merchants were the fulcrum of the social and economic transformation that hit New England in the eighteenth century. Hunter’s study “brings to

light the key role they played not only as agents of capitalism but also as proponents of the new polite and commercial culture” (p. 11). The merchants of Boston and Salem “began in earnest to adopt Georgian gentility and refigure their identity based on purchased goods and acquired manners. In pursuing economic goals and proclaiming personal status, they used wealth derived from global trading connections to reshape local environs” (p. 171). These merchants spent considerable sums of money as well as their time in investing in consumer goods and acquiring genteel behaviour.

Similarly, works by Prestholdt (2004) and Richardson’s (1979) on consumerism in East Africa and West Africa respectively suggest that “African consumers directly affected the shape of British trade ... globally” (Prestholdt, 2004, pp. 757-758). Of greater interest here is what the African merchants used their wealth for. Most of them, including Bannerman, Hansen, and Blankson, maintained a retinue of slaves, who decided to serve even after abolition. They also bought and sold land, eventually passing it on “as private property to their children.” These merchants, built houses on the properties, “erecting substantial residencies in the European style and constructing other buildings in the coast towns – solid structures which the Europeans were happy to rent or buy” (Kaplow, 1977, p. 320). They then obtained ample provisions and purchased furnishings for their homes. Some also paid to educate their children in Britain.

Apart from the motif of capitalist agent and consumer, which intrigues historians, *Anowa* allows the historian to frame the merchant prince as a tragic figure who lost in the struggle for power on the Gold Coast. Kofi Ako was not a typical resistor to European commercial incursions, but he played the roles of facilitator of trade and tragic figure. In *Anowa*, Kofi Ako controlled the export of palm oil in his area of influence, and this made him “the richest man, probably, of the whole Guinea Coast” (Aidoo, 1984, p. 44). Sadly, this enterprise involved “buying men and women as though they were only worth each a handful of the sands on the shore” (Aidoo, p. 39). Indeed, the nineteenth century witnessed a remarkable expansion in

the “commercial production of cash crops based on slave labour.” This situation “generated a need for agricultural labour and for porters to carry produce to coastal traders” (Akyeampong, 2012, pp. 231-232) In the end, however, the co-protagonist (together with the heroine) ended up committing suicide, for it was “remarked that every house is ruined where they take in slaves” (Aidoo, p. 39).

Similarly, African merchants fell victim to British desire to control the West African coastal marketplace and political authority. In the 1860s, a series of events led to apprehensions about the future of the coastal African merchant elite and potentates in the Colony. These included the Asante invasion of 1863 and loss of confidence in British protection, and the gradual withdrawal of the Dutch from the Gold Coast, especially after the 1867 exchange of territories and possessions with the British. The exchange of possessions between the British and Dutch particularly crystalized the Colonial Office’s monopoly on the West African coast. The instinctive response of African merchants to this growing British political and economic dominance was through movements such as the Fante Confederation of 1868, Accra Native Confederation of 1869, and the Aborigines’ Rights Protection Society of 1897. Additionally, individual acts of resistance against what was perceived to be European attempt to monopolize trade on the West African coast was met with arrest and exile. In 1866, King John Aggrey of Cape Coast was arrested and exiled to Sierra Leone for challenging British authority in his domain. In the case of Geraldo de Lima, Governor Young of the Gold Coast Colony placed a bounty on his head in 1885. He was subsequently arrested and incarcerated in Accra. Similar fates befell king Jaja of Opobo and Nana Olomu of Itsekiri in the Niger Delta region, when they resisted British incursions into their spheres of influence. Kaplow referred to the trajectory of the nineteenth century Gold Coast merchant as “the abortive development of a Gold Coast bourgeoisie in the Victorian era” (Kaplow, p. 318). Unfortunately, the economic activities of these African “Victorian” merchants inadvertently consolidated capital and political power for British monopolies, damning the political ambitions of the

merchant princes.

Conclusion

The political economy of nineteenth century Gold Coast suggests a synergy and a complex interaction between capitalist exchange, consumerism, and power. While economic opportunities allowed African merchants to accumulate wealth and openly display it through property acquisition and consumer items, their attempts to translate that wealth into political power faced stiff opposition from the British, and sometimes from traditional rulers. These merchants elicited several kinds of responses. On one hand they were admired for their entrepreneurial spirit, and on the other hand, disliked for taking advantage of market forces to enrich themselves. They were often seen as opportunistic individuals who accumulated wealth at the expense of the community. These West African brokers manipulated their economic assets to protect the economic monopoly they enjoyed in the interior before the advent of formal colonial rule. They frequently clashed with British as well as the interest of traditional rulers, because “they often used their influence to protect and to foster their own interests” (Reynolds, 1974a, p. 258).

In *Anowa*, Kofi Ako’s rise to wealth through trade is foreshadowed by several historical personages who assumed the role of a merchant prince. In the end, Ako’s tragic end mirrors the stifling of political and economic ambitions of a West African merchant elite. Aidoo’s *Anowa* is a text that lends itself to multiple layers of analyses and interpretations, especially when studied comparatively with other works such as McCaskie’s (1995) book on pre-colonial Asante, or Reynolds’ (1974a) study on African merchants on the Gold Coast. Points of similarity as well as points of departure between the historical merchant prince and Kofi Ako have been explored to illustrate the capacities and limitations of attempts by West Africans to control market forces, or at least to manipulate them in a nineteenth century context. In the process, historians inadvertently show a bias for the historical text, but this work hoped to push the boundaries of innovative thinking by

blurring the interface between the literary text and the historical text, appreciating the varied levels of nuances.

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