

The Nineteenth Century Colonial Governments in the Gold Coast

الحكومات الاستعمارية في ساحل الذهب خلال القرن التاسع عشر

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ملخص:

يتناول المقال تطور نظام الحكم الاستعماري البريطاني في ساحل الذهب منذ وصول البريطانيين إلى المنطقة حتى بسط السيادة على كامل تراب المستعمرة التي باتت تعرف بساحل الذهب البريطاني أو جمهورية غانا حاليا. يتطرق البحث إلى ثلاث نقاط أساسية: أولا وصول البريطانيين (التجار وعناصر الحركات التبشيرية) إلى ساحل الذهب وإنشاء الإدارات الاستعمارية لتسيير وحماية مصالح الرعايا البريطانيين. ثانيا، ردود فعل السكان المحليين على التدخل التدريجي للإدارات البريطانية المتعاقبة في شؤونهم والتي أخذت في البداية أشكالا سلمية كالامتناع عن دفع الضريبة لتتطور إلى إنشاء كنفدرالية الفانتي وتنتهي بمواجهات بين البريطانيين وقبائل الأشانتي. ثالثا، الظروف السياسية والاقتصادية الدولية التي عجلت بضم البريطانيين للمناطق الشمالية لساحل الذهب ويسطهم للهيمنة الاستعمارية على كامل أراضيه.

Abstract

The article deals with the evolution of British colonial rule in the Gold Coast from the arrival of the British as merchants and evangelists by the seventeenth century until the fall of the whole territory of the Gold Coast under British control by the late nineteenth century. The paper examines three main elements. The first one deals with the arrival of the British and their gradual involvement in the local people's affairs through the different administrations established on the spot to defend British interests. The second element examines the reactions of the local people to British interference in their affairs. Finally, the third element is devoted to the international context under which the British put the whole territory of the Gold Coast under their control.

Introduction:

The presence of the British in the Gold Coast goes back to the seventeenth century succeeding the Portuguese who were the first Europeans to set foot on the area in 1474. In January 1482, the Portuguese started building a stone-built castle to become the headquarters of the Guinea trade which they had already been carrying on for some few years. The castle was given the name of San Jorge da Mina and from it the place has been called Elmina ever since.¹ The area was later named by the British 'the Gold Coast', a name derived from the fact that gold was widely diffused there². However, the Portuguese were chased by the Dutch in 1637³ where they themselves built a fort of their own on St. Jago Hill. Under an atmosphere of keen competition for trans-Atlantic slave trade, other Europeans came to the premises to get their share in this trade. The Swedish built the Christianborg Castle in 1652 and a castle in Cape Coast in 1655. Two centuries later, the Dutch had taken over the Swedish possessions before they fell into the hands of the British⁴. It is worth noting that the British had already been controlling the whole coastal area of the Gold Coast, and a number of British missionaries and traders had been working there. As a result of the extension of the religious and commercial activities, the number of the British increased, making the establishment of an official administration necessary to look after their interests.

1. British Involvement

1. 1 The nineteenth century was marked by a steady increase of the British power and jurisdiction in the Gold Coast; during the first two decades of the century, the British forts and settlements were administered by a group of merchants who established two committees one in London composed of three members, and the other in Cape Coast composed of five members under Sir Charles McCarthy's administration despite the local people's refusal to the British involvement in their affairs.

1.2 McCarthy's Administration

In 1821 the British government dissolved the Company of Merchants and appointed Sir Charles McCarthy as governor for both

¹ - F. W. H. Migeod, 'A History of the Gold Coast and Ashanti,' *Journal of the Royal African Society*, Vol. 15, No. 59. (Apr., 1916), p. 236

² - Charles H. Knowles, "The Gold Coast," *The Scientific Monthly*, Vol. 25, No. 5. (Nov., 1927), p. 400

³ - Sean Kelly, "New Faces for Old Forts," *African Arts*, Vol. 4, N° 4, (Summer 1974), p. 45

⁴ - Ibid., p. 46

Sierra Leone, and the British forts in the Gold Coast became under common administration for the three following decades. Meanwhile, conflicts arose between the Ashanti and the Fanti states on the coast, the main reasons of which were the Fanti refusal to give the Ashanti traders a direct access to the coast to trade with the Europeans, and their support to the rebellions in the Ashantiland. The British could not remain unconcerned by the Ashanti attacks on the Fanti states. The *Ashantehene*, on the other hand, refused to recognize Britain's sovereignty on the settlements under their control; furthermore, he criticized Britain's alliance with his traditional enemy (the Fanti). The resulting situation gave birth to a series of Anglo-Ashanti conflicts that lasted for about seventy years¹. Since the beginning of the Anglo-Ashanti wars in 1807, British Parliament had been debating the question of keeping and extending settlements on the West African coasts, or abandoning them. Divergent opinions marked the debates between two groups in British Parliament. The group that opposed maintaining and extending the settlements was defending British taxpayers' interests². In contrast, the other group was acting under the merchants' pressure. To settle this question, the British Government sent a number of commissions to investigate on the spot the situation of the settlements and the matter of financing their administrative expenses. While the commissions were inquiring, the British were seeking to decrease the administrative costs in West Africa through the control of all their possessions from their sole colony in West Africa, Sierra Leone³. The mission of McCarthy was not easy as he faced two major challenges during his term office: first, providing sufficient means to stop slave trade; second, to ensure safe trade routes for British merchants in West Africa. These two missions added a financial burden to the British Treasury, a fact which led McCarthy to look for new incomes locally. In this context, he sought an alliance with the Fanti and the Dutch to face the Ashanti's threats, and therefore reduce the administration expenses.

¹ - The Anglo-Ashanti conflict (1807-1874) accounts four main wars, the last of which ended by the defeat of the Ashanti on April 4th, 1874. Source: A. Boahen, Ghana: Evolution and Change in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, London, Longman, 1975, pp. 31-33

² - In 1814 the administration of Sierra Leone had cost £ 24,000. Ten years later this amount rose to £95,000. Such a sum was greater than the colony's revenue, and the difference had to be paid by British taxpayers. Source: J. D. Fage, A History of West Africa, Cambridge University Press, 1969, pp. 133-134

³ - Fage, op. cit., p.133

In 1824, the Ashanti launched their first attack on the British settlements on the coast. McCarthy underwent a severe defeat, and was captured and killed. The British reacted by a complete withdrawal of their soldiers from the settlements, in 1828, the British merchants criticized this decision harshly and reminded the Government of its moral commitments, such as their protection and defending their interests. After long negotiations, the British Government agreed to grant an annual subsidy of £4000 to administer only the forts of Cape Coast and Accra.

1.3 MacLean's Administration

In 1829, George MacLean was appointed president of the Council of Merchants in Cape Coast¹, he was not luckier than his predecessor. He inherited a difficult situation marked by the Ashanti threats, in addition to the slave raiders' activities to which he had to put an end. Because of the limited means at his disposal, MacLean tried to create friendly relationships with the other European powers present in the area, on the one hand, and with the southern states and the Ashanti, on the other. He succeeded to achieve his goal through a series of negotiations. As a result, peace and order reigned, and British merchants could reach Kumasi in peace, and therefore trade with the hinterland flourished. MacLean's prerogatives were restricted because of the limited force at his disposal. However, he could abolish some habits and customs², which according to him, hampered the progress of the local people.

1.4 Hill's Administration

In 1843, the British government decided to administer officially its forts and castles on the Coast, for that purpose, Commander Hill was appointed as Lieutenant-governor, and MacLean as Judicial Assessor. In fact, this measure aimed at giving legitimacy to MacLean's achievements. Hill managed to bring, at a first phase, seven chiefs to sign a declaration in March 1844, known as the Bond of 1844³. In a second phase, ten other chiefs, representing the southern states, joined the treaty. These bonds generated a peaceful atmosphere and safe trade routes; and brought peace to the merchants in their

¹- Captain George MacLean took in charge the merchants' problems just after the death of Mc Carthy, but he was not appointed president of the council of British merchants until 1830, see Boahen, op. cit., p. 34

²- The customs and habits banned by MacLean included: human sacrifice, slave trading, and raids on traders. See Boahen, Ibid., pp. 38 - 39

³- A "bond" was called as such because it bound the African rulers to protect the rights of individuals and property.

journeys between the coastal trading posts and the Ashanti markets. The resulting favourable situation attracted more merchants, and led British officials to seek more efficient ways to administer their settlements in the Gold Coast. They decided to make them independent of the crown colony of Sierra Leone, because they believed that an administration on the spot could be more efficient than a remote one. The withdrawal of the Danes from the Gold Coast in 1850 was another factor that encouraged the British to establish effective rule. They installed a legislative and an executive councils; the former composed of four members: the governor, the chief justice, the colonial secretary and the officer of the Corps; and the latter of European officials only. This made the British look for new sources of revenue to meet the financial burden of the administration. For this purpose, the British administration took two important measures. The first was the purchasing of the Danes' forts, such a measure allowed the British to get an extra-revenue from duties on goods passing through these forts. Second, the British administration imposed a Poll Tax by an ordinance passed by a legislative assembly of chiefs in April 1852. The revenue expected from this tax in its first year was estimated at £15,000¹, but the sum gathered did not exceed £7,567, to decline afterwards until the collection of tax was completely abandoned in 1861. This complete failure was due to three reasons: first, the local people felt that the money collected was destined to pay British officials' high salaries. Second, the system of collecting tax itself was not well structured. Finally, the resistance of some chiefs in some areas and their refusal to collaborate with the administration affected the collection of tax. Boahen reported in this respect:

Resistance to the tax which began towards the end of 1853 developed into open rebellion first in eastern districts in January 1854 where the kings and people organised protest meetings in Accra and refused to pay tax².

2. People's Reactions

Reactions took different forms, the most important of which was the formation of the Fanti Confederation in January 1868, and the Accra Native Confederation in 1869. The former lasted until 1873, while the latter declined by the same year of its foundation because it

¹ - Boahen gave the mentioned annual amount, while Fage gave an annual estimate of £20,000, but the sum collected actually as given by Boahen was estimated at only £7,500 in the first year. See : Boahen, op. cit., p.42; and Fage, op. cit., p. 140

² - Boahen, op. cit. p.46

was entirely composed of the educated elite. The next important factor behind the declaration of the Fanti Confederation lies in the consequences of the war that broke out between the Ashanti and the British in 1863, and which ended in a severe defeat of the latter. The British Government responded to these losses in 1865 by ordering their troops to withdraw from several parts of the West Coast following the recommendations of the 1865 Select Committee¹. The Fanti people lost confidence in the British ability to protect them, and thus, adopted the motto 'force lies in unity', and founded the Fanti Confederacy² gathering about thirty-three states from the southern region. Besides its political objectives³, the Confederacy aimed at creating a strong alliance between the southern states to put an end to the repeated attacks of the Ashanti. However, the British saw in this newly born Confederacy a threat to their presence, and arrested its prominent leaders⁴, but they were soon released after the intervention of the Colonial Office. The Fanti Confederation succeeded in declaring itself independent from the British protectorate, and elaborated its own constitution in which was a poll tax introduced to cover the administration expenses.

A year after the foundation of the Fanti Confederacy, the Ashanti launched an attack southwards against the allied forces of both the British and the Fanti Confederacy. The Ashanti won its first round, but the British and their allies could change the course of the war thanks to the 2,500 British soldiers, and to a large number of African fighters from southern states. Under the command of Major General Sir Garnet Wolseley⁵, they achieved a large victory on the Ashanti warriors. They succeeded not only in beating them back, but also in counter invading them and entering Kumasi on February 4th, 1874⁶. Meantime, the British succeeded in preventing the Fanti Confederation from emerging. The British victory over the Ashanti was followed by the withdrawal of the Dutch from the Gold Coast. These factors helped

¹ - Ibid., p.52.

²- The most important political objectives of the Confederacy as outlined in Article 8 of its constitution were :

to promote friendly intercourse between all the kings and chiefs of the Fante, to make good roads throughout the confederation and build schools to promote agriculture and industrial pursuit. It also aimed at achieving self-government. Ibid., p. 53.

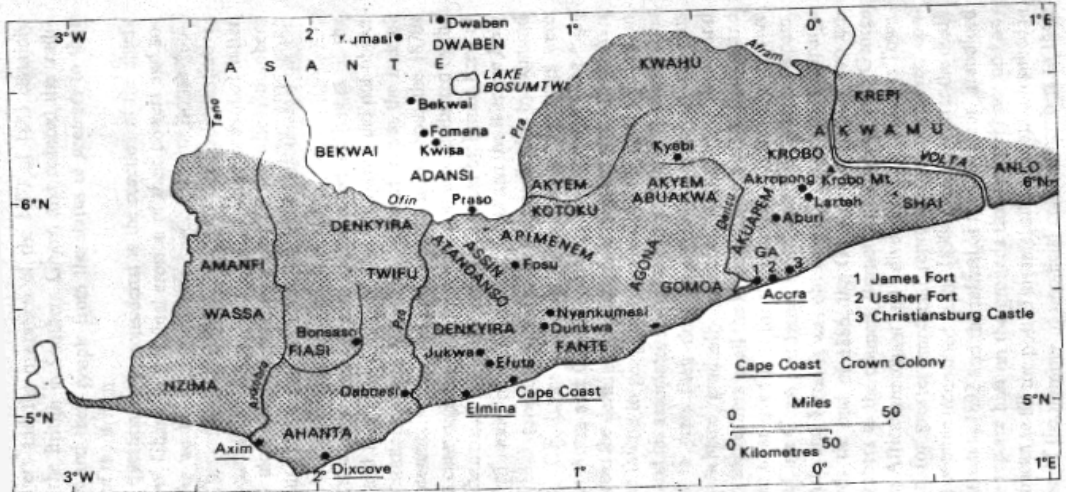
⁴ - The leading members of the Fante confederacy were : W. E. Dadson, J. F. Amissah, J. H. Brew, F. C. Grant, R. J. Ghartey, G. Amissah, and S. Ferguson. Ibid., p. 53

⁵ - Fage, op. cit. , p.144

⁶ - Ibid. , p. 145

the British to declare their forts and settlements in the Gold Coast and Lagos a crown colony, and the states south the Pra River a Protectorate, in 1874. (see Map 1)

Map1: The British Crown Colony and Protectorate (1874) Source:
Boahen, op. cit., p. 58



The British Crown Colony and Protectorate

3. Establishment of British Rule

Following the Anglo-Ashanti war that broke out in 1874 and that ended by a severe defeat of the Ashanti, and due to the international context characterized by a radical change in the attitude of the European powers present in Africa towards the acquisition of African territories, the British were compelled to annex Ashanti and the Northern territories. On the other hand, the proclamation of the protectorate¹ in the southern region of the Gold Coast put the British administration in front of new commitments vis-à-vis their subjects in the colony such as providing facilities in transport, education, medical services, justice and so on, which required more funds. The colonial administration thought of increasing the colony's revenue by imposing duties on imported and exported goods, and by introducing taxes. Such measures required the setting up of political machinery to make it legal and accepted by the local people. Besides, a number of departments

¹ - The British Protectorate referred to the territory ruled by the chiefs with whom the British signed bonds.

were established to put into effect the colonial government's policy. In fact, the government of the colony consisted of a governor appointed by the Colonial Office assisted by an executive council composed exclusively of officials, in addition to a legislative council consisting of both settlers and representatives of the local people whose function was to make laws and control finances, all under the control of the Colonial Office. The people of the Protectorate were governed through their chiefs under the system of indirect rule to reduce the administration cost.

Other measures followed the proclamation of the British Crown Colony and the Protectorate. For humanitarian reasons, and for the promotion of western civilization, the colonial government passed two ordinances in 1874, through which they abolished domestic slavery, and emancipated all slaves in the protectorate. The growing involvement of the British in the Gold Coast went hand in hand with the increasing costs of the administration. So they introduced new taxes and passed the Town Council Ordinance in 1869. The latter aimed at getting revenue from the control and exploitation of forests and mines, and to protect landowners from corrupt speculations. A series of measures including the introduction of the Land Bills of 1894 and 1897, the reestablishment of the Supreme Court and the Executive Council, the operation of the National Jurisdiction Ordinance of 1883, and the appointment of the District and Travelling Commissioners showed that the British were strongly established in the southern region of the Gold Coast, and the people were not considered as mere *protégés* but as subjects¹.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed an abrupt change in the attitude of the Europeans present in Africa vis à vis the acquisition of African territories. Boahen wrote in this context: The Europeans abandoned their "sand beach" policy and pushed further inland into the heart of Africa².

Generally, historians consider the economic crisis³ of the last quarter of the nineteenth century as being responsible for the expansionist policy that prevailed among the Europeans at that time. The European interest in the African territories came as a direct consequence of the Industrial Revolution. The latter multiplied unemployment and made the need for raw materials greater. The wide

¹ - Boahen, op. cit., p. 61

² - Ibid., p.69

³ - A. G. Hopkins, **An Economic History of Africa**, London, Longman, 1975, p. 160

use of machines produced more goods and required more raw materials to which the Europeans had to look for new markets and new sources of raw materials. This led the Europeans to look for new resources outside Europe. In addition, the emergence of new powers such as Germany, the United States, Japan and Russia created new poles of competition in controlling international resources and markets. In other words, the economic difficulties at home incited the Europeans to seek solutions overseas. This situation increased competition between European companies which were backed up by their governments. They all struggled for the same objectives, that is the acquisition of new African territories to control more raw materials and secure new markets for their outputs.

The fledgling French companies in West Africa¹, for instance, could not enter a fair commercial competition with the giant British National African Company. The French and Germans thought of reinforcing their commercial ambitions with protectionist measures in the markets under their control. The new circumstances were then the direct factors behind the sudden change in the attitude of the European powers towards acquiring new territories in West Africa. A. G. Hopkins argued about the reason of the competition for African territories as follows:

“The economic crisis between 1875 and 1900 intensified the antagonism between Britain and France and led to a competition for African territories”².

The mentioned changes in the European powers’ attitude generated some disputes, which sometimes developed into clashes in different regions of West Africa. These conflicts were quickly settled by agreements between their governments in Europe.

The stressing atmosphere resulting from clashing interests led the European powers present in Africa to meet in Berlin in 1884-85³. The objective of the Berlin Conference was to determine the political spheres of influence of each of the European colonial power on the African territories. It also came to legitimize a reality that existed on the ground, at least at that time. The French, for instance, had reached

¹- The largest French companies in West Africa were *La Compagnie Française de l’Afrique Equatoriale* founded in 1880, *La Compagnie du Sénégal* and *La Compagnie Française de l’Afrique Occidentale*, which were established in 1881 and 1887 respectively. Ibid., pp. 160-199

²- Hopkins, op. cit., p.160

³- R. Oliver, and A. Atmore, **Africa Since 1800**, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 107

Bamako (600 miles inland from the Senegalese coasts) in 1879¹. The Conference gave birth to new boundaries between the Europeans' interests in Africa to prevent any possible clash to break out. These boundaries are still the frontiers recognised by the United Nations of the modern states of Africa. It is important to note that the partition of African territories had deep social and political consequences on the African societies. Many tribes and communities were split regardless of their tribal, cultural, and linguistic ties. For instance, the Hausa Community was divided into French Niger and British Nigeria. Benin territory was divided into twenty five per cent as French Benin, whereas the remainder seventy five per cent was annexed to British Nigeria. Politically, the new frontiers resulting from the Berlin Conference are in fact, today like time bombs, as they constitute the origin of conflicts between neighbouring countries.

Imposing 'effective occupation' on African territories in conformity with the resolutions of the Berlin Conference was not easy. It varied from one territory to another for many reasons, the most important of which was the reaction of the local people towards the change brought about by the new system. The British, for instance, found it difficult to handle the situation in the Gold Coast, especially in the Ashantiland and to a lesser extent in the North. The Ashanti continued smuggling in slaves, attacking merchants. The British accused the Ashanti of violating the Fomena Treaty² which insisted on keeping safe the trade routes to Kumasi from the coastal trading posts. On the other hand, the British rivals continued their commercial activities on the territories supposed to be under British influence.

However, thanks to their industrial supremacy, the British did not need to impose political domination on African territories to secure markets for their surplus production. Yet, they feared that the French or the Germans would conquer the Ashanti and the Northern territory; hence, they decided to put them under their control, thereby generating

¹ - Hopkins, op. cit. , p.162

² - The Treaty of Fomena was signed between the defeated *Ashantihene* , Kofi Karikari ,and Sir Garnet Wolseley. It contained four resolutions. First, the Ashanti should pay an indemnity of 50,000 OZ of gold. Second, the Ashanti should renounce all claims to suzerainty over Denkyira, Assin, Akim, Adansi, and *el Mina*. Third, they should promise to keep the roads to Kumasi open to traders from the coast. Finally, they should abolish the practice of human sacrifice. Fage, op. cit., p. 145

great tension among the Ashanti chiefs. The British sent their troops under the command of Sir Francis Scott and R. S. Baden to annex Ashanti by force. They entered Kumasi on 7 January 1896. Furthermore, they sent the *Ashantihene* Prempeh I and his family into exile in Sierra Leone. Four years later, a rebellion broke out, but it was soon crushed thanks to the modern weapons used by the British. Thus, by 1901 Ashanti was officially annexed to the Crown Colony. Some time later, the British peacefully annexed the Northern Territory to give birth to the modern British Gold Coast. (see Map 2)

Map 2: The British Gold Coast

Conclusion:

During the nineteenth century, the territory known as the British Gold Coast knew important political changes. It was at that period that modern Ghana was shaped to satisfy British economic ambitions. However, it is worth noting that the British reactions were, to a large extent, to face the challenges posed by the Germans and French. In other words, the British were compelled to do so otherwise they would lose ground to their rivals. In contrast, the British were reluctant as to the acquisition of African territories because of the strong opposition of the British Treasury. Furthermore, on the ground, the strong resistance of the local people significantly influenced the political fate of the colony.

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