

## The British Council's Role in Colonial West African Educational Development: The Case of the Gold Coast

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ملخص:

يتمحور هذا المقال حول دراسة دور المركز الثقافي البريطاني (The British Council) في تطور العملية التربوية في "ساحل الذهب" (غانا حاليا) خلال فترة الاستعمار البريطاني. كانت الخدمات التربوية و الثقافية المقدمة من طرف هذا المركز على الصعيد غير الحكومي - خاصة فيما يتعلق بالنشاطات التربوية التي كانت من صلاحيات الحكومة الاستعمارية فقط - فعالة في غرس البذور اللازمة و بناء أسس متينة من أجل مساندة بريطانيا في أوقات المحن و التذبذبات و لمواصلة التأثير البريطاني هناك، و تهيئة الأرضية المطلوبة لدعم الشراكة بينها و بين هذه المستعمرة الافريقية المهمة بعد الاستقلال.

Abstract in English

Although education in the Gold Coast was the concern of the Colonial Government, the role the British Council played in the educational development of this British African colony was very important to preserve British interests. Indeed, the Council succeeded to plant the appropriate seeds for more support for Britain - which was in most need of it after the Second World War - during the Colonial era and for more welcomed British presence in this strategic West African area after independence.

## Introduction

After the Second World War (1946), British Colonial Office planners became conscious of the need for a well-designed policy based on the political development of Africans. This allowed political advancement in Africa increased the number of openings for Africans in the Civil Service and elsewhere, a fact that augmented the demand for education, mostly for an utilitarian kind. There was much general interest in matters like Parliamentary Government, Trade Unionism and the Press. Thus, information about parliamentary government, local government, the Commonwealth relations, welfare services and economics and politics, in terms of lectures or expertise to government officials, was constantly requested from the British Council. The latter was the agent of the Colonial Government in charge of the cultural sphere during the colonial era.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the British Council's work in the Gold Coast during the colonial era succeeded to plant appropriate seeds and build strong pillars that were to preserve and consolidate British educational and cultural influence in this very important British colony.

### I- Western Education in the Gold Coast

The spread of western education in the Gold Coast was initiated, and for many years supervised, almost and entirely by the Christian missionaries. The latter succeeded to establish western-type schools despite the government little financial assistance. For instance, by the early 1920's there were 31,089 children enrolled in the mission

schools.<sup>1</sup> These schools became largely financed by the colonial government, which also provided the inspectorate and machinery for maintaining academic standards. The government had also provided a certain number of schools, mainly secondary and technical ones. Yet, the establishment of government schools here and there did not mean a commitment of the British Government to the native's education. There was not a definite educational policy. In fact, like the other colonies, the Gold Coast was expected to be financially self-supporting, and education was considered as a heavy financial burden.

Thus, the provision of British education was left to missionary schools which trained western educated colonial individuals. The latter's welfare in Britain, where the majority of them completed their studies, became the concern of several institutions, namely Victoria League, West African Students' Union and Aggrey House which contributed to promote capitalist values against anti-British propaganda.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the Government did not want to spend money on education but, on the other hand, wanted to fill its posts with clerical staff. It is obvious that the concern here was purely economic. This was

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<sup>1</sup> - F. M., Bourret, Ghana: The Road to Independence 1919-1957, Stanford University Press, 1960, p. 138.

<sup>2</sup> - For details see : CO859/3/1205/1939, Part 2.

CO859/3/1209/1939, extracted from memos submitted by the Colonial Governments at the 1939 Conference in Lagos.

a cause of worry since the demand remained greater than the supply as less and less people succeeded in the entrance exam. Consequently, the low standard provided by missionary schools motivated the Government's concern in education, and the attempts to raise the level through grants and supervision were not sufficient to provide more and better educated people for the different government posts with the object of forming efficient clerks.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that western education was introduced and maintained in the Gold Coast for European interests: the missionaries wanted to spread their religion and the government wanted to have a cheap manpower. Yet, whatever was the motivating force, British culture had been promoted in the Gold Coast through the missionaries' educational enterprise before the British Council became well established there and took this responsibility and was allowed to operate in a professional and targeted way after the political development the Gold Coast knew during the postwar era.

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<sup>1</sup>- Sir Frederick Lugard (1858-1945) was High Commissioner of Northern Nigeria from 1900 to 1906, Governor of Hong Kong from 1907 to 1912, Governor of Northern and Southern Nigeria from 1912 to 1914 and Governor-General of Nigeria from 1914 to 1918. He declared that 'an increase in the supply has become a matter of vital and pressing necessity'. H. M. Kirk-Greene, Lugard and the Amalgamation of Nigeria London, F., Cass, 1968, p. 150.

## II- Political Development

The Gold Coast had a flourishing African leading economy based on cocoa, and the best western educated population in British Africa. It was viewed as the most developed colony in which the British had serious political problems to solve. There was a long history of strikes on railways, in mines and in Cocoa industry.<sup>1</sup> Britain carried her colonial policy of gradualism there, by claiming a new constitution in 1946. The Burns Constitution<sup>2</sup> established the first legislative Council in British Africa with an elected African majority. While Ashanti was allowed a voice in the Gold Coast Legislative Council, the constitution met resistance from the United Gold Coast Convention (U.G.C.C), organised in 1947 by J. B. Danquah and others in the Gold Coast.

Kwame Nkrumah, whom Danquah appointed as Secretary of the United Gold Coast Convention in 1947, started his efficient nationalist base under self-government slogan. After a series of protests and successful boycotts of European goods in 1948, Nkrumah left the U.G.C.C and in 1949 founded the Convention People's Party (C.P.P) which appealed more to the masses. In 1950, he led a general strike and boycott which ended in violence and resulted in his imprisonment. Thus, he won great popularity which offered his party victory in the elections of 1951, and he became Prime Minister.

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<sup>1</sup> - R. Hyam, Britain's Declining Empire. The Road to Decolonisation 1918-1968, USA,

Cambridge University Press 2006, p. 146.

<sup>2</sup> - Sir A. Burns, Governor of the Gold Coast, 1941-1947.

The quick advance towards self-government remained the most important feature of political life in the Gold Coast during 1952-1953, a year that coincided with significant political developments. The latter was manifested in the establishment of the new Representative Assembly; the inauguration of a system of local government; the acceleration of educational reforms in schools and teacher training colleges, and the growth of adult education and mass education; Africanisation of the civil service; development of industrial and other economic projects, such as Takoradi harbour.<sup>1</sup> Although the British remained in complete control, power was shifting to the nationalists. This culminated in a more liberal constitution in 1954 and finally, independence in 1957.

On the light of such significant imposed colonial political developments, the British Council had to adapt its course accordingly and sustain its position of impartiality whilst preserving its ability to follow the rapidly growing new progress to ensure the continuity of its work. Indeed, the Council managed to maintain excellent relations with the Gold Coaster Government Departments and local institutions which continued to sustain the Council's establishment and activities which they viewed as an important contribution to their social and educational development.

Before dealing with the Council's role in the Gold Coast educational development, it is important to refer to the Council's policy

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<sup>1</sup>- BW93/5, Confidential, The British Council, Gold Coast, Representative's Annual Report 1952-1953,1953, p. 1.

in the colonies. This policy knew a significant development and became clearly defined, particularly in 1948.

### III- The Council's Policy Development in the Colonies After the Second World War

The Colonial Office encouraged the British Council to multiply its efforts in the colonies. In 1947, Mr Green-Jones (UK delegate to UN 1946-1948) expressed his wish and strong feeling about the obligation to maintain the British Council's work in the British Colonies for a very important reason. He stated:

As the Colonies themselves progress towards greater self-consciousness and self-sufficiency, their culture and institutions may retain a British flavour and cultural ties may supplement or take the place of political ties on which less reliance can be placed than in the past.<sup>1</sup>

The Colonial Office used the British Council to cultivate an understanding of British colonial policy through British publicity.<sup>2</sup> The Council was also used in the colonies as a strong means in the improvement of race relations.<sup>3</sup> Such an enterprise was particularly important in African colonies where large unofficial European populations were established. In 1948, the Colonial Under Secretary, Charles Jeffries, himself stated:

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<sup>1</sup>- BW26/4, I. Thomas to Adam, 9 August 1947.

<sup>2</sup>- PREM 8/648, Report of the Empire Publicity Sub-Committee, 20 February 1947.

<sup>3</sup>- CO878/48/1, Minute by K. W. Blackburn, 17 January 1949.

I feel that the Council can play a vital part in the development of closer links between the people of the Colonies and the people of Britain,..., the services of the Council should be used to an even greater extent than they have in the past.<sup>1</sup>

This Council's secured support from the Colonial Office facilitated the setting up of Council's offices in all but the smallest colonial territories. Besides this, the Council's policy there became clearly defined in 1948. The opportunity of this agency's work was briefed as 'the carrying of any activity in the cultural and educational sphere whose chief purpose was the projection of British way of life and the promotion of closer relations in cultural matters between the people of Britain and the people of the colonies'.<sup>2</sup> The Council was allowed to take part in cultural and educational operations which were to improve the promoted appreciation of the British way of life. In this context, the Council's Annual Report for 1950-1951, stated:

At present there are strong links between Britain and the Colonies which for the most part have not been forged by the Colonial peoples themselves. In many ways the strength of these links is threatened. It is to be hoped that as the peoples of the Colonies obtain greater control over their own affairs, they will realise the value of the connection with Britain and will themselves seek to strengthen the links between their countries and the

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<sup>1</sup>- A. J. S. White, The British Council, The First 25 years 1934-1959, London, the British Council, 1965.

<sup>2</sup>- A. J. S. White, *op. cit*, p. 85.



Commonwealth clearly the Council can play ... in achieving this purpose.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the Council's work in the colonies was judged to be crucial and helpful to the Colonial Governments and was strongly encouraged by senior officials within the Colonial Office. In 1948, the Council was ordered to focus as much as possible on activities such as visits, courses, lectures and English lessons rather than on longer-term projects like exhibitions of modern paintings.<sup>2</sup> Such direct selection for the British Council's post-war priority was expected to ensure rapid political return to which Britain was in most need, particularly in relation to her colonies' young generation with whom Britain would have to treat in the future.

This clarification of the Council's position during the post-war era led to an accelerated development of the Council's work. The Council's representatives overseas were asked to classify targets and themes in an order of priority. This operation resulted in giving education the first priority. Indeed, the Council's services targeted education authorities, universities, schools and teachers before any other ranks.

To introduce Britain to colonial students in a perfect way, the Council organised courses. From the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1950, this task became an official responsibility tackled at the demand of the Secretary of State for the Colonies. The British Council succeeded to expand this

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<sup>1</sup>- BW151/12, Report of The British Council 1950-1951, (London, MCMXLVII, 1951), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>- CAB124/1029, Bevin to Greech-Jones, 22 September 1948.

particularly important educational activity by acting on an agency basis for various international bodies, which were providing scholarships for study abroad; and by proposing British Council's services and assistance to professional experts who came to Britain in large numbers. For instance, in 1952-1953, the Council organised courses for 1,570 visitors.<sup>1</sup> Besides, it provided training facilities for overseas teachers of English and was heavily identified with the creation and work of the School of Applied Linguistics in Edinburgh University. For instance, the Council founded a one-year course for overseas teachers from the colonies at Moray House Training College in Edinburgh; and placed teachers at the Institute of Education in London University where tailored courses for such teachers had been carried for many years.

In fact, the flow of these students to Britain was of a significant long-term importance. The latter extended the economic side to cover other unquantifiable benefits in the political and social fields because of the established friendship. Among these overseas students would spring future leaders who would drive the administration, the policies, the economy, the academic and creative life of their societies and countries. Having been offered an opportunity to study in Britain, they generally developed a positive feeling towards Britain.<sup>2</sup>

Another Council's main activity after the Second World War was to facilitate access to British books, periodicals and professional

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<sup>1</sup>- Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>- For details see: P. Williams, The Overseas Students Question, (London, Heinemann, 1980).

journals by purchasing books for the Council libraries and for presentations to other libraries.<sup>1</sup> The Council involved itself with what could be exported as a reading material by Britain in order to protect Britain's image. Consequently, it worked in partnership with other British agencies, essentially British book publishers. The latter exported books at a value of about £34 million annually more than the publishers of any other country in the world.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the flow of selected books and reading materials to British colonies contributed to attract intellectuals and students from such areas to Britain. This indirect contact was expected to drive these target groups, despite other developed countries' educational and training institutions and systems' efforts, to choose Great Britain as a country for their education whose acquirement would be facilitated by the Council's help in the English language teaching sphere.

As the process of decolonisation was launched and the spread of communism became a reality threatening imperialists and British interests in particular, the British Council's policy was allowed to grow and secure support from the British Government in order to strengthen its establishment and develop its cultural and educational work in the British colonies.

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<sup>1</sup>- From 1947 to 1952 the sums allocated 'to the purchase of books for Council libraries and for books presented to other libraries dropped from £81,000 to less than £20,000. Of this only about £1,500 was allotted to presentations - virtually alien colonial territories'. A. J. S. White, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>2</sup>- A. J. S. White, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

#### IV- The British Council's Contribution to Educational Development

After the Second World War, the educational development on British lines became vital for colonial political and economic stability which only development could ensure. Sir Charles Jeffries, representing the Colonial Office on the Executive Committee of the British Council over a long period, strongly believed in the Council's ability and skill to spread and promote understanding and friendship through activities which could not be supervised on an official basis. His reference to the Council as an instrument designed by providence reflected his conviction of the benefit British Council's activities could provide for Britain.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the Council's post-war work in the Gold Coast improved. For instance, the Council's activities in Accra were extended to Kumasi and Secondi-Takoradi where new centres were established to allow a more efficient British educational presence to develop and a further impact to be secured in this British dependency which was progressively advancing towards self-government.

Indeed, despite the Council's non-official concern with the colonial educational field, significant work was indirectly fulfilled in relation to direct assistance and problems-solving of adult education to help governmental and other institutions concerned. For instance, Council's cultural operation grew to cover different activities as library and books, lectures, language teaching, films, music, drama and

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<sup>1</sup>- C. Jeffries, *The Colonial Office*, London, 1956, p. 189.

broadcasting. The latter had a positive impact on the educational development in this West African colony.

In fact, the general tendency to substitute African staff for British had been followed by an increase rather than a decrease in the demand for the British Council's services.<sup>1</sup> Although there had been some anti-British feeling which could have constituted a serious obstacle for the Council, the latter had succeeded to be on good terms with the Prime Minister and the other African Ministers during the colonial era. Thus, the Council's educational dynamism was mainly manifested in relation, for instance, to libraries and the reading material, lectures, sending students to Britain and film shows.

The Council's three centres in the Gold Coast had libraries, each one with a reading room. They received large numbers of books and were supplied with up-to-date British newspapers and periodicals which were well used.<sup>2</sup> These libraries were backed to an increasing extent since they were started in 1953. In Kumasi and Sekondi where the average monthly borrowing were 335 and 250 respectively, the majority of users were Africans. The library in the Accra Centre was started a year later than the others and had a well selected stock of books, but did not secure sufficient support from Africans though it was increasing. For instance, in 1955-1956, the average monthly borrowing was 157 of which 20% were by Africans.<sup>3</sup> This Council's

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<sup>1</sup>- BW93/5, Confidential, The British Council, Gold Coast, Representative's Annual Report 1953-1954, 1954, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>- BW93/14, Confidential, The British Council, Ghana, Representative's Annual Report 1956-1957, 1957, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup>- Ibid.

loan service at the individual level was extended to institutional level through moving boxes.

The Council's effort in the field of librarianship was remarkable as a pioneering operation which developed to provide more access to British books, periodicals and reading material. A library service for places outside Accra was initiated by the Council. Boxes of 50 or 60 books were on loan to an increasing number of centres, and were exchanged 3 or 4 times a year. For instance, in 1945-1946, 30 centres throughout the Gold Coast benefited from this service. The following year, the number of centres which benefited from this library service increased to 88, a number that was in continual progress to allow an extended access to British books in this British colony.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to books, periodicals were distributed to training centres, schools, clubs and community centres. For instance, in 1947-1948, some 2,000 periodicals were distributed to African clubs and schools.<sup>2</sup> Interesting sums were increasingly devoted to this operation. In 1952-1953, the British Council presented about £700 worth of periodicals.<sup>3</sup> The main titles of these presentations were Geographical Magazine, Pictorial Education, Teachers World, Children's Newspaper and Child Education.<sup>4</sup> In fact, this operation was of a significant importance because the increased Mass Education and Quickened Education Development Plan resulted in progressing literacy. The latter

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<sup>1</sup>- Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>- BW151/9, Report of The British Council 1947-1948, London, The British Council, 1948, p. 45.

<sup>3</sup>- BW93/15, Confidential, The British Council, Gold Coast, Representative's Annual Report 1952-1953, 1953, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup>- BW93/5, Confidential, op. cit, 1954, p. 6.

faced a shortage of good reading features and the British Council judged prerequisite to fill the existing gap with British cultural and educational production and ‘not leave the vacuum to be dealt with from other sources’.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, eminent lecturers were selected to give courses and organise discussions and talks on different subjects. For instance, in 1950-1951 lectures, talks and discussions were arranged largely in conjunction with the Department of Extra-Mural Studies and the People’s Educational Association. These had comprised : series of talks on ‘Modern Literature’, ‘Modern Poetry’, ‘Musical Appreciation’, ‘Understanding the Structure of Music’, series of classes on ‘Drawing and Painting’, series of talks on ‘Art and everyday Life’, ‘African Music’, ‘Nineteenth Century Literature’. Moreover, other subjects like ‘Spontaneous Drama’, ‘Community Plays’, ‘Bull Fighting’, ‘The Royal Empire Society for the Blind’, ‘The Gold Coast in World Affairs’, ‘Our Language Problem’; and many others were covered by miscellaneous lectures.<sup>2</sup>

Among the prominent visitors who lectured for the Council was Miss Mary Trevelyan, Advisor to Colonial Students in the University of London; Miss Marjorie Stewart, Director of the Tropical Community Development Centre, Y.W.C.A, London, who talked about the Development of Voluntary Leadership; and Miss Wan Youngman, Art Advisor to the Cambridge Education Authority who fulfilled a full

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<sup>1</sup>- BW93/5, op. cit, 1953, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>- BW93/5, Confidential, The British Council, Gold Coast, Representative’s Annual Report 1950-1951, 1951, p. 1.

programme under the joint auspices of the West African Examination Council and the British Council. Mr Frank Cawson from the Adult Education Division of the Council, London, also went to the Gold Coast to advise on Study Boxes by both the British Council group and by the public educational associations.<sup>1</sup>

The Council's diverse programmes did not neglect the sending of students from the Gold Coast to study in Britain by offering bursaries. For instance, in 1954, two Council bursaries were granted to Mr Owusu Prempeh to study 'Choir Training and Management' and to Mrs Florence Nylander who was concerned with the 'Organisation of Day Nurseries'. Besides, at the demand of the Ministry of Education a week-end course briefing students proceeding to the United Kingdom was arranged in Accra and attended by some 60 students. A similar smaller course was supervised in Sekondi where students, embarking or disembarking at Takoradi, were assisted.<sup>2</sup>

However, it is worth noting that the high percentage of illiteracy and the insufficient presence of the reading habit, which was only acquired by comparatively few people in the Gold Coast, led the Council to rely more on visual material than on the written word. Consequently, film shows in schools, training colleges and other institutions was carried on extensively from Accra, Kumasi and Sekondi. For instance, in 1950-1951, 132 films shows were arranged all over the Gold Coast for colleges schools, prisons and other institutions. Several fixtures were arranged so as to assist and co-ordinate with the

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<sup>1</sup>- BW93/5, op. cit, 1954, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>- Ibid, p. 2.



activities of Mass Education Team, the People's Educational Association and the other groups and societies. Specialized film shows were given to material authorities and educational workers.<sup>1</sup>

The Accra Film Unit was dynamic. For instance in 1953-1954, it visited the Eastern, Central and Western regions of the Colony once every three months, and showed films to some 15-20 schools, clubs and other educational institutions in each area during each tour. In addition to this, it answered 36 special requests for film shows both in Accra and outlying districts. These covered special shows for the Labour Department, the Department of Social Welfare, Farmer's Associations, and the People's Educational Association. The British Council in Accra had the loan of three feature-films: 'Henry V', 'Bush Christmas' and 'Royal Journey'. All the three films were very successful and attracted large audiences wherever they were shown. Shakespearian and Dickens films seemed to embody both propaganda and educational values. Therefore, the British Council expressed a fervent wish to have at least three of such films each year.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, Film Shows remained one of the successful mediums on which the British Council relied to seed positive feelings towards Britain.

With the advancement of the Gold Coast towards independence, the Council's concern with educational operations started to develop. Indeed, the British Council initiated the establishment and the growth of libraries and activated the distribution of British reading material

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<sup>1</sup>- BW93/5, op. cit, 1951, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>- BW93/5, op. cit, 1954, p. 10.

through which strong links with Britain were cultivated during this colonial period to be fully exploited during the post-colonial era.

Indeed, with the attainment of independence, the Council's main tasks in the Gold Coast were to become the maintenance of the English language and improvement of its use. This was achieved through, for instance, advice on methods of teaching English, especially at primary school level, assistance to government in the recruitment of teachers from Britain, and support for the country's programme of public development.<sup>1</sup>

## Conclusion

Established in the Gold Coast during the difficult world circumstances in 1943, the British Council cultivated goodwill towards Britain through the setting up of centres and libraries where both Africans and British individuals were brought together to share some cultural and educational facilities. Yet, the Council's start in the Gold Coast significantly developed from 1947 onwards as both internal and external changes affecting Britain imposed new realities.

The British Council's involvement in the Gold Coast requirements in the educational field such as libraries and books, film shows as this colony advanced towards independence was appreciated. Students at Achimota College in Accra continued to avail themselves of the reading-room and other facilities provided by the Council. Although it was outside the scope of the Council's responsibility to

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<sup>1</sup>- CO1045/1340, British Council Papers, 15 June 1962, 63, 67, 68, 70.

help directly in the tackling of the serious problems of adult education in the Gold Coast, very important was the work the Council fulfilled indirectly to help the Colonial Government and other organisations concerned with this matter. The British Council ensured fuller participation in the adult education movement which became administered by the extra-mural department of the Gold Coast College, in a way Britain was consciously and constantly projected in talks on parliamentary government, local government education, voluntary services, etc.

The British Council's professionally performed work left a British touch and marked the Gold Coast educational development. It was able to promote British culture and educational influence in such a way that British educational services, in particular, became highly demanded during the post-colonial era.

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