

Moving the people to save the soil?  
The Gonja Development Corporation groundnut failure, Protectorate of the Northern Territories  
of Gold Coast Colony 1947-1957

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**ABSTRACT**

In 1948, the government of the Gold Coast (Ghana) launched a program to develop mechanization groundnut production in an unoccupied region of the Protectorate of the Northern Territories. The project's workers were to be drawn from the densely populated upper eastern section of the Protectorate. The scheme thus offered the possibility of countering an environmental catastrophe in an 'overcrowded' area while easing Britain's post-war oilseeds shortage. Moreover, Colonial Office experts believed that this could be accomplished without undermining communal land tenure or traditional African social relations. Rather than simply resettling individual workers, the project envisioned moving entire villages intact and operating the production area based on communal labour on state-owned land. In the end, the idea proved impossible to implement and the project failed completely, liquidating its assets in 1957. Our paper discusses the historical circumstances leading up to the groundnut scheme as well as the reasons for its failure.

**INTRODUCTION**

Between 1948 and 1957, the colonial administration of the Gold Coast (Ghana) attempted to implement a major agricultural mechanization project in the Gonja District, a vast, unoccupied region of the colony's Northern Territories Protectorate. Triggered by Britain's desperate postwar need for oilseeds and proteins, the project reflected the British government's turn towards planned development in Africa to benefit the British economy. At the same time,

colonial officials were worried about desiccation, soil erosion and overpopulation in northernmost areas of the Northern Territories, especially the 'overpopulated' Zuarungu District in the northeast. From 1943, the Forestry Department worked with the administration to create Land Planning Areas (LPAs) that delineated agricultural lands, grazing areas and forest reserves. As part of this process, colonial officials also believed that population pressure should be relieved by moving peasants out of the most densely populated areas into less populated zones. The GDC project provided an ideal testing ground, and the colonial government created a plan to resettle 80,000 peasants from Zuarungu to Gonja (Quansah 1972, 18-19).

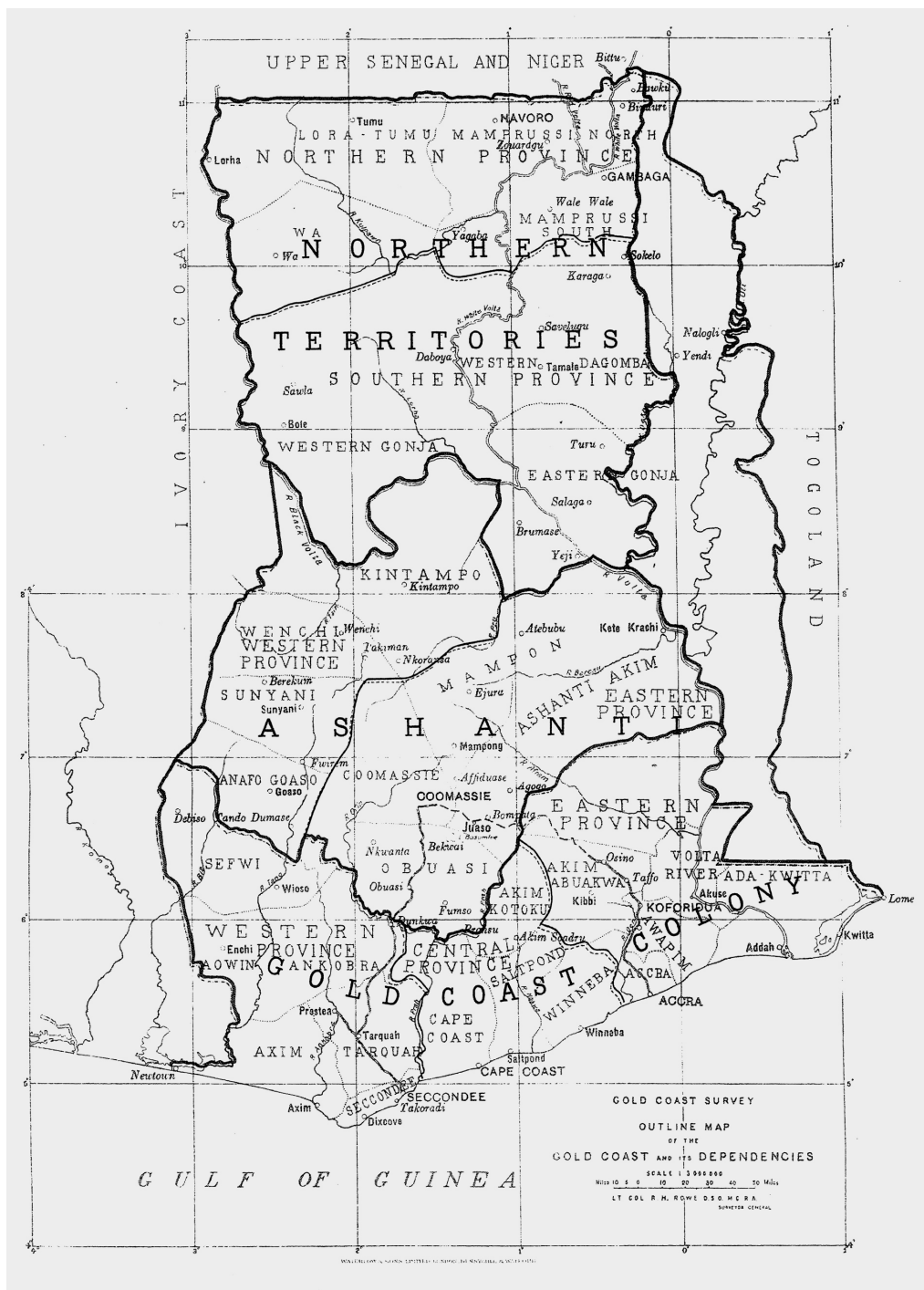
Zuarungu was part of the North Mamprusi District ('Mamprusi North' on Map 1) of the Northern Territories Protectorate of the Gold Coast (more of which below). When British military officials arrived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, they found a population of scattered peasant farmers with few signs of centralized political control under chiefs. The closest thing to chiefly rule appeared to be the office of *tindana* or land priest, the spiritual custodian of the land. Farming in the area – which took the form of hoe cultivation on small plots of land – had been disrupted by slave raiding in the precolonial period, and it was severely disrupted again between 1898 and 1907 by violent British campaigns of military 'pacification' to bring the people under colonial control. After successful military raids, British officials appointed – and in many cases invented – chiefs as agents of colonialism, sidelining the authority of the land priests. Although colonial officials recognized early on that the Zuarungu area was very densely populated, little was done before the 1930s to improve farming or relieve population pressure. Instead, the colonial administration used the chiefs as recruiting agents for migrant workers, who went to the forest zones of the south (Ashanti and the Gold Coast Colony on Map 1) to work on mines and

cocoa farms. There was a shift of opinion in the 1920s, and by the 1930s colonial officers in the north were sounding alarms over an impending environmental disaster in North Mamprusi. By the late 1940s it was believed that many of the people would have to be moved out to save the soil. At the same time, in an apparently fortunate confluence of events, the colonial government was developing the GDC plan. It was launched to great fanfare in 1948. But within a decade the Gonja program had failed spectacularly, liquidating in 1957 after having planted only 1,500 of the projected 30,000 acres, and attracting a grand total of 15 settlers from Zuarungu (Quansah 1972, 18-19). The following discussion offers an analysis of the circumstances behind the GDC program as well as the reasons for its failure.

### **Colonial Development in the Northern Territories, 1901-1946**

The British colony of the Gold Coast included three political entities: the Gold Coast Colony (1874), Ashanti (1901) and The Northern Territories of the Gold Coast (1901). Initially under military rule, the Northern Territories was transferred to a civilian administration in 1907. Before the colonial period, trade in the region centred on exports of gold, slaves, kola nuts and livestock northwards to the Sahel. After 1874 trading networks shifted to the south, as the colonial state worked with metropolitan and (for a time) African merchants to develop 'legitimate commerce' in palm oil, rubber, cocoa and timber (Fage, 1956; Hill, 1970; Kimble, 1963; Mcsheffrey, 1983; Wilks, I., 1975). The success of these resources meant that colonial officials in the north faced serious challenges in promoting development in the Northern Territories. Under military rule, Chief Commissioners A.H. Morris and A.E.G. Watherston attempted to promote gold mining, cotton production and cattle rearing. None of these attempts succeeded and a tax on caravans between the Northern Territories and the Sahel remained the only stable source of

revenue. Under Watherston, the only other major economic activity consisted of recruiting young men as labour migrants to the mines of Ashanti and the Colony (Watherston, 1908). The years 1908-1919 brought more attempts to develop the Northern Territories, but support from the Governors in the south was uneven and all the attempts eventually failed. In 1908 Watherston moved the administrative capital from Gambaga to Tamale, closer to markets in the south. Watherston also built a port on the Volta River near Tamale and roads fanning out from the new capital. Watherston and his successor Cecil Armitage promoted cash crops including cotton, hibiscus, rubber, shea butter and tobacco (Gold Coast *NTAR*, 1908, 8-9). Between 1912 and 1919, however, the new Governor Sir Hugh Clifford rejected cash crop development for the north in favour of preserving peasant subsistence production (Bening, 1999, 232-3).



Map 1: Protectorate of the Northern Territories, Ashanti Colony and the Gold Coast Colony, showing Western Gonja and North Mamprusi ('Mamprusi North')

Clifford's successor Sir F.G. Guggisberg reversed Clifford's stance by making northern development an important part of his ten-year development plan for the Gold Coast (Gold Coast NTAR, 1920, 6). Specifically, Guggisberg wanted to build Kumasi-Tamale railroad, which would lead to 'trains heavily loaded with groundnuts, shea-butter, corn and cattle steaming South across the Volta' (Konings 1986, 164). But Guggisberg's lofty plans failed in the face of the Gold Coast's dependence on cocoa – and the cocoa industry's dependence on northern migrant labour – as well as the expense of a northern railway. The Northern Territories remained entrenched as a labour pool and economic backwater (Phillips 1989, 41, 46; Plange 1984). Although he failed to build a railway, Guggisberg did improve the road network to the north, focused on Tamale as the administrative and economic hub. As a result, motor traffic began to reach the Northern Territories in the early 1920s. This development coincided with declining subsistence production in the south in favour of cash crops, particularly cocoa, which resulted in higher demand for foodstuffs. Increased cocoa production combined with mining produced a growing population in the Colony and Ashanti dependent on the market for their subsistence. Motor transportation in the north made foodstuff exports profitable, and farmers responded to private buyers from Kumasi and Accra, who would travel north to buy as much as they could get. In addition, there was an increasing demand for food to feed the European and African salaried employees of the colonial administration and its various departments in Tamale. Hence, the production of northern foodstuffs for export increased during the 1920s, especially yams, maize and rice in the Southern Province (Weiss 2003).

In the 1920s and 1930s, these developments led the colonial government to begin promoting the Northern Territories as a potential breadbasket for the south. For several

reasons, at this time the administration rejected large-scale agricultural development in favour of peasant farming. First, the south (Gold Coast Colony) had a history of strong and successful nationalist resistance to colonial exploitation, including land grabbing for foreign firms. Second, northern colonial administrators in the 1930s relied on traditional authorities to prop up colonial rule, and they feared an economic revolution that might threaten chiefs' powers by undermining supposedly traditional social systems. In fact, in the mid-1930s, rule through chiefs was formalized in the Northern Territories through the adoption of indirect rule, which devolved official powers of taxation, administration and justice to the traditional rulers. Agricultural development had to be made consistent with indirect rule. The solution was 'mixed farming,' which was a package of scientific techniques combining crop and livestock production, including 'manure-intensive husbandry, the use of legumes, a reduction of fallows and the integration and mutual development of arable and pastoral husbandry' (Scoones and Wolmer 2000, 3-4). Agricultural officer C.W. Lynn introduced the program in 1932, working with chiefs to encourage farmers to take up mixed farming techniques. The goals were to enable peasants to secure subsistence and eventually to produce marketable surpluses (Der 1979, 7). As more grain was produced food prices would fall, surpluses would be produced and even the poorest farmers would be able to buy grain during famine periods. By the time local markets became saturated, the producers would have been taught how to feed surplus grain to their livestock and rural development would be set in motion (Lynn 1937, 56).

By 1936, Lynn had created a handful of 10-acre farms in North Mamprusi. Initially, Lynn focused on manuring rather than plough farming and recommended prohibitions against grass burning to provide bedding and feed (Lynn 1937, 51). The early experiments impressed the

Department of Agriculture. In 1940, Agricultural Director H.B. Waters proclaimed mixed farming as “the best method” for overcoming “local famine” in a sustainable manner. Waters committed the government to Lynn’s program in the two stages noted above (hand cultivation with manuring and anti-erosion measures followed eventually by bullock farming). In the second stage, the Agricultural Department would work through the Native Authorities to supply bullocks, ploughs, training and financing to “progressive” farmers who had demonstrated a capacity to fertilise and conserve their land (Waters 1940, 5-6). By 1946, however, the program had produced only meagre results. Despite extending the farms to the west, east and south, the number of mixed farmers remained insignificant. Making matters worse, many “mixed farmers” did not cultivate along the contours or use manure, which worsened soil erosion and led to poor harvests. Work on the mixed farms also was hampered by persistent shortages of senior staff and poor credit facilities for bullock purchases (Gold Coast *DAAR* 1947, 1951, 1955, 1956). Faced with these problems, colonial officials turned to other, larger-scale alternatives after 1946.

### **Forestry and Conservation in the Northern Territories, 1908-1948**

In the south, the growth of a resource-based colonial economy prompted the colonial administration to develop a scientific forest policy beginning in 1908, modeled on British precedents in India and Burma. In the latter colonies, the ‘empire forestry mix’ included establishing Forestry Departments, appropriating land for forest reserves, and controlling bushfires. In the Gold Coast, as a first step the administration appointed H.N. ‘Timber’ Thompson – the Conservator of Forests in Southern Nigeria and former Assistant Conservator of Forests in Burma – to study the forest situation. Thompson’s report underpinned the initial



forest policy developed after the creation of the Forestry Department in 1909 (Thomson, H.N., 1910, 196; Bryant, 1997: 111; Agbosu, 1983: 181).

The first Conservator of Forests N.C. McLeod – who had been Thompson’s assistant in Nigeria – toured southern Ghana and developed a Forest Bill in 1909. Among other things, McLeod’s Bill called for the establishment of Forest Reserves by Traditional Chiefs’ Councils or the colonial government. However, the Bill proved unenforceable in the face of resistance from European merchants, African middlemen and Gold Coast nationalist intellectuals. The colonial administration closed the Forestry Department in 1916 as its officials left to join the military in Britain. But McLeod returned in 1919 and convinced Governor F.G. Guggisberg to reopen the Department and create a new forestry policy. Rather than revive the program of government-created forest reserves, Guggisberg opted to devolve forestry powers to the chiefs through the Native Jurisdiction Ordinance of 1883. The ensuing tension between ‘Native Authority forestry’ and central programs delivered through the Forestry Department would have ramifications for later forestry policy in the Northern Territories. Still, by 1939 the Forestry Department was well established in the south, having overseen the creation of 214 forest reserves covering 15,000 acres, implemented measures to protect water supplies and created a good environment for cocoa production (Agbosu, 1983: 169-187; Grove and Falola, 1996; Chipp 1923; Bourret 1949: 35).

In contrast, the colonial administration did not put conservation or forestry on the agenda in the Northern Territories until the 1940s, despite regular reports of environmental crises. Poor rains, droughts and (in some cases) near famine conditions occurred in 1900, 1907/8, 1913/14 and 1919, but the colonial government did little if anything to intervene, and

colonial officials did not believe there was a need for conservation measures. This began to change in the 1920s, when colonial officials began to attribute food shortages in the areas like North Mamprusi to overpopulation and desiccation. Much of the blame was placed on the peasants. Whereas the African farmer previously had been identified as the cornerstone of progress and well-being of the colonial state, after the 1920s he or she became a threat and a burden. African systems of farming, especially shifting cultivation, came under heavy attack from soil conservationists, and were deemed destructive and identified as the main cause of desertification: the former self-sufficient system was identified as self-destructive (Anderson, 1984; Beinart, 1984, 2003; Ribot, 1999). European concepts of a degrading environment assumed that Africa was drying up and that the 'abnormal' weather conditions that had been noticed during the previous decades were definite indications of such a trend. Already during the 1922-23 crisis the DC North Mamprusi feared that a degrading environment was the reality: "(The) advance of desiccation noticed further north in the Sudan has reached these parts and it is only a question of time before the dense population of this district must drift southward (Gold Coast, 1923a: 5). A common complaint was that it rained when it was not expected and did not when expected (Gold Coast, 1927a: para 218; Gold Coast, 1927b: para 170, 191).

The realization that the Northern Province was very thickly populated was to cause much more concern than the question of desiccation. Colonial officials believed that the high density of population together with archaic farming methods was putting pressure on the soils. Overpopulation resulted in a collapse of the carrying capacity of the land as well as in low standards of sanitation and hygiene in crowded homesteads (Poole, 1914). This connection between overpopulation, carrying capacity and soil erosion emerged during the early 1920s. The

1921 census had revealed that the northern section of the Territory had a much larger population than the Southern Province and that population densities were very high in the North. District Commissioners of the northern districts would annually remark about the “thickly” populated Northern Provinces, which was feeling the pinch of “abnormal” weather conditions. The stability of society in these seemed threatened by both external pressure and by self-induced causes: too many people living on land that would not be able to support them and implementing farming strategies that were neither able to increase the output nor save the soil from degrading. The results were chronic, or 'perennial' food shortages:

There is little doubt that throughout the Old Northern Mamprusi District there are more people on land which is cultivated than it can fairly carry which accounts for perennial shortages of food. This problem, however, is so mixed up with the Religion of the people that a solution is hard to seek (Gold Coast ,1931: 5).

For example, when DC Zuarungu District reported in 1929 that during the previous years there was "a famine in the land" and the Frafras had been going to neighbouring districts to buy food, he regarded this as a consequence of the increase of population and the shortage of land (Gold Coast, 1929b: 3; Gold Coast, 1929a: 1). A few years later, Acting Chief Commissioner Duncan-Johnstone warned that immigrants who settled in the north-eastern parts of the Protectorate further added to the “congestion,” ultimately leading to an ecological collapse and societal crisis if not checked. “If this continues,” he remarked, “the perennial shortage of food must become acute and the resulting hunger lead to lawlessness and discontent” (Duncan-Johnstone, 1932).

Concerns about food insecurity in the Northern Territories expanded during the 1930s, especially in densely populated areas such as the North-East. By this time, colonial officials pinpointed especially the North Mamprusi area as a major region of poor harvests and environmental degradation. In 1936, economist C.Y. Sheperd stated that agriculture, especially in the north-eastern part of the territory, was facing severe problems. Food shortages were identified by him as first and foremost being caused by erratic rainfall and light soils, but also due to 'primitive' social organisation, labour migration and wasteful cropping practices. 'Pax colonial' further added to the problems as population growth was no longer restricted by inter-tribal warfare and slave raiding; he also warned of the problem of overpopulation. If the annual fluctuations in rainfall were soon noted by the colonial officials, so too were the annual variations in the harvests. Sheperd's notion that "a definite shortage is said to occur two years out of five" in the northern section of the Northern Territories was well known by the officers on the spot (Sheperd, 1936, 82).

Weather conditions remained adverse during much of the 1940s, and the colonial government reported harvest failures almost every year during the decade, usually as a consequence of the rains being late and stopping early. Drought affected crops already in 1940; early millet was a failure in Western Dagomba, Northern Mamprusi and Wa Districts and the main crops were barely average. As a consequence, all parts of the Protectorate suffered from increased food scarcity until the main crops had been harvested; the situation being most difficult in Western Dagomba District (Gold Coast, 1941b; Gold Coast, 1941c). Further constraints were added to the meagre food security when large amounts of foodstuffs were transferred to the army and used for the supply of troops stationed in the Protectorate (Gold Coast, 1940: file

159). In 1944, severe food shortages were reported in Zuarungu and Navrongo Districts in May 1944. In response, the government had for the first time to bring up rice and maize from Ashanti and was sold at controlled prices by the Native Authorities. In addition, local traders in other areas released stocked grain they had been holding for higher prices and received extra petrol to move large quantities of grain to food deficit areas. Good but rains during the latter half of the year saved the main crops although they produced only a “satisfactory” harvest (Gold Coast, 1945c: 8; Gold Coast, 1944).

Even worse was the situation throughout the Protectorate during the next two years. The dry season 1944-45 was claimed to be one of the most severe on record, resulting in high mortality among the cattle in the Navrongo and Zuarungu Districts (Gold Coast, 1945b). The rains started again late and finished early in 1945, resulting in the “bad harvest of 1945” when grain was scarce and expensive (Gold Coast, 1946a; Gold Coast, 1947b). In the Northeast, abnormal rains resulted in a “freak” harvest: in the higher grounds, it one of the best on record, in the lower ground, a total failure (Gold Coast, 1945d: file 211). A “severe hunger” followed in parts of Northern Mamprusi District, propelling the government to organize famine relief measures, including the import of grain from the South (Gold Coast, 1946d: file 222). In 1946, the harvest was generally poor but better than that of the previous year. A drought in June, July and August resulted in a failure of early crops and yams in both Western and Eastern Dagomba District while acute shortage and famine conditions were reported in Zuarungu and Navrongo Districts due to the bad harvest in 1945 and the delayed harvest in 1946. Severe food shortage was also reported in Gonja District during the first half of 1946, partly due to the poor harvest in 1945, partly to the influx of ex-servicemen who settled in the district but had not yet cleared any

farms (Gold Coast, 1947e; Gold Coast, 1947i; Gold Coast, 1946c; Gold Coast, 1947c). Even in Krachi District farming conditions were poor due to the drought during the farming season (Gold Coast, 1947g: 5). Southern Mamprusi District was the only region not affected: here, the best harvest for some years was collected (Gold Coast, 1947h). Government relief measures were again organized during the first half of 1947 when large quantities of grain in the northeast and maize was brought up from Ashanti and the Gold Coast Colony as there was practically no surplus grain available in the Protectorate (Gold Coast, 1947a). A good harvest in 1947 brought at last some relief. Although the rains were once again late – planting was delayed until the end of May/early June - weather conditions were favourable resulting in good harvests throughout the Protectorate (Gold Coast, 1947-8: §52). However, the adverse weather conditions in Dagbon during the early part of the agricultural season resulted in a failure of early crops and “almost famine conditions” in parts of Western Dagomba District in July and August. The shortage of food supplies in the district, in particular affecting Tamale, was alleviated through grain exports from Nanumba (Gold Coast, 1947d: §31; Gold Coast, 1947i: 2,4). Nevertheless, the situation remained problematic in the “perennially-poor grain producing” Navrongo and Zuarungu Districts. While there was no surplus grain in Kusasi District, cereals were brought up by traders from the south, in particular from the Bimbila-Kpandae area, and was sold by the Native Authorities at controlled prices (see further below) (Gold Coast, 1947a). Not surprisingly, the export of grain from the Northern Territories was prohibited during the whole year (Gold Coast, 1947d: §31).

A new food crisis emerged in 1948. At first, the rains developed well and promised a good crop season but a drought in June blocked growth and the rains stopped completely in

September. The effect was an almost failure of the main crops and food shortages were anticipated. In January 1949, the colonial administration re-imposed an embargo on the export of grain from the Northern Territories to the south (Gold Coast, 1949: 3). However, the next two successive years brought a general relief throughout the Protectorate. The harvests of 1949 were regarded as one of the best harvests for many years (Gold Coast, 1950: 3). Even better was the situation in 1950 when the Agricultural Department recorded excellent yields of millet and sorghum in spite of "subnormal" rainfall. High prices stimulated record exports of cereals, yams, cowpeas and groundnuts to markets in Ashanti and the Colony. Tomatoes grown in the northeast were for the first time exported as far as Tamale. On the other side, the export trade to the south had an adverse effect on the supply of grain to the Northeast, resulting in an export embargo on maize from the Northern Territories (Gold Coast, 1950: 1-2).

#### **Forestry and Land Planning, 1948-57**

The Gold Coast government finally began to develop a scientific forestry policy in the Northern Territories after 1943. Previous to this, the only major forestry initiatives had been inspection tours carried out between 1922 and 1935. The first major tour happened in 1922 at the request of Governor Guggisberg to investigate the potential to develop teak, shea nut, shea butter and silk cotton. These industries failed to take off, however, and the Northern Territories remained marginal to the colonial economy. Forestry officials made the next major tour in 1935, when concerns over population pressure and desiccation prompted the Forestry Department to examine forestry issues. The tour resulted in an important memorandum by the Chief Forestry Officer, which provided the foundation for a Governor's despatch to the Colonial Office in 1937 and the posting of the first forest officer to the Northern Territories (Navrongo) in 1938. By this

time the Forestry Department recommended forest reservation as the best policy for the north, but the commitment to indirect rule meant that it would have to be carried out through the Native Authorities not the Department itself (Guggisberg, 1921; McLeod, 1922a, 1922b; Vigne, 1935, 1937; Sutton, 1989).

This happened over the objections of the Forestry Department, who criticized indirect rule as the wrong framework for forest policy. For instance, Chief Forestry Officer H.W. Moor complained that the “stable administration” provided by the Forest Ordinance was “subordinated to an administration under defective and wholly inadequate Bye-laws passed by Native Authorities (Moor, 1935: 1). Moor laid the blame squarely on the shoulders of indirect rule. “As an ideal,” he said, “indirect administration is in line with general policy in West Africa. But it overlooks the fact that forestry is a technical and little understood subject, and in practice a difficult problem has been created and, in existing circumstances, the Chiefs placed in an invidious position” (Moor, 1935: 1). Moor’s successor H.C Marshall echoed this sentiment in 1936, writing that

The problem is not, at bottom, a forestry problem at all. The problem is how to give forestry a chance to function ... to put these fundamentally sound precepts into practice is, however, a very difficult question ... the administration of the Gold Coast is no easy matter complicated as it is by the system of land tenure and the difficulties inherent in indirect rule (Marshall, 1947, 15).



Marshall extended Moor's argument by criticising Guggisberg's policy of administering forest reserves in the south through the chiefs:

As things stand it is a case of putting the cart before the horse. Trustees should manage an estate for heirs until such heirs become of age and the estate can safely be handed over to their management. Minors should not be allowed to ruin an inheritance through lack of understanding (Marshall, 1947, 28).

In short, Government had a duty to supervise forest conservation until the chiefs were capable of administering it themselves. Bye-laws were insufficient, because they did nothing to protect reserve land from being sold by chiefs. The problem could be overcome only if an adequate policy were clearly defined and sufficient African and European staff put in place, supported by "a very firm hand by Government" (Marshall, 1947, 29).

As of 1937, however, Marshall still believed that Bye-laws could be retained, if they were supplemented by a Forestry Ordinance that could be applied if chiefs failed to enforce them (Marshall, 1947, 29). Accordingly, the Forestry Department helped the Native Authorities to create rules for protecting economically valuable trees, controlling bush fires and developing forest reserves around the headwaters of the Volta River. However, Native Authority forestry had limited success due to resistance from chiefs and land priests as well as the diversion of the Forestry Department into supplying timber during World War Two (Burns, 1942; Brooks, 1947). In the face of this failure, the colonial administration moved to centralize scientific forest policy through the Forestry Department. The process began with the appointment of a Senior Assistant Conservator of Forests (SACF) Cox to the Northern Territories in 1943 (Cox, 1943). In

continued for the next five years as Marshall tried to push through his vision of centrally created forest reserves across the Northern Territories. The shift culminated in 1947, when the Forestry Department announced a plan to evict 500,000 northerners to make way for a series of forest reserves. This number included *all* the people from the most populated and eroded area of North Mamprusi, and it brought the Forestry Department into a confrontation with the doctrine of indirect rule (Gold Coast, 1947f: 4).

This vision, however, quickly became absorbed into a larger program of land planning, which emerged out of the North Mamprusi Forestry Conference held in late 1947. Chaired by the Mamprusi Senior District Commissioner, the conference rejected Marshall's proposal in favour of demoting forest reserves to a smaller part of the land planning process (Gold Coast, 1947l; Gold Coast, 1947k). In addition to forest conservation, land planning also set aside areas for farming and grazing, and included measures to protect water supplies. Some LPAs were created, including in North Mamprusi where the District Administration formed the North-Eastern Land Planning Committee centred on Zuarungu (Gold Coast, 1947l: 5-6). As with forestry policy, however, the devolution of land planning to Native Authorities meant that progress was very slow. There also were tensions between Forestry and Agriculture, as evidenced by one Agricultural Officer who wrote that 'it was not much good conserving the soil and moving the people' (Gold Coast, 1947l: 5-6). However, by 1950 the Agricultural Department had warmed to the idea of moving people out of densely populated areas like Zuarungu because of the new GDC scheme to develop mechanised agriculture in the unpopulated areas of the savannah in Western Gonja. Launched in 1948, the Gonja Development Company promised both an outlet for 80,000 peasants from Zuarungu and an opportunity to develop export agricultural on a large scale.

### The GDC and Resettlement from North Mamprusi

Injected with £1 million in nominal capital, the GDC project grew out of Britain's oilseed crisis immediately following World War II, when the nation's desperate need for oilseeds plunged the Labour Government into a series of massive development projects in West and East Africa. The project's origins can be traced back to 1947, when Unilever claimed that the Northern Territories could support "an area of not less than one million acres" of groundnut production (Panton 1953, 207). The goal was to resettle peasant farmers and their families from the 'over-crowded' areas of North Mamprusi onto the project site, where they would provide labour for clearing the land and then planting and harvesting groundnuts. The move would help the Zuarungu area, where colonial officials believed that overpopulation and overgrazing was producing soil erosion and the collapse of farming (Quansah, 1972).

The Damongo project emerged as an experiment in social engineering with the "ultimate objective" of "the establishment on the land of peasant communities" fully employed in semi-mechanized agricultural production. These communities, however, would not be mere "replicas" of traditional peasant settlements. Instead, argued Clay, the villages would "establish on the land new social communities, modernised and made more efficient" (Clay, 1947: 22). First, each peasant would be able to expand his acreage for both subsistence and cash crops. Increased foodstuff production would protect producers from periods of famine and hunger, and increased cash crop production would facilitate higher standards of living. The use of natural and artificial manures would produce better soil fertility and more sustainable forms of agriculture. Cash crop production would be communally organized, and a village-based division of labour, in which all peasants from one village would perform the same function in the production process, would

ensure the maximum efficiency of groundnut production. Under the scheme, settlers would be trained variously as tractor drivers, lorry drivers, cattle-keepers, market clerks, and other necessary skilled and unskilled occupations. Eventually, stated the Clay Report, this division of labour would “establish a tradition which could be carried over into the independent communities already established” (Clay 1947, 22).

GDC Managing Director J.B. Panton agreed to follow the vision of the Clay Mission. As noted above, Panton rationalized the choice of Damongo by emphasizing the “social engineering” aspect of the project. “Village settlements” would be patched together out of settlers taken from the “densely populated areas of the Northern Territories.” This act of transplanting villages would deliver labour to the GDC project while relieving the perceived “social and economic problem” of population pressure in the Zuarungu District (Panton 1953, 2). Colonial ideas about African tradition permeated this program, to the point where an initial phase of wage labour (for bush clearing) was considered “artificial.” Production itself would be carried out by smallholders organized into traditional villages (Konings 1986, 252-53). The GDC would manage the project from centre, functioning — as noted in the introduction — as land priest and village market. Each settler was to receive a thirty-six-acre leasehold plot on which to grow several mandated crops. Settlers in turn would belong to one of nine larger farm units.

It did not take long for the GDC project to turn sour. Within two years of its creation, Gonja scheme experienced major problems in every stage of the production, marketing, and distribution processes. First, there were political problems, as West African politics forced the colonial state to locate the scheme on uninhabited — and thus marginal — land, in order to avoid dispossessing peasants. This requirement produced a host of problems, including

everything from clearing land and constructing soil conservation works to attracting settlers, producing crops and maintaining acceptable breakage rates on machinery. Second, the Gold Coast government left Panton to administer resettlement as well as manage agricultural development. Third, Panton experienced labour problems. Skilled labourers were difficult to attract and keep, and unskilled peasant labourers were inefficient under the model of partial mechanization. Finally, Panton struggled to find marketable foodstuff crops and to produce them efficiently enough to yield profits in the face of extremely high transportation costs.

The choice of Damongo itself produced major problems of clearing land, guarding against soil erosion, and mechanizing production. In 1952, Panton (1953, 4-5) concluded that only fourteen thousand acres of the Damongo site could be cultivated, and even this land was far from ideal. Water courses and rock outcrops rendered the contour strips unsuitable for “maximum efficiency in the operation of mechanical equipment” (Panton 1953, 23). Ploughing against the contour, however, posed the risk of serious erosion and, in any case, the GDC lacked the capital for total land clearance. To combat erosion, Panton left a series of natural buffer strips uncleared. This necessity posed further problems for mechanization because the buffer strips broke up the farm units into disconnected blocks (Panton 1953, 24, 25, 28). Meanwhile, mechanization itself clashed with the GDC’s mandate to produce groundnuts, because the crop was poorly suited for mechanized production. During the planning phase, this characteristic of groundnuts could be applauded as perfectly suitable for peasant-friendly dream of “semi-mechanization.” On the ground, however, the GDC’s reliance on hand labour under semi-mechanization rendered production inefficient. Moreover, where groundnuts found markets at all, the prices offered by local traders were well below the GDC’s preferences (Panton 1953, 7-9).

Panton thus quickly reoriented the project towards other foodstuffs. Other crops would grow but faced difficulties finding markets and prices sufficient to offset the high costs of production and transport. Regarding the latter, the project site was located far from the major market centre, Kumasi, with poor access to roads and no access to railways. George Rees, who managed the GDC's agricultural operations after 1954, estimated the cost of transport to have equaled the cost of production (Rees and Parry 1995). Given the high cost of transport, most GDC crops failed to find sufficient markets to justify their production. In fact, some of the crops most suitable for mechanization failed to find markets at all. For instance, the main crop after groundnuts, hegari (dwarf sorghum), could be mechanized efficiently but failed to find a local market because the local population preferred other varieties. This problem forced Rees to remove hegari from the crop rotation in 1955 (Rees and Parry 1995). For different reasons, the GDC rejected the large-scale production of tobacco, another crop suited to the GDC site. Though tobacco could be grown and marketed, once again the high cost of transportation rendered the crop unprofitable. In this case, however, an expatriate firm (the Pioneer Tobacco Company) offered to buy the crop at its source and cover the cost of transport to Kumasi. Wary of capital, Panton rejected the firm's offer and confined tobacco production to a small portion of the GDC's acreage. By 1955, the project only possessed two thousand acres of guinea corn and one hundred and fifty acres of groundnuts (Gold Coast 1955b, 12). Ultimately, none of the GDC's major crops found profitable markets.

The labour question plagued the GDC project from the beginning on several fronts. For instance, Panton found it difficult to attract unskilled labour at any stage of the process, including gang labourers for clearing and settlers for weeding and harvesting. During the clearing

phase, unskilled labourers defected at alarming rates if they could be enticed to Damongo's inhospitable location at all. Workers avoided Damongo because of its poor reputation for food and water supplies. Once arrived, sixty per cent of the unskilled labour force deserted in the first nine months, leaving only fifteen workers available for clearing. Eventually, the GDC brought its attrition rate down to 7.5 percent. When they did stay, however, clearing gangs produced poor results because they were too scattered to be controlled effectively by the GDC. As a result of poor clearing by hand labourers Caterpillars, Massey-Harris tractors and combine seeders suffered high rates of breakage (Panton 1953, 24-28). This was a serious issue because of the shortage of capital equipment cause by the dollar crisis, and short supplies from the United States, Canada, and South Africa.

As for the settlers, they were difficult to attract and Panton complained bitterly that the Gold Coast saddled the GDC with the task of recruitment. In 1952, Panton wrote that "the administrative problems of the resettlement scheme are now sufficiently to the fore to merit serious study" and the appointment of "specialist administrative officers." On this score, Panton complained that the Gold Coast expected the GDC "to undertake the functions of local government and to deal with the administrative problems of resettlement" (1953, 30-31). Furthermore, once settled the peasants did not adapt well to their supposedly natural roles as communal farmers. According to Panton, Meetings have been held and an effort has been made to get the settlers to operate certain farming activities on a communal basis; some difficulty was experienced in securing agreement regarding activities of this kind (1953, 30). Panton thus faced a major challenge in teaching the settlers to behave "communally." Even more difficult was the task of educating the settlers into modern agricultural methods:

Many social, educational and economic problems arise in connection with re-settlement of people accustomed to a tribal organisation and traditional agricultural methods. Not the least of these is the ability of the settler to adapt himself to the new environment and to modern mechanised agriculture (Panton 1953, 30).

In order to modernize the “traditional” resettled peasant farmers, the Company, it seemed, first would have to teach them to become “traditional.” Beyond gang labourers and settlers, Panton experienced problems with the skilled labour force. First, Panton had to recruit skilled labourers from the south, a policy which contradicted the GDC’s mandate to preserve tradition during the process of development. Second, the skilled workers tended to defect to the more lucrative southern labour market after receiving their training at Damongo. Those who stayed organized walkouts if Panton asked them to work at other tasks during the off-season (Gold Coast 1955b, 11-12; Panton 1953, 30-32). Finally, as noted above, Panton found it difficult to attract peasant settlers to the project and to use them profitably in the production of cash crops.

By 1953, Panton had turned to road construction and soil conservation in search of profits, moved to Kintampo and left the agricultural operation to a new Managing Director, George Rees (Reese and Parry 1995). The First Advisory Committee recommended that separate records be kept of the Company’s agricultural and construction activities, once again paying the closest attention to each section’s profit and loss statements profitably. The Advisory Committee expressed satisfaction with the profitability of the GDC’s contracting branch, which Panton had been running as a separate branch of the GDC (Quansah 1972, 18-19). In 1955, the Gold Coast government broke the two sections into separate Companies, with Panton taking over the Construction Company and hiring a new Managing Director of the agricultural



operations. In 1956, a Second Advisory Committee recommended the retention of the profitable GDC construction company, in the interests of participating in resettlement schemes outside the Damongo project area (Gold Coast, 1956b: 2).

On the agricultural side, however, the Second Advisory Committee urged the GDC to reduce its acreage to between fifteen hundred and two thousand acres and concentrate on tobacco, the only consistently profitable crop (Gold Coast 1956). Following the Advisory Committee's advice, the GDC reduced its acreage to fifteen hundred acres during 1955. By this time only 15 families from the Zuarungu area moved to the GDC project site. After failing to improve its performance or attract more settlers, the Company entered into voluntary liquidation in 1957 and sold its assets to Nkrumah's government (Quansah 1972, 18-19; Hilton 1959, 240; Konings 1986, 253). For Nkrumah, The GDC experiment yielded some data on mechanical farming in the savannah areas of northern Ghana. However, the lessons learned were not applied by the State Farms Corporation which followed in the footsteps of the Gonja settlement scheme shortly after Ghana's independence (Chambers 1969). In a fate similar to the oilseed projects in Northern Nigeria and Tanganyika, the historical and political need to preserve and reproduce African community rendered mechanized agriculture hopelessly infeasible in Western Gonja.

### Conclusion

During the 1920s and 1930s, colonial concerns about desiccation and overpopulation led to plans to move people out of North Mamprusi to save the soil. The problem was that the

people had to have somewhere to go. In the late 1940s, the plan to develop mechanized groundnut production in Western Gonja offered a tantalizing solution. Eighty thousand peasants could now be moved from their villages around the Zuarungu area, resettled on the GDC project site and put to work on the groundnut scheme. For the African environment and colonial production, it seemed like a win-win proposition. What was more, the experts in the Colonial Office believed that they could accomplish this program while preserving communal peasant production and traditional social structures. The Northern Territories could be turned into a major exporter of groundnuts without needing private property or capitalist production. In a feat of social engineering, whole villages could be uprooted from areas under environmental strain and deposited intact in a region in need of development.

In the end, however, the project proved impossible and the GDC scheme failed miserably. Families refused to move, the land in Gonja was unsuitable for large-scale agriculture, peasants who did move defected in the face labour demands and low pay, transport was expensive and inadequate, and markets for the projected products were not good. Attempts to diversify crops also failed, and Managing Director Panton was forced to look for other options to make the GDC profitable. Interventions by two Advisory Committees failed to save the project, and it liquidated shortly after independence in 1957. In the end, it proved much more difficult than anticipated to make the Gonja project a success, particularly under conditions of communal land tenure. On the environmental side, the only lasting effect of the GDC was to set itself up as a contractor for soil conservation works in other areas of Northern Ghana. In terms of its original goal, however, colonial officials had fooled themselves into thinking that they could actually “move the people to the save the soil.”



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