

The Riots of 1948 in the Gold Coast: Causes and Consequences

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Abstract

By the end of WWII, the imported consumer goods were so scarce in the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana), and their prices were so high that the cost of living became unbearable for the majority of the population. The Gold Coasters accused the European firms which were responsible for importing goods of being the direct cause of this situation. Besides, the British colonial authorities were believed to operate in collusion with these firms, since no measures were taken to alleviate people's hardships. Instead, the British authorities maintained a non-committal attitude, thereby favoring indirectly the growth of public discontent. As a consequence, a large campaign to boycott European goods was launched in the Gold Coast in January 1948. Despite negotiations between the British colonial government and the campaign leaders, people were still dissatisfied with the outcome and a peaceful march was organized in protest. However, the march soon took a tragic course after the police opened fire on the demonstrators. This was the beginning of violent riots which started in Accra (the capital) and spread to major towns after a few days. As a result, the Gold Coast nationalists' position was strengthened, and the colonial policy in the Gold Coast was to gradually change in favor of the natives.

ملخص المداخلة:

أحداث الشغب سنة 1948 في ساحل الذهب: الأسباب والنتائج

بعد نهاية الحرب العالمية الثانية، كانت السلع الاستهلاكية المستوردة نادرة جدا في ساحل الذهب (غانا حاليا)، و كانت أسعارها مرتفعة بحيث أصبحت تكاليف المعيشة لا تطاق بالنسبة لغالبية السكان الذين اتَّهموا الشركات الأوروبية التي كانت مسؤولة عن استيراد تلك السلع بكونها السبب المباشر لذلك الوضع. الى جانب ذلك كان يُعتقد أن السلطات الاستعمارية البريطانية كانت متواطئة مع هذه الشركات لأنها لم تتخذ أي تدابير للتخفيف من معاناة الشعب. بدلا من ذلك انتهجت السلطات البريطانية موقفا حياديا ساعد بشكل غير مباشر على ازدياد الاستياء العام. نتيجة لذلك تم إطلاق حملة واسعة لمقاطعة البضائع الأوروبية في ساحل الذهب في يناير عام 1948. و لكن وعلى الرغم من سلسلة المفاوضات التي جرت بين الحكومة الاستعمارية البريطانية وقادة الحملة بقي الشعب غير راض عن النتيجة، فَنُظِّمَت مسيرة سلمية احتجاجا على ذلك. لكن سرعان ما اتخذت هذه المسيرة منحى مأساويا بعد أن فتحت الشرطة النار على المتظاهرين. وكانت هذه بداية لأعمال الشغب العنيفة التي بدأت في العاصمة أكرا ثم امتدت إلى بقية المدن الكبرى في غضون بضعة أيام. أدَّت هذه الأحداث الى تعزيز موقف الوطنيين في ساحل الذهب من جهة، وتغيير السياسة الاستعمارية في البلاد تدريجيا لصالح السكان الأصليين من جهة أخرى.

Introduction

During the Great War, the revenue of the Gold Coast had suffered a great deal, as the lack of shipping space had severely reduced the country's exports. The exports of cocoa, which was the predominant industry in the Gold Coast, had dramatically fallen because of price fluctuations in world markets, decrease of demand, and the loss of German markets. Consequently, cocoa farmers' incomes had decreased causing a neglect of cocoa farms which in turn had seriously affected the economic and social conditions of the Gold Coast people. Another crisis took place during the 1937-38 cocoa season. After a drop in cocoa price on the world market, the Gold Coast farmers, middlemen, and chiefs had joined together in a large movement of protest against the monopoly of the large British firms which were engaged in West African Cocoa trade – such as the United Africa Company (U.A.C.); Cadbury Brothers Limited (Cadburys); and John Holt and Company, Liverpool (Holts) – and accused them of being at the origin of the price collapse. The Africans refused to sell their cocoa crop to these

expatriate firms (which were thought to plan for a manipulation of producer prices) and boycotted European goods. The crisis had resulted in important losses for the European firms and the African traders.

With the mistakes of the First World War and the 1937-38 experience still fresh in mind, the British government undertook then some economic measures to stabilize the conditions of the Gold Coast during wartime. However, the war years and post-war period proved that the efforts of the British colonial authorities were insufficient to meet the Gold Coast's economic needs and soothe their discontent which eventually resulted in the 1948 riots. Before dealing with these riots, it is necessary to examine the economic and social conditions of the Gold Coast people during and after the Second World War, and follow the events which took place during that period and which contributed to the emergence of public anger.

- The Economic Impact of W.W.II on the Gold Coast

In the autumn of 1939, a cocoa Control Board under the Ministry of Food was established in London with the objective of buying the Colony's entire produce of cocoa for all the duration of the war at a fixed price that would be announced at the beginning of each season (Bourret 150). Commercial firms in the Gold Coast, most important among which was the U.A.C. formed in 1929, were to act as licensed buying agents. The latter were to buy the cocoa at the different trading centers in the Gold Coast, then transport it to the ports after grading and bagging it to be sold to overseas buyers by the Control Board. These buying agents were also allocated quotas which were determined by their shipments during the previous seasons. Accordingly, large firms (such as the U.A.C. which dominated West African trade) were designated as 'A' shippers while smaller agents, generally African merchants, were recognized as 'B' shippers (Alence 403-04).⁽¹⁾ The 'A' buyers were all

expatriates, consisting mainly of almost all British firms engaged in the export of West African cocoa and which had entered into a market-sharing Agreement or 'Pool' in 1937.

The Gold Coasters' reaction to this state-controlled cocoa marketing and quota system scheme was ambivalent. On the one hand, the cocoa farmers were relieved to have a guaranteed buyer for their produce so that they remained safe of the world market fluctuations and wartime dislocations, but at the same time they considered the control price (nine shillings) per load (sixty pounds) too low to cover the costs of production. On the other hand, the African merchants viewed the quota system as a flagrant attempt to maintain the dominance of British firms over trade in the Gold Coast (Alence 404-05). To these complaints the Colonial Office replied that the quota system allowed the 'B' shippers to continue to exist, and that without it the 'Pool' firms would eliminate them from the cocoa trade altogether. Accordingly, and despite the protests of African merchants, the 'Pool' firms' power succeeded to exert enough pressure on the British government to make the marketing scheme permanent. In 1940 the Control Board was transferred from the Ministry of Food to the Colonial Office which established a West African Cocoa Control Board (W.A.C.C.B.), henceforth responsible for the purchase of West African crop, with a permanent secretary to reside in one of the British West African colonies to be closer to local conditions (Bourret 151; Meredith 293).

Political pressure on the British colonial government continued unabated from the African 'B' shippers under the leadership of Nana Sir Ofori Atta, a notable leader and the Paramount Chief of Akim Abuakwa in Eastern Gold Coast. He eventually succeeded to extract some concessions from the U.A.C. which agreed to increase the 'B' shippers' share for the 1940-41 season. Nevertheless, African shippers were still unable to compete with the 'A' group and were regarded as troublemakers and a nuisance both by the Colonial Office and the

British business community, who wished to completely eliminate them from trade (Meredith 293-94). Such hostile attitude and uneven competition led most 'B' shippers to sell their cocoa to 'A' firms instead of exporting directly. In fact, the W.A.C.C.B. became so successful by 1942 that the scope of its activities was widened to include other export materials such as manganese, bauxite, timber, and rubber; and its name was accordingly changed to become the West African Produce Control Board (W.A.P.C.B.). In that year, the W.A.P.C.B. decided that the 'B' buyers were to sell their cocoa only to the 'A' shippers on the coast, a decision that transformed the African traders to simple buying agents for the U.A.C. which handled almost all the cocoa trade of the Gold Coast by the beginning of the 1942-43 season (Meredith 294). Meredith wrote that: "Finally, having lost in an unequal struggle with the expatriate firms and the Colonial Office between 1937 and 1944, African international shippers of cocoa were permanently excluded." (300)

Designed at the beginning as a wartime measure to shield the Gold Coast economy from price fluctuations in the world market that were expected during the war period and secure political peace and stability in the colony, the cocoa control scheme became a means of maintaining, and even consolidating, the dominance of the large British trading firms during the Second World War. While it made important profits from cocoa transactions and accumulated foreign currency, the British government guaranteed the availability of cocoa supplies at a very low cost. However, during the application of the scheme, British officials, both in the Colonial Office and the colonial governments in West Africa, held a negative and prejudiced attitude to African traders and farmers in the Gold Coast and affirmed:

... that African middlemen and traders were... undesirable and should be discouraged; that African farmers were ignorant, unintelligent and incapable of running their own affairs; that cocoa co-operative societies – created and organized by British district officers – were more 'natural' units of production and marketing than African

capitalist enterprise; and finally that West Africans should not be allowed to manage the local marketing boards themselves. (Meredith 298)

Such actions and attitudes reflected a typically colonialist policy that aimed at the exploitation of the colonized, regardless of (or at best giving a secondary consideration to) the development of the natives' economic enterprise. As a result, the Gold Coast merchants and farmers felt frustrated most of the time and were irritated by the colonial authorities' commercial measures which led to their gradual exclusion from the marketing process. This made them lose any hope of expanding their own business during the war years.

Though cocoa represented the predominant export crop upon which the Gold Coast economy mostly relied, it was not the only produce supplied by the colony. When the Resident Minister, Lord Swinton, settled in the Gold Coast in 1942 and established the West African War Council, he appealed for greater efforts to increase the production of raw materials to meet the needs of the war. Many industries which did not exist or were small in scale in the pre-war period saw an important development during the Second World War. For example, the production of manganese was increased; bauxite deposits began to be exploited after the establishment of railway transport; the timber industry was quickly built up; and so were the rubber, palm oil, and copra industries (Bourret 153).

In parallel with these efforts, the British authorities launched an extensive program to curtail imports and achieve the colony's self-sufficiency in food supplies, clothing, household goods, and building materials. This policy was dictated by the shortage of shipping space, most of which was devoted to the war effort. Farmers were encouraged to diversify their agricultural produce other than cocoa, to raise cattle, and keep poultry in order to meet the needs of the ever-increasing population of the Gold Coast, especially with the presence of great numbers of Allied soldiers and personnel in urban areas such as Takoradi and Accra.

Moreover, industries concerned with building materials were also taken into consideration, and several brick and tile factories were established (Bourret 153-54). As a result of these intensive activities, the Gold Coast economic life was greatly stimulated during W.W.II, and the colony's revenue rose considerably. However, the Gold Coast's financial revivification did not benefit large proportions of the population.

In addition to its fears from fluctuations in the prices of the major products of the Gold Coast during the war years and their consequences on the colony's coffers, the British government was constantly worried about inflation that might affect political stability in the country. The Gold Coast depended on imports for its consumer goods, and this made it vulnerable to supply disruptions because of the war. Furthermore, Britain's imperial economic policy was "... to prevent 'the wrong use of Colonial spending power on unnecessary consumption', and the UK government imposed strict controls on colonial imports of consumer goods" (Alence 408). In line with this policy, the British imposed strict controls over the Gold Coast's imports during the war, and their volume was substantially reduced. These controls were even tightened as Britain's debt increased throughout the war years, a situation which gave birth to a flourishing black market controlled by middlemen who had access to scarce goods. Consequently, the increase of the Gold Coast population in the urban areas (especially with the presence of Allied forces) combined with the shortages of imported consumer goods led to sharp price rises and the deterioration of the purchasing power of the majority of the population (Bourret 154). To remedy the situation, the British colonial authorities set up price controls in an attempt to keep the prices within acceptable limits in the large retail shops of the government supply department. This measure proved, however, to be inefficient in front of the great number of formal and informal middlemen between the government retail shops and the final consumer. As a consequence, "... the cost of living rose

50 to 75 per cent in some of the coastal areas and, to a lesser extent, throughout the Dependency” (Bourret 154).

During the Second World War, then, large sections of the Gold Coast population suffered from the scarcity of consumer goods and of the high prices of the few available ones. Those like producers and merchants who could afford to purchase imported manufactured commodities and consumer goods could not do so because of the British authorities’ strict controls over imports which led to a shortage of the desired products. These frustrations created a favorable atmosphere for nationalist ideas and actions to ferment. The Gold Coast people expected great changes to take place after the end of the war, in which they played a crucial role by the side of their colonizers. Moreover, the Second World War had an unprecedented effect on them as it widened the political outlook of large portions of the Gold Coasters, and ignited their desire for self-determination and democratic self-government as promulgated both in the Atlantic Charter and the covenant of the newly-established United Nations. The post-war period was, therefore, the most significant episode of the Gold Coast’s history, for it was during this period that outstanding political progress was achieved through the activities of a group of radical nationalists who were determined to challenge the authority of the British colonial administration.

- The Growth of Discontent and Political Protest after W.W.II

During the Second World War, the British colonial authorities’ policy was directed towards an economic, social, and political advancement of the Gold Coast, especially after the appointment of Sir Alan Cuthbert Maxwell Burns (1887-1980) as governor. His predecessor, Sir Arnold Weinholt Hodson (1881-1944) who had governed the Gold Coast during 1934-41, had given priority to war expenses and believed that development plans should be delayed until the end of W.W.II. (Bourret 151). However, as soon as the new governor Alan Burns

arrived to the Gold Coast in 1942, he made a tour of the country to evaluate its most pressing needs. He concluded that development projects should not be postponed until the restoration of peace, and that the colony's most urgent requirements should be immediately considered. Accordingly, he drew up a five-year development plan (1942-47) which represented an important beginning though it was not completely fulfilled because of the war disruptions and lack of staff (Gocking 79). Nevertheless, one of the most important measures taken by Burns was the appointment in 1942 of Nana Sir Ofori Atta and Kobina Arku Korsah, a distinguished lawyer, as the first African members of the Gold Coast Executive Council, hitherto composed exclusively of British officials (Padmore 58-59). The next year, two other Africans made their entry to senior posts in the civil service and were appointed as Assistant District Commissioners, positions which had been exclusively held by Europeans before. According to R. S. Gocking, this appointment was facilitated by the depletion of the civil service staff because of the war (78).

Despite the important steps made by the British colonial authorities for the political and economic advancement of the Gold Coast, the nationalist leaders were no longer content with piecemeal reforms and pressed for a rapid change in policy towards self-government. The events and experiences of the Second World War had occasioned deep changes in world politics and reshaped international relations. Colonial powers' traditional vision of their dependencies as mere sources of raw materials and wealth started to change, and so did the colonial peoples' attitude to their colonizers. With regard to the Gold Coast, the war had constituted a turning-point in its history, for it had brought about the political awakening of the people, opened up their perspectives on the outside world, and made them sensitive to certain injustices. The Gold Coasters who had been involved in overseas fighting had learned a great deal from their contacts with other races, both in the political and professional spheres. Those at home "... had seen the old stereotype of the European as solely an administrator, or a

director of African labour, smashed by the presence ... of appreciable numbers of British or American servicemen” (Oliver and Fage 218-19). Furthermore, great hopes for a better future were raised by the favorable economic situation of the Gold Coast, and by the promises of the great powers to respect people’s liberties and political choice, through the Atlantic and the United Nations Charters. With such an increasing interest of the international opinion in the colonial peoples’ conditions, the Gold Coasters thought that the days of the British presence in their country were numbered.

The Gold Coasters had already experienced a great disappointment during the Second World War, when Winston Churchill made it clear that the Atlantic Charter, especially the third point which had had an electrifying effect on colonial peoples in general, was in fact intended for those Europeans who had been aggressed by Nazi Germany and not for the colonial peoples. “The Joint Declaration [the Atlantic Charter],” Churchill pointed out, “does not qualify in any way the various statements of policy which have been made from time to time about the development of constitutional government in India, Burma and other parts of the British Empire” (qtd. in Geiss 366). The Gold Coasters had, therefore, been denied the principles of democracy and national sovereignty, and their hopes had been dissipated by Churchill’s strong opposition to extend the principles of the Atlantic Charter to the British colonies.

By the end of the Second World War, the Gold Coasters’ hope for the materialization of their aspirations was revived after the foundation of the U.N. in 1945 to replace the League of Nations. Indeed, the U.N. Charter included a chapter which guaranteed, *inter alia*, the colonial peoples’ rights to self-government and advancement. The chapter stated that:

“Members of the United Nations which have or assume responsibilities for the administration of territories whose peoples have not yet attained a full measure of self-

government recognize the principle that the interests of the inhabitants of these territories are paramount, and accept as a sacred trust the obligation to promote to the utmost, within the system of international peace and security established by the present Charter, the well-being of the inhabitants of these territories, and, to this end:

“a- to ensure, with due respect for the culture of the peoples concerned, *their political, economic, social, and educational advancement, their just treatment, and their protection against abuses;*

“b- *to develop self-government, to take due account of the political aspirations of the peoples, and to assist them in the progressive development of their free political institutions,* according to the particular circumstances of each territory and its peoples and their varying stages of advancement....”⁽²⁾ [Emphasis added]

This noticeable change in world politics reflected the profound effect of the Second World War on humanity. According to Sithole, neither W.W.II nor the U.N. gave birth to African nationalism, but the latter provided the African nationalists with a powerful international forum and moral authority to fight colonialism (59). Freedom, justice, and security became the most precious values for the world population, and there sprang a worldwide tendency towards a rejection of colonialism as an unfair ideology which had caused so much wrong to the weaker peoples of the globe. Not only did the war undermine the power of the world's greatest imperialist nations, namely France and Britain, but it also “... brought into question the moral right of one nation to rule over another” (Goldberg 663). The Gold Coast nationalist movement was now ready to take full advantage of such developments to move a step forward in the direction of self-government. Though many Gold Coast leaders believed that British policy aimed at developing self-governing nations within the Commonwealth, the conditions after the war encouraged them to intensify their activities to hasten this process.

When the war ended, the Gold Coast ex-servicemen had expected a positive change in the British colonial policy because they had fought by the side of British soldiers and even helped liberate former British dependencies in Asia, like Burma. Those acts of loyalty and support during such critical moments of Britain's history would undoubtedly be rewarded by the end of the Second World War, the ex-servicemen thought. They felt, however, deeply frustrated by the British indifference to their hopes and aspirations during the post-war years. "After the war ended," Adrienne Israel wrote, "the soldiers expected better jobs, as well as war bonus, gratuities, and pensions. On the whole, they were disappointed and disillusioned. Import shortages, inflated food and clothing prices, low wages, and unemployment wracked the Gold Coast economy" (361). For most of the Gold Coast Regiment (G.C.R.) soldiers life after demobilization was not up to their expectations, and they came to believe that their participation in the war was worthless. As a result, in 1946 some politically engaged ex-servicemen revived the Gold Coast Ex-Servicemen's Union which had been formed in Accra in 1919, and which had functioned from 1920 to 1935, to voice their grievances and ask for more consideration of their demands (Israel 362; Schleh 210).

The Gold Coast farmers' conditions were not better, and the war years had been very difficult. The farmers felt exploited by the large British firms and European companies which dominated the export-import operations, and which exported their produce, mainly cocoa, at low prices while the imported consumer goods were at exorbitant prices. Actually, the great damage incurred by European industry during the war made the availability of European-manufactured staples difficult for Europe itself, so overseas territories' needs were barely considered. In addition to these problems, cocoa producers had suffered great losses during and after the war because of a disease which had hit the cocoa trees during the 1920s, and which had been spreading in epidemic proportions ever since. The disease which destroyed the cocoa trees was caused by a virus known as the Cocoa Swollen-Shoot Virus (C.S.S.V.)

carried by an insect, the mealy bug, and scientist were unable to eradicate it (Gocking 81). Therefore, to contain the epidemic the government put forward a program for the eradication of the C.S.S.V. through the cutting down and burning of the infected trees. Participation in the program was voluntary during wartime, but after the end of the war it became obligatory as the harvests dropped considerably.

In 1946 the colonial government passed an ordinance which compelled the producers whose farms were affected by the C.S.S.V. to cut down the infected trees by themselves or by government-appointed cutting-out crews. The problem which resulted from the ordinance was that it came at a time when cocoa prices were significantly rising, and the farmers' opportunity to make up for the previous losses was now at stake. "To most farmers," Gocking wrote: "the cure seemed worse than the disease, since even affected cocoa trees could continue bearing fruit for at least two seasons" (81). The irate cocoa farmers strongly opposed the ordinance even when the government offered compensation for the destroyed trees in 1947, for the cocoa prices continued their ascension. In this year, local state capitals of the cocoa-growing areas in the Gold Coast witnessed the organization of protest meetings by the farmers, many of whom were chiefs, which sometimes led to clashes with the cutting-out crews of the Department of Agriculture (Austin "Politics in Ghana" 66). This atmosphere of discontent favored the growth of nationalist feelings and led to many farmers' espousal of nationalist protest for radical reforms by the side of the Gold Coast intelligentsia later on.

Despite these problems, by the end of W.W.II conditions in the Gold Coast were much better than in many other African countries. The country was more developed economically and socially, and possessed an important number of western-educated Africans such as lawyers, teachers, and businessmen (Mazrui and Tidy 56). All indicators pointed that the 'model colony' deserved its name, and that the country's march towards self-government was

going smoothly. Dennis Austin pointed out that: "... by 1946 the country as a whole possessed a number of advantages over its less fortunate neighbours – advantages of size, wealth, educational attainment, administrative skill, and an air of confidence and stability – all of which seemed likely to enable it to achieve an easy transition to self-government." ("Politics in Ghana" 2)

Yet, subsequent events were soon to change the political scene of the Gold Coast by the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, and surprise both the British colonial authorities on the spot and the Colonial Office in London. In fact, by the end of the Second World War the Gold Coast had acquired a long experience of political protest which went back to the previous century, and the hardships engendered by the war convinced the nationalist leaders that the old methods of protest were no longer reliable. Sending petitions of protest to the colonial governors or delegations to the Colonial Office became outmoded practices and had proved to be ineffective on several occasions. There was now a need for rapid and radical constitutional reforms that required a change in nationalist strategies.

As the Gold Coasters' needs for radical social, economic, and political reforms grew by the end of World War II, the nationalists realized that independence was no longer a remote demand but a rather urgent priority. To mitigate the Gold Coasters' discontent and satisfy their claims for immediate reforms, in October 1944 Governor Alan Burns announced the introduction of a new constitution for the country, but which did not come into force until March 1946 because staff shortages in the Colonial Office during wartime delayed its drafting (Bourret 163). The Burns Constitution gave the Gold Coast, among other things, an African elected majority in the Legislative Council, a constitutional advance which was not made in any other place in colonial Africa up to then.

The Burns Constitution was an important political progress for the Gold coasters, and seemed in accordance with the requirements of the post-war spirit of democracy and respect of people's political aspirations as stipulated in the U.N. Charter. Describing the reaction of the Gold Coasters, J. G. Amamoo wrote: "The new constitution was heartily welcomed by all sections of the people and the Press, and the British Government was praised for its magnanimity" (7). Public opinion acclaimed this bold advance, and the inauguration of the new Legislative Council was characterized by national celebrations, especially in the capital Accra. However, a close examination of the 1946 Constitution by the nationalist elite revealed serious loopholes with regard to responsible government. Actually, despite the African majority in the Legislative Council, the Burns Constitution did not give the Africans greater control over government policy. The senior government posts remained in the hands of British officers, and the Executive Council was still dominated by permanent members⁽⁴⁾ who were appointed by the Governor, and who were responsible to him and not to the Legislative Council. This meant that they could not be expected to change their advice on government policy in response to criticisms from the legislature (Ward 324-25).

All these defects provoked the discontent of the more politically-minded Gold Coasters, who were soon to turn against the Burns Constitution and express their dissatisfaction. The nationalists accused the new constitution of favoring the traditional authorities rather than the intelligentsia. The position of the chiefs was further entrenched, since out of the eighteen unofficial African members of the Legislative Council, thirteen were either chiefs themselves or elected by the native authorities. Moreover, these members were not expected to affect the balance of power or show any opposition, because "... [they] were completely under the influence of the British political officers and as such invariably supported the policies laid down by the powers-that-be" (Padmore 96-97). Furthermore, the Burns Constitution was drawn up after consultation with some traditional authorities while the

educated elite were kept aloof, the nationalists argued. “What the constitution of 1946 did,” Amamoo stated, “was to confirm the fears and suspicions of people that, so long as the chiefs took an active part in politics, they would always be an impediment to rapid political advance” (9-10). Therefore, the Burns Constitution did not only widen the gap between the government and the nationalists but also between the native authorities and the intelligentsia. At this point, some nationalists thought it necessary to form a mass political organization to exert pressure on the colonial authorities for more political concessions to achieve self-government.

During the 1940s, Joseph Boakye Danquah (1895-1965), Nana Ofori Atta’s half-brother, was one of the most influential leaders in the Gold Coast political arena. His royal ancestry and academic achievements had undoubtedly enriched his personality. He belonged to two classes of the Gold Coast which had often clashed: the traditional authorities and the intelligentsia. He, therefore, knew better than any other leader the aspirations of each section and was able to handle this ‘dual’ personality with the skill of an insightful leader. When the Burns Constitution came into effect, he was among those who hailed it. He was even nominated by the Provincial Council of the Eastern Province to become a member of the Legislative Council in 1946. As time went by, Danquah became more critical of the new constitution and denounced the anomalies it contained (Padmore 60). His criticisms culminated in the foundation of a new political party, the United Gold Coast Convention (U.G.C.C.), at Saltpond on 4 August 1947 as a reaction to the British dilatory policy of piecemeal concessions, and also “... to ensure that the control and direction of Government shall within the shortest possible time pass into the hands of the Natural Rulers and their people” (Padmore 60). Danquah made it clear then that the objective of his nationalist party was to achieve self-government. The U.G.C.C. was, therefore, the first political organization

in the Gold Coast to explicitly demand self-government as a necessary measure to the welfare of the country.

The emergence of the U.G.C.C. took place at a time when public wrath was at its zenith. The ex-servicemen's grievances, the obligatory cutting down of the farmers' cocoa trees because of the C.S.S.V., the European firms' dominance of the import-export trade, and the high cost of living served as the basis upon which Danquah and his party stood to launch his anti-government campaign. Ward asserted that: "Under Dr. Danquah's leadership, the Gold Coast Convention set itself to use the grievances to turn the country as a whole against the Government..." (329). The U.G.C.C. was at the beginning an elitist party, composed for the most part of lawyers, businessmen and middle-class members. Aware of the importance of the masses in strengthening the position of any nationalist movement, Danquah decided to broaden the political base of his party and increase the number of his followers. Accordingly, he made appeal to Kwame Nkrumah (later the first president of Ghana) who was at that time involved in Pan-African and anti-colonial activities in Britain. Nkrumah (who was then thirty-nine years old) responded favorably and returned to the Gold Coast in December 1947 to take up his position as General Secretary of the U.G.C.C. Nkrumah's appointment would greatly benefit the party which entrusted him with the task of securing the support of the masses. This mission would be facilitated by the popular upheavals of February 1948 which started in Accra and spread to major towns of the Gold Coast.

- The Riots of 1948 and their Consequences

By the end of 1947, the consumer goods imported to the Gold Coast were so scanty and expensive that they became unaffordable to the majority of the population. The European firms which imported goods were accused of being responsible for this situation, because they aimed at making maximum profits, the Gold Coasters thought. As no concrete measures were

taken to improve people's conditions and purchasing power, the Gold Coast people believed that the British colonial government worked in complicity with those European firms. Moreover, people were angered by the increasing prosperity of foreign traders, mainly Syrians and Lebanese, at the expense of the local ones, a fact that led to a growth of a hostile attitude to non-African traders in general. The chiefs' attempts to convince the government to intervene and ease the situation were fruitless. As a consequence, an Accra sub-chief named Nii Kwabena Bonne III, a semi-educated wealthy trader who was determined to do something to lower the prices, organized a large campaign to boycott European goods. He established an Anti-Inflation Campaign Committee in Accra, with local committees in many other towns. He toured the country to explain the purpose of his initiative and gain the support of the chiefs and the people. As discontent was widespread, the idea was welcomed and accepted everywhere (Amamoo 13).

The boycott which started on January 25th, 1948 quickly spread all over the country. It concerned a wide range of imported goods such as cotton prints, tinned meat, flour, biscuits, and spirits. It was backed up by the common people and was morally supported by the traditional authorities as well as the nationalists. At the beginning, both the European firms and British authorities believed that the plan would never succeed, because the Gold Coasters could neither organize a strong united front nor dispense with European goods. However, subsequent events would soon prove that the Gold Coasters were capable of transcending dissensions and tribal differences, and show an ardent national consciousness (Amamoo 13). In fact, the boycott was so successful that on 11 February 1948 the British colonial government was brought to arrange a series of negotiations between the Nii Kwabena Bonne Committee and the Joint Provincial Council of Chiefs on the one side, and the Accra Chamber of Commerce on the other, under the chairmanship of the government. In the end, on 20 February, the two sides agreed on a reduction of the prices of some imported goods and the

resumption of retail buying by the twenty-eighth of the same month (Austin "Politics in Ghana" 72-73).

The announcement of the results of the negotiations by the British colonial government brought new hopes for a better situation, and the Gold Coasters felt they had achieved a great success over the foreign companies. According to the agreement reached between the Bonne Committee, the Joint Provincial Council of Chiefs, and the Chamber of Commerce, the firms promised a reduction of their gross overall profit margin of 50-75 per cent on imported goods not subject to price control for a trial period of three months (Rathbone 213).⁽⁵⁾ As the agreement was inappropriately explained to them, the Gold Coasters erroneously understood that the prices of commodities would be reduced by 50 per cent. On February 28, the day which marked the end of the boycott, a great number of people gathered outside large European-owned shops and stores to make sure the agreement was respected, but they soon realized that the reductions were not as important as they had expected, and their anger rose to a climax.

On that same day, the Ex-Servicemen's Union organized a meeting and a march through the streets of Accra, both of which had been authorized by the British government on condition that the marchers follow a prescribed route that would keep them more than a mile away from the Governor's official residence at Christiansborg Castle. The ex-servicemen wanted to present a petition to the Governor to ask him for a redress of their grievances. After handing the petition to the government Secretariat to be transmitted to the Governor, the march began and was soon joined by great numbers of civilian sympathizers, but the peaceful procession was soon to take a tragic twist. In the excitement of the event, the marchers deviated from the official route prescribed by the Police Commissioner and reached a crossroads, only a few hundred meters from Christiansborg Castle, to demand a meeting with

the Governor. Injured by stones thrown by the demonstrators and fearing for the Governor's life, the police opened fire on the inflamed crowd killing two people and injuring five others (Ward 331-32).

The news of the shooting was not long to spread throughout Accra, especially in the business district of the town where hundreds of Gold Coasters were already infuriated by the unsatisfactory reductions in prices after the lifting of the boycott. The angry masses began to loot and burn the big European and Syrian shops. The central prison at Accra was stormed by the demonstrators and some of the inmates who were freed joined in the rioting. Describing the whole turmoil, Amamoo wrote:

Looting of goods, especially imported goods, started, and pent-up wrath which the discontented masses had been nursing was vented on all foreigners. The houses of Syrians were broken into; cars of Britons and wealthy Africans were turned over and set on fire. There was pandemonium everywhere. All efforts by the police to control the situation were fruitless, and throughout the evening [of the 28th February] wanton destruction, both of life and property, went on.(16)

The riots continued for several days and spread to several major towns in the Gold coast (such as Nsawam, Koforidua, Akuse, and Kumasi), and strikes paralyzed public utilities and transportation. To put down the violence, the British authorities made appeal to Nigerian reinforcements which arrived to the Gold Coast by March 8, while additional British troops were convoyed from South Africa, and troop carriers were sent to Gibraltar for possible intervention in the Colony (Fitch and Oppenheimer 14). The deployment of these forces reflected the gravity of the situation and the scope of the riots. When peace was restored by the middle of March, the number of people killed rose to twenty-nine, while about 237 others were injured, and the property damage totaled £2,000,000 (Bourret 169). Besides their political impact, the 1948 riots had a deep psychological impact on the Gold Coasters, for it was the first time that British arms were turned against them causing such heavy casualties.

From that date on, the Gold Coast people's attitude to the colonial authorities would undergo an important change, characterized by distrust and suspicion.

Before the outbreak of the riots, the U.G.C.C. had given full support both to Bonne's Anti-Inflation Campaign Committee and the Ex-Servicemen's Union. Nevertheless, the U.G.C.C. did neither plan nor participate in the riots which presented J. B. Danquah and his friends with a unique opportunity to take further action. They sent a telegram to the Colonial Secretary telling him that the British colonial administration had collapsed, and that an interim government should be formed under their leadership. The lengthy telegram which was sent on 29 February read in part:

Unless Colonial Government is changed and a new Government of the people and their chiefs installed at the centre immediately, the conduct of masses now completely out of control with strikes threatened in Police quarters, and rank and file Police indifferent to orders of officers, will continue and result in worse violent and irresponsible acts by uncontrolled people. Working Committee United Gold Coast Convention declare they are prepared and ready to take over interim government....
(qtd. in Fitch and Oppenheimer 16)

The new governor of the Gold Coast, Sir Gerald Hallen Creasy, who had taken office only in January 1948, proclaimed a state of emergency and ordered the arrest and deportation of J. B. Danquah, Kwame Nkrumah, and four other members of the U.G.C.C. (William Ofori Atta, E. Akufo Addo, Ako Adjei, and E. Obetsebi Lampsey) to isolated areas in the Northern Territories in the Gold Coast. They were accused of being the instigators of the events and of planning further disorders. However, the imprisonment of the U.G.C.C. leaders made them popular national heroes, and people acclaimed them as the 'Big Six', while the U.G.C.C. membership increased about twenty-five times between March and May 1948 (Bourret 169).

After the restoration of peace, the Colonial Secretary Mr. Arthur Creech Jones (1891-1964) appointed an independent commission to proceed to the Gold Coast to investigate the real causes behind the outburst of violence in the country and make recommendations. The Commission of Enquiry which arrived in the Gold Coast in April 1948 was composed of Mr. Aiken Watson (as chairman), Dr. Keith Murray, Mr. Andrew Dalglish, and Mr. E. G. Hanrott of the Colonial Office (as secretary) (Padmore 65). During a whole month, the Commission held sessions, visited the major towns, and met with different people to probe into the underlying causes of the riots and look into the main problems of the country. The six leaders of the U.G.C.C. were released so that their case could be fully heard by the Commissioners. Judging by the findings and the recommendations of the Commission of Enquiry, it is worth to note that it was quite objective and unbiased in its investigations, and the Gold Coasters felt they had been treated fairly. This was confirmed by Amamoo (a Gold Coast scholar) who wrote that: "One cannot but be proud of the impartiality and fairness with which this commission did its work, showing favour to neither African nor European" (17).

The Commission submitted the results of its investigations in June of the same year, in what came to be known as the Watson Report, so-called after its chairman. The latter stated that the causes of the riots were not only political but also economic and social, and recommended serious reforms in all these fields. It criticized the lethargy of the British authorities' Africanization policy, since the Commission had noted the insufficient opportunities offered to the educated elements to take part in the government, thereby causing a great frustration among them. Moreover, the Report referred to the suspicious attitude of the more advanced Gold Coasters to the chiefs who were seen as mere instruments of British policy, and to their (the educated elements') opposition to the traditional rulers' participation in the country's political life (Bourret 170). Besides its conclusions about the whole situation in the Gold Coast, the Watson Report contained a number of recommendations. It remarked

that the Burns Constitution was already outmoded by 1946, for it was conceived to suit pre-war conditions. The designers of the 1946 Constitution had expected a slow and gradual progress towards self-government, but the riots showed that the Gold Coast people were no longer satisfied with this policy and wanted immediate constitutional changes. The Watson Report recommended, therefore, further constitutional advances by issuing a new and more democratic constitution, the details of which were to be drawn by the Gold Coasters themselves (Padmore 65). This recommendation was in itself a tremendous political progress as it meant that for the first time people would be able to determine the form of government under which they wished to live, and that the country would be granted a sizeable measure of autonomy.

The Colonial Office accepted the main recommendations of the Commission of Enquiry, especially that of further constitutional reforms, and in December 1948 the Governor appointed an all-African Committee on Constitutional Reform to advise on the details of a new constitution, under the chairmanship of Mr. Justice (later Sir) J. Henley Coussey, a fifty-five-year-old Gold Coast judge. The Committee consisted of thirty-eight members from all over the country and included chiefs, professionals, middle-class Africans, and nationalists (Bourret 170).⁽⁶⁾ Six members of the U.G.C.C., including Danquah, joined the Coussey Committee while Nkrumah was discarded because he was considered as a radical figure. Eventually, the Committee on Constitutional Reform formulated a number of proposals for deep reforms in the local and central government systems. In 1951 the British government announced the introduction of the Coussey Constitution which was drawn according to the recommendations of the Coussey Committee with slight modifications. The Coussey Constitution provided for a unicameral legislature with nine nominated members and seventy-five elected members. The Executive Council was to constitute of the Governor as chairman,

three British officials, and eight Africans. In addition, the members of the Executive Council were to hold ministerial responsibilities (Ward 342).

Conclusion

The 1948 riots constituted one of the most memorable dates in the Gold Coast nationalist movement because of the great political changes they brought about and their role in accelerating the pace of the country's advance towards independence. On the other hand, the events of February-March 1948, which took place only a few weeks after Nkrumah's arrival to the Gold Coast, represented the starting-point of a rich nationalist and political career during which Nkrumah would overshadow all his peers and profoundly influence the course of events in the Gold Coast during the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s. Actually, one of the indirect consequences of the 1948 Riots was the dissension which emerged between Nkrumah and the U.G.C.C. leaders (especially Danquah) because of their participation in the Coussey Committee. Nkrumah and his supporters considered this act as a compromise with the colonial authorities that would further defer the granting of self-government. In addition, while Nkrumah advocated an immediate full self-government, the Working Committee of the U.G.C.C. demanded self-government within the shortest possible time (Nkrumah 103).

The dissension between Nkrumah and Danquah culminated in Nkrumah's resignation from the U.G.C.C. and the foundation of his own party, the Convention People's Party (C.P.P.), in June 1949. The C.P.P. led a strong opposition to the British colonial government through peaceful and constitutional means such as strikes and boycotts, largely inspired by Ghandi's philosophy of non-violent protest. Moreover, the C.P.P. participated in the general elections which took place in 1951, 1954, and 1956 winning an overwhelming majority in

each. With the increasing popularity of his C.P.P., Nkrumah was able to lead his country towards complete independence which was achieved on 6 March 1957.

Endnotes

1- According to this quota system, 'A' shippers were entitled to buy 88.2 per cent of the cocoa crop, whereas the 'B' (African) shippers were to buy only 11.8 per cent of the crop. Such a huge disparity would bring about much protest on the part of African merchants (Bourret 150).

2- "Charter, United Nations, Chapter XI: Declaration regarding Non-Self-Governing Territories." *UN News Center*. UN, n.d. Web. 7 Sep. 2012.

<<http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/chapter11.shtml>>.

3- At his deathbed, Casely Hayford is said to have called Danquah to him to ask him to continue the struggle for the emancipation of the African continent. "J. B. Danquah." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 22 Oct. 2012. Web. 29 Oct. 2012.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._B._Danquah>

4- In addition to Nana Sir Ofori Atta and Kobina A. Korsah who had had been appointed in 1942, Sir Tsibu Darku IX joined the Executive Council in 1946, through the Burns Constitution, so that out of the eleven members of the Executive three were Africans (Padmore 96).

5- Austin wrote that the reduction of the European firms' gross overall profit margin was from 75 per cent to 50 per cent. This seems more plausible because it is unlikely that any company would accept to reduce its gross overall profit margin by 50 to 75 per cent, a reduction that would severely decrease its profits (Austin "Ghana Observed" 18; "Politics in Ghana" 72).

6- Ward stated that the Coussey Committee consisted of thirty-six men (336), while Austin claimed that it was composed of forty members: thirty-one commoners and nine chiefs (“Politics in Ghana” 81).

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