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## Child labor in the Gold Coast: the economics of work, education and the family in late-colonial Africa, c.1940-57

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## **CHILD LABOR IN THE GOLD COAST: THE ECONOMICS OF WORK, EDUCATION, AND THE FAMILY IN LATE-COLONIAL AFRICAN CHILDHOODS, C. 1940–57**

Historical knowledge of childhood in the Gold Coast (modern Ghana) is sparse and too often disconnected from a global historiography that has convincingly demonstrated the “child” to be a social construct. In contemporary discourse the “African child” is most commonly portrayed as either aspiring scholar or helpless victim—images that are echoed in the fleeting appearances of children in Africanist historiography. This essay, by contrast, explores the economic aspects of childhood in the colonial periphery and paints a more complex picture of the “African child.” Children in the twentieth-century Gold Coast were vital economic actors and agents: at once producers, consumers, and accumulators of wealth. They remained so despite the political and commercial upheavals of the colonial period. Exploring the economic use and the social purpose of child labor illuminates both the material experience of children and their place in the household and wider society—and it sheds light, too, on the question of why both illiteracy and child labor are stubbornly persistent in modern Ghana.

*H*ow does a society decide whether its children should be sent to work or to school? This is still a live question in contemporary Africa, but policy debates play out over only the most cursory of historical backgrounds. This is unsurprising because, although historians of the continent have separately documented child labor and education, the interaction of and choices between the two have been largely ignored. This article explores precisely this aspect of childhood in the late-colonial Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana). The essay examines the strategies that families devised and deployed over work and school and argues that the fundamentally economic nature of childhood in the Gold Coast helps explain why an education was never a universal aspiration for colonial subjects and, furthermore, why child labor is so enduring in Ghana. The first part of this essay will argue that contemporary ideals have distorted existing Africanist historiography on children and instead propose

an alternative conceptual model of colonial-era childhood that incorporates the economic role that children played. The second part of the essay explores how the rise of education was often at odds with the necessity of child labor and how an extended institutional schooling was an uncertain investment. Part three turns to child labor in greater detail, arguing that children were integral to the household economy and that child labor played a key role in the accumulation of social and financial capital by both the family and individual children themselves.

### PARADIGMS OF CHILDHOOD IN AFRICA

Contemporary discourse on childhood defines, in terms that are concrete and morally loaded, what children ought to be doing with their young lives: in short children should be learning and not earning.<sup>1</sup> The working childhood is an aberration, an injustice, or an historical relic. Education, by contrast, represents the normative model of childhood, and learning is the natural and morally superior childhood activity.<sup>2</sup> During the era of British colonial rule in Africa, the idea of an “educative” childhood was well established in the metropole, and, as children became a marginal and marginalized sector of the workforce and the era of universal education began, that ideal was increasingly matched by material reality.<sup>3</sup> This essay section examines how that metropolitan model of childhood has implicitly, and erroneously, informed much Africanist historiography on children in the colonial periphery, distorting our understanding of choices between schooling and labor.

In 1948, forty-three percent of the population of the Gold Coast was aged fifteen or under.<sup>4</sup> The African continent as a whole has a similarly youthful demographic structure, yet Africanists have only recently begun to place children at the center of academic inquiry.<sup>5</sup> Most historical attention thus far has concentrated on youths, who left a heavier archival trace than the very young, due primarily to colonial concerns over their socially disruptive potential.<sup>6</sup> But “youth” is also a problematic analytical category unless we consider how—if at all—it was separated from earlier childhood. In his historiographical survey, Waller argues that “colonial interventions” ruptured many existing paths to adulthood and that African youth subsequently experienced a “crisis of confidence in the promise of maturity.”<sup>7</sup> Yet if historians want to understand how this crisis arose for individuals then it is perhaps as important to study the boundaries, markers, and experiences of *immaturity* as it is to understand those associated with adulthood. A greater focus on the early life cycle and the quotidian experience of the young is the most obvious next step for Africanist histories of childhood.

Most historical knowledge of African childhoods comes from studies of education and labor, but, when refracted through a lens of contemporary moral judgments, it is difficult to link these subjects to each other and to ruptures in the colonial life course. Indeed many Africanists have implicitly endorsed or adopted the educative model of childhood. There is a large and critical literature on the cultural impact of western education, the imperial divergence from western pedagogic practices, and the struggles to control the education system.<sup>8</sup> But the education of individual children has generally been seen as a positive catalyst, creating a generation of “exemplars and social engineers.”<sup>9</sup> The education of individuals has in turn been linked to those narratives that historians have, at various times, been sympathetic towards: ambition, social mobility, nationalism, modernization, self-realization, and resistance.<sup>10</sup> This work has demonstrated the centrality of education to wider historical dynamics, but historians have inevitably concentrated on the most successful—and most visible—products of colonial schools. As a result, historiography has bypassed the majority of African children who did not attend school and has minimized the short- and long-term *costs* of education. South African scholarship offers an alternative approach. Clive Glaser, for example, has analyzed how individual Sowetan youths profited socially and financially by choosing gang membership over education and how those who avoided or dropped out of apartheid-era schools still proved key actors in the 1976 Soweto Uprising.<sup>11</sup> Such a dispassionate approach to formal education is important for future historiography on African childhood, both because it appraises the full costs of schooling and because it incorporates unschooled children into historical narratives of colonialism.

By contrast with education, child labor has commonly been associated with “negative” historical narratives. Contemporary and retrospective observers of western societies, for example, have been more critical of the use of child labor in “larger, more commercial and more capitalist” concerns than of its use within the family.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, unpaid labor for the household has often been viewed as natural and non-exploitative—or rather, as Grier has argued about child labor in general, it has become invisible through its ubiquity.<sup>13</sup> Such domestic labor can even gain implicit approval because it allows children to go to school and thus conform to the educative ideal of childhood.<sup>14</sup> In Africanist historiography such morality judgments are complicated by the relationship of child labor to colonialism. Most research has focused on the contribution of African children to the accumulation of land and capital by Europeans in settler colonies, an approach that is less relevant for non-settler colonies in West Africa such as the Gold Coast.<sup>15</sup> Colonial exploitation has also overshadowed

the alternatives to working for Europeans: the roles of children in subsistence agriculture, in the household economy, and in "African" firms and commerce are largely unknown.<sup>16</sup> Akurang-Parry, for example, identifies how children in the Gold Coast were incorporated into the booming cocoa transportation business in the early twentieth century, but his focus on forced labor perhaps obscures the sheer pervasiveness of child labor beyond extreme examples linked to "colonial governments allied with expatriate trading companies."<sup>17</sup> The empirical gap surrounding household economics obscures long-term patterns of childhood economic activity, the benefits or social uses of a working childhood, and the financial trade-off between labor and learning. This paper seeks to fill this historiographical lacuna by asking novel questions about the history of child labor in Ghana: Were children always exploited or might they also profit by their labor? And if labor stopped children going to school, what did it allow them to do instead?

A family strategy approach offers a potentially unifying analytical framework for understanding choices between school and work. The "new economics of family" analyzes the household unit as a rational entity seeking to maximize its well-being: here the choice between school and work is understood as a financial one.<sup>18</sup> Analysis of family strategies holds great promise for the Gold Coast; indeed, existing literature has implicitly adopted this approach by ascribing enthusiasm for education to a desire for social mobility driven by structural changes in the economy.<sup>19</sup> However, because children have not been treated as economic producers within the family, the perceived benefits of education have not been examined alongside the true costs it imposed: the cost of fees, books, and uniforms were important, but so too was the labor that the household lost by sending a child to school. The great strength of analyzing family strategies in this way is that it removes the moral judgments on child labor that twenty-first-century observers find so difficult to avoid.

But the family strategy framework is no panacea: there are inherent difficulties stemming from the theory's roots in neoclassical economics. Firstly, it is deterministic and bestows families with high levels of foresight and dispassionate analysis; as Cunningham argues, this can reach the stage where a "strategy" can only be explained as an unconscious one.<sup>20</sup> It is better to accept that decisions were not always "correct" and that they were made on the basis of imperfect information and uncertainty over the future. This helps explain how similar families adopted different strategies, and it explains, too, how the adoption of an educative strategy could have an unexpected outcome: not only could the assumptions and rationality underlying the strategy be wrong, but the aggregate of similar decisions made by other families could change the

socioeconomic environment in which that strategy would play out. The second problem with family strategies is that they assume a unitary family with a single goal.<sup>21</sup> This is clearly too simplistic: the interests of a wife are not always those of her husband, the ambitions of a child can diverge from parental expectation, and the interests of maternal kin in childrearing can clash with those of paternal kin. In the Gold Coast, in fact, these divisions were crucial in shaping how, where, and for whom children worked.<sup>22</sup> Finally, people in the past were as influenced as contemporary historians by moral and cultural concerns over their children: when it came to decisions over work and education, honor, probity, and intellectual interest (among other things) had a value immeasurable on any financial matrix. Thus family strategies could encompass “irrational” behaviors as individuals wandered—inevitably and irrevocably—outside the confines of neoclassical economic models.

With these provisos in mind, this article proposes a conceptual model of colonial childhood built from the foundations of the new economics of the family. Education is necessarily a part of this model, but, rather than being the central pillar of childhood, it is an option with both benefits and costs, an option considered alongside other alternatives in the light of the family’s means and needs, the talents and preference of the individual, and the socioeconomic environment both now and in the predicted future. The “economic” model of childhood proposed here has two parts. First, it is argued that children were productive, meaning economically active and important. The essay will demonstrate that children were integral to the productivity and viability of the household and, furthermore, that the nature and utility of child labor corresponded to structural and technological change in the colonial economy. The second aspect of the model is that children were not just economically productive but also accumulative: that is, childhood was not a static state but a dynamic and accretive process, with economic adulthood as an important target. It is a key argument of this essay that children were significant economic actors as individuals and that a working childhood involved not just laboring for the household, a master, or employer, but also the personal accumulation of financial, intellectual, and social capital. This approach avoids two potential pitfalls when studying childhood in the past: an undue focus on schools as the primary source of human capital and the assumption that child labor is inherently exploitative.

### CHRONOLOGY, SOURCES, AND METHODOLOGY

The approach to the history of childhood sketched out above requires detailed and textured records on individuals and households; the chronological span of this essay is thus constrained by the availability of suitable sources. In the

Gold Coast the documentary record is most complete for the years 1940 to 1957. This period is a complex one, spanning both the so-called second colonial occupation—when both the functions of government and the production of colonial knowledge in sub-Saharan Africa expanded rapidly—and the process of decolonization.<sup>23</sup> The British colonial state grew in size, but, simultaneously, it became more “Africanized.” Kwame Nkrumah, leader of the Convention People’s Party and Ghana’s first president, was effectively the prime minister of the colony by 1951, six years before Ghanaian independence. Most colonial functionaries, and the authors of the richest sources on children, were Africans, partially offsetting methodological concerns that an overreliance on government sources obscures local voices.<sup>24</sup> Substantial printed works containing rich quantitative and qualitative material on childhood appeared in these years: urban social surveys, the 1948 census reports, and Barrington Kaye’s anthropological survey of childrearing practices.<sup>25</sup> But it is archival sources that provide the most detailed and novel evidence of childhood experience in the Gold Coast. The most significant development was the creation of the Department of Social Welfare between 1943 and 1946. This body was charged with developing and administering a juvenile justice system, including courts, penal institutions, and a probation service. Most significantly for the historical record, probation officers were given the power to monitor and intervene in the home lives of the colony’s child subjects.<sup>26</sup>

The most valuable documents produced by the department were probation reports on alleged delinquents in the colony’s capital, Accra. This essay draws on two sets of probation records, relating to cases before the Accra juvenile court in 1946 and 1952–54, that cover around three hundred and fifty children in total.<sup>27</sup> Probation officers were locally trained civil servants who gathered their information from home visits and interviews; they produced structured reports on the offender’s history, home life, and daily activities that are rich in unexpected detail. But how representative are probationers of the wider child population? “Delinquent” children were certainly more likely to be migrants, male, impoverished, or living outside their natal home. But the wide spectrum of alleged crimes—and the inclusion of the innocent alongside the guilty—ensures a broad socioeconomic spread, even if the sample size for some demographics is small. The reports’ undeniable urban focus is partially offset by the dynamic linkages between city and country that they reveal. And although the historical argument advanced below is illustrated with stories of individual children, they are not exceptional examples but representative of broader trends visible in juvenile justice records. Overall, the methodologically troublesome aspects of the probation reports are outweighed by the rich detail on individual lives

and the unrivaled data they provide on the material experience of childhood in the Gold Coast.

### COSTS, CONFLICTS, AND DISAPPOINTMENTS OF EDUCATION

The Gold Coast was perhaps more likely than other African colonies to embrace the educative model of childhood. Missionary schools had a long-standing presence in coastal regions: primary education was firmly established by the 1840s, the first English-language secondary school opened in 1876, and university-level training was available at Achimota College, opened in 1927.<sup>28</sup> Education was certainly central to individual childhoods in the Gold Coast, and the ideals of an educative childhood had a wider social resonance. Elites, in particular, pushed restlessly for the expansion and improvement of schooling in the colony.<sup>29</sup> But a counter-narrative is easy to discern. Only a minority of colonial subjects received an education—and the majority of those were educated in the southern half of the colony, in urban areas, and in the late-colonial period. The proportion of school-age children enrolled in educational establishments rose from just nine percent in 1930, to twenty-nine percent in 1950, and forty-one percent by 1957. In 1948, only four percent of the overall population had received six or more years of schooling—but this figure varied from a full seventeen point eight percent in urban Accra to just point two percent in the Northern Territories.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, enrollment did not necessarily mean regular attendance, and, although statistics are hard to find, school inspectors often complained of chronic absenteeism.<sup>31</sup> Even in Accra, where education was most common, probation records are replete with examples of how an educative model of childhood could clash with individual ambition and enthusiasm, economic opportunity and necessity, or secular and spiritual belief. Lasisi Balogun, for example, sold his school materials “to obtain means for gambling and cinema shows.”<sup>32</sup> Akwetey Kwaku, aged ten, “swore he would never attend school,” and aspired instead to “go to sea with the fishermen.”<sup>33</sup> Tawia Kwame, fourteen, was dismissed from school for “practising Magic” and imprisoned a few months later after breaking into the building to steal money and damage property.<sup>34</sup> Eric Lutterodt, aged nine, was “too clever for his age” but had already attended five schools in an abortive academic career and was such a persistent truant that his father had to “accompany” him to the school gates.<sup>35</sup> Let us now turn to those economic factors that informed childhood choices between school and work.

#### *The Contradictory Demands of Education*

The use of child labor by the family will be discussed in more detail below, but for now it is sufficient to note that children were integral to the economic flexibility



and viability of the household and wider kin groupings. Education therefore imposed a dual cost, reducing the supply of labor available to the household and siphoning off its other income. Unsurprisingly, attendance was often infrequent or piecemeal, and many children combined education with work. In 1954, a survey covering a quarter of Accra's schoolchildren found that thirty-six percent were "gainfully employed"—but this was probably a significant underestimate.<sup>36</sup> Work could be undertaken with the express intention of continuing education, as for eleven-year-old Stephen Amenumey, whose father sent him to Accra from Kpando "to find one with whom he would live as a servant and who could be responsible for his schooling."<sup>37</sup> But more often such labor seems to have been a complement to other household income, an investment in some domestic enterprise, or a vocational alternative to academic learning. Tobias Kojo, fourteen, was "very keen on his father's trade, Kente Weaving," and did "a lot of it" when his school was on vacation.<sup>38</sup> Addo Kwamli, also fourteen, spent his holidays and weekends hunting; he caught the eye of the probation service after stealing a dog to help him out.<sup>39</sup> Education had therefore not replaced work for many children in the Gold Coast but ran in parallel to it. But this coexistence was often uneasy because the continued use of child labor was not reflected in either the education system or the model of childhood that informed it.

The education system, driven by the metropolitan model of childhood, made it difficult to combine learning with alternative, often essential activities. The colonial school system adopted a model of standardized testing within a grade system based on age. This assumed both consistent attendance and steady academic and chronological progression through school. The rigidities of the system were probably necessary for the rapid expansion of schooling in the late-colonial period, but they also made schooling more difficult and costly for those whose childhoods did not conform to the educative model. The need to work competed for the time of schoolchildren, and this, Busia noted of the port town Sekondi-Takoradi, left most schoolchildren "underslept . . . causing strain and discouragement to pupils and teachers alike."<sup>40</sup> Fixed, inconvenient, or lengthy school hours also made education and apprenticeships incompatible. Of the three hundred children investigated by the probation service between 1952 and 1954, only one had a history of simultaneous education and apprenticeship—and that ultimately proved to be unsuccessful. Awudu Dagomba, aged twelve, learned goldsmithing from his uncle after school, but, because lessons sometimes ran into the afternoon, his uncle "stopped him from learning the trade so that Amadu might concentrate on his schooling."<sup>41</sup> The colonial education system, then, found it hard to accommodate the need for many children to work; it also struggled to reintegrate children whose education was disrupted for this or other reasons.

An interrupted or suspended education was common because a child's schooling was hostage to the inconstant fortunes of the household and the colonial economy. Those who dropped out of school temporarily faced considerable pressure because children were expected to have a level of educational attainment commensurate with their age. The pressure was, firstly, academic because failure to reach the required level could lead to dismissal from school.<sup>42</sup> Temporary breaks could easily become permanent and presage greater personal turmoil. Busia interviewed Takoradi's vagrant "pilot" boys and found that they were often "forced to be idle owing to the break in their schooling."<sup>43</sup> But the pressure also had a social element. In 1952, for example, Solomon Amartey was described as "too old for his class" after a two-year break in his schooling caused by the death of his father.<sup>44</sup> Frequent comments by probation officers that children were "too old" suggest that the idea of educational attainment being directly linked to age was gaining currency, at least among the literate minority. Many children encountered these pressures because illness, bereavement, or financial necessity often led to cutbacks in discretionary spending on education, even if this was restored as circumstances improved or as the child was integrated into alternative care networks.

Migration—integral to the colonial economy and a key familial response to temporary or permanent setbacks—was also a common and disruptive childhood experience. Migration affected whole families, but, as we will see, some children migrated alone or, more commonly, within geographically dispersed kin networks. Changing schools was unsettling and perhaps also a difficult bureaucratic process.<sup>45</sup> And for those coming from further afield, the replacement of English with vernacular instruction was a real problem. Kwaku Boye, an eleven-year-old Efutu from Winneba, began school in his hometown but was later sent to live with his brother in Accra. Kwaku could not speak Ga, the indigenous language of the capital, and his teacher reported that this "hampers his work."<sup>46</sup> The colonial education system, then, was informed by an educative model of childhood, and it often failed to accommodate the needs of children and their families because it did not recognize either the continuing economic role of children or the fact that education was vulnerable to familial hardship and the dynamics of the economy. These failings were compounded by the uncertain return on an investment in a child's education.

### *The Limits of Education*

Acquiring an education required sacrifice, commitment, and good fortune. Such an investment in a child made sense in a society where an educative model of childhood deferred, but ultimately enhanced, socioeconomic success.

It is dangerous to assume—as much historiography has done—that this was the case in the Gold Coast. Indeed, there is significant evidence that literacy and education did not necessarily translate into individual advancement and that their perceived importance exaggerated structural changes in colonial society that were, in fact, slower and more complex than contemporary and historiographical analyses allowed. The drawbacks and frustrated hopes of an educative childhood materialized during young adulthood, but they are vital in analyzing the choices made earlier in life and their longitudinal impact on the individual and society.

The limits of education, and the frustrations this could engender, are vividly expressed in a letter from the orphan J. W. Y. Aidoo, who wrote directly to the chief commissioner of Ashanti in 1946. Aidoo was orphaned at the age of ten, and, despite having “no relatives on either side who could help,” he continued with his education by working as a tinsmith.<sup>47</sup> But by 1946 Aidoo’s wider ambitions were frustrated. He had failed to find work in one of the “trustworthy departments where boys with Primary School Certificates have the chance” and now felt unable to “prestige and ameliorate [his] condition.”<sup>48</sup> Aidoo complained that the market for literate labor was nepotistic and corrupt:

Your Honour, I have applied for many vacant posts, but I was not offered. It is not a question of education that I was not given the post no! It is a question of rich parents [and] relatives. There are not even two people who are my relatives in the departments who would plead for one. In fact, Your Honour, I am very poor of which one must pity and cannot help despising. Your Honour, if not by the kindness of mere acquaintances it will be hard for me to get even my daily bread.<sup>49</sup>

Aidoo was no isolated case: unemployment was the major social problem facing school leavers, although it is difficult to quantify and analyze in detail due to a lack of data. Acquah reported that in Accra “many educated females remain a financial burden on their parents until they marry.”<sup>50</sup> Busia met tearful parents who bewailed their still-dependent children and told of hefty bribes to even have a job application considered.<sup>51</sup> A month-long survey of the Accra Labor Exchange in 1954 found that literate workers in Accra made up 10.4 percent of applicants, a level of unemployment commensurate with their share of the capital’s workforce.<sup>52</sup> There is also evidence that clerical unemployment tended to be long-term: there were not just fewer casual opportunities for clerical work, but, the Labor Department claimed, “literate applicants considered manual work to be beneath their dignity and would in no circumstances accept such employment as a temporary measure.”<sup>53</sup>

Education could open doors to the intensely competitive literate economy, but it did not guarantee employment or success. It is these limitations and drawbacks that have been downplayed in existing historiography. Foster argued that the increased demand for education in the late-colonial period was driven by an implicitly teleological process of economic modernization and bureaucratization, driven by and dependent upon the creation of a skilled and literate workforce.<sup>54</sup> But Foster overestimated the importance of literacy and literate work. The 1948 census found just eight percent of the colony's workforce employed in clerical or other literate professions.<sup>55</sup> The expansion of education had far outstripped the availability of clerical work by the 1950s, and rewards to the individual were less dramatic than in earlier periods. Remuneration in the upper echelons of the civil service and the commercial economy was very high by local standards, but most clerks struggled at lower pay grades, where wages were comparable to skilled technical work.<sup>56</sup>

Foster also underestimated the importance of technological change and of skilled manual labor. He used census data to argue that "demand for technicians and craftsmen was never high."<sup>57</sup> Yet this claim probably arises from an inaccurate—but unstated—definition of skilled manual work. "Fitters"—skilled manual workers at the leading edge of technological change—were almost certainly excluded. In 1948 there were approximately 4,800 fitters across the mining, manufacturing, and transport sectors: this was only twenty-five percent less than the number of commercial clerks, the largest literate profession in the Gold Coast, and almost fifty percent *more* than the number of either teachers or civil servants.<sup>58</sup> Even in 1960, fifty-one percent of middle school children aspired to skilled manual or artisanal work in adulthood.<sup>59</sup>

Economic change therefore provided children with a broader range of long-term opportunities in both the literate and non-literate sectors—but the cash economy also offered immediate alternatives to education. The introduction of modern transport technology and the expansion of internal trade—largely driven by exponential growth in cocoa exports from the early twentieth century—created various ancillary roles for children. The drivers of goods and passenger vehicles were assisted by youthful "mates" who frequently aspired to become drivers themselves.<sup>60</sup> Children found employment at transport hubs and commercial centers such as railway stations, lorry parks, markets, and fishing beaches.<sup>61</sup> Child labor transferred cargo between different transport modes and routes or moved goods from the point of the production to the point of sale, an example of the common use of child labor to plug the gaps left by "failed or incomplete mechanization."<sup>62</sup> Children were suitable for this work because, compared to the long-distance portage of the past, goods were now carried

shorter distances and to and from fixed locations. Children could therefore be porters without leaving their homes—and adult care networks—for long periods: this may help explain why forms of “unfree” child portage decreased relative to waged labor.<sup>63</sup>

Urbanization and monetization of the economy created other employment opportunities for children. Organized leisure generated casual work for ball boys and caddies and more sustained employment for jockeys and stable boys.<sup>64</sup> Migration by single men expanded the sex trade. “Pilot” boys acted as go-betweens for prostitutes and their clients.<sup>65</sup> Girls were employed as maids and apprentices to the trade.<sup>66</sup> The expansion of the local elite and of expatriate populations created opportunities for paid domestic service.<sup>67</sup> Street hawking, which expanded alongside urbanization and the commercialization of food preparation, was probably the most significant form of child labor in the cash economy.<sup>68</sup> Many of these novel jobs had limited long-term prospects, offered scant reward, or were in some way hazardous—but they demonstrate, nonetheless, that the economy was changing in ways other than bureaucratization and that not every new job required a literate employee.

The benefits of education were not, of course, restricted to those in or aspiring to clerical work, but did literacy really make one a more successful trader, carpenter, or engineer? Children continued to enter apprenticeships at an early age, suggesting that a sustained education was not perceived as a prerequisite for success, either by masters within the trade or by those children who left schooling behind.<sup>69</sup> Two theoretical insights shed light on this phenomenon: first, writing must be seen as a powerful transformative technology, and second, older or non-optimal technologies can be both viable and enduring.<sup>70</sup> The key questions for the colonial Gold Coast, therefore, are whether viable alternatives to written technologies existed and whether a childhood investment in education was necessary for a successful non-clerical enterprise or career.

These are difficult questions to answer definitively, but there is some evidence that viable alternatives to writing existed and that education could be of uncertain value. The widespread use of non-written technologies in the colonial economy is certainly plausible. Despite low literacy rates, nineteenth-century coastal communities sustained diversified urban economies and a high level of commercial activity in both the interior and Atlantic zones.<sup>71</sup> In 1926 an imperial report noted that the colony’s newspapers published shipping news and sundry financial statistics, but also that “illiterate cocoa farmers” had adopted and partially funded an “excellent” telephone network in the cocoa belt.<sup>72</sup> The existence of professional letter writers and street corner lawyers suggests that the demand for literacy skills could be satisfied on an ad hoc basis. Most contracts

and debts probably remained oral, and agricultural and ecological knowledge was stored in memory rather than in writing.<sup>73</sup>

In any event, a school-level education may not have been sufficient for those tasks that did demand literacy. Literacy certainly allowed access to various bureaucratic institutions and procedures, but it did not imply mastery of them. Frederick Amartey, aged fourteen, was falsely charged with forgery after withdrawing money from his brother's post office savings account. Customers had to prove their identity with a thumbprint, but withdrawals also required a form. Despite being an "above average" pupil in his seventh year of schooling, Amartey needed help from a professional letter writer to fill it out.<sup>74</sup> More evidence comes from letters from children in Ashanti Region—roughly the territory of the most powerful Akan pre-colonial state, Asante—applying for licenses to export monkey skins to friends in England. These letters are extant precisely because they were sent to the wrong departments. One boy was reprimanded for confusing an export license with an import license. He wrote a subsequent letter, pleading that "a little consideration should be offered to me for not saying the right thing."<sup>75</sup> Given the high cost of an education, an imperfect ability to manipulate the literate institutions of government and commerce may have been an insufficient reward. And, as the existence of professional letter writers suggests, it made sense for many to ignore or curtail schooling and take advantage of the inevitable division of labor in a society with a literate minority. A childhood education, in sum, was an investment where rewards were uncertain and often exaggerated: the remainder of this essay will examine why child labor remained a viable alternative to schooling.

## CHILD LABOR: PRODUCTION AND ACCUMULATION

### *Wages and Productivity*

In order to assess the economic aspect of colonial childhoods, it is necessary to have some measure of the value and productivity of child labor. Most children remained unpaid and worked within the household, but wages in the cash economy are a useful proxy measure of the value of child labor. Table 1 uses data extracted from probation records and government surveys to show cash wages paid to children between 1946 and 1954. The data set is small because wages were rarely recorded, but there is enough overlap in trades and ages to suggest that these figures are roughly accurate. The wage data can therefore be used to estimate the relative importance of child labor to the family economy and thus to gauge the financial implications of childhood choices between work and education (table 1).

Table 1: Cash wages paid to children in employment, c. 1946–54<sup>76</sup>

<i>Report Date</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Job</i>	<i>Pay</i>	<i>Place</i>
1947	—	—	Apprentice electrician	1s.6d./day	Takoradi
7.17.1952	Amadu Frafra	13	Domestic assistant	£2. 10s./month	Accra
10.30.1952	Andrew Sieh	14	Laborer on beach	2–4s./day	Accra
11.6.1952	Kobina Amasa	14	Fisherboy	4–5s./week	Accra
1.8.1953	Amadu Moshie	15	Making Dutch stoves	5–20s./day	Accra
9.23.1953	Mercy Obenawa	15	Nursemaid	£4./month	Akwatia
"	"	13	Cook	4s. 6d./day	Akwatia
10.29.1953	Francis Addo	13	Catching tennis balls	6d./day	Accra
10.29.1953	Y. Zabrama	13	Carrier	2s./day	Accra
2.25.1954	Kwabena Kwame	12	Selling bread	15% commission	Achimota
5.20.1954	Y. Chamba	15	Houseboy	£2. 10s.–£4./month	Accra
5.20.1954	N. Mensah	13	Stable boy	£2./month	Accra
8.12.1954	N. Hammond	15	Mason	4s. 6d./day	Tema
10.14.1954	Albert Grunshie	14	Steward	£4./month	Accra
"	"	14	Odd jobs	2–3s./day	Accra
"	"	12	Houseboy	£2. 10s./month	Kumasi
10.14.1954	V. Okoe	15	Unknown job for "Quality Press"	£2. 10s./month	Accra
10.29.1954	A. Zabrama	15	Laborer/porter	3s./day	Accra
10.29.1954	L. Zabrama	13	Carrier	2–3s./day	Accra

What does the data in table 1 tell us about the earning power of children? Converting daily to monthly rates is problematic. The most optimistic scenario is that a child paid 2s. to 3s. per day in casual work could expect to earn £2. 10s. to £3. 15s. in a month.<sup>77</sup> This is broadly comparable to those on a regular monthly wage, but casual laborers had no guaranteed minimum income and were vulnerable to unemployment and underemployment. In addition to the data in table 1, the Accra social survey found that employed schoolchildren could earn between 10s. and £2. 10s. per month; the earnings potential of

children without educational commitments was presumably higher.<sup>78</sup> More data would be helpful, but it is reasonable to estimate that a twelve-to-fifteen-year-old child employed full time in the cash economy could earn between £2 and £3 and probably no more than £4 in a month. This was significantly lower than adult wages. Comparative data on wages earned by adult and child Zabrama migrants working as porters suggest that children in unskilled labor could expect between half and two-thirds of an average adult wage.<sup>79</sup> The gap for skilled work was probably wider still. This is unsurprising because adults were stronger and more experienced and because children undertook low-wage work—perhaps perceived as exploitative by contemporaries and historians—as a means of accumulating skills and future opportunities.

The economic value of children is made more difficult to quantify because the Gold Coast labor market was not fully cash based. Children under twelve seem to rarely have had jobs in the cash economy, but they worked within the household from a much younger age.<sup>80</sup> Their labor could allow more productive adults or older children to work elsewhere or contribute directly to some domestic enterprise, but the lack of wage earners under twelve makes the equivalent value of this labor uncertain. For older children, payment for extra-familial child labor was often in both cash and kind: the remuneration in table 1 is therefore likely to underestimate real earnings and productivity. Thirteen-year-old Adotey Sackey, for example, washed the pots of food sellers in return for their late night “remnants of cooked rice and stew.”<sup>81</sup> Board and lodgings were often integral to domestic service and apprenticeships. Kwabena Mensah, an eleven-year-old apprentice carpenter, was given money to buy two meals a day but slept and took his evening meal in his master’s house.<sup>82</sup> This made extra-familial child labor more lucrative than it initially appears because non-cash payments eased the burden of care on the natal household. And children—especially migrant children—were more receptive to such remuneration because they were socially and physically vulnerable outside adult care networks, for which payment in kind acted as a partial substitute. Thirteen-year-old H. Abdulai, for example, traveled with other migrants from Gao in French Soudan (modern-day Mali), to Cotonou in Dahomey (Benin), and then on to the Gold Coast by himself, working as a laborer for “boarding and lodging from some tribesmen.”<sup>83</sup> But, conversely, those children ensconced within adult care networks that did not require them to work—like Francis Addo in table 1—could accept trivial cash wages without needing such payment in kind.<sup>84</sup> The existence of more leisured educative childhoods, then, could make it harder for other children to make a living.



But what do these estimates of the worth of child labor amount to in an urban economy? Was a child an economic asset or a burden? A key piece of evidence is that there were children in late-colonial Accra living outside any recognizable family unit and surviving solely on their wages. These children were mostly migrants from French colonial territories—primarily modern-day Mali, Niger, Benin, and Togo—who came to Accra with the express intention of raising funds to pay colonial taxes.<sup>85</sup> The crucial point here is that children were able to save money after meeting their subsistence needs: these children could pay their own way. Runaways and independent-minded children could also survive for days, weeks, and even months away from their family home. This was not a luxurious life: children were able to survive independently because they reduced their expenditure to a minimum and had no dependents. Their diets centered on cheap, starchy foods.<sup>86</sup> Rented accommodation was shared with many others and was often crowded and unhygienic.<sup>87</sup> Others were effectively vagrants, sleeping at the beach, on store verandas, and at open-air cinemas.<sup>88</sup> Ten-year-old runaway Tetteh Aryee worked as a porter and slept in “empty packing cases” behind Accra’s main Makola market, but he was also unimpressed by the probation service’s efforts to improve his lot and, indeed, considered “the whole affair as a joke.”<sup>89</sup> Independent children were also vulnerable to threats to their livelihoods because they usually had no adult care network to fall back on and were too young to have dependents working on their behalf. H. Abdulai, the migrant from Gao, struggled to survive after being “incapacitated” by a “disease on the neck” and was sent back to French Soudan by the juvenile court.<sup>90</sup> In fact, living alone was so precarious that some “independent” children could survive only by their integration into care networks on a temporary and perhaps non-reciprocal basis. Indeed, the Welfare Department pursued this strategy to ameliorate the conditions of working children. Larabu Zabrama, thirteen, was allowed to remain in Accra to earn the levy on his father’s farm in French Soudan, but his probation officer wanted to find a suitable guardian instead of Larabu living with “other Zabrama boys.”<sup>91</sup> Pilot boys and other groups of children may have created their own networks of care, forging a collective identity and sharing improvised accommodation.<sup>92</sup> There may also have been social pressure—only lately formalized and echoed by the state—to provide for the subsistence of non-kin children. Kofi Baako, a seventeen-year-old orphan in Ashanti, apparently survived on charity alone: “I am now eating in people’s houses,” he informed the chief commissioner.<sup>93</sup> The experience of children surviving alone is ambiguous, but it certainly demonstrates that, at least after adolescence, children were not necessarily “dependents” or an economic liability for the family and society.

*Child Labor in the Household Economy*

To what extent and in what ways did children contribute to the household economy? The *1953 Accra Survey of Household Budgets* contains some useful data on this question and allows us to construct a simplified model of the family economy, the relative importance of child labor within it, and the immediate consequences of choices between childhood work and education. The survey only included households where the head was in waged employment, and, although expenditure patterns in waged and unwaged families are likely to be similar, the survey may underestimate the economic importance of children because it excludes those trading, food-producing, and artisanal households that were most likely to exploit family labor in domestic enterprises.<sup>94</sup>

Households were grouped into bands of expenditure for the survey, and the median band is used here to examine a simplified household economy. The median household had a wage income of £10. 16s. a month and a total income of £13.<sup>95</sup> After paying for subsistence items this median household had just £3. 17s. left for discretionary spending each month, so decisions over childhood work and education had serious financial implications.<sup>96</sup> The typical household had two children of school-going age, one of whom would be old enough to earn a cash wage.<sup>97</sup> From the data in table 1, a thirteen-year-old in the cash economy could—at a very rough estimate—increase the wage income of the household by up to a third or undertake household labor of an equivalent value. The costs of choosing education over work involved the loss of this contribution to the household on top of the direct cost of schooling. It cost £1. 13s. a month to send a thirteen-year-old to middle school, equivalent to fifteen percent of the household's main income or fifty-eight percent of its discretionary spending.<sup>98</sup> Primary schooling cost about half this much.<sup>99</sup> An educative childhood was an expensive proposition, and it became more expensive as children got older. It is difficult to say precisely when children became net economic assets to their families, but education delayed that transition. Schoolchildren were meanwhile an increased burden on the household: for many families the immediate costs of education were simply too high.

Child labor played a crucial role in the viability of the household and wider kin groupings. Wages were part of this equation, but still more important was the unpaid use of children in the interstices of the family economy, plugging temporary or permanent shortages of labor, and extending the reach and mobility of household labor, production, and exchange.<sup>100</sup> By adolescence, children were expected to be capable of most economic "tasks required of the adult."<sup>101</sup> Children were useful as temporary standbys. Yaw Poku was sent to guard his uncle's Kumasi store after his watchman failed to arrive and, after wounding

a boy he found sleeping on its veranda, ended up in a reformatory home.<sup>102</sup> Children also took on roles that adults could no longer fulfill. The orphan Afua Mensah, thirteen, did “the cooking in the house assisted by her younger sister.”<sup>103</sup> The juvenile courts recognized this duty. Afua Adotey, thirteen, avoided a penal sentence for assault because she was “the only help to the mother,” and removing her from the house would create “hardship.”<sup>104</sup> Child labor could also make adult labor more profitable by filling the less-skilled roles in household enterprises, particularly street hawking. During the school holidays, for example, Adjeley Nyonmoaley extracted more profit from her bar by sending her ten-year-old son to sell food in the streets.<sup>105</sup>

Migration and greater spatial mobility in the twentieth century created—or more likely extended—one particular form of interstitial child labor: the “circulation” of children through networks of geographically dispersed kin—and, to a lesser extent, non-kin—households.<sup>106</sup> The most common reason for children to begin circulating was to fulfill another household’s need for labor. An uncle took Kwaku Kwame, twelve, to Akim Manso because he “thought the boy would be useful.”<sup>107</sup> Bereavement or impoverishment could also push children out of their natal home.<sup>108</sup> Other children were sent to households that promised a better standard of care or discipline.<sup>109</sup> Still others left in search of training, employment, or education in urban areas. The circulation of children was a flexible and necessary response to the uncertainties of colonial life, but it was not always a positive experience for the child concerned. The circulation of children probably had its lineage in “pawning”—in which a dependent was given to a creditor as security on a debt—and other forms of unfree labor.<sup>110</sup> Adotey was described as being “given” to a relative as a servant: this verb recurs again and again in probation reports.<sup>111</sup> Children were socially vulnerable outside of their natal home because of their low status, particularly in non-kin households. They were unpaid but were also likely to receive inferior food and accommodation and were often mistreated.<sup>112</sup> But transport technology and literacy could help mitigate such abuses. Children who felt mistreated often ran away or, less commonly, communicated with someone more sympathetic. Isaac Sackey, for example, wrote to his parents to complain about the lengthy walk to school.<sup>113</sup> The circulation of children is representative of the complexity and adaptability of the family and the household. Kin institutions in fact emerge as agents of urbanization and labor mobility, dispersed by these phenomena but not necessarily weakened by them.<sup>114</sup>

Children were used extensively in the household economy, but were they—in the pejorative sense of the word—exploited? There was certainly no unitary household “interest,” but nor was the family simply about adult domination.

Children did not, in general, try to escape the family, but to push against its constraints and increase their seniority within the household. Families contained both selfishness and selflessness: the balance between the two was a product of historical circumstance. The growth of cash employment gave children a measure of autonomy. B. Busanga, fourteen, was sent from his home in French territory to Accra specifically to earn money for his future education, suggesting a certain compartmentalization of earnings and the subsequent direction of investment in human capital.<sup>115</sup> Autonomy is perhaps most obvious in patterns of consumption. Mercy Obenawa, a veteran employee at fifteen, was “in the habit of spending money in her own way.”<sup>116</sup> Independent consumption was easier for—but not exclusively confined to—children in more prosperous homes or those who had taken jobs without parental consent. The probation reports are full of disapproving references to criminal or legitimate earnings being frittered away on “luxuries”: the cinema, hiring bicycles, sweets, and ice cream. But the family retained control of most earnings: ninety-three percent of Accra schoolchildren surrendered their wages to a parent.<sup>117</sup> A more significant change was that children had greater autonomy over the work they did and trained for because urbanization and economic specialization created a critical concentration and diversity of trades in cities and within kin networks. This gave children added leverage to choose, or lobby for, a particular trade rather than just inheriting an occupation.<sup>118</sup> Many children were consulted over their ambitions; others gave up one trade and took up another.<sup>119</sup> Spatial mobility also facilitated and broadened childhood autonomy for rural children: running away to a cash-driven urban economy was an emphatic rejection of parental authority.<sup>120</sup> Socioeconomic change undoubtedly created greater autonomy for children, but it did not shatter the paradigm that child labor was largely controlled by the household.

The centrality of the household to economic childhoods was occasionally reflected in the motives for criminal activity. Tettey Tei, part of a fishing family, walked past a two-foot-long “rail clip” and decided to take it home because it could be used as an anchor.<sup>121</sup> Quarshie Taylor sought to ease the burden of carrying water by stealing boards “to build a miniature truck.”<sup>122</sup> Why were these boys risking punishment to improve the lot of the household? In short, the family remained the decisive economic unit by aligning its interests—however imperfectly or unfairly—with those of its youngest members. This was manifested in both the internal organization of the household and in its external articulation with the economy and society. Child labor was unwaged, for example, but it was not unrewarded: and the incentives for hard work were both material and emotional. The distribution of consumption within the

household implicitly recognized the often divergent interests of its members. Hard-working children received surrogate wages: fish or meat at mealtimes, sweet foods, clothes, or praise. But a minimum expected level of work was encoded in household discipline. Laziness or refusal to work was met with corporal punishment, and persistent offenders could be sent to live with “distant relatives.”<sup>123</sup> The threat of spiritual sanction could also keep children honest. Dawdling on errands was a common complaint of parents and employers: in Apa, Ashanti Region, parents spat on the ground and warned the child that if it dried before his return “his navel will rot and he will die.”<sup>124</sup>

One of the founding debates in the historiography of childhood regards the love and affection that parents felt—or did not feel—for their children.<sup>125</sup> Parental love is probably a universal constant, independent of time or place, but what changes are the ways in which love is expressed and understood and those variables that strengthen or weaken the bond between parent and child. In the Gold Coast, childhood work seems to have been one such variable: emotional bonds were connected to those of economic reciprocity, and child labor strengthened the parent-child relationship as it cemented and propagated the wealth and integrity of the household unit. Nii Aryee Amartey worked and traveled alongside his carpenter father, who was described as being “very much attached to him so as to impart to him his knowledge about the work, so that he might carry on when he is past and gone.”<sup>126</sup> Kaye reported that hard-working children “earned their parents’ affection and respect,” and, conversely, that children who failed to work were “never properly loved.”<sup>127</sup> Probation officers, however, frequently blamed wayward behavior on a lack of parental—and particularly maternal—love and affection, suggesting that such emotional forms of work discipline were under pressure from ideological shifts over childrearing practices.

The prospects of child and household were often symbiotic, and so parents were integral to long-term decisions related to child labor. Inheritance of capital goods, for example, was not necessarily automatic but a right accumulated by labor and training as a child. Kwaku Duku was persuaded to leave school aged nine to learn carpentry “so that he could inherit his grand-uncle’s tools when he died.”<sup>128</sup> Human capital, too, was acquired through the household. Apprenticeships were often arranged within kin groups. The “incorrigible” misbehavior of thirteen-year-old Augustus Yarney persuaded his bus driver father to apprentice him to an uncle who ran a “good business” as a tailor.<sup>129</sup> And parents retained residual rights over children working for kin and non-kin employers. Kobina Apeaku, a “fetish priest” and herbalist in Winneba, originally apprenticed his eleven-year-old son as a fisherman but later decided

that the boy was too young and sent him as an apprentice carpenter to Accra instead.<sup>130</sup> Helping a child fulfill his or her economic potential was apparently perceived as the duty of adult kin by children, by their families, and even by the juvenile justice system—probation officers often insisted that parents found training for their child to check their wayward tendencies. The near-monopolistic power of the family may, however, have been under challenge in the late-colonial period as the government extended its control over the private realm, and the economy became more formalized. The apprenticeship of Yaw Nyarko as a lorry driver, for example, was not to be a strictly household affair but arranged “with the co-operation of the Chief driver of Cape Coast, the Motor Driver’s Union, the relatives and the Welfare Department.”<sup>131</sup>

### *Accumulation*

The household may have been central to economic life, but it was an inherently cyclical institution. If children were to become more senior within the family, or create a new household altogether, then they also had to produce and accumulate capital as individuals. Accumulation during childhood involved both financial and human capital. Both aspects have been neglected because children have been understood through an educative model. But, in the Gold Coast, human capital could be created outside formal education, and the acquisition of property or finance was as vital as knowledge and skills in turning a child into a successful adult.

The ability of migrant children from French territories to save for taxes in Accra suggests that accumulation during childhood was possible. Moreover, it was almost certainly easier for those children embedded in local networks of care and patronage. The intended uses of this capital suggest a strong link between successful childhood accumulation and the eventual attainment of adulthood. Emmanuel Lartey, nine, was arrested after stealing both the school fees and “building fund money” of a cousin.<sup>132</sup> In the village of Tutu, north of Accra, some children were “able to build up a reasonable capital of their own before getting married.”<sup>133</sup> It is difficult to quantify the accumulation of personal and capital goods, but it was substantial in some cases. Benjamin Nyarko, a thirteen-year-old who worked for his tailor father, stole £50 worth of goods from a fellow apprentice.<sup>134</sup> The initial capital was often provided by a living parent or as an inheritance. Mercy Obenawa’s mother intended “starting her off in selling plates etc.”<sup>135</sup> Pass books for trading with expatriate companies were passed from mother to daughter.<sup>136</sup>

Childhood accumulation was almost certainly a continuation of pre-colonial patterns. The phenomenon was evident in rural areas and in both the

subsistence and commercial sectors of rural agriculture. In Tutu, boys went to farm with their parents aged seven and when they became “a little older” were allowed to “make a small farm of their own.”<sup>137</sup> Similar practices were documented in Ga, Ashanti, and Tallensi areas. Early colonial anthropologists also provide evidence of the legal framework for childhood accumulation: the right of children to own, acquire, and dispose of property on an individual basis. Rattray noted that “every Ashanti child, even today, will have his or her own particular hen, or pig, or sheep . . . and woe betide any father, mother, or King who, without reasonable cause, tries to take it away. A great principle is at stake—the inviolability, under all normal circumstances, of personal private property.”<sup>138</sup> In the Northern Territories, Fortes wrote, “even a small boy can dispose of his poultry freely,” and any profit from agriculture remained “absolutely his own.”<sup>139</sup>

Accumulation was not strictly a male phenomenon. Trading, in particular, was dominated by women, and the accumulation of goods and credit was integral to their profession. When trading goods on credit from expatriate companies, the commission earned was added to the initial security, enabling a greater volume of goods to be withdrawn and sold. One of Accra’s most successful postwar traders began her career aged fourteen, “trading on her own in beads and silk handkerchiefs. Because of her mother she was invited to trade with the firm Swanzy and Miller after she had deposited some Aggrey beads with them.”<sup>140</sup> It occurred on a smaller scale too. Christina Adjei left school at thirteen “on her own accord to sell the wares of her late mother” and continued trading thereafter.<sup>141</sup> In rural Akuapim, girls aged ten to eighteen were “encouraged to trade on a very small scale,” making round-trips of thirty to a hundred miles to buy and sell goods “at a profit.”<sup>142</sup> Not all children would turn into large-scale traders, of course, and nor was this a risk-free profession. Solomon Wiah began selling ice cream “on a commission basis” but “sustained a loss of 20/- on this business”—a debt that his uncle refused to clear.<sup>143</sup>

The accumulation of human capital was also integral to a successful childhood, but this was not just restricted to an institutional education. Work was itself a learning process: child labor on farms, for example, involved planting and harvesting various crops using complex techniques.<sup>144</sup> Apprenticeships were the most formal way to acquire training and entry to artisanal and technical trades. Busia provided several case studies of school-leavers aged sixteen to eighteen who aspired to technical jobs but who had yet to find employment.<sup>145</sup> Crucially, they had no practical experience of these trades and were competing against children who had been apprenticed to these careers from as young as ten years old. Such apprenticeships were perceived as serious commitments for

both master and child. Lazy or reluctant apprentices were often dismissed. But, equally, an apprentice was not simply a source of cheap labor. Kwabena Mensah was apprenticed as a carpenter aged eight, but his father fetched him back after finding out that the boy was being used as a farm hand.<sup>146</sup> The obligation to provide proper training was backed by the juvenile courts. Kwadjo Awudee apprenticed an eleven-year-old boy as a mason but, after running into financial difficulties, used him on his farm. After the intercession of a probation officer Awudee “realized his mistake” and agreed to return the boy to his parents.<sup>147</sup>

The acquisition of skills and the accumulation of working capital during childhood were intrinsically linked. This is not obvious if childhood is considered through an educative lens. Foster, for example, argued that the products of technical schools suffered from high levels of unemployment.<sup>148</sup> Maybe so, but this was not simply because the market for technical and artisanal labor was saturated but because institutional training was itself flawed. These schools taught valuable technical skills, but children could not accumulate the other forms of socioeconomic capital that a working childhood made possible. Industrial schools, part of the juvenile justice system, are a good proxy measure for technical schools because they were designed to teach convicted delinquents an honest trade. B. Lawani, fourteen, learned shoemaking during his four-year incarceration, but on his release was compelled to weave mats with his father, who “could not buy the necessary tools for him.”<sup>149</sup> Lawani’s probation officer thought that a “wasted life” could only be averted by apprenticing the boy until he could “stand on his own.”<sup>150</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This paper has concentrated on the economic aspects of childhood in the Gold Coast, demonstrating that children were an essential part of the cash and kin economies, producing and accumulating wealth both for their families and on their own account. The growing availability of institutional education did not erase or easily accommodate the imperative for children to work. These findings contradict the “educative” model of childhood implicit in much historical writing on children in colonial Sub-Saharan Africa. In the colonial periphery, child labor was neither a poor second best to schooling, nor simply about the exploitation of children by their elders or by colonial outsiders. This more nuanced and dispassionate analysis of childhood economic activity does not, however, mean jettisoning the instinctive empathy that historians may feel for children in colonial Africa. Instead, that empathy is reinforced by restoring historical agency and a fuller humanity to a social group too often rendered as the frustrated and near-invisible victims of African history.



## NOTES

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1. This phrase is from S. Lassonde, "Learning and Earning," *Journal of Social History* 29, no. 4 (1996): 839–70.
2. For a critical summary of this discourse relating to childhood in contemporary India see Sarada Balagopalan, "Memories of Tomorrow: Children, Labor, and the Panacea of Formal Schooling," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1, no. 2 (2008): 267–85.
3. Hugh Cunningham, "The Decline of Child Labour: Labour Markets and Family Economies in Europe and North America since 1830," *Economic History Review* 53, no. 3 (2000): 409–28.
4. Gold Coast Census Office, *Census of Population, 1948. Report and Tables* (London: Crown Agents for the Colonies, 1950), 77.
5. For a representative selection of recent work, see Alcinda Manuel Honwana and Filip de Boeck, eds., *Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2005); Alex De Waal and Nicolas Argenti, eds., *Young Africa: Realising the Rights of Children and Youth* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2002).
6. For an excellent survey, see Richard Waller, "Rebellious Youth in Colonial Africa," *Journal of African History* 47, no. 1 (2006): 77–92.
7. Waller, "Rebellious Youth," 81.
8. The sprawling debate is summarized in Timothy Parsons, *Race, Resistance, and the Boy Scout Movement in British Colonial Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004), 37–49.
9. Carol Summers, *Colonial Lessons: Africans' Education in Southern Rhodesia, 1918–1940* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002), xxviii.
10. Of many examples, see Summers, *Colonial Lessons*; J. S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Karin Barber, ed., *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).
11. Clive Glaser, *Bo Tsotsi: The Youth Gangs of Soweto, 1935–1976* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000).
12. Jane Humphries, "Child Labor: Lessons from the Historical Experience of Today's Industrial Economies," *World Bank Economic Review* 17, no. 2 (2003): 178.
13. Beverly Grier, "Child Labor and Africanist Scholarship: A Critical Overview," *African Studies Review* 47, no. 2 (2004): 15.
14. Olga Nieuwenhuys, *Children's Lifeworlds: Gender, Welfare and Labour in the Developing World* (London: Routledge, 1994), 9.
15. For example, Beverly Grier, *Invisible Hands: Child Labor and the State in Colonial Zimbabwe* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006); William Beinart, "Transkeian Migrant Workers and Youth Labour on the Natal Sugar Estates 1918–1948," *Journal of African History* 32, no. 1 (1991): 41–63.
16. A valuable exception is Elias C. Mandala, *Work and Control in a Peasant Economy: A History of the Lower Tchiri Valley in Malawi 1859–1960* (Wisconsin: Wisconsin University Press, 1990).

17. Kwabena O. Akurang-Parry, "'The Loads are Heavier than Usual': Forced Labor by Women and Children in the Central Province, Gold Coast (Colonial Ghana), CA. 1900–1940," *African Economic History* 30 (2002): 43. By 1911, the Gold Coast was the world's largest cocoa exporter. For an autobiographical account of non-coercive child labor on cocoa farms in early colonial Ashanti Region, see T. E. Kyei, *Our Days Dwindle: Memories of My Childhood Days in Asante* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001).
18. For a survey see Robert J. Willis, "What Have We Learned from the Economics of the Family?" *American Economic Review* 77 (May 1987): 68–81. Historiographical uses of the family strategy approach include Clark Nardinelli, *Child Labor and the Industrial Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) and Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
19. This idea was advanced most influentially for the Gold Coast in Philip Foster, *Education and Social Change in Ghana* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965). But the argument also underlies, for example, Allman and Tashjian's work on the ideals of parenting in colonial Ashanti. Jean Marie Allman and Victoria B. Tashjian, *"I Will Not Eat Stone": A Women's History of Colonial Asante* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000).
20. Cunningham, "Decline of Child Labour," 414.
21. Cunningham, "Decline of Child Labour," 414.
22. On childrearing disputes in Asante see Allman and Tashjian, *"I Will Not Eat Stone,"* 85–125.
23. Sabine Clarke, "A Technocratic Imperial State? The Colonial Office and Scientific Research, 1940–1960," *Twentieth Century British History* 18, no. 4 (2007): 453–80.
24. This article forms part of a broader project on the history of childhood in Ghana that will also draw on oral sources to correct this imbalance.
25. Ioné Acquah, *Accra Survey: A Social Survey of the Capital of Ghana, 1953–1956* (London: London University Press, 1958); K. A. Busia, *Report on a Social Survey of Sekondi-Takoradi* (London: Crown Agents for the Colonies, 1950); Barrington Kaye, *Bringing up Children in Ghana: An Impressionistic Survey* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1962).
26. Social Welfare Department—Development Plan, May 1944, National Archives of Ghana, Accra [NAG], CSO 28/1/4; Directive to secretary for social welfare and security, 1945, NAG CSO 28/1/8.
27. Juvenile Court, Accra, 1946, NAG SCT 17/5/299; Juvenile Court, Accra, 1952–4, NAG SCT 17/5/300. These reports are a matter of public record, but I have changed individual names in the main text, preserving only the initials and generic "tribal" surnames (like "Zabrama"). Initials and dates are used in the endnotes to allow unambiguous identification of the original records.
28. On the wider African situation, see Andrew Roberts, "African Cross-currents," in *The Colonial Moment in Africa: Essays on the Movement of Minds and Materials, 1900–1940*, ed. Andrew Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 223–66.
29. Stephanie Newell, *Literary Culture in Colonial Ghana: 'How to Play the Game of Life'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 1–63. For an example of early twentieth-century debates in the local press, see Anonymous, "Scrutineer," *Gold Coast Leader*, 25 April 1903.

30. Figures adapted from Philip Foster, *Education and Social Change in Ghana* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 113–18. E. Engmann, *Population of Ghana, 1850–1960* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1986), 82, 109.
31. See, for example, Village Day Schools, 1945–47, NAG ADM 39/1/100.
32. L. B., 8 October 1953, SCT 17/5/300.
33. A. K., 22 July 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
34. Report on T. K., 9 May 1938, Industrial Home at (Ada) Kintampo for Juvenile Offenders, Regional Archives of Ghana, Kumasi [RAGK], ARG 7/1/34.
35. E. L., 14 October 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
36. This figure excludes unpaid domestic labor, probably underestimates those children employed in family enterprises, and may not include persistent truants or the unemployed. Acquah, *Accra Survey*, 76.
37. S. A., 24 June 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
38. Kente was an intricate woven cloth and an important marker of power and wealth in local societies. T. K., 10 June 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
39. A. K., 11 February 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
40. Busia, *Sekondi-Takoradi*, 52.
41. A. D., 8 October 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
42. I. M., 18 December 1952, SCT 17/5/300.
43. Busia, *Sekondi-Takoradi*, 98.
44. S. A., 2 October 1952, SCT 17/5/300.
45. K. M., 24 June 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
46. Ga itself belongs to a different branch of the Kwa language family than the dominant Akan languages of the southern Gold Coast. K. B., 13 November 1952, SCT 17/5/300.
47. Letter from J. W. Y. A., 2 January 1946, RAGK ARG 1/1/206, Orphans.
48. Letter from J. W. Y. A., 2 January 1946, RAGK ARG 1/1/206, Orphans.
49. Letter from J. W. Y. A., 2 January 1946, RAGK ARG 1/1/206, Orphans.
50. Acquah, *Accra Survey*, 69.
51. Busia, *Sekondi-Takoradi*, 63.
52. Acquah, *Accra Survey*, 77–78.
53. Acquah, *Accra Survey*, 77.
54. Foster, *Education and Social Change*, 133–41.
55. Occupations were recorded only in more literate areas, so this figure is itself inflated and the agricultural sector undercounted: Gold Coast Census Office, *Census of Population, 1948*, 8, 371.
56. Acquah, *Accra Survey*, 66–67.

57. Foster, *Education and Social Change*, 133.
58. Gold Coast Census Office, *Census of Population, 1948*, 389–93.
59. Foster, *Education and Social Change*, 207.
60. L. Y., 17 July 1952, SCT 17/5/300.
61. A. A., 28 August 1952 and A. M., 5 August 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
62. Humphries, “Child Labor,” 182.
63. On forced labor, see Akurang-Parry, “Forced Labor by Women and Children,” 31–51.
64. F. A., 29 October 1953 and Y. C., 20 May 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
65. Busia, *Sekondi-Takoradi*, 96–100. On pilot boys in Lagos see Laurent Fourchard, “Lagos and the Invention of Juvenile Delinquency in Nigeria, 1920–60,” *Journal of African History* 47, no. 1 (2006): 115–37.
66. G. A., 30 April 1953, SCT 17/5/300; Acquah, *Accra Survey*, 73.
67. A. F., 17 July 1952, SCT 17/5/300.
68. A. L., 15 November 1953, SCT 17/5/300. Petty commerce was more commonly undertaken by girls than by boys, raising the intriguing possibility that the “gender chaos” of the colonial period may have begun at a young age. On this “chaos,” see Jean Allman, “Rounding up Spinsters: Gender Chaos and Unmarried Women in Colonial Asante,” *Journal of African History* 37, no. 2 (1996): 195–214.
69. This was true for both long-standing trades and newer professions like fitting.
70. Jack Goody, *The Power of the Written Tradition* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000); David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History Since 1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
71. E. Reynolds, “The Rise and Fall of an African Merchant Class on the Gold Coast, 1830–1874,” *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines* 54 (1973): 253–64.
72. Government of Great Britain, *Report by The Hon. W. G. A. Ormsby-Gore, M.P. on his Visit to West Africa during the Year 1926*, Cmd. 2744 (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1926), 173–74.
73. On the depth of environmental knowledge absorbed in rural childhoods, see Kyei, *Our Days Dwindle*, 63–90.
74. F. A., 24 June 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
75. Letter from S. E. G., 26 May 1951, RAGK ARG 1/1/203, Monkey Skins.
76. Juvenile Court, Accra, 1952–4, SCT 17/5/300, NAG; Busia, *Sekondi-Takoradi*, 62, 96.
77. Minimum wage regulations imply a month of twenty-six working days. Acquah, *Accra Survey*, 66–67.
78. Acquah, *Accra Survey*, 77.
79. Acquah, *Accra Survey*, 69. However, the upper limit for adults working as “kaya-kaya” (porters) was 10s. per day, more than three times the wage reported by A. Zabrama in table 1. Jean Rouch, “Migrations au Ghana,” *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 26 (1956): 129.

80. Kaye, *Bringing up Children*, 194.
81. A. S., 6 May 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
82. K. M., 6 May 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
83. H. A., 20 August 1953, SCT 17/5/300.
84. F. A., 29 October 1953, SCT 17/5/300.
85. Among others, see L. Zabrama, 29 October 1953, SCT 17/5/300.
86. K. A., 6 November 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
87. L. Zabrama, 29 October 1953, SCT 17/5/300.
88. O. L., 23 September 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
89. T. A., 14 January 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
90. H. Abdulai, 20 August 1953, SCT 17/5/300.
91. L. Z., 29 October 1953, SCT 17/5/300.
92. Busia, *Sekondi-Takoradi*, 96–100.
93. Letter from K. B., 14 October 1945, ARG 1/1/206.
94. Gold Coast Office of the Government Statistician, *1953 Accra Survey of Household Budgets*, NAG ADM 7/18/3.
95. Gold Coast Office of the Government Statistician, *1953 Accra Survey of Household Budgets*, NAG ADM 7/18/3, 10.
96. Gold Coast Office of the Government Statistician, *1953 Accra Survey of Household Budgets*, NAG ADM 7/18/3, 10, 12.
97. Gold Coast Office of the Government Statistician, *1953 Accra Survey of Household Budgets*, NAG ADM 7/18/3, 11, 55.
98. Acquah, *Accra Survey*, 114.
99. Acquah, *Accra Survey*, 114.
100. For more information on how child labor was woven into the fabric of family life and household structure, see Jack Lord, "Spatial Approaches to the History of Child Labour in Colonial Ghana," *Polyvocia: SOAS Journal of Graduate Research* 2 (2010): 31–45.
101. Kaye, *Bringing up Children*, 195.
102. Report on I. G. P. vs. Y. P., 18 January 1935, RAGK ARG 1/13/1/38, Industrial Home for Juvenile Offenders.
103. A. M., 30 October 1952, SCT 17/5/300.
104. A. A., 15 July 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
105. M. A. A., 7 January 1953, SCT 17/5/300.
106. A concept drawn from Latin American historiography: see N. Milanich, "The Casa De Huerfanos and Child Circulation in Late-Nineteenth-Century Chile," *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 2 (2004): 311–41.

## 114 CHILD LABOR IN THE GOLD COAST

107. K. K., 27 May 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
108. N. A. T., 6 May 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
109. O. F., 4 December 1952, SCT 17/5/300.
110. Busia reported that pawning was an ongoing source of “housemaids”: *Sekondi-Takoradi*, 35.
111. A. A., 11 October 1952, SCT 17/5/300.
112. Busia, *Sekondi-Takoradi*, 35.
113. I. S., 29 July 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
114. On western parallels see T. K. Hareven, “The History of the Family and the Complexity of Social Change,” *American Historical Review* 96, no. 1 (1991): 113–14.
115. B. B., 6 November 1952, SCT 17/5/300.
116. M. Y. D., 23 September 1953, SCT 17/5/300.
117. Acquah, *Accra Survey*, 77.
118. Inheriting a trade was “traditionally” the case: Acquah, *Accra Survey*, 74.
119. K. A., 2 September 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
120. K. A., 21 October 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
121. T. T., 15 November 1952, SCT 17/5/300.
122. Q. B. T., 2 October 1952, SCT 17/5/300.
123. Kaye, *Bringing up Children*, 198–99.
124. Kaye, *Bringing up Children*, 199.
125. For a summary, see Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500* (London: Longman, 2005), 11–12.
126. N. A. A., 24 December 1953, SCT 17/5/300.
127. Kaye, *Bringing up Children*, 198–99.
128. K. D., 18 September 1952, SCT 17/5/300.
129. A. T. Y., 18 December 1952, SCT 17/5/300.
130. K. Y., 13 November 1952, SCT 17/5/300.
131. Y. N., 28 January 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
132. E. A. L., 14 October 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
133. Kaye, *Bringing up Children*, 197.
134. B. N., 7 May 1953, SCT 17/5/300.
135. M. Y. D., 23 October 1953, SCT 17/5/300.
136. Acquah, *Accra Survey*, 71.
137. Kaye, *Bringing up Children*, 198.

138. R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), 337.
139. M. Fortes and S. L. Fortes, "Food in the Domestic Economy of the Tallensi," *Africa* 9, no. 2 (1936): 244, 250.
140. Acquah, *Accra Survey*, 71.
141. C. N. A., 26 November 1953, SCT 17/5/300.
142. Kaye, *Bringing up Children*, 197.
143. S. W., 10 June 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
144. Kaye, *Bringing up Children*, 196.
145. Busia, *Sekondi-Takoradi*, 59–62.
146. K. M., 6 May 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
147. K. K., 2 September 1954, SCT 17/5/300.
148. Foster, *Education and Social Change*, 133.
149. B. Lawani, 18 December 1952, SCT 17/5/300.
150. B. Lawani, 18 December 1952, SCT 17/5/300.