
From Head-loading to the Iron Horse
*Railway building in colonial Ghana and the origins of
tropical development*

Komla Tsey



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About the Author

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Introduction

From Head-loading to the Iron Horse tells the story of railway building in British colonial Gold Coast (modern Ghana) and its social and economic consequences. Two factors motivated me to write. First, I believe that there is a need for international development, as a relatively new intellectual and practice discipline, to engage more deeply with history.ⁱ Although there are excellent history texts on most countries and regions in Asia, Africa and South America, this wealth of knowledge is largely confined to history students and professional historians. In my experience, international development courses have very little historical content. A typical course will cover who the colonial power was, when the country became independent, and the extent to which it has become politically and economically stable. Yet, international development, which mobilises financial or human resources mainly from the industrialised world for the apparent benefit of people in poorer countries, has its origins in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century political economies of colonialism. A sound grounding in history, including political economy is essential if international development workers are to better understand the complex social, economic and cultural contexts in which they work.

My second motivation is the resurgence of academic and development interest in the tropical zones and the role that research and innovation can play in building healthier and sustainable livelihoods there. At James Cook University in Australia's far north Queensland where I work, the university's mission has been to improve life for the peoples of the tropics through research, teaching and innovation. To demonstrate their commitment the university has set up new research institutes, among them the Cairns Institute, and appointed several research professors, designated as Tropical Leaders, of which I am one. The aim is to undertake strategic research and development responsive to the opportunities and challenges facing the tropics. The university is also leading a consortium of academic institutions which will produce a *State of the Tropics Report* series to draw attention to the significance of the tropics as an 'expanding geo-political region' (in the words of the Vice-Chancellor), deserving global recognition.ⁱⁱ

While the climatic and ecological aspects of the tropics are reasonably straightforward to conceptualise and work with in research and innovation, the same cannot be said of the social dimensions. What makes social

relationships tropical? Is the term 'tropics' synonymous with climatic conditions, or are there other, unique ways of understanding them? For most people living there, the idea of studying the tropics is a somewhat artificial, European construct originating with Aristotle, who classified the world into three climatic zones – the Frigid, the Temperate and the Torrid. He believed that only the Temperate zone could support civilisation, as the Torrid (tropical) was too hot and the Frigid (arctic) was too cold.ⁱⁱⁱ For the inhabitants, the tropics are part of who they are and are the norm, not something exceptional. The knowledge and experiences of the inhabitants ought to form the core of any attempt to understand the tropics through research and innovation. Equally important, however, is that when studying the tropics with fresh eyes,^{iv} we do not ignore the views of those who originally formulated the concept, as they can assist us to determine whether, and if so how best, to achieve economic and social development in Africa, Asia and South America through international development. Focusing on tropical development over time will help international development practitioners to evaluate the values and motivations of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century advocates of tropical development against those of the early twenty-first century. If for no other reason, it cautions against uncritically occupying the high moral ground since the links between the past and the present may be stronger than we like to believe.

The story of British railway building in the Gold Coast in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries enables us to revisit the origins of international tropical development and the opportunities and pitfalls that this presented. Railway innovation provides the focus for this book, as it was the single most significant means of colonial penetration in tropical Africa during the first quarter of the twentieth century. In this period, road transport was still in its infancy. The Gold Coast subsistence society, which had always relied on head-loading (head carriage) as its principal form of transport, was propelled into the twentieth century on the back of the iron horse. The Gold Coast may give us a more positive picture of the social and economic consequences of railway building than could be expected from other tropical African colonies at this time, given its relative wealth and status as a model colony in which more pounds per capita were expended than anywhere else in West Africa.^v

Based on primary research from Colonial Office correspondence, Railway Departmental Annual Reports, *Blue Books*, *Government Gazettes* and other official publications held at the Public Records Office in London and

at the National Archives of Ghana, this book tells the story of the introduction and expansion of railways on the Gold Coast and the social and economic implications for modern Ghana. The term 'Gold Coast' is used flexibly to refer to the geographical area that has become present-day Ghana, because the colonial railways there were designated as 'Gold Coast Railways'. The Gold Coast and other colonial railway experience are compared with those of their European and North American progenitors in order to emphasise the unique features of the tropical experience.

The book is divided into three parts, each of which focuses on different aspects of railway development and operation. Part I examines the policy decisions that determined railway construction on the Gold Coast and the effect of those decisions on the configuration of railway lines and associated ports and harbours. This is approached chronologically, so that each step can be unpacked, evaluated and understood. It also enables us to establish the intentions behind railway innovation in Africa as distinct from the effects.

Part II considers the railways as a business and commercial enterprise, looking at how the railways were organised and how the resources and skills needed for construction and operation were mobilised. In this, I follow Alfred Chandler, who demonstrated that as they were the first large-scale commercial enterprises to be undertaken, railways faced novel problems in engineering, recruitment, training and organisation, mobilisation of massive investment capital as well as large-scale appropriation of land.^{vi} Solving these problems marked a significant step forward in managerial knowledge, training and organisation for large-scale industry generally. This part also assesses the 'spill-over' effects of a technology developed and perfected in one part of the world and transplanted in another. 'Technology transfer' is on trial here. Moreover, in British West Africa, where railways were owned and operated by the colonial governments, they occupied a central point in the formation of colonial policy. So, this part also sheds light on the British Government's attitude to public finance, labour and land tenure in the colonies.

Part III examines the effect of railway development on the economy of the Gold Coast and the impact of new modes of transport on urbanisation and public health. The period covered begins in 1879, when the first proposals for railway construction were made, and ends in 1929, by which time the basic railway network and associated ports and harbours had been completed. 1929 also marked the onset of the Great Depression, which ushered in a new phase in the colonial economy. Since that time, no new

railways have been built in Ghana, though the basic network has been modified and upgraded.

Before delving into railway development and operation, a historical overview of the peoples and regions that we now call Ghana is called for. This will help provide context for the railway story. Among the ethnic groups of Ghana, the Guans are believed to be first to have established permanent settlements. They extended their range mainly along the River Volta. The Guans were followed by the Akans, whose earliest known settlements date back to at least 1000 AD. They mainly inhabited the forest regions. The Ga, Adangbe and Ewe came in waves between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries from present-day Benin and Nigeria and settled mainly in the coastal grassland regions in south-eastern Ghana. At about the same time, other migrants were entering the country from the dry savannah north. These groups assimilated and integrated with earlier settlers and became the present-day Mole-Dagbani people, and occupied the areas in present-day northern and upper Ghana. Initially, these groups lived in isolated settlements under family heads. State formations and centralised political authority developed much later, partly in response to increased trade and commerce.^{vii}

From the start, production and exchange were influenced by ecological and resource endowments. The coastal people, who caught fish and produced salt, traded these for palm oil and other foodstuffs cultivated in the forest regions. Similarly, kola nuts, produced in the Akan forest, were exported to the savannah regions in exchange for livestock. The people also engaged in long-distance trade. Gold, slaves and kola nuts were traded on the trans-Saharan route from a very early period and for several centuries, external commerce gravitated towards North Africa and southern Europe.

The desire to locate and control the sources of trans-Saharan gold brought the first Europeans, the Portuguese, to the coastal town of Elmina in 1482. Other European nationals soon followed and the direction of Ghana's external commerce increasingly shifted from the Saharan north to the Atlantic seaboard in the south. By the seventeenth century, the demand for gold and other tropical produce had been overtaken by a demand for cheap labour to work on sugar, cotton and tobacco plantations in the Americas and the Caribbean. For the next two centuries, millions of Africans were seized by more powerful groups and exported as slaves.^{viii}

By the early nineteenth century, it had become clear that the slave trade was neither profitable nor morally defensible. Britain, the leading nation in

the trade, was the first to ban it in 1807. Other European nations followed and by the 1830s, the slave trade had become universally illegal. Now, instead of exporting humans to produce raw materials in the New World for the benefit of European industry and commerce, Africans were expected to produce the raw materials within Africa itself. A 'legitimate' trade, involving the export of palm oil and kernels, groundnuts, cotton and rubber, was established in West Africa by the mid-nineteenth century. This led to renewed European interest in the region, spurred on by keen competition for the control of raw materials. In 1884, this culminated in the Berlin Conference, where the major European powers carved out and shared the entire African continent among themselves; colonialism was fully underway.

The Gold Coast Colony, the southern coastal parts of present-day Ghana, was the first to come under British rule in 1874 through the so-called 'treaties of protection'. Ashanti was annexed to the Gold Coast Colony two decades later, in 1896. British rule expanded to encompass the Northern Territories by the turn of the century, mainly through a series of treaties which Ferguson, a Fante civil servant, concluded with the chiefs of the area on behalf of the British Government. Togoland (the present-day Volta region of Ghana) came under British rule after the First World War, when Germany's African possessions were given to the Allied powers as mandated territories.^{ix}

The administration practised by the British was known as the Crown Colony system. At its apex was the Secretary of State for the Colonies, a cabinet minister based in London. He made policy decisions regarding the general administration of the Crown Colonies. The day-to-day running of the colony was entrusted to the Governor, who was resident there. The Governor was assisted by the Executive Council, which was made up of senior civil servants. There was also a legislative council, comprising both officially and unofficially nominated (later elected) members, which legislated for the colony. All laws were, however, subject to the approval of the Secretary of State for the Colonies.

The office of the Secretary of State for the Colonies has now been designated the Minister for Overseas Development. Clearly, the colonial origins of what is now called international development – tropical development included – cannot be overstated.

Introduction

i K. Tsey, *Rethinking Development in Africa* (Mankon, 2011).

ii S. Harding, The Tropical Agenda, *Journal of Tropical Psychology*, 1(1), 2–5.

iii Ibid.

iv Ibid.

v K. Tsey and S.D. Short, From Head-loading to the Iron Horse: The Unequal Health Consequences of Railway Construction and Expansion in the Gold Coast (Ghana). *Social Science and Medicine*, 40(5), 613–21.

vi A. D. Chandler Jr., *The Railroads, The Nation's First Big Business, Sources and Readings* (New York, 1965).

vii A. Boahen, *Ghana: Evolution and Change in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London 1975).

viii Ibid.

ix Ibid.