



Experiencing Colonialism Through a Ghanaian Lens

Colonialism is a big topic, but it can only be understood by looking at human experiences. Formal colonialism first came to the region we today call Ghana in 1874, and British rule spread through the region into the early twentieth century. The British called the territory the “Gold Coast Colony”. The British colonizers tried to control everything from trade and transportation to religion and social structures. But local people resisted in many different ways, reclaiming their ability to make their own decisions and shape their own lives and societies.



00:01

*Trevor Getz, PhD, San Francisco State University
Animated map shows the region being overtaken by colonists*

Hello, my name is Trevor Getz. I'm a professor of African history at San Francisco State University, and I'm here in Ghana, in West Africa, to talk to two historians, Ato Quayson and Jennifer Hart, about colonialism.

Before 1874, this entire region was made up of independent states and self-ruling communities. Then, in that year, the British declared that this region would be the Gold Coast colony, and in the next two decades they pushed deep into the interior. I'm interested in how colonialism operated and how it felt to be colonized. It seems to me that colonialism was a lot about control, about the colonial authorities getting to be in charge of what happened and make things work the way they want it to work. How did that feel? How did local people react? I'm going to be talking to Professor Quayson and Professor Hart about what colonialism was like in certain situations and get a picture for all of Ghana. And we'll see whether we can use that information to get a better sense of colonialism and how it operated around the world.

01:16

*Ato Quayson, PhD, Stanford University
Map shows the location of the Customs House in Jamestown*

We're standing on this very loud street in Jamestown and there's this big, blue official looking building behind us. - Yes. What is this building?

QUAYSON: Well, this building is the Customs House. The Customs House built in 1926. And the Customs House was used to collect taxes on imported goods. All imported goods had to pass through here, the officials who assessed their taxes on the goods.

GETZ: So, so this is one of the ways that the British colonial administration made their money?

01:45

Photographs of men in canoes roping on to the ship, to carry the goods to shore

QUAYSON: A lot of it, actually. A lot of it. The thing is that this building is not far from the Old Harbor. And the harbor was a shallow water harbor. So the ships had to dock three miles out at sea and the goods would be carried in and out on canoes of different sizes. But everything was carried on the canoes. Pianos, entire pianos were brought in via the canoes, cars, vehicles, spare parts, the parts were all brought in. Alcohol, cases of alcohol. And then, in the other direction, salt was exported, meat and gold, ivory, all kinds of... - Palm oil. Palm oil, lots of palm oil was also sent the other way, but all on the canoes.

02:30

GETZ: So from the British point of view, the Customs House is there to, first of all... - Income. - ...financially collect money. - Income. - And, second, to control... - Control goods. - ...what's coming in and out. - Absolutely. - Now, did Ghanaians, especially these canoe men and others working, did they just accept this?

QUAYSON: Well, there are lots of stories, but one of the ones that I found out is that because everything was brought in on the canoes, as I mentioned—you know, car parts, pianos—it wasn't unusual or unknown for the canoe men to drop, to drop a crate of, say, whiskey or alcohol into the sea. And at night they would go back and go and fetch it. So what they did was that they dumped some of the goods into the sea and then went and then took them at night and then used it for themselves, but alcohol was the favorite.

GETZ: Sure, so in a way this is a kind of resistance. But really it's just them trying to use the system to get what they want.

QUAYSON: Yeah, they didn't have the money, they were just laborers. So how do they benefit from this absent of material wealth that is flowing into the colony. - They find a way to divert it. - They find a way to... - A little bit of it. - And they take it.

03:38

Trevor Getz in conversation with Jennifer Hart, PhD, Wayne State University

GETZ: Jennifer, where are we?

HART: We are in La, some people know it as Labadi, which is a suburb of Accra. And we are sitting in the offices of the Law Drivers' Union, it's a branch of the G.P.R.T., the Ghana Private Road Transport Union, which is the largest union in the country of drivers and transport owners.

Footage of taxi and driving businesses in La

GETZ: So, what was this place like before colonialism?

HART: So, this place was a relatively small suburb. It was considered pretty far from Accra. Today it's really close, (laughs) really close and part of the city. But at that time it was a pretty big distance because people would have to walk between here and there.

04:17

GETZ: So when the colonial system came into effect in the 1870s, it seems to be that the British had this port then that they controlled, Accra, and they wanted to move things out, right? I mean that was a large part of the point of colonialism was to move out all these goods coming in from the interior to Accra. So, what was their plan? How did they plan to move things efficiently and make money off of them?

HART: - Mm-hmm. So, in Britain itself, moving things was primarily done through the railway. And the railway had kind of grown hand-in-hand with the growth of industrial capitalism— so the development of factories and the discovery of coal.

04:55

Photos of the railway: cargo being unloaded; people ride in a train car

So when the British came to Africa, they saw this as an important technology, the British kind of prided themselves on their railways. But it was also a very easy kind of centralized means of controlling the flow of goods and people around the countryside. By the beginning of the 20th century, they started building railroads first into the mining areas and then about a decade or two later in the 1920s, into the cocoa-growing areas. And their goal was to try to control the movement of, of produce or primary materials like gold, from the interior to the coast so that they could maximize the amount of money that they could profit off of, and control the kind of access to and flow of goods.

05:36

GETZ: Okay, so, there's a precolonial system and then the British come along and they want everybody to use the railroads that they can benefit from. And then what do Ghanaians do? Did Ghanaians say, "Yeah, we'll just use the railroads?"

HART: No, Ghanaian farmers were extremely resistant to using British railways for various reasons. Unlike other parts of the continent, Ghanaians or Africans in the Gold Coast had control of land and were the primary producers of cash crops, particularly cash crops like cocoa and palm nuts. And so they had access to capital. They had control of the market in various really important ways. They wanted to control their produce all the way to the coast so that they could get the highest profit possible, selling it directly to the exporters at coastal ports.

06:17

Photo of Ghanaians carrying produce in baskets that were carried on one's head
Photo of a line of Ghanaians in Lorries, (early cars).

The British, by contrast, wanted them to just take it to the nearest railway terminus and sell it to local agents in the interior where they would get a lower profit. So they weren't interested in that at all. So, instead, they would in some cases bypass the colonial railways using head carriers, but increasingly by the 1920s and 1930s, started investing some of the profits of their cocoa farming in lorries. And so they started purchasing lorries, and hiring or finding young men in their families to drive the lorries, and then transporting the goods themselves using those, in many cases, those same footpaths the carriers had used before, just using this new technology.

06:53

Video footage of tro-tros, or minibuses, in Ghana

GETZ: I know that today in Ghana, a lot of people travel by taxi or by tro-tro, which is a minibus that people can pick up and drop off of. How did that industry start?

HART: Tro-tros emerge also because of this lack of access to vehicles in the city. But what we see is, so these mammy trucks or mammy lorries would come in from the eastern interior. They would be carrying goods and they would continue on into the center of the city, Accra, where there would be a major market and a major lorry park. On their way they would see market women, and women are the primary traders in Ghana. They would see them standing on the roadside with their goods. There was a municipal bus system at the time, but those buses were very small and they didn't have a lot of storage space. And so they weren't very convenient for traders. So, the, the lorry drivers would stop on the side of the road and pick up these women who really liked the idea of being able to travel in a lorry because it provided a lot more cargo space, and it was a much more flexible... and it took them directly to the lorry park, which was right by the market where they were trading.

Photo of a municipal bus in Ghana with a large crowd of people waiting to get on board

07:52

GETZ: So what I'm hearing from you is essentially that the British colonial model was to have a centralized bus system, to have a state-run railroad system, and Ghanaians didn't find these things useful and so they kind of built their own transportation systems to try to get what they needed instead.

HART: Yeah, and the British found this incredibly challenging, right? So they, they actually call these lorries "pirate passenger lorries." - "Pirates"? Yes, I know, right? (laughter) So, we think about pirates in terms of like, "Pirates of the Caribbean," right? And they're these kind of almost cartoonish figures. But in the colonial period all over the world, the British in particular, and the French and other European colonial powers, were very concerned about piracy. To call somebody a pirate is not just a kind of name you give to somebody who's on a ship or somebody who looks a certain way or wears certain kinds of clothes, right? It is a reflection of that person's undermining of authority. (car horns honk in distance)

08:44

Footage of Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Jamestown; Getz and Quayson sit in a church

GETZ: So, we're here in the Holy Trinity Anglican Church, which was built in 1894 here in Jamestown. You know, I look around this church, it's amazing. It's a very English looking church. - It is. - In the middle of Ghana. - Yeah. - And one of the most amazing things is these plaques that are on the walls to those who died, and I'm just noticing there's a Dale over there. There's a Pine over there. There's a Frasier. These are all Europeans. - Mm-hmm. Where are the African plaques in

pew in conversation

this church?

QUAYSON: The African plaques come later. So, from 1894 and well into the 20th century, the pews were segregated. - They were actually segregated. - They were actually segregated because it was the official colonial church. So, the colonial administration, all the senior colonial administrators attended church here. And because of the hierarchy that they established, the colonial officers sat in front and the African members sat behind them.

09:47

GETZ: But then, somewhat later, we do get plaques of that.

*Video footage of
schoolchildren coming out
of the church*

QUAYSON: This is much later, and, of course, the plaques for Africans are senior Africans who contribute to the church and so on. So the church becomes a microcosm of the colonial enterprise. (children talking indistinctly in background)

10:07

*Trevor Getz stands at the
Cape Coast Castle again*

When I first began to explore colonialism in Ghana, I speculated that colonialism was really a question of authority. Just how in charge was the colonial administration and to what degree could Ghanaians evade or resist what the colonial administration wanted to happen? And certainly we've seen both things over the past few days. We've seen ways in which the colonial administration could dominate the way that people moved goods or themselves. We've seen the way that colonial taxes dominated what came in and what went out. We've even seen the ways in which churches had hierarchies and segregation. But we've also witnessed the fact that Ghanaians could sometimes push back. They could be pirate taxis, they could force desegregation in the churches, they could find lose and find, mysteriously, bits of cargo. So, in the end, it sort of seems like there was a bit of a balance between the colonial administration's ability to control them and their ability to do what they wanted. I wonder if that's true in other parts of the world as well.