

WHAT'S IN A DRINK? CLASS STRUGGLE, POPULAR CULTURE AND THE POLITICS OF *AKPETESHIE* (LOCAL GIN) IN GHANA, 1930–67*

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Wunni ntramma na wo se nsa nye de

When you do not have cowry shells, you say wine is not sweet
(Twi Proverb).

SOCIAL revolutions or movements of popular protest often begin innocuously. They are initially preoccupied with 'bread-and-butter' politics and with no sophisticated ideology of class-consciousness or a desire to overturn the social order. Adherents to such movements – the weak and poor – seek to minimize the disadvantages of the 'system' for their lives.¹ In the Gold Coast from the 1930s, an excellent arena for popular protest centered on African demands to distill *akpeteshie* (local gin). Distilled from fermented palm wine or sugar cane juice, and requiring a simple apparatus of two tins (usually four-gallon kerosene tins) and copper tubing,² *akpeteshie* quickly became a lucrative industry in an era of economic depression, incorporating extensive production and retail networks. But, far from being associated with just the right to distill spirits, *akpeteshie* became embroiled in African politics under colonial rule as world depression, World War II and the intensification of nationalism prompted an African re-evaluation of the colonial situation.

Local distillation of *akpeteshie* became widespread in the Gold Coast after 1930, when temperance interests secured restrictive liquor legislation raising the tariffs on imported liquor. As previous increases in import duties on liquor had not adversely affected import levels and the liquor revenues so

* Research for this article was made possible by research grants from the African Development Foundation in 1991–2 and from the William F. Milton Foundation (Harvard University) in the summer of 1994. The paper is based on archival research (official and missionary), contemporary Gold Coast newspapers, highlife music, comic opera and oral interviews conducted in Ghana. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 1994 African Studies Association Conference in Toronto. This current version has benefited from the comments of Charles Ambler, Luise White, Leroy Vail and the anonymous reviewers of the *Journal of African History*.

¹ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985), ch. 8.

² The fermented palm wine or sugar cane juice was boiled with a coiled copper tube running from the boiling container through a receptacle filled with cool water or a stream and into an empty container. Steam rises from the boiling palm wine or sugar cane juice, condenses as it passes through the cool water and drips as gin into the empty container. The standardized alcohol strength of *akpeteshie* today is between 40 and 50 per cent by volume. Palm wine contains between 3 and 5 per cent of alcohol by volume.

vital to the government, the colonial government was not very perturbed. But this time, higher tariffs coincided with a world depression, encouraging illicit distillation. *Akpeteshie* distillation threatened the colonial government's finances, raised the specter of crime and disorder, compromised colonial concerns about urban spacing, exposed the weakness of colonial rule and eventually led the British government into the embarrassing diplomatic position of seeking an alteration of the Saint Germain Convention of 1919 that banned commercial distillation of spirits in the African colonies. Indeed, *akpeteshie* had become a popular issue in nationalist politics by the 1940s and 1950s.

But the overwhelming African support of *akpeteshie* as an indigenous drink aside, the drink conjured images of class and popular protest that divided Ghanaian society and would unnerve independent African governments. As a cheap drink, *akpeteshie* came to be associated with the working-class experience; and as such, it could not be ignored by the powerful or the weak.

ALCOHOL, REVENUE AND ORDER IN COLONIAL GOLD COAST: THE GOVERNMENT'S VIEW

Wine – palm wine, corn wine – has always been an important part of socialisation among the Akan, Ewe and Ga-Adangbe of southern Ghana from pre-colonial times. In pre-colonial Gold Coast, the palm-wine bar was often the liveliest spot in the village, where men gathered after fishing and farming to refresh themselves and to catch up on news.³ Palm wine featured prominently in the organization of communal labor,⁴ and in rites of passage.⁵ The generous distribution of palm wine among followers distinguished the patronage of wealthy male elders and office holders.⁶ Centuries of Afro-European trade had gradually promoted the incorporation of rum, and later gin, into the religio-cultural lives of the Akan, Ga-Adangbe and Ewe by the nineteenth century.⁷ But European liquor strengthened the prestige value of alcohol, and male elders increasingly excluded women and young men from its social use.⁸

After repeated failures from the 1850s to introduce a poll tax in the Gold Coast, the colonial government in the 1870s decided to experiment with the metropolitan practice of financing the government through tariffs on liquor

³ See, for example, W. Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (London, 1705), 189–90.

⁴ See, for example, John Mensah Sarbah, *Fanti National Constitution* (London, 1968 [1906]), 5–6.

⁵ See, for example, R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford, 1923), 97–8, and *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford, 1927), 148–50.

⁶ T. E. Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee* (London, 1966 [1824]), 277 and 293; and C. C. Reindorf, *The History of the Gold Coast and Asante* (Basel, 1895), 133. On alcohol's links to spiritual and political power, see Emmanuel Akyeampong, 'Powerful fluids: alcohol and water in the struggle for social power in urban Gold Coast, 1860–1919' (Paper presented at Northwestern University, Evanston, January 1994).

⁷ Raymond Dumett, 'The social impact of the European liquor trade on the Akan of Ghana (Gold Coast and Asante), 1875–1910', *J. Interdisciplinary Hist.*, v (1974), 69–101.

⁸ Dumett, 'Social impact of European liquor trade', 80.

imports.⁹ Between 1883 and 1895, about 9 million gallons of liquor were imported into the Gold Coast.¹⁰ Already in the 1880s, the Manchester Chamber of Commerce was complaining that the Gold Coast government was neglecting British trade interests as taxes on liquor and tobacco were bringing in sufficient revenue.¹¹ Colonial finances improved even further with the emergence of the Gold Coast as a leading world producer of cocoa. A prosperous, indigenous cocoa industry raised the purchasing power of Gold Coasters and increased their demand for consumer goods – including alcoholic drinks. By the immediate pre-World War I period, liquor duties were contributing almost 40 per cent of total government revenue in the Gold Coast.¹² By 1919 government officials, such as the Comptroller of Customs, were commenting on the close connection between increased cocoa exports and increased alcohol imports.¹³

Unlike British colonies in East Africa (Kenya) and Southern Africa (the Rhodesias) where the security concerns of white settlers entwined African alcohol consumption with issues of law and order,¹⁴ the Gold Coast (and West Africa in general) had no significant white settlement but did have a history of liquor imports. Here, the principal colonial preoccupation was not with the sabotage of the fragile colonial order by drunken Africans, but with the maximization of colonial revenues from duties on imported alcoholic drinks. The colonial government's minute regulation of alcohol imports, the licensing of liquor outlets and rigid hours of sale did ensure, however, that liquor consumption would not threaten the colonial order. The duty on spirits imported into the Gold Coast was increased gradually from 2s 6d in 1897 to 27s 6d in 1929, partly to raise revenue, but also to limit African demand.¹⁵

Other influences affecting colonial policy came from two sources. One was the vocal temperance movement based in the Gold Coast and in Britain; the other was Britain's subscription to international conventions that aimed to curtail European liquor traffic to Africa. Britain's liquor policy in West Africa was marked by tensions generated by Colonial Office bureaucrats, concerned with the practical exigencies of financing colonial administration,

⁹ Although the Gold Coast was not declared a British colony until 1874, attempts by British administrators to tax Gold Coasters date from the 1850s. David Kimble, *A Political History of Ghana 1850–1928* (Oxford, 1963), ch 4.

¹⁰ Dumett, 'Social impact of European liquor trade', 76.

¹¹ G. E. Metcalfe, *Great Britain and Ghana: Documents of Ghana History, 1808–1957* (London, 1964), 428–30.

¹² Emmanuel Akyeampong, 'The state and alcohol revenues: promoting "Economic Development" in Gold Coast/Ghana, 1919 to the present', *Social History/Histoire sociale*, xxvii (1994), 397. A similar situation developed in southern Nigeria before 1914. See A. Olorunfemi, 'The liquor traffic dilemma in British West Africa: the Southern Nigerian example, 1895–1918', *Int. J. Afr. Hist. Studies*, xvii (1984), 237–8.

¹³ Public Records Office (PRO), London, CO 96/597/15501.

¹⁴ See, for example, Charles Ambler, 'Drunks, brewers and chiefs: alcohol regulation in colonial Kenya, 1900–1939', in S. Barrows and R. Room (eds.), *Drinking: Behavior and Belief in Modern History* (Berkeley, 1991), 165–83; and Michael O. West, "'Equal rights for all civilized men": elite Africans and the quest for "European" liquor in colonial Zimbabwe, 1924–1961', *Int. Rev. of Soc. Hist.*, xxxvii (1992), 376–97.

¹⁵ PRO, CO 96/692/6571. See Appendixes II and IV of the 1930 Report of the Commission of Inquiry Regarding the Consumption of Spirits in the Gold Coast for the liquor duties and licensing ordinances in force before 1929.

and metropolitan politicians involved in the temperance movement or sensitive to the temperance interests of their constituencies.

British initiative was instrumental in the international conferences convened from 1889 to regulate liquor traffic to the African colonies. In 1890 an international convention at Brussels prohibited European liquor to areas without a previous history of liquor consumption, including the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast. The idea of 'prohibition zones' at the Brussels conference had been proposed by Britain. Lord Salisbury, the Prime Minister, had also demanded a duty of 10s on every gallon of imported spirits but this had been reduced to 2s due to the practical objections of, among others, the Colonial Office.¹⁶ Before the Saint Germain Convention on liquor traffic was enacted in 1919, Walter Long, Secretary of State for the Colonies,¹⁷ was already promising the prohibition of spirits in West Africa in election speeches in Britain. The strong opposition from the colonial governments of Nigeria and the Gold Coast shifted the metropolitan position from prohibition to ensuring the quality of spirits.¹⁸ The Saint Germain Convention raised the minimum tariffs on European liquor imported into Africa, banned 'trade spirits' (or cheap spirits), and outlawed the commercial distillation of spirits in the African colonies.¹⁹ However, the Convention left it to each colony to define what it considered 'trade spirits'.

The Gold Coast government initially defined 'trade spirits' to include most of the cheap Dutch and German brands of gin. The result was a precipitous decline in liquor imports as most Africans could not afford the more expensive brands of imported gin. In 1924 the government re-defined trade spirits to allow the cheap Dutch brands favored by Gold Coasters, and liquor imports soared. The commencement of Governor R. A. Slater's administration (1927–32), however, witnessed a cut back in development projects – in spite of the increase in liquor revenues – and created the strong impression among chiefs and educated Africans that an African demand was being exploited exclusively for colonial needs.

An indigenous ethic of temperance existed among the Asante, other coastal Akans and the Ga-Adangme. It endorsed the use of alcoholic drinks in religio-cultural frameworks and stressed moderation in social drinking. The major exponents of indigenous temperance were chiefs and male elders.²⁰ As missionary work gained ground in mid-nineteenth-century Gold Coast, Western-style temperance societies were introduced. The first of these was formed at Anomabu in 1862 by Kwamin Akyempong, who was later installed in 1872 as King Ghartey IV of Winnebah.²¹ In Britain, where the movement for prohibition had been thwarted by the 1870s,²² the attention of the

¹⁶ Lynn Pan, *Alcohol in Colonial Africa* (Uppsala, 1975), 34.

¹⁷ Hereafter referred to as the colonial secretary.

¹⁸ For a summary of British liquor policy in Africa up to 1920, see PRO, CO 554/62/20621.

¹⁹ Pan, *Alcohol in Colonial Africa*, 41–5.

²⁰ Interview with Nana Ewua Duku II, Dutch Sekondi, 3 Mar. 1992; and interview with A. A. Amartey, Accra, 31 Aug. 1994. See also, Rattray, *Ashanti*, 135.

²¹ Magnus J. Sampson, *Gold Coast Men of Affairs* (London, 1937), 113–18.

²² Brian Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England, 1815–1872* (Pittsburgh, 1971), 187. For a history of the prohibition movement, see A. E. Dingle, *The Campaign for Prohibition in Victorian England: The United Kingdom Alliance 1872–1895* (London, 1980).

temperance movement shifted to the colonies. In the 1880s, 26 missionary and temperance societies came together to form the United Committee for the Prevention of the Demoralization of the Native Races by the Liquor Traffic. It was presided over by the Duke of Westminster and chaired by the Bishop of London.²³

But the missionary front in the Gold Coast lacked unanimity as to the meaning of temperance. In 1914, when the Wesleyan Missionary Society explicitly stated its temperance demands, prohibition was not included but rather temperance or moderation; this had changed to a demand for teetotalism by the 1920s.²⁴ Other missions like the Scottish Mission and the Roman Catholic Mission excluded wine and beer from their demands for prohibition.²⁵ The legacy of different histories of temperance in Victorian England and on the European continent, and practical evaluations by different missions in the Gold Coast concerning the feasibility of prohibition, partially explain the varied missionary positions.²⁶

Perhaps it was this flexible definition of temperance that made possible the unusual alliance of local chiefs (versed in the ritual use of alcohol), educated Africans and missionary societies in the 1920s.²⁷ In 1928, this alliance succeeded in pressuring the Gold Coast colonial government into introducing restrictive liquor laws that increased the retail license fee for spirits from £20 to £60, shortened hours for the sale of spirits and banned the sale of spirits on credit.²⁸ The immediate effect of these measures was a decrease in the number of licenses by 52 per cent (from 3,245 to 1,547) in the first six months of 1929.²⁹ Temperance interests achieved a further victory in 1930 when a commission of inquiry recommended that importation of gin be gradually abolished by means of a progressive reduction in imports over a ten-year period.³⁰ The import duty on potable spirits was raised 21.8 per cent from 27s 6d in 1928 to 33s 6d in June 1930.³¹

The restrictive liquor laws, unlike previous increases in liquor tariffs,

²³ Pan, *Alcohol in Colonial Africa*, 25.

²⁴ The Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS) West Africa Archives, School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London), microfiche box 11, Gold Coast District Synod Minutes, 1914.

²⁵ See the 'Notes of Evidence' in the 1930 Commission Report.

²⁶ See Emmanuel Akyeampong, 'Alcohol, social conflict and the struggle for power in Ghana, 1919 to recent times' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Virginia, 1993), ch. 4, for a detailed discussion of the Gold Coast temperance movement.

²⁷ Local African politics concerning liquor legislation and metropolitan temperance interests received a boost in the 1920s with the enactment of prohibition in the United States. The repeal of prohibition in the United States in the early 1930s deflated demands for prohibition in the Gold Coast. The onset of World War II further marginalized temperance politics in the Gold Coast.

²⁸ See Gold Coast, *Government Gazette*, 29 Sept. 1928, for the stipulations of the Spirit License Amendment Ordinance.

²⁹ Pan, *Alcohol in Colonial Africa*, 71.

³⁰ Gold Coast, *Government Gazette*, 25 Oct. 1930.

³¹ WMMS (West Africa) Archives, microfiche box 11. The WMMS Synod Minutes for the years 1928–31 highlight the intense involvement of the mission in the Gold Coast 'liquor question'. The Gold Coast Synod Minutes of 1931 justifiably claimed that 'the principal recommendations made therein [The 1930 Commission's Report] accord with our own and we believe a notable advance in the cause of Temperance has been made'. The Methodist Missionary Society did successfully influence the agenda of the commission of inquiry.

coincided with the depression of the 1930s and re-configured the colonial government's financial agenda. Liquor imports plummeted, and fewer licenses were taken for the retail of spirits. Gin imports dropped 91.4 per cent from 569,746 gallons in 1929 to 49,356 gallons in 1931 although the permitted quota was 512,280. The total revenue collected from spirit licenses dropped 82.4 per cent from £68,078 in 1928–9 to £12,118 in 1933–4.³² The colonial government quickly discovered, however, that Gold Coasters had not given up gin, but that local sources of illicit gin had emerged to compete with the old shops that sold imported gin. In 1930–1, only six cases of illicit liquor traffic had been reported with 11 persons convicted. These offenses jumped a hundred times to 558 reported cases with 603 persons convicted between 1 April 1933 and 31 March 1934.³³ The colonial government was astounded. As recently as March 1926, the Comptroller of Customs had confidently opined that the art of distillation was largely unknown in West Africa except in Liberia.³⁴ The government fumbled to piece together what was happening.

Comparisons with Nigeria, the other British colony experiencing a rash of illicit distillation, further alarmed the Gold Coast government. Also overtaken by events, Governor Donald Cameron of Nigeria believed that illicit distillation

commenced as recently as May last [1931] and it is alleged that the knowledge was acquired from natives who had returned from the United States of America. I am told that the secret of distilling spirits by means of a rude still made of earthen pots (or petrol tins) and copper or other tubing is being sold broadcast for £10 in each case.³⁵

Political officers in the Calabar province reported an epidemic of thefts of feed pipes from launches and cars. Even the enforcers of colonial rule were not immune from this new vice, and the Commissioner of Police reported a constable on duty at the Ibagwa Mill, who was found 'raving and maniac drunk' from what was believed to be illicit gin.³⁶ Illicit gin appeared to have heralded a new dawn of crime and disorder in colonial Nigeria.

To the Gold Coast government, patronage of illicit *akpeteshie* compromised respect for law, and represented a loss of revenue as it undercut liquor imports and the taking out of retail licenses.³⁷ But *akpeteshie* also constituted a menace to public health because of its unrefined nature and harmful contents. One laboratory analysis in 1933 found as 'much as twenty-four grains of copper and zinc per gallon of spirits in an exhibit'.³⁸ Another *akpeteshie* sample from Saltpond in 1932 was found to contain 72.9 per cent of alcohol by volume.³⁹ And those involved in *akpeteshie* distillation in the

³² Governor Shenton Thomas, *Memorandum on Liquor Policy* (Accra, 1934). Copy in PRO, CO 96/715/21702. ³³ Thomas, *Memorandum on Liquor Policy*.

³⁴ PRO, CO 96/681/6204.

³⁵ PRO, CO 554/89/4495. Governor of Nigeria to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 22 Dec. 1931. It is strange that the Nigerian government regarded illicit distillation as a recent phenomenon. Colonial records indicate a proliferation of illicit distillation in Nigeria around 1910. Olorunfemi, 'Liquor traffic dilemma', 241.

³⁶ PRO, CO 554/89/4495. Resident of the Calabar Province, 'Memorandum on the illicit distilling in the Calabar Province'.

³⁷ PRO, CO 554/89/4495. Governor Slater to the Colonial Office, 16 Jan. 1932.

³⁸ PRO, CO 554/96/21446.

³⁹ PRO, CO 96/708/1660.

colonial era admit to the hazards of the trade, especially the explosion of kerosene tins when overheated.⁴⁰

Equally disturbing to the Gold Coast government was the fact that those involved in illicit liquor defied categorization. The colonial mind was a neat mind, and crime in the Gold Coast was conveniently catalogued according to 'tribal' tendencies. Ewes were prone to murder, northerners to drunkenness and disorder and Akans were often the perpetrators of fraud. A gender categorization of crime also made crime appear 'orderly'. Violent crimes, for example armed robbery, were associated with men. Women ran foul of the Ministry of Health for leaving refuse in public places or having open water receptacles at home, which encouraged the breeding of mosquito larvae.⁴¹ With illicit distillation, retail and consumption of local gin, no regional, ethnic nor gender stereotypes seemed valid. The perpetrators lacked an organized face, but had a boldness that unnerved the colonial government.

With roots in rural and urban areas and patronized by urban men and women, *akpeteshie* also compromised the colonial government's conception of urban space. In parts of colonial Africa, governments strongly discouraged the immigration of women into the towns,⁴² especially urban centers that sprang up as a result of colonial activity. Colonial economies were very male-oriented and women were supposed to remain in rural areas, but the depression of the 1930s dampened rural and urban economies, and increased the movement of men and women between villages and towns in search of economic opportunities. Some urban women, short of cash, took to the retailing of *akpeteshie* although outlawed by the colonial government which opposed single women discovering niches in the urban economy. The colonial government galvanized its forces to stamp out illicit gin.

LEGISLATING LEISURE? THE COMMONERS' VIEW

The restrictive liquor laws of the 1930s directly threatened a vibrant popular culture⁴³ of drinking bars, popular music ('highlife') and comic opera

⁴⁰ See, for example, interview with Jeremiah Oman Ano, Sekondi, 15 Aug. 1994.

⁴¹ These impressions are based on the author's perusal of ADM 15 files (Law Officer's Department), the CSO 15/3 files (Criminal Investigations and Reports), and the Criminal Record Book of Nsawam District (SCT 38/5) housed at the Ghana National Archives (GNA), Accra. These 'tribal' categorizations, in the author's mind, were aided by the fact that Eweland was on the border of the colonial territory, hence Ewes were seen as being free of colonial restraints; by the prohibition of European liquor in the Northern Territories, hence the belief that European liquor was culturally and chemically powerful for northerners; and by the early establishment of mission schools in Fante territory, making educated Fantes the perfect perpetrators of fraud.

⁴² See Kenneth Little, *Women in African Towns* (Cambridge, 1973); and Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago, 1990).

⁴³ 'Popular culture' is used here in the sense defined by Johannes Fabian, 'Popular culture in Africa: findings and conjectures', *Africa*, XLVIII (1978), 315. In particular, 'it suggests contemporary cultural expressions carried by the masses in contrast to both modern elitist and traditional "tribal" culture' and 'it signifies, potentially at least, processes occurring behind the back of established powers and accepted interpretations...'. But the use of popular culture in this paper differs from Fabian's in that it posits no inherent tension between rural and urban culture. Areas of tension may exist, but popular culture also has the potential to link or integrate urban and rural social experiences.

(concert), that was emerging in urban Gold Coast.⁴⁴ To appreciate the tenacity of *akpeteshie* patrons in their resistance to colonial forces, and what *akpeteshie* meant to them, it is necessary to outline the history of this new urban culture.

Urbanization and economic development in southern Gold Coast from the turn of the twentieth century opened up new employment opportunities and encouraged rural–urban migration among young men. With the declaration of the Gold Coast as a colony, European expatriate businesses gained sufficient confidence to invest capital in the gold-mining sector. The towns of Tarkwa and Obuasi soon burgeoned as centres of mining activity. Deep-level mining promoted the idea of building a railway to link a coastal port with interior mines, so that heavy mining machinery could be transported to the interior and the export of gold facilitated. From 1898 the construction of a railway network was begun from the small coastal village of Sekondi. The onset of cocoa cultivation generated a parallel agrarian revolution. The period between 1900 and 1928 witnessed phenomenal economic expansion and massive urban immigration.⁴⁵ Sekondi's population of 4,095 in 1901 expanded to 16,953 by the 1931 census. The village of Obuasi was transformed by the gold-mining activities of Ashanti Goldfields and registered a population of 7,877 in the 1931 census. The population of Accra rose from 19,582 in 1911 to 60,726 in 1931.⁴⁶

However, these structural transformations engendered social dislocation and alienation among urban laborers. Migration was often conceived as a temporary economic measure – to earn cash for taxes, pay off family debt or acquire dowry – and the rigors of migrant life made it a youthful phenomenon. Its transience encouraged single, male migration. The combination of an arduous industrial labor while separated from their families and the need to create some form of social life to replace abandoned rural social networks, made drinking prominent in urban life.⁴⁷

An emerging, 'modern', élite lifestyle in the towns provided fertile grounds for social experimentation among rural immigrants. From the early twentieth century, Europeans and educated Africans established club houses in the coastal towns under colonial auspices. The Roger Club in the administrative capital of Accra was donated by Governor John P. Roger (1904–9).⁴⁸ The Optimism Club was opened by educated Africans in

⁴⁴ These were not the only pillars of the new urban popular culture, other aspects included film and sports. But drinking- and dance-bars, with their associated paraphernalia of popular music and comic opera, were particularly relevant to the history of *akpeteshie*. From the 1940s, highlife bands doubled as concert parties. They staged plays theatricalizing urban life and punctuated with music, the lyrics of which underscored the themes in the play and with the actors as singers. This genre has been dubbed 'comic opera' by scholars, but ordinary Ghanaians prefer the term 'concert'.

⁴⁵ Jonathan H. Frimpong Ansa, *The Vampire State in Africa: The Political Economy of Decline in Ghana* (Trenton, 1992), ch. 4.

⁴⁶ GNA, ADM 5/2/3. Gold Coast, *Census of the Population, 1911*, 50; and A. W. Cardinal, *The Gold Coast, 1931* (Accra, 1931), 158–9.

⁴⁷ For the social life of railworkers and miners, see Richard Jeffries, *Class, Power and Ideology in Ghana: The Railwaymen of Sekondi* (Cambridge, 1978); and Jeff Crisp, *The Story of an African Working Class: Ghanaian Miners' Struggles, 1870–1980* (London, 1984).

⁴⁸ *Gold Coast Independent*, 31 Aug. 1918.

Sekondi in 1915.⁴⁹ The 'bar' represented a conspicuous focal point in both social institutions.⁵⁰

World War I, the stationing of foreign troops in towns like Sekondi and Accra, and the need to entertain these troops strengthened an élite urban culture in which European-style drinking bars, dance-band music and comic opera were becoming central. Against this bustling social background, highlife music emerged when dance-bands fused Akan dance rhythms and melodies with Western instruments and harmonies.⁵¹ The term 'highlife' was assigned to the new genre of music by the urban poor excluded from élite social activities.⁵² Comic opera constituted another important part of this new social life. 'Concert' originated in Empire Day drama performances and the first professional actor, Teacher Yalley, began his career in these events. Just like the new dance-bands, Teacher Yalley performed to an élite audience at places like the Optimism Club, charging entrance fees as high as 5s in the early 1920s.⁵³

Johannes Fabian has commented on the process of cultural 'creolization' that characterizes the creative synthesis of African and Western influences into unique urban popular cultures.⁵⁴ David Coplan notes in the case of urban Gold Coast that as rural-urban migration increased after 1919,

the new elite rapidly began to serve as a reference group for more traditional, nonliterate Africans as the new urban socio-economic reality became progressively less comprehensible to the latter and less responsive to mediation by traditional values and systems of social control.⁵⁵

But the social needs of the new migrants differed from those of the educated coastal Africans. The immigrant urban workers began to construct, not imitate, a unique urban popular culture that meaningfully interpreted their urban social experience.

Working-class drinking bars like 'Liberia Bar' and 'Columbia Bar' were established in Cassava Farm (Takoradi).⁵⁶ The drinking patterns of urban workers differed significantly from those of the rural palm wine bar in that they transcended barriers of ethnicity, age and gender.⁵⁷ Unlike the élitist Optimism Club, anyone with cash was welcome at Columbia Bar. Acoustic guitar-bands bridged the social gap between the rural *seprewa* (Akan lute)

⁴⁹ GNA, Sekondi, No. 140 ('Optimism Club').

⁵⁰ The striking similarities between the rural palm wine bar and the urban drinking bar as centers of social activity are apparent.

⁵¹ E. J. Collins, 'Ghanaian highlife', *African Arts*, x (1976), 62-8. Kofi E. Agovi, 'The political relevance of Ghanaian highlife songs since 1957', *Research in African Literatures*, xx (1989), 194, points to the greater significance of lyrics over instrumentation in highlife songs.

⁵² David Coplan, 'Go to my town, Cape Coast! The social history of Ghanaian highlife', in Brunno Nettle (ed.), *Eight Urban Musical Cultures* (Urbana, 1978), 100.

⁵³ On comic opera, see E. J. Collins, 'Comic opera in Ghana', *African Arts*, ix (1976), 50-7.

⁵⁴ Fabian, 'Popular culture', 317.

⁵⁵ Coplan, 'Go to my town, Cape Coast!', 101.

⁵⁶ Interview with Laurence Cudjoe, J. K. Annan, Joseph Ackon and Arhu, Sekondi, 27 May 1992.

⁵⁷ David G. Mandelbaum, 'Alcohol and culture', *Current Anthropology*, vi (1965), 281, points out that in complex societies, 'the drinking patterns of each subgroup or class may reflect its special characteristics as well as the cultural frame of the society'.

player and the urban dance-band designed for élite entertainment.⁵⁸ Itinerant concert parties, like 'The Axim Six'⁵⁹ and 'The Two Bobs', toured towns and peri-urban villages, socializing new migrants and would-be migrants into the urban experience through plays that dramatized urban life for a low admission fee. Popular groups like 'Glass and Grant' drew crowds with plays like "'Another Little Drink'" (wouldn't do us any harm).⁶⁰ And important to these new forms of recreation was cheap Dutch gin.

It was this whole complex edifice that the restrictive liquor laws of 1930 assailed. In addition to expressing the real and the ideal about the urban social experience, popular culture provided new job opportunities as bandsmen, actors, retailers of liquor and prostitutes.⁶¹ Urban and rural laborers felt themselves pitted against the 'discriminatory' laws of colonial rule. Ironically, the colonial onslaught against *akpeteshie* heightened the relevance of popular culture as an interpretation of the exploited existence of workers in urban Gold Coast.

Women who retailed *akpeteshie* experienced first-hand victimization in a colonial economy that was male-oriented. Women like Anita Mensah⁶² and Novisi Segbedzi⁶³ cited the need to supplement the inadequate wages of their husbands as their reason for selling *akpeteshie*. It was difficult for the colonial regime to justify the classification of such women, who were struggling to survive in the urban environment, as 'criminal elements'.⁶⁴ Striking about these women is the fact that many either came from families with a history of retailing liquor or were married to distillers. Anita Mensah's grandfather had worked in the Customs Service in the 1880s and 1890s, when there was no port at Sekondi-Takoradi. Then, ships docked around Shama and canoes were used to offload the ships. The grandfather would buy a cask of rum and the grandmother would retail it in tots. Anita's mother went into *akpeteshie* retailing in the 1930s, when demand for it arose in Sekondi. Anita was her mother's first born, so at the age of thirteen she began to assist her mother in the *akpeteshie* business.⁶⁵ Also, the grandparents of *akpeteshie* retailers, Novisi Segbedzi and Tsotso Alice Akwei, had sold imported European liquor.⁶⁶

⁵⁸ The guitar-bands became famous for their 'palm-wine music', a style of highlife that emphasized the trials of life in its lyrics. The lyrics of palm-wine music contrasted with the lofty images of love, comfort and happiness portrayed by dance-bands.

⁵⁹ *Gold Coast Times*, 9 Aug. 1930.

⁶⁰ See *Gold Coast Independent*, 10 and 17 Jan. 1925.

⁶¹ The close association between drinking places like Colombia Bar and prostitution in Sekondi and Takoradi was pointed out by interviewees like Anita Mensah, Takoradi, 16 Aug. 1994. In his social survey, K. A. Busia counted 127 known prostitutes in Sekondi-Takoradi in 1947–8. K. A. Busia, *Social Survey of Sekondi-Takoradi* (London, 1950), 107.

⁶² Interview with Anita Mensah, Takoradi, 5 Mar. 1992.

⁶³ Interview with Novisi Segbedzi, Accra, 14 June 1992.

⁶⁴ Helen Bradford points out the paradox that by sexist definition women could not be a threat to law and order. The arrest, manhandling and jailing of women during women's demonstrations against municipal beerhalls in Natal in 1929 had the effect of bringing their men into the struggle against the government. Helen Bradford, "'We women will show them': beer protests in the Natal countryside, 1929", in Jonathan Crush and Charles Ambler (eds.), *Liquor and Labor in Southern Africa* (Athens, 1992), 208–34.

⁶⁵ Interview with Anita Mensah, Takoradi, 5 Mar. 1992.

⁶⁶ Interview with Novisi Segbedzi, Accra, 14 June 1992; and interview with Tsotso Alice Akwei, 14 June 1992.

Distillation was sometimes a family venture that involved both men and women.

In the distillation of *akpeteshie*, when the mash has been put into a drum ready for boiling, it is a woman who puts firewood under the drum, lights it and tends it. It is a woman who fetches water for the receptacle the pipe passes through. Distillation was often a family concern. The man did it with his wife and children. In those days, women worked strictly under their husbands' instructions. But all women worked.⁶⁷

Several interviews conducted at Ntoaso, a village close to Nsawam, confirmed the existence of a tradition of distillation among certain families. In Ntoaso today, cement wells used in distillation have become valuable heirlooms.⁶⁸ In peri-urban villages, men dominated distillation as the proximity to large towns heightened fears of police raids. These areas were also probably new to the *akpeteshie* business, and they lacked the tradition of family distillation common in an Ewe village such as Akpefe in the Volta district by the 1930s.⁶⁹ The *akpeteshie* was smuggled into the town at night, sometimes by armed gangs, and delivered to retailers.⁷⁰ *Akpeteshie* distillers also came to town to explore new retail outlets. New contacts were put on a trial basis, even extended credit facilities, and supplies were increased when they showed promise. Migrant women from families or rural areas that had distilled *akpeteshie* were quick to capitalize on these new urban opportunities. That is how Novisi Segbedzi struck business relationships with distillers from Coaltar and Suhum in the 1930s.⁷¹ *Akpeteshie* represented an important link between rural and urban economies.

The production of *akpeteshie* meshed neatly with the rural economy – oral evidence suggests that cocoa farmers had knowledge of distillation from the late nineteenth century – and farmers came to distill gin as a supplementary occupation and supplied it to villages and towns. There appears to be some confusion as to when knowledge of distillation became available in the Gold Coast. It is likely that this knowledge may have existed in restricted circles, at least by the early nineteenth century when Dutch traders in the Gold Coast experimented with commercial distillation.⁷² Ironically, Ewe laborers, who worked on the Basel Mission's cocoa plantations in Akropong,⁷³ are credited by one source with learning the art of distillation from the European missionaries. Apparently, Basel missionaries distilled liquor from fermented cocoa beans for their private use.⁷⁴ In the words of Anita Mensah:

⁶⁷ Interview with Anita Mensah, Takoradi, 16 Aug. 1994.

⁶⁸ See, for example, interview with Adotei Akwei, Ntoaso, 11 July 1992; and interview with George Blankson, Ntoaso, 11 July 1992.

⁶⁹ Interview with Samuel Agbeve, Accra, 26 Feb. 1992; and interview with Sylvester Adenyo, Ntoaso, 26 Feb. 1992.

⁷⁰ Interview with Jeremiah Oman Ano, Sekondi, 15 Aug. 1994.

⁷¹ Interview with Novisi Segbedzi, Accra, 14 June 1992.

⁷² Sampson, *Gold Coast Men of Affairs*, 114–15.

⁷³ Cocoa seedlings had been introduced into the Gold Coast by the Basel Missionary Society in 1858.

⁷⁴ Interview with Anita Mensah, Takoradi, 16 Aug. 1994. Anita is from a family of distillers, and she was recounting what her grandfather told her. Susan Diduk points out that 'Basel missionaries came from rural areas of southern Germany and Switzerland

Two of my grandfather's brothers were taken as laborers for the Basel Mission from Eweland to Akropong. These Europeans instructed my grand uncles in distillation. My grand uncles would supervise the fermentation of cocoa beans. They would then connect a pipe between two receptacles and distill. The vapor from the fermented cocoa beans turned into gin. My grand uncles developed an interest in this gin as the Europeans used to give them some to drink, although they were paid laborers. So immediately after the cocoa season at Akropong, my grand uncles would ferment some of the beans and distill it. But the Europeans used to rectify their distilled gin. But that part of the process they did not let my grand uncles witness or learn. So my grand uncles would just do the initial distillation and drink their gin. The gin aided them in their agricultural labor and it livened their social moments.⁷⁵

As the Ewes left Akropong for other areas, they took their interest in distillation with them. The Ewes later discovered that fermented palm wine had the same qualities as fermented cocoa beans and, since palm trees grew naturally in the forest habitat, it was a cheaper raw material than cocoa. Later, distillers experimented successfully with fermented sugar cane, taking their cue from the fact that the Basel missionaries added brown sugar to the fermented cocoa beans before distillation.⁷⁶ But it appears a market for *akpeteshie* did not develop until the economic depression with its expanding urban population and emerging popular culture. From the 1930s, also, farmers came to use *akpeteshie* distillation as a source of cash in the non-productive period between harvests.⁷⁷ The cocoa hold-ups of the 1920s and the 1930s – when farmers refused to sell their cocoa at the low prices offered by expatriate firms – may have actually radicalized cocoa farmers, encouraging them to breach colonial regulations in their distillation of *akpeteshie*.⁷⁸

The colonial attack against *akpeteshie* afforded ordinary Gold Coasters the opportunity to critique the ideology of colonial rule. James Scott points out 'the extent to which most subordinate classes are able, on the basis of their daily material experience, to penetrate and demystify the prevailing ideology'.⁷⁹ The colonial rhetoric argued that *akpeteshie* was physically injurious to its consumers because of lead and copper contents. But for those who patronized illicit gin in the Gold Coast, the colonial concern was really about revenue. As K. K. Kabah, an executive member of the Western Region Distillers Cooperative, put it:

The white men wanted to cheat us. If they could ban our local drink, we would end up buying their imported drinks. We knew they were cheating us, but we could not say anything. So we hid in isolated places and distilled our gin and drank our own thing.⁸⁰

where they were well acquainted with home brews like *most*, prepared from fermented apples'. Susan Diduk, 'European alcohol, history, and the state in Cameroon', *African Studies Review*, xxxvi (1993), 9.

⁷⁵ Interview with Anita Mensah, Takoradi, 16 Aug. 1994.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ See Asare Konadu, *The Wizard of Asamang* (Accra, 1988), 114–15.

⁷⁸ Roger J. Southall, 'Polarisation and dependence in the Gold Coast cocoa trade 1890–1938', *Trans. of the Hist. Soc. of Ghana*, xvi (1975), 93–115.

⁷⁹ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 317.

⁸⁰ Interview with the Western Region Distillers Cooperative Management Committee, Takoradi, 16 Aug. 1994.

In several interviews the author conducted, none of the interviewees seemed convinced by the colonial government's altruistic arguments. Even the government employee, A. A. Amartey, who worked in the Broadcasting Corporation until 1959, affirmed that it was all about revenue.⁸¹

The colonial government was disturbed that Gold Coasters, even the chiefs, refused to see illicit distillation as a moral or legal crime. Voluntary informers were rare. The Eastern Province Commissioner in despair stated:

I must with regret express the opinion that illicit distillation will never be entirely stamped out, as it has become the practice to distil in individual houses sufficient spirit for family needs, apart from the class of distillers for commercial profit. The process is so easy, the profit is clear, and the trade is regarded as a very venial breach of the law by the chiefs and people generally. It is quite obvious, however, that definite action must be taken by the government, who cannot remain passive under the reproach which is conveyed in the native name of the liquor 'the whiteman's shame'.⁸²

Other names given to illicit gin capture the colonial experience of its patrons. '*Akpeteshie*' is a derivative of a Ga word meaning 'hide-out' because distillation and consumption were secretive.⁸³ Another revealing name was *bome kutuku* ('box me'), which described the sound of the beating the arrested culprit received from the colonial police.⁸⁴

A general atmosphere of 'daring the state' developed, and it appears baiting the authorities became fun. A contemporary witness in Sekondi remembered that his father found it amusing outwitting policemen by stringing his purchased *akpeteshie* bottles around his waist, and then putting on his cover cloth.⁸⁵ When the author asked Novisi if the colonial police ever arrested her, she laughed and clapped her hands: 'yes', she answered. She had to secure a lawyer and go the High Court in Accra where she was fined £5.⁸⁶ Her amusement at her recollection was linked to the feeling of having 'gotten away' from the state. Imprisonment constituted a real threat, and *akpeteshie* retailers had by necessity familiarized themselves with the workings of the colonial judicial system. According to Anita Mensah, who aided her mother in *akpeteshie* sales as a teenager in the 1940s,

if I was fined and it took my mother even a few hours to get the money, I was put in a small cell. If at 2:00 pm – when the court was over and the prisoners were being taken to jail – and my mother was not back, I would have to be taken to jail with the prisoners. You incurred further expenses getting your ward out of the prison yard. Because you were booked as a prisoner and you had to pay a discharge fee.⁸⁷

For female *akpeteshie* retailers, staying out of prison and minimizing court fines were essential. Although the passage of time may have encouraged romanticized memories, it is clear that in the post-1930s, the 'moral

⁸¹ Interview with A. A. Amartey, Accra, 31 Aug. 1994.

⁸² PRO, CO 96/715/21702. Eastern Province Commissioner's Report, 28 Dec. 1933.

⁸³ *Co-op Distillers News*, No. 1 (Jan.–Mar. 1992).

⁸⁴ Interview with Jeremiah Oman Ano, Sekondi, 15 Aug. 1994.

⁸⁵ Interview with J. K. Annan, Sekondi, 27 May 1992.

⁸⁶ Interview with Novisi Segbedzi, Accra, 14 June 1992.

⁸⁷ Interview with Anita Mensah, Takoradi, 16 Aug. 1994.

authority' of colonial rule came under question. It became imperative that the colonial government salvage its image and repair its hegemony.

THE TAIL WAGS THE DOG: THE COLONIAL
GOVERNMENT'S DILEMMA

Although the colonial government could not deny the 'representatives' of the people – the chiefs and the educated élite – their demand for stiff liquor laws (highly publicized in Britain), it did not intend to give up a lucrative and reliable source of revenue without a fight. It believed it could out-manoeuvre the liquor distillers if it could reduce the price of imported gin to make it competitive with *akpeteshie*. A second strategy involved the vigorous prosecution of *akpeteshie* patrons and the imposition of heavy sentences. The government hoped that both strategies would end the *akpeteshie* menace.

From 1933, Governor Shenton Thomas petitioned the Colonial Office to relax the restrictions on liquor imports and sales passed in 1928 and 1930. He stressed the need to reduce tariffs on imported liquor, pointing out that while a bottle of *akpeteshie* was priced around 3s 6d, a bottle of imported gin cost at least 5s.⁸⁸ In rural areas such as Yabiw, in the Western Province, a bottle of *akpeteshie* cost as little as 1s 6d during World War II.⁸⁹ Thomas believed that illicit distillation was spawning criminal networks that could threaten colonial law and order if *akpeteshie*'s popularity was not eroded. The report of the Commissioner of Police in Kumasi that hundreds of bottles of *akpeteshie* had been seized from Kumasi stores in the Christmas of 1932 was very disturbing since it suggested the existence of an organized production network.⁹⁰

Even the Catholic Mission at Keta endorsed the Governor's remedy of a cheaper imported alternative to *akpeteshie*, pointing out its deleterious effects on the inhabitants of the Volta River District.

The consumption of the spirits distilled from palm wine was started only when the natives could no more buy imported spirits. This locally distilled spirit is very harmful and it tends to increase. About 40 people around Abo (near Keta), where the stills are numerous, have died in consequence of the consumption of this native spirit.⁹¹

It remained for the Governor to persuade the Colonial Secretary about the validity of his strategy. Although Thomas did not remain in office long enough to push his policy through, his successor, Arnold Hodson, adopted his demand for a reduction in tariffs on imported gin.

The urgent need for cheap imported gin was heightened by the apparent inability of the colonial police to stem the tide of illicit distillation. Hodson confessed to the Colonial Secretary that he had been 'advised that no efforts by the police can successfully deal with the problem'.⁹² Persons convicted for

⁸⁸ PRO CO 96/708/1660. Thomas to Cunliffe-Lister, 7 Jan. 1933.

⁸⁹ Interview with Jeremiah Oman Ano, Sekondi, 15 Aug. 1994.

⁹⁰ PRO, CO 96/715/21702. Report of the Senior Commissioner of Police, Kumasi, 16 Nov. 1933.

⁹¹ PRO, CO 96/715/21702. Gold Coast, *Correspondence and Statistics Relating to the Consumption of Spirits in the Gold Coast* (Accra, 1934), 161. The Catholic Mission of Keta was the only mission in the Gold Coast that favored the reimportation of cheap gin.

⁹² PRO, CO 554/98/33522. Hodson to Cunliffe-Lister, 3 May 1935.

trafficking in illicit gin preferred to go to prison instead of paying the fine.⁹³ This was to ensure that their profits were not depleted.⁹⁴ Some offenders, who had paid heavy fines, now restricted their activities to touring the Sekondi and Axim Districts instructing people, in return for payment, on how to make the illicit stills and manufacture the liquor.⁹⁵

But international conventions regulating liquor traffic to the African colonies limited the extent to which Britain could reduce tariffs on imported liquor. Allowing for the depreciation of the franc, the lowest duty under the Saint Germain Convention that the colonial government could levy on a gallon of imported gin was 24s in 1936.⁹⁶ This was not sufficiently low to enable imported gin to out-compete *akpeteshie*. By 1939, the option of reducing duties on imported spirits to make them competitive had been ruled out by the Colonial Office.⁹⁷

The outbreak of World War II in 1939 and the military's demands on shipping space further reduced liquor imports into the Gold Coast, forcing the colonial government to consider the radical and embarrassing option of legalizing illicit gin.⁹⁸ Although this would involve Britain unilaterally seeking to revise the Saint Germain Convention, the government believed it would be an expression of goodwill towards Gold Coasters in a time of national crisis, not to mention the revenue that would accrue from the distillers' fees and excise duties on *akpeteshie*.⁹⁹ In October 1942, the War Cabinet approved in principle the proposal for local distillation of spirits in West Africa, but insisted that this should be done by a government agency. The War Cabinet asked the Foreign Office to explore the best means of revising the Saint Germain Convention.¹⁰⁰

Popular opinion in the Gold Coast and Nigeria ruled out the institution of any 'Durban System' in West Africa, whereby the colonial government could commercially exploit the production of an 'African drink' through government agencies.¹⁰¹ In South Africa, beginning with Durban in 1909, several municipal governments monopolized the production of indigenous beer, retailed exclusively through municipal beerhalls. The West African War Council minuted that:

The products of such distilleries would be boycotted, and the present system of illicit distillation would continue. On the other hand, a system under which private manufacture was permitted under government licence would be workable. Responsibility for administering such a system would be largely decentralised on the native administration.¹⁰²

The British government eventually approved the private distillation of local

⁹³ Thomas, *Memorandum on Liquor Policy*.

⁹⁴ See the report of the Social Welfare Committee in the WMMS's Gold Coast Synod Minutes of 1946 (box 1241).

⁹⁶ PRO, CO 554/103/33522 (1936).

⁹⁵ PRO, CO 96/715/21702.

⁹⁷ PRO, CO 554/119/33522 (1939).

⁹⁸ PRO, CO 554/127/33522/B (1943), conveys the Foreign Office's acute embarrassment at having to seek unilaterally an amendment to an international liquor agreement.

⁹⁹ PRO, CO 554/127/33522 (1942).

¹⁰⁰ PRO, CO 554/127/33522/B (1943).

¹⁰¹ On the 'Durban System', see Paul La Hausse, *Brewers, Beerhalls and Boycotts: A History of Liquor in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1988).

¹⁰² PRO, CO 554/127/33522/B (1943). Resident Minister (Accra) to the Colonial Secretary, 24 Oct. 1942.

gin by Africans in 1943, and the Gold Coast and Nigeria were advised to proceed with the necessary legislation.¹⁰³ Curiously, the Nigerian Executive Council chose not to proceed with legalizing local distillation. Citing regulatory problems as a justification, the government clearly stated that it did not consider 'that the present is the time to embark on an undertaking that would be bitterly opposed by the missionary bodies'.¹⁰⁴ This sudden turn-about deterred the Gold Coast government from implementing its desire to legalize local distillation.¹⁰⁵ The *akpeteshie* issue was thus left unresolved.

AKPETESHIE GAINS A CHAMPION: THE ERA OF
NATIONALIST POLITICS

Once the Constitution of 1951 introduced universal adult suffrage, public expectations and mood seemed to propel Gold Coast politics and manipulating popular culture became an important means of gauging and shaping popular opinion. From its formation in 1949, the Convention People's Party (CPP), led by Kwame Nkrumah, portrayed itself as the 'commoners' party' and patronized urban popular culture.¹⁰⁶ Although the CPP broke away from the older United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC), there is no substantial evidence that the UGCC, with its élite leadership, effectively utilized popular culture. Overnight, urban popular culture gained a new saliency and political legitimacy. Highlife songs promoted the CPP and praised Nkrumah as the political savior,¹⁰⁷ the Axim Trio staged plays like 'Kwame Nkrumah will never die',¹⁰⁸ CPP sponsored 'political dances' increased the party's popular appeal and drinking bars became the center of political organization and discussions.¹⁰⁹

In the election campaigns leading to the CPP victories of 1951 and 1954, some CPP politicians promised the legalization of *akpeteshie* distillation if the party attained political power.

I was in Ashanti when the struggle for independence was on, and I heard the CPP politicians on the platform saying the British government is deceiving us. In those

¹⁰³ PRO, CO 554/127/33522/B. 'Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Colonies', dated 28 Apr. 1943.

¹⁰⁴ PRO, CO 554/127/33522/B. T. Hoskyns-Abrahall, Nigerian Secretariat (Lagos), to Resident Minister (Accra), 9 Aug. 1943. ¹⁰⁵ PRO, CO 554/142/33522 (1946).

¹⁰⁶ For excellent studies of nationalist politics in Ghana, see Dennis Austin, *Politics in Ghana 1940-1960* (London, 1970); and Jean Marie Allman, *Quills of the Porcupine: Asante Nationalism in an Emergent Ghana* (Madison, 1993).

¹⁰⁷ Examples of such highlife songs include Kumasi Dramatic Choir's '*CPP wobedzi kunyim*' ('CPP will emerge victorious'); and Kojo Bio's '*Ko hwe CPP Assembly ho*' ('Go and look at the CPP in the Legislative Assembly!'), composed after CPP's 1951 election victory.

¹⁰⁸ Collins, 'Ghanaian highlife', 67. Albert Ocran, one of the Sekondi Railwaymen who supported the CPP in its early days, emphasized the relevance of these plays in explaining the nationalist ideology to illiterates. Interview with Albert Ocran, Sekondi, 15 Aug. 1994.

¹⁰⁹ See Akyeampong, 'Alcohol, social conflict and the struggle for power', ch. 6, for a detailed study of popular culture and nationalist politics in Ghana. For a study of the political relevance of drinking bars in nationalist politics, see Charles Ambler, 'Alcohol, racial segregation and popular politics in Northern Rhodesia', *J. Afr. Hist.*, xxxi (1990), 295-313.

days if they see you with a tot of *akpeteshie*, you were in trouble. *Akpeteshie* was banned in the country by the British government, and you would be prosecuted whether you were drinking it or distilling it or even holding it... So they [the CPP politicians] said, 'the British government is bringing their alcoholic beverages from overseas to us and is asking us to buy [these], but we make our own [drink] here and they say no. If I go to Parliament, I will see to it that it is legalized.' And they won.¹¹⁰

The argument for African economic self-sufficiency in an independent Ghana was a powerful one when applied to the legalization of *akpeteshie*. The state of the economy was a driving force in Gold Coast nationalist agitation of the 1940s and 1950s.¹¹¹ Contemporary newspapers commented on the economic potential of the *akpeteshie* industry if it was legalized and regulated to ensure good quality.¹¹²

Akpeteshie retailers like Anita Mensah and Novisi Segbedzi, and several other urban women, became staunch supporters of the CPP. For Anita, Nkrumah's rhetoric was appealing:

He explained how the white men were cheating us. How they exported our resources to build their country. How Britain was actually poor in resources but exploited her empire. That we should come together to protect what resources we had left before the British depleted everything.¹¹³

For patrons of *akpeteshie*, hounded by the forces of colonial rule, this was indeed an attractive message. And their loyalty to the CPP would pay off, for *akpeteshie* distillers and retailers would use their membership in the CPP 'to influence' the CPP government in the early years of independence to legalize *akpeteshie*.¹¹⁴

On the streets, highlife songs in the vernacular championed the cause of *akpeteshie* and deprecated colonial rule in general. Highlife songs articulated a worldview that was significant in its lack of a moral commitment to colonial rule and, perhaps, to authority in general. 'Ma ye adwuna aye aye tro na wode tua me ka' ('After all my labor you pay me with 3d!') by Kwaa Mensah expressed the feelings of economic exploitation laborers experienced in the colonial economy.¹¹⁵ And 'Nye mi nku na warrant atia me' ('I am not the only one who has fallen foul of the law'), by A. K. Mathews' band, disparaged law.¹¹⁶ The commoners' impression of the colonial order as exploitative seemed to have rationalized economic pursuits that bordered on criminality. Okaija 'Coal Boy' sang in Ga, 'Ka wie nakai' ('Don't say that it [*akpeteshie*] is not good'), refuting the colonial propaganda that *akpeteshie* was dangerous.¹¹⁷

A song, 'Akpeteshie', released by The Comets in the early 1960s, sought

¹¹⁰ Interview with Revd. Col. Kofi Asare, Accra, 30 June 1992. J. D. Wireko (MP) would remind the CPP government of these electoral promises in 1958. Ghana, *Parliamentary Debates*, 23 July 1958.

¹¹¹ See, for example, Richard Rathbone, 'Businessmen in politics: party struggle in Ghana, 1949-57', *J. of Dev. Studies*, ix (1973), 391-401.

¹¹² See, for example, *Spectator Daily*, 14 Sept. 1939; *Gold Coast Observer*, 5 Mar. 1943; and *Sunday Mirror*, 4 Apr. 1954.

¹¹³ Interview with Anita Mensah, Takoradi, 16 Aug. 1994.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Albert Prempeh, General Secretary of the Ghana Cooperative Distillers Association Limited, Accra, 29 July 1992. ¹¹⁵ Zonophone JLK 1015.

¹¹⁶ Zonophone JVA 160. ¹¹⁷ Interview with A. A. Amartey, Accra, 31 Aug. 1994.

to recapture the *akpeteshie* controversy of the colonial period. It is revealing how the song utilizes lyrics in Pidgin-English and Fanti-Twi to highlight the need for duplicity in the colonial period. The chorus runs:

Akpeteshie no good oh, akpeteshie no good oh,
no good oh no good oh, akpeteshie.

This was a line that definitely appealed to the colonial government. But one stanza in Fanti-Twi runs:

Meya me sika de ato nsa
awo te akyire na wobo afu
hwe wo ho yie na wo anhye me ahoroba
akpeteshie.

I have earned my money and I am spending it on drink
You, the observer, are infuriated
be careful and do not annoy me
akpeteshie.

And the colonial officials, it was assumed, would not understand the Twi lyrics. If the government was pursuing its 'selfish' interests – under the guise of public warfare – in its prosecution of *akpeteshie* patrons, the people being prosecuted did not lack guile.

In the Legislative Assembly, CPP members initiated debate on legalizing *akpeteshie*. Miss Mabel Dove, CPP representative for Ga, inquired:

whether, in view of the fact that distilling *Akpeteshie* (illicit gin) is a permanent feature of the local industry, despite fines and imprisonments, the Government will consider legalising it so that it can be tested and rendered less dangerous for human consumption.¹¹⁸

Other CPP members of the Assembly supported Mabel Dove's suggestion that the government legalize local distillation. And as the CPP gained more political authority with the grant of internal self-government in 1954, it confidently moved towards legalizing *akpeteshie*. In November 1956, the officer administering the Gold Coast reported to the Colonial Office that the CPP was planning to submit legislation to legalize *akpeteshie* distillation to the Legislative Assembly in the following January.¹¹⁹

AKPETESHIE, CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS AND POLITICAL PROTEST

Certain images associated with *akpeteshie*, such as its connections to political protest and social non-conformism and its identity as a working-class drink,¹²⁰ made the CPP government apprehensive about legalizing it. Although Ghana achieved its independence in March 1957, distillers had to wait until 1962 for the CPP government to implement legislation regulating

¹¹⁸ Gold Coast, *Legislative Assembly Debates*, 25 Mar. 1955.

¹¹⁹ PRO, CO 554/1302/235/251/04 (1956).

¹²⁰ Mandelbaum, 'Alcohol and culture', 282, accurately points out that: 'Among other symbolic uses of drink are its diacritical functions, as when one group or class within a larger society follows drinking patterns that serve as a badge marking them off from others'.

the distillation and sale of *akpeteshie*.¹²¹ Indeed, in the early years of independence, the government actively prosecuted persons dealing in *akpeteshie*. In 1957, the government recorded 712 convictions of persons possessing illicit gin.¹²² Like the colonial government it had succeeded, the CPP government now appreciated the connections between alcohol, revenue and political control. The government was unwilling to completely surrender a lucrative alcohol industry into private Ghanaian hands.¹²³

Also important, was the widespread political tension in 1957,¹²⁴ which heightened the government's uneasiness about legalizing the distillation of a drink associated with political protest against the state. The illicit nature of *akpeteshie* had promoted solitary drinking in secret places and it was impossible to drink it in the same social settings as palm wine or European beer. The drink was nicknamed 'the white man's shame' exactly because colonial rule had perverted the essence of social drinking. Most people just wanted a drink and a good time, but drinking *akpeteshie* implicated them in political protest. A Twi alias for *akpeteshie*, *mete me gya ho* ('I sit by my fireside')¹²⁵ conveys the sense of the state's unwarranted intrusion in the individual's consumption habits.

Akpeteshie as a symbol of political protest was also acquiring a 'class' dimension, as its cheapness made it the commoners' drink. Laborers involved in demanding manual work found its 'invigorating' effect appealing. From its origins, distillers, retailers, and consumers of *akpeteshie* were regarded as 'low-class' and 'filthy' people by *akrakyefo* (educated gentlemen) and *awurabafo* ('ladies'). To distill or retail *akpeteshie* entailed courting social ridicule, and *akpeteshie* enthusiasts, motivated by the industry's profits, became social non-conformists. The drink had an especially pungent scent, and people avoided the company of *akpeteshie* patrons.¹²⁶ Imported drinks were seen as symbols of social status among the upwardly mobile in the Gold Coast. Although the 'upper classes' would not inform on *akpeteshie* patrons because of a sense of 'African solidarity', they ostracized them socially. Patrons of *akpeteshie* found themselves involved in a two-way battle: politically against the colonial state, and socially against educated and wealthy Africans to whom they were also bound by kinship ties. Indeed, many urban workers entertained the hopes of making it big one day. Although it would be premature to speak of a coherent working-class, what was emerging was 'class struggle without class'.¹²⁷

As CPP rule became corrupt and authoritarian in independent Ghana, drinking places became active centers of resistance to CPP rule. In 1961, a

¹²¹ Legislative Instrument 239, 'Manufacture and sale of spirits regulation, 1962'.

¹²² Ghana, *Parliamentary Debates*, 23 July 1958.

¹²³ GNA, Accra, ADM 13/1/26. Cabinet Minutes of 12 Mar. 1957; and GNA, Accra, ADM 13/1/27. Cabinet Minutes of 23 May 1958.

¹²⁴ On the eve of independence, British Togoland (now part of Ghana) was threatening to secede and join French Togoland, Asante was in a state of political unrest, and the Ga Standfast Association had raised the banner of opposition in the capital of Accra.

¹²⁵ Gold Coast, *Legislative Assembly Debates*, 2 Nov. 1955.

¹²⁶ Interview with the Western Region Distillers Cooperative Management Committee, Takoradi, 16 Aug. 1994; and interview with Anita Mensah, Takoradi, 16 Aug. 1994.

¹²⁷ See E. P. Thompson, 'Eighteenth-century English society: class struggle without class', *Social History*, III (1978), 133–65.

general strike fomented in drinking bars broke out among railway workers in Sekondi-Takoradi.¹²⁸ At the same time, drinking patterns were also solidifying along class lines. Jeffries discerned three distinct drinking patterns in Sekondi-Takoradi that clearly expressed social class. The élite drank their whisky at plush hotels like the 'Atlantic', the resort of white expatriates and the new African élite of politicians, government-connected businessmen and lawyers. The middle class frequented beer bars, where the music was quiet and the atmosphere 'cool'. But:

For the urban poor, their house, or more commonly their single room, serves as little more than a bedroom. Life is led almost entirely out of doors, strolling the streets or sitting and talking with friends on street corners. They generally drink in the *akpeteshie* bars, which consist of little more than a shack, or occasionally in one of the dancing bars where both beer and local gin are sold.¹²⁹

And although highlife songs like '*Yen nyina ye bow pepepe*' ('We all booze the same'), sought to ridicule the status connections attached to expensive alcohol – for one could get drunk on *akpeteshie* as well as whisky – the reality of social inequities in independent Ghana could not be shaken off.

Akpeteshie gradually came to be associated with the working-class experience,¹³⁰ and the aliases assigned to the drink charts this development. 'Kill me Quick', 'Take me and Fly' and 'V.C. 10' underscored the potency of *akpeteshie*. The drink served an escapist function and 'flew' people away from the difficulties of life. '*Keka bi kyere wo ase*' ('Tell your mother-in-law your mind') captured the aggravation indigent urban workers often suffered from their mothers-in-law. 'Moon-die' referred to the phenomenon of buying *akpeteshie* on credit to be paid at the end of the month when workers received their wages. By the mid-1960s, *akpeteshie* had acquired a social life of its own. Meanings attached to it expressed social inequities, working-class disillusionment and protest against corrupt governments. It also sustained an urban popular culture that was fast losing its relevance for the ruling classes that had appropriated it in the 1950s. In present-day Ghana, the meanings attached to *akpeteshie* have extended to include unruliness in general. An irritated parent who appears unable to discipline a wayward son offers the illuminating information: '*O nom akpeteshie*' (Twi: 'He drinks *akpeteshie*'). No further explanation is deemed necessary.

CONCLUSION

The history of *akpeteshie* between 1930 and 1966 illustrates how a drink can become a symbol of popular culture, anti-government protest and class consciousness. The secretive origins of *akpeteshie* and the change in drinking patterns that resulted, infused the drink with meanings that disturbed the upper classes and governments. Having patronized popular culture – and thus highly aware of the power of drink – the CPP was saddled with an

¹²⁸ Jeffries, *Class, Power and Ideology in Ghana*, 78.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* 181.

¹³⁰ Or as Ivan Karp would put it: *akpeteshie*-drinking became the 'social theory' of the working class, 'expressing ideas about the nature of their social world and their experience of it'. Ivan Karp, 'Beer drinking experience in an African society: an essay in formal sociology', in I. Karp and Charles S. Bird (eds.), *Exploration in African Systems of Thought* (Bloomington, 1980), 83.

ambivalent relationship with the *akpeteshie* industry. Nkrumah believed in political centralization and sought to bring all organs under the CPP umbrella. P. K. Hormeku, a senior officer with the Ghana Distillers Association, pointed out that in socialist countries, co-operative movements are very powerful. Considering the huge number of workers in rural and urban areas who patronized *akpeteshie*, Nkrumah was nervous about the influence a well-established distillers' co-operative movement would exert over the people.¹³¹

Ironically, when the CPP government was overthrown in a military coup in 1966, the new government formed by the National Liberation Council (NLC) believed that *akpeteshie* distillers and retailers had exercised undue political influence on the CPP. Like the colonial government, the NLC planned to provide 'a more wholesome and cheaper gin', and hoped *akpeteshie* would 'die a natural death'.¹³² Although *akpeteshie* has remained legal since independence, it was the focus of government propaganda in the 1960s and 1970s when it was portrayed as unwholesome. The result has been a negative official image, which has posed difficulties each time the Distillers Association has applied for a bank loan.¹³³ This is in sharp contrast to the commoner's image of the drink. The General Secretary of the Ghana Cooperative Distillers Association believes that 'about 60 per cent of consumers of alcohol [in Ghana] take *akpeteshie*'.¹³⁴ The official perspective of *akpeteshie* also ignores the significant financial contributions of this large co-operative society to the government through sales and income taxes. In 1992 these taxes averaged 12 million cedis a month.¹³⁵ To correct this unsavory image, the Ghana Cooperative Distillers Association established a factory at Kwadaso (Kumasi) in the early 1990s to manufacture *akpeteshie*. A glamorously packaged, standardized, exportable *akpeteshie* may be the new image of the near future.

SUMMARY

This article examines the history of *akpeteshie* (local gin) in Ghana from its illicit origins and widespread distillation in the 1930s to about 1967, when the Convention People's Party – seen as the 'champion' of the *akpeteshie* industry – was overthrown. *Akpeteshie* distillation proliferated when temperance interests succeeded in pressuring the colonial government into raising tariffs on imported liquor in 1930, just before the onset of a world-wide depression. Urban and rural workers, unable to afford expensive imported gin, became the patrons of *akpeteshie*. For urban workers, *akpeteshie* came to underpin an emerging popular culture.

Akpeteshie distillation threatened the colonial government's prior dependence on revenue from imported liquor, raised the specter of crime and disorder, compromised colonial concerns about urban space, exposed the weakness of colonial rule and eventually led the British government into the embarrassing diplomatic position of seeking an alteration of the Saint Germain Convention of 1919 that had banned commercial distillation of spirits in the African colonies.

By the 1940s, *akpeteshie* had emerged as an important symbol of African grievances under colonial rule. It became entwined in nationalist politics from the 1940s, and its legalization was one of the first legislative acts passed by the

¹³¹ Interview with P. K. Hormeku, Accra, 8 Sept. 1994.

¹³² Ghana, *Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Manner of Operation of the State Distilleries Corporation* (Accra, 1968), 6–7.

¹³³ Interview with Albert Premph, Accra, 29 July 1992. ¹³⁴ *Ibid.* ¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

independent Ghanaian government. But the overwhelming African support for *akpeteshie* as an indigenous drink aside, the drink conjured images of class and popular protest that divided Ghanaian society and would unnerve independent African governments. As a cheap drink, *akpeteshie* became associated with the working-class experience, reflecting the social inequities within Ghanaian society and the undelivered promises of the independence struggle.