Colonial famine relief, development policies and climate: Towards an environmental history of Northern Ghana

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Our research focuses on climate change, environmental history and the British colonial discussion on famine prevention and development policies in Northern Ghana. Local coping-strategies were said to have been put under pressure during the colonial period not only in Northern Ghana but throughout much of Africa. One aim of the colonial system was to integrate the African 'dependencies' into the world market, which resulted in the erosion of pre-colonial economic and social patterns. Of equal importance was the outspoken aim of the colonial governments that - whatever policy was pursued - the cost for the upkeep of the whole system was to be borne by the local inhabitants. Such a position resulted in the discrepancy between planning for development and actual performance. ¹

During the colonial period, food shortages were reported almost every second year in the region known as the Protectorate of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast. Before 1930 not much was done apart from reporting about the problems faced in various localities. However, with the emergence of a more welfare-oriented approach, which started with the Colonial Development Act of 1929, Britain started to enhance the welfare of its colonial peoples by developing agriculture. ² Though slow to begin in the Northern Territories, colonial agricultural development wrested on two pillars, namely tsetse

eradication and mixed farming. Furthermore, malnutrition was “discovered” during the 1930's and in 1936 the Colonial Office created a Nutrition Committee to examine the problem. As Weiss has shown, these insights resulted in the formulation of the British famine prevention policy for the territory during the 1940s and the 1950s.

Throughout the colonial period were the Northern Territories more or less a 'sleeping beauty': untouched by Western - or Islamic - civilization, capitalism and all other forms of modern social evils. Colonial policies in the North were aimed at preserving this state of affairs: as in Northern Nigeria, where the Northern Nigerian Lands Committee (NNLC) had declared that no individual landownership existed, the West African Lands Committee, which was established after the example of the NNLC, came to similar conclusions for the Northern Territories. The policy to be pursued in both northern dependencies was to block the emergence of a private landholding class. Instead, all rights in tenure were transferred to the chiefs and ultimately to the colonial governor. The aim of such a policy in the Northern Territories was, as Grischow has shown, the emergence of a community-oriented approach, i.e., that the local entity (community) under the supervision and surveillance of the colonial government would be the driving force of development.

The objective of our research is to highlight the intersection between colonial agricultural history and the doctrine of community development, and its implications for the ecological and environmental history of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast. Our research combines a macro- and a micro-level approach as to integrate an investigation of long-term consequences and a short-term analysis. Hitherto, there has been little research

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3 See further Jeff Douglas Grischow, A History of Development in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, 1899-1957, PhD diss., Queen's university (Canada) 1999 as well as Grischow, Shaping Tradition.
6 Grischow, Shaping Tradition.
that integrates climate, environment and society in West African history: the studies conducted have either stemmed from a climatic-geographical or a politico-societal perspective. Earlier research on West Africa that originates from an environmental or ecological historical perspective, such as that by George E. Brooks and James L.A. Webb, are the forerunners of our approach, but did not focus on the 19th and 20th centuries and have not made use of the new insights of climatic history. Especially since the latter half of the 1990s, new insights and considerations concerning causes and consequences of macro- and micro-level climate variations, including the possibility of the ENSO-effect in West Africa, has opened the need to integrate the ‘climate factor’ to a much larger extent in environmental and societal research on the African recent past.

Our research integrates three perspectives of macro- and micro-level analysis: a) climate variation and change; b) environmental; c) societal. Whereas the macro-level analysis ranges from a global to a West African perspective, including a world-systemic and political economic/ecologic approach, the micro-level analysis will focus on the causes and consequences, agency and effects on various local levels. The novelty of our research approach is that we are inspired by the insights of ‘entangled history’ (histoire croisée) and ‘spacial turn’, the (social) production of (social) space, as much of the new insights of climate history. Consequently, although the ‘scene’ of our research is northern Ghana from the late precolonial to the early postcolonial period, i.e., circa 1870-1970, it includes a high variation of different (geographical, historical, mental) ‘spaces’ that existed side

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10 Weiss has since 2006 lectured on special turn and since 2008 on the history of climate. He has also written about the methodological challenges in African climate history in “Västafrikanska krönikor som källor för historisk ekologisk-klimatologisk forskning om 1700-talets samhällskris. Möjligheter och begränsningar,” Historisk tidskrift för Finland 93:1 (2008), 38-55.
by side at the same time and that all had different experiences of the climatic and ecological changes that took place during this period.

Our research is based on our earlier research on northern Ghanaian environmental and societal history, our earlier working papers on the topic, and new archival research. The outcome will be the first monograph on environmental history of (Northern) Ghana and is expected to be finished by the end of 2011.

Preliminary outline of the monograph:

I. Introduction (Weiss & Grischow)
II. Climate, environment and society in West African history: long-term consequences and short-term analysis (Weiss)
   a. West African climate and society
   b. West African environment and society
   c. Case-study: climate, environment and society in Ghanaian history
III. The Northern Territories - the Backwater of the Gold Coast (Weiss, Grischow)
   a. Markets (local, regional, national, global), food security and colonial policies in the Northern Territories
   b. Rainmaking and communal self-support
   c. Climate and harvest, 1870-1970
IV. Crop failures, food shortages and famines in the Northern Territories (Weiss)

11 Apart from Weiss, ‘Crop failures’ and Grischow, Shaping Tradition, also Holger Weiss, Between Accommodation and Revivalism: Muslims, the State and Society in Ghana from the Precolonial to the Postcolonial Era, Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society 2008.
13 Both of us have conducted extensive archival research in Ghana and in England over the last decade and collected material: Grischow on British colonial development policies, agrarian policies and disease control; Weiss on British famine relief policies, climate and harvest in Northern Ghana.
a. The 1910s and earlier: The period of reporting without responding
b. The period of desiccation and overpopulation
c. A decade of locust invasions
d. Colonial famine relief policies
e. From Early Warning to Rumours of Food Scarcities

V. Plagues and plights: disease and locusts (Grischow, Weiss)
   a. Diseases (influenza, CSM, sleeping sickness, trypanosomiasis)
   b. Locusts

VI. Colonial development policies and community development (Grischow)
   a. 1892-1927: Wealth Extraction and Migrant Labour
   b. 1927-40: Mixed Farming and the North as a Foodstuff Supplier to the South
   c. Mixed Farming Questioned, 1940-44
   d. Land Planning, Co-operation and Community Development

VII. Aftermath: from the precolonial condition to the postcolonial dilemma (Weiss & Grischow)