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## EVOLUTION OF SEAPORTS IN GHANA: 1800–1928

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**ABSTRACT.** Before the opening of the first artificial harbor at Takoradi in 1928, Ghana possessed numerous surf ports, most of which originated early through European trade contacts with the coast. Subsequent disappearance or survival of ports depended on the changes in speed and direction of the country's economic development. Finally, the flourishing economy of the 1920's made the construction of a modern port imperative, and most surf ports disappeared after the construction of Takoradi harbor.

**T**HE most important theme in the historical geography of Ghana in the 19th and early 20th centuries is the instability of the social, economic, and political conditions of the period, which resulted in frequent changes in the nature, intensity, and distribution of economic activities in the country. This period was crucial to the development of the salient geographical characteristics of contemporary Ghana. The significance of these changes to the fashioning of the cultural landscape cannot be studied in its entirety owing to the absence of suitable data. There is, nevertheless, sufficient documentary and other material to support a meaningful study of the manifestations of these changes in two instances, namely the development of the agricultural landscape and the evolution of seaports.<sup>1</sup>

Ghana today possesses two artificial harbors, one at Takoradi, opened in 1928, and the other at Tema, opened in 1962, and these two handle the whole of the overseas trade of Ghana. There now is no other seaport worthy of the name carrying on overseas trade. The opening of Takoradi harbor was a major economic event that ushered in the present era of port development. This article seeks to investigate the past development of seaports in Ghana and, therefore, it will conclude with the year 1928.

Along the coast of many parts of the world in which an old sea trade has existed the development of ports often was negligible so long as the water craft were relatively small

and of shallow draft, and so long as the unit size of cargo was sufficiently small for human porters to handle that cargo. On open coasts the operation entailed moving cargo through the surf zone to and from ships anchored offshore. Such a port has been termed a surf port. Overseas trade contact with the coast of Ghana during the 19th century involved cargo handling at such surf ports.

In considering the present situation surrounding the sea trade of Ghana one may not be immediately aware that the emergence of the two modern harbors has been the result of a long and ruthless struggle for survival among some forty surf ports through which the country's foreign trade passed at the beginning of the 19th century. The disappearance of some ports and the survival of others was an accurate reflection of the changing nature of the country's economic geography, for stages in the evolution of the ports corresponded fairly closely to major landmarks in the country's economic development.

The first stage, 1800–1884, witnessed several changes in patterns of economic development, but for the greater part of it up to 1872, when the ports came under the undisputed control of Britain, the economy of the country, as mirrored in the frequent changes of fortunes of ports, was generally unstable and weak. This was because the economy was still recovering from the chaos into which it was plunged by the abolition by Britain of the export slave trade in 1807, and the stern measures Britain subsequently adopted to enforce the law. Although agriculture first emerged as an effective substitute for the slave trade after the 1850's, it was many years

<sup>1</sup> K. B. Dickson, "The Agricultural Landscape of Southern Ghana and Ashanti-Brong Ahafo: 1800 to 1850," *Bulletin of the Ghana Geographical Association*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1964), pp. 25–35.

before it could provide a strong enough basis for capital development, for exports of agricultural commodities were, in addition to being of very modest proportions, subject to wild fluctuations owing to the low prices frequently offered for them in overseas markets.

The second stage, 1885–1910, represented a clean break with the past and saw the birth or strengthening of those forces that were to revolutionize the country's economy. It was a period of planned capital development made possible by two factors: 1) the availability of the necessary capital derived partly from export trade in cacao and partly from modest grants by Britain; 2) a more decisive change of Britain's attitude to the question of economic development of Ghana from one of vacillation to a positive desire for planned development. The desire was engendered by numerous criticisms from interested British merchants, by a new sense of responsibility arising from complete overlordship of most of Ghana, and was strengthened by the decision of the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 that claim to a colony could be maintained only by effective occupancy. All these developments were reflected in a new process of rational selection among ports. The subsequent regular pattern of evolution of ports was sketched within this period.

The process of economic development within the third period from 1911 to 1928 was a continuation of that begun in the second period; it differed from the latter only insofar as it was accelerated and embodied clearly defined forces, most of which were beginning to take shape in the second period. The process of rational selection among ports, determined by patterns of production and trade, continued and reached its logical conclusion in the opening of an artificial deep water harbor at Takoradi in 1928, the first of its kind in the country, and the survival of a few surf ports.

#### 1800–1884

From the time of the earliest European contact with the coast in the 15th century to the beginning of the 19th century, a port was chosen not necessarily for any advantages of site or shelter it may have possessed. The primary concern of the Europeans on the coast was to acquire a piece of dry ground,

normally very close to the sea, on which to erect a warehouse or a castle, and such a place naturally functioned as a port, regardless of its suitability or otherwise for such a purpose. Thus neither the pounding surf nor the rocky coast stopped the Dutch or the British from making Cape Coast a port. Bitter jealousies among the Europeans also made them create ports or use different landing beaches at the same town, as at Komenda, Sekondi, and Accra although some of the landing beaches were extremely dangerous. At all the ports, with the notable exception of Elmina, the little sailing ships stood some distance out at sea while canoes forced their way through heavy breakers to reach them.

Figure 1 shows the location of the principal ports and their ownership in 1800. Many of the ports were situated on broad shallow bays, but some, like Winneba, Apam, Shama, Elmina, and Mouri, were located on more pronounced bays with calm water in which the sailing ships could get much nearer to land (Fig. 1 inset). Such ports, through advantages of location, tended to be more important than others, although they may not have been originally chosen with those advantages of site in mind. The importance of ports was more affected by a complex of political and other factors. A port automatically became more important than its neighbors if it was made the seat of Colonial Administration; the fortunes of such ports varied with the fortunes of the Colonial Powers that controlled them. Again, the degree of importance attached to coastal towns by the local people themselves was a major consideration, for trade was normally concentrated in the towns or seats of Paramount Chiefs, and if these towns happened to be on the coast they naturally became busy ports, e.g., Cape Coast and Accra. Finally, some of the important ports were the termini of the great trade routes between the interior and the coast.

In 1800 the principal exports were slaves, gold, and ivory, with the first two by far the more important. Nearly all the ports were engaged in the export of these commodities, except those to the east of Accra whose chief export consisted of slaves, and those to the west of Elmina which dealt principally in gold and ivory. It is not possible to calculate the volume of trade that passed through each

PORT OWNERSHIP: 1800

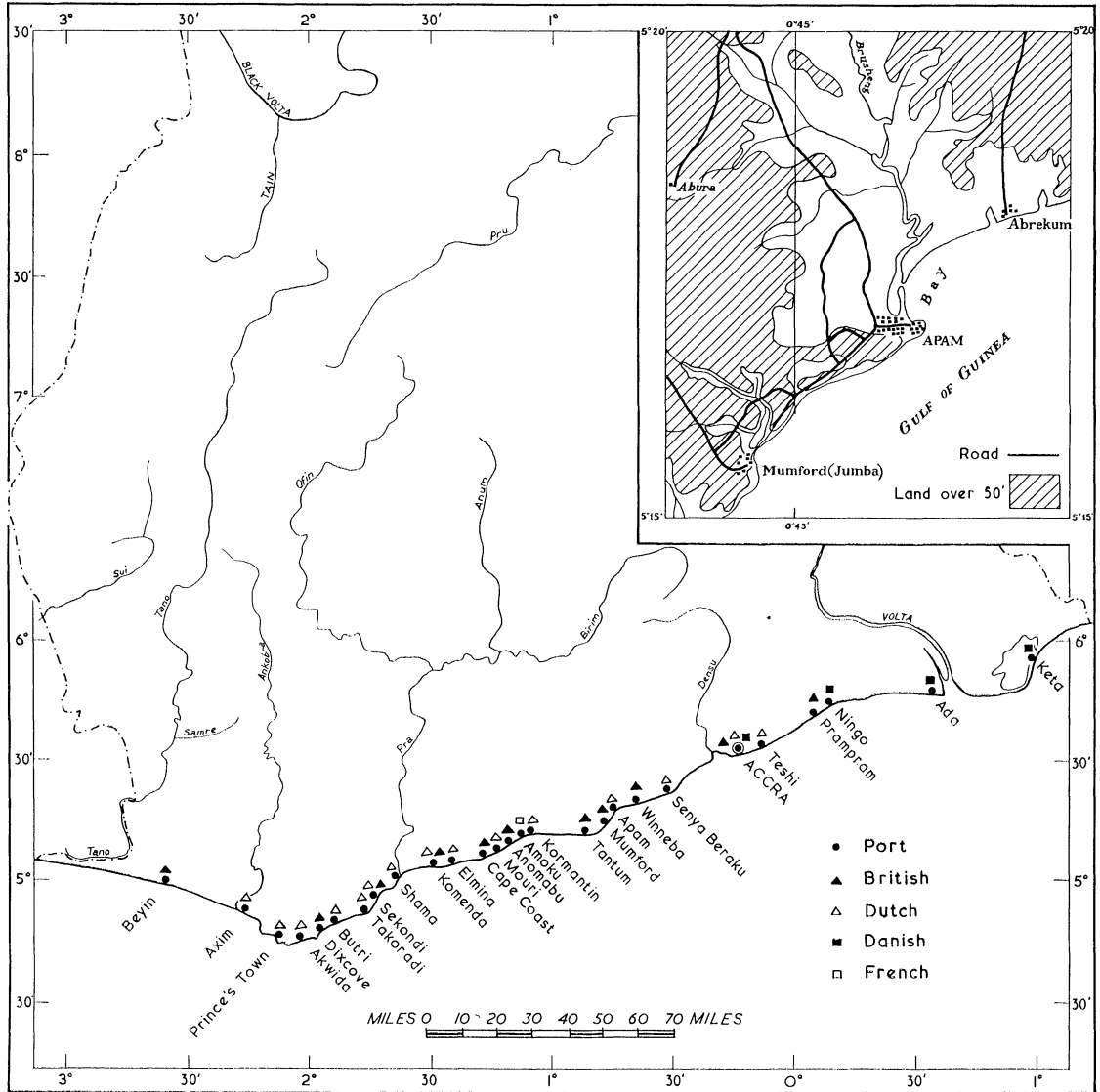


FIGURE 1

port; neither is it possible to define with any degree of precision the respective hinterlands served by the ports, except perhaps in the case of the Western Region ports whose gold obviously came from Denkeria, Wasaw, and Ashanti. The source of the ivory was the forest zone which, around 1800, was much nearer the coast than it is now. The slaves came from all over the country, especially from Ashanti where interminable wars waged against neighboring tribes produced a steady stream of slaves.

There was no organized export of agricultural produce, except that masters of slave ships purchased at all the ports large quantities of "negro provisions," principally rice, millet, maize, and palm oil, for the journey to the West Indies.<sup>2</sup> There had been previous attempts at systematic export of agricultural

<sup>2</sup> J. Roberts, *A Description of the Forts Belonging to Europeans on the North, South and East Coasts of Africa*. This work, dated Lewisham, 1779, is in manuscript and is not paginated. It is kept in the National Archives of Ghana.

produce, but it appears the only important crop involved was cotton, which was exported from Axim and Shama where the Dutch made plantations, probably in the late 1750's, with the aid of slave labor. The cotton plantations at Shama were abandoned in 1772 and those at Axim around 1786. An inquiry into the economy of the country in 1801 showed that cotton was no longer exported.<sup>3</sup>

Timber used to be another export mainly from Axim and the neighboring ports, but by 1800 the immediate vicinity of the port at Axim and of the other ports had been denuded of exportable timber. To export timber thus meant transporting it over long distances from the forest to the ports, which was too formidable a task in the absence of wagons, or machines and tools for working the wood.<sup>4</sup> Farther down the coast, in the Eastern Region, small quantities of gum copal, collected from wild gum trees in the immediate interior, were regularly exported from Accra and no doubt from other ports in the region.

In about 1800, then, agricultural produce did not feature prominently in the export trade. The situation began to change, very gradually and almost imperceptibly, in the first decade after 1800 when the Danes began to take the first practical steps in Ghana to establish export agriculture as a substitute for the export slave trade. The crowning success to their enterprise came in about 1810 when Schionning, the Danish Governor in Christiansborg, exported through Accra about eight tons of coffee from a large plantation he had made in 1808 at the foot of the Aburi Hills, about fifteen miles from Accra. Unfortunately, exports of coffee and of other crops from farms made by the Danes and by Ghanaian farmers under the auspices of the Danish Administration were reduced to a trickle, and more often cut off altogether, by the crippling Ashanti wars in and after the first decade of the 19th century. Although the Ashanti wars paralyzed agricultural production while they lasted,

they did not in any way destroy the new sense of awareness of the importance of agriculture that was slowly emerging after Britain abolished the export slave trade in 1807. It is true the slave trade continued after 1807, but the stern measures adopted by the British against offenders no doubt drew a certain amount of attention to the possibility of developing agriculture as a substitute for the traffic in human beings. And so sixty puncheons of palm oil were exported from Anomabu in 1818, and this, as the source of information clearly shows, was not the first time palm oil was deliberately exported from Anomabu. Three years later, in 1821, Anomabu exported 1,300 puncheons of palm oil.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, by this time nearly all the ports were handling palm oil and, to some extent, maize.

It was about this time too that the European powers began to look closely at port location with respect to the physical features of a site and to discourage trade at those ports where navigation and landing were difficult. For example, Sir Robert Mends drew attention in 1822 to the dangers of navigating the narrow and difficult channel between the rocks in the little bay at whose head the town of Dixcove stood, and implied that there was no reason why ships should stop there.<sup>6</sup> Sir Robert wrote this in a report which was incorporated by Sir Charles MacCarthy in a general report on the British "Forts and Settlements on the Gold Coast." Sir Charles' report and another report on the same subject written by Major James Rowan in 1827<sup>7</sup> constitute, in spite of their obvious imperfections, the best earliest material since 1800 on the country's ports and their trade, and although the two documents were written five years apart, they supplement each other in a most satisfactory manner.

#### WESTERN REGION

Between 1822 and 1827 the busiest ports in the Western Region were Axim, Dutch

<sup>3</sup> C. O. 267/22, P.R.O., London. Reference is to unofficial letters, official despatches, official reports, and related documents recorded by index numbers in the archives of the Colonial Office, filed in the Public Records Office, in London, which may be found under these numberings. Later footnotes will refer only to these index numbers in identification, specifying a particular document by its necessary label.

<sup>4</sup> C. O. 267/22, *op. cit.*, footnote 3.

<sup>5</sup> C. O. 267/56, P.R.O., letter dated 22nd April, 1822 from Mr. James Swanzy to Governor-General Sir Charles MacCarthy, included in Sir Charles' despatch to the Colonial Office in London, dated 22nd May, 1822.

<sup>6</sup> C. O. 267/56, P.R.O., despatch dated 22nd May, 1822.

<sup>7</sup> C. O. 267/93, P.R.O., *Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of the Colony of Sierra Leone and its Dependencies* (1827), by Rowan, Major James (Rowan's Report).

Sekondi, and Dixcove, although Dixcove had gradually been losing its trade over the previous ten years or so. The remaining ports were in a state of rapid decline, for reasons exemplified by the case of the port of Beyin. First, there was the violent surf which rendered the process of landing goods or loading them on to ships at Beyin dangerous. Second, the trade of the port was interfered with by the local chief who did not scruple to rob merchants or maltreat European officials residing in his town. Lastly, the flow of the principal exports of Beyin, gold and ivory from Denkera and Wasaw, was repeatedly interrupted through dissensions among the tribes in the hinterland on the one hand, and between the Chief of Beyin and the chiefs controlling the trade routes linking Beyin with its hinterland on the other. It is thus not surprising that Fort Appollonia at Beyin was abandoned as early as 1820, and that Beyin in 1827 exported not more than 2,000 ounces of gold and about four tons of ivory. Butre and Shama were, in addition to reasons similar to those outlined for the loss of trade at Beyin, too close to Sekondi to exist and flourish independently.

It has been indicated above that Dixcove was also losing much of its trade, but the reasons were of a slightly different nature. On considerations of physical geography alone the port of Dixcove, in spite of what Sir Robert Mends wrote about it, was no worse than most ports on the surf-bound coast. The reasons for the loss of trade at Dixcove were threefold. In the first place, as in the case of Beyin, interminable quarrels between the Chief of Dixcove and the Chief of Wasaw reduced the port's trade in gold and ivory, particularly in gold, to insignificant proportions. In the second place, taxes levied on the inhabitants of Dixcove by the King of Ashanti, who had political control over them, were so heavy and extortionate as to stifle economic activity and encourage emigration from the town. The third reason, of temporary validity, was the low price offered at the time in England for palm oil, one of the principal exports of Dixcove. In 1827, therefore, Dixcove exported little more than 100 ounces of gold (700 to 1,200 in former times) and about 40,000 gallons of palm oil which was still considerable, compared with what most other ports handled, but apparently much smaller than what used to

pass through Dixcove itself. There was only one European merchant at Dixcove in 1827, and "his house remained unfinished and neglected."

Axim, situated near the mouth of the Ankobra River, was the busiest of the three outstanding ports in the Western Region. Apart from having a safe landing beach, the town was also the seat of the Vice-President of the Dutch Administration; moreover, Axim was easily accessible to the gold-producing interior both by means of the established trade route leading to it from Ashanti through Wasaw country, and by means of the Ankobra River which was navigable for a considerable distance upstream by small vessels.

The success of Dutch Sekondi as a port rested first on the fact that it possessed a good landing beach fairly well sheltered from strong winds, and secondly on its nearness to Wasaw, a rich source of gold and ivory. Takoradi, another Dutch settlement near Sekondi but of lesser significance as a port than the latter, was considered to hold great promise as a future port because of its sheltered site and the protection afforded it by the guns of the fort at Dutch Sekondi. It is true there were dangerous reefs at Takoradi but these, declared William Hutton, were of great value in forming a safe harbor for vessels, although he conceded that the reefs were dangerous to pass in the night by sailors unacquainted with the coast. He went on to suggest that it would be wise for the British to take possession of Takoradi and Dutch Sekondi, so that they could own "one of the strongest and most desirable situations on the coast, particularly as there is also a sheltered harbor for vessels immediately under the Dutch fort at Succondee (Sekondi)."<sup>8</sup>

#### CENTRAL REGION

In the Central Region the best port, from the point of view of shelter for ships and of facilities for loading or unloading them, was easily Elmina, the seat of the Dutch Administration. The great castle stood, and still stands, near the mouth of River Benya, on a calm bay which was deep enough for the shallow-draft ships of the period to come very close to land; in addition, the Dutch had built,

<sup>8</sup> W. Hutton, *A Voyage to Africa in the Year 1820* (London: 1821), p. 43, copy in British Museum Library, London.

within the first half of the 18th century, a wooden wharf on which stood a crane for landing goods which could then be taken into the castle through a gate opening directly on to the wharf.<sup>9</sup> The port dealt extensively in slaves, gold, and ivory mostly from Ashanti, and in small quantities of agricultural produce. The uniqueness of the port is explained not only by its possession of a wharf but also by the fact that the welfare of the town was the special concern of the King of Ashanti who had the right to collect ground rent from the Dutch. Elmina was consequently a favorite rendezvous for Ashanti traders.

Eight miles to the east of Elmina was the port of Cape Coast, the seat of the British Administration. Its trade was apparently as important as that of Elmina (one cannot be more specific in the absence of relevant trade statistics), but unlike Elmina it had no port facilities for handling cargo. The landing was bad and several observers, including Robertson, lamented the fact that the British Administration had thought neither of building a quay, for which the reef projecting into the sea from near the castle would have provided a natural foundation, nor of developing and using the little bay with relatively calm water about two miles east of the town.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, merchant ships called regularly and conducted brisk trade at the port, in spite of the heavy surf, the treacherous reefs, and the constant risk of shipwreck. The principal exports were gold, mainly from Akim and Ashanti, and ivory from the forest country behind the port, including Ashanti. Small quantities of palm oil from the immediate interior and, occasionally, maize were also exported. The trade of the port was virtually at the mercy of the Ashanti who could always bring it to a standstill by rerouting their goods to Elmina and other Dutch ports. Thus the main anxiety of the British in their relations with the Ashanti was to keep the Cape Coast-Kumasi trade route open at all times.

That Cape Coast was an important trading center could not be in any doubt: almost

every contemporary work on the country bore witness to it. The prosperity was reflected in the stone houses in the town, among other things, for, apart from Elmina where the normal building material was the local sandstone, there was hardly any other town in the country in which the inhabitants undertook the expensive and difficult task of building in stone. The major exceptions were Accra and Cape Coast, and the latter boasted of fourteen stone houses in 1827, each worth anything up to £2,500 at the time.<sup>11</sup> The proliferation of warehouses in the town, commented on by so many writers of the period, was also a good indication of the extent of trading activities at Cape Coast.

A few miles east of Cape Coast was the Dutch port of Mouri which used to be an important slave port but had lost practically all its trade by the end of the first decade of the 19th century. The port did not survive the first Ashanti invasion of the coast in 1807. Next to Mouri was the port of Anomabu which Labarthe claimed in 1803 to be "the centre of commerce for the Gold Coast," with fifteen to twenty ships daily anchored in the roads to load on merchandise. Some of the merchants at Anomabu even came from as far as Dahomey.<sup>12</sup> The situation was different fifteen years later when Robertson wrote about the port: its trade had been diverted to other ports, and many of the inhabitants who sought refuge in the neighboring towns during the Ashanti war of 1807 had not returned.<sup>13</sup> There was a certain amount of recovery in the early 1820's and, according to James Swanzy, the well-known trader who resided at Anomabu at the time, about 137,000 ounces of gold, eight tons of ivory, and 1,300 puncheons, equivalent to about 500 tons, of palm oil were exported annually. Also the town itself, with an estimated population of about 3,000, was being steadily rebuilt. The persistence of the port could be explained in terms of its central position on the country's coastline, and of its having a tolerably good landing beach.

<sup>11</sup> C. O. 267/93, P.R.O., Rowan's Report, *op. cit.*, footnote 7, p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> P. Labarthe, *Voyage a la Cote de Guinee* (Paris: 1803), p. 71. He actually visited the coast of West Africa in 1788; copy in British Museum Library, London.

<sup>13</sup> Robertson, *op. cit.*, footnote 10, p. 147.

<sup>9</sup> G. Sale, Ed., *The Modern Part of an Universal History* (London: 1760), Vol. XVII, pp. 54-55, copy in British Museum Library, London.

<sup>10</sup> G. A. Robertson, *Notes on Africa* (London: 1819), p. 130, copy in British Museum Library, London.

The ports of Amoku, Kormantin, and Tantom were of no consequence, having lost practically all their trade to Anomabu; similarly the port of Apam had been forced into obscurity by the wider influence of Winneba, which itself was not as important as it used to be in about 1800, although it still exported considerable quantities of gold from Akim and palm oil from Agona country. The port of Winneba possessed a number of advantages with respect to site and location. The bay on which the port stood was calm and safe for navigation; the port was also the terminus of a short route to the rich gold country of Akim. Lastly, Winneba was regarded as one of the healthiest spots on the coast. The loss of trade at Winneba after 1810 was owing, not to a change in geographical factors, but to the unpopularity of the inhabitants with the British after the murder of the Governor of the British fort there in 1812. The fort was destroyed by the British, and for many years thereafter any British warship that passed by the town fired a broadside into it. The initial bombardment may have destroyed the town but not its geographical advantages of site and location, for it was not long before the African Company thought it would be desirable to build a large fort at Winneba in order to safeguard its trade there.<sup>14</sup> East of Winneba was Seyna Beraku, which never achieved eminence as a port; its trade in gold and ivory never amounted to more than £500 annually.

#### EASTERN REGION

The Eastern Region began roughly with the port of Accra, one of the major ports in the country. As a settlement, Accra had several advantages over many other towns on the coast. It was in the first place considered to be one of the healthiest settlements for Europeans in the country, which gave it a decisive superiority to all other European settlements on the coast, except Winneba, Cape Coast, and Dixcove which were thought to be just as healthy. In the second place, the town was situated in attractive surroundings in the Accra Plains with wide open vistas and affording good opportunities for hunting, a

favorite pastime of the European residents. Provisions were also cheap there. Thus Robertson suggested in 1819 that Accra, not Cape Coast, should be the seat of the British Administration.<sup>15</sup>

The port of Accra was a busy one: gold dust, ivory, palm oil, maize, cattle, and other miscellaneous products arrived in a steady stream. Gold came no doubt from Akim and Ashanti; palm oil from the Akwapim Mountains and their foothills and from Krobo, where the oil palm tree had been systematically cultivated for many years. Maize was cultivated in the Accra Plains, where herds of cattle were also reared. The cattle were shipped from the port, not to Europe, but to other European forts on the coast. Also, small quantities of coffee and cotton were apparently exported now and then. Outside Cape Coast and Elmina the greatest number of European merchants resided at Accra, not to mention the large number of African merchants who also lived there. Some of these merchants, like those at Cape Coast, had invested large sums of money in huge stone houses, of which there were no fewer than eight in the town. For the reasons outlined, to which must be added the important fact that Accra was the terminus of one of the principal trade routes between the coast and Ashanti, the town ranked as a major port, although the landings at Dutch and Danish sections of the town could be dangerous.

Of the remaining ports east of Accra only three, Prampram, Ada, and Keta, deserve notice. Prampram was a small palm oil port serving, like Accra, Krobo and the Akwapim Mountains, and it maintained this function throughout the greater part of the 19th century. Ada, a Danish port at the mouth of the Volta River, was not of much consequence, although it had been a major slave port. It exported, in the 1820's, small quantities of palm oil and was mainly used, according to Robertson, as "a port of communication between Christiansborg and Keta."<sup>16</sup> The same was true of Keta, which exported little else apart from palm oil, and, like Ada, was a watering station for ships.

It would have been noticed that what has so far been said about the ports and their trade has scarcely, if at all, been backed by

<sup>14</sup> Robertson, *op. cit.*, footnote 10, p. 156.

<sup>15</sup> Robertson, *op. cit.*, footnote 10, p. 219.

<sup>16</sup> Robertson, *op. cit.*, footnote 10, p. 226.



relevant statistics. The reason for this is the extreme difficulty of compiling such statistics, scattered as they are in archives and in private collections of documents in European cities. Even if such a tremendous task could be accomplished, the result would be far from giving a complete picture of trade at the ports. Some trade statistics are available for ports that were under the British in the 1820's and 1830's but as the British administrators themselves were at pains to point out, the figures were, for many reasons, incomplete and are therefore of dubious value. Generally speaking, it was only at Cape Coast and Accra customs houses that returns of exports or imports were recorded, and the returns did not always refer to cargo loaded exclusively at Cape Coast or Accra; some of the cargo might have been picked up at Dahomey or the Ivory Coast. The official collection of trade statistics, such as they were, began in, or soon after, 1829 when on the 25th of May of that year the British Administration passed an act requiring masters of ships exporting goods from, or importing them into, British settlements in the country to declare the quantity and value of the goods and state where they were loaded. But evasions of the law were only too frequent.

If the situation with regard to trade statistics for the British ports was bad, that with regard to the Dutch and Danish ports was no better. Moreover, the Dutch authorities consistently rejected any proposals by the British Administration to collect customs duties, and when the British implemented their proposals, a great deal of trade was naturally driven from British ports to the free ports under the Dutch and the Danish where no duties were collected and no returns for goods exported or imported asked for, except in the case of official Dutch traders.

Thus was the condition of Ghana's seaports and trade in the 1820's and, indeed, throughout the next sixty years or so. A description of the ports and their trade in 1838 was in no way different from what has been already said;<sup>17</sup> the same is true of the relevant sections of the Madden Report (1841), except that the port of Anomabu, according to Dr. Madden, was beginning to capture some of the trade at Cape Coast. A report by Rev. T. B. Freeman in

<sup>17</sup> C. O. 267/50, P.R.O., despatch dated 23rd April, 1838.

1858 confirms the detail that the palm oil exported at the Prampram came from Shai country and Krobo,<sup>18</sup> and a despatch sent to the Colonial Office in the following year stated that Anomabu was an outlet for a fair portion of the palm oil produced in Fante country.<sup>19</sup> In a report written in 1861, Governor Andrews estimated that the ports of Ada and Dixcove each exported, on the average, about 100,000 gallons of palm oil per annum, with Ada's palm oil coming from that part of Krobo lying near the Volta, whereas Winneba and Anomabu together exported about 380,000 gallons,<sup>20</sup> perhaps in roughly equal proportions. Saltpond, according to H. T. Ussher, was the principal British port for palm oil, and Accra also did a fair trade in the oil.<sup>21</sup> The export slave trade had not completely disappeared, stated a despatch to the Colonial Office in 1863, and Keta was still a rendezvous for slave ships.<sup>22</sup>

In spite of the general absence of trade statistics for individual ports before 1895, all the *Blue Books*, from 1846 onwards, affirm that Cape Coast was the chief port. What this really means is that Cape Coast was the chief British port until about 1867; it was not the most important port on the coast until the Dutch, weary of the incessant intertribal quarrels and their depressive effect on trade particularly at their chief port, Elmina, began planning to abandon their possessions on the coast. They eventually ceded all their forts to the British and left the country in 1872. The Danes had been previously bought out by the British in 1850, and their ports on the eastern section of the coast were, on the whole, never of the same stature as the British or Dutch ports. From about 1867, therefore, Cape Coast was the principal port for the whole coast, with Accra coming second, although the former's function as British Administrative Headquarters was transferred to the latter in 1877.

<sup>18</sup> C. O. 96/43, P.R.O., despatch dated 5th August, 1858.

<sup>19</sup> C. O. 96/45, P.R.O., despatch dated 11th January, 1859.

<sup>20</sup> C. O. 96/55, P.R.O. despatch dated 11th September, 1861.

<sup>21</sup> C. O. 96/74, P.R.O., despatch dated 4th May, 1867.

<sup>22</sup> C. O. 96/60, P.R.O., despatch dated 7th May, 1863.

EXPORT OF PALM OIL, RUBBER, GOLD AND LUMBER : 1895

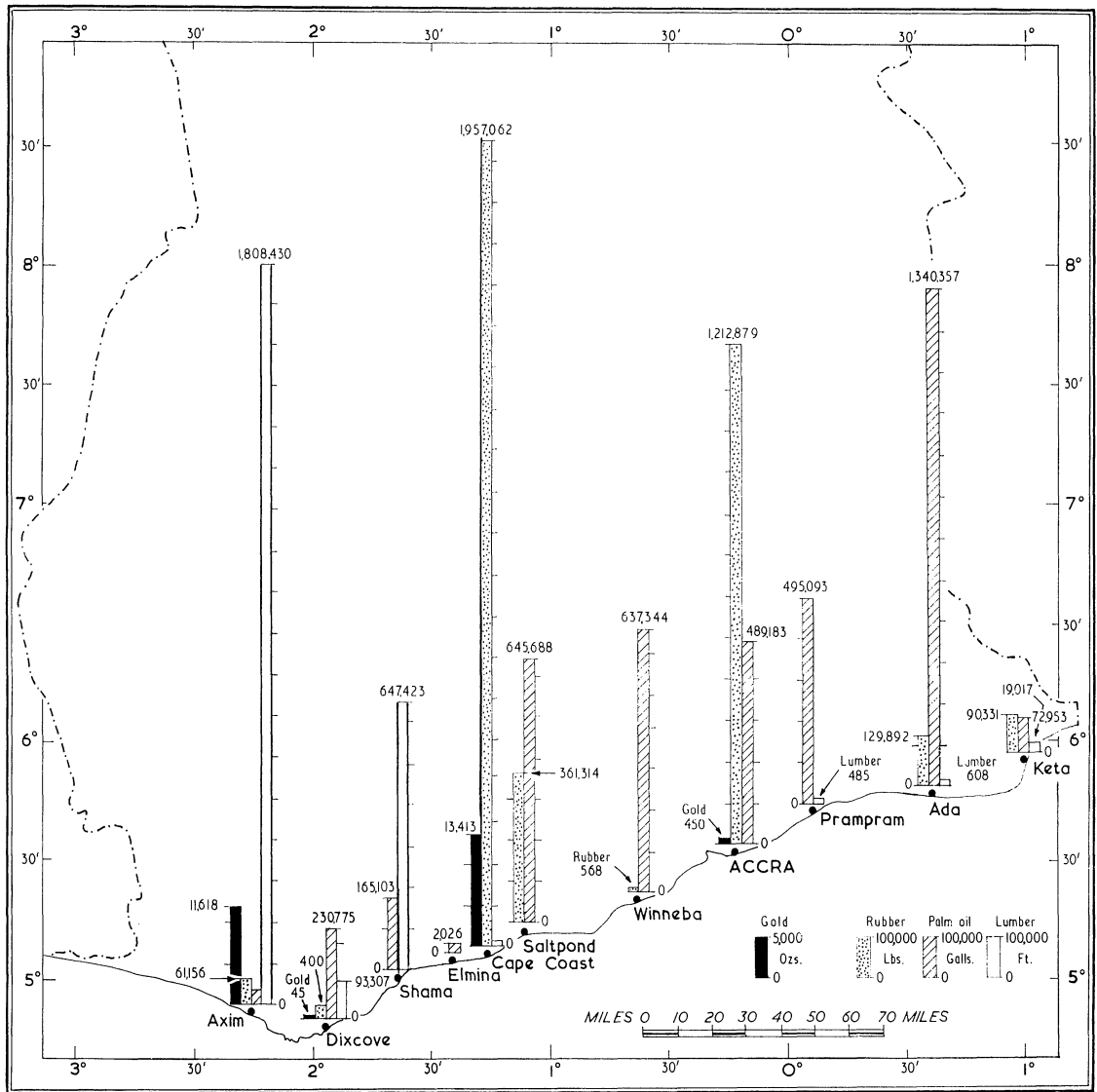


FIGURE 2A

The survival of most of the original surf ports up to 1885 can only be explained with reference to the expansion and increasing diversification of the country's economy after 1850, and to the fact that the different sectors of economic activity were not all grouped behind any individual port or group of ports but extended behind the whole length of the coast. The most spectacular changes in the economic life of the country were in agriculture which was described by Brodie Cruickshank in 1853

as "still in a very primitive state," but became by 1885 an effective substitute for the export slave trade. Palm oil, gum copal, kola nuts, cotton, coffee, rubber, to mention only the important ones, came to occupy a higher place on, or were added to, the export list which in the early part of the 19th century consisted principally of gold and ivory.

Progress in agriculture was accompanied by plans to intersect southern Ghana with light railways connecting productive agricultural

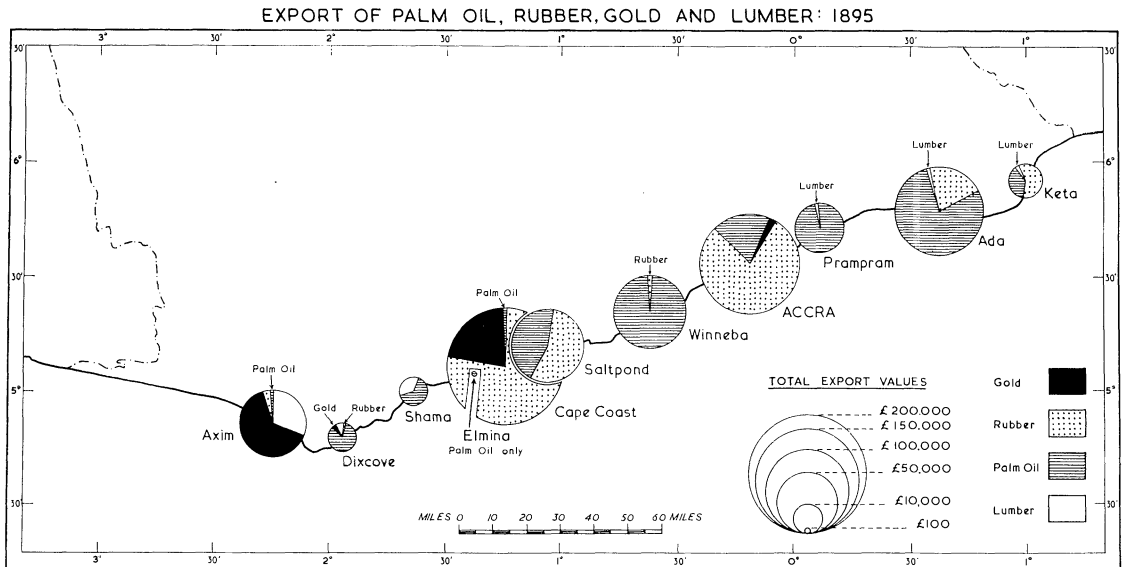


FIGURE 2B

and mining areas to the ports. Axim was, for example, to be the terminus of a proposed railway to the Tarkwa gold mines in 1822,<sup>23</sup> and a group of merchants in 1883 suggested that Cape Coast was to be the starting point of a railway to the palm oil district of Asin Denkera.<sup>24</sup> But the two proposals were rejected by the Colonial Office: the first because of the prohibitive expense of the construction of the line, the second for the same reason and also because its proponents could not produce statistics to show that there would be enough freight to justify the existence of the line. An essential part of both schemes was the provisions for improvement of port facilities at the termini. Indeed, the improvement of the landing stages at nearly all the ports was contemplated or suggested after the 1870's, but it was in the case of Accra that the most concrete, though unacceptable, proposals were ever made in 1884. It was suggested that Accra already possessed a sort of natural quay in the broken reef jutting into the sea behind James Fort, and all that was needed to make a real quay was to fill the gap in the reef by sinking the old Colonial steamer *Ekuro* in it.<sup>25</sup>

The building of roads, on the other hand, did not keep pace with the march of economic development, and before about 1890 it was not, for many reasons, even considered necessary to build good roads.<sup>26</sup> All commodities were headloaded from the interior to the ports, except where they could be transported by canoes on navigable rivers. Four of the rivers, the Volta, Ankobra, Tano, and the Pra, were explored by Europeans on several occasions and the possibility of using them as major commercial waterways considered. The Volta and the Ankobra, particularly the Volta, received the most attention after the 1850's and became vital components of the country's transport system. Axim and Ada at the mouths of the two rivers maintained their status as major ports on account of this fact.

#### 1885-1928

A new element that was to change the status of ports and the whole of the country's economic geography made its very modest appearance in the country's export trade in 1885. This was cacao, of which there was 121 pounds valued at £6 ls. The next export of the crop was in 1891, a mere eighty pounds of cargo

<sup>23</sup> British Parliamentary Papers (1883), Cmd. 3687, in Colonial Office Library, London.

<sup>24</sup> C. O. 96/150, P.R.O., despatch dated 19th May, 1883.

<sup>25</sup> C. O. 96/160, P.R.O., despatch dated 24th

October, 1884.

<sup>26</sup> K. B. Dickson, "The Development of Road Transport in Southern Ghana and Ashanti since about 1850," *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, Vol. V, No. 1 (1961), pp. 33-42.

COCOA EXPORTS: 1910 & 1928

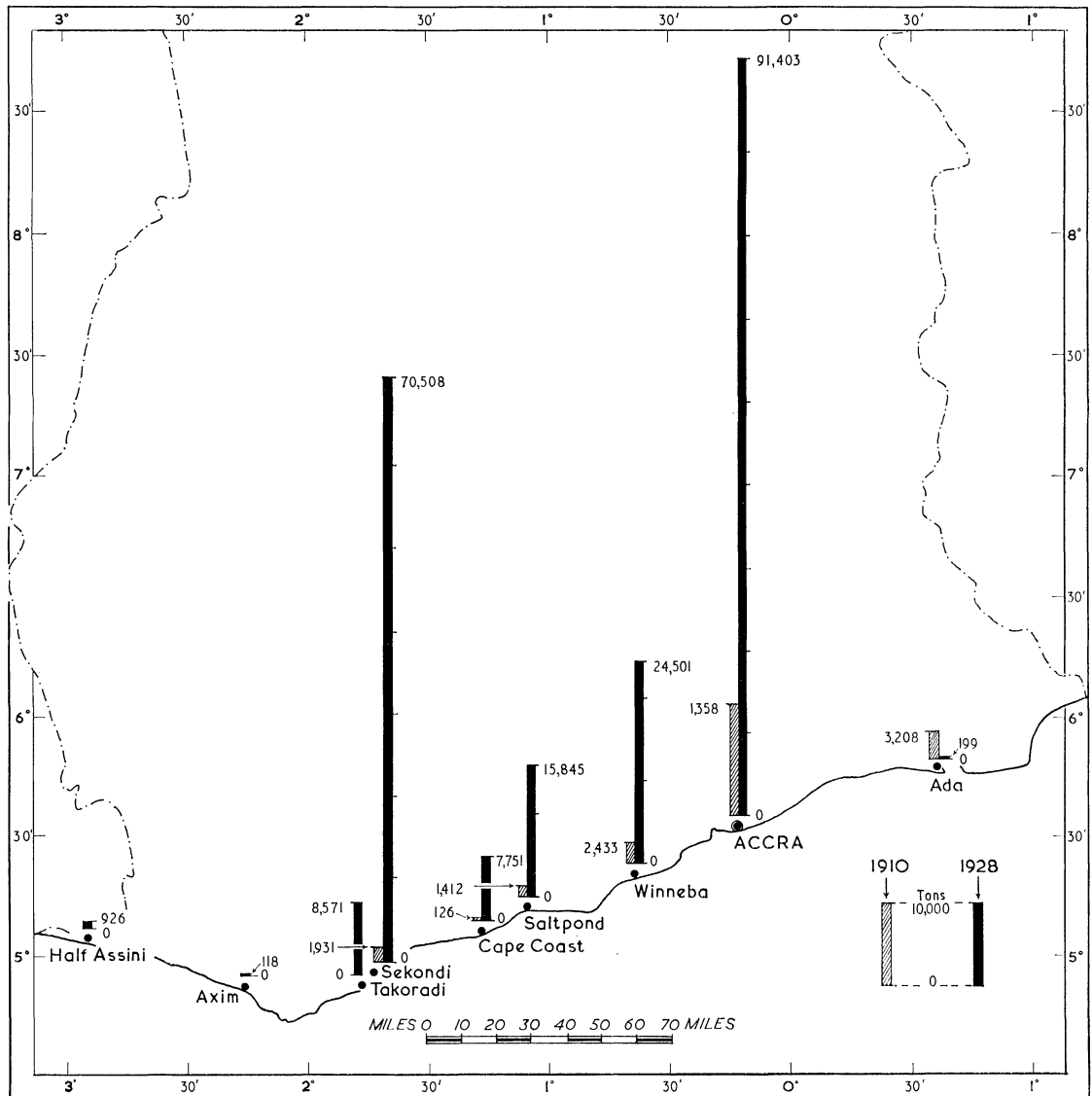


FIGURE 3

beans valued at £4, but by 1911 cacao was the most valuable export from Ghana, worth more than gold; and the quantity exported exceeded that of any other country in the world. Ghana has been the world's largest exporter of cacao ever since. The fortunes of ports became closely linked with the spread of cacao, particularly since the spread of the crop meant the disappearance of others on which the existence of some ports mainly depended. Railways and

improved roads made their appearance about the same time that cacao was spreading and equally affected the status of ports.

By 1895, the year in which external trade statistics for all the ports were published for the first time, cacao was a minor crop, the least valuable on the export list, and was not included in the trade statistics for the ports. The principal exports in that year were, in descending order of value, rubber, palm oil,

palm kernels, gold, kola nuts, timber, and ivory; and to handle these were no fewer than nineteen accredited ports of entry and twenty-two sufferance wharves where goods could be loaded or unloaded by ships only after due notice had been given and permission granted.<sup>27</sup> Figures 2A and 2B show in what quantities four of the commodities mentioned passed through each port. The four items of export were chosen because every port dealt in at least one or more of them; palm kernels have been omitted since their supply was complementary to that of palm oil. Thus, according to the criteria chosen, the two maps show Cape Coast as the most important port, handling a total value of exports greater than that from each of the remaining ports (the inclusion of the values of kola nuts and ivory would not have made any difference). No account has been taken of imports since most of them were unloaded at Accra and did not materially affect the status of ports. It will be noticed that the major port of Sekondi is not shown on the map. This is because the port was closed temporarily to facilitate preparations for building jetties there. The diversion of trade from Sekondi to other ports contributed to the large volume of trade recorded at Cape Coast.

From about 1910 onwards cacao was the principal determinant of port status in the Central, Eastern, and Volta regions, except in the case of Prampram in the Eastern Region and Keta and Denu in the Volta Region, which traded almost exclusively in palm oil. In the Western Region the ports traded mostly in gold, timber, and rubber, supplies of which, especially those of rubber, fluctuated wildly. Through advantages of situation in relation to the producing hinterland, certain ports became more important than others, and above all stood three of them: Sekondi, the terminus of the railway to Kumasi completed in 1903; Accra, the capital, which was linked by "cask roads" to the rich agricultural areas of Akwapim and Krabo; and Ada, the outlet for the rich cacao-producing areas in Volta Region. The first two ports had also been selected to be converted to harbors. Already by 1903 two jetties, one wooden and the other iron, had been built at Sekondi; the con-

struction of a second iron jetty was begun in 1906. Designs for a breakwater at Accra had been on the drawing board since 1895, but it was not until 1905 that the scheme was actually launched.

Around 1910, therefore, the major ports that showed some signs of permanence were Sekondi, Cape Coast, Accra, Ada, Axim, Saltpond, Winneba, Keta, and Half Assini. Figure 3 shows how much cacao passed through each port in 1910. In the Western Region the ports of Beyin, Atuabo, Dixcove, and Adjuah were being steadily crowded out between the port of Half Assini which was most advantageously situated for the rubber and timber trade in the Tano basin, and the port of Axim whose status depended almost entirely on the size of the timber trade in the country directly behind it. Shama was in a state of decline because of its nearness to Sekondi.

In the Central Region, proximity to Cape Coast and Saltpond meant loss of trade at Komenda, Elmina, Mouri, Anomabu, and the ports east of Saltpond up to Legu; nevertheless, Cape Coast and Saltpond themselves were not entirely immune from the overpowering influence of Sekondi. The port of Winneba grew in stature whereas the ports of Mumford, Apam, and Senya Beraku gradually fell into a state of decay.

In the Eastern Region all the ports east of Accra had stopped functioning, except Prampram which had also been losing its trade to Accra since the opening, in 1904, of the new "cask road" between the latter and Dodowa, then a major market town in the interior and the immediate source of the palm oil export from Prampram.

Of the ports in the Volta Region, Ada and Keta were the most outstanding, with the rest moribund or eliminated. Denu, one of the moribund ports, could have been a fair competitor with Keta for the palm oil trade in the region, but ineffective preventive service at the Ghana-Togo border meant the transfer of export commodities to the port of Lome in Togo, where prices were slightly higher. None of the sufferance ports in this or other regions were in use.

The hierarchic arrangement of ports, as shown in Figure 3, first crystallized after 1906 when many "cask roads" leading to ports were

<sup>27</sup> *Gold Coast Government Gazette*, 31st May, 1894.

PERCENTAGE EXPORT VALUES  
1908-1928

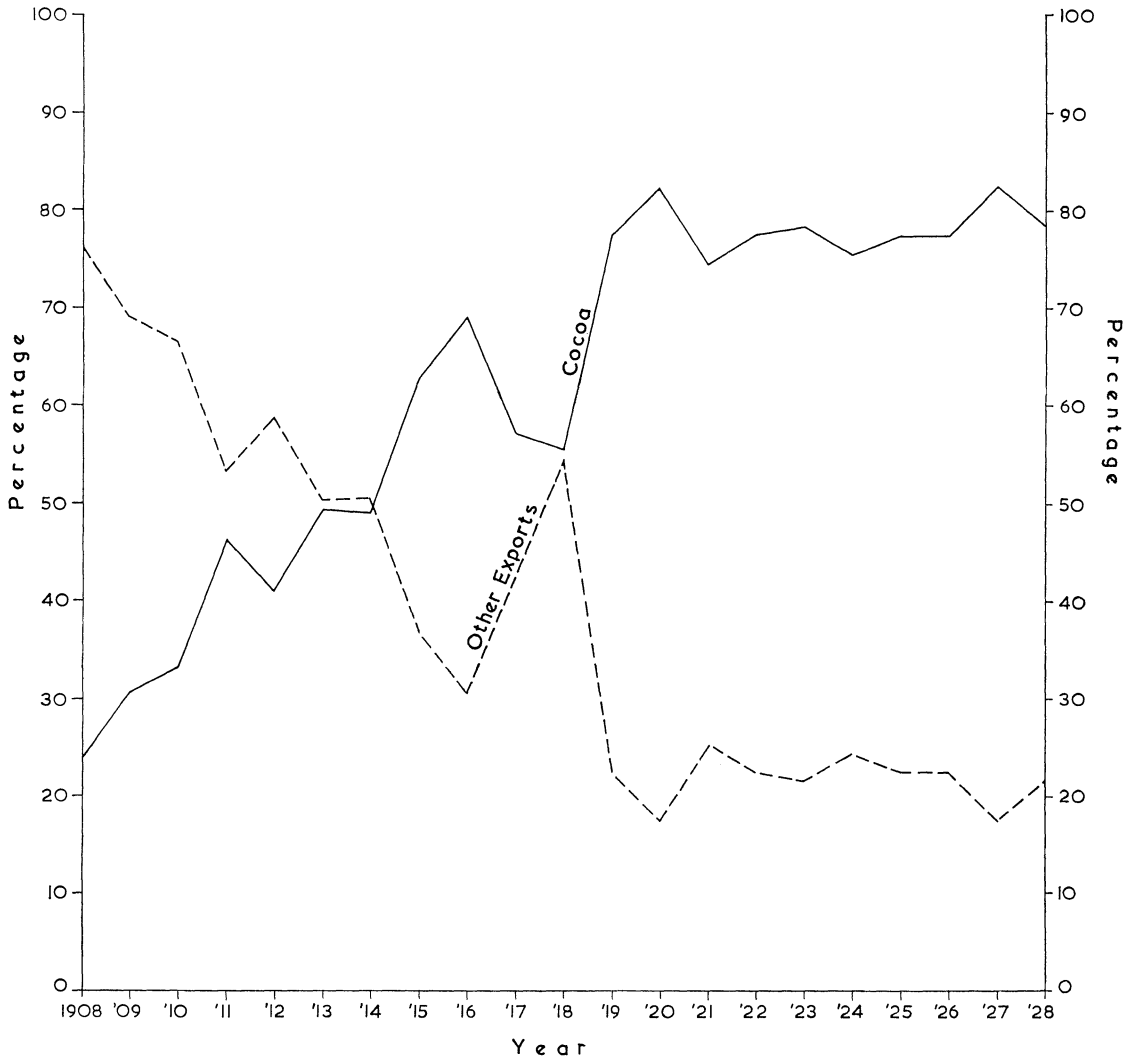


FIGURE 4

converted to good roads suitable for hand-drawn carts and light motor traffic, and more railway lines built. The successful introduction in Accra district for the first time, in 1915, and soon in most of Eastern Region, of light American Ford trucks with their high road clearance accordingly elevated the status of the port of Accra; the construction of the Accra-Kumasi railway, begun from Accra in 1909, further accentuated the importance of Accra and caused some of the trade at Win-

neba and Ada to be diverted to it. The use of the Ford trucks on Central Region roads from about 1916 similarly raised the status of the port of Cape Coast in particular. In the Western Region the opening of the branch railway from Tarkwa to Prestea in 1911 widened the sphere of influence of the port of Sekondi.

The cacao industry attained a high degree of prosperity as a result of the improvements in transport, and the excessive preoccupation of farmers with the industry after 1911 (Fig.

4) led to the virtual disappearance of crops such as rubber and gum copal in which some of the smaller ports traded. In the same way, the concentration of the industry in Eastern Region where it began made Accra the largest cacao port, a position it held until it was displaced by Takoradi in 1942.

These changes in the distribution of production and trade resulting from changes in the transport system led to the closing down of several ports. The port of Anomabu was closed down in 1912, the port of Denu in 1916; then followed the ports of Adjua, Shama, and Prampram in 1919; and finally the ports of Dixcove, Atuabo, Apam, and Elmina in 1921. Arguments for deep-water harbors were numerous: the ever-present danger of shipwreck (between 1907 and 1911 no fewer than seven ships ran aground at Takoradi, Sekondi, Axim, and in the Ankobra River); the increase in the volume of the country's external trade; the appearance of bigger ocean-going merchant ships after the First World War. Moreover, the construction of the lighterage harbors at Accra and Sekondi was being constantly obstructed by accumulation of sand in the harbors, which pumping and dredging could not successfully combat. The remedial measures were expensive and were therefore discontinued at Accra in 1918 and at Sekondi in 1927. A year later, in 1928, Takoradi harbor, the first artificial deep-water harbor in Ghana, was opened.

#### CONCLUSION AND POSTSCRIPT

The opening of Takoradi harbor did not immediately threaten the existence of all the remaining surf ports, for the simple reason that more than one port was needed for the physical handling of a vastly increased over-

seas trade; for another reason the cost of distribution of goods from Takoradi to Eastern and Volta regions was obviously much higher than from ports in, or nearer to, the two regions. The point must also be underlined that shipment of goods at the surf ports is not so dangerous and time consuming as it is often made out to be; one must take into account the highly developed skill of the canoe men which not only makes for fair speed of travel but also largely removes the possibility of a laden surf boat capsizing. In 1953, when Takoradi harbor was enlarged, the surf ports in operation were Cape Coast, Winneba, and Accra; now that Tema harbor is in use these have practically lost their port status, not so much as a result of competition with Tema as through direct official intervention. They were declared sufferance wharves in September, 1962.

Nevertheless, there is no reason why some surf ports should not continue to function, although their continuance may well be as fishing ports usable by trawlers. Fishing is a major industry at most of the ports, and the vessels used are canoes, sometimes fitted with outboard motors, which do not require specially constructed landing stages. The fishing industry is now being gradually reorganized on a nationalized and cooperative basis; the use of trawlers envisaged in the reorganization would naturally require the building of suitable ports. Sekondi and Elmina are already equipped as bases for small trawlers, a few of which are in use, and it would not be superfluous similarly to equip a few more surf ports. These have played a vital part in the economic development of the country, and although they are no longer engaged in their former role of handling the export trade, they will yet continue to serve, thanks to the new functions they are acquiring.