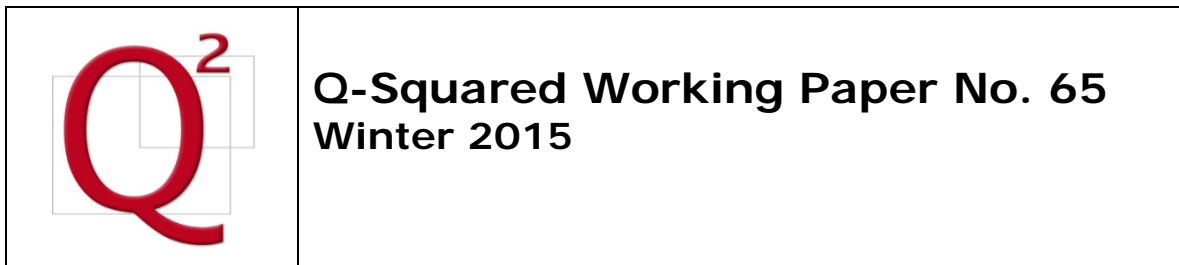


Colonialism and Seasonal Poverty in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, circa 1900-1940

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Abstract

There are ongoing controversies about the effects of colonial era policies on poverty in the Global South which have proved difficult to adjudicate because of the fragmentary nature of empirical information. An exceptionally rich database on poverty from the early colonial era in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast (presently, Ghana) is among the few exceptions to this rule. The present article draws on this database, which includes colonial reports, ethnographic studies, nutritional surveys and administrative data, to make inferences about the scale of poverty in the early colonial period and the likely effects of colonial policies on it. Overall, the data do paint a picture of severe seasonal poverty in the early colonial period, circa 1900-1940, but do not suggest that colonial policies or practices had a pronounced impact either way.



1. Introduction

the extractive industries that underpinned the poverty of these [colonised] nations were imposed, or at the very least further strengthened, by the very same process that fueled European growth: European colonial empires were often built on the destruction of independent polities and indigenous economies around the world or on the creation of extractive institutions... (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2011)

In their much-heralded recent monograph *Why Nations Fail*, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson have reignited an old debate about the impact of colonial policies and institutions on development outcomes in the Global South. They argue that colonial rule had harmful consequences for colonised regions, drawing on evidence from sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Latin America. As such, they provide renewed support for a position long-held by proponents of dependency theory (Rodney, 1974) and post-development theory (Rahnema, 1991) among others (e.g. Davis, 2002), which maintains that colonial era policies actively ‘underdeveloped’ colonial societies.

A related debate concerns the extent of hunger or poverty in precolonial societies in general, and sub-Saharan Africa in particular. Some have argued that such phenomena were rare in normal times but significantly worsened due to processes introduced or accelerated by colonial era policies such as cash cropping, taxation, labour migration, land alienation and so forth.¹ Others have decried this position as the ‘myth of Merrie Africa’ (Hopkins, 1973, p.10) and pointed to a long history of hunger in precolonial times (Curtain, 1985).

A major problem when adjudicating between competing positions in debates about early and pre-colonial poverty concerns the weakness of the underlying evidentiary base, typically consisting of reports from travellers, doctors, shipwrecks and missionaries along with oral histories.² These types of data provide a very fragmentary account of the magnitude of poverty and hunger and may be biased in any number of ways (Kuhanen, 2005; Iliffe, 1987). It is not surprising that widely divergent interpretations of the historical evidence have emerged as illustrated, for example, by the Tanganyika debate, between John Iliffe and Helge Kjekshus, about the extent of poverty in pre-colonial Tanzania (Kuhanen, 2005).

It is in this context that the historical experience of Northern Ghana, or the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast as they were then known, is particularly germane. The Territories were incorporated into the British Colonial Authority only at the turn of the 20th century and had limited contact with colonial authorities before that time (Fortes 1945; Hart, 1978; Mahama, 2009). Further, there is an exceptionally rich data base on poverty from the early colonial era including detailed ethnographic work conducted in the 1930s by the distinguished anthropologist Meyers Fortes and a nutritional survey conducted in the early 1940s by the medical officer F.M. Purcell.

The twin facts of relatively recent contact with colonial authorities and high quality data on poverty shortly thereafter, suggest a research strategy to address historical questions about poverty. Inferences may be drawn about the likely consequences of colonial policies on poverty by extrapolating backwards from the time of the studies of Fortes and Purcell, with emphasis on the likely effects of policy changes introduced in the early colonial era, circa 1900-1940. If such effects are found to be marginal, then it may be inferred that conditions found in the 1930s and 1940s were driven by factors unrelated to colonialism, and may indeed have been longstanding.

¹ Palmer and Parsons, 1977; Rijpma, 1996; Tosh, 1980; Webster, 1986; Worboys, 1988.

² Examples include Webster 1986; Chretien 1988; Rijpma 1996.

The analysis makes a number of contributions to the literature. First, it brings to bear the exceptionally rich data from the Northern Territories to historical debates about poverty trends during colonial rule. While others have drawn on these data, they have focussed on different issues.³ Second, it presents previously unpublished materials dealing with the 1940-1941 nutritional survey along with new linguistic evidence about seasonal hunger. Third, it demonstrates the value of a mixed method or Q-Squared (Shaffer, 2013a&b) approach to the analysis of poverty, integrating a wide range of sources of data including ethnographies, nutritional surveys and linguistic analysis, among others. Fourth, it contributes to the resurgent interest in the issue of seasonality (Devereux et al., 2008 and 2012), recently characterised as the ‘most neglected dimension of rural deprivation’ (Chambers 2008: xvi).

The format of the paper is as follows: Sections 2 and 3 present evidence on poverty in pre and early colonial times drawing on linguistic information and reports in the early colonial period, respectively. Section 4 presents the ethnographic findings of Fortes from the 1930s and results of the nutritional study undertaken by Purcell in the 1940s. Section 5 provides an overview of processes of change introduced or accelerated by colonial policies in the period 1900-1940. Section 6 examines in greater detail the consequences of labour migration to Ashanti and the Southern Colony. Section 7 concludes.

There are two preliminary points to note. First, I am using the term seasonal poverty as shorthand for seasonal hunger or undernutrition. To be sure, poverty comprises more than hunger or undernutrition, and these latter terms may subdivide into finer categories⁴. This usage of terms is justified in the present context, however, for two reasons: first, there are unresolved controversies about adequacy levels of caloric intake used to distinguish the non-poor from the poor, in particular the nature of adaptation to dietary stress, which caution against excessive precision when anchoring the calculation of poverty on nutritional intake⁵; second, by most accounts, the sorts of nutritional deprivation experienced by populations in the 1930s and 1940s would constitute an important dimension of poverty, however defined (see below).

Second, the historical analysis is about the likely effects of colonial-era policies on poverty. It is not about the long term consequences of all forms of external contact, in particular the Trans-Saharan and Atlantic slave trades and later-day slaving activities. The literature on the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, is rife with allusion to the destruction wreaked on local populations by notorious slave raiders such as Samori and Babatu.⁶ Further, there is evidence of long-term debilitating effect in that ensuing population movements to safer territory increased tsetse fly infestation in vacated areas, and complicated later day reoccupation (Hilton, 1960). The present analysis does not address such issues and focuses on the effects of colonial policies in the early colonial period, circa 1900-1940.

2. The Linguistic Record

The relevance of linguistic information to inform historical debates relating to poverty and diet or nutrition has long been argued by scholars such as John Iliffe and Jena-Pierre Chretien. They have shown how analysis of the meaning of linguistic terms and phrases, such as proverbs and verses, may contribute to a historically informed understanding of social phenomena and processes. Iliffe (1987), for example, analyses the meaning of the term ‘poverty’ in local African languages to support his claims that the poor

³ See in particular, the work of Destombes (2001, 2006), who focused on spatial differences in living conditions within Northern Ghana, contrasting the experience of inhabitants of watersheds and valleys.

⁴ For example, Devereux (2006) distinguishes between moderate and severe, as well as transitory and chronic hunger.

⁵ See Payne and Lipton (1994) and contributions in Osmani (1992).

⁶ Dickson (1969), Bening (1975), Mahama (2009), Allman and Parker (2005), Songsore, nd.

were at times distinguished from the very poor, or destitute, and that poverty was often associated with incapacitation, inability to work and lack of family support. Chretien (1988) shows that ancient crops and production practices in sub-Saharan Africa are much more frequently mentioned in proverbs, tales and agrarian vocabulary, than newer arrivals from America, allowing for the possibility to ‘reconstitute agrarian and alimentary evolutions’ on the basis of linguistic evidence.

In the present case, linguistic information is presented simply to determine if there is a ‘linguistic record’ of ‘hunger’ in Northern Ghana. Analysis will include linguistic terms, common greetings and proverbs/sayings. To the extent possible, it will cover the three major language groups in the North, specifically the Mole/Dagbani, Grusi (Kasem/Sissala) and Guan (Gonja) language groups,⁷ though emphasis will be on the former which comprises the vast majority of the area’s population.

A first step is simply to establish if the terms ‘hunger’ or ‘hungry season’ exist in the languages of Northern Ghana. While the existence of such terms does not offer much information on the magnitude of pre-colonial poverty, their absence would suggest that such phenomena were rare or absent in early times. The earliest recorded transcription of local languages appears in Appendix B of a 1899 report by Captain Henry Northcott. Seven local dialects were presented from various areas in the North, which fall under the Mole/Dagbani (Dagomba, Mamprusi, Moshi, Wa, Gurunsi) and Guan (Daboya, Bole) language groups. The term hunger appears in all seven, as *kom* or a derivative in the former and *erkun* or *ekon* in the latter.

Similarly, a 1920 publication by a District Commissioner in the North-East, A.W. Cardinall, includes a transcription of terms from the Grusi (Kasem/Sissala) language group compiled by the White Father missionaries who were resident in Navarro (presently, Navrongo) from 1906. The term hunger appears as *kana* which is distinguished from *kananga* or starvation (Cardinall, 1920, p.139).

A final early source is from Captain R.S. Rattray’s early ethnography of the North which included a vocabulary of terms from the Mole/Dagbani (Mole, Mampelle, Dagbane, Nankane, Dagare, Nabe, Bulea, Loberu, Talene), Grusi (Kasene, Isal) and Guan (Gbanya) language groups. Once again the term hunger appears in all thirteen of these local languages and is also distinguished from starvation (Rattray, 1932, vol. 1, p. 85).

It is important to emphasise that famine is typically distinguished from the hungry or lean season. In the Mole-Dagbani languages, the former is referred to as *fufali* whereas the latter is known as *dimpooi yuuni* (Wazam, 2013).

A second source of linguistic information concerns common greetings or salutations. There is a literature in social anthropology on the social significance of greetings, including classic studies from Ghana (e.g. Goody, 1972). It has been argued that the analysis of greetings provides information not only on the social functions of such acts, but also the historical and cultural context in which they occur (Duranti, 1977). It is in this context that greetings form part of the linguistic record with bearing on historical questions about hunger or undernutrition.

In the Grune (Mole/Dagbani) language spoken by the so-called ‘Frafra’⁸ people of the North-East, reference to hunger figures prominently. Common responses to the salutation ‘how are you’ (*la an wani*) include ‘we’re ok, just the challenge of food’ (*dia maa*) and ‘we are eating/we have food’ (*ti di ti*).⁹

⁷ The Mole/Dagbani (or Oti-Volta) and Grusi are both Gur languages of the North Volta-Congo language group. Guan forms a part of the Volta-Comoe branch of the Kwa language group (Awedoba, 2006).

⁸ The ‘Frafra’ are a loose grouping of peoples in the Upper East part of Northern Ghana, specifically in Bolgatanga and neighboring districts, whose name was derived from a local greeting (Awedoba, 2006)

⁹ I thank Dr. Atinga Mba, Rector, Bolgatanga Polytechnic for this information.

Similarly, a common greeting in Sissala, which is part of the Grusi language group, begins with the phrase ‘how is hunger treating you?’ (*abai ma losu*) (Wazam, 2014).

A final source of information concerns proverbs or sayings. In April, 2013, a focus group discussion was held with elders who resided in Bongo and neighboring communities in the North-East.¹⁰ At the end of the discussion, participants were asked to recount proverbs dealing with hunger and to explain their meaning. In as short period of time, the following eight proverbs were identified:

	Proverbs in “Grune”	Translation	Meaning
1	“Lavori kakuri bia”	An empty bowl does not kill a child	Hunger does not kill it rather teaches one lessons. It may be interpreted as a form of encouragement to those suffering from hunger.
2	“Fin soy Mongri”	“Small (food) is better than nothing”	In times of food scarcity, people must learn to economize
3	“Diki Zaa kakuri Chima”	Taking all/everything does not kill an elder	In times of hunger, elders in communities should sacrifice/share the little food available
4	“Nimboogh n’sibiri ti Nongo butta”	Pity bores/creates the holes and poverty sows the seeds	In times of food difficulty, people should not resign themselves to faith but rather do something about the situation.
5	“Saa nyake Chibiga Sagbori”	Lightening has revealed/exposed the orphans mussel of food	In times of food scarcity, people should not be greedy.
6	“Kon kakuri gye a pali la yam”	Hunger does not kill rather it teaches lessons/makes one wise up	There are lessons to be learned from hunger.
7	“Kon dela nimboogh”	Hunger is a pity/ dehumanising	Hunger dehumanizes and reduces one’s dignity
8	“Kon kagaheri/lockiri”	Hunger does not discriminate/is not a respecter of persons	Hunger can afflict anyone/ no one is immune from hunger
9	“Dia nde Vom”	Food is life	Food sustains life

The above list is hardly exhaustive but it does reveal a strikingly rich record of allusions to hunger in proverbs and sayings.¹¹ Together with information presented on linguistic terms and common greetings, these data do not suggest that hunger was rare or absent in pre-colonial times.

3. Early Studies on Seasonal Poverty (1900-1930)

Prior to the more systematic studies of the 1930s and 1940s, there are a number of reports conducted in the early colonial period which make allusion to the hardship facing local populations in the hungry season.

An early report on the Northern Territories was compiled by Lieutenant-Colonial Northcott on the basis of reports of colonial officers. It did not address seasonal poverty per se but makes mention of ‘the scantiness of the water supply’ in the dry season when “great privations are endured’ (Northcott 1899, p. 9). Similarly, the 1901 *Annual Report of the Northern Territories* (p. 15), states that despite a plentiful

¹⁰ I am grateful to Coleman Agyeyomah for very high quality facilitation of the focus group, translation and subsequent interpretation of information.

¹¹ Additional proverbs about hunger are found in GILLBT (1997) and Mahama (2004).

harvest 'large number of them [locals] live in a state of semi-starvation for four months, from April to July, when the harvest of the new crop begins.'

A 1911 report by a resident officer, Captain Wheeler, specifically addresses food supply in the Northern Territories based on field observations. It begins with the affirmation that 'no one who has been stationed in Fra Fra [in the North East] at the end of the dry season, can fail to be struck with the food difficulty' ('Food Supply in Fra-Fra', p. 1). According to Wheeler, during this period, people subsist on 'a kind of soup made out of a species of grass or herb and the leaf of the Baobab tree' (Ibid, pp. 4-5).

A similar picture is presented in by A.W. Cardinall (1920, pp. 82, 86), District Commissioner in the North-East, in his account of the agricultural cycle:

At the end of the dry season there is usually great scarcity, and the improvident ones seek out many weeds and the new leaves of trees ...harvest is in June and July for early millet and November for guinea-corn and late millet. The other crops are gathered at intervals between these dates. There is thus a long gap, which is tided over by storing the grain, but is most frequently a period of semi-starvation.

While allusions to seasonal hunger and poverty are prevalent in this early literature, there are also dissenting voices. In 1931, a dietetics research officer, William McCulloch ('Food Shortages at Navrongo-Gold Coast', p.1) commented that the 'appearance of people [in Navrongo] did not suggest that any food shortages existed' and concluded that the 'shortage of grain is being compensated by the importation of grain from areas with a marketable surplus.' A shortcoming of this study however, is that unlike Wheeler and Cardinall, McCulloch was not resident in the Northern Territories, and based his observations solely on a one day visit to Navrongo in April, 1931.

The early literature on the Northern Territories, then, is not short references to seasonal poverty, though such claims were not based on systematic studies. The ethnographic work of Fortes and nutritional survey of Purcell served to fill this gap in the 1930s and 1940s, respectively.

4. Fortes and Purcell (1934-1941)

4.1 Fortes

The anthropologist Meyer Fortes and his spouse Sonia were resident in the village of Tongo, adjacent to the Tong Hills, in Northern Ghana in 1934-35 and 1936-37. The ethnographic work completed over this period formed the basis of Fortes' canonical works on social organisation among the Tallensi (Fortes 1945; 1949). In addition, the Fortes conducted a detailed analysis of the cycles of agricultural production and food consumption over the course of the 1934 agricultural season which was considered by locals to be 'a fair year' (Fortes and Fortes, 1936 p. 252).

The Fortes compiled a month by month chronicle of agricultural activities, food availability and food consumption. Of particular importance is their depiction of the 'hungry season' which coincides with the beginning of the rainy season in April and lasts until the harvest of early millet in July. The Fortes' account of this period is as follows:

April: Food stores very low in average households and being rationed. Many households dependent upon supplementary sources of supply. Ample food supplies in market and many buying grain. Wild fruits ... being consumed to stave off hunger.

May: Food stores depleted and severe rationing. 'Hunger' commences. Poorer households suffer two or three days' hunger a week, living on vegetable soup, ground-nuts and wild fruits.

June: Peak of 'hunger' reached. Granaries empty among poorer households... grain scarce and dear... Small groups of children wander about hungry, feeding on wild fruits and small animals ...people are staunching their hunger by cutting the ripe or half ripe heads of early millet which they roast ...

July: Wild fruit still eaten and hunger prevalent in late-planting areas ... (Ibid, pp. 253-256)

The above summary statement of conditions was supplemented by case records which illustrated in greater detail the nature of seasonal hardship. The case of Baripeta, one of the best young farmers in the area, is telling: "By May 9 the household was living on shea fruit and vegetable soup, with a meal of porridge every third day... the five adults and the infant used, say, 40lb of [begged] grain in about 8 to 10 days ... Thus alternatively starving for a couple of days and having enough for a few days, the household carried on until the harvest in July. This case is typical of dozens; but many households were not reduced to such straits ..."

Fortes' summarised the food economy as characterised by a 'marked seasonal periodicity ... [whose] margin of security for the average householder is extremely small' (Ibid, p. 252). He also noted that 'domestic food supplies are at their lowest at the times ... of the most strenuous output of physical labour' and ponders the effects on the working capacity of farmers (Ibid, p. 260).

It is certainly true that not all in the community suffered the same hardship as Baripeta. According to the Fortes, differences of wealth were prominent and 'chiefs and headmen ... have sufficient food even in hard times' (Ibid, p.238). It is also true that the low caloric intake did not lead to functional impairment, preventing the completion of agricultural tasks such as hoeing, weeding, planting and harvesting.¹² Nevertheless, there seems very little doubt that seasonable hunger/poverty were pervasive during Fortes' time in Tongo in 1934. To assess the generalizability of Fortes' results beyond the village of Tongo, we now turn to survey data on nutritional intake and diet.

4.2 Purcell

The Gold Coast's Diet and Nutrition Survey was administered in 1940-41 under the overall guidance of Dr. F.M. Purcell, a medical officer in the colonial service.¹³ This survey was part of a broader initiative championed by the League of Nations and taken up by British Colonial Authority which has been aptly labelled the 'discovery of colonial malnutrition between the wars' (Worboys, 1988). The Northern Territories component of Gold Coast study involved repeated diet surveys of 65 compounds in 11 'centres' in the North. Daily weighing of foodstuffs 'as prepared for cooking' over a 7-10 day period was accompanied by questionnaires administered to chiefs and farmers which served to cross-check results. ('Summary to the Complete Report, 1941,' p.2).

It is worth quoting at length Purcell's overall assessment of the nutrition situation provided in the *Summary to the Complete Report* (p. 2):

... the great majority of the diet ranges from as low as 500 calories daily in the worst months to 2000 plus after harvest. The great majority of the people average less than 2000

¹² Though the strong presumption is that there would be negative effects on labour productivity.

¹³ A smaller survey was undertaken during the 1939 rainy season (July-October) in Mamprusi which didn't allow for a seasonal comparison of caloric intake ('Diet and Nutrition in Mamprusi', 1939).

calories daily through the years. The majority lie between 1400 and 1800, most of them near the lower figure. But the food scarcity is seasonal, from February to March, when reserves of the main millet crop are exhausted or are severely rationed, until July, when the meagre 'early' millet is ripe... In brief, throughout the area there is a severe shortage of every kind of food during several months yearly. Many lack sufficient [sic] for as long as five months. In a relatively small area [Nakon, Yellinia], the supply lasts only a few months; and there exists a state of semi-starvation which becomes extreme and causes death.

The data presented in Table 1 below form the evidentiary base of Purcell's conclusion.

Table 1: Average Caloric Intake per Adult Equivalent in the Northern Territories, 1940-41

	1940						1941			1940-41	1940-41	Seasonal Change (%)
	July	August	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	March	Average	Range	
Zuarungu	1597				1572	1388		1118		1419	805-2408	-30
Nangodi				1388				1382		1385	906-2124	0
Tongo			1677			1546		1001		1408	674-2065	-40
Sokote						1484		1207		1346	820-1969	-19
Bongo				1484		1165				1324	680-2086	-21
Navrongo		1415				1399		850		1221	478-2100	-40
Sandema			1908			2105		1348		1787	1025-4567	-36
Nakon			999			1193		327		808	280-1717	-73
Lawra				923		2831			2431	2064	788-4180	-14

N.B.: Data from Chaana were illegible in the original and are excluded.

Source: 'Diet and Nutrition Surveys Gold Coast: Final Report', p. 71E.

A number of points are relevant to note with respect to his findings:

1. Data are presented by adult equivalent whereby adults and children of different ages were assigned different weights¹⁴.
2. The final column presents data on the percentage change in caloric intake from the highest monthly value in the rainy season (July-December) to the value in the Dry Season (Jan-March). In all but one centre (Nangodi) the declines are quite steep ranging from 14% to 74%.
3. Overall, levels of annual caloric intake are quite low which raises questions of a potential downward bias associated with 'missing' foodstuffs, such as wild fruits, groundnuts and beer (pito) or other forms of measurement error, perhaps due to poorly trained assistants¹⁵. In the extreme case of Nakon, average annual intake of 808 calories, and 327 calories in the hungry

¹⁴ Adults and children aged 12-19 were assigned the weight of '1'. The age categories, 11-12, 9-11, 7-9, 5-7, 3-5, 2-3 and 1-2 were assigned the following weights, respectively: 0.9, 0.8, 0.7, 0.6, 0.5, 0.4, 0.35 Purcell felt that equivalence scales proposed by the League of Nations, which assigned different values to males and females were inappropriate in the Northern Territories, where often 'women eat more than men' ('Diet and Nutritional Surveys Gold Coast', 1941, p.4).

¹⁵ Critical comments on Purcell's report in the 1940s by the well-known anthropologist Audrey Richards, who had conducted one of the seminal studies of diet and nutrition in Northern Zambia in the 1930s (Richards, 1939; Moore and Vaughan, 1994) and the nutritionist, B.S. Platt, raised questions about the training and supervision of his 'dietitian' assistants ('Notes on Dr. Purcell's Report', Sept. 1941; 'Comments on Dr. Purcell's Report', Dec., 1941).

season, are difficult to believe. Purcell himself, felt that the data likely underestimated consumption by up to ten per cent ('Diet and Nutritional Surveys Gold Coast', 1941, p. 72). Further, in his response to critical comments from the nutritionist, B.S Platt ('Comments on Dr. Purcell's Report', 1941), Purcell suggested that some respondents with very low levels of nutritional intake in Nakon were unlikely to have survived ('Reply to Comments on Dr. Purcell's Report', 1942).

4. Another explanation for the very low average levels of caloric intake is that rainfall in 1940 was abnormally low. Total accumulation was around 28 inches which is far below the average of around 42 inches in the preceding decade. While the lower levels of rainfall, apparently, did not affect average crop yields, they did lead to crop failures for early millet in North Mamprussi ('Annual Report, Dept. of Agriculture, 1940-41), which was one of two districts chosen for the nutrition survey ('Diet and Nutritional Surveys Gold Coast', 1941, p. 5).
5. Even if there is a downward 'levels' bias, however, it would not necessarily affect the seasonal trend described above. Further, because surveys were not undertaken at the time of greatest seasonal food shortages, April-June, it is likely that the data *over-estimated* consumption in the hungry season and underestimated seasonal variation in consumption.
6. The published reports presented data on average caloric intake, and the range of estimates, but not the distribution. The latter is required to estimate population percentages at different levels of caloric intake. It is noteworthy, however, that in above quotation, Purcell affirms that caloric intake of 'most' survey respondents was close to the lower end of the 1400-1800 range, which implies a high incidence of poverty.
7. The sampling strategy was not made explicit and no standard errors were presented for the results obtained. In the Northern Territories, the report notes that attempts to ensure that data were representative was 'not easily fulfilled' (p. 6). In her critical comments on the report, Audrey Richards wrote that 'it is not clear that he [Purcell] was familiar with the voluminous literature on modern survey methods, selection of samples etc.' ('Notes on Dr. Purcell's Report', Sept. 1941)

Despite these shortcomings, and the fact that 1940 was atypically low for rainfall, the data leave little doubt about the reality of severe seasonal poverty in the Northern Territories. Such concerns were, in fact, acknowledged in private by both the Colonial Office in London and local authorities in the Gold Coast subsequent to Purcell's report. In his confidential despatch of July 21, 1942 to the Gold Coast Governor, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Viscount Cranborne, wrote that 'even when due allowance is made for the report's many defects, certain matter of importance emerge ... there appears to be a state of constant and chronic hunger in some localities, notably Nakon, and intermittent acute shortage in some others (e.g. Navrongo, Paga, Bongo, Zuarungu, Sekoti) in both cases even amounting to real starvation.' ('Despatch from the Secretary of State', 21 July, 1942'). In his confidential letter of September 17, 1943 to Secretary of State for the Colonies, the Gold Coast Governor concurs. He refers to an August 1943 report ('Report on Certain Features of Dr. F.M. Purcell's Report, 1943) which 'shews that the periodical food shortages referred to in Dr. Purcell's Report still occur and that in certain areas, relief issues of food have had to be made' ('Letter from Governor of the Gold Coast', 17 Sept. 1943).' While the precision of Purcell's estimates are open to debate, the core conclusion about severe seasonal poverty is not.¹⁶

In an interesting aside, and consistent with the analysis in Worboys (1988), Purcell felt that his report was shelved because it reflected poorly on colonial authorities. In his Letter to the Editor of the publication

¹⁶ Data from the 1950s and 1960s provide additional evidence of very low caloric intake and large seasonal fluctuations. Hunter (1966) refers to a FAO/WHO study in 1958 which found declines in average daily caloric intake of young males from 1600 calories after the harvest in July-November to 1120 in February. In addition, Hunter's own study in 1963-64 found an average bodyweight loss of 6.4% during the 'hungry' season, of which over 20% of the population lost more than 10% bodyweight (Ibid).

West Africa, Dec., 4, 1943, Purcell argued that ‘apparently because it contained a few facts which might cause official embarrassment (unofficially it was explained to me that “no one may starve in the British Empire”) the report has been suppressed’ (‘Letter to the Editor, Dec. 4, 1943). Archival materials provide further support for Purcell’s position. The Diet and Nutrition Survey Report was only transmitted to the Colonial Office in London approximately one year after it was formally submitted and discussed at a Meeting of the Nutrition Committee in Accra on May 30, 1941, only after an official request of March 23, 1942. A subsequent request for information from the Colonial Office of July 21, 1942 received no response until August 4, 1943 when it was advised that follow-up reporting would be undertaken and submitted to the Colonial Office (CO/859/68/1). There certainly was no urgency on the part of the Gold Coast Colonial Administration to address the findings of the report or to transmit it to the Colonial Office.

5. Colonial Era Changes 1900-1940

Fortes’ ethnographic work and Purcell’s nutritional study provide strong support for the existence of severe seasonal poverty in the mid-1930s to the early 1940s. To what extent may such results be attributable to colonial era policies? The question requires reviewing major changes ushered in during the early colonial period and analysing their likely effects.

The literature on the effects of colonialism on poverty or hunger in the Northern Territories identifies a number of colonial era changes with allegedly adverse effects on economic development and living conditions in the North, including: land expropriation (Plange, 1976, Konigs, 1986), undermining of local trade (Plange, 1976, 1979), labour recruitment for building, public works and transport in the Northern Territories (Plange, 1979; Thomas, 1973) and labour migration to Ashanti and the Southern Colony (Konigs, 1986).¹⁷ Labour migration is discussed at greater detail in Section 6 while the other three issues are reviewed below.

A preliminary point concerns changes in the nature of production, in particular agricultural production practices, which in principle could have had dramatic effects on poverty. As discussed in the introduction, such changes elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, including, for example, the introduction of cash cropping, are alleged to have had significant effects on the welfare of local populations. In the Northern Territories, however, there is no evidence to suggest that significant changes in production practices took place in the period 1900-1940.¹⁸

By most accounts, agricultural practices in the 1930s were essentially unchanged from earlier times. The staple crops remained millet and guinea corn which were cultivated using the same techniques as in the earliest times. The agricultural officer C.W. Lynn, who conducted farm surveys from 1932 to 36 gave the following account of planting practices: ‘men wander over the farm with long sticks and make holes at random, and women and children follow with the seeds in a calabash’ (Lynn, 1942, p. 81). Lynn, in fact, attributed the problems of hunger to such techniques of cultivation: ‘the precarious food situation was due primarily to ... methods not sufficiently intensive for the conditions obtaining’ (Ibid).

The view is echoed by Fortes (1945, p. 12) who felt that Tale society had been remarkably stable with respect to techniques of production. He argued that: ‘[the] Tallensi economy is primitive, static, subsistence based... [they] continue to farm by same methods of their forefathers.. grow no cash crops and produce no surplus of local crops.’ Likewise, he maintained that the kinship-based social structure, and in particular, social relationships of production and distribution, had changed very little over time.

¹⁷ Taxation in cash was not introduced in the Northern Territories until 1934 (Lynn, 1942).

¹⁸ A pilot scheme to introduce cotton growing was attempted in 1903 but subsequent initiatives proved disappointing and large-scale cotton cultivation never materialised in the early colonial period (Dickson, 1969).

Such relationships reflected long-established norms governing land allocation, labour contribution, distribution of agriculture output and food sharing.

Fortes' assertion of relative stability in social structure and relationships has been the source of some controversy in the literature. In the 1950s, Worsely (1956) argued that Fortes' own work, along with other secondary materials, pointed to fundamental transformative change in social structure due to labour migration and the growth of product and labour markets. More recently, Parker's (2013) analysis of Fortes' field notes led him to conclude that Fortes downplayed the significance of changes introduced through such forces as labour migration, the spread of new commodities and tourism to the shrines in the Tong Hills. For both Worsely and Parker, Fortes' structural functionalism, and attendant emphasis on social equilibrium, blinded him to key aspects of social relationships which were beginning to change rapidly in Taleland by the 1930s.¹⁹

The argument that the social structure was changing by the 1930s does not imply however, that production had fundamentally changed with attendant effects on seasonal poverty. Worsely (1956, p. 67) himself has acknowledged that the main driver of change, labour migration, was 'numerically insignificant'. The best assessment of the situation prevailing in the time of Fortes' fieldwork is provided by Keith Hart (1978, pp. 195, 197):

Taleland remained an agrarian economy with the vast bulk of income generated by subsistence farming on the part of small groups ...by the mid 1930s the Tallensi economy could be said to be functioning much as before, allowing for a slightly higher degree of commercialisation of production and for increased population mobility ... one local industry had taken off namely tourism to the Tong Hills to the cult shrines.... Tallensi had only just begun to be integrated into the wider economy and political system and the consequences were still to be felt by the majority of Tallensi.

With respect to colonial era policies, land expropriation for purposes in the 'public interest' did occur and received legislative authority in the form of the Mineral Rights Ordinance of 1904 and the Land and Native Rights Ordinance of 1927. In general, however, expropriation measures were limited, and confined to land required for the construction of roads, rest houses and administrative centres.²⁰ For example, the program of road works entailed the construction of a few roads linking the colonial capitals of Gambaga, and subsequently Tamale, to a few other major towns and markets such as Salaga. In 1912, the road construction program effectively came to an end, and the road network was essentially the same between until the 1930s (Dickson, 1969, pp. 226-7). Accordingly, it is unlikely that land expropriation was of a sufficient scale to have affected the overall incidence of seasonal poverty in the Northern Territories. According to Bening (1995, p.258):

During the colonial period the free acquisition of land did not affect the people very adversely as little land was actually taken for large scale development after the abandonment of the railway project. The only govt. lands were those occupied by the administrative station in the district, provincial and regional capitals ...

¹⁹ Anafu (1973), as well, documented changes in political structures introduced by colonial authorities in the period 1912-37, in particular the attempt to subsume local and dispersed forms of political organisation among the Tallensi, under the auspices of a paramount chief.

²⁰ The very limited investment in infrastructure in the early colonial period in the Northern Territories is a consensus view in the literature among scholars of different ideological persuasion (e.g. Dickson, 1969; Konigs, 1986; Plange, 1976; Sutton, 1989).

With respect to trade, Plange (1979, p. 661) has argued that measures were introduced, such as a new currency, with the intent and effect of undermining local trade in such items as livestock, cotton, shea-butter and groundnuts, ‘which all eventually disappeared, along with their long-evolved networks of socio-economic relations’. Other commentators have come to the opposite conclusion, that trade volumes increased in the early colonial period involving both imported and local goods²¹.

It is likely that trading centres associated with the slave trade, such as Salaga, went into decline while other trading sites favoured by the colonial authorities, such as Bawku, became ascendant (Chalfin, 2001, Dickson, 1969). Overall, the available evidence does not suggest trade-induced worsening of seasonal poverty, though it may have led to increased levels of social differentiation within communities (Hart, 1978). On the other hand, some have argued that increased trade in livestock and foodstuffs served to mitigate the effects of the hungry season in general (Lynn, 1942) and of particularly poor harvests, which may have spelled famine in the past (Fortes, 1945). In summary, the thesis of trade-induced marginalisation finds little support in the broader literature.

It should be mentioned in this regard, that the ending of slave raiding and the associated climate of insecurity had undoubtedly beneficial effect on agricultural production and exchange. The period immediately prior to the incorporation of the Northern Territories in the Gold Coast was particularly violent with high levels of slave raiding and destruction (Moradi et al. 2013, Allman and Parker 2005). It is for this reason, that some areas in the Northern Territories, such as Western Gonja and Wa, welcomed the newly established British authority in the North (Mahama, 2009), though others actively resisted.²² Other data are consistent with the hypothesis that living standards improved at the turn of the century in the Northern Territories following the cessation of slave raiding. The heights of recruits in the Gold Coast Regiment from the Northern Territories born in the first decades of the 20th century increased significantly compared to those born in the last two decades of the 19th century (Moradi, 2008; Moradi et al., 2013).

The final issue, labour recruitment within the Northern Territories, was instituted as an indirect form of taxation early in the colonial era. It has been argued, in fact, that ‘the major day-to-day impact of British rule on the chiefs and people lay in the recurrent call for labour, often unpaid, for building, maintenance of public works and transport within the Northern Territories’ (Thomas, 1973, p. 79). Every compound was obliged to supply 2-3 days of labour per month, though duties could extend over the dry season (Roncoli, 1994). Apparently, this labour requirement was widely resented, and resisted (Ibid).

It is difficult to assess the overall effect of labour recruitment on seasonal poverty. There are a number of reasons why, however, that it is unlikely to have been a major contributor to the severe nutritional deficits observed in the studies of Fortes and Purcell. First, the labour drain described above was modest even if some occurred during peak periods of planting and harvesting. Second, apparently there was widespread avoidance of labour recruitment (Ibid). Third, there may have been some indirect economic gains associated with road work, especially for trade. Overall, it is likely that the impact of labour recruitment on seasonal poverty was slight though probably negative.

To summarise, information on trade, land appropriation and labour recruitment in the Northern Territories do not support the thesis of marginalisation during the early colonial period. The core issue of the colonial impact on poverty hinges then, on the question of labour migration.

²¹ See Hart, 1978; Lynn, 1942; Moradi et al. 2013; Roncoli 1994.

²² For example, the Tallensi around Tongu actively resisted the British and were suppressed militarily. In fact, British suppression of those who refused to submit to their authority was often quite brutal (Anafu, 2014).

6. Labour Migration to Ashanti and the Southern Colony

As mentioned, one of the major changes which occurred in the early years of the 20th century in Northern Ghana was the increasing mobility of the population. Fortes considered this phenomenon, which included short term trips to trade, purchase goods or visit friends and relatives, along with longer-term and seasonal migration, the greatest change occurring in the early colonial period (Fortes, 1936; Hart, 1971). He argued that:

roads have served to open up Taleland to a wider sphere of intercourse with other parts of the Gold Coast than was possible twenty years before ... To-day young men and even women go in increasing numbers every year, in the dry season, to Tamale, Kumasi, or the coast towns (Fortes, 1945, p. 10).

Assessing the impact of labour migration on poverty in communities of source is difficult for a number of reasons. First, the theoretical literature about the likely effects of migration on poverty is ambiguous and highly dependent on contextual considerations (Siddiqui, 2012). Such debates figure centrally in the literature on the Northern Territories as discussed below. Second, data on migration are difficult to compile and quite scant for the Northern Territories in the early 20th century. Nevertheless, a range of relevant data on the likely effects of migration are presented below.

There is a preliminary point which concerns whether labour migration from the Northern Territories in the early 20th century was primarily voluntary or forced. This issue has been the subject of much controversy in the literature pitting proponents of the voluntary thesis, such as Fortes (1936, 1945), Hart (1978) and Dickson (1969) against others such as Thomas (1973), Plange (1976, 1979) and Roncoli (1994). There are indeed documented cases of forced conscription for work in the mines in the South (Thomas 1973, Roncoli, 1994), though the breakdown of forced and voluntary migration remains undetermined. This debate has obvious bearing on the assessment of the conduct of the Colonial Administration in the Northern Territories. It is less directly relevant to the present question which inquiries about the effects on seasonal poverty of labour migration, whether voluntary or forced.

The core theoretical case for the immiserising role of labour migration for communities of source involves a labour drain thesis in the context of limited remittances. According to the former, migration deprives host communities of male labour, often in their prime working years, precluding their contribution to local production and facilitating depopulation. According to Plange (1979, p. 670): 'Labour reserve role [of the Northern Territories] siphons able bodied young men out of the region with long term depopulating effect'.

The contrasting position is that the labour draining effect of migration was quite minimal and offset by certain benefits. Specifically, there are four points: i) some of the labour migration was seasonal and temporary and occurred during the slow season prior to planting²³ (*Annual Reports of the Northern Territories 1926-27 & 1929-30*; Hilton, 1960); ii) apparently, returning migrant labour were reabsorbed in home communities without much disruption (Fortes, 1945; Hart, 1978); iii) in some cases, local chiefs would meet their procurement quotas by supplying the least able, unfit labourers, thereby minimising losses in productivity (Thomas, 1973); iv) in certain densely populated regions, migration arguably served

²³ For example the *1926-27 Annual Report of the Northern Territories* contrasts the situation in the Northern Territories and the French colonies. In the former, 'a number of men ... migrate South for work but few remain there long, generally returning in May to look after their own farms'. In the latter, the volume and duration of labour migration is greater as 'men come down to earn enough money to pay their taxes.'

as a ‘vent for surplus’ population, in the process easing pressures on redistribution and the natural resource base (Lynn, 1942).

There are not adequate historical data to tease out the relative importance of the purported negative and positive effects of migration. Nevertheless, there are data on the overall level of long-term migration which is suggestive. Such data derive from the population census and from Annual Reports of the Mines Department.

The 1931 population census contained a question on ‘Place of Origin’ including, where possible, the name of the country or province. The reliability of the Census results are open to debate given that the Census questionnaire was administered only in the largest and most important towns and supplemented by population ‘counts’ supplied by village officials. In 1931, only around 14% of the population was directly surveyed (as opposed to being ‘counted’) resulting in an overall underestimate of between 2 and 10% (Kuczynski, 1948, pp. 400-404). The size and direction of any resulting bias on data on population shares by place of origin is unclear. Nevertheless, the presumption is that population shares from the Northern Territories in other regions will be overestimated given that they may have settled disproportionately in urban and peri-urban areas, in proximity to mines, and that seasonal migrants may have been incorrectly classified as residents.

Data presented in Table 2 show that the number and shares of migrants from the Northern Territories (NT) resident elsewhere in the Gold Coast or Ashanti was very modest. More specifically, only around 6% of the population whose area of origin was the Northern Territories were resident elsewhere. These data do not suggest that long-term or permanent migration was a significant phenomenon in the 1930s with major depopulating effect.

Table 2 Area of Residence of Populations from the Northern Territories (NT), 1931

	Gold Coast Colony				Northern Territories	Total Population of the NT
	Western Province	Central Province	Eastern Province	Ashanti		
Number	7454	4626	7664	22659	653104	717275
Share of ‘NT Origin’ Pop.	1.1	0.7	1.1	3.3	93.9	

Source: Kuczynski (1948, p. 423)

The second main source of information concerns the number of mine labourers of origin from the Northern Territories. Migratory flows to work in the mines has been a major part of the argument that the Northern Territories served as a labour pool to facilitate growth in the Colony and Ashanti. Table 3 present data on total mine employment in the Southern Colony and Ashanti by labourers from the Northern Territories compiled in the *Annual Reports* of the Mines Department. As above, the striking result is the small absolute number of such labourers, which averaged less than 3000 per year over the entire period.²⁴ By way of illustration, this amount would have comprised less than 0.4% of the total population of the Northern Territories in 1931 when the population census was undertaken.

²⁴ In 1921, around two thirds of ‘organised’ labour recruits from the North were sent to the mines while the rest worked on the railways, surveys and sisal plantations (Annual Report of the Northern Territories, 1922, p. 30).

Table 3 African Mine Labourers by Place of Origin

Date	Northern Territories	Total	Date	Northern Territories	Total
1911	2421	17127	1922-23	2493	12193
1912	2359	16882	1923-24	2441	12995
1913	2900	16099	1924-25	2868	15301
1914	4215	17369	1925-26	2020	14344
1915	4070	17347	1926-27	2492	10734
1916	3605	17157	1927-28	2707	10719
1917	3591	19310	1928-29	2883	11353
1918	3152	17388	1931-32	2580	12615
1919	2530	14132	1932-33	3152	15026
1920	2122	11250	1933-34	5070	19882
1921	2136	13398			
			Average	2943	14887

Source: Kuczynski (1948, p. 426)

These numbers are not consistent with an oft-cited figure in the literature which maintains that at its height, the annual flow of mine labourers from the Northern Territories reached 15000 in 1917 (Plange, 1979, p. 663; Roncoli, 1994, p. 113). The inconsistency stems from a misinterpretation of the data whose source is given as Kimble (1962). The 15,000 figure actually refers to the total ‘African labour force’ employed in the mines and not to annual flows of labour from the North (Kimble 1962, p. 42, note 2). In fact, given that the total number of mine labours from the North shows a quite modest upward trend over time, *net* year-on-year flows averaged only 132, as incoming mine workers were offset by those departing.

In summary, labour migration from the Northern Territories to Ashanti and the Southern Colony was unlikely to have significantly impacted upon seasonal poverty in the North because the scale of migration in the early colonial period was quite modest.

7. Conclusion

The core objective of this article was to bring to bear the rich data base on seasonal poverty in Northern Ghana to historical debates about poverty trends during colonial rule. From a methodological point of view, it has relied on a mixed method or ‘Q-Squared’ strategy which has combined evidence from linguistic information, colonial reports, ethnographic studies, nutritional surveys and administrative data. On the whole, these data do paint a picture of severe seasonal poverty in the early colonial period, *circa* 1900-1940. They do not suggest however, that colonial policies or practices had a pronounced impact either way. In particular, this point applies to policies related to land appropriation, trade, labour recruitment and labour migration.

There are a number of implications of this analysis. First, they suggest caution with respect to very sweeping conclusions about the effects of colonial era policies. As noted in the Introduction, there is a long history of such types of analysis and recent celebrated examples such as Acemoglu and Robinson’s *Why Nations Fail*. There are, of course, many documented cases of deleterious effects of colonial policies

on colonial societies and human welfare. The point however, is to guard against overgeneralisation and to do justice to the contextual specificity of the issue.

Second, the findings suggest that seasonal poverty is likely a long-standing phenomenon in communities of Northern Ghana, as evidenced by the linguistic record. This conclusion is tentative as it would require ruling out any other possible exogenous changes occurring in the early colonial period which could have worsened seasonal poverty.²⁵ Nevertheless, it cautions against romanticisation about a distant past and so-called 'traditional' societies, as in, for example, invocations of Sahlins' concept of the 'Original Affluent Society' (Sahlins, 1997). There is little doubt that historical conditions in the North of Ghana led to suffering for large sections of the population and constituted 'poverty' however defined.

Finally, the analysis shows the value of mixed method approaches when addressing issues of historical significance. Given the often fragmentary nature of historical information, the validity of research results is enhanced if different methods of inquiry and informational sources arrive at similar conclusions. In the present case, ethnographic evidence and data from nutritional surveys converge in their finding of severe seasonal nutritional deficits, as does the linguistic evidence and data from early colonial era reports. Routine administrative data and census information suggest that colonial era policies were unlikely to have significant effect because they were very modest in scale. The combined evidentiary base makes for a stronger overall argument.

²⁵ It is beyond the scope of this analysis to adequately address this point, but no obvious exogenous forces of change which could have accounted for the severe seasonal poverty found in the 1930s and 1940s, are apparent in the literature.

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