

The cocoa revolution

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The most important economic transformation in which the Basel Mission and its trading company participated was the rise of the cocoa economy in the Gold Coast. Cocoa was introduced into the Gold Coast in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Basel Mission made early attempts at cultivation. According to the Ghanaian tradition, the farmer and blacksmith Tetteh Quarshie, a man trained in the mission workshops, brought cocoa beans from the island of Fernando Po, where he had worked, to the Gold Coast in 1879 and planted them at Mampong in Akuapem, close to the mission centre of Akropong.¹

The cocoa economy spread rapidly among African farmers, who cleared forest land, planted cocoa trees and sold the beans to traders. Within three decades, the Gold Coast became the largest cocoa producer in the world. The expansion was driven by African farmers and entrepreneurs, who organised the migration of labour, the acquisition of land and the financing of plantations through their own networks. The Basel Mission Trading Company was one of the principal buyers and exporters of cocoa and contributed to the organisation of the trade by establishing buying stations, providing credit to farmers and arranging the shipment of cocoa to Europe.²

The cocoa of the Gold Coast was shipped to Europe, where it supplied the growing chocolate industry. Switzerland, whose chocolate manufacturers had become world leaders in the nineteenth century with the invention of milk chocolate and the conching process, was one of the largest consumers of West African cocoa. The Basel Mission Trading Company thus connected the farmers of Akuapem with the chocolate factories of Switzerland.

The cocoa economy brought prosperity to many farmers and made the Gold Coast one of the wealthiest colonies in Africa. It also created dependence on a single export commodity, exposed farmers to the

fluctuations of world prices and led to conflicts between farmers and the European trading firms, which sought to control prices. In 1937 and 1938, the cocoa farmers of the Gold Coast organised a boycott against the European trading firms, which had formed a buying agreement to depress prices. The conflict led to an inquiry by the British government.³

1 Notes

1. On the introduction of cocoa into the Gold Coast, the early experiments of the Basel Mission and the tradition of Tetteh Quarshie (c. 1842–1892), who is said to have brought cocoa beans from Fernando Po in 1879 and planted them at Mampong-Akuapem, see the literature on the history of cocoa in Ghana. To be verified. ↩
2. On the rise of the Gold Coast to the largest cocoa producer in the world by around 1911 and the role of African farmers and of European trading firms, including the Basel Mission Trading Company, see the literature on the cocoa economy of Ghana (e.g. Polly Hill, *The Migrant Cocoa-Farmers of Southern Ghana*, 1963). To be verified. ↩
3. On the cocoa hold-up of 1937/38 in the Gold Coast against the buying agreement of the European trading firms and the subsequent Nowell Commission, see the literature on the economic history of Ghana. To be verified. ↩

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