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Threats to Empire: Illicit Distillation, Venereal Diseases and Colonial Disorder in British West Africa, 1930-1948.¹

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Introduction

Between 1930 and 1948 colonial governments in British West Africa found themselves fighting an unusual battle against ordinary Africans on two fronts: illicit distillation from 1930, which undermined colonial revenue, assailed colonial hegemony in the flagrant disrespect for law, and compromised British subscription to international conventions that forbade liquor distillation in the African colonies; and prostitution, particularly during World War II, when venereal diseases emerged as a real threat to military preparedness among British military forces. Though I have written on liquor traffic, illicit distillation, and prostitution in colonial West Africa, I underestimated the American influence on the international context that framed these issues between the 1880s and the 1920s and the energy of American moral reform organizations that drove temperance and the social purity movement. The American factor enters African historiography from decolonization, and America and the former Soviet Union are presented as anti-colonial forces. Elided within this historiographical tradition are America’s imperial history and the formative influence of American moral reformers in shaping the very nature of colonial rule in the British Empire.² The internationalized

¹ An earlier draft of this paper was first presented at the International Conference on “Fighting Drink, Drugs and Venereal Disease,” Ascona, April 1-4, 2012. Papers presented at this conference and discussions underscored the need to connect the West African narrative more firmly to the broader international – and American – perspectives. I am grateful to Jessica Piley and Harald Fischer-Tine for their comments on this published version.

² The “new imperialism” studies have brought colonizer and colonized into the same analytical frame in instructive ways, exploring how influences move in both directions and also across colonies or empires. A good representative of this genre is Philippa Levine and Susan R. Grayzel, ed., Gender, Labour, War and Empire: Essays on Modern Britain (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). See also, Jane Burbank
struggle against vice in the British Empire lent a depth to colonial responses and a sharpness to the colonial crackdown on illicit distillers and prostitutes in West Africa in the 1930s and 1940s that radicalized ordinary men and women and unveiled their potential for nationalism and mass politics.

In the Gold Coast, for example, these ordinary men and women would be heavily represented in Kwame Nkrumah’s Convention People’s Party (CPP). The collapse of prohibition in America in 1933 in the face of widespread criminality and corruption took the wind out of the sail of the international moral reform movement and helped undermine the discourse of the “civilizing mission” and the “white man’s burden” as rationales for colonialism. In the aftermath of economic depression in the 1930s and World War II, colonial emphasis shifted to development in partnership with African nationalists. Nkrumah in the early years of Ghana’s independence commented on how the mosquito was an unsung hero, for its presence in West Africa limited white settlement and removed a bottleneck from the process of decolonization in West Africa. This chapter points to the ignored constituency of ordinary men and women who struggled to earn a living through distillation and the sex trade, how these pursuits positioned them as antagonists to colonial rule, and their resilience made them threats to empire.

The chapter is divided into five parts: an introduction; the role of American evangelicals in the Anglo-Saxon moral reform movement between the 1880s and the 1920s/30s; temperance, liquor legislation and the rise of illicit distillation in West Africa; the internal disorder caused by illicit distillers and prostitutes in West Africa during

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World War II; and a conclusion. It draws on archival sources from Britain and West Africa, oral interviews from Ghana, and published secondary literature.

**American Evangelicals and the Anglo-Saxon Moral Reform Movement, 1880s-1920s**

The late nineteenth century and World War I witnessed two major developments in American history that set the stage for the American moral reform movement with implications for the narrative outlined in this chapter for West Africa. The first was the Spanish-American War of 1898, which left America in possession of the overseas territories of the Philippines, Puerto Rico and other islands, and transformed the country into a major military and political presence in the Caribbean, South America, and Southeast Asia. By the end of the nineteenth century, the United States, the ardent critic of empire, had become one. The second development related to the transformation of America from being the great debtor-nation in the late nineteenth century, always hungry for foreign capital, to the world’s greatest creditor in 1918. Financing the Allied war effort had redeemed America’s debt to its European trading partners and given her a credit of US$1.7 billion in loans to the Allies.³ Appreciative of America’s growing might, American evangelicals sought to present a different vision of empire for America through moral reform. They perceived their empire as a Christian moral empire that was above “nation.” Their activities succeeded in giving the impression that American influence did not fit classical European imperialism.⁴

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The proliferation of American evangelical organizations that sought to reform the world is simply mind-boggling: the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the World Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WWCTU), the Anti-Saloon League, the American Purity Alliance, Rev. Dr. Wilbur Craft’s International Reform Bureau, the United Society for Christian Endeavor, the Student Volunteers, Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), the World League Against Alcoholism (WLAA), and others. Organizations such as the International Order of Good Templars (1852) and the WCTU, which had established an International Women’s Temperance Union in 1876, certainly predated the turn of the 20th century, when the formation of several reform movements coincided with America’s acquisition of overseas territories. These reform movements cut their teeth in campaigns against military canteens and the registered examination of prostitutes in America’s newly acquired colonies such as the Philippines. American evangelicals, such as the Methodist Frances Willard, who visited France in the 1860s and 1870s, were shocked to see the government regulation of prostitution. They were determined that such practices would not be part of America’s empire. Moral reformers waged a campaign to abolish military canteens in the Philippines, which was extended to include a social purity crusade once

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6 While the regulation of prostitution and the medical inspection of prostitutes had become so identified with France that it had come to be known as the “French system” within Europe, constituencies within France itself had come to question the wisdom of this policy and its co-existence with civil and political liberties by the 1870s under the Third Republic. Andrew Aisenberg, “Syphilis and Prostitution: A Regulatory Couplet in Nineteenth-Century France,” in Roger Davidson and Lesley A. Hall, ed., *Sex, Sin and Suffering: Venereal Disease and European Society since 1870* (London: Routledge, 2001), 15-28.
word leaked that the US Army in the Philippines had taken up the medical inspection of prostitutes, following the precedent of the previous Spanish regime.\textsuperscript{7}

For the American moral reformers these were foreign practices. Overlooked was America’s own history of the inspection and regulation of prostitution in some areas during the civil war, and St. Louis’s experimentation with the medical inspection of prostitutes beginning in 1870.\textsuperscript{8} Concerns about venereal diseases and soldiers arose for Britain and the United States during the Crimean War and the American Civil War. Rising venereal disease rates during the American Civil War encouraged the licensing of female prostitutes in some cities close to military encampments. What is striking about the St. Louis experiment is that it commenced during peacetime and it was aimed at a civilian population.\textsuperscript{9} In the introduction to an important volume on venereal disease and European society since 1870, Roger Davidson and Lesley Hall note how the regulation and inspection of prostitutes unduly affected “marginal” groups in metropoles, while for

\textsuperscript{7}José Flores Ramos, “Virgins, Whores, and Martyrs: Prostitution in the Colony, 1898-1919,” in Félix V. Matos Rodríguez and Linda C. Delgado, ed., Puerto Rican Women’s History (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), 84, notes that the first official brothel in San Juan was authorized by the king of Spain in 1526. Ramos points out, however, that by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, municipal authorities in San Juan, like other Western cities, had come to see prostitution as dangerous to health. Ramón Castejón-Bolea, “Doctors, Social Medicine and VD in Late-Nineteenth-Century and Early-Twentieth-Century Spain,” in Roger Davidson and Lesley A. Hall, ed., Sex, Sin and Suffering: Venereal Disease and European Society since 1870 (London: Routledge, 2001), 61-75, traces the Spanish government’s shifts in position on the regulation of prostitution from one of state acceptance from the sixteenth century to the prohibition of regulated prostitution in the seventeenth century to a new system of “tolerated houses” from the mid-nineteenth century. In the last phase, Spain followed the rest of Europe in the regulation and medical inspection of prostitutes.


\textsuperscript{9}Philippa Levine observes how contagious diseases acts were more extensive in their application in the colonies than in the metropoles, and colonial legislation on regulating prostitution often preceded that in the metropole. Philippa Levine, “Public Health, Venereal Disease and Colonial Medicine in the later Nineteenth Century,” in Roger Davidson and Lesley A. Hall, ed., Sex, Sin and Suffering: Venereal Disease and European Society since 1870 (London: Routledge, 2001), 160-72; and Philippa Levine, “Venereal Disease, Prostitution, and the Politics of Empire: The Case of British India,” Journal of the History of Sexuality, 4: 4 (1994), 579-602.
the colonies venereal disease “was an important site for the intersection of medicine, sexuality and imperialism.”

Philippa Levine shows that in St. Louis African American and immigrant women were heavily affected by regulation, though they constituted a small minority of the population, and venereal disease became a metaphor for savagery or primitiveness in the colonial context.

With the push by American moral reformers, the canteen for the US Navy was abolished in 1899, and for the Army in 1901. American troops were then stationed in the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Samoa, Hawaii and the Protectorate of Cuba. In 1903 colonial authorities enacted a two-mile prohibition zone around all military camps. The focus of moral reformers then shifted to the anti-prostitution campaign to prevent the US military from licensing prostitutes. These were complex developments, for while American moral reformers saw themselves and the United States’ empire as exceptional or unique, Laura Briggs argues “that U.S. colonialism emerged neither by accident … nor in isolation from other colonialisms, as many diplomatic historians have suggested, but rather inserted itself into an already established set of colonialist practices, specifically prostitution registration.”

She reflects on how the registration of prostitutes organized “disorderly” women and enrolled them as imperial citizens. British authorities in India, just as American authorities in the Philippines or Puerto Rico, assumed that the military rank-and-file lacked the higher instincts to abstain from sex and thus the dangers of “mercenary love.” The central issue then became how to protect European or American

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13 Ibid.
soldiers in foreign lands while providing for their sexual needs.\textsuperscript{14} Briggs flags Cynthia Enloe’s important insight that prostitution “is always one of the key questions for an army about garrisoning troops outside of “domestic” borders, and one of the first and always extensive negotiations with the receiving society.”\textsuperscript{15} Prostitution and its regulation in the colonies spoke to larger issues of sanctioned domesticity at home and abroad, as military prostitution serviced empire, while its regulation and inspection kept soldiers safe for their return home and future marriages.

The interconnections between empires is also illustrated in how American moral reformers traveled within the British empire and drew on lessons learned there for application in American possessions. But what American reformers viewed as the need to keep British licensed prostitution in India out of the US Army had a deeper and more complicated history. Mass petitioning under the encouragement of moral reformers, suffragettes and organizations such as the WCTU convinced Theodore Roosevelt to order a ban on the formal inspection of prostitutes in 1902. The attention of reformers now shifted to opium in 1903.\textsuperscript{16} But the regulation of prostitution would continue as a policy of the United States military overseas.

Wherever it went to combat “foreign” threats, the U.S. military instituted prostitution regulation. Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, Santo Domingo, the Panama Canal Zone, and the Philippines all had some policy of regulation from the moment of U.S. occupation, and this continued throughout the pre-World War I period.\textsuperscript{17}

In Puerto Rico the registration of prostitutes was formalized again in 1905, special hospitals existed for women found ill on inspection, and the regulation would continue

\textsuperscript{14} See, for example, Kenneth Ballhatchet, Race, Sex and Class under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics, 1793-1905 (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980).
\textsuperscript{15} Briggs, “Familiar Territory,” 43.
\textsuperscript{16} Tyrrell, Reforming the World, ch. 6.
\textsuperscript{17} Briggs, “Familiar Territory,” 50.
It is with the grant of U.S. citizenship to Puerto Rican residents in 1917 and
the conscription of thousands of young Puerto Rican men into compulsory military
service that U.S. authorities turned systematically to the suppression of prostitution in
Puerto Rico. There is clearly analytical value in not seeing U.S. imperialism as unique,
isolated or an accident.

Now an imperial power, American reformers converted to the idea of the
“civilizing mission” as the “white man’s burden” and extended their activities to the
British Empire and non-western peoples in partnership with British organizations. This
relationship of reformers on both sides of the Atlantic was bilateral and predated the late
nineteenth century. British reformers campaigning against the Contagious Diseases Act
in Britain from the 1860s that legalized the medical inspection of prostitutes in or near
docks and garrison towns reached out to the American anti-slavery party of William
Lloyd Garrison in 1876 for support. When the Contagious Diseases Acts were repealed
in Britain in 1886, British reformers extended their campaign to India and the existence
of military brothels in the cantonment system. In the face of colonial denial of the
existence of such a system, British reformers turned to American researchers, Dr.
Katherine Bushnell and Mrs. Elizabeth Andrew, to investigate the phenomenon in India.
Their report confirmed the existence of the brothels in military cantonments, and the
publication of their report forced governmental action in 1893. The Repeal Act of 1895
abolished the system in India, though its enforcement remained problematic, and the

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18 Ibid., 61.
British Army reinstated the practice in 1897. Philippa Levine shows how cantonment legislation that allowed Indian prostitutes to be identified and expelled from the cantonment encouraged women to volunteer for medical examination for fear of losing their livelihood.

Likewise in temperance there was cross-Atlantic collaboration. The WWCTU had a formal alliance with the British Women’s Temperance Association (BWTA) in 1886. The American naturalist, W. T. Hornaday, visited the Congo, saw the havoc of the European liquor trade and wrote an exposé, *Free Rum on the Congo* (1887). He condemned the European powers for their failure at the Congress of Berlin in 1884 to ban liquor from the Congo in their concern that the trade in the region be absolutely free. Temperance pressure on the British government convinced Lord Salisbury, secretary of state for the foreign office, of the need to pursue the issue at the Brussels Conference in 1889-90, where the seventeen-nation signatories for the first time restricted the importation of alcohol into Africa under the General Act of the Brussels Conference. Temperance pressure compelled a reluctant American government to sign the General Act belatedly in 1892. Mary Leavitt, the WCTU’s round-the-world- missionary traveled from West Africa east to the Congo basin in 1889 and discussed her findings at temperance gatherings. From the late 1890s American temperance reformers worked closely alongside their British counterparts, and the American Native Races Deputation formed by Rev. Dr. Wilbur Craft was modeled after the British Native Races and Liquor

21 Ibid., 259-60. See also, Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class*.
Traffic United Committee.\textsuperscript{25} Craft credited the WCTU influence on British policy for raising the tax on alcohol imported into Africa from 70 francs to 100 francs at the 1906 Brussels Convention.\textsuperscript{26} These successes buoyed the hopes of American temperance activists. The WCTU in 1911 announced the goal of world prohibition, followed by the Anti-Saloon League in 1913.\textsuperscript{27} With its chapters around the world and its campaign against legalized vice, WCTU was the American organization at the forefront of the international social purity movement in the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{28}

World War I and its accompanying patriotism generated a wave of restrictive legislations on alcohol in Europe in aid of the war effort. A strong prohibition movement emerged internationally, grounded in moral arguments and the perception that distillation and brewing diverted grain, molasses and labor from the war effort. Ian Tyrrell has observed that:

International conditions between 1917 and 1919 were as propitious as they would ever be for a world-wide prohibition drive. Wartime enthusiasm had had an effect on liquor and anti-liquor forces in many parts of Europe. Even the French had banned absinth during World War I, ‘the sole case of prohibition of a drink in France.’ Lloyd George, in a much publicized statement, had declared drink a greater enemy of the British nation than the Kaiser’s hordes, while his foe, Germany, had also restricted brewing. Some countries went further. Iceland had enacted prohibition as early as 1912, and Finland would do so in 1921. Norway had established a partial prohibition by outlawing alcohol over 12 per cent in 1917; a pro-prohibition vote was taken by plebiscite in 1919 and permanent legislation was enacted in 1921.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{25} Tyrrell, Reforming the World, 131-2.
\textsuperscript{26} Tyrrell, Woman’s World, 161.
\textsuperscript{27} Tyrrell, Reforming the World, 212.
\textsuperscript{28} Briggs, “Familiar Territory,” 52-54.
It is in this environment that the temperance movement in the United States pushed through the Volstead Act of 1919, which passed national prohibition. Daniel Okrent, however, points to how the ground for prohibition in America had been laid years before 1919. By 1901 WCTU had succeeded in establishing compulsory temperance education for every state in the United States, and 22 million American children out of the total population of 80 million people received temperance education thrice weekly. A generation of Americans came to age around 1919 bred on temperance. With prohibition, America embarked on its boldest social experiment, and evangelicals viewed it as their responsibility to export this “gift” to the world. As the Methodist Bishop James Cannon declared: “God has brought America into the kingdom for such a time as this.” The WCTU’s Union Signal proclaimed “world prohibition” as essential to “world democracy.” American prohibition became the test case for the viability of this experiment elsewhere.

It is against this larger background that Walter Long, secretary of state for the colonies in the British government, sought to strike a blow against “this German [and] Dutch trade” in liquor in West Africa. Writing to the governors of the British West African colonies on January 7, 1919, he opined that the time had come to extend “the system at present in force in the prohibited areas to the whole territory under your administration.” By this he was referring to the Brussels Convention of 1890 that had declared as prohibition zones in Africa areas hitherto not exposed to liquor traffic. The Brussels Act of 1890 established an arbitrary prohibition zone between latitudes 20

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31 Tyrrell, Reforming the World, 209-10.  
32 National Archives of Britain (NAB), London, CO 554/41/19073.
degrees north and 22 degrees south, within which the signatory European powers pledged to prohibit the importation and distillation of spirituous liquors in those areas not already exposed to these. American prohibitionists showed up at the Convention of St. Germain-en-Laye, which sought to put these measures into effect. Indeed, Ernest H. Cherrington of the Anti-Saloon League claimed that the League was responsible for the provisions against the supply of alcohol to African colonial peoples at St. Germain in 1919. The response of British colonial governors eager to protect liquor revenues as a valued source resulted in a compromise in the 1919 Convention. The European powers decided to ban “trade spirits,” defined as spirits exported with Africans as the targeted market and not ordinarily consumed by Europeans—in short, inferior spirits. Under this label, rum from New England, and German and Dutch gin were excluded from British Africa.

Emmanuel Akyeampong has examined in detail the process by which Dutch liquor interests lobbied for the reentry of Dutch gin or geneva into the Gold Coast in 1923, after its exclusion negatively affected colonial revenues. Prohibition in America prevented commercial distilleries that produced rum in New England for the West African market from seeking a similar concession. As early as 1763, there were 159 such distilleries in New England. The readmission of Dutch geneva increased imports of gin ten-fold in the Gold Coast from 83,855 gallons in 1921 to 859,160 gallons in 1925. Out of a total spirits imports of 1,313,258 gallons in 1927, gin contributed 1,181,913 gallons

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34 Tyrrell, *Reforming the World*, 212.
35 Okrent, *Last Call*, 7.
or 90 per cent of total imports. This spike in gin imports set the context for the temperance assault on liquor traffic in the Gold Coast from the late 1920s, and the subsequent decision to gradually prohibit gin.

One cannot divorce the politics of illicit distillation in the 1930s and 1940s and the fight against prostitution in West Africa during World War II from the international setting outlined in this section. Developments in America in the 1920s informed debates about the viability of prohibition in West Africa and the repeal of prohibition in 1933 signaled the defeat of this social experiment globally. The forces that undermined American prohibition—economic depression, the determination of individuals to drink and make money of alcohol, and popular culture as a nexus for drink and a site of resistance—were also present globally. But a spike in venereal diseases with the onset of World War II revived anxieties about the war and the military preparedness of British troops. This came after a decade of decline in the incidence of syphilis in Britain by almost 40 percent between 1931 and 1939. Concerns military authorities expressed about liquor consumption and the improper use of prophylactic packs among American and Dominion troops returned. Four hundred thousand (400,000) cases of venereal disease were treated among British and Dominion troops during World War I. Viewed as working class “vices” and embedded in a working class popular culture that tolerated illegality, prostitution and illicit distillation became joint targets of the colonial crackdown in West Africa during World War II. There is a sense, also, in which military

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37 Lesley A. Hall, “Venereal Diseases and Society in Britain, from the Contagious Diseases Acts to the National Health Service,” in Davidson and Hall, ed., *Sex, Sin and Suffering*, 130.
38 Ibid., 125.
authorities perceived the rank-and-file of armies, largely recruited from the working classes, as particularly prone to commercial sex and to drink.  

Temperance, Liquor Legislation and the Rise of Illicit Distillation in West Africa

Early colonial rule in British West Africa was heavily dependent on duties on imported liquor. Simon Heap has highlighted how liquor was the most important import in terms of volume and value in the British colonies of Lagos, Oil Rivers Protectorate, Niger Coast Protectorate and Southern Nigeria, all of which were eventually incorporated in 1914 into the Southern Provinces of Nigeria. In 1906 Southern Nigeria became the first West African colony to earn a million pounds in revenue. Liquor duties constituted half the colony’s total revenue. In the four years before World War I, liquor duties comprised about 38 per cent of total revenue in the Gold Coast. For temperance advocates in Britain and West Africa, liquor had a degenerating effect on Africans, and they saw an explicit connection between drink, immorality and crime.

39 See, for example, M. J. Exner, “Prostitution in its Relations to the Army on the Mexican Border,” Social Hygiene, 3: 2 (917), 205-20. Nikolay Kamenov, this volume, points to how alcoholism and venereal diseases—together with mental illness and other diseases such as tuberculosis—merged in the “social hygiene” movement from the early twentieth century. An increasingly scientific approach to vices transformed alcoholism, for example, from being solely a religious and moral concern.


41 Akyeampong, Drink, Power, and Cultural Change, 81.

42 See Charles Ambler in this volume. Ambler explores the attempts by temperance advocates in the 1909 Liquor Traffic Commission to place southern Nigerians with other “native” peoples in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa as racial minors who needed to be protected from the degenerative impact of European liquor, and some African resistance to this categorization.
these as being in direct competition with British textiles. In the Colony of Lagos between 1892 and 1903, the duty on liquor imports amounted to as much as between 53 per cent and 68 per cent of total revenue.

In response to missionary and temperance agitation in Nigeria and the Gold Coast, the two British colonies in West Africa with the highest liquor imports, duties on liquor were successively raised from the 1890s but with little effect on demand. The beneficial result was to increase government revenue. Meanwhile, a debate raged in Southern Nigeria in the early 20th century over whether there was a liquor problem. The Lagos governor argued that cases of drunkenness were rare and that temperance allegations of a liquor problem in Southern Nigeria were unfounded.

As far as the government was concerned, this was a case of morality blending with sound economics, and the Colonial Office was able to view with some satisfaction “the beauty of a system by which the consumers of spirits were made to contribute more than anyone else to the cost of governing the country.”

But advocates of prohibition succeeded in pushing for a commission of inquiry into the liquor question in Southern Nigeria in 1909. Chaired by Sir Mackenzie Chalmers, a former British civil servant in India, the commission concluded that there was no evidence that liquor consumption had caused the population of Southern Nigeria any physical harm, and that the commission was satisfied with the quality of spirits imported into the region.

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44 Ibid., 237.
45 Ibid., 239.
In the Gold Coast, the significant increase in gin and geneva imports by 1928 riled temperance and missionary interests. The legislative council meeting in the Gold Coast on March 1, 1928 provided an occasion for chiefs and the educated elite to jointly launch a formal attack against colonial dependence on liquor revenues. Unwillingly, the colonial government was pushed into setting up a committee in 1928 to review liquor licensing, and a commission in 1929-1930 to consider the entire question of gin and geneva imports and the consumption of spirits in the Gold Coast. Chaired by the secretary for native affairs, H. S. Newlands, the colonial government’s dilemma was made explicit in the second term of reference for the 1929-30 Commission: “in the event of action being advisable which would be likely to result in an appreciable loss of revenue, what means should be adopted to make good that loss.”

After lengthy deliberations, in which 125 witnesses were heard, the commission recommended the gradual prohibition of geneva imports over a ten-year period by means of progressive reduction on a quota basis. The commission opined that the liquor question in the Gold Coast was confined to the consumption of gin, and that there was a genuine demand for its exclusion, but that the Gold Coast had no national drink problem. Liquor laws were enacted in 1930 to implement the commission’s recommendations. The Gin and Geneva (Restriction of Importation) Ordinance was intended to gradually prohibit gin and geneva

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47 Gold Coast, Legislative Council Debates, March 1, 1928. Akyeampong, Drink, Power, and Cultural Change, ch. 4, examines the complexity of temperance discourse and politics. Gold Coast educated elite and chiefs had been content when liquor revenues were applied to internal development under Governor Frederick Guggisberg (1919-27). It was partly his successor’s refusal to respect the link between liquor revenue and internal development that attracted the strident criticism of Gold Coast representatives in the legislative council from 1928.

over ten years, complete prohibition to be achieved after December 1939. The Liquor Traffic Amendment Ordinance prohibited the importation of cheap brandy, rum, and whisky to preempt their replacing gin. The import duty on potable spirits was raised 21.8 per cent from 27.6d. in 1928 to 33s.6d. in June 1930. The Liquor Licenses (Spirits) Amendment Ordinance imposed further restrictions on the sale of spirits.

But this time it was not business as usual: an increase in the tariff on liquor that does not offset demand. Economic depression had intervened from 1929, and the ordinary men and women for whom German and Dutch schnapps and gin had become central in their social life had limited financial resources. They turned to illicitly distilled gin. For the colonial government the first signal of the change in tide was the sharp drop in liquor imports and applications for spirit licenses. Gin imports declined 91.4 per cent from 569,746 gallons in 1929 to 49,356 gallons in 1931 although the permitted quota was 512,280. The total revenue collected from spirit licenses dropped 82.4 per cent from £68,078 in 1928-29 to £12,118 in 1933-34. Officials debated whether this decline in gin imports was due only to the temporary decrease in purchasing power because of the fall in the value of cocoa exports in the depression or was a reflection of a new, permanent downward trend in gin imports. The colonial government quickly discovered that Gold Coasters had turned to illicit distillation. Cases of illicit distillation jumped from six in 1930-31 with eleven persons convicted when the colonial government began to keep

49 Gold Coast, Government Gazette, October 25, 1930 and November 1, 1930. The government decided to avoid the confusion in distinguishing pot-still Geneva from patent-still gin by abolishing both over the ten-year period. In this way, Dutch distillers could not accuse the British of discriminating in favor of British gin distillers.
50 Gold Coast, Government Gazette, November 3, 1930.
51 Gold Coast, Government Gazette, November 18, 1930 and November 22, 1930.
records of offenses to 558 reported cases with 603 persons convicted between April 1, 1933 and March 31, 1934.\(^{53}\)

Moreover, this epidemic in illicit distillation had spread to Nigeria, though liquor politics differed there in the 1920s. Governor Donald Cameron of Nigeria, equally overtaken by events, believed that illicit distillation had “commenced as recently as May last [1931] and it is alleged that the knowledge was acquired from natives who had returned from the United States of America.”\(^{54}\) The sudden eruption of illicit distillation was perhaps what convinced the governor that its origins had to be foreign. In the Gold Coast case, it is clear that knowledge of distillation predated the 1930s, and informants noted that the Basel missionaires distilled liquor from fermented cocoa beans. Of rural background in southern Germany and Switzerland, Basel missionaires were often familiar with processes of distillation, making brews like *most* from fermented apples back home.\(^{55}\) Ewe laborers who worked on the Basel Mission’s cocoa farms in Akropong picked up knowledge of distillation.\(^{56}\) Secure in their homelands of the Volta River District—extending east of the Volta River estuary littered with lagoons, ponds, creeks and isolated islands—the Ewe of southeastern Ghana from the 1930s took up distillation with gusto.

In January 1934, a highly successful raid was made by the police in force between the villages of Kpong and Amedica, where 50 Bush Stills, 40 gallons of distilled spirits and 500 gallons of palm wine were seized and destroyed. Fines to the aggregate of £375 were imposed in respect of this raid but nothing was paid. The raid revealed the fact that the Volta River Islands afford suitable shelter for the

\(^{53}\) Ibid.
\(^{54}\) Governor of Nigeria to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, December 22, 1931. NAB, CO 554/89/4495.
\(^{56}\) Interview with Anita Mensah, August 16, 1994.
distillers which accounts for the numerous cases of possessing trade spirits reported in the Akuse and Ada Districts.\textsuperscript{57}

Olorunfemi also noted the existence of illicit distillation in Nigeria around 1910.\textsuperscript{58} By 1931, the governor of Nigeria reported that the “secret of distilling spirits by means of a rude still made of earthen pots (or petrol tins) and copper or tubing is being sold broadcast for £10 in each case.”\textsuperscript{59}

**Besieged Within and Without: Illicit Distillers, Prostitutes and Internal Disorder in British West Africa during WWII**

*The Age of Akpeteshie (illicit gin)*

It is important to note how popular culture in the 1930s and 1940s brought together migrants and indigenes in the burgeoning towns, and created a shared social nexus in which distillers and retailers of illicit gin mixed with prostitutes, musicians, and actors. Drinking bars, dance halls, cinema, and comic opera (“concert”) were vital pillars of popular culture. The common social background of patrons and their struggle to subsist and thrive economically in colonial towns lent camaraderie to their resistance to colonial law and decriminalized their behavior. For elderly informants interviewed in the early 1990s, illicit distillation and its persecution was about colonial liquor revenues and the desire of the colonial government to preserve a valuable source of income. As K. K. Kabah, an executive member of the Western Region Distillers Cooperative put it:

> The white men wanted to cheat us. If they could ban our local drink, we would end up buying their imported drinks. We knew they were cheating us, but we could not say anything. So we hid in isolated places and distilled our gin and drank our thing.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{57} Gold Coast, Report on the Police Department, 1933-34, 5.
\textsuperscript{58} Olorunfemi, “Liquor Traffic,” 241.
\textsuperscript{59} NAB, CO 554/89/4495.
\textsuperscript{60} Interview with the Western Region Distillers Cooperative Management Committee, Takoradi, August 16, 1994.
Even A. A. Amartey, who worked in the Broadcasting Corporation until 1959 and was thus familiar with the colonial government’s position on illicit distillation, affirmed that it was all about revenue.\textsuperscript{61}

It is against this context that colonial officials expressed doubt about their ability to rein in illicit distillation, considering that even some chiefs, partners in colonial rule, refused to see illicit distillation as a moral or legal crime. In his report for 1933, the commissioner for the Eastern Province in despair confessed:

I must with regret express the opinion that illicit distillation will never be entirely stamped out, as it has become the practice to distill in individual houses sufficient spirit for family needs, apart from the class of distillers for commercial profit. The process is easy, the profit is clear, and the trade is regarded as a very venial breach of the law by the chiefs and people generally. It is quite obvious, however, that definite action must be taken by the government, who cannot remain passive under the reproach which is conveyed in the native name of the liquor “the whiteman’s shame.”\textsuperscript{62}

That illicit distillation was taking on organized form was especially worrisome to the colonial government, not to mention the complicity of even those not directly involved in the industry.

At this point, prohibition in America had collapsed, with foreign newspapers and Hollywood documenting vividly the gangster culture with its accompanying violence that emerged to combat the authorities. Illicit distillation and smuggling tested the limits of the forces of law and order, and for Okrent a key aspect of prohibition’s failure in America was how it “encouraged criminality and institutionalized hypocrisy” and “fostered a culture of bribery, blackmail, and official corruption.”\textsuperscript{63} British colonial

\textsuperscript{61} Interview with A. A. Amartey (aka Nii Amarkai II), Accra, August 31, 1994.
\textsuperscript{62} NAB, CO 96/715/21702. Eastern Province Commissioner’s Report, December 28, 1933.
\textsuperscript{63} Okrent, \textit{Last Call}, 373.
authorities worried that such criminality had taken root in West Africa due to the restrictive liquor legislation they had passed in a time of economic depression.

Motor lorries have on occasions been found to be conveying as much as 100 gallons illicitly distilled spirits at a time. The distribution and sale of such quantities of unusually potent liquor in any community could well be unknown even by those of the local inhabitants who neither participate in the trade nor themselves consume the illicitly distilled spirits; but, despite this, the fact remains that it is very rarely indeed that any assistance or information is volunteered to the police in this matter by Africans who could, by reason of their social status or their education, be expected to disapprove of the trade in cheap potent illicit spirits.64

Even the snobbish educated elites, who looked down on illicit distillers and retailers involved in a “dirty” industry associated with hiding in the bush and a pungent odor, still would not inform on them, as they took sides in the battle between “European” and “African” liquor. Informants from the 1990s revealed that illicit gin was smuggled into town at night, sometimes by armed gangs and delivered to retailers.65

The forces of law and order seemed compromised as well. In Ibagwa Mill in Calabar, Nigeria, the commissioner of police reported a constable on duty found “raving and manic drunk” from what was believed to be illicit gin.66 Faced with the specter of a breakdown in law and order, corruption of the police force, public complicity, and a flourishing counter culture, colonial officials could not help but see the parallels with the resistance to prohibition in America in the 1930s. Enforced by the 18th Amendment to the American Constitution from 1920 to 1933, prohibition in America faltered in the face of the insistence of many to the right to drink or profit from drink, and the inability of the

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64 Gold Coast, Report on the Police Department, 1934-35, 7.
65 Interview with Jeremiah Oman Ano, Sekondi, August 15, 1994.
66 Resident of the Calabar Province, “Memorandum on the Illicit Distilling of Spirits in the Calabar Province.” NAB, CO 554/89/4495.
government to enforce prohibition especially with the onset of economic depression.67 An era associated with home stills, gangsters, bootleggers, speakeasies (underground bars that provided food, live music and shows with liquor as a quiet aside), police corruption, gang violence, and violent clashes between gangs and the forces of law and order, the colonial government feared the worst in the Gold Coast and Nigeria.

Indeed, the American example of prohibition seemed to have created a negative precedent, as the international sentiments in favor of prohibition cited above during WWI dissipated in the 1920s and 1930s. As resistance to prohibition in the United States was fully reported in international media, the American prohibitionist, Mary Harris Armor, could not help but complain that: “Never was a crime committed in America but it was heralded from one end of the Dominion to the other [here a reference to the British Empire], as being the result of prohibition.”68 In an age where prohibitionists in the United States sought to export prohibition to Europe and the British dominions and colonies, the unraveling of prohibition in their own country came to serve as their strongest indictment. American movies exported this image.

One of the clearest trends across a number of countries was the image of an America racked by sexual immorality, divorce, crime, and gangster violence conveyed in American movies, which were outlets in no way directly controlled by liquor interests. Moral reformers outside the United States across a broad range of positions on the prohibition issue did not like what they saw in these movies, and American prohibitionists reported back at home the negative impact this had on support for prohibition outside the country.69

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69 Ibid., 345-6.
In the Gold Coast, as governors beginning with Shenton Thomas in 1933 sought to repeal the restrictive liquor legislation that had unleashed illicit distillation, they made explicit reference to the American failure with prohibition. Stating his case to the secretary of state for the colonies in 1933, Thomas opined that: “Unintentionally we have imposed a policy of prohibition, with the results which I understand have been noted elsewhere.” He went on to express the inability of the police to suppress illicit distillation: “It will be understood that, although they do their best, the police are no more able to suppress the traffic here than they have been in the United States of America.” His conclusion was that the colonial government made a mistake with the restrictive liquor legislation of 1930-31, “even though with the best intentions, [and] it is our duty to put it right.” Liquor imports dropped through the 1930s, a trend worsened by the onset of World War II and the need to utilize shipping space for the war effort. Unable to sufficiently reduce the duty on imported gin to make it competitive with illicitly distilled local gin due to international conventions, and responding to the concerns of colonial governments over revenue and law and order, the Colonial Office in 1943 approved the private distillation of gin by West Africans under new legislation to be passed by the governments in Nigeria and the Gold Coast. Citing regulatory problems and anticipating bitter opposition from “missionary bodies,” the Nigerian colonial government backed out of this scheme, and the Gold Coast decided not to pursue this course alone. Nationalist politicians would champion the cause of legalizing locally distilled gin in the 1950s.

70 Governor Shenton Thomas to SOS Cunliffe Lister, January 7, 1933. NAB, CO 96/708/1660.
71 The lowest duty that could be levied on a gallon of imported gin under the St. Germain Convention was 24s in 1936, which still made imported gin over-priced compared to local gin. NAB, CO 554/104/33522 (1936). On the Colonial Office’s approval to distill gin in Nigeria and the Gold Coast, see “Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Colonies,” dated April 28, 1943. NAB, CO 554/127/33522/B.
72 NAB, CO 554/127/33522/B. T. Hoskyns-Abrahall, Nigerian Secretariat (Lagos), to Resident Minister (Accra), August 9, 1943.
A Diseased Fighting Force: VDs and British Troops

As the colonial government struggled to get out of the conundrum of illicit distillation in the 1930s and 1940s, it was faced with a new challenge in venereal diseases with the onset of WWII. Venereal diseases had long been associated with sailors and soldiers in colonial Africa, and venereal diseases clinics existed in several seaports under international conventions such as the Brussels Agreement of 1924, where sailors could be treated free of charge.73 Venereal diseases tended to spike among troops during war because of troop mobility and wartime conditions, as evidenced in WWI.74 The American medical doctor, M. J. Exner put it succinctly in a 1917 publication: “It is a matter of history that prostitution follows the army.”75 The resulting concern, as venereal diseases rates soared among British troops and particularly among Dominion soldiers (Canada, Australia, New Zealand), allowed the reintroduction of elements of the Contagious Diseases Acts.76 The British government even passed a new Defense of the Realm Regulation 40D in March 1918 making it an offense for women with a communicable venereal disease to solicit and have sex with a member of the British armed forces.77

During WWII, venereal diseases assumed epidemic proportions among British and African troops stationed in British West Africa, necessitating a discussion of this development at the eighth meeting of the West African War Council in 1943.78 From the

75 Exner, “Prostitution in its relations to the army,” 205.
76 Ibid., 146.
77 Ibid., 163.
78 British colonies in West Africa had escaped the Contagious Diseases Acts in the late nineteenth century because of the small European populations in colonies like the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone. Levine, “Public Health, VD and Colonial Medicine,” 162. The Cape Colony differed in this respect, and it
colonial perspective, illicit distillation and venereal diseases appeared to have combined
to threaten colonial revenue and military preparedness – in short, the British war effort.
Nigeria went as far as to pass in 1943 a “Bill for an Ordinance Relating to Venereal
Disease,” making it a criminal offence for anyone to conceal a venereal disease condition
and not report to the medical officer of health for the area or a qualified medical
practitioner for treatment. Ostensibly battling “red light” districts and brothels in Lagos
and the Southern Provinces, the Bill gave the governor of Nigeria the power to commit an
entire group in a locality for treatment.

Where the Governor, on a report by the Director of Medical Services, has reason
to believe that venereal disease is prevalent among the residents in any premises
or locality he may issue an order requiring the examination by a medical officer of
the health of any person or of persons of any specified class or description
residing therein.79

Colonial responses to venereal diseases and prostitution are not as detailed in the archives
as the two decades struggle against illicit distillation and its undercutting of colonial
revenues. The peak of venereal diseases during the war in the 1940s also coincided with
the invention of penicillin as an effective treatment for gonorrhea.

British official responses to the threat of venereal diseases to the military
preparedness of troops drew on the tradition and legacy of the Contagious Diseases Acts
that had been introduced into Britain and the Empire from the 1860s. This tradition
viewed the British soldier, a loyal patriot who had offered his life in defense of country,
as the victim of loose, diseased women. The soldier had to be protected; the culprit was

witnessed the institutionalization of prostitution from 1868. See Elizabeth B. Van Heyningen, “The Social
Evil in the Cape Colony 1868-1902: Prostitution and the Contagious Diseases Acts,” Journal of Southern
African Studies, 10: 2 (1984), 170-97. It was during World War II that large numbers of European and
American troops were stationed in West Africa.
79 “A Bill for an Ordinance Relating to Venereal Disease.” Copy in PRAAD, Accra, CSO 11/10/136
(1943).
the diseased woman. Measures included preventing known prostitutes from residing in or frequenting places where troops were stationed. At the same time sexual virility was associated with the military tradition: “a sexless soldier is a paradox,” opined an American physician in 1918.\textsuperscript{80} The British military authorities responded by issuing soldiers with prophylaxis in World War I: calomel ointment for syphilis and potassium permanganate solution or tablets for gonorrhea. Lavage or washing rooms in barracks facilitated the post-coital washing or flushing of genitals with prophylactic preparations. In the tropical colonies, racial difference and the supposedly dangerous environment of the tropics complicated this legacy. Philippa Levine notes how over the period from the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century through the 1920s, British perceptions of the “sexual fecundity of the tropics, the fear of contagion, the associations between race and sex changed very little …”\textsuperscript{81} Her observation can be extended to the period of World War II.

Colonial officials routinely argued that prostitution was normalized in nonwhite societies and held no stigma. This, they argued, was proof that subject peoples were less evolved.\textsuperscript{82}

Commenting on the language of war in the combat of venereal diseases, Levine opines that the “greater vulnerability of British troops abroad to disease more than to combat made military metaphors potent.”\textsuperscript{83}

World War II saw the peak of prostitution and venereal diseases during the colonial period. In Sekondi-Takoradi, a port town in the Gold Coast, this was the time of “pilot boys,” who guided foreign soldiers and sailors to prostitutes for a small

\textsuperscript{80} Cited in Levine, \textit{Prostitution, Race, and Politics}, 153.
\textsuperscript{81} Levine, \textit{Prostitution, Race, and Politics}, 323.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 324.
commission. Globally, the number of people suffering from syphilis peaked during World War II, and then fell dramatically. In terms of drug therapy, the effectiveness of drugs in the treatment of yaws and syphilis from the 1920s encouraged attendance at government hospitals and venereal clinics, and this partly explains the decline in syphilis in colonial medical statistics. Gonorrhea, on the other hand, seemed to increase over the colonial period, reaching “epidemic” proportions during World War II in West Africa. In 1943, when Nigeria passed its bill criminalizing the non-reporting and non-treatment of venereal diseases, all over West Africa military personnel showed gonorrhea rates in excess of 60 per cent per each British West African colony. The governors of the British West African colonies at an executive meeting in May 1942 had considered the necessity of altering the law “so as to empower Medical Officers of Health to enforce the attendance for examination and treatment, if necessary, of persons suspected to be, or known to be, suffering from venereal diseases.” The decision was to await the legislation to be passed by Nigeria on venereal diseases and follow Nigeria’s lead. Following Nigeria’s example in 1943, the criminal code was amended in the Gold Coast in 1943 to prosecute those found harboring venereal diseases.

The West African War Council considered “the Takoradi/Sekondi area [as] the worst area of the coast from the point of view of venereal disease,” as seen from medical statistics of the incidence of venereal diseases among the members of the Royal Air Force (R.A.F.). The War Council resolved that a “special drive” in this Gold Coast town was necessary. This took place on June 26, 1943 and netted nineteen persons who were

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charged under the relevant sections of the Criminal Code (Amendment) Ordinance of 1943. The acting senior health officer of the Western Province, E. Daly, reported that:

Further “drives” of a like nature are contemplated in the near future. Meanwhile a special watch is being maintained to locate Brothels and Wing Commander Graham R.A.F. tells me that Takoradi has been placed “out of bounds” and that additional service police have been employed to enforce order. These measures should help reduce to some extent the incidence of venereal disease in Takoradi, which is the “Red Lamp” section as far as the R.A.F. is concerned.86

These measures seemed to have helped and a grateful Air-Vice Marshall J. Cole-Hamilton, the air officer commanding R.A.F. in West Africa, wrote to the Governor of the Gold Coast on September 15, 1943 to express his appreciation.

It is now possible to compare the incidence for the three months of June, July and August with that for the preceding three months. Figures, which are expressed as rates per thousand per year, are as follows:

- June, July and August, 48
- March, April and May, 77.

An improvement during the last three months is apparent and I trust that this will be bettered in the future. I should like to thank you for the assistance you have given.87

A major article by R. R. Wilcox in 1956 compares military and civilian statistics on the incidence of venereal diseases in British West Africa between 1944 and 1945.88 He provides medical statistics for European and African troops in the last two years of the war in the four British West African colonies, when the War Council was most concerned with the issue.

Table 1: Relative Importance of VDs in European and African Troops in 1944 & 1945

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86 PRAAD, Accra, CSO 11/11/140.
87 Ibid.
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In addition to the broad representation of venereal diseases in table 1, one notes an increase in syphilis cases for both European and African troops from 1944 to 1945, though still under ten per cent incidence, and alarmingly high rates of gonorrhea and urethritis in both European and African troops. On average for 1944 and 1945, over 70 per cent of the troops in each British West African colony—both African and
European—suffered from gonorrhea and urethritis. In this period, there were approximately fifty thousand African troops in the four West African colonies being trained by about six thousand Europeans.89

The British official tendency to label as “prostitutes” and social deviants broad categories of women who offered sexual services to soldiers and sailors in West Africa for gifts and remuneration ignored deep cultural norms that regulated sexual relations, and social dynamics within working class communities such as Sekondi-Takoradi, where “respectable” and “non-respectable” women—from the perspective of colonial authorities—cohabitated and shared a common popular culture. Peter Sarpong notes from songs sang during puberty rites in colonial Asante that domesticity and reward were linked, and men were expected to reward women after sexual intercourse.90 For British military authorities—who may not have understood the cultural nuances at play--this underscored the thin line between prostitutes and non-prostitutes and reinforced long-standing colonial assumptions that portrayed women in the tropics as contaminated.91

Posters prepared by the General Council of Health Education in Britain as part of the propaganda campaign against venereal diseases, which the colonial office sent to the Gold Coast for possible use, confirm that the colonial focus was on European troops and expatriates in the Gold Coast. With images of European wives waiting back at home, the posters stressed the importance of European soldiers returning home clean from venereal diseases.

In African colonial towns prostitutes were usually migrants who used their social anonymity to earn a living. For some women this was an initial step to townlife, and they

viewed prostitution as temporary. Studies in prostitution in colonial Africa have noted the general absence of male pimps; hence women controlled their sexuality and earnings. Prostitution often provided merely the initial capital that enabled migrant women set up in other trades, and marriage remained a desirable goal. Indeed, in southern Ghana were female labor and accumulation were supposed to be pursued within marriage, prostitutes in colonial towns as single, assertive women making money on their own became radical role models for other women. The absence of social barriers between “prostitutes” and “respectable women” in working-class leisure activities in towns such as Sekondi-Takoradi facilitated the exchange of beliefs and mannerisms. Social life in Takoradi in the 1930s and 1940s revolved around spots like Columbia Hotel, famous for its dances. The “Liberian Bar,” owned by a Liberian in Takoradi, was another active spot in the 1930s and 1940s. As prostitutes and non-prostitutes patronized these places, mannerisms were exchanged. The ability to chew gum and make it snap was introduced into Sekondi-Takoradi by Kru women from Liberia, but it expanded to become the badge of female nonchalance. The association of prostitution with images of autonomy, acquisitiveness, even glamor, was evident in the recollection of Anita Mensah, whose family was involved in illicit distillation in the Sekondi-Takoradi area in the 1930s and 1940s.

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By then, Kru people were the dominant group in Takoradi. The other growing area was Nkontompo in Sekondi. There many women resided. The men who worked at Takoradi lived in compounds, for example the present New Takoradi, and when they wanted women came down from the compound at New Takoradi to Nkontompo in Sekondi. So the nickname “Nkontompo Headquarters” emerged. Many single women lived there. In this period some of the young men who visited Nkontompo would fall in love, and ask the women to quit the business of prostitution and come to join them at New Takoradi as wives. I saw this happening myself.\textsuperscript{95}

It is unclear how a neighborhood in Sekondi acquired the name Nkontompo, but \textit{nkontompo} in Twi, the Akan language, means “deceit” or “falsehood,” and the sexual conduct of freelance single women may have bequeathed the title of “Nkontompo” to their residential area. In this Ahanta town of Sekondi, prostitutes were migrants and not indigenes, and interviewees recalled the dominance of Fante women from Cape Coast.

For the colonial authorities, illicit distillers, those who sold and consumed illicit gin, and prostitutes were criminals, whose activities undermined colonial revenues, sabotaged British troops, and encouraged disrespect for colonial law. Leveraging tools that years of anti-vice legislation in Britain and the Empire had bequeathed, it deployed the considerable forces of the state against ordinary men and women struggling for a living. Many distillers of illicit gin were also cocoa farmers, the crop that propelled the Gold Coast to fame when it emerged as the world’s leading producer in 1911. Cocoa took six years to mature and bear pods, and in the interim cash-strapped cocoa farmers depended on illicit distillation from the oil palm, which grew in the same forest environment as cocoa. Ensconced in isolated farming hamlets, distillation could be safely carried out. Colonial antagonism to these economic pursuits sensitized ordinary West Africans politically. The connections between farmers involved in the cocoa hold-ups of the 1930s, who refused to sell their cocoa to expatriate companies for the low prices

\textsuperscript{95} Interview with Anita Mensah, Takoradi, August 16, 1994.
offered in the depression; farmers as illicit distillers in the 1930s and 1940s; and the support of this constituency for the commoners’ party, Nkrumah’s CPP, merits investigation. On February 28, 1948, the Gold Coast exploded in riots, as a boycott of European imported goods intersected with a protest march of ex-servicemen seeking relief from the economic hardships of the post-war period and programs to rehabilitate ex-servicemen. Accounts of the demonstration indicate that it quickly became more than an ex-servicemen’s march, and the police firing on the protestors sparked off the riots. The commoners who patronized popular culture were at the center of these riots. The colonial government decided that the Gold Coast was ready for decolonization and put in place a process to transfer political power. Commoners gained a champion in the CPP, formed in 1949, which adopted the legalization of illicit distillation as a cause, and incorporated into its ranks market women and notable prostitutes such as Ataa Baasi of Kumasi. The party became a prominent patron of popular culture, using musicians and actors in its campaigns. Though absent from the Gold Coast between 1935 and 1947, Nkrumah as an organizer was astute enough on his return to detect a major shift in Gold Coast politics; that urban workers and rural farmers had emerged as a politically conscious class, and that in the move to popular elections, they would hold the upper hand, not the numerically few chiefs and the educated elite. Nkrumah was the political leader who read accurately, the signs evident in the struggle of the illicit distillers and the prostitutes against colonial rule. That was the most fundamental political development in the 1930s and the 1940s: the era of mass politics had emerged.

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96 Ataa Baasi had founded the Baasifuo Community, an association of prostitutes in Kumasi that sought and received recognition from the king of Asante (Asantehene). PRAAD, Kumasi, Item 2339 (1943). See also, Ashanti Pioneer, April 27, 1955.
Conclusion

This paper has sought to connect the local struggles in colonial British West Africa over illicit distillation and prostitution (and venereal diseases) in the 1930s and 1940s to the metropolitan temperance and social purity crusade, and the mission of American evangelicals to reform the world. The three levels connect to provide an understanding of the anti-vice crusade, which is missed when any of these levels is examined in isolation. The strength of the American moral reform movement made prohibition in America a global test case. Their interests pursued through Anglo-Saxon networks on both sides of the Atlantic informed international liquor conventions on Africa despite the fact that America did not hold colonies in Africa. When prohibition failed in America, the lid was closed on prohibition around the world. The history of the Contagious Diseases Acts and its offshoots in Britain, the British Empire, and the American colonies forged a set of official responses to prostitution and the military over decades that were extended to West Africa during World War II. Levine notes in regards to prostitution and its regulation during the colonial period that:

Historians of empire have mostly chosen to ignore how far the tensions over the abandonment of CD [Contagious Diseases] legislation pushed the imperial government to the brink, and on several occasions. That the topic precipitating such a crisis was concerned with lowly prostitute women and diseases impossible to name in polite circles is important.97

These “lowly prostitute women” in West Africa were baffled by the colonial state’s intense interest in their activities during World War II, unaware of the larger history of the Contagious Diseases Acts and the social purity considerations that framed this encounter.

97 Levine, Prostitution, Race, and Politics, 328.
The outcome was a political radicalization of women involved in the sex trade, distillers and consumers of illicit gin, and patrons of a popular culture that increasingly drew together rural and urban networks. An inadvertent threat to empire, their response to colonial prosecution underscored for an astute political organizer like Nkrumah their potential for political mobilization in the nationalist cause. Sekondi-Takoradi became a stronghold of Nkrumah’s CPP and a center of radical politics. Those interviewed on nationalist politics in the 1950s, especially the campaigns leading up to the elections of 1951 and 1954 in the Gold Coast, recalled how some CPP politicians exploited the liquor question.

I was in Ashanti when the struggle for independence was on, and I heard the CPP politicians on the platform saying the British government is deceiving us. In those days if they see you with a tot of akpeteshie, you were in trouble. Akpeteshie was banned in the country by the British government, and you would be prosecuted whether you were drinking it or distilling it or even holding it. … So they [the CPP politicians] said ‘the British government is bringing their alcoholic beverages from overseas to us and is asking us to buy [these], but we make our own [drink] here and they say no. If I go to Parliament, I will see to it that it is legalized.’ And they won. The last statement speaks to the importance of legalizing distillation as a nationalist issue and the electoral significance of this constituency. Incorporated into the national “narrative,” this hitherto neglected constituency propelled Nkrumah’s party to political power in the era of mass politics.

100 On the location of “narrative” at the center of history, empire and nationalism, see Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).