

Imperial Policing and the Antinomies of Power in Early Colonial Ghana

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Abstract: *In the nineteenth century, constabulary officers in the British Gold Coast were emancipated slaves purchased for conscription. From 1870 to 1900, British officials bought enslaved men of “Hausa” origin, hailing from the Northern territories and the Niger hinterland. In Britain’s eyes, Hausas constituted a venerable “martial race,” ideal for policing. But to local communities, they were an ethnic group known for their enslaved past. This essay reassesses dynamics of policing and imprisonment in the colony through the histories of slavery and abolition. It argues that one result of Britain’s recruitment practices was that police wanted to escape the colonial state as much as the convicts under their care. The colonial prison was riven by a phenomenon of mutual escape. These conditions formed the antinomies of power in early colonial Ghana.*

Keywords: *police, colonialism, slavery, prison, Ghana*

Introduction

In each edition of the British state’s official newspaper, *The Government Gazette*, printed for the colony of the Gold Coast (present-day southern Ghana), ran two parallel columns of Wanted Ads. The first concerned a familiar provocateur. Resembling fugitive slave ads from a century prior, the circulars advertised the detailed profiles of escaped prisoners and offered £1 rewards for their recapture. A typical ad from 1878 reads:

ESCAPED ... whilst at work outside the Elmina Castle on the 7th instant, Criminal Prisoner Dodo Garribah, Houssa, height 5 feet 1 inch; short and stout, complexion dark, round face, small eyes, three small scars on the left side back, left thumb disfigured by disease, left foot minus a toe, a scar (spear wound) on the left side of the head; age, about 30 years.¹

In the adjacent column, the second Wanted Ad concerned a somewhat less conventional felon:

DESERTED from the Gold Coast Constabulary (Houssa), from Elmina, on the 1st June 1882, No. 598 Acting Gunner Owonibi. Height, 5 feet 7 ½ inches; complexion, light; strongly built and stout; small eyes; hair, black and woolly; sharp nose; round face without marks; no beard, whiskers or moustache; country, Ackaye in Niger District.²

Side by side with notices for escaped criminals were those for constables who served in the colony’s prison staff and police. Between 1870 and 1900, officers deserted this force in rates of 20–30 percent per annum, provoking the same £1 rewards for their

¹ *Government Gazette* (Accra), 4 November 1878.

² *Government Gazette*, 30 June 1882.

recapture. On occasion, they fled with the convicts under their guard. Oftentimes, those jailed for desertion subsequently re-escaped from the prison as “criminal prisoners.”

This essay explains the dynamics of imperial policing in the Gold Coast through the histories of slavery and abolition. In scholarship on colonial Ghana, it has not been recognized that the imperial police in the early decades of colonial rule was principally composed of enslaved Hausa captives that the British “emancipated” by purchasing them for conscription.³ From the 1870s until as late as World War I, the British dispatched regular recruiting parties to slave markets in the Upper Volta and Northern Nigeria to obtain constabulary officers. Brought to the Gold Coast, Hausa officers suffered racialized violence at the hands of residents who associated them with enslavement and who resented the incursions of a foreign police. The result was an imperial police system where Hausas were not middlemen of the colonial state so much as its captives. They escaped alongside criminal prisoners, eliciting parallel columns of Wanted Ads. These were the antinomies of power in early colonial Ghana.

In scholarship on colonial policing, the relationships between police and slavery is typically framed in different terms. In the history of the Americas, it has been shown how police forces evolved out of community organizations designed to recapture runaway slaves.⁴ The genealogy of the police, in other words, was as *slave catcher*, not as *slave*. Across the Caribbean, emancipated captives, enslaved captives,

³ Several historians acknowledge that the first recruits for the constabulary in the 1870s were enslaved men that the British purchased for £5 a head. This observation does not account for the violent extent to which recruitment from enslaved populations persisted through the constabulary’s history, coming to include the majority of “Hausa” soldiers. See Marion Johnson, “Slaves of Salaga,” *Journal of African History* 27, 2 (1986), 341–62; David Killingray, “Imagined Martial Communities: Recruiting for the Military and Police in Colonial Ghana, 1860–1960,” in Paul Nugent and Carola Lentz, eds., *Ethnicity in Ghana* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 121; Trevor Getz, *Slavery and Reform in West Africa: Toward Emancipation in Nineteenth-Century Senegal and the Gold Coast* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), 108–109. On abolition in general, and the failure of Gold Coast literature to note the enslaved history of Hausa police, see Emmanuel Akyeampong, *Between the Sea & the Lagoon: An Eco-Social History of the Anlo of Southeastern Ghana, c. 1850 to Recent Times* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001); David Anderson and David Killingray, eds., *Policing the Empire: Government, Authority, and Control, 1830–1940* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1991); Kwabena Akurang-Parry, “Slavery and Abolition in the Gold Coast: Colonial Modes of Emancipation and African Initiatives,” *Ghana Studies* 1 (1998), 11–34; Gerald McSheffrey, “Slavery, Indentured Servitude, Legitimate Trade, and the Impact of Abolition in the Gold Coast, 1874–1901: A Reappraisal,” *Journal of African History* 24, 3 (1983), 349–68.

⁴ Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Bryan Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power After Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Kristian Williams, *Our Enemies in Blue: Police and Power in America* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015). On the distinct genealogies of slave patrols and police precincts in relation to slavery, see Michael Ralph, *Forensics of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 62–64.

and maroons all participated in constabulary forces.⁵ Despite the empathy that scholars have expressed when writing about these actors, the “collaborator” model has never been fully abandoned.⁶ Like the figure of the plantation overseer, captives employed in state forces are considered participants in imperialism, “collaborators,” in contrast with the ultimate non-participant, the runaway prisoner.

In our understanding of the African colonial state, the collaborator model has largely been displaced onto the concept of indirect rule. The practice of indirect rule, defined by Lord Lugard, referred to colonial rule by way of intermediaries.⁷ Dividing the population into ethnic and racial groups parochially known as “tribes,” certain communities were elevated to the privileged status of colonial bureaucrat while others might be designated as fit for the police and military. This practice was what Mahmood Mamdani called “define and rule.”⁸ Occupation within the colonial state became tied to ethnic identity, itself a category that ossified under colonialism.⁹ Imperial governance involved strategically manipulating “collaborators” against each other.

The problem with this model is the presumed fidelity between the colonial state and the police as opposed to the colonial state and its subjects. The collaborator, however coerced, is always juxtaposed to the captive. The police officer is not the prisoner. That is, not unless imperial policing took the form that it did in early colonial Ghana where police officers were tied to a history of *slavery*, not of slave-catching.

⁵ Roger Norman Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats: The British West India Regiments, 1795–1815* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979); Peter Voelz, *Slave and Soldier: The Military Impact of Blacks in the Colonial Americas* (New York: Garland, 1993); Rivke Jaffe, “From Maroons to Dons: Sovereignty, Violence and Law in Jamaica,” *Critique of Anthropology* 35,1 (2015), 47–63; Peter Way, “Militarizing the Atlantic World: Army Discipline, Coerced Labor, and Britain’s Commercial Empire,” *Atlantic Studies* 13,3 (2016), 345–69; Maria Allesandra Bolletino, “‘Of Equal or of More Service’: Black Soldiers and the British Empire in the mid-Eighteenth-Century Caribbean,” *Slavery & Abolition* 38,3 (2017), 51033.

⁶ Ronald Robinson, “Non-European Foundations on European Imperialism: A Theory of Collaboration,” in Roger Owen and Robert Sutcliffe, eds., *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism* (London: Longman, 1972), 117–42.

⁷ Frederick D. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1922). See also Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Karen Fields, *Revival and Rebellion in Colonial Central Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

⁸ Mahmood Mamdani, *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁹ Archie Mafeje, “The Ideology of ‘Tribalism,’” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 9,2 (1971), 253–61; John Iliffe, “The Creation of Tribes,” in *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 318–25; Terence Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa,” in Terence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawms, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 211–63.

This essay argues that the problems with state security in early colonial Ghana are attributable to the antinomies of power characterized by a police force held in captivity. From 1870 to 1910, inmates escaped Gold Coast prisons in rates of 1–5 percent of total prisoners per annum, although larger penitentiaries reported rates of roughly 10 percent.¹⁰ These figures did not significantly differ from other colonies in Africa.¹¹ What is more surprising is that police officers deserted in rates triple that figure, oftentimes working in collaboration with prisoners.

Rather than consider this situation atypical of the colonial state, it ought to make us think differently about the relations of power that undergird colonial institutions.¹² Daniel Branch's influential study of colonial Kenya makes the point that escapes, smuggling, corporate violence, communal loyalties and friendships all undermined the putative "wall" that cordoned the prison from Kenyan society while no less diminishing its symbolic potency.¹³ This essay extends on such work by showing how a mutual state of captivity led to a porous distinction between police officer and prisoner, collaborator and dissident. These were the dynamics of imperial policing in early colonial Ghana.

Policing the Colony

In September 1896, the Gold Coast government dispatched a recruiting party into the Niger interior with the aim of raising 1,000 men "of pure Hausa nationality."¹⁴ January's war against the Asante Empire had severely depleted the constabulary forces—so much that by 31 December, only 404 men remained in troops that had totaled 609 in 1895. The government party had been vested with the necessary task of enlisting Hausas from where they had always found their best officers: the Niger hinterland. However, this year, the governor, receiving early word from the recruiters, wrote soberly to Whitehall: "It is a fact to be recognised that the men

¹⁰ Blue Books record figures of 1–5%. *Government Gazettes* and District Reports, published every one and three months respectively, provide higher figures. However, prisoners were often recaptured before the printing date, meaning many escapes went under-reported. The gravity of under-reporting can be loosely estimated by the fact that 1885—the only year to print Wanted Ads in the *Government Gazette* on a weekly basis—reported more than twice the number of escapes than the previous year and one-third more than the sum in the Blue Book. For prisons reporting escape rates of about 10%, see National Archives of the United Kingdom (NAUK)-CO 96/175, Visiting Committee to Colonial Secretary, 4 July 1885. Of the 151 prisoners admitted to Elmina prison between 1 January and 30 June 1885, fifteen escaped during the period.

¹¹ Laurent Fourchard, "Between Conservatism and Transgression: Everyday Life in the Prisons of Upper Volta, 1920–1960," in Bernault, ed., *History of Prison*, 112–37; Ibrahima Thioub, "Juvenile Marginality and Incarceration During the Colonial Period," in Bernault, ed., *History of Prison*, 79–95.

¹² See recently Nana Osei Quarshie, "Contracted Intimacies: Psychiatric Nursing Conspiracies in the Gold Coast," *Politique Africaine* 157,1 (2020), 91–110.

¹³ Daniel Branch, "Imprisonment and Colonialism in Kenya, c. 1930–1952: Escaping the Carceral Archipelago," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 38, 2 (2005), 239–65.

¹⁴ NAUK-CO 96/242, F.M. Hodgson to the Marquis de Ripon, 4 January 1894.

whom we want to make soldiers are slaves. Our best recruits are escaped slaves. But ... under those circumstances, recruiting ... in Sokoto or Bornu ... is of doubtful utility.”¹⁵

Although enslaved captives in the hinterland still outnumbered free men, officers nevertheless reported that this year the owners had refused to relinquish their captives. Each “were valued at £10,” stated one agent, but “even if this sum had been offered, their owners informed me they would not part with them.”¹⁶ The recruits who eventually amassed consisted of only a few escaped and manumitted slaves. Yet, even prior to departure for the Gold Coast, one-sixth had deserted.¹⁷ Exasperated, the governor sent immediate orders “to engage and ship to the Gold Coast every able-bodied Hausa slave who can make his escape from the Ibadan country.”¹⁸

Throughout its early history, the Gold Coast Constabulary comprised an army of formerly enslaved captives. During the force’s formation in the 1870s, British officers had compelled Gold Coast residents to sell them their slaves against their will. By the 1890s, while facing increasing scrutiny from Whitehall, recruiters stressed that they only hired “escaped” slaves but their preferences had not changed. The Gold Coast government wanted men of Hausa background living under slavery and who could continue to be captives of another kind—those wearing constables’ uniforms.

Like the Sikhs of India, the Scottish Highlanders, and the Yao in Nyasaland, a martial race theory substantiated the Hausas’ use as police officers.¹⁹ Hausas were favored by the British for their supposedly superior physical strength and the sobriety demanded by their Islamic faith. In this way, we can see the elasticity of the concept of “martial race.” During the Atlantic slave trade, the British had considered the people that they called the “Coromantee” or “Coromantine”—their name for those communities sold out of ports in the Gold Coast—to be best suited for military recruitment.²⁰ Now to police them, they imagined importing an even stronger foreign people. At the same time as the Nigerian colonial state deployed Hausas to the Niger

¹⁵ NAUK-CO 96/288, William Maxwell to Joseph Chamberlain, 18 January 1897.

¹⁶ NAUK-CO 96/277, J.G.O. Aplin to William Maxwell, 3 September 1896.

¹⁷ NAUK-CO 96/288, William Maxwell to Joseph Chamberlain, 18 January 1897, 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁹ In other territories, the British viewed the willingness to enlist as indicative of a racial martial spirit, which helped construct these “martial races.” This was not the case in the Gold Coast, where the Hausas were forcibly enlisted from the start. See Risto Marjomaa, “The Martial Spirit: Yao Soldiers in British Service in Nyasaland (Malawi), 1895–1939,” *Journal of African History* 44 (2003), 413–32; Timothy Parsons, “‘Wakamba Warriors Are Soldiers of the Queen’: The Evolution of the Kamba as a Martial Race, 1890–1970,” *Ethnohistory* 46, 4 (1999), 671–701.

²⁰ Walter C. Rucker, *Gold Coast Diasporas: Identity, Culture, and Power* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 108–43; Vincent Brown, *Tacky’s Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 87–92.

middle belt to act as imperial bureaucrats, the Gold Coast colonial state settled on an understanding of the Hausa as strong stalwart constables.²¹

But to Gold Coast communities, Hausas faced a contradictory status as former slaves.²² The term *odonko* referred to “a negro from the interior,” around the Upper Volta and Niger hinterland, who are “brought thence and sold as slaves in the countries nearer the coast ... hence a slave.”²³ For over a century, Northerners of the Upper Volta and Niger hinterland had been enslaved to the Ga and Akan-speaking communities of the coast. Their elevation to the status of “police officer” did not prompt awe or respect in local imaginations. From the outset, their changed status triggered violent dissent.

A social inquiry into the lives of Hausa troops in the Gold Coast reveals to us the contradictory relationship that police officers held to the colonial state. In both African societies and European imperial powers, it had been common to employ enslaved captives in the army.²⁴ Their lives were considered more expendable and continuous re-deployment kept them from developing local attachments. This was not the case for police. Though the Gold Coast Constabulary was imagined akin to an army, the primary threat that African colonial states faced was at home, not abroad. Constabulary officers were delegated the responsibility of putting down civil conflict and apprehending criminals. People who had once been enslaved found themselves policing the communities who considered themselves their rightful slave owners. Under these conditions, Hausa constables confronted constant and terrible violence. Resistance to their policing incited them to commit crimes, including desertion, for which they were jailed. Throughout colonial rule, police and military officers deserted the force, fleeing the confines in which they performed the role of “colonial middleman.”

The call to create a local police force first emerged in the Gold Coast in the mid-1850s. During the 18th century, British slaving companies had employed convicts sent from England as guards, by 1784 outnumbering voluntary soldiers in a ratio of

²¹ Moses E. Ochonu, *Colonialism by Proxy: Hausa Imperial Agents and Middle Belt Consciousness in Nigeria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

²² As Heather Streets explains, an essential component of “martial race” theory was the concept of racial honor and valorized masculinity. Martial races, like the Sikhs and Gurkhas in India, were held up as model “men,” and therefore, worthy constabulary officers. In the Gold Coast, the Hausas made a different impression given their association with enslavement. *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857–1914* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010).

²³ J.G. Christaller, *A Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi* (Basel, Switz.: Evangelical Mission, 1881), 91.

²⁴ Christopher Leslie Brown and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Arming Slaves: From Classical Times to the Modern Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

16:5.²⁵ High rates of desertion and mutinies shifted Britain's recruitment to the West India Regiment (WIR): a trans-Atlantic army of enslaved conscripts.²⁶ Before abolition, British authorities on Caribbean islands purchased men in groups of thirty to fifty at a time, sorting them into regiments in order to wage war.²⁷ After abolition in 1807, purchasing captives became illegal and the British shifted their recruitment practices to "liberated Africans"—captives whose slave ships they intercepted and who they decided to "free" by conscripting them into the WIR.²⁸

In this way, imperial policing in the Gold Coast involved a long history of using enslaved, imprisoned and conscripted captives. However, the expense of importing and training WIR officers, given high rates of death and disease in West Africa, prompted the colonial government in the Gold Coast soon to look elsewhere.²⁹ In 1858, the Gold Coast Governor had remarked that the constabulary consisted of "slaves, generally bad characters ... sent back to [their masters] with red coats on their backs, to enforce the orders of Government, which they ... do with all the insolence natural to their sudden change of fortune."³⁰ But records do not reflect any attempt by the colonial state to recruit police other than from within enslaved populations. By the 1860s, the British state in Lagos had created a local police force of emancipated Hausa slaves. An initial loan of 72 Hausas by Lagos to the Gold Coast in 1872 convinced the latter of the Hausas' martial capacity. The Governor praised: "Not only are the Houssas far cheaper [than West Indian troops], but ... especially for service a few miles inland, they are also more efficient."³¹ By the dawn of the 1880s, Hausa soldiers had entirely replaced the West Indian Regiment.

Although the term "Hausa" became an ethnic marker referring to almost anyone from the West African interior, British agents officially located the home of the "pure Hausa" between latitude 8°N and 14°N and longitude 14°E and 11°E: the approximate area of the Sokoto Caliphate.³² Hausa had been a language of trade and contact for several centuries prior to the 1804–1808 Fulani jihad which had unified

²⁵ Trial of Captain Mackenzie for Murder, 10 December 1784, in J.J. Crooks, *Records Relating to the Gold Coast Settlements, From 1750 to 1874* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2012), 71.

²⁶ Kyle Prochnow, "'Saving an Extraordinary Expense to the Nation': African Recruitment for the West India Regiment in the British Atlantic World," *Atlantic Studies* (2020), 3–11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

²⁸ Padraic Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017); Jake Christopher Richards, "Liberated Africans and Law in the South Atlantic, c. 1839–1871" (Cambridge, UK: Ph.D. dissertation presented to the University of Cambridge, 2020).

²⁹ See Killingray, "Guarding the Extending Frontier," 107.

³⁰ NAUK-CO 96/43, B. Pine to Labouchere, 10 February 1858.

³¹ Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD)-Accra ADM 1/2/17, Governor to Early of Kimberley, 31 May 1872.

³² Bodleian Library, Nathan Ms. 311, Wilkinson to Nathan, 29 June 1901, quoted in Killingray, "Imagined Martial Communities," 121.

the Hausa states, historically hemmed by the Songhai and Bornu Empires. In the 18th century, the Asante Empire had employed Hausa mercenaries in their army to secure slaves for trade and to consolidate their vassals.³³ Beginning in the mid-19th century, the Hausas became Britain's preferred martial race as well. In the words of one general, they were undoubtedly the "Sikhs of West Africa."³⁴

Wanted Ads, however, suggest that the majority of Hausa troops in the Gold Coast may have come from places other than Hausaland. Wanted Ads show Mossi, Grunshi, and Dagomba in the Upper Volta being the origins of most deserting Hausa officers. When the Gold Coast founded a "Fante" Constabulary in the early 1890s to supplement the Hausa Corps, they recruited large numbers of Kru men from Liberia, Yorubas from Nigeria, and former Caribbean soldiers. In other words, all Northerners from the hinterland were classified as "Hausa," while everyone else, from the coast to the Atlantic, were "Fante."

The most significant factor unifying the disparate troops of Hausa heritage was the experience of slavery. The initial purchase of troops for the Gold Coast Constabulary began in November 1873 from within the Gold Coast itself. Confronting an impending war with the Asante Empire, the British began to enlist Gold Coast residents' enslaved Hausa captives. The army general reported the state of things in a sober manner:

The greatest repugnance has been, and still is, evinced by the people of Accra against the enlistment of their Houssa slaves in the Armed Houssa Police force. This repugnance has led to manifestations of ill-feeling, both on the part of the Houssas and the townspeople.³⁵

Believing that defence against Asante invaders required every Accra man on military duty, let alone his captives, the colonial state's recruitment campaign caused pandemonium among the Ga residents of Accra. Reports abounded of captives being shackled to walls, preventing them from enlisting. On one occasion, Hausas broke into the Ga *mantse* Tackie Tawiah's prison in Accra, freeing a Hausa captive who had there been confined for attempting to join the British troops.³⁶ In another instance, an escaped enslaved man named Bochay undertook the day's journey from Senya

³³ Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: The Structure and Evolution of a Political Order* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 618–20; Festus B. Aboagye, *Indigenous African Warfare: Its Concept and Art in the Gold Coast, Asante and the Northern Territories Up to Early 1900s* (Accra: Ulinzi African Resources, 2016), 62.

³⁴ John Glover, "Volta Expedition, During the Late Ashantee Campaign," *Royal United Services Institution* 18, 78 (1874), 330.

³⁵ *Further Correspondence Regarding the 1874 Ashanti Invasion; Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty, March 1874*, J.H. Glover to G. Wolseley, 6 November 1873 (London: Printed by William Clowes & Sons, 1874).

³⁶ *Ibid.* Also see Trevor Getz, *Slavery and Reform in West Africa*, 106. On the prisons run by Gold Coast rulers and merchants, see Sarah Balakrishnan, "Of Debt and Bondage: From Slavery to Prisons in the Gold Coast, c. 1807–1957," *Journal of African History* 61 (2020), 3–21.

Beraku to Cape Coast to enlist, “bringing with him the staple by which he had been secured to a log, and ... marks of the iron on his wrists and legs.”³⁷

As both Marion Johnson and David Killingray have parenthetically noted, the Gold Coast government paid £5 per captive to appease owners, claiming that “since slavery is a recognized institution in the Courts of this Protectorate ... slaves offering themselves for enlistment must be paid for.”³⁸ The orders to compensate owners hastened throughout the colony—much to Whitehall’s chagrin, having lodged their disapproval.³⁹ Rulers and slave owners elsewhere in the protectorate were likewise given security for up to £9 per man as such was “the price of a domestic slave” in those regions.⁴⁰ In total, recruitment for the Hausa Constabulary had been an expensive undertaking, directly defying Britain’s own abolitionist laws. As the governor himself remarked in April 1873, nearly everything had to be provided to the Hausas as “they are nearly all, at the best, miserably poor.”⁴¹

High rates of desertion meant relentless recruitment from 1873 onward. In 1879, the Captain of the Hausa Constabulary, A.B. Ellis, estimated that desertions averaged 15–20 officers per month of a force of 600 (an annual rate of 30–40 percent).⁴² By 1880, desertions to the Asante army abounded through colonial reports—a fear compounded in the 1890s when deserters also began to join the Malinke warrior, Samory Touré.⁴³

In response, the Gold Coast government dispatched regular recruiting parties to slave markets in the Upper Volta and the Niger hinterlands—in particular, to the town of Salaga, famed for its inland slave market. Although Whitehall had ordered that captives could not be purchased, only encouraged to escape, the outcome of these missions is difficult to corroborate. As one German officer wrote to Bismark in 1888:

English officials ... have as a main task to acquire soldiers. This is done as follows: the chief in question or the Sultan of Salaga is told by the official that within so many days he must provide a given number of people ‘and if you are not willing, I will use force’, for which purpose there are always 50–75 well-

³⁷ *Further Correspondence Regarding the 1874 Ashanti Invasion*, J.H. Glover to G. Wolseley, 6 November 1873.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Further Correspondence Regarding the 1874 Ashanti Invasion*, J.H. Glover to Sartorius, October 28, 1873; *Further Correspondence Regarding the 1874 Ashanti Invasion*, Earl of Kimberley to G. Wolseley, 17 December 1873.

⁴⁰ *Further Correspondence Regarding the 1874 Ashanti Invasion*, War Office to the Colonial Office, 22 May 1873.

⁴¹ PRAAD-Accra ADM 1/2/17 Governor to Earl of Kimberley, 19 April 1873.

⁴² PRAAD-Accra ADM 1/1/48 A.B. Ellis to the War Office, 30 June 1879.

⁴³ For Hausas joining Samory, see NAUK-CO 96/279 William Maxwell to Joseph Chamberlain, 19 November 1896; for joining the Asante, A.B. Ellis, *The Land of Fetish* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1883), 188–89; Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century*, 617–21.

armed Hausas available. With much trouble and palaver people are obtained, most of them in chains, as they would not voluntarily go to the English. The English pay 6–7 sack cowries (£5–£6) per man, and so have *bought* the man. The people are transported away like prisoners, and when they arrive in Elmina, are dressed up as recruits. Officially they are probably free, as the English government cannot well hold slaves, but must serve for six to ten years. Exactly like the Portuguese with their purchased workers.⁴⁴

Complaints of this nature became so commonplace that Whitehall opened an inquiry in 1888 into the nature of recruitment to the Gold Coast constabulary. Interviewing a recent recruiting party of forty-two Hausa men from Grunshi, the British unveiled a high number of enslaved officers conscripted against their will, having been purchased from their owners. In the testimony of one corporal, a formerly enslaved refugee from Asante:

Commissioner: Do you know what [you were recruited] for?

Corporal Pamwen: I do not know.

Commissioner: ... Did you like to be a recruit?

Corporal Pamwen: No.

Commissioner: ... Why did you go as a recruit with this officer?

Corporal Pamwen: The clothes were put on me.⁴⁵

In the testimony of Lance Corporal Baliko Fulani, one of the Hausa officers accompanying the recruiting mission:

Corporal Baliko: We heard our whiteman tell them that they came there for the purpose of wearing the clothes [that] I am standing [in] now.

Commissioner: Did they put on the clothes?

Corporal Baliko: They refused—they said they did not know where the white man is going to take them.

Commissioner: Why did they refuse to put on the clothes?

Corporal Baliko: They said they have got wives and children and would not go until they had seen their wives and children.⁴⁶

As the corporal described, two of the new recruits deserted the troops that night. Many more “tried to get away but the guard prevented them.” In the summary of the investigating commissioner: “As soon as [the men] were told to put on the uniform, they realized more strongly than before what was required of them and at once there

⁴⁴ Quoted in Johnson, “Slaves of Salaga,” 357.

⁴⁵ NAUK-CO 96/195 Testimony of Corporal Pamwen, 12 March 1888.

⁴⁶ NAUK-CO 96/195 Testimony of Lance Corporal Baliko Fulani, 12 March 1888.

came the revulsion of fear that they were going to be taken as slaves to the ‘White Man’ and the sudden panic and endeavor to get away.”⁴⁷

The investigation uncovered that the Grunshi soldiers had been enslaved captives sold in Kratchi to the British for a bounty of £3.16.1 per man.⁴⁸ “As far as the mere purchase of recruits goes, it does not offend my sense of justice for slavery is a recognized institution in Africa,” defended the captain of the recruiting party.⁴⁹ But another officer admitted: “There was no doubt a panic when the men were told to put on the uniform.... The headman was held down on the ground while the uniform was forced on him, and he wept like a child.”⁵⁰

Recruitment to the constabulary proceeded with these “high-handed and unlawful” acts into the twentieth century.⁵¹ Although Britain legally had abolished the Atlantic slave trade in 1807 as well as domestic slavery in the colony in 1876, they exploited slavery to consolidate their martial capacity. Constables purchased from slave owners could not bring their families with them to the coast. None of the forty-two Grunshis in the 1888 expedition spoke Hausa.⁵² Whereas A.B. Ellis summarized the problem of desertion as that “the Houssa Constabulary was and is a purely mercenary body, ready to sell their services to the highest bidder,” an inquiry into soldiers’ livelihoods provides alternate answers.⁵³ Yanked from their families, sold by their masters, conscripted and deported to a community who was hostile to their presence, the police in the Gold Coast embodied the antinomies of colonial rule. As foot soldiers of empire, they were both its captives and its everyday perpetrators. The instability of these two roles produced a constant friction, sometimes spilling into violence, other times leading to an unexpected cooperation with the very people they had been hired to restrain—the criminals.

It is not difficult to understand why being policed by former captives incited backlash from Gold Coast residents. As an Akan proverb recounts: *Odonko nya ade-a, obodam*, “When the *odonko* becomes rich, he runs mad.”⁵⁴ Recorded in 1865, the saying reveals something of the social anxieties that Gold Coast communities held about reversals of fortune. What would happen if their slaves (*odonko*) became free and wealthy—if they turned the tables on their masters? What would be the result of the colonial state protecting their servants? When British authorities began enforcing abolition in 1876, these questions developed pressing importance.

⁴⁷ NAUK-CO 96/195 *Report of Commission Appointed to Enquire Into the Truth of the Statements Made in Assistant Inspector Stewart’s Letter to the Governor of 12 March 1888.*

⁴⁸ NAUK-CO 96/195 Brandford Griffith to Lord Knutsford, 10 November 1888.

⁴⁹ NAUK-CO 96/195 C.M.D. Stewart to the Governor, 12 March 1888.

⁵⁰ NAUK-CO 96/195 Colonial Minutes, 12 November 1888.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Ellis, *Land of Fetish*, 189.

⁵⁴ Richard F. Burton, *Wits and Wisdom from West Africa or, a Book of Proverbial Philosophy, Idioms, Enigmas and Laconisms* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1865), 96.

It also did not help that the role of protecting the town was an esteemed occupation traditionally fulfilled by the paramilitary companies, called *asafo*. During the slave trade, settlements in the southern Gold Coast developed town militias (*asafo*) that guarded the borders and that policed the streets—tasks over which they were extremely territorial.⁵⁵ As a Ga proverb recounts: *Gbo hinmeii kpleikplei si enaa man mlinii*, “The eyes of a stranger (may be) very large, but he does not see the inner things of the town (or nation).”⁵⁶ Protection was associated with indigeneity. Policing was a service of status.

In this context, Hausa police faced violent resistance. Beginning in the 1870s, tales of brutal confrontations with Hausa officers filled local newspapers. Stories ranged from random attacks upon Hausa officers to Gold Coast men hiding in the bush, waiting to kill passing Hausas.⁵⁷ In the Eastern Ewe-speaking region of Anlo, there existed a particularly “strong racial enmity between the Hausas and the Awoonahs [Anlos]” due to the high number of officers deployed to prevent smuggling across the British-German border.⁵⁸ In 1895, a public execution in Keta involved three men convicted of killing a Hausa be viewed by over 10,000 Anlos gathered by the colonial government to send a clear message.⁵⁹ “The Hausas always receive wounds when travelling in the bush,” reported one Hausa malam in 1903, adding: “This generally happens in Keta [Anlo].”⁶⁰

In general, Hausa officers suffered loathing from Gold Coast residents whose resentment of the “*odonko* police” shaped the Hausas’ fragile position in the colonial state. In some instances, the government would not dispatch Hausas to locations where the British thought them “ill adapted ... caus[ing] irritation among the people.”⁶¹ Elsewhere animosity toward Hausas made their deployment especially effective. In cases of riot, Hausas were often quartered in offending towns “at the

⁵⁵ Sarah Balakrishnan, “Anticolonial Public: From Slavery to Independence in Southern Ghana, c. 1500–1957” (Cambridge, MA: Ph.D. dissertation Presented to Harvard University, 2020), 55–90; Ella Jeffreys, “War People: A Cultural History of Violence Among the Fante *Asafo* of the Gold Coast, c. 1700–1950” (London: Ph.D. dissertation presented to the School of Oriental and African Studies, n.d.).

⁵⁶ Burton, *Wits and Wisdom*, 147.

⁵⁷ “Jottings,” *Gold Coast Times* (Cape Coast), 25 November 1882; “General News,” *Gold Coast Chronicle* (Accra), 11 August 1894; “The Great Riot Case,” *Gold Coast Chronicle*, 14 March 1895; “Crime in Awunah,” *Gold Coast Chronicle*, 18 April 1895. Also PRAAD-Accra ADM 11/1/1106 J.F. Easmon to Colonial Surgeon, January 1885 [date unmarked], regarding the murder of a Hausa Constable by Geraldo de Lima.

⁵⁸ NAUK-CO 96/255, Brandford Griffith to Marquis de Ripon, 16 February 1895. See also Emmanuel Akyeampong, *Between the Sea & the Lagoon: An Eco-Social History of the Anlo of Southeastern Ghana, c. 1850 to Recent Times* (Oxford: James Currey, 2001), 62–65; and William Honyman Gillespie, *The Gold Coast Police, 1844–1938* (Cape Town: Government Printer, 1955), 19.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ PRAAD-Accra ADM 11/1/1772, Palaver with Chief James Ocloo of Kwitta &c, 27 October 1903.

⁶¹ NAUK-CO 96/254, District Report Adda, 14 January 1895.

expense of the inhabitants,” which was a policy to deter outbreaks.⁶² Likewise, during protests or incidents, District Commissioners would “requisition for the appearance of the Hausa soldiers ... to terrorize the people.”⁶³

In many instances, Hausas became the receptacle for violence against colonial aggression and oppression. In the famous 1886 Accra race riots, which followed the acquittal of a White officer who had beaten a Gold Coast man within an inch of his life, violent mobs erupted against Hausa police—not against White officials. Brandford Griffith, the District Commissioner of Accra, wrote urgently to the governor: “the Police are being constantly stoned by the townspeople.”⁶⁴ In response, the Hausas amassed their own “mob” and stormed the Basel Mission Factory, where the Euro-African lawyer believed to be responsible for the incident, Edmund Bannerman, had “taken refuge ... from the fury of the Houssas.”⁶⁵

In another incident, occurring in the far Western region of Appolonia (Nzima), the King of Attuaboe imprisoned a Hausa soldier in his jail for having supposedly shot into a crowded street. The colonial government could not decide whether to believe the Hausa soldier, who claimed that he had done no such thing, or the angry king who refused to release him—although possibly, as one British officer acknowledged, the king had acted out of his own racial prejudice. As the First-Class Constable, Mama, testified: “I told [the King] that I did not fire the rifle ... I explained everything to him as it happened. Yet he would not release me ... I was unable to resist his orders, being afraid.”⁶⁶

The constant harassment that faced Hausa police precipitated in violent exchanges between citizens and constables. Mutual enmity created the conditions for Hausa officers to commit crimes against the people that they were supposed to police. In districts like Ada along the Eastern shore, the commissioner reported: “Natives seem to allege [that] the Hausas steal or pillage ... [but] the men of the Hausa force complain that the natives will not sell to them at all.”⁶⁷ Elsewhere, laws mandated that towns provide Hausa officers with food or shelter; however, residents often refused, prompting the police toward theft and assault. For such acts, townspeople were sometimes reprimanded, but just as often, punishment fell on the police. “The Hausas unlawfully seize and carry away fowl and sheep,” protested the king of Fanti Nyankumasi.⁶⁸ By 1890, the problem had become so endemic that markets in the East

⁶² NAUK-CO 96/289, William Maxwell to Joseph Chamberlain, 8 February 1897.

⁶³ NAUK-CO 96/260, District Report Pram Pram, 28 September 1895.

⁶⁴ PRAAD-Accra ADM 11/1/1498, Brandford Griffith to Governor [likely September 10, 1886].

⁶⁵ PRAAD-Accra ADM 11/1/1498, King Tackie & Others to the Governor, 25 September 1886.

⁶⁶ PRAAD-Accra ADM 11/1/1, Statement of 1st Class Constable No. 312, Mama, 4 August 1902.

⁶⁷ NAUK-CO 96/270, District Report Ada, 17 February 1895.

⁶⁸ PRAAD-Accra ADM 11/1/595, Kobina Tsiboo to the Governor, 3 December 1898.

had emptied of all “fish, flesh and fowl” because traders had deserted the towns where the Hausas patrolled without supervision.⁶⁹

Petty crimes and violence comprised the majority of offences for which constables found themselves jailed. In 1904, 516 constables of a force of only 611 were convicted of 1,467 total offences in the year—an average of 2.5 crimes per officer.⁷⁰ For these offences, a large but unspecified number of police were sent to prison. Scuffles with criminals, like smugglers, often ended in the imprisonment of both police and culprits.⁷¹ In the hinterland district of Sefwi Wiawso in 1892, one Hausa constable was delivered as “a prisoner by the people of Sefwhi” to the commissioner, charged by the community with several acts of assault and extortion.⁷² During the mid-1890s, bills to curb the corporal punishment of prisoners appeared alongside those for police, the government acknowledging that they should perhaps not discipline their police like criminals.⁷³ However, in reality, their material circumstances appeared little different. Prisoners and police arrived in the same cells, were given the same labor, and escaped separately or together.

The problem with the constable was that their allegiance to the state was not what we would suppose of a colonial “middleman” or “collaborator.” Rather than receive better protections and privileges than their neighbors, the police faced constant acrimony. As enslaved captives, they had not been able to bring their family to the colony. Little tied them to the Gold Coast. Local attachments that might have concerned the colonial state never developed. Rather than become too intimate with Gold Coast residents, the police officer became increasingly disaffected. These conditions made them as likely to escape the government as the prisoner under their care.

Antinomies of Power

In this light, how do we understand the organization and role of imperial policing? What influence did it have upon its subject communities? If the historical role of police was to retrieve runaway slaves and criminals, how does one account for the fact that the imperial police in early colonial Ghana *were* the runaway captives and criminals?

In the parallel columns of Wanted Ads printed in the *Government Gazette*, one can see the troubling contiguity between the police and the prisoner, the constable

⁶⁹ PRAAD-Accra ADM 11/1/1106, DC-Akuse to Brandford Griffith, 17 December 1890.

⁷⁰ PRAAD-Accra ADM 5/1/81, “Report on the Gold Coast Police for the Year 1904,” 6 March 1905.

⁷¹ For example, the fight in Agbosome in 1878, which ended in a Hausa constable murdering an Anlo smuggler. PRAAD-Accra ADM 11/1/1113, Letter from Colonial Secretary [unaddressed], 13 April 1878.

⁷² PRAAD-Accra ADM 11/1/1130, DC-Eastern Wassaw to Colonial Secretary, 7 November 1892.

⁷³ NAUK-CO 96/312, F.M. Hodgson to Joseph Chamberlain, 21 February 1898; also see David Killingray, “‘Rod of Empire’: The Debate Over Corporal Punishment in the British African Colonial Forces, 1888–1946,” *Journal of African History* 35, 2 (1994), 201–16.

and the captive. The problem for the colonial state was that its police did not consider themselves assistants in the imperial project. They were pawns of the state, brought to the territory with little knowledge of what awaited them. They repeatedly sought their escape by deserting their posts—a crime under colonial law. Imprisoned for desertion, many re-escaped as “criminal prisoners.” These were the weaknesses of state security. The colonial state suffered a fundamental vulnerability in its incapacity to maintain the fidelity of its police force.

The contradictions of the police-state relationship revolved around the colonial prison, both as figment and as an institution. Much like the Hausa Constabulary, the prison developed from the history of captivity that sedimented the slave trade. During its first century, the Royal African Company had detained enslaved captives in store rooms inside their trading forts, waiting for transport across the Middle Passage. Escapes from these sites prompted the British to develop facilities “specifically geared to the traffic in human beings.”⁷⁴ By 1682, underground dungeons had been hewed into the forts’ rock foundations.⁷⁵ Colonial rule turned the dungeons into prisons. James Fort in British Accra became James Fort Prison. Ussher Fort in Dutch Accra became Ussher Fort Prison.

Designed to maximize air ventilation, the walls of the trading forts did not afford substantial security, nor did their dungeons, constructed for corralling hundreds of captives rather than for five or six convicts with ample room to move.⁷⁶ Elmina’s St. Jago’s Prison was one such precarious facility. Constructed by the Dutch in 1671 on a sloping hill 150 feet above sea level, the prison contained a paved central courtyard and towering cells along both the north and south sides.⁷⁷ Yet, as one *Gold Coast Times* writer reported from 1881: “Much excitement prevailed here yesterday afternoon ... by ... a daring escape ... effected by a convict, who, it appears, managed to get away by jumping off the Gaol wall.”⁷⁸

Colonial prisons in the Gold Coast consisted of two types of facilities. The first were forts like St. Jago in Elmina, James Fort and Ussher Fort in Accra, and Anomabu Fort on the western coast, all of which had once been involved in the slave trade and which were longstanding landmarks of fear and suspicion to West African communities. The second were makeshift gaols consisting of little more than “swish

⁷⁴ Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 36.

⁷⁵ Jean Barbot, *Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, 1678–1712*, Volume 2 (London: Hakulyt Society, 1992), 392; Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 37.

⁷⁶ PRAAD-Accra ADM 1/12/5, *Sanitary Report on the Gaol of Elmina* (31 March 1886) for how females were kept in cells from which convicts could most likely escape. “The only protection around the inner battery [was] a wall a few feet high in which there are several breaches so that there is nothing to prevent any one jumping over.”

⁷⁷ PRAAD-Accra ADM 1/12/5, *Report on the Gaol, Elmina, for the Quarter Ending 31st December, 1883*.

⁷⁸ *Gold Coast Times*, 15 October 1881, 2.

huts ... wholly unsuited to the purpose.”⁷⁹ Located in small coastal municipalities like Dixcove and in hinterland villages like Akuse, the prisons resembled miniature collections of thatch-roofed shanties, guarded by one man near the entrance. In the words of a British officer, they represented “a wonder [in] how any prisoner could be detained in custody.”⁸⁰

The police officer was never far from finding himself in these cells. Due to a lack of barracks, police officers and wardens were housed in the prison with the convicts, making for intimate circumstances.⁸¹ Although in other colonies the attraction to constabulary positions was free housing and a steady wage, the Gold Coast government never succeeded in providing separate barracks in the nineteenth century. The lack of state facilities causes terrible “inconvenience,” complained one officer of the Cape Coast police headquarters, which was simply “a room in a merchant’s house ... to get to the office, [one] had to go through the merchant’s sitting room.”⁸² When small pox arrived in the Western town of Axim in December 1889, the only infected parties were prisoners and constables.⁸³ Integrated housing spurred fraternization as much as the spread of disease. “He may be called upon at any time to arrest any of his friends,” stated the constabulary commander gravely in 1896, adding: “And then he hesitates to do his duty.”⁸⁴

In these contexts, constabulary officers developed alliances with prison inmates. Housed in the same facilities and each suffering their respective confines, police and prisoners aided each other in escaping. Escapes were so common from Gold Coast prisons that they structured the penal labor system. As opposed to British metropolitan prisons, where long-term convicts performed “hard labor” outside the gaol while short-term convicts remained inside, these roles were reversed in the Gold Coast in order to minimize the escape of dangerous felons, made easier by extra-mural labor.⁸⁵

Complaints of police turning a blind eye to escapes or aiding convicts in flight abounded through District Records and local newspapers.⁸⁶ “So many prisoners have been allowed of late to escape by the Gaolers,” remarked a Supreme Court judge in 1862, condemning one guilty gaoler to eight months hard labor.⁸⁷ Colonial gaolers or turnkeys were routinely fired after only a few months of service. Prison reports

⁷⁹ NAUK-CO 96/236, J.R. Phillips to Marquis de Rippon, 20 September 1893.

⁸⁰ NAUK-CO 96/236, Sheriff to Colonial Secretary, 20 September 1893.

⁸¹ PRAAD-Accra ADM 5/1/72, A.W. Kitson, “Civil Police Annual Report, 1895,” 2 April 1896.

⁸² PRAAD-Accra ADM 5/1/74, A.W. Kitson, “Gold Coast Police—Annual Report,” 12 February 1898.

⁸³ NAUK-CO 96/209 1889, *Sanitary Report for the Gold Coast Colony*, 51.

⁸⁴ PRAAD-Accra ADM 5/1/72, A.W. Kitson, “Civil Police Annual Report, 1895,” 2 April 1896.

⁸⁵ NAUK-CO 96/212, Governor to Lord Knutsford, 30 October 1890.

⁸⁶ *Gold Coast Times*, 28 July 1883, 2.

⁸⁷ PRAAD-Accra SCT 2/4/2, Supreme Court Held at James Fort, Accra, 31 March 1862.

repeatedly recounted that the majority of staff that quarter “ha[d] been punished by fines, for laxity in supervision of prisoners and neglect of duty.”⁸⁸

Though it is understandable why sympathies would have developed between the constable and the convict, the warden and the ward, the colonial state lay the responsibility with the “moral fiber” of the police force. District commissioners bitterly complained of the “class of men” who registered for prison employment: all guards who could be bought, bribed, or who appeared otherwise undeterred by the threat of firing.⁸⁹ Although, as Gold Coast newspaper writers argued at the time, perhaps a large aspect of the corruption problem concerned the government’s chronic under-payment of necessary guards, officials continued to assign the blame of prison escapes as “all due to lack of supervision on the part of the Prison Officers and the Hausa Escorts.”⁹⁰

Because the prison staff was drawn from the general constabulary pool, state officials puzzled over which officers were more likely to be “corrupt.” The government increased their budget for prison wardens in 1892, hoping to attract a so-called “better class of men.” Total sums expended on prisons rose from £4,230.10.3 in 1891 to £5,387.1.8 in 1892, with the average cost of a prisoner likewise shifting from about £12 to £15.19.4.⁹¹ Initial results of the experiment appeared positive. A report from September 1893 proclaimed that: “During 1892 there were eleven escapes – as against twenty-three in 1891—twenty in 1890—twenty one in 1889.”⁹² However, such numbers had little correspondence to the totals in Wanted Ads or Assize records. The year 1892 witnessed fewer escapes than previously: 23, as compared to 24 in 1891, 31 in 1890, and 26 in 1889. Yet the next year, 1893, would provide the highest minimum count of 33 escapes.⁹³ Even by the government’s deflated figures, escape rates remained steady in metropolitan prisons whose employees had been putatively replaced by this better class of officer.

In the state’s eyes, the problem with the prison staff and the police force was their tenuous fidelity to the British—a fact that, rather than analyze, they simply racialized. In their eyes, the cost of sending European officers to the Gold Coast for remedial jobs like warden made little financial sense, as did importing officers from other colonies. But when they hired gaolers from among Gold Coast communities, wardens often found themselves in kin relationships with the very prisoners that they supervised. As one 1892 report from Elmina (following the new hiring wave) declared: “It is somewhat unfortunate ... that the greater number of Prison Warders who are Natives of Elmina are acquainted with, and even related to, many of the

⁸⁸ NAUK-CO 96/218, *Half Yearly Report on St. Jago’s Prison*, 30 June 1891.

⁸⁹ NAUK-CO 96/236, J.R. Phillips to Marquis de Ripon, 12 September 1893.

⁹⁰ NAUK-CO 96/218, Sheriff to the Colonial Secretary, August 1891.

⁹¹ NAUK -O 96/236, *Prisons Report 1892* (20 September 1893): 5.

⁹² NAUK-CO 96/236, J.R. Phillips to Marquis de Ripon, 12 September 1893.

⁹³ These figures are the sum total of escapes reported in *Government Gazette* Wanted Ads and in Supreme Court Assize records.

prisoners.”⁹⁴ This perfunctory statement prompted inquiry from the Colonial Secretary, although nothing was done.⁹⁵ As a visiting committee to Accra’s prisons had commented earlier: “The case of [wardens’] insufficiency has been weakness of will and racial sympathy, rather than any other cause, which often throw them into the power of prisoners.”⁹⁶

The only viable solution to which the British arrived was to increase the amount of police supervision in the prison by deploying more members of the one inexpensive alien force readily available—the Hausa Constabulary. The prohibition of deploying Fantes during civil riots, local conflicts, or in stations without White officers, meant that the Hausas effectively behaved as a secondary shadow police force, supplanting local officers whenever government officials so desired.⁹⁷ From 1890 onward, Hausa officers suffused the prison staff as part of a state plan to radically increase the number of police officers supervising the convicts. “The direction that there should be one policeman to every three prisoners was one which I found it necessary to issue in consequence of the ... numerous escapes,” explained the governor to Whitehall in 1888.⁹⁸

In addition to providing auxiliary support to prison staff, Hausas were preferred employees. As the sheriff stated in 1894: “I find it difficult to get good men.... As ordinary 2nd Class Warders to supervise unskilled labour, I find that retired Hausa Non-Commissioned Officers are the best.”⁹⁹ A District report from Keta in August 1894 likewise reported that:

The number of [police] discharged for gross misconduct and indictable offences, has quite decimated the force at this station, which is now very much under-policed. So much so, in fact, that the Hausas have been doing prison escort work, executing all warrants and even police duty in the town.¹⁰⁰

By the 1890s, the Hausa police fulfilled most duties to do with state security, including supervising the prisons. In contrast to local police officers, the British saw Hausa constables as more reliable “collaborators” because they were less social and, so the British presumed, less likely to tend toward corruption. The Hausas’ only deficiency, however, was considerable: that they were escaping the prison at even higher rates than inmates.

Stories of constables escaping the state appeared often in the *Government Gazette*. Desertions typically occurred from colonial prisons, hospitals, and recruiting

⁹⁴ NAUK-CO 96/225, J.G. Aplin, to Victoriaborg, 26 September 1892.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ NAUK-CO 96/209, Prison Committee to Colonial Secretary, February 1890.

⁹⁷ NAUK-CO 96/272, *Re-Organization of the Civil Police Force*, 16 April, 1896.

⁹⁸ NAUK-CO 96/192, Governor to Lord Knutsford, 24 July 1888.

⁹⁹ NAUK-CO 96/246, J.R. Phillips to the Colonial Secretary, April 1894, 1.

¹⁰⁰ NAUK-CO 96/247, District Report on Kwitta, 11 May 1894.

stations.¹⁰¹ The most common disappearances involved officers at their posts. Constables deserted their barracks in every town in the colony. If they were on “escort duty,” traveling from one site to another, it was always easy to desert for another town or village. In these cases, it typically took weeks for the state to notice an absence, given that escorts travelled independently. Possessing more control over their escape than prisoners, police usually deserted with comrades from their hometowns recruited at similar times. Constabulary identification numbers provide insight in this respect. Recruits No. 1426 and 1427, Constables Kwabina Buamah and Kwofi Ammuyow, deserted the police force at Elmina on 12 September 1892, ages 25 and 27, both from Sadden in Western Axim.¹⁰² As Akan-speaking people, they had been enrolled in the Fante Constabulary, which, although not suffering the same prejudice as Hausas, nonetheless witnessed high rates of desertion due to broad resentment of police.¹⁰³ In the words of one colonial officer: “More disgrace is attached to the calling of a Policeman than to the fact that a man is a convict or ex-convict; the latter receives sympathy.”¹⁰⁴

Stories of convicts escaping with their police escorts became a common enough event in the late 19th century that the colonial government began ordering troops of two to three persons for the transport of one prisoner.¹⁰⁵ In 1901, a district commissioner reported a constable who, when escorting a convict to Accra, “became so drunk on the way that he assaulted the prisoner and they both in the end came before King Akrobetto at Sra, who kindly sent them both ... on to me.”¹⁰⁶ The convict and the policeman were sent to prison on the same day. In another incident, a Hausa officer transported to Accra for having deserted the constabulary made his escape while under the supervision of a fellow Hausa guard, imaginably through having persuaded his kinsman to turn a blind eye.¹⁰⁷

Wanted Ads posted in the *Government Gazette* suggest that British administrators believed that deserting officers tried to escape to their homelands in the Northern Territories and in the Niger middle-belt. Defecting officers were not often recaptured, but should they be caught, they typically found themselves imprisoned for one to three months’ servitude, sometimes longer. From there, officers often re-escaped as “criminal prisoners.” In a few exceptional cases, deserting officers were recaptured and imprisoned multiple times. One example is Private No. 819, Adam Zaria, a man from Northern Nigeria who had deserted the Elmina Constabulary on 18 June 1886 at 25 years old, but who nevertheless must have been

¹⁰¹ E.g., Officer John Grey from Monrovia who deserted James Fort Prison on 16 October 1901 while acting as 2nd Class Warder. *Government Gazette*, 21 December 1901.

¹⁰² *Government Gazette*, 30 September 1892.

¹⁰³ PRAAD-Accra ADM 11/1/1128, Testimony of Corporal Samuel Allen, 20 April 1884.

¹⁰⁴ Gillespie, *Gold Coast Police*, 38.

¹⁰⁵ “Circular on Carriers,” *Government Gazette*, 31 July 1882.

¹⁰⁶ PRAAD-Accra ADM 11/1/1098, DC Akuse to Colonial Secretary, 31 December 1901.

¹⁰⁷ *Government Gazette*, 11 November 1885.

recaptured in order to have been dispatched on the gruesome 1888 British massacre in the village of Taviefe, where he was killed at the age of 27, along with nine other officers.¹⁰⁸

Cases like Zaria's reflect the colonial state's often fragile authority. Recruitment of the enslaved put constabulary officers at risk of crime, which landed them in jail. Relationships between officers and convicts—formed through kinship and circumstances of co-confinement—helped inmates to escape. Constabulary soldiers who fled the colony might as easily have been “deserting” or “escaping,” depending on whether the soldier had first been imprisoned, or not. The arbitrariness of this distinction reflects state antinomies which continued throughout colonial rule. Insofar as colonial institutions had to be embodied—that is, they had to be made of, and run by, people—the colonized always had to, at least partly, form the axes of colonial overrule. And this condition made institutions like prisons unreliable instruments of power.

Conclusion

The Gold Coast security forces underwent many changes through the remainder of colonial rule. In 1901, the Gold Coast Hausa Constabulary blended into the larger cosmopolitan troops of the West African Frontier Force, dispatched throughout the British colonies in the region. Until the First World War, their function had been primarily paramilitary, quelling civil dissent. After the war, the civil police overtook the regiments in most domestic functions. It is clear from recruitment rosters that both the civil police and the police forces of Gold Coast rulers incorporated large numbers of Hausas into their ranks, thereby expanding the functions of Hausas as a martial race. Some of these troops were former Gold Coast Constabulary or WAFF soldiers. Others had been Hausa civilians who communities of the Gold Coast had come to see as model military personnel.

Although these changes might have reduced the racial violence involved with policing, both desertions and criminal rates among officers remained high. The case of Hausa communities in the Gold Coast should draw our attention to the tensions between Britain's preference for an alien police and their desire to create faithful colonial servants. The Hausas' relegation to the job of constabulary officer created tenuous boundaries between police and criminals in early colonial Ghana. The captive and the constable were contiguous categories, both experiencing different forms of confinement. Until as late as 1920, the Prisons and Police Departments of the Gold Coast remained integrated. Police officers served in prisons and lived alongside the convicts with whom they escaped from the state.

These convergences show us the fragile nature of imperial policing inside the non-settler colony of the Gold Coast. New recruits were perpetually needed to replace the police officers who vanished. The problem with colonial state security was not

¹⁰⁸ For Zaria's Wanted Ad, *Government Gazette*, 7 July 1886; for death, *Further Correspondence Respecting the Affairs of the Gold Coast* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1888), 154.

simply that colonial prisons were understaffed and under-financed. They were structurally incapable of distinguishing captives from collaborators.