

# Market Encounters

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# Introduction

## *Consuming Histories and Creating Economies*

IN THE AFTERNOON ON Saturday, February 28, 1948, over a thousand African veterans gathered in the center of Accra, the capital of present-day Ghana (then called the Gold Coast). The men assembled on the Old Polo Grounds, opposite Parliament House, and headed toward the governor's residence.<sup>1</sup> Their goal was to demand compensation from the British colonial government for their service during the Second World War, and they intended to present their list of grievances to the governor in person. Having fought in the British Army alongside Allied forces in Burma, Ceylon, and India, many of these soldiers returned home and found themselves destitute. According to the Ex-Serviceman's Union, the colonial government had made promises—of paid employment, disability pensions, business grants, and affordable housing—that were never fulfilled.<sup>2</sup> Singing old war songs and marching in unison, the ex-servicemen, accompanied by more than two thousand supporters, were stopped en route by a group of armed police and instructed to turn back.

The official commission of inquiry that was appointed in the following weeks to investigate the events reported that the confrontation quickly became aggressive. The crowd, determined to pass, hurled stones and insults at officers. A few minutes later, just after 3:00 p.m., the head of police ordered his men to open fire in order to “control the mob.” Three demonstrators were shot dead and several others were wounded. The angry crowd retaliated. Yet they did not attack the governor's residence, just a few blocks away, nor other

centers of government power against which the men had been protesting; instead they burned and looted offices, warehouses, and wholesale and retail stores owned by Europeans and other foreigners.<sup>3</sup>

What became known as the Accra Riots have long been familiar to historians of Ghana. That day in February 1948 features consistently in nationalist narratives as a watershed moment that pushed the country on the path toward independence from Britain, which would come less than a decade later in 1957. But few have closely analyzed what it meant for a very different (though inextricably linked) path that the country was on—toward becoming an emerging nation of African consumers.<sup>4</sup> Although sympathy for the veterans no doubt rallied supporters that Saturday afternoon, much of the crowd also consisted of those fed up with the restrictive economy that had been imposed under Britain's rule. For decades the colonial government had enabled large foreign trading firms, mostly European, to control the West African import-export market. Allowed to operate with little government regulation, large firms dominated the commercial scene, controlling commodity prices, credit terms, and channels of distribution. During the war, essential imported commodities like rice, sugar, milk, kerosene, and cotton piece goods were in short supply, and the resulting spike in prices fueled resentment against these large firms, who by that point controlled more than two-thirds of all goods that were imported and sold in the colony.<sup>5</sup> Various groups including African nationalists, businessmen, retailers, cocoa farmers, and consumers accused foreign firms, especially those belonging to the Association of West African Merchants (AWAM), of artificially inflating prices, conspiring with the colonial government, monopolizing trade, and cheating customers.<sup>6</sup> Though some of these accusations were overblown, many were on target. Firms associated with AWAM *had* engaged in price fixing and engineered market sharing agreements that cut Africans out of commercial trade and restricted consumer aspirations.

The Accra Riots were thus about a broad and growing sense of economic injustice and financial frustration as much as they were about the soldiers themselves. The government-appointed commission that investigated the underlying causes of the protest reported that the administration's failure to seriously address rising prices and allegations against AWAM firms paved the way for "the resentment which manifested itself in the looting and useless destruction which took place in Accra and elsewhere."<sup>7</sup> After all, this was not the first time Gold Coasters had protested the practices of foreign firms. Cartel-like behavior and price fixing were among the primary causes of the Gold Coast cocoa hold-ups organized by farmers, brokers, and chiefs in 1920, 1930–31, and 1937–38.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in 1947, Nii Kwabena Bonne II, an Accra

chief and businessman, created the Anti-Inflation Committee and sent an ultimatum to the city's chamber of commerce demanding that firms lower profit margins and reduce retail prices. Several local chiefs supported the campaign and established Anti-Inflation Committees in their own districts. Underestimating the seriousness of these grievances, foreign firms brushed these demands aside. As a result, in January 1948 a month-long boycott of imported goods ensued.<sup>9</sup>

February 28, 1948, was not just the day ex-servicemen marched in protest; it was also the day several firms were to finally announce price cuts in an attempt to end the boycott.<sup>10</sup> As the commission of inquiry under the chairmanship of Aiken Watson pointed out, a number of "spectators and sympathizers" that afternoon had actively participated in the boycott during the previous month.<sup>11</sup> The marginal reductions announced by firms, however, were not enough. As the veterans were gathering at the Old Polo Grounds, organized looting and violence broke out in towns throughout the Colony and Ashanti regions, and intensified later that day as news of the shootings in Accra spread.<sup>12</sup> The destruction ensued for several days. In response, on March 5, 1948, Governor Charles Noble Arden-Clarke declared a state of emergency. Special constables, including the European employees of a number of trading firms, were sworn in and provided with rifles and other equipment to police towns. The colonial government also brought in military forces from the Northern Territories and Nigeria to support the effort.<sup>13</sup> In the end, losses from damage to property and looting were considerable, with costs estimated to be over one million pounds.<sup>14</sup> Another loss was less obvious but more portentous: within days of the events, AWAM member firms also agreed that the association should be dissolved, a decision that forced companies to re-evaluate their business activities and finally address long-standing public criticism.<sup>15</sup>

The Accra Riots, and the simultaneous boycott, hint at the importance of consumer politics to decolonization but, just as important, they help us situate these and many other postwar dramas as part of a longer and larger struggle within Ghanaian society over access to commodities and consumer markets. Contrary to what nationalist narratives would have us believe, not all Gold Coasters joined the 1947 boycott, and events that followed were less black and white than they are often portrayed as being. For instance, Nii Bonne recalled that certain Kwawus, especially those in Korforidua, still bought from those boycotted firms "on the sly,"<sup>16</sup> and a Union Trading Company (UTC) agent reported to his superiors that the women in Winneba "abused the menfolk" for obeying orders given by the chief and the police to not participate in the looting.<sup>17</sup> Further, while African-owned

businesses were supposedly spared, African sales managers and storekeepers employed by foreign firms received physical intimidation and death threats from looters at their homes and shops.<sup>18</sup> Some of these threats turned fatal. In Sekondi, a group of men armed with bows and arrows attacked a United Africa Company (UAC) store and killed a watchman there.<sup>19</sup> In a letter to the general manager of the UAC it was also reported that loyal African staff were denounced as “stooges” and their names posted on signs all over towns.<sup>20</sup>

High prices were not the only source of contention among angry consumers. Equally infuriating were the firms’ practices, carried out by both European and African staff, including behind-the-counter sales, conditional sales, refusal of sales, and favoritism given to employees’ relatives, wives, and girlfriends. Consumers complained that these actions contributed to artificial shortages. More important, they argued that such practices led to unfair distribution or sales based on a person’s ability to tap into personal networks.

This frustration was not new. In 1943, the colonial government had set up a commission of inquiry to investigate wartime shortages. Led by W. E. Conway, who was then the comptroller of customs, the commission conducted informal interviews with representatives of all the major firms, collected and examined evidence, and invited members of the public to submit complaints and suggestions in writing. It also held thirteen public hearings and listened to fifty-seven witness accounts. As one Accra customer testified, “During peacetime, I could go to any store and buy commodities such as tobacco, cigarettes, kerosene, candles, sugar, drinks, and drugs. But now it is impossible. . . . Whilst I cannot obtain these things in stores I could, provided I pay black market prices, obtain them from petty and private traders.” He later described purchasing kerosene from a woman’s private residence in Adabraka and declared to the commission, “I have been forced to buy on the black market.”<sup>21</sup>

Another Accra witness recounted how firms’ agents and shopkeepers regularly reserved goods for their “market women friends” and influential people in town, such as “certain lawyers and pressmen,” to gain their favor.<sup>22</sup> This practice, he explained, led to refusal of sales from storekeepers even when goods were available. He recounted, “I once went to a store in Accra. I saw four cases of beer behind the counter and two on the counter. I presumed they had been sold, and I asked the European in charge for two cases. He told me he had no beer. I asked him, ‘Why is it that there are four cases of beer behind the counter and yet you say there is none for sale?’ He said I should not trouble him.”<sup>23</sup> What angered consumers was not only that employees of trading firms and their “favorites” reaped high profits by increas-

ing the price of commodities in short supply, but that their activities also determined who had the right to buy.

While the commission recommended that colony-wide fixed prices or price controls on scarce goods, although difficult to enforce, could alleviate high costs, it considered unfair allocations and distribution by firms through “parasitic middlemen”—those petty and private traders described by witnesses—a larger problem. At the same time, however, it recognized that petty traders or “keepers of small stores, market traders, and hawkers” were absolutely essential to consumer markets: “The petty trader plays a very important part in the distribution of goods to the actual consumer . . . he sells in units within the spending power of the poorest members of the community and reaches the smallest villages in the bush.”<sup>24</sup> While the resale of goods through middlemen by foreign firms had been an integral part of the West African economy since the inception of overseas trade, wartime shortages exposed the complexities of this system and made clear that consumption was not only an economic transaction guided by the laws of supply and demand but also one that was deeply embedded in the social.

As the complaints about “certain Kwahus,” men in Winneba, and “market women friends” reveal, the clash between European trading firms and African consumers, driven by what some scholars have identified as a growing sense of economic nationalism, was only part of the story. Such a narrow focus also fails to explain how similar conflicts over the market persisted in the decades following political independence. To better understand the complexities of Ghana’s economic landscape both before and after independence, we must go back and consider a variety of other encounters and exchanges responsible for its creation. Both fierce opposition and unlikely alliances—forged between people as different as European managers and African market women, nationalist politicians and foreign investors, and military soldiers and chiefs—together shaped how goods made their way off shelves and into consumers’ hands. Yet these personal and often unexpectedly intimate social relations have largely been forgotten in accounts of Ghana’s economic past.

To uncover how people actively engaged consumer markets requires that we first move beyond the standard explanations of how African economies work. Here I refer particularly to the “European exploitation versus African resistance” binary that has shaded much of what we know about African economic and business history, especially regarding the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> Although narratives of resistance against extractive and violent colonial regimes—everything from worker’s strikes to hold-ups to boycotts—have been essential to uncovering African agency, this bifurcated view has actu-

ally narrowed our understanding of how imperialism and capitalism intertwine and how they play out in people's lives. More importantly, it has obscured the fundamental contests and sophisticated cultural repertoires that underlie consumer culture in Ghana. While battles against colonial and neocolonial domination undoubtedly shaped the trajectories of consumer markets, so too did ongoing controversies over the meaning of wealth and proper accumulation, the role of the state and political authority, and the formation of gendered and racial ideologies.<sup>26</sup> I also argue that though the firms themselves, alongside government business policies and practices, are typically seen as inevitable or governed by sound economic logic, they have a contested social history that needs to be examined.

*Market Encounters* is an attempt to explore the multitude of relationships that shaped Ghana's economic reality and structured capitalist exchange throughout the twentieth century. Anthropologist Brenda Chalfin, writing about the power of the state in contemporary Ghana, argues that "before we can understand how it is subverted and undermined" we need to consider how it is "manufactured, institutionalized, and recursively inscribed."<sup>27</sup> Shouldn't we interrogate the economic in similar ways? My answer is yes. It is far too easy to consider the sometimes dry and impersonal specifics of economic data as wholly distinct from the highly charged and deeply personal experiences of which everyday life is composed. This division, all too common among scholars, blinds us from considering the relentless interweaving of both. Our blindness is particularly acute when it comes to economics. The discipline rests on claims of scientific objectivity, but like much of the substance of human life, it relies on a series of tropes, metaphors, and storytelling devices. Central to the story I tell here are what literary scholar Erika Beckman calls "capital fictions"—the process in which ideology and imagination are fashioned into commonsensical truths that allow capitalism to function.<sup>28</sup> Our story, then, is an effort to fuse economics and business history with social and cultural history. Such a method attempts to uncover how economic power is "manufactured, institutionalized, and recursively inscribed" while interrogating the fictions from which that power emerges. By weaving together two seemingly distinct sources—corporate archives and oral histories—I hope to offer a more textured sense of how people navigated the complex social terrains that made the buying and selling of goods in modern Ghana possible.

LOCATING THE “AFRICAN CONSUMER”  
AND CHALLENGING CONSUMPTION STUDIES

Before delving into any history of consumption, we must contend with a more basic question: Who, exactly, was the “consumer”? Early scholarship on consumer culture, starting in the 1970s, tended to paint the consumer in one of two ways, as either a “passive creature created by cultural industries and advertising” or as an “‘active’ or ‘citizen consumer’—a creative, confident, and rational being articulating personal identity.”<sup>29</sup> These tropes have dominated the field of consumption studies and the ways we have come to know the consumer, though they have not gone unchallenged. Over the past ten years, historians have argued that the category *consumer* needs to be interrogated rather than assumed.<sup>30</sup> Most notably, Frank Trentmann argues that “while all human societies have been engaged in consumption and have purchased, exchanged, gifted, or used objects and services, it has only been in specific contexts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that some (not all) practices of consumption have been connected to a sense of being a ‘consumer,’ as an identity, audience, or analytical category.”<sup>31</sup> Simply put, *consumer* is far from a timeless or inevitable category. The consumer did not magically appear from a world of goods, rather, the consumer was created in particular historical moments and in dynamic relations with other actors and agencies. *Market Encounters* carefully engages scholarship in consumption studies—both its older simplicities and its newer complexities—to understand the development of consumer markets in West Africa. In doing so I am not suggesting that we superimpose a Western model of consumption on African societies; rather, I contend that by directly engaging this literature, historians of Africa can offer fresh insights and develop new areas of inquiry that expand consumption studies altogether.

Yet identifying the consumer is not just the distant task of scholars looking back on the historical record. In Ghana’s case, as we will see, firms and colonial and postcolonial governments have been equally determined to figure out who they are selling to. Therefore, any history of consumer culture in Ghana must account for “locating the consumer” as an intellectual project initiated by the work of historians and consumer studies scholars, as well as a political project framed by the interests of capitalist firms and the different regimes that seized state power. In other words, the question of who the consumer was in Ghana is both a historiographical one and a historical one that emerges in different periods of the twentieth century.

In Ghana, *consumer* was a blurry and unstable category, but not exactly in the ways that scholars of consumption might expect. As with other former

West African colonies, a large physical distance existed between African consumers and manufacturers abroad. The British colonial government was far more interested in resource extraction than in creating and supporting local industries.<sup>32</sup> As historian Adu Boahen aptly puts it, essential to the political economy of colonialism was the “total neglect of industrialization and manufacturing and the refusal to process locally produced raw materials.” As a result, the majority of commodities had to be imported, from large items like building materials and cars, to popular food products like meats, vegetables, jams, milk, tomatoes, and sardines, to staples like rice, flour, sugar, and salt. The British government empowered a handful of foreign firms to control the flow of goods into and out of the colony. Those firms in turn relied heavily on local, often preexisting, trade networks to distribute the commodities. In this way a firm’s success depended on its ability to maintain relationships with thousands of African men and women who sold on the firm’s behalf, and who facilitated the movement of imported goods from the two major port cities, Accra and Takoradi, to small towns scattered throughout the interior.<sup>33</sup> From a financial standpoint, this system allowed firms to keep their overhead costs low, saving them from having to invest money in building and maintaining physical retail structures. From a social standpoint, this system meant that Ghana’s economy was forged to a remarkable degree by a disparate blend of thousands of individuals. This web of distribution and sales, a group of what I call *commercial intermediaries*, encompassed a range of different people.<sup>34</sup> It included those hired as shopkeepers, assistants, and clerks who received monthly salaries and worked at company-owned wholesale and retail stores as well as those entrusted as credit customers—people who bought goods from firms at wholesale prices, collected commission on sales, and sold mostly in areas where company-owned stores were nonexistent.

The reliance on intermediaries created a division between the firms and the actual consumers they (eventually) sold to, and was further complicated by the widespread practice of reselling. The breaking down of goods into smaller units for resale incorporated an even larger network of people into the pipeline of distribution and sales; this makes identifying the consumer even more difficult. The sale of matches is one of many examples. Several firms bought cases of matches from factories abroad, and imported them by boat to Accra. At the port, a firm’s receiving agent would divide the shipment, which typically contained hundreds of cases, and send some to both Accra and upcountry wholesale stores. A wholesale storekeeper would then break down cases into “zincs,” each containing about six metal containers. Those “zincs” would then be further broken up into packages and either

distributed or sold, package by package, to retail shops owned by the firm or directly to credit customers. Each package contained ten to twelve boxes of matches, and retail storekeepers and credit customers often sold one box at a time to petty traders or consumers. Yet the point of sale did not stop there, as that same box, which contained seventy to eighty matchsticks, could then be divided by traders or the “consumer” into smaller and more affordable units of ten sticks for resale based on individual need.<sup>35</sup>

The business of reselling thus made divisions among the categories of wholesaler, retailer, and consumer highly ambiguous. In a 1950 company publication, the UAC admitted that “apart from high class retail stores in large towns, it is difficult if not impossible to know which of the buyers are ultimately consumers . . . [this] applies not only to divisible merchandise such as matches in bulk, but also to indivisible items, such as bicycles.”<sup>36</sup> Even this confession was an understatement. A former African employee of Kingsway Department Stores also described difficulties in identifying “real consumers,”<sup>37</sup> and store policies that prohibited the sale of large quantities to suspected resellers further illustrate the dilemma. But trouble locating the consumer was not strictly the concern of firms and their employees; colonial governments also tried to make distinctions between people who bought for personal use and those who intended to engage in resale. A whole assortment of names cropped up around efforts to pinpoint this difference. “The ultimate consumer,” “the end-use consumer,” and the “the bona-fide customer” were used in both corporate and government documents in attempts to make this distinction. At this point, we need to consider a question: If firms were still collecting profits and keeping overhead costs low, why would they care about identifying the “ultimate” or “end-use” consumer? One reason was that the system of reselling made collecting statistics on sales and creating standardized policies extremely difficult; it also made firms’ compliance with postwar government-imposed price controls and quotas an arduous, and often expensive, task.

However, the other, more profound reason, was about power. This system of commodity distribution could be quite profitable, but it had a lasting consequence: it created a large gap in what the firms actually knew about local consumer demand and desire. On the West African coast, trends changed rapidly, especially in the sale of textiles or wax prints. As an agent of the UTC stationed in Akuse warned, “any European staff taking a leave lasting more than two months” would have to completely relearn consumer tastes.<sup>38</sup> Gaps in market knowledge led to huge profit losses. As a former UTC manager reflecting on his forty-year career wrote in 1961, “Nobody took pains to do market research . . . the stores were filled with products that were many times

useless.”<sup>39</sup> Full shelves of rotting supplies, the overstocking of unpopular brands, and unsold items sitting in warehouses for years: all these realities were a constant source of frustration among firms. As we all know from every trip to the grocery store, changes in packaging and a product’s overall aesthetic can also affect sales.<sup>40</sup> Bottles of Brilliantine hair product would only sell if wrapped in paper; sugar sold in cardboard boxes was preferred to that sold in paper bags; sleeping mats had to have red instead of blue trim, and only blue and green cars should be ordered, as red cars were “very unpopular.” Even details like an item’s smell had to be considered; on a stocktaking visit to various stores, one UAC employee asked, “Can we not obtain tablet soap similar to White Windsor with Eucalyptus scent?”<sup>41</sup> What Africans perceived as poor packaging, the wrong color, or an unpleasant smell were as consequential to an item’s saleability as they were baffling to the firms’ management a world away in London or Basel.

As in most aspects of colonialism, stereotypes framed by racialized assumptions about the colonized abounded; firms often classified African consumer behavior as conservative, selective, and overly brand conscious. One reason cited for this selectiveness was that African consumers had particular difficulties in obtaining redress for defective merchandise from overseas producers.<sup>42</sup> Another reason was the low income of farmers and wage earners, who had to shop carefully because of limited funds. What is less apparent in these observations is that when firms described “the African consumer” they were mainly referring to the demands of their storekeepers and credit customers who were responsible for resale. This gap between firms and ordinary consumers put European managers in a difficult predicament: invaluable market knowledge could only be gained through the feedback of African intermediaries, and this dependency was fragile—it had to be cultivated, maintained, and renewed. Of course, commercial intermediaries reflected the preferences of those they sold to; they, too, wanted to make a profit, but this was not always the case. Intermediaries thus wielded power in determining which goods gained popularity in the market and had a huge impact on shaping and translating consumer demand.

Let us now turn to the role of advertising in locating the consumer. As one of the primary means through which historians have studied how consumers were imagined and created, advertising often had different objectives in Ghana. The practice of using advertisements, and the principles of marketing, developed in their current form around the 1920s in the United States and other Western markets, were neither as established nor as meaningful in West Africa.<sup>43</sup> Even after the Second World War, advertising geared toward African audiences was considered “in its infancy,” according to one UAC mer-

chandise director.<sup>44</sup> A large percentage of early print advertising in Ghana was focused on promoting the reputation of certain firms rather than endorsing specific products. Many ads were produced to convince African businessmen and retailers to buy stock from firms (rather than from other sources like mail-order catalogs) and thus carried a different message. The hope was to deter African retailers from importing on their own. Of course, print advertisements geared toward elite and middle-class African shoppers existed. Early Gold Coast newspapers were full of ads for brands like Ideal milk, Ovaltine, Wright biscuits, Tin-apa pilchards, and Waterman pens, but the images in the ads featured mostly Europeans.<sup>45</sup> Posters and signboards hanging in stores and high-traffic areas like railway stations were also part of urban landscapes.<sup>46</sup> In most cases, however, print advertisements reflected the competition among various trading firms attempting to attract potential retailers to sell on their behalf; the need to cultivate and stimulate consumer demand for a particular product seemed secondary. Furthermore, in times of commodity rationing and scarcity, product-directed advertising became obsolete.

During the period of decolonization and in the years following Ghanaian independence, firms appropriated advertising for another purpose—namely, they used advertisements as a tool to build up goodwill toward a company and publicize corporate policies. The goal was to link the firm to ideas of reciprocity and quality rather than to promote a particular product. UAC campaigns and advertisements announcing their role in “Africanization,” or policies focused on promoting Africans to managerial positions that were formerly reserved for Europeans, were some key examples.<sup>47</sup> While firms paid lip service to courting the African consumer, advertising and marketing were not the primary ways they did so. Prior to the 1950s, efforts were limited mainly to questioning African staff about what products they preferred and used. The first large-scale market research project, titled Project Joseph, was not undertaken until 1954. Paid for by the UAC and conducted by the Export Advertising Service to test West African reactions to different forms of press advertising, the project was primarily geared toward helping the firm improve its public image in response to anticolonial activism. As a result, whatever market research was gained was not specific enough to actually change a product’s design or production, nor was it apparently intended for that purpose. Furthermore, tests were conducted on six hundred of the UAC’s own staff from the Gambia, the Gold Coast, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. While recognizing that the firm must have considered its own African staff members as archetypal middle-class shoppers who warranted research, its strategy also showed a continued reliance on information from intermediaries. Thus, drawing on market research and advertising to un-

cover the underlying assumptions and changing values of consumers, as a number of other studies on consumerism have done, carries certain limitations when applied to the Ghanaian context.

The “ultimate consumer” did not become any easier to single out after independence in 1957. As foreign firms retreated due to nationalist pressures and a number of policies put in place to curb their power, state-owned corporations like the Ghana National Trading Corporation (GNTC) were established and replaced many of the firms’ long-standing functions. By 1961 the GNTC, under President Kwame Nkrumah and his Convention People’s Party (CPP), took over a number of wholesale and retail outlets across the country as well as credit customer accounts. Though it was intended to protect the consumer, state ownership did not introduce any major changes in how people accessed and purchased goods, and the GNTC reproduced some of the same problems identified by ordinary Ghanaians during the colonial period. In the years following independence, similar accusations of favoritism and the creation of artificial shortages emerged. Like many African nationalist leaders, Nkrumah hoped to reduce dependency on foreign firms through investment in local manufacturing and by implementing import substitution strategies via state-owned enterprises.<sup>48</sup> But industrial development did not catch up with the demand for goods. Additionally, the world market price of cocoa (the country’s primary source of foreign exchange) plummeted; the years 1964–66 were especially bad. Commodity shortages swept through the country, and irregular issuing of import licenses and the funneling of state funds for personal use by select CPP members and high-ranking government ministers further reduced the number of goods available on the market.

By the mid-1960s, it was not uncommon to see hundreds of people lining up for long hours outside retail stores. Shoppers regularly lined the street in front of Ghana House, the GNTC’s Accra department store, well before opening hours in hopes of buying the most basic items. While the GNTC claimed that lines were necessary to weed out reselling and ensure that each person received his or her fair share of milk, rice, and sugar, customers developed a whole range of sly tactics to evade government control. As an official commission of inquiry into trade malpractices reported, these lines “should not fool anyone into thinking that the distributor firms are issuing goods to consumers.” Instances of customers rejoining the line two or three times after each sale, and of customers hiring four or five other people to stand in on their behalf, were common.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the imposition of lines as a method for firms to ensure fair distribution by identifying and selling to the “real” consumer was largely unsuccessful.

While the CPP government claimed that tighter control over distribution through the GNTC was a method of protecting consumers from unfair trading practices, such strategies frustrated customers even more. It became a common practice for stores to stagger their business hours to coincide with the off-duty hours of workers and to regulate the release of goods at specific times. Debates about identifying the genuine consumer persisted and were manifested in the state-controlled media, pitting consumers and retailers against one another. Above all, the consumer was depicted as a victim of self-serving traders who ransacked store shelves, hiked up prices, and hoarded essential commodities for profit. Inflation and shortages were framed as a by-product of greedy retailers who monopolized goods rather than the result of state mismanagement. Efforts to distinguish the genuine consumer from a person who intended to purchase goods for resale were reminiscent of attempts undertaken by European firms during the colonial period. Echoing reports like the 1943 Conway Commission, the GNTC accused market women in particular of undermining Ghana's economic stability. Stories of crowds of women stampeding GNTC stores, abusing staff, and intimidating "respectable" shoppers were featured in the national news.<sup>50</sup> Described in a newspaper article as "human vultures," market women's practices were positioned as the antithesis of modern economic development. Indeed, these criticisms also revealed a larger ongoing social concern—specifically, the threat posed by women's financial autonomy.

General discontent with the economy provided part of the momentum for the 1966 military and police coup that overthrew President Nkrumah. As commodity shortages persisted in the 1970s, Ghana's second military government—the National Redemption Council, under Ignatius Kutu Acheampong—empowered the army and police to ensure fair distribution and price controls by force. Soldiers patrolled retail centers and commercial main streets, and violence was inflicted on retailers as well as consumers thought to be selling and buying beyond permissible daily usage, or what the government called "normal requirements." During what is now remembered by older Ghanaians as "Acheampong's time," stores and marketplaces throughout Ghana became sites of fear and intimidation. The military arrested hundreds of people accused of *kalabule*, a term that came to define a number of unlawful selling and consumption practices including hoarding, profiteering, smuggling, and selling on the black market. Soldiers also seized goods from private homes in military exercises like Operation Bring Out. In some regions, like Brong-Ahafo, military barracks became retail sites as soldiers took control of selling confiscated items to people they deemed "real" consumers. The category *consumer* thus continued to bedevil, even amid the supposed

idealism of postrevolution rule; now one was deemed an authentic consumer through military discretion, a judgment backed by the threat of physical punishment, jail time, and exorbitant fines for those who failed to fit the image.

I begin with this brief genealogy of the consumer to encourage a rethinking of consumer studies from an African-centered perspective. The focus on consumer choice, demand, and desire, which has been the usual terrain of studying consumer culture, has limitations when applied to Ghana's history.<sup>51</sup> First, the organization and regulation of distribution channels were often as important to accessing commodities and shaping the consumer's experience as was the amount of money in that consumer's pocket. I therefore argue that histories of commodity distribution, typically the domain of economists and development policy planners, are not separate from consumer culture and have an economic and social history that demand examination. Second, to study consumerism in Ghana also requires that we take seriously an economic past characterized by boom and bust cycles and a general lack of stability. Such an economic reality created dramatic shifts from periods in which people enjoyed relative abundance to periods in which people suffered debilitating scarcity. So stark were some years that people remember month-long shortages that were interrupted only by an occasional flooding of a commodity that lasted for mere hours and then disappeared once more. The popular saying "plenty money, no goods" that was frequently evoked to describe the market (particularly from the late 1960s through the mid-1980s) further illuminates the need to account for these conditions. Here, my intentions are aligned with the work of consumer historian Sherene Seikaly, who has argued that "managing scarcity" in British-ruled Palestine was crucial to a longer process of "creating needs and desires."<sup>52</sup> This is not to say that people did not make sophisticated shopping choices when goods were available. Rather, the impetus is to have us move from interrogating the consumer as an identity (both individual and collective) to exploring the historical processes that brought that identity to fruition.

While this book seeks to locate the consumer as part of larger developments in Ghana's economic past, it is by no means an origins story. We will not find here a tale about the "birth of the consumer" in Ghana. In this sense, my research diverges from early consumer histories that traced the emergence of consumer culture during industrial revolutions in Britain and the United States or focused on a specific historical event like the American Revolution or World War II.<sup>53</sup> As we have seen, the British colonial economy produced a system in which the identity of the consumer, as a subject of corporate policy and state regulation, was never clear. I interpret this elu-

siveness as an opportunity for a critical engagement into the operation of power rather than as an obstacle or gap in the historical record. As Jean and John Comaroff, following Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall, remind us, “At any particular moment, in any marked event, a meaning or a social arrangement may appear free floating, underdetermined, ambiguous. But it is often the very attempt to harness that indeterminacy, the seemingly unfixed signifier, that animates both the exercise of power and the resistance to which it may give rise. Such arguments and struggles though are seldom equal.”<sup>54</sup> Specifically, this vagueness allows us to examine how the consumer was implicated in various projects that went beyond what might typically be defined as market or economic exchange.

As we shall see, for much of the twentieth century in Ghana *consumer* was used as both an aspirational category and a value term. Both private and, later, state-owned firms deployed the notion of the consumer in flexible ways to serve their interests and legitimize their authority. Ordinary Ghanaians similarly evoked the category to advocate for greater control over the political and economic life of their country, as well as for more accountability from leadership. Consequently, different versions of the consumer surfaced at specific historical moments. However, these versions were never universal, consistent, or equally acknowledged. By questioning the assumed identity of the consumer we can gain a deeper understanding of what was at stake for different people who participated in the market, and what knowledge, justification, and cultural values framed their encounters.

#### REWRITING AFRICAN CONSUMER CULTURE AND RETHINKING ECONOMIC HISTORY

While the formation and organization of colonial capitalism made the African consumer an ambiguous figure, perceptions of the continent—popular and academic alike—also color what we know about African consumer history. Typically we think of consumerism in Africa as either a recent phenomenon or a result of Western cultural hegemony. Media images of Asante chiefs using the latest iPhone model or Congolese youth donning Gucci and Christian Dior fashions are used as representations to both celebrate “third world advancement” and signify the dangers of globalization and capitalist culture. These images are sometimes intended to shock and surprise Western audiences, who tend to still see the continent as different, distant, and underdeveloped. In many ways, academic literature also perpetuates some of these tired tropes. For example, in global studies of consumption the development of African consumerism is often positioned as part of a linear

progression that slowly creeps across the globe or as a “last stop” in a process that originated in Europe or North America.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, histories of global commerce persistently portray African men and women as either producers of raw materials or as industrial laborers catering to the demands of Western markets and consumers.

Certainly this is not the case, as a number of scholars in the field of African history have shown. We know that West Africans participated in pre-colonial commercial networks and have traded long distance with Europeans since the fifteenth century, beginning with the Portuguese. In fact, the economic history of Ghana is extremely rich. Studies of African merchant communities and histories of prominent coastal trading families that predated colonial rule have been at the center of several foundational works.<sup>56</sup> Despite Ghana’s significant economic past, Africans as consumers have not been the primary focus in the literature. Given that the trafficking in slaves (figured as “Atlantic commodities” by slave traders) and the violence that permeated it dominated commercial life on the Gold Coast,<sup>57</sup> early economic scholarship concentrated mainly on the organization and impact of transatlantic slave trade economies. This lack of attention to the consumer was also shaped by theories of underdevelopment that dominated African economic scholarship in the 1970s. Walter Rodney’s influential study *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* marked a crucial shift in African economic history from a Eurocentric to an African- and Caribbean-centered perspective, bringing to the forefront the term capitalist imperialism—the idea that imperialism was, and should be understood, as an economic phenomenon. Here Rodney directly took on a generation of European (and North American) economic historians like D. K. Fieldhouse, who argued against the severity of colonialism on the basis that it was “not that profitable” for Europeans. In attempting to counter these claims by tracing the roots of underdevelopment through centuries of institutions that exploited African labor and resources, however, Rodney’s work did not consider the role of Africans as consumers or active participants in a larger Atlantic economy of goods. The only mention of consumerism in his book was in combating the work of colonial apologists who used African consumerism as some sort of evidence that the European slave trade “was undoubtedly a *moral evil*, but it was *economically good* for Africa.”<sup>58</sup> In many ways, African consumer histories have been trapped within this uncertain space, between bourgeois and radical Marxist debates that have persisted in various forms for decades.<sup>59</sup>

Within these confines, however, we can find glimpses of the goods being exchanged as well as the manners in which imports were first used. Challenging popular myths that Africa was a dumping ground for “assorted

rubbish”—that early trade goods consisted of cheap liquor, useless trinkets, and defective firearms—historians of material culture have cataloged detailed lists of various commodities registered and sold along the coast. For instance, even before the eighteenth century, Dutch traders stored 218 types of merchandise in Elmina Castle. Indian textiles, European linen, felt hats, Venetian beads, smoking pipes, mirrors, and paper, along with fancier goods like multicolored umbrellas, silver-headed canes, velvet-upholstered armchairs, and Turkish carpets were among the items listed on customs records, trading post inventories, and orders placed by African merchants.<sup>60</sup> Such evidence, however small, testifies to the engagement of Africans as consumers within the Atlantic economy. The variety of goods listed further demonstrates desires beyond those stereotypical staples of the slave trade, like guns and liquor—two commodities that are often blamed for perpetuating further violence and destruction on the West African coast.

Scholarship since the late 1960s on the ending of the slave trade and the shift to “legitimate” commerce introduced new areas of economic and historical study.<sup>61</sup> Even so, the consumer still figures as only a marginal character in a larger story that tends to focus on two types of activities: the business of large colonial trading firms and changes in agricultural production. In the first type, historians focused on the rise of merchant capital and the relationship between European firms and the emerging colonial state. Some of this literature falls into the category of corporate or company history and was written by firms’ European employees. Frederick Pedler, a former colonial officer and the deputy chairman of the UAC from 1965 to 1968, wrote *The Lion and the Unicorn in Africa*, one of the first published histories of the UAC and the various British and Dutch firms that came to form it. Other studies were interested in evaluating the extent of collusion between merchant firms and the colonial administration. D. K. Fieldhouse made a distinction between the interests of colonialists and capitalists, while historians like Adu Boahen, Rhonda Howard, and certainly Walter Rodney saw their interests as basically one and the same. Another body of literature within this first type, written over the last two decades by business historians, explores the implications of Gold Coast nationalist politics and decolonization on European firms. Stephanie Decker and Sarah Stockwell, for instance, have traced the strategies used by British business to legitimize their continued presence amid nationalist agitation and protest in the years following the Second World War.<sup>62</sup>

The second type of economic scholarship centers on the activities surrounding agricultural production—specifically, the development of the Gold Coast cocoa industry. Scholarship by Jean Allman and Victoria

Tashjian, Gareth Austin, Polly Hill, Gwendolyn Mikell, and Ivor Wilks has been foundational in shaping the contours of this literature.<sup>63</sup> By 1911 cocoa had become the colony's largest export and main source of income. To illustrate, estimates from cocoa sales in Asante rose from £63,000 in 1909 to £700,000 in 1915.<sup>64</sup> Unlike eastern and southern Africa, there was never a large European or white settler population in the Gold Coast, so profits from cash crop farming remained, for the most part, in African hands.<sup>65</sup> Many cocoa-buying points, especially in the growing areas, had attached wholesale and retail stores where farmers were encouraged to spend their cash. Firms' produce buyers therefore acted as storekeepers and took responsibility for both sides of the business: the buying of the cocoa crop for export and the selling of imports to consumers. Among some cocoa farmers, the two activities were synonymous; in his memoir about his childhood in Asante, Thomas E. Kyei equates traveling with his father to cocoa buying stations with opportunities to view and buy items from abroad or goods from "the country of white men."<sup>66</sup> While the increase in consumer imports grew alongside the cocoa business, the production side of the cocoa industry has always overshadowed the consumption side in most of these histories.

Through a third type of scholarship framed by the concerns of early labor historians and feminist scholars that focused on women's contributions, we are able to catch a small glimpse into the lives of consumers. We know from Gold Coast labor historians like Jeff Crisp, Raymond Dumett, and Richard Jefferies that access to consumer goods spurred industrial workers to strike for higher wages in the gold mines and on the railways as early as 1918.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, we learn how women came to dominate retail trade as men shifted their energies toward cocoa profits and wage employment. Studies by Gloria Addae, Gracia Clark, and Claire Robertson also reveal how Ghanaian women devised intricate strategies through market trading, temporary liaisons with European and African men (privileged in the colonial order), and economic solidarity with each other to obtain goods, from basic foodstuffs to kitchen utensils and cosmetics.<sup>68</sup> As Clark eloquently puts it in her study on market women in Kumasi, "Whether this balancing act resembles harmonious orchestration or frantic juggling, in the experience of a trader it holds the key to daily survival and successful accumulation."<sup>69</sup> Rather than positioning these struggles as reactions or responses to changing economic structures, I wish to explore them as fundamental to shaping how colonial capitalism was constituted in the first place. Through the lens of consumption rather than production, the present volume seeks to revisit this early economic literature and emphasize these "balancing acts" as embedded in the very fabric of African consumer histories.

Over the past ten years scholars of Africa have become increasingly interested in African consumer practices and the social logics of demand. Much of this literature, however, is dominated by research on specific commodities. Major works on African consumerism, including Timothy Burke's 1996 groundbreaking study *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women*, concentrate on the circulation and use of particular goods like cosmetics, cloth, and alcohol.<sup>70</sup> Burke shows how African consumers rearticulated the meanings of foreign manufactured items like soap, cosmetics, and other toiletries prescribed by European companies, missionaries, and white settlers; he argues that African consumption practices became central to battles over economic power, white supremacy, and African respectability. Some whites viewed the consumption and adoption of their products by Africans as a sign of the pliability of the continent and a justification for their "civilizing mission." Other white settlers perceived African consumption of certain items as a complete disregard for public codes of deference. As one anxious white settler expressed, "Our civilization is in the shop windows and if we don't guide them carefully, they will come and get it." Burke's study reveals how deep-seated settler racism not only shaped Africans' access to goods but also their perceptions of goods.

Reaching back into the nineteenth century, Jeremy Prestholdt demonstrates how East African consumer desire influenced global patterns of trade and stimulated the industrialization of cities like Bombay, India, and Salem, Massachusetts. The cultural process of *domestication*, or what he defines as the remaking of foreign goods into something familiar and usable, is at the core of Prestholdt's analysis. Among Zanzabaris, for instance, the consumption of imported clocks, mirrors, and umbrellas was rearticulated to reflect ongoing debates about modernity, personhood, and status. While Prestholdt builds on Burke's work, he argues that East African consumers used commodities to not only address the particularities of culture in the Indian Ocean region but also project new senses of self to the larger global world. By excavating these "forgotten histories of mutuality and global interdependence," Prestholdt challenges long-standing assumptions about Africa's relation to other parts of the world—namely, he refutes the idea that African consumerism has been largely shaped by the interests of others.<sup>71</sup>

While he categorizes his study on alcohol as a social history, I consider Emmanuel Akyeampong's *Drink, Power, and Social Change* to be the first full-length consumer history of Ghana.<sup>72</sup> Tracing alcohol's role as a ritual object, a marker of personal identity, and an economic commodity, Akyeampong uses it to historicize the circulation and legitimization of power and authority. Focusing on Asante worldviews, he illustrates how access to alcohol informed intergenerational and gender conflicts in precolonial Ghana

and shaped the formation of urban social life in the early colonial period. Akyeampong's investigation into temperance agitation and the history of liquor legislation, which included tariffs on imported liquor and licensing fees for liquor outlets, is particularly insightful. As these tariffs and fees accounted for as much as 40 percent of total government revenues in the period immediately preceding World War I, debates over liquor prohibition became an important factor in the extension of colonial hegemony and key to solidifying indirect rule—the British policy of ruling through “traditional” chiefs and local authorities implemented throughout West Africa.

Taking the many insights of this diverse scholarship, we will here depart from the persistent focus on the social meaning of *things* and instead foreground the centrality of *people*—and, in particular, the human relationships that have created, constituted, and counteracted the participation of African consumers within the world of goods.<sup>73</sup> Rendering visible these various encounters demands a rethinking of the very starting point for our inquiry—namely, the term *consumer culture*. Our decades-old concept of consumer culture has been generated predominately from research on mass consumption in Britain and the United States, and the resulting studies have primarily addressed the cultural meanings behind consumer choice and the construction of desire.<sup>74</sup> These meanings are, of course, relevant to our study of Ghana, but our inquiry must move in many other directions, as well. Therefore, rather than focus on consumer culture, I use the term *consumer politics* instead. This shift in terms will, I hope, allow us to expand upon the definition of consumer culture and to emphasize the fact that consumer markets are the products of shifting power relations and competing interests. For instance, while elements like advertising, branding, salesmanship, and market research have shaped consumer markets in Ghana, just as they have done in Britain, the United States, and other places around the world, the restrictive nature of the colonial and postcolonial economies made other issues—including the regulation of retail stores and marketplaces, international supply networks and import licensing, and price controls and government contracts—equally significant.

Just as important, in relation to the specifics of our terms, is that I wish to redefine the way we currently use *consumer politics*, a term that has a much shorter academic history than *consumer culture* and a relatively slim historiography dating mainly from the last ten years. Additionally it has typically been linked to large-scale consumer revolutions, or at least consumer-led movements.<sup>75</sup> But far beyond the obvious instances of boycotts and protests, I see struggles over big market forces as happening all the time, within ordinary face-to-face interactions that took place in wholesale and supply

offices, across retail and credit counters, at trade fairs and promotional events, and on department store selling floors. As Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton have argued, “Nuanced analyses of a range of cultural spaces—from the classroom to the hospital, the asylum to the family album, the nursery to the archive—have made it possible to understand how and why imperial power operated through the colonization of spatialized domains brought into the purview of the colonial state and its reformist agendas.”<sup>76</sup> Commercial spaces are no different, though they may seem at first glance to be static or predictable. They, too, are always changing and animated by “the collusions and collisions” of bodies, power, and regimes—not unlike the spaces that Ballantyne and Burton describe. I therefore apply this spatial analytic to market encounters of all kinds in order to piece together the mixture of beliefs, emotions, and desires that dictated consumer exchange and persisted beyond the “end of empire.” Therefore, I define *consumer politics* as the everyday contests over access to goods and channels of distribution (retailing and wholesaling) as well as the regulation of consumer practices and consumer spaces by both the state and other systems of social authority and power.

To write about consumer histories in Ghana is also to write about the operation of global capitalism more broadly. My research shares the intentions of modern African business history and critical anthropological work, which has documented African businesspeople as everything from transporters to cattle suppliers, financiers to street vendors, and has shown them actively shaping local, regional, and international political economies. This research has uncovered transnational business networks from Freetown to Fouta Djallon, from Brazzaville to Paris, and in multiple routes across the Sahara that have long shaped the methods and modes of commercial exchange within and beyond the African continent.<sup>77</sup> My analysis of similar linkages is further informed by feminist and critical race scholarship, two areas of study that have been essential to understanding the construction, circulation, and maintenance of power and inequality in Ghana. By applying these rigorous frameworks to the ways in which colonial and postcolonial consumer markets are constituted, I hope to offer new ways to think first about how gender and race are embedded in the policies and the practices of “doing business” and, second, about how the circulation of transnational capital is both a gendered and racialized experience.<sup>78</sup> As Anna Tsing reminds us, “Rather than assume we know exactly what global capitalism is, even before it arrives, we need to find out how it operates in friction.”<sup>79</sup> I argue that the history of consumer politics in modern Ghana provides one entry point for undertaking such a challenge.

CULLING THE CORPORATE ARCHIVE  
AND ANIMATING THE MARKET

My hope through this book is to offer a more interconnected vision of African consumer worlds. My aim in documenting the various social relationships that shaped the history of consumption is to not only show markets as contested spaces but also to encompass the range of experiences (excitement, hope, and determination, as well as fear, panic, and disillusion) that animated individual encounters with the market. To do so I draw on a wide range of sources, collected in Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States, and throughout Ghana from a wide swath of both daily life and official business: government reports and correspondence, newspapers and magazines, economic and household surveys, advertising copy and images, private papers and memoirs. While each of these sources introduces its own set of problems and challenges, together they enable the book's larger goal of putting disparate sources into conversation in order to offer a more holistic understanding of consumer politics. Nowhere is this disparate feeling, and both the problems and challenges that accompany it, more evident than with my two most important types of sources: corporate archives and oral histories.

Economic and business historians regularly rely on corporate sources to reconstruct economic pasts; I believe that corporate archives have untapped potential for reconstructing social and cultural history.<sup>80</sup> Such history, particularly for this time and place, usually relies on the records kept by governments and religious missions—and as a result, these histories tend to focus on how people's lives intersected with such institutions as schools, courts, and hospitals. Yet these sources often lack a sense of how Africans engaged with private industry and business; therefore, the resulting histories too often ignore African relationships with the market beyond top-down legislation. In contrast, my use of staff correspondence, managers' circulars, and district reports provide crucial details about the role that Africans—not to mention Europeans, Indians, and Lebanese—played in the rocky terrain of West African commerce.

The contents of these corporate sources are surprisingly rich. Firms like the UAC and UTC had much to gain or lose with regard to their West African businesses, and they kept impressive records on all aspects of Ghana's import-export trade that span both the colonial and postcolonial periods. Furthermore, some European managers wrote extensively about the lives of individual African employees on issues that extended beyond what would be considered a typical business, including family and inheritance, religion and

the supernatural, and entertainment and leisure activities. One European manager even took it upon himself to produce a type of amateur ethnography on his African coworkers—unbeknownst to them.<sup>81</sup> Other groups were included in these reports as well; the business of Indian and Syrian merchants (whose numbers had increasingly grown after the First World War) and the recruitment of Greeks as salesmen served as additional topics of inquiry.<sup>82</sup>

There is one aspect of these corporate archives that is, not surprisingly, lacking. Aside from a few responses to managers' inquiries and the UAC's in-house staff magazines—the *Gold Coast UAC News* and the *Unicorn*—I found very little material authored by Africans. Because most company records were written by and for European employees, I was constantly aware of the power of the corporate archive to both document and also silence African experiences. As a result, I approached the corporate archive not as a depository of facts but as a space to investigate the negotiation of power.<sup>83</sup> A critical reading of corporate sources demanded both the unpacking of contradictions and inconsistencies in firms' policy versus practice and an interpretation of what these moments of dissonance revealed about the development of consumer markets in Ghana more broadly. I read hundreds of districts reports, nearly all of them dry and obligatory, but when I viewed them not merely as catalogs of dutifully noted events but as active sites of contestation, I turned my focus from *what* was reported to *how* it was written. Such an analysis also demanded situating corporate sources within a broader context. To do so I drew on a number of African-authored newspapers and magazines (especially editorials), letters from readers, opinion and advice columns, and business publications like *Business Weekly* and the *Ghana Trade Journal*.

The accumulation of all this material, written both by and for Africans, is abundant and rich, but it was not sufficient. Thus, at the heart of this work are oral interviews I conducted with a wide range of men and women throughout Ghana, including former managers, wholesale and retail storekeepers, and credit customers and consumers.<sup>84</sup> Talking with these people proved invaluable to understanding shifts in consumer practices and generated new questions about the boundaries and limitations of consumer capitalism.<sup>85</sup> I use oral history not as a tool to “identify or extract overlying falsities to get an underlying truth” but as a method to comprehend how “Africans saw their lives, their worlds, their histories” and how they “*felt* about—or understood and represented” their experiences.<sup>86</sup> Simply put, I did not use oral sources to supplement or fill in missing gaps from the corporate record. Instead I attempted to create a dialogue between corporate and oral sources

to uncover the intricacies of colonial capitalism. Uncovering the ways in which such an economic system structured a variety of institutional and intimate relationships, as well as affective experiences, was central to this process.

Most interviews took place inside private homes, as well as in public spaces like stores and offices, and were informal and conversational. The average age of interviewees was sixty-eight, with the youngest being fifty-five and the eldest around ninety-five. I first located interviewees through the public relations office at Unilever Ghana in Tema. I was aware that this was not a representative sample, and assumed that Unilever would link me to those who held high-level positions and would speak favorably of their experiences. While in some instances this was the case, in others I found that interviewees spoke rather freely about blatant racism and poor treatment. Through these interactions I also learned that many interviewees had been employed in various positions throughout the course of their working lives. For instance, those who had started as storekeepers or clerks in the 1940s and 1950s had become managers by the end of their careers, and this allowed them to speak from multiple perspectives on a wide range of topics and various aspects of the business. Most of these interviewees, however, were predominantly men who had received some sort of postsecondary education in Ghana or abroad.

To gain access to a larger, more diverse group of interviewees, I cast my net wider. I shared my research with practically everyone I met, including neighbors, friends, colleagues, and strangers, asking if people knew of men or women who had worked as storekeepers, credit customers, or employees of foreign firms. This method proved extremely successful—particularly in smaller towns, where I was usually connected with someone who either agreed to be interviewed or put me in contact with others. Another technique was locating interviewees through the tried-and-true snowball sampling method: after each interview, I asked interviewees if they would introduce me to others in their social network. Both of these strategies expanded the scope of the project to include not only employees of the UTC and the GNTC but also a range of people who worked with firms but were not formally employed by them.<sup>87</sup> These methods also led me to a number of women, including one of Accra's most infamous credit customers. Finally, I gained a deeper understanding of how people conducted business in spite of the various restrictions that limited their autonomy and under conditions that at moments made it risky to sell even a tin of milk.

Although historians have used interviews with former African staff to reconstruct corporate histories, few have investigated how local employees navigated the various colonial and postcolonial social worlds of which they

were a part.<sup>88</sup> While I did ask structured questions about firms' practices (selling, storekeeping, advertising, relating to customers) to begin and guide conversations, I also asked more open-ended questions about interviewees' backgrounds, education, families, and day-to-day lives. These questions varied from interview to interview based on individuals' willingness to share and their interest in a given topic. With those who were particularly enthusiastic, I conducted follow-up interviews. I also shared materials from the corporate archive with interviewees; copies of the *Unicorn*, old advertising campaigns, and photographs of stores and shoppers sparked vivid memories and led us to new topics and unintended conversations about changing tastes and desires, cautionary tales about certain products, and the pleasures and dangers of consuming.

The result is a history of African consumer politics, but also—and notably—an exploration of the social relations, practices, beliefs, and sentiments responsible for that history. While *Market Encounters* is organized chronologically, the structure is not linear. Instead, it reads as a series of case studies; sometimes these overlap, sometimes they stand alone. Each chapter emerges from a specific historical moment and space to capture the varied interactions and encounters that animated Ghana's commercial landscape. District wholesale offices, shops and market stalls, urban department stores, international trade fairs, and military barracks provide the backdrops for these histories. Anxious European managers, energetic storekeepers, glamorous saleswomen, frustrated consumers, and opportunistic soldiers serve as some of the book's central characters.

I begin by placing the expansion of consumer markets at the center of the social, cultural, and political transformations that not only shaped the colonial period but also Ghana's relationship to the global economy. I uncover transnational business networks as key sites where knowledge about Africa, African markets, and the nature of global exchange were produced by foreign trading firms to establish commercial superiority. The growth of foreign capital after the First World War required fabricating a parallel narrative about African businesspeople as untrustworthy and immoral and the African market as a space of commercial chaos and danger. Chapter 1, which focuses specifically on the relationships between foreign firms and their African employees and consumers, reveals the colonial state as not just a political and military apparatus but a commercial one that produced a specific set of social relations for its own benefit. Yet those efforts were fraught and often illusory. The superior market knowledge of Africans, the contradictions between a firm's policy and its practice, and the dilemmas of on-the-ground interactions all demonstrated the limits of colonial capitalism, as did

African counternarratives about capitalist expansion and the potential dangers of consuming, which persistently disrupted efforts by the UAC and UTC to fully control and dictate market terms.

This fundamental struggle of foreign firms—between the desire to maintain commercial authority and their reliance on African knowledge about the market—defined commercial life in the first half of the twentieth century. However, tensions escalated during World War II; shortages and the inability of firms to implement government-imposed quotas and price controls revealed the extent of this dependency. Set in the 1940s and 1950s, chapter 2 takes a closer look at the specific strategies employed by African shopkeepers and credit customers in shaping corporate policies and the international circuits through which firms operated. My analysis of the UAC's credit customer business, in particular, asks us to consider how preexisting ideas about racial and gender inferiority affected market relations and how these constructs were produced within the ongoing structuring of global capitalism. Through the corporate language of professionalization, we see how the market expertise of African women was refigured as deceptive and outdated, and thus how these women were placed at a distance from and at odds with modern economic development.

The book's remaining chapters address the late 1950s through the 1970s—the decades that spanned the movement toward independence, self-rule under Kwame Nkrumah and the CPP, and control of the government by two different military regimes. The debates surrounding the planning, construction, and operation of Kingsway, one of Ghana's largest and most famous department stores, are the backbone of chapter 3. Embedded in the politics of decolonization, this centerpiece of Accra's shopping district demonstrated a new relationship with foreign capital and symbolized Nkrumah's hopes for legitimizing Ghana as a newly independent nation. Owned and operated by the UAC, Kingsway was part of a larger public relations strategy prompted by decolonization. Fueled by demands from Nkrumah and Accra residents, the building of Kingsway revealed a temporary inversion of a past colonial relationship. Yet the project of postcolonial nation building and the fulfillment of consumer aspirations were often at odds. Beneath the store's sleek exterior, modern technologies, and promises of convenience and efficiency festered generational conflict and inequalities of class and gender. Young salaried saleswomen became objects of desire and disgust, while young, educated managers found it difficult to assert their authority over older employees who refused to see a fancy education as trumping age and experience.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the militarization of the market—namely, the efforts undertaken by military regimes to control the consumer market and

define the boundaries of consumption. After the 1966 coup, the National Liberation Council (NLC) used ideologies of consumerism to attract foreign investors and the support of local businessmen who had been neglected under Nkrumah's socialist agenda. Chapter 4 analyzes Ghana's first International Trade Fair as part of a larger NLC refashioning project that celebrated the country's transition to a free market capitalist economy. Through the fair, the NLC also reintroduced older ideas about wealth and accumulation considered vital for the country's economic, political, and moral reconstruction. The NLC accused Nkrumah and the CPP of dismantling the authority of chiefs, elders, and parents and corrupting the morals of youth—especially young women. The fair thus established a new, more disciplined form of consumerism that proscribed certain limitations and restrictions in the name of national reform. Ghana's second coup in 1972 and the violence undertaken to instill market discipline serve as the backdrop of chapter 5. Under dire economic conditions and commodity shortages, the National Redemption Council led by Acheampong seized power and aimed to legitimize their rule through a policy of state-guaranteed economic stabilization. Strict regulations (reminiscent of colonial market controls) required military and police involvement in all facets of the market. Via oral histories of this market scarcity, we reconstruct the experiences of those targeted by volunteer price inspectors and government-appointed antihoarding squads. I show how the criminalization of those buying and selling outside state-regulated guidelines shaped people's relationship with goods and the ways in which they perceived themselves as consumers.

In sum, the book's exploration of consumer politics in modern Ghana complicates the old "European exploitation versus African resistance" binary and disrupts representations of Africans as merely laborers or producers for consumers elsewhere. The analytical shift from consumer culture to consumer politics also allows us to account for how issues like gender and racial inequalities are implicated in—and act as driving forces behind—commercial and business networks that span the globe. By emphasizing the centrality of people and human relationships to Ghana's economic past, *Market Encounters* introduces a radical rethinking of consumption studies from an African-centered perspective. Such a vantage point enhances our understanding of colonial capitalism in all of its intricacies, legacies, and contradictions.